The Universe Hopper

by Amelinda, grayclouds

Summary

Harry Potter, an ordinary teen, knows nothing of witchcraft or wizardry. Tom Riddle, a wizard, wants nothing to do with Muggles. It is by a bizarre quirk of fate that both happen upon an enchanted diary, converging their disparate universes and uniting their two souls as one.

Notes

Last summer, we wrote this collaboration as a simple roleplay that quickly spun out of control and became this, Harry, written by grayclouds. Tom, written by Amelinda. Anticipated word-count is in the 250k range, so to put it mildly, this is going to be a long and bumpy and (hopefully) enjoyable ride.
NOTE: On August 18, 2018, I returned to the chapter to make edits to both content and grammar. The fundamental text remains unchanged, but because the story has grown so much since this was published, I felt compelled to edit some things.

Part One

Harry Potter’s life isn’t so bad, really.

Sure, he was orphaned at a very young age, but he was too young to remember his parents, so while he has always wondered about them, their deaths didn’t have much of an impact. Relatives still took him in, raised him (somewhat), fed him (mostly). And while he might not be going to a fancy boarding school like his cousin Dudley, it’s not as if the comprehensive schools in England are all that horrible.

No, his life isn’t all that bad. But it certainly isn’t all that good, either.

“You missed a spot,” Dudley sneers at Harry as he passes through the kitchen, shoes tracking mud all over the newly-mopped linoleum tiles.

Harry stares at the dirt with the mop still in his hands and briefly wonders how many days it takes for a missing-child-report to be investigated by the police.

When he’s finally done with his chores on the last weekend of Christmas holidays that he’s barely gotten to enjoy—much like every vacation—Harry quietly retreats to his room upstairs, ignoring his aunt and uncle sitting in the living room. By this point he’s used to doing these things without so much as a thank you.

Inside his bedroom, he collapses on his bed. It might not be as big as Dudley’s room, but it’s his, and it’s the only place he has some peace of mind from the Dursleys.

‘They could’ve been much worse,’ he reminds himself, though, honestly, it is of little comfort to his sore muscles. Face-down on his pillow, he shifts his head a bit and looks over at the old desk sitting in the corner, on top of which a bag of school supplies his aunt and uncle grudgingly bought for him as Christmas presents.

New things always have a way of cheering him up. Forcing himself to move from his bed with a grunt, Harry gets up and meanders over groggily to the plastic bag, grabbing it and turning it upside down, unceremoniously emptying its content onto his desk.

Standard items, all of it: pens, pencils, erasers, various notebooks to write in, all stuff he’s sure to lose by the end of the school year. The notebooks, of course, are an exception; he’s rather diligent about his schoolwork, mainly because it’s his only ticket to a life of his own, free from the Dursleys. He even owns all his old notebooks, each filled to the brim with notes and homework assignments from previous years, neatly marked with his name.

Harry grabs a random journal out of the pile, flipping it open and looking at the cleanly-lined,
white pages. Might as well start marking them now, in case Dudley gets the bright idea to try and
steal some from him again. Why on earth the fat idiot thinks it necessary when he already has so
much stuff of his own, Harry will never understand.

Taking a pen from the heap, he turns to the inner cover, and inscribes his name.

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The Slytherin Dungeon is low-lit by the warm radiance of a magicked fire, the soft light a contrast
to an eerie gleam of emerald streaming through the windows. It is Tom’s favorite hour to watch
the room dance with shadows from the creatures swimming behind the leaded glass. But, on this
night, he is instead occupied by a far less marvelous sight.

His dark eyes scrutinize the black, faux-leather diary, searching it for any sign of distinction.

When the mysterious seventh floor room appeared for him, he mistakenly presumed it was
responding to his quest for the Chamber of Secrets. His fingers itched with anticipation as he
swung the door back, eager to at last lay claim to his birthright as the Heir of Salazar Slytherin.
Rather than provide him entry to the place he anticipated, however, a force from behind the
ingress recklessly lobbed this useless, nondescript diary his way before dissolving back into the
wall.

He scratches lightly at the inscription on its inner cover:

PROPERTY OF: HARRY JAMES POTTER – 1/3/2010

The ink is blue and contained, as though written with a blunt Muggle pen. Potter is a familiar
name—in fact, they’re a prominent wizarding family, if his memory serves him right. But there are
no Potters among his classmates now; only thirteen students remained through the holidays, all
which Tom can name offhand. So, why does the date suggest the diary was marked on today?

He glides his pointer across the top-stitching as the blue ink sinks into the parchment. Very
curious, indeed. On a whim, he summons a quill and scrawls his name across the first page.

There’s no time to give his signature another glance. Within seconds, the words ‘Tom Marvolo
Riddle’ fade into the page, absorbed like they were never written at all.

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After having written his name, Harry puts the pen away and is on the verge of closing the journal
when something on the first page that he’s certain wasn’t there before catches his attention.
Written in black ink, in an elegant but entirely unfamiliar hand, is another’s name—and his own,
written just seconds before on the inner cover, is gone.

Harry blinks several times, staring blankly at the first page that reads ‘Tom Marvolo
Riddle’ at the
top. He puts the journal down on the desk, left open on that page, and takes his glasses off,
cleaning them with his shirt and putting them back on to look again.

The unfamiliar name is still there, and his own is gone.

“Huh?” Harry rubs over it, turns the page and looks at its back, but it’s not some insane trick of
the light nor is it his eyes, he’s certain. Is he just going crazy? Is it sleep-deprivation or fatigue,
messing with his head? Names don’t just disappear or appear out of nothing like that.

He quickly picks his pen back up, putting its tip down on the page right below the name, and after
a moment of hesitation, writes a simple, ‘Hello.’
The word lingers on the page for all but half a second before, to his utter bewilderment, the ink fades away and the word disappears.

Like magic.

“What the hell?”

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‘Hello,’ flashes in boyish script for a mere moment before the page fades into blankness again. Biting his lip, Tom rests the quill on his leg and considers the risk of communicating with the diary. If it is cursed with Dark Magic—which he suspects it must be—then the sentient presence could attempt to manipulate him. He lifts his wand and wordlessly summons a flame, watching with scruple as it fails to ignite the vellum.

“It is enchanted, but is it dangerous? A child’s plaything wouldn’t be retardant. Could be a gag.”

Though that’s highly unlikely. He doubts he knows a peer suicidal enough to concoct such a moronic prank. Not even the frivolous Weasley dolts dare target him. And whoever put the diary there has the intelligence to manipulate the mysterious room, something even he has yet to accomplish.

Suddenly, a thought occurs to him, lifting his spirits high. The castle wishes to help him locate the Chamber of Secrets! The soul within the diary could be an ancestor, or some sort of relic of Slytherin’s consciousness. The faded name and date, well… He dismisses it. There’s an explanation somewhere in the fine print, he simply needs more information.

He curls his lip in a sharp smile and eagerly puts the quill to paper. What to ask? Better to be tactful than jeopardize its integrity. His hand nearly tremors with enthusiasm as he writes, ‘Hello. I’m Tom. Who are you?’

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When the words start fading away again after lingering for a moment Harry immediately reaches for the phone in his pocket, pulling it out as he takes a seat at his desk. It’s an old HTC, a hand-me-down from Dudley, but its camera still works fine.

He taps on the record button, holding it with one hand as he shakily writes back with his other. ‘I’m Harry,’ he writes, holding his breath as he watches the words fade away again, adding after a second of thought, ‘Are you real?’ That too fades, and the page is blank once more.

Stopping the recording, his phone takes a second to save the video. He taps to play it with nervous anticipation, anxious. Of what, he doesn’t quite know. But the frames played back to him in the clip show exactly what he saw the first time. He writes the words down, and they disappear a moment later.

Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. He’s never believed in ghosts before, but it looks like he might have to starting today. The situation is far too similar to one of those ghost stories with some cursed object that eventually leads to their owners’ demise for him not to be on edge, the pen in his hand shaking slightly—not out of fear, but out of excitement.

This is easily the coolest thing that has ever happened to him in his entire life.

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“Am I real?” Tom repeats indignantly, bemused by the now-dissolving ink’s inquiry.

What a peculiar question for a cursed, inanimate object to ask him, a wizard. Does the presence in the diary not realize it isn’t human? Can it see Tom all? It asserted that name again: Harry. If that’s true, it makes it altogether impractical for him to pursue his theory any further. From prolonged sessions spent hunched over genealogy texts, he can recite his ancestry through to the sixteenth century. Among his matrilineal, he has Morfins and Marvolos, Gormalaiths and Rionachs. But not, to his knowledge, a single Harry.

Still, he doesn’t allow his faith to dissipate entirely. The possibility that Harry is knowledgeable about the Chamber of Secrets remains a considerable motivation to speak with him—or it, rather—for as long as he can. This could truly be his chance! His fingers clench with anticipation, digging long nails into his palms until a less-inspired consideration breaches his mind.

It’s not completely improbable that his discovery of the diary was a chance happening.

The thought alone makes him scoff. It is far, far more likely that the castle recognized his connection to the founders and sent him the diary intentionally. If not to help him find the Chamber, then perhaps for something else. He knows there must be a reason for why the room chose him.

He stares at the diary pensively, considering how best to coax out its secrets. There are too many unknown variables to infer which angle would prove the most persuasive. He settles with a direct approach, quickly writing, ‘Yes, I’m real. I’m a fifth year at Hogwarts. Where are you from, Harry?’

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Hogwarts? Harry mouths the word quietly to himself, frowning at the oddness of it; what an utterly bizarre name for a school. Still, ‘fifth year’ indicates that it’s at least somewhat contemporary. Maybe he’s talking to a ghost that died recently in one of those small towns down in the country? It would somewhat explain away the name as one of those countryside quirks, even if it wouldn’t at all explain what on earth is going on here.

Not to mention the absurdity of the mere thought that he’s talking to a ghost at all. He still hasn’t discarded the idea that this isn’t some sort of incredibly vivid hallucination he’s having, or maybe even a dream. Of all the people on this planet to have gotten a probably-cursed or haunted notebook as a Christmas present, it happened to him? It seems too ridiculous an option to consider; nothing special ever happens in his life.

Deciding that debating the issue in his head isn’t going to help him any, Harry turns his attention to the question the assumed ghost asked of him. Where is he from? Well, that’s an easy enough question to answer. In return, he supposes it’ll be only fair if he asks a few things of his own.

‘A small town in the northern part of Surrey,’ Harry writes, knowing full well that few people have ever heard of Little Whinging, and perhaps also feeling a little cautious about being too specific. What if he accidentally invites the ghost into his house? Or does that rule only apply to vampires?

Regardless, he’s satisfied with his answer, and quickly follows up with a question or two of his own. ‘Where is Hogwarts? Are you there right now?’

He considers the words with a sense of strange amusement as they quickly fade away once he’s done writing completely, almost as if the journal knows when he’s finished. This feels exceedingly like some sort of weird supernatural equivalent of an online chatroom, minus the
ability to read your words back.

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The word ‘Surrey’ momentarily arrests Tom’s concentration. He’s familiar with northern Surrey. In particular, he’s familiar with a dull, steel-paneled mobile home in northern Surrey, where the state once placed him to dwell among the three plumpest, dumbest pigs he ever witnessed masquerade as children. A small smirk twists his lips as he recalls that two-pence-whore of a foster mother shrieking at the sight of her corpulent son on the branch of a tall oak, begging Tom to use his ‘demon powers’ and deny the oinker freedom from his banal, valueless life.

His eyes focus on the diary, anchoring him back in reality. Where did that memory come from? Tom hasn’t considered it in years. Suspicion creeps up his limbs and he wonders: Is it possible that the diary can sense his recollections, like legilimency? Is it reading his thoughts?

“No,” he decides. That couldn’t be. The presence – Harry, he reminds himself, doesn’t even know of Hogwarts.

Or is that simply a lie? Is Harry trying to test him by poking at his vulnerabilities and measuring his response? This could be the castle’s idea of an evaluation to judge whether Tom is fit to discover the Chamber. Without leaving room for reconsideration, Tom takes the quill to paper again and responds, ‘Hogwarts is in Scotland; it’s both a boarding school and my home.’

As he watches the words bleed in, he impulsively adds, ‘Where I am, it is 3 January, 2010. Which century do you come from?’ It is, perhaps, against his better judgement, but so was levitating a 10 year old Muggle onto a tree branch thirty feet above ground, and he had enjoyed that immensely.

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A boarding school—like Dudley’s? Harry considers it for a moment, finding that even for a school in Scotland, Hogwarts is probably the strangest name he’s ever heard for any given institution.

Nevertheless, it’s the second answer that is of any real importance.

3 January, 2010. The exact date of today, as Harry had written on the inner cover a moment ago. He might’ve been suspicious of the response, possibly even assuming that the ghost might’ve just gotten that information from what Harry wrote to him earlier, but it’s the question he’s asked in return that really makes him think.

‘Which century do you come from?’

That’s not the type of question a ghost would ask. Rather, that’s the type of question one would ask a ghost.

Is he talking to another living, breathing human being? One that thinks, just like Harry did a moment ago, that whoever he’s talking to isn’t real? That Harry died ages ago and is now haunting the pages of a notebook? The possibility is an enthralling one. Harry could be talking to an actual person in Scotland right at this second!

“This is absolutely bonkers,” Harry whispers to himself, quickly putting his pen to the paper again and eagerly writing back.

‘The twentieth. Born in 1994, specifically,’ he scribbles hastily. ‘I’m a real person, not a ghost or a magic notebook or whatever you think I am.’
Of all that Tom considers absurd, from Dumbledore’s hackneyed moral allocutions to Hermione Granger’s monstrously untamed hair, nothing compares to his present situation. His faith in the diary’s willingness, or ability, to direct him to the Chamber is dwindling, replaced in its stead by the fear that this is some sort of prank. But, as he concluded moments ago, no person so lacking in prudence could possibly have the intelligence to contrive this stunt. Yet somehow his other theories seem even unlikelier. To get real answers, he realizes he must eschew his instincts and examine the diary’s claims logically.

He claims his name is Harry. Presumably he is Harry James Potter, as his first message suggested. He claims he lives in northern Surrey, that he was born in 1994 and, most troublingly, that he is real.

If he is both British and of Tom’s time, and not to mention alive by the same definition that Tom is alive, then perhaps this diary is one part of a twin set, and Harry just happens to have the other half. But a British wizard who doesn’t know about Hogwarts? That is quite unlikely.

‘You didn’t know about Hogwarts, did you, Tom?’ a small thought reminds him. He swiftly sweeps it to the back of his mind. All wizarding children are invited to Hogwarts, Harry would be no exception. Then again, he couldn’t just be a Muggle—why would the castle want him chatting with some random Muggle?

It feels brash to ask, but regardless, his quills scratches, ‘I’m neither a ghost nor a magic notebook. But I am magical. Are you a wizard, Harry? How did you come across this diary?’

The question he receives in return for his reply seems a little bit ridiculous. Though, considering the situation, maybe not by much. Whoever he’s talking to is magical? What does that even mean? And him, a wizard? Like an old man with a long gray beard and a pointy hat?

Harry is at a loss on what to answer to that, let alone what to make of it. Does this mean that Tom is implying that he is a wizard? For a moment the very idea seems so absurd that Harry wants to dismiss it entirely, but then it occurs to him that a ghost is not any more strange an idea than a wizard is. Besides, there’s clearly something going on with this journal—magic, at this point, seems like the only explanation he has for any of it.

Hesitant now as he’s begun to realise he has no idea what he’s getting himself into, Harry writes back. ‘No, I’m not a wizard. And my aunt got it for me as a Christmas present. A bargain, since it was right before curfew.’

He doubts she would’ve bought it for him otherwise. Uncle Vernon loathes spending any money on him, and while Aunt Petunia is better in that respect, whatever Vernon says goes in this household. He has the scars to prove it.

Still, not like there wasn’t a risk involved for Aunt Petunia. Getting caught out during curfew rarely ends well. People with the money to pay off the police to look the other way tend to be fine, so he suspects his aunt wouldn’t have had any trouble anyway, but if you’re poor and you’re caught outside past 10 PM, there’s a very good chance you’re never seen or heard from again.

(It doesn’t stop Harry from sneaking out to meet up the other boys whenever his aunt and uncle aren’t home. But it’s a small town, and he knows it like the back of his hand. He can avoid patrols with ease.)
‘And you? How did you find it?’ He adds after a moment.

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Oh, Merlin.

Harry’s a Muggle. He’s a Muggle whose cheap aunt bought him a cheap diary off some cheap greasy swindler. It all makes sense. Well, perhaps not the part when the castle spat the diary’s twin at Tom, but that matters not. The castle is apt to do strange things. Coincidentally, he wonders? No. He still suspects the castle wouldn’t have given the diary to just anybody.

Tom spares a moment to inspect the Dungeon, swiveling his head from the dimming windows to the worn tapestries, ensuring with certainty that the other two Slytherins haven’t roamed out of bed. Communicating with a Muggle in such a fashion could have repercussions. He is perhaps too young to be tried harshly, and he strongly doubts he’d be sent down from Hogwarts for it, but he dislikes the idea of popping up on Dumbledore’s radar. Oh, how he’d drone about the dangers of exposing their world, as if Tom hadn’t risked such a feat in his first 11 years of indiscriminate, albeit ignorant, spell-casting.

Besides, it is probably more dangerous to leave the diary now, without the smallest of explanations, than it would be to continue writing to Harry. He doesn’t particularly care if Harry retells the incident—who would believe him?—but he could tell Dumbledore as much if the matter somehow wormed its way into the law’s purview.

And he must admit, he is curious to know what Harry meant by ‘curfew.’ Probably little more than a reference to some local ordinance. What else could it mean? When Tom lived in northern Surrey, there was no such restriction. Deciding against the urge to lie, Tom responds with some sincerity, ‘An enchanted door bestowed it to me. I’m not sure why, though.’ He pauses, letting the word sink in before he asks, ‘What exactly do you mean by curfew, Harry?’

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Magical journals, wizards, and enchanted doors. Harry takes a deep breath, rubbing over his face and eyes with his hands, glasses slightly askew when he’s done having a semi-crisis about the existence of magic. It is too surreal. The best Christmas present he’s had by far, of course, but still completely and utterly out of this world.

‘Enchanted door?’ he writes back. ‘So Hogwarts is some sort of magic boarding school, then?’

Turning now to Tom’s question, Harry is a little baffled. Wizard or not, how could he not know about the curfew? There’s been a curfew for as long as Harry can remember, instated before he was born, even. He did once overhear of the time Before the curfew, from a hushed conversation between his aunt and their gossipy neighbour. Curious, he went to a friend about it, an older boy who hung with the misfits. He’d said the curfew was a conspiracy, a way for the government to control people. (Harry thinks so, too. But it’s not something he should discuss aloud.)

In any case, wizard or not, Tom ought to be aware of the curfew. It’s enforced in Scotland just as strictly.

‘As for your question, the 10 PM curfew is all over Great Britain. Although, I guess maybe not for wizards...’

Harry awaits with a rapping foot and, fortunately, Tom’s reply is quick.

‘Hogwarts is a boarding school for magical people. But I’ve never heard of this curfew before. Could you please tell me more? Who is your head of state?’
Huh. So he really doesn’t know about the curfew. Are wizards that isolated from the rest of the world? Harry supposes he can’t fault them; he wouldn’t want anything to do with the non-magical either if he’d had a choice in the matter.

‘Boris Johnson’s been our Prime Minister since before I was born. Curfew was put into place for our safety when we started war with the Soviets.’

Harry’s gaze drifts off towards the history books he uses for classes. This is a bit of a boring topic to discuss with a wizard, isn’t it?

‘What kinds of magic do they teach you at Hogwarts? And what’s the school like? Are enchanted doors that spit out magic notebooks common over there?’

Moments later, Tom's response bleeds into the page.

‘We learn several branches of magic; my personal favorites are potions and transfiguration (transforming the properties of objects). The school is an ancient castle that was built in the tenth century, so it’s not uncommon for strange things to happen.’

He grins at this, this ridiculous, silly world. All he can think of are shelves filled with colourful concoctions sealed in elegant glass vials, potions for goofy things like making you fly or turning your hair purple or giving you ugly yellow boils all over your face.

Harry feels at once envious. Here he is, stuck in this boring, stupid world, forced to live with relatives that don’t even like him.

What he wouldn’t give to leave it all behind him.

He glances over to his schoolbag hanging off the rack on his door, remembering the homework due for tomorrow. ‘That sounds brilliant. The school I go to is nothing compared to a magic boarding school. I had to dissect 4 of the Prime Minister's stupid autobiographies over Christmas break. Most people worship him like he's a god.’

It could be stupid, saying all of this into a journal. But then, what about this situation isn't stupid?

‘Why are those your favourite subjects? And what about the others?’

As Tom's question surfaces, Harry grins.

'I like all aspects of magic. Potions and transfiguration are my favorite because they involve taking the mundane and turning them into the extraordinary. Thistles and beetles, with a touch of magic, can become chairs, cats, elixirs. But there are other subjects, of course, like charms, which is the addition of magical properties, and flying, where we ride in the sky on broomsticks.’

Then, a moment later, as he begins his next remark, another line of elegant script appears.

'Harry, I promise to tell you all that I can about Hogwarts, but I need you to help me understand your society. I think it’s possible that we’re writing between two independent universes.’

In an odd, surreal flash, Harry’s consciousness fades to white. Independent universes. Just like in the movies, right? So lost is he in thought, he almost doesn’t hear Aunt Petunia yelling that he needs to come down and do the dishes before going to bed, belatedly yelling a distracted affirmation as he keeps fixated on the mesmerising visual painted by Tom’s words in his head.

It’s a bittersweet feeling. Knowing that he’ll never be part of that world, stuck in his own as he is.
He wonders if Tom realises how lucky he is.

In the end, he decides to take it in stride.

'Alright,' he writes back once he gathers his thoughts. In exchange for more answers about Hogwarts, it seems like a more than fair trade, though he doesn’t quite understand why Tom would necessarily need to understand his society at all. *I'll try my best. What do you want to know first? I can’t stay and talk for much longer so, give me your top three or something.*'
Pearlish streaks of white tincture the dull, cerulean sky as Tom crosses the barren Hogwarts grounds away from Care of Magical Creatures. He tolerates the oafish instructor, Hagrid, because the fool is the only supplier of acromantula venom in Scotland, but with his fingers chapped from mishandling a Blast-Ended Skrewt, Tom thinks he may need to do business elsewhere. While in step, Tom slips a hand into his messenger bag, ensuring that his diary is not misplaced or stolen. It is a tedious habit, and perhaps it’s unnecessary, but after Draco’s recent remark on Tom’s newfound journaling hobby, he cannot risk negligence.

A month has passed since he first wrote to Harry and their correspondence persists daily. In their agreed upon exchange, Tom offers Harry insight into his studies and his history, and Harry provides Tom a window into his own life.

It's quite the interesting twist, really. Police brutality, state propaganda, war. All are oppressions narrowly avoided in Tom’s universe, all due to some unknown points of divergence. Not that Harry's much insight into such things. He's a typical boy. Football loving, and all that nonsense.

At his destination in the dungeons, Tom sits for Potions with Professor Slughorn. The man is an obese tuft-hunter whose faults outweigh his genius, but he is smitten with Tom beyond the considerable affection his other teachers demonstrate. He gives a little wink to Tom before the start of his lesson. It’s some tedious lecture on the properties of moonstone. As if Tom doesn’t already know it all.

Casually, he pulls out his diary and writes to Harry, knowing he’ll be on the other side waiting. ‘Just arrived at Potions. I expect it will be even less invigorating than usual.’

Immersed in his writing, Tom almost misses Slughorn’s open inquiry to the class. Just as he raises his hand to answer, however, he calls for Hermione Granger to respond. In her horrid, grating voice, she says, “Moonstone, also known as the wishing stone, is a gem that is often ground into a dust. It’s mostly used in potions to foster endearment and reduce anxiety.”

While Slughorn awards Gryffindor ten points, Tom sinks in his chair. Stupid Mudblood.

The quiet chattering around Harry falls into silence when Mrs. Farris enters the classroom. Together as one, the students rise from their desks and stand until the assignment is given.

“Open your books and read chapters seven through nine,” she instructs as she seats herself on the large office chair. “You have an hour to get started on an essay on the importance and impact of biblical scripture within English literature. Anyone who doesn’t have it finished by tomorrow will automatically receive a failing grade.”

Unlike his peers who immediately begin writing, Harry has no motivation to start now. He can do
it later. Maybe use it as an excuse to get out of a few chores.

Tom is his current priority. He takes out the journal and positions it carefully underneath his thick textbook, keeping half of it visible next to his regular notebook. It only takes a minute of waiting before Tom’s words appear on the first page, and something of a reassuring feeling washes over him. Sometimes Harry thinks the only real conversations he ever has are with Tom, even if most of it consists of probing questions or the occasional complaint, such as now. It’s still bizarre to think that one of his lifelines to sanity is a wizard in an alternate universe, but the stories Tom tells of Hogwarts are one of the few highlights of Harry’s day, usually.

‘I’m in Bible Studies. Want to trade?’ Harry writes, glancing at the bible sitting on the corner of his desk and opening it up on a random page. ‘Psalm 136:1. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Or he’ll send you to hell, I suppose.’

Having written that, Harry glances surreptitiously to Mrs. Ferris, who hasn’t moved from her desk and is reading the textbook herself. If she saw what he just wrote, he’d be on a one-way trip to a labour school and probably never be heard from again. It’s part of the appeal of talking to Tom; a way to vent all the rebellious thoughts in his head without actual risk of being caught.

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From his periphery, Tom notices ink appear on the diary page, forcing him to pry his eyes off Granger’s fidgeting form. He pulls the diary to the edge of the counter, adjusting his shoulder so that Theo Nott can’t see, and smirks at Harry’s message. He almost responds immediately, but then notices from the intonation in Slughorn’s voice that a question is looming on the horizon. Tom can’t let the ignoble Granger best him this time.

“Now, class,” Tom tenses at Slughorn’s words, tightening his arm for the trigger, “I would like for one of you to tell me why might a witch or wizard foolishly substitute labradorite for moonstone?”

*Easy.* Their hands raise in unison so quickly it causes Slughorn to belt one of his meaty chuckles. His beady eyes tick between the two, as if deciding which is worthier. Tom catches this moment of indecision and cuts the tension with a warm smile, a blend between modesty and eagerness. It works as expected; Slughorn’s grin stretches beneath his long, gingery moustache and he gestures toward Tom.

In calm, clear baritone, Tom explains, “I suspect one may do so because labradorite is colloquially known as rainbow moonstone, though this name is geologically unearned. Moonstone itself is potassium feldspar, rather than plagioclase feldspar.”

“Excellent!” Slughorn congratulates, positively beaming. “Ten points to our house, Slytherin!”

“Ahem.” Tom looks to Granger, who straightens her back to advertise her obnoxiously smug expression. “I think what Tom meant to say is that rainbow moonstone is a variety of labradorite. The two are not synonymous.”

Slughorn nods. “Right you are, Ms. Granger, right you are.”

“Oh, please don’t mistake me,” Tom chimes in, his pleasant tone a contrast to his stern gaze. “The adularescence which gives rainbow moonstone its name is all that distinguishes it from other labradorites. Other varieties include coarse-grained rocks like — ”

“Gabbro! Like gabbro!” Hermione interjects, face flushed.

“Yes, and that’s not to mention basalt,” Tom continues, polite as ever.
“And let’s not forget that substituting rainbow moonstone for regular moonstone can enhance the longevity of potions used to inspire affection.” She giggles nervously. “Though one certainly wouldn’t want it in their Amortentia!”

Tom and Hermione stare at one another, locked in a state of mutual disdain.

“Brilliant! Excellent, ten additional points to each house!”

Still annoyed with Hermione, but powerless to reprimand her, Tom expresses his anger with his quill.

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Harry glances out the window emptily, imagining what Tom looks like, what he sounds like. The clean, white guidelines painted on the soccer field remind him that unlike him, Tom doesn’t like sport. Arrogant as he is, he’s probably some unathletic little swot. Harry smiles, line of sight still aimless over the grass, trying to invent a voice for Tom, a crisp, posh accent, like the Queen has.

Then, interrupting his fantasy, a group catches his eye: a few boys, huddled around something. Another boy. He’s curled up on the ground in the fetal position, shaking violently as the bully grabs him by the hair to yank his head up and a second punches into his face. The bullies, Harry recognises at once. They’re teammates of his.

It’s an incredibly common sight, if you know where to look. Harry watches with quiet concern as the smaller boy is pushed against the fence. Squealing wouldn’t do him any good, would it? Teachers tend to look the other way when such behaviour rears its head, particularly if it’s from the football players. Winning school tournament cups is deemed more important than the welfare of their other students. Informing Mrs. Ferris would earn him a scoff at best.

Glancing down at the journal, he notices the newly written words on the page.

‘I’m already in hell, actually. This moron in my class never shuts up. It’s miserable.’

His periphery steers his attention again at the boy. The others haven’t left him alone. Two of his assailants hold him by his arms as the tallest among them reeks back his fist. Harry winces at the moment of impact. He wants to help him but, with eyes flitting to Mrs. Ferris, he must think of the cost. He already got into trouble for mouthing off last week. If he acts out now, the consequences could be much more severe than three hours of detention and re-educational films.

He distracts himself with his response to Tom, trying as best as he can to ignore it.

***

‘Your misanthropy is showing again. Your misanthropy is showing again. Surely she can’t be that bad?’

Tom blinks at the one odd word he does not expect: misanthropy. Has he shared too much with Harry?

“Alright, kids, that’ll be it for today,” Professor Slughorn dismisses. “Great job, Ms. Granger and Mr. Riddle. Leave it to a couple of Muggle-borns to put the rest of you to shame!”

Slughorn’s ignorant, supposed-to-be-jovial comment reddens Tom’s ears. His eyes dart to Nott, who smirks, a superior hint about his demeanor. He could lash out, snap, tell Slughorn that he is not the son of Muggles. But what a waste that would be.
Instead, he writes to Harry, ‘I’m going to the library to continue my research on the diaries. I’ll return in ten minutes or so. Tell me all about Jesus touching your heart.’

Crossing the threshold out of the dungeon, he feels a light tug. The rabbity visage of Nott looks at Tom with his typical vacant expression. Dully, he says, “You don’t seem to get past that first page of your journal.”

Tom feels a glitch as he attempts to lie, a small hiccup that registers as deception. He smiles to salvage the situation, but knowing Nott, who is shrewd, his doubts will remain. New direction, then. He exhales through his nose slowly, pulling his shoulders back, and stares at Nott gravely.

“Never you mind what I’m up to. You keep to your affairs, I’ll keep to my own.”

Nott merely shrugs, “Whatever you say, Riddle.”

“Now be on your way,” Tom demands, tilting his head toward the flow of students. An obliging man, Nott goes on, bare of emotion. Tom’s cheeks numb with a rush; he likes it.

Relationships are unusual. In route to the library, Tom considers his friendship with Nott contrasted against his even more questionable friendship with Harry. Nott’s an unusual sort, but nevertheless the most trustworthy Slytherin Tom knows by far (which, while no great feat, may prove useful). On paper, Harry is not someone he dislikes. He’s a book, an interactive character. If Harry became flesh, like Nott, would his opinion change?

Could he ever care about another person, really? He smiles, shakes his head.

No, he couldn’t.

***

‘Don’t look,’ Harry says to himself, keeping his eyes focused on his desk. Suddenly the soft sounds of pens scribbling over paper feels oppressive, the slightest cough and groan from the wood of a chair as it shifts setting him on edge. There’s a person outside, being beaten right at this second. The sight isn’t an unfamiliar one. He’s seen his share of violence—executions, police beatings, schoolyard bullying. *(His own flesh smacked raw by leather.)*

But this feels different. He’s the only one watching. There is no crowd of students watching with him, offering the cloak of apprehension as everyone waits for another to act. There is only him, and a boy being beaten to a bloody pulp in the corner of his eyes. He glances down at the journal.

‘I’m going to the library to continue my research on the diaries. I’ll return in ten minutes or so. Tell me all about Jesus touching your heart.’

He can’t even talk to Tom anymore to distract himself, can’t even use it as an excuse for his inaction. He knows the price he’ll pay if he intervenes. The teacher isn’t what worries him; he’s much too good at football, reflexes second to none. At most he’ll get a scolding for leaving class early, but if he gives the excuse of having to speak to his coach about something he’ll get off lightly.

The biggest risk to intervening comes from his teammates.

But he can’t help but look out the window again. The sight arrests him at once. There’s blood on the grass, and the boy isn’t moving anymore. One of his teammates poking him in the side with his foot. He twitches, curling in further on himself, and the guys standing around him laugh.

He can’t take it. He bolts up from his chair and shoves his things into his bag. Mrs. Ferris gives
“Coach wanted to speak to me,” he says, swinging his backpack over his shoulder. “I forgot. Sorry. Gotta go.”

“In the future—” Mrs. Ferris starts, but Harry isn’t listening anymore, already running out the door and down the corridor. Had he been any other student, it would’ve landed him a month of detention and re-education. Had these bullies been any other student, they would’ve been expelled and transferred to labour schools.

It only takes him a short minute to go down the stairs and out into the field, the gate in the fence left open for convenience. There isn’t a single thought going through his head as he approaches the small group several feet away, only the hope that the kid they were beating on is alright, that it looked worse than it is.

The tall, blond-haired boy named Zeke, whom he suspects of being the ringleader, spots him first. “Oh, look who it is,” Zeke sneers at the sight of him as Harry drops his backpack on the grass and doesn’t slow down his step, rolling up his sleeves. The two boys on either side of Zeke look slightly nervous, but Zeke himself seems unworried. “Come to spoil the fun? Look, mate, the guy was asking for it. You know his type,

Harry’s fist slams into Zeke’s jaw, feeling it underneath his knuckles for a brief moment as Zeke goes down in an instant, knocked right on the grass next to his victim.

Zeke’s two friends look frozen, until Zeke, with what looks like a dislocated jaw, starts screaming as he scrambles up. “YO’ FUDDIN DEAD, PODDER!”

Harry would’ve laughed had one of Zeke’s cronies not launched at him, bigger and broader than he is, tackling him to the ground. The other lingers in the background with hesitation.

The fight isn’t pretty. Even when he finally manages to land a good punch on the boy striking him, his nose might be broken and there’s blood gushing down, staining the front of his shirt. Even as the tide of the fight turns in his benefit—Zeke too preoccupied by his dislocated jaw to join in—and the third boy finally drags Harry off his friend, Harry knows that from that moment on, he’s going to be a target.

Zeke is the top-scorer in their football team, one of the more popular kids in the entire school. He tolerated Harry because until now, Harry didn’t form a threat beyond being a “killjoy.”

What happens next is a bit of blur, and when he finds himself in the nurse’s office (the boy that was beat up carried away in an ambulance) what he remembers most isn’t the initial worry he had for the victim, his moral outrage at what’s being done and for what reason.

It’s the feeling of pure satisfaction the moment his fist met Zeke’s face. The thrill and the rage and the mindless violence being on top of someone and beating them blue and bloody. It comes over him so unfamiliarly, and yet, so naturally.

The nurse leaves for a moment to no doubt inform the principal or whoever, maybe even call his aunt and uncle. Harry, holding a wad of now blood-soaked tissues to his face, reaches over for his backpack and slips out the journal and a pen with one hand, putting the journal down on his lap and opening it on a page.

He wants the reassurance that he’s not become the thing he so abhorred—an animal, taking out his repression whenever he can on whoever he can. But he can’t think of anything to write. What is he supposed to say? That what started out as something just, as him defending someone who was
helpless, quick turned into some sick kick off the thrill? That a part of him, however small, enjoyed it?

Blood drips onto the pages and he curses, reaching for another handful of tissues and throwing away the dirtied one in a bin, trying to wipe away the large splatters but they’re already fading into the pages.

“For god’s sake—” he groans, taking a moment to make sure the new tissues are enough to stop the bleeding before writing in a shaky hand.

‘I think I did something very stupid.’

***

Propped against a mound of undusted tomes, the diary faces Tom, open, while he skims the content in Llewellyn Rowle’s *Through the Void: Unverified Tales of Interdimensional Travel*. More time has passed without Harry’s reply than Tom anticipated. Hm. Well, it is perhaps a bit curious, but of no real concern; he’s more than grateful for an uninterrupted read through what is proving to be the most informative text on parallel universes he has yet encountered. Though it is disappointingly scant with its technical delineations, it is rich with intriguing anecdotes.

A large, bolded heading demands Tom’s attention: “ACCIDENTAL CONNECTIONS: THE STORY OF ALVINIUS KUMP.” He reads the content beneath it with increased interest. Alvinius Kump, owner of a millinery in 16th century Portsmouth, alleged that on a stroll through town, she discovered a tattered piece of parchment that allowed her to contact a man from a different world. For nearly a decade, her family dismissed her claim with derision, assuming dottiness seized the better of her. Then, one humid, summer evening, the unthinkable happened: Alvinius walked into her family cottage, hand-in-hand with a strangely-garbed man, and introduced him as her interdimensional pen pal.

Aloud, Tom mutters the final sentences in the paragraph, both vexed and dismayed, “Kump, to her dying day, refused to discuss the spell she used to transport her distant friend. She insisted that it was those in need, not those in want, who would find their hard-sought answers.”

What an obnoxious woman. Speaking of, Tom scowls, noticing Hermione round the nearest bookshelf, reedy arms stretching around three overlarge texts. Too slow to avert his stare, she catches him and blushes, perhaps out of embarrassment or silly affection. Tom snorts, imagining her professing her admiration, and him assuring in return that he wouldn’t touch her with the sharp-end of a rusted poker. She nods her head, as if in resolution, and approaches him.

Oh? Is she besotted?

“Hi, Riddle,” she says, clearly nervous. “I wanted to apologize about earlier.”

He smiles effortlessly and lies, “No, it’s fun sport, wouldn’t you say? It’s no secret we’re top of our class.” Tom derives satisfaction from the unspoken knowledge between them—in their fourth-year exams, he surpassed her marks in all subjects, save for History of Magic. (The bint has a knack for the tedious rote.)

“It is fun having a bit of competition.” She smiles then arches her neck to read the titles on Tom’s books. “I have to finish studying for Arithmancy, but I notice you’re reading about alternate timelines. I strongly recommend Florius Chance’s *Beyond These Worlds*. I borrowed it from Professor Dumbledore last term, I’m sure he’d let you look at it, too.” And with that, she sets off for her studies, luckily far from Tom, who doubts he could force himself to ask the slightest favor from Dumbledore.
As he attempts to return to Rowle, he notices markings on the diary. He looks closer, discovering that rather than coherent pen scratches, there are thick spots of scarlet. Blood. Unsure of what exactly to write, or even how to feel, he jots what comes to mind. ‘What have you done? Is that blood? Are you going to prison?’

***

Harry tries holding his nose up while gently prodding at the bridge of it with his fingers, trying to feel if it’s broken. It doesn’t feel broken, but it’s swollen and bloody and he’s mostly sure the rest of his face is pretty bruised as well. At least the guy didn’t manage to get him in the glasses. If they’d broken, he might’ve ended up with shards in his eyes.

He pulls the journal up, holding it in front of his face when he notices Tom has written something back. Predictably, a whole lot of questions. Harry waits for about three minutes until he’s sure the nose-bleed has stemmed and he can throw away his tissues and reply. He keeps an eye on the door as he does, hoping the nurse won’t be back too soon.

‘Sorry, nosebleed. I saw a kid getting beat up and got into it with his bullies,’ Harry replies.

What his only real concern is at this point is what Zeke and his two lackeys might pull in retaliation. He’s going to have to watch his back from this point on—and a thought occurs to him that he hadn’t considered, in all his anger.

The boy they were beating up on... Zeke called him queer.

He’s kept it hidden for all this time. No one had reason to suspect him before, not when he was so careful with his encounters. That all could change now. If the coach ever catches wind of this, if Zeke figures something out, Harry fears of what might happen. Would the man would take Harry’s word over Zeke’s? He might even get sent off to a correctional camp, worst case scenario.

Harry looks down at the journal. ‘Don’t know what’ll happen to me,’ he adds in honesty, the writing unsteady. He really should’ve thought it through before interfering.

‘But hey, at least I won the fight.’

***

Dust fills the air as the dense, leather cover slams shut. Tom quickly gathers his supplies, sends his library books levitating to their rightful slots, and shakes his head at Harry’s latest. It’s just as he feared—Harry truly is a Gryffindor type.

Getting into a fight for necessary reasons is one matter. The company Tom kept in his early years was that of society’s dregs, the neglected, maltreated left-behind children of a country that could give a shit. Early enough, he learned to leverage his magical advantage, but there were times when it took a bite, or a kick, or a punch to get what he wanted. But that was for his benefit, not for the protection of someone too pathetic to fight on his own.

Tom can understand, albeit quite shallowly, how the overindulged may possess that streak of fatuous altruism. The precious, loved peers he knows, people like Granger, they care because they’ve never watched some moron’s benevolence spun against their well-being. Tom remembers listening to little girls who protected their drug-addled mummies at the expense of their sanity, little boys who starved to feed their foul, ugly siblings. That do-gooder attitude is treacherous to one’s health, and rejecting it was paramount to Tom’s survival.

The thought that prevents Tom from understanding Harry is the fact that Harry should know
better. He is familiar with abuse, disregard, and oppression. His existence, each day, is like paddling upstream against a turbulent current. So why doesn’t he know better? Why does he still carry on? It’s irrational, and frankly, hypocritical. It’s not as if one can live selflessly all the time. Someone will always go without to ensure another’s needs are met, no matter what. Food in his stomach is hunger in another’s. Money in his wallet is another’s poverty.

Tom glowers at the diary as he chides, ‘Your chivalry inspires me, it truly does. Next, why not storm the ministry and free your nation? If your life’s worth is so easily eclipsed by another person’s, why not get it over with?’

***

While the cutting words he receives in return take him aback, Harry can’t exactly get angry at the scolding. It was such a stupid, reckless thing to do. It could very feasibly get him killed. But what’s the point in living if his entire life is going to be filled with regrets, of not doing something when he could’ve, not saving someone when he should’ve?

Maybe Tom doesn’t understand. He’s never been particularly fond of people, as Harry gathers from his regular commentary on his classmates. Tom probably would’ve never risked his life or his freedom for some stranger, and fine, that’s how some people will always feel. But it doesn’t make it right.

‘It’s not like I’m entirely selfless,’ Harry writes back, the sight of the boy’s bloodied face ingrained on the back of his eyelids. ‘I just couldn’t sit there and watch it happen. That’s not the kind of person I want to be.’

After a moment of consideration he adds, in a thought that is perhaps a bit absurd but written solely to pester, ‘But if it bothers you that much you could try and help me escape. Like, wave your wand around and open a portal or something. That’s how magic works, right?’ He knows very well that’s not how it works, but he also knows it’ll probably annoy Tom, and that’s always a laugh. He’s way too far up his own arse, sometimes.

The sharp clicks of a heel against the stone floor draws Harry’s attention, and he quickly scribbles a last word in the notebook before putting it away. ‘Nurse, gotta go.’

The woman in question enters the room just a second later, looking very severe as she closes the door behind her.

“Your aunt and uncle are on their way to pick you up.”

Harry’s heart sinks into his stomach.

***

With Harry’s words rolling in his mind, Tom halfway wraps the diary in a bit of loose cloth and carefully places it in his bag. His portal comment was a glib jibe, Tom knows that, but is there some truth to it?

There exists an unquestionable similarity between his diary and Alvinius Kump’s parchment. It’s reminiscent of a silly, old divination adage he read in a novel during second year: “Across the veil, there are worlds aplenty, and the truly divine may see two before their third, final destination.” The plot was, regrettably, that of a fictional romance Tom ventured merely to feed his curiosity, but outside the unthinkable context of soul-mates and other stupid notions, perhaps it possesses a grain of veracity. Perhaps there is a veil that Kump’s partner crossed that Harry, too, could cross to deliver him to this universe.
He needs more insight. Of course, Tom cannot fathom taking Hermione’s recommendation seriously; the nosey codger, Dumbledore, would simply assume Tom had committed some grievous wrongdoing. Besides, he is but one of several professors. Slughorn is the most logical option, being that he’s the softest toward Tom and a sufficiently knowledgeable man taboot. But somehow it feels wrong to seek him for this matter; his expertise leans more toward the practical than the theoretical. Dumbledore is, by leaps, the likeliest to know, so who is the closest to Dumbledore?

“Professor Lupin,” Tom decides.

He tightens his messenger’s strap, strokes the spine of his diary and heads to the Defense instructor’s office. Lupin is too young to gab back to Dumbledore, too old to leave Tom to his own devices, and with predictable people like him, Tom knows how to set a clean trap. He’ll go to him, betray a smidgen of worry in his knitted brows, pretend he has a question for a research project, and trigger Lupin’s alarm. When Lupin notices Tom is distressed, he’ll ask the big question—oh, Tom, are you sure this is for research?—and Tom will have him in the state of paternal vulnerability he needs him to really suck his resources dry.

So caught up in his plans, Tom is shocked to see he’s already arrived at Lupin’s office. He melts his expression to just where he wants it and plants a polite knock on the sheen alder door.

***

After speaking to his teacher and the nurse, his uncle doesn’t say a single word to him until they’re home. The anger in his face is visible in the redness of his skin that persists for such a long period of time Harry almost starts to think it must just be permanent. His aunt is the only one that gives him an initial talking to about what an embarrassment he is, how his mother is rolling in her grave, how she would’ve never wanted such a failure of a son—nothing he hasn’t heard before.

As far as Harry can tell, since he didn’t have to go see the principal, he probably won’t be punished by the school. His uncle, however, is another matter entirely.

The entire ride home, sitting in the backseat, Harry almost instinctively wants to reach for the journal to pour his thoughts out as he’s so used to doing. It’s his only venting mechanism, his only access to a semblance of a companion, but even though it’s close enough to touch it’s still out of reach.

The screaming doesn’t start until Harry walks through the front door of the house. He suspects his uncle refrains from beating him only because he’s already been beaten, shouting him down with profanities and insults like he always does—worthless pathetic unwanted unloved unneeded pitiful disgusting repulsive freak freak freak—before sending him up to his room.

He already knows how it’s going to go without Vernon having to lay it out for him. Only one meal a day for the next several weeks. Home directly after school or practice, and failure to abide by this usually results in beatings. Double the number of chores he must do. Not allowed contact with anyone—never mind the fact that he doesn’t actually have any real friends to contact to begin with.

Well, save for one.

Harry sits on his bed with the journal in his hands, opened on a blank page, staring at it for a moment with such immense gratitude for having something, someone, to anchor himself with that he can hardly imagine what his life might’ve been like the past month had he never gotten the journal. He wonders if Tom realises how much of a difference he has made in Harry’s life, and resolves immediately to never let him know. It’s too embarrassing a thought.
The door eases open with a mild creak, revealing Professor Lupin’s inquisitive stare. Standing tall, pale, and plain, he scratches his ashen crine and smiles. He has pedestrian features and a few crooked teeth, yet still maintains a certain charm by Tom’s measure.

“What brings you, Tom?”

“Hello, Professor,” he greets, nervously fiddling with his hands in a gesture he’s never once displayed authentically. “I was wondering if I could talk to you about an independent research project.”

Lupin nods and invites him in. While not quite cavernous, his office is a comfortable size with a pleasant overview of the courtyard. If not for the mismatched bookshelves, which line every bit of the rightward wall, and the varied photographs fidgeting in their frames, the room could look tastefully baroque. Tom identifies the lowest chair opposite Lupin’s desk and claims it for himself; the lower he sits, the more juvenile he looks, and the more mature Lupin feels by comparison.

“Now, I’d be happy to help,” Lupin says as he straightens against his wingback chair. Dominance. “What’s your topic of research?”

“Well, you see,” Tom’s eyes drift. “I want to write a paper on the effects, well, the uh – the explanations for interdimensional travel.”

“Quite a Muggle concept, isn’t it?”

“In some regards, yes, I suppose. But I’m interested, specifically, in the accidental transport of people between dimensions. Umm, perhaps, maybe, through an… object.” Tom looks up on the last word, blinking hopefully.

Lupin eyes Tom knowingly. “Is this really a research project, Tom?”

Three. Two.

Tom exhales dramatically and exclaims, “You’ve caught me, Professor.” He shakes his head in rue. “I came to you because, well, you’re my youngest professor, I know I can count on you to keep this a secret. I’ve found an object and I think it could be a portal to another universe.”

“Do you mind if I see the journal, Tom?” His hand reaches expectantly, palm open and greedy.

“No, sir, I’ve left it in my room,” Tom lies. He isn’t sure this choice is wise, but he doesn’t equivocate. Giving Harry to someone else, no matter how briefly, feels uncomfortable, wrong. “I didn’t foresee us discussing it, to be honest.”

“I understand,” Lupin says as he retracts. “Well, I can’t tell you much, Tom, but I’ll tell you what I know. There have been rare incidences, indeed quite rare incidences, of people popping in from
an alternate universe through an enchanted object. These people are called *universe hoppers*. Not much is written about them, unfortunately, and I think to fully help you with your question, I'll require another day to reference my texts. Do you believe you can come back this weekend?” He then adds, “*With* the journal?”

It’s not ideal, but it will do, so Tom offers an affable agreement and leaves Lupin to it. Through dinner, he eats with the diary open beneath the table, glancing down in vain for an update every few bites. It is not until he is beneath the emerald green Slytherin canopy, and half-occupied by his thoughts, that Harry finally writes. Tom is a bit disappointed by his brevity (*‘I’m back. Tired.’*), but responds all the same, ‘*So I take it you won’t be sent to prison?*’

***

Harry shifts on his bed, sitting in the corner against the wall right next to the open window, leaning his head back and enjoying what little comfort the cool wind is against his bruised skin, dried up blood crusted right beneath his nose and above his lips. He can still taste the copper in his mouth, still hear the snap of bone against his fist.

‘*So I take it you won’t be sent to prison?*’

Is there a prison? Harry isn’t quite sure. All he’s ever heard of are correctional camps. The government has no use for long-term imprisonment, or, so he hears. Maybe there are prisons, but not any he’s ever seen or heard of. That probably says enough.

‘*Wouldn’t make a difference, really. I’m already in one,*’ he pens back wryly, though there’s more to it than that. He almost wants to add that he’ll probably be starved at the whim of his uncle who will almost certainly deny him that one meal a day depending on his mood, that he will almost certainly come away with even more bruises and welts on his back from the belt, but complaining—because that’s how he sees it—isn’t in his nature.

‘*But no, I just got grounded indefinitely. Do anything productive while I was being yelled at by my dear uncle?*’

Probably having dinner in the Great Hall underneath its enchanted ceiling. Harry would gladly give an arm or a leg just to be there, instead of where he is now—a small, cramped room which is to be his cell for the next few weeks, and probably his only safe haven for the inevitable attempts at retribution from Zeke at school, which will no doubt be plentiful.

‘*Like figure out that portal, maybe?*’ he adds mostly in jest. Mostly.

***

Harry’s low spirits set Tom’s mouth in a line.

He grazes the diary cover absently. The magic at his fingertips is singularly more mysterious, more powerful, than he imagined witnessing this soon in his adolescence. He considers it a testament to his eminence that, as he ages, life only proves him to be greater; born magically supreme and intellectually gifted, he now has fate’s favor blessing him, too. Only an intensely special person would be chosen for this connection, which means Harry must be special in his own regard.

This is the only feasible explanation Tom can surmise for why he even cares to free Harry from his burdensome universe. Biting the edge of his quill, and doing his damnedest to ignore Draco’s routine ego-wank session with Goyle as they chat about girls, Tom wonders if Harry’s insistence on the portal is a sign, like some subliminal godlike whispers in his ear. Buying time to decide whether it’s prudent to wind Harry’s hopes, he answers his question vaguely.
'Nothing terribly productive, no. I spent my evening in the library. Didn’t make much headway.’

“Please, Riddle’s all she has eyes for,” Zabini’s voice rings dryly. Tom’s head perks at the mention, then turns questioningly toward his roommates.

“Who are you talking about?” he asks. Tom doesn’t really care, but it’s wise to keep track of social affairs, isn’t it?

“Shove off, Zabini,” Draco snarls, raising his middle-finger obscenely. “It’s not like Pansy’s Riddle’s type anyway.”

“Hm,” Tom hums disinterestedly. “Then pray tell, Malfoy, what is my type?”

Draco snorts and replies, “A mirror, I reckon. Or perhaps diaries are what you’re into now.”

His temper shortens, but it’s not worth pursuit. He can cut Draco much quicker by cementing his fears. “If what we invest our time in is an indicator of type, then I imagine you’ll be marrying your spunk-encrusted sock any day now.” Tom smirks. “I joke. But in truth, I do think Pansy’s a lovely girl. I can see why you pine.”

There is a tense pause. Oh, how Tom loves the sound of Draco shutting his thin-lipped mouth.

Few fatter lies have danced off his tongue, though; Pansy Parkinson is pug-faced with skinny, bowed legs and a flat personality. A classic example of too much inbreeding, Tom presumes. Why is such a bulk of the population so painful to look at? Quill hesitating over the page, he almost wants to ask Harry about his appearance. His portal curiosities are obviously more about scientific inquiry than anything, but it would be interesting to see how Harry differs physically from how Tom pictures him.

He closes his eyes in concentration. What harm could he do by informing Harry about his meeting with Lupin? At worst, he ends up with deflated feelings—boohoo, poor boy doesn’t get to escape his universe, how tragic. And telling him could somehow help Tom, though it’s unclear how.

‘I’m going to bed now, but I have something to admit: I think it’s possible this diary is a portal. I’ve contacted a professor to conduct further research. Just don’t feel misled if our findings are dry, though. This isn’t common magic. I’ll talk to you tomorrow about it.’

***

Tom’s words that night are the only thing that keeps him going the next couple of weeks.

He doesn’t notice being ostracised at first. Harry never interacted much with the other students at school, which was probably a mistake in hindsight since he now has no one to stand with him in the face of a crowd seeming to completely avoid him. Most teachers seem indifferent to the change, but some treat him almost coldly, and he’s called on far more often when he becomes too distracted by the journal.

Harry doesn’t think much of it, at first. He thinks if this is all he has to deal with, then he’ll be able to get through the year just fine.

He underestimated the extent of it.

When he comes to school two days after the incident, he finds his locker sprayed with graffiti, ‘QUEER’ written in large red letters. The lock itself he discovers to be busted, and any books or school assignments he kept there shredded up and torn apart. He stares at it for a good few seconds, painfully aware of the whispers of the students around him as they watch for what he’ll
do.

The first thing he does is go to a teacher, let them know, and with a resigned sort of acceptance, continue with his day as if nothing was at all amiss.

It angers Zeke and his cronies, he’s sure. The more days pass the more he feels like he might as well not exist. If someone talks to him, it’s to make a sneering comment about staying away from them before they ‘catch’ his disease. And yet he takes it all in stride, keeps his head held high, at least in public. When he comes home, it tends to fall apart, just a little bit.

He doesn’t initially tell Tom about it, not really. It just seems like it would be whining, like it would be fishing for sympathy, but when one afternoon he’s walking home and a passing student tries shoving him in front of a speeding car—he avoids being hit only thanks to his reflexes. When he gets home, it just comes pouring out of him. And it isn’t depression or fear or even desperation, but sheer fury, with his life, his system, the sheer cowardice rooted in the society around him, everything.

He doesn’t realise how angry he’s really been all this time until he finds his hands shaking in suppressed rage as he sits there and tries to just breathe, his fingers aching from how much he’s written, blotted with ink. Tom has been his only comfort this whole time. It’s a small relief, his only one in a week filled with misery. It all culminates on a single afternoon.

When the day of the first match arrives on Friday, Harry does as he’s always done as a goalie and performs excellently—even more so, just to spite Zeke who looks furiously conflicted with every shot Harry stops. He's not at liberty to do anything about it, and Harry puts it off his mind.

As his team celebrates the victory that evening, Harry thinks to quietly slip away home. Of course, it is not to be.

Walking with his training bag slung over his shoulder, the sky dark and street lights dim, Harry doesn’t really think about the footsteps nearing closer from behind him. Not until he suddenly finds an arm wrapping around his chest pulling him back against another body and cold, sharp steel against his throat.

“Where are you going, Potter?” Zeke’s voice hisses in his ear. “Going home so soon, superstar? The whole team’s celebrating—”

“What do you want?” Harry growls, struggling just enough to be a nuisance but not enough to get his throat slit, and Zeke would, without hesitation.

“Think you’re above the fray, do you?” Zeke sneers. “Fucking queer. I bet that’s why you stuck up for that kid; like it up the arse, don’t you, Potter?”

“You’re sick, Zeke,” Harry bites back, the sharp of the knife pressing into his skin.

“You’re the sick one, you’re the freak! You’re fucking disgusting, you and your kind, then turning around and acting all high-and-mighty, fucking teacher’s pet, think you’re so bloody special—”

Harry—fed up, fed up, fed up—couldn’t give a single shit about the knife to his neck, grabbing Zeke’s wrist with both hands and yanking his head back. He feels it collide with Zeke’s face as the boy curses, grip twitching but ultimately slipping as Harry breaks out of his hold, only to his surprise being grabbed by his hair.

“You’re not going fucking ANYWHERE until we’ve settled this!” Zeke screams into his face, the tip of the knife pressing into the side of his cheek.
“What’re you gonna do?” Harry snaps back. “Kill me in the middle of the street? If so you’re even dumber than you look.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Zeke looks slightly mad, breathing heavily as Harry feels the blade break his skin and still, still feels nothing of fear and only of anger, and he’s had it, had it with everything. It feels hot, boiling right underneath the surface of his skin, pulsing through his veins with every heartbeat, making his fingers itch. “We’re going to have a lot of fun tonight, Potter. I’m not going to let you go that–"

A car turns the corner and comes driving up the street, startling Zeke long enough for Harry to grab for Zeke’s hand, the one holding the knife, and twist it mindlessly. There’s a sickening crack and Zeke screams bloody murder as Harry slips the knife out of his fingers, throws it away and punches Zeke.

And punches him. And punches him. And punches him. And punches him. And punches him. And punches him –

There’s a yell and Harry blinks, suddenly finds himself sitting on top of Zeke, blood dripping off his knuckles, the boy below him with a face swollen and unrecognisable, unmoving.

What happened? Did he… did he just black out?

“Oh my god,” a woman shouts in the distance, the yell he heard before. “Oh my god, someone call the police!”

Harry scrambles off Zeke, dazed and confused, having the presence of mind to grab his training bag before running off.

What just, what did he do? Oh god, what did he do?

***

Tom, planted on his bed, is surrounded by a cloud of floating parchment scraps, quietly mouthing quatrains of runic scripture. The Ordinary Wizarding Levels are fast approaching and his sights are set on a full flush of the highest marks. Without the persistent distraction of Harry’s dramatic fits, Tom feels his preparation would so far outpace his peers, there would be little reason to study. Yet, to his dismay, the fallacy of this accusation ultimately casts a poor light on him, not Harry.

Tom could shut the diary if he wanted. Throw it back from whence it came, pretend there was never a Harry and move on with his studies. The independent research Lupin facilitates with Tom has yielded few discoveries pertinent to extracting Harry from the diary. It has enhanced his knowledge of Charms, perhaps, but only marginally, and Tom feels it was unimportant to the investigation at hand; despite Lupin’s insistence, Tom knows the diary is not Charmed, not like a Portkey anyway. All in all, he has gained little from his diversion called Harry, and yet the diary sits to his right, open and within view.

He watches it constantly. He never tires of what Harry says, nor does he ever feel quite as critical as he should at how dimly Harry thinks.

Tom doesn’t prioritize his impending tests because, facts being faced, he values Harry more.

“Sss,” Tom hisses. The idea is such an annoying one that it actually creates a buzzing sound in his head, a low ringing noise unlike anything he’s ever heard. He ignores it and continues his silent recitation.
All Tom’s excuses for tolerating Harry’s odious heroic mentality fall flat. Harry’s a bloody moron for having incited the violence against him. Had he kept his mouth shut, his nose clean, there would be no bullies to navigate. Tom can admit there is something decisively low about the nature of Harry’s renunciation; those who pick on him do so with frail, shallow justifications, and gain little more than satisfaction and social status from their ventures.

But would Tom treat Harry differently, if it were him who Harry punched in intervention? Perhaps not. What Harry did by standing up for the silly gay boy subverted their standards, of course those at the height of the pecking order wouldn’t take kindly to it. Tom knows the thrill of dominion and had many times stood on the opposite side of Harry’s fight. When that foul-mouthed child, Billy Stubbs, squawked—to Tom’s face and in Tom’s face—that he ‘didn’t appreciate’ Tom’s authority, the little shite later found his rabbit upended from a noose, feeble and unmoving. Harry is no different from that boy. He’s a foul insurgent, a pesky instigator, the type of nancy who privileges morals over pragmatics, and Tom should absolutely hate him for it.

But he doesn’t.

The ringing doesn’t cease. Instead, it gains in intensity. Unable to bear the mental weight of both this grating noise and his studies, Tom organizes his papers with the wave of his hand and reaches for the diary.

Suddenly, it stops. The ringing stops.

When he lets it go, the noise returns, and when he grabs it, it stops again. Faintly, Tom feels a tingling sensation on the surface of his hands, a small, pleasant electric jolt emanating from the diary. His breathing hitches.

He shouldn’t know what this means, and yet, by some instinct, he does.

It means it’s almost time.

Chapter End Notes

Pleased to know what you think.
It is through a pure stroke of luck that neither his aunt nor uncle are home yet when he arrives. He remembers faintly in the back of his mind his aunt mentioning they’d be out for dinner and be home late, but the thought barely registers as Harry drops his training bag in the hallway and closes the front door behind him.

He feels like he’s trying to breathe underwater, like he’s seeing through a distorted mirror, his surroundings not feeling quite real. Zeke’s face burns in his memory, bloodied and bruised, silent and still. There’s a pounding in his head, thrumming against his skull.

Harry looks down at his blood-smeared hands and a wave of nausea hits him, bile rising in his throat, prompting him to make a run for the toilet on ground floor. He collapses on his knees in front of it, throwing up what little contents are left in his stomach, the acid leaving a disgusting taste in the back of his mouth when he’s done and left heaving over the toilet bowl, sweat running down his neck and back.

How did he lose control like that? One moment he was just disarming Zeke, throwing away the knife, the next he finds himself pummeling the boy unconscious. He was just unconscious, wasn’t he? Harry didn’t… he didn’t….

Shakily pushing himself up off the floor and flushing the toilet, he quietly makes his way to the kitchen, rinsing the taste of bile out his mouth with water from the sink. He feels like he’s not quite there, as if walking in a dream, numbed to everything around him. Did the woman who yelled for someone to call the police see him? How many people know that Zeke went looking for Harry? How long will it take for them to figure out that he was the one who did it? What if Zeke never wakes up? What will happen then?

In the blink of an eye Harry suddenly finds himself in his bedroom with the journal in his hands, unable to even remember leaving the kitchen and going up the stairs, as if his feet carried him there while his mind was trapped in its own thoughts. He feels strangely calm holding the magical notebook, as if it’s grounding him to it, almost magnetic in its attraction. The pounding in his head has stopped.

Harry opens it up to the first page, pen in hand which he doesn’t remember reaching for either. The tip of it rests on the blank sheet for a while as he stares at it, hand trembling when he, feeling on the brink of collapse, writes:

‘I think I killed Zeke.’

His breaths don’t feel deep enough, not getting enough oxygen as he keeps writing and it turns frantic, almost illegible near the end. He doesn’t even have the capacity to care what Tom might think of him for doing this. Harry’s never been this terrified in his entire life.

‘he had a knife to my throat and I dont know what happened I just snapped blacked out and I was on top of him just punching him I got so angry I couldnt think and then he wasnt moving anymore oh god his face he was bleeding all over I couldnt even recognise him I think I knocked some teeth out what do I do? I think I killed him fuck what if hes really dead what do I do what if I killed him’

Harry drops the pen and the diary on his lap, trying to calm his breathing before he starts to
hyperventilate, feeling like he’s about to pass out, the pounding starting in his head again that now feels like a terrible drumbeat which only stops when he reaches for the journal, his only haven.

What if he really did kill Zeke?

What if he’s a murderer?

What’s going to happen to him now?

***

Thumping from a rapid flow of blood still resounds in Tom’s head when Harry’s frenzied message appears, detailing an act more gruesome than even Tom can claim he has committed. Bloody hell. He underestimated Harry—majorly underestimated Harry, actually. In the uncomfortable wedge between savior and survivor, there is Harry, an intermediate residing in the gaps. It inspires no small amount of joy in Tom. One could nearly describe his feeling as giddy, though he’s sure that giddy is one of many emotions that fall rather outside his depths.

This is nearly the moment for Harry to join Tom. And for what other reason than that Harry has finally embraced Tom’s nature? Harry is untamed by his ego; he now knows the sheer power one attains when they relent to surges of rage and abandon those lame, fickle precepts from elementary days. A zealous grin cuts across Tom’s features, one so wide it strains the underused muscles in his hollow cheeks.

‘Don’t panic, Harry,’ he writes quickly. ‘You did what you needed to protect yourself. He wanted to kill you and you didn’t let him; this makes you the hero.’

In the distance, the voices of Draco and Zabini echo, raising with volume as they draw nearer. Tom carelessly tosses his ink pot into his bag and exits the room; he needs to be alone, he cannot have the presence of others damage his good mood. He stretches the front cover behind its back and, with a remarkably steady hand, writes as he walks. ‘Harry, I think I can feel the diary changing. I think it wants you to cross over. I don’t know if it’s today, or tomorrow, or when. But soon. Maybe you were meant to kill him, Harry. He is a monster, isn’t he?’

Monster or not, he is (was?) a damned nuisance. Certainly not anyone worth mourning. Hell, least of all should Harry, his victim, suffer concern for his parting. Tom crosses through the Dungeon entrance and sprints down the cool, stone corridor, stopping only when satisfied with the extent of his isolation. By the light of his wand, he leaves Harry with a final comment before resigning to wait for the next reply.

‘No matter what happens, keep the diary on you. Do you understand?’

***

It is a surreal experience to discover what you’re truly capable of when pushed to the brink of breaking, and where Tom’s reassurances should’ve eased his mind, they only raise more questions.

‘…this makes you the hero.’

The hero? Maybe it started as self-defence, maybe he meant to only disarm Zeke, but what happened after that, the senseless violence and rage. How could he possibly be the hero? Did he really do what he needed to protect himself, when he could’ve stopped after breaking Zeke’s wrist and left him there instead of going a step further and beating into him?
Harry shudders to think what would’ve happened had that woman not been there when she was; Zeke would almost certainly be dead, if he isn’t already.

What Tom writes next shakes him up even further, in more way than one. The idea that there’s actually a way for him to leave this place seems too fantastical to be true. How long has he dreamed of something like that, just jumping through a portal and ending up in Hogwarts, where there isn’t a regime pressing down on him from every corner, where freedom is a real ideal and not just a faraway memory.

‘Maybe you were meant to kill him, Harry. He is a monster, isn’t he?’

He was meant to kill Zeke? Harry stares in pure incomprehension at the words that now almost seem to glow on the pages, glaring at him. Is Tom really just trying to reassure him, or is this how he actually feels? For all of Zeke’s faults, he was not a monster. Society shaped him into this. He doesn’t deserve to die, for Christ’s sake!

‘No matter what happens, keep the diary on you. Do you understand?’

Harry takes a deep breath, calmer now than a few moments ago. He still feels nauseated, sick to his core, his heart pounding against his ribs like an anxious bird aflutter in its cage. The uncertainty of what might happen to him is far less pleasant than had he known his fate to be a bleak one, and yet there seems to be a bit of hope, in the form of this small notebook in his hands.

‘Yeah, okay. I will.’ Harry writes. ‘Thank you, Tom.’ For what, he isn’t quite sure. Just having someone to talk to has made his life that much more bearable. Maybe that’s enough. ‘If it really does want me to cross over, I hope it happens sooner rather than later. A woman saw me, across the street. It probably won’t take the police long to find me.’

His only relief is that tomorrow is a Saturday, so he won’t have to go to school—that would make finding him infinitely easier.

***

Hogsmeade weekends are, under normal circumstances, an embittering occurrence for Tom. There are few students at Hogwarts who are unable to attain signatures on their permission slips and Tom is among them. To him, the restriction scarcely matters, as he frequently exploits secret passages out of the castle, but the injustice of it is not something he can forgive. He hasn’t got, nor has he ever had, a genuine guardian, and the Muggles he lives with know nothing of magic.

Today, however, he doesn’t mind watching his classmates assemble in their little packs, chatting and laughing and shoving chocolate frogs down their gullets. From the mountainside, Tom observes their activities with little interest, far more concerned with the diary laying across his lap.

There is no letting go of the diary. The slightest inch of distance sets off the unbearable, whistling siren that he alone can hear. He fell asleep the night prior with it bundled in his arms, like a dependent toddler latched onto a threadbare blanket. It’s unsettling, no doubt, but so very, very exciting that it offsets his concerns. For the upteenth time, he writes into the diary, ‘Are you there?’ and watches the words dissolve. Harry must be sleeping or otherwise occupied.

But then, it is all too possible that Harry was apprehended for his crime, isn’t it? Meaning his half of the portal could lay alone, unclaimed. Would the pounding in Tom’s head persist for the rest of his life if Harry was slaughtered? What an unsettling prospect. Should this prove his fate, he could return to researching Horcrux creation as a remedy for his otherworldly attachment. He’s given it rather little contemplation since his discovery of Harry. Perhaps it was a dead end, anyway; it’s not like there’s much literature on Horcruxes, and his connection through Harry could even turn
out to be far more propitious to his ambition for immortality.

Strange how little he’s considered immortality these past few months, too. But he trusts the tides of fate, knowing fate is in his hands and that his hands are more than capable of forging greatness from nothing. He intakes a lungful of the fresh spring breeze and waits for the next sign.

***

When Harry wakes up that Saturday morning, he finds the journal sitting on the bed next to his pillow, his right hand curled around its cover.

The happenings of the night before still fresh in his mind, Harry is shocked he managed to fall asleep at all. The journal feels… strange, he can’t quite put his finger on it. Like a subtle vibration tingling against his skin.

He takes a deep breath, staring at his ceiling as the sunlight falls through the window onto his face, tries not to think of the severity of his situation. No doubt in a small town like this where little happens during an average week, his incident with Zeke probably made the paper. Seeing as how his aunt hasn’t come upstairs to scream at him yet, and the police isn’t knocking at his door, he assumes that they’re not yet onto him.

His stomach turns as he realizes that Zeke’s fate is probably written there as well. Does he even want to know? He has no choice. Not knowing is worse.

Getting up from his bed he takes the time to freshen up, a quick cold shower getting him fully awake, he dresses up before checking the journal. ‘Are you there?’ is written in cursive, as if waiting for him.

‘Just woke up,’ he writes back anxiously. ‘Going to check the paper.’ The moment he separates himself from the notebook the thumping sounds in his head again, but he ignores it for the moment, knowing it’ll only take half a minute.

As he goes down the stairs he immediately notices the silence in the house. It seems no one but him is awake yet. Harry approaches the front door, the newspaper half-shoved through the mail slot. His heartbeat thumps erratically against his chest as he approaches it, pulling it out of the slot and folding it open.

‘BEATEN INTO A COMA’

The headline has him reeling in relief, but also disgust. On the one hand, Zeke isn’t dead. He’s not dead and Harry didn’t kill him. But a coma is still incredibly serious. Harry quickly skims the article, feeling the colour drain from his face.

Perpetrator description: round glasses, black hair, 175 cm, average weight, jeans and shirt.

“Shit.” Harry shoves the newspaper in his backpack. Going outside dressed as he is would definitely be a terrible idea. With a heavy heart he returns to his bedroom, hoping the police won’t arrive before he’s ready to go, sitting down on his bed and picking up his pen again.

‘Let’s just say I’ll be shocked if the police don’t come knocking at my door today. Zeke survived, apparently, but he’s in a coma. At least he won’t be talking,’ he notes, feeling the cold sweat already breaking out on his back. At least he won’t be talking? Since when does he think in such a cold and calculated way? He shakes it off, nonetheless feeling disturbed ‘Do you feel anything from the diary? Like a weird pounding in your head? I’ve been having it since yesterday, every time I get too far away from it.’
At least he won’t be talking’?

Ha! It is something of a shame that the Zeke boy’s heart beats on, but with comas, one can never be too certain how things will resolve. To live a half-life, one bound to a bed and defined by dependency, is perhaps more awful than death itself, though Tom seldom blames the defective for inching on in their sad, little lives. It is the nature of being, the purpose of evolution, to strive to live forever.

It would be nice to mock the near-dead, but despite Harry’s display of good humor, he likely still possesses a shred of sentimentality. So, leaning his back against the dewy grass, Tom informs him, 'Yes, I can’t escape this peculiar headache either. It’s almost surreal that you’ll soon be here. I can feel it.’

He’s set on remaining outside of school grounds until Harry’s arrival. If Harry has no magic, the castle wards could pose a barrier. With his hands, trembling slightly, he clutches the diary tighter, tense with the hope that Harry will be a wizard. From a borrowed book of Dumbledore’s—likely Hermione’s recommended text, he assumes with some bitterness—Professor Lupin discovered that Alvinius Kump’s partner, though Muggle in origin, developed magical abilities upon transference. Harry will be the same. He’s not like Muggles, who are silly and cowardly and unexceptional. He’ll be a wizard, or Tom will –

Crack.

Tom turns with a start to face his unexpected visitor, Professor Lupin, who smiles down at him mildly. From Tom’s angle, Lupin’s head is limned by sunlight, looking almost angelic.

“Blimey, Professor,” Tom complains with his tone benign. “What are you doing here?”

“I spotted you on my way out of Honeyduke’s,” Lupin explains, lowering to his knees by Tom’s side. “Bold to sit here in plain sight, don’t you think?”

Tom represses a petulant comeback and opts for something almost honest. “I wouldn’t normally betray castle rules, Professor, but I think it might happen today.”

A light eyebrow raises in curiosity. “Oh? How can you be sure?”

“I can’t explain it,” Tom says, eyes concentrating on the plain, white page that has captured his interest for so long. “But I know it’s soon.”

‘I can feel it.’

Harry somehow knows what Tom is referring to, that strange atmosphere almost foreboding but more optimistic, somehow. Something is going to happen, he’s sure of it, but it frightens him that he doesn’t know what.

A portal could open and swallow him whole right now, just as a squad of police officers could break down his door and put a bag over his head to take him away, and he’d be as good as dead. Harry’s fingers practically cling to the edges of the journal, hoping, praying that he’ll be gone before they find him, before they kill him.

He listens to the silence in the house until his aunt wakes up and breaks through the quiet by going into the shower in the bathroom, humming a tune to herself, probably thinking everyone else still
asleep. Had Harry not been fearing for his life, he might’ve been.

The sound of a car pulling up makes his shoulders tense. He glances out the window, stays stock-still for a long moment as he watches the men exit the vehicle and walk up to the front door, then turns to the journal to write down what could very well be his last words.

‘They’re here. In case they take me away—thank you for everything.’

He closes the journal, holding it tight in one hand, and quietly makes his way downstairs just as the doorbell rings. Not to the front door, but the kitchen, grabbing a large knife off the counter and watching the door.

The police tire of the doorbell quickly, instead starting to pound with fists against the door. “This is the police, open up!”

Harry stays still.

“We give you to the count of three! One… two…”

***

“This is very peculiar magic, Tom,” Remus says, not as though it is a new thought, but as though it is one worth discussion.

It is a hollow conversation to have at this point. Tom doesn’t require Lupin’s babying attitude to question his choices; there remains the chance that Harry is untrustworthy, or demonic, or not even coming at all. But what is Tom to do now? Turn back? He could not, and far more importantly, would not. Exhilarating as it is dubious, his future is now tied to Harry’s fate. This is the dark stretch down a winding road, that moment without clarity before dawn. Out of respect, or rather the pretense of it, he acknowledges Lupin’s fear.

“Peculiar or not, it’s the hand I’ve been dealt. What would you have done, Professor?”

“I would be sitting where you are now.”

“As I thought.”

The blank page feels emptier than usual. What he wouldn’t give for a glimpse into Harry’s world, if only for a moment, just to see what he so heatedly anticipates. It began as an academic interest, and aloud Tom would never admit this interest transformed over the course of his correspondence, but in the stutter between his heartbeats, his true curiosity thrives. Harry could be a lieutenant, a helpmate, someone to progress Tom’s ambitions, someone to be loyal to him above all others.

Tom is caressing the page when Harry’s words appear.

‘They’re here. In case they take me away—thank you for everything.’

“It needs to happen,” Tom hisses, vaguely aware that he’s swapped his English for Parseltongue, but too preoccupied with taking quill to paper to explain himself to Lupin.

‘Harry, don’t let go of the diary. Don’t let go of it.’

He feels unsteady, sick, his limbs are quavering, his breathing is uneven. Lupin says something, but the words are low, almost muted, under the sudden ear-piercing buzz of the diary’s call. The sound travels through his body, frazzling his nerves, turning his intestines, dizzying his sense. The agony, so immense, drowns his judgement entirely, and he barely registers the bitter taste of blood
as he chews through the soft flesh of his cheek.

And then all that happens, happens in slow motion.

The diary rattles madly, vibrating and fluttering, struggling and shaking. Through the torturous, throbbing ache, Tom maintains enough awareness to clench its pages and secure it in his lap, but if the torment continues for much longer, he’ll be forced to let go. He grates his teeth and prays, begs for it to end.

When the diary’s pressure builds to a peak Tom cannot mount, he bursts with a deafening scream. As if cued by his exclamation, a bright glistening force erupts from the diary.

***

They break the door down.

Harry has his back against the wall, hiding next to the door, waiting with the knife trembling in his hand as footsteps near. Aunt Petunia is still in the shower, Uncle Vernon is still sleeping, and the weight of the diary in his hand is the smallest comfort.

He thinks, there isn’t going to be a portal, he’ll have to do it alone, and this time won’t be an act of rage and forgive him but he’ll go straight for the man’s throat if he must, if that’s what it takes to survive –

The moment the first police officer steps foot past the kitchen door’s threshold Harry takes a breath, grip tightening on the knife, and lunges. But he never makes contact.

Right as the tip of his knife grazes over the man’s neck, his vision goes black.

A thump. Nothing.

Then, all at once, all so sudden that it almost feels like being born again, like having breathed underwater all your life and taking your first breath of air, grass and wind and trees and birds chirping and soft earth underneath his feet and–

Blurs of two people in front of him.

Harry tries backing away frantically, mind yet to catch up with what has happened, tripping backwards over his own feet onto the ground with the knife still in one hand pointed forward—the next moment a flash of red and a sting in his hand and the knife flies out of his grip.

“Wha-what…” Harry blinks several times, still holding onto the journal. The first person he sees in front of him is a startlingly handsome young man with the backdrop of a majestic castle behind him, holding a notebook like Harry’s. And then it dawns on him. “Tom?”

Harry is so fixated that he completely misses the other person present, who is eyeing him with nothing short of pure bewilderment, because right now his mind is still processing what just happened.

Did he make it? Is he really here, at Hogwarts? With bruises still on his face, covering his nose, cuts on his lip and cheek from the fights and the misery and all that he’s endured, looking wild and wide-eyed and having been a second away from murder, he stares up at the unfamiliar young man in front of him in equal parts wonder and desperation. He made it.

*He made it.*
It’s so much more than he could’ve imagined. The castle so much bigger and grander than in his fantasies, the grounds so much more lush with green and stretching as far as the eye can see, and Tom.

He is not at all the average looking bookish type that Harry always imagined. His beauty is stunning, breathtaking, something almost aristocratic to his features, as if he were the owner of the castle behind him rather than a mere student.

Still sitting on the grass with his journal now lying in his lap and unable to tear his eyes away from Tom, Harry can only ask one thing. “Am I dreaming?”

***

Here he is, for real; flesh and bones and soft, vulnerable tissue. Not a dream at all. Tom moistens his lips and tries to respond, but phlegm catches his words. He coughs to clear his throat and croakily manages, “No, you’re not. Welcome, Harry.”

A picture of comely features and boyish mien, Harry is quite unlike Tom’s expectations. The vague, uncertain image Tom envisaged was somewhat reflective of his own high cheeks, pallor and dark eyes. But Harry’s eyes, behind round-rimmed glasses, are recumbently green, the exact shade of fresh, verdant foliage. Bruises mar the planes of his face, blending shades of black and blue with contusions, but they don’t obscure the strong, smooth curve of his maturing jawline. Pieces of his windswept hair, jet-black and at odds with gravity, frame a peculiar jagged cut on his forehead.

He attempts to rock forward, perhaps stand if he can. However, Lupin distracts him with a string of incoherent whispers. Tom nearly asks him to speak clearer, but just as he is about to, Lupin raises to his feet and edges near Harry, an unusual, bewildered look about him.

“James?”

***

Harry is so focused on Tom—still so overwhelmed by what has just happened—that the man who stands up from beside him startles him so much that it takes a few long seconds for him to register the name that was said, directed at him.

“James…?” Harry repeats slowly, feeling numb with shock. “I… no, my name is Harry; James is my middle name, after my father. Harry James Potter.”

The man now standing in front of him seems almost as bemused as Harry is, and Harry wonders if he’s been mistaken for someone else when the man’s eyes widen almost comically as if a realisation has just hit him like a freight train and he takes a step towards him. Harry quickly scrambles up from the ground, wary of the stranger, eyes flitting over to where the knife has landed five feet away from him.

“Harry?” the man repeats near frantically. “That can’t… unless… you have her eyes. How old are you? Fifteen? And your parents, were they—”

“James and Lily Potter,” Harry answers, not seeing what the man could possibly mean. “They both died fifteen years ago. Whose eyes? What are you talking about?”

“My god,” the man whispers, holding a hand to his head, looking struck in utter disbelief. “Your parents, they aren’t dead, Harry. At least, not in this universe. You were the one that died, fifteen years ago.”
Harry looks helplessly at Tom, hoping for some sort of explanation. Whatever this man is talking about is complete insanity. He died? He didn’t die, both of his parents lost their lives in a car accident, that’s why he spent fifteen years in the hellhole that is the Dursley’s house. Aunt Petunia always took him to his mother’s (and by extension his father’s) grave on the anniversary of their deaths each year. Their gravestones are seared into the back of his mind like a scar. And now this strange man is telling him they’re not dead?

That they’re alive, in this universe where they were the ones who lost a son rather than a son who lost his parents, in this universe of magic and grand castles and mythical creatures?

“I…” Harry feels faint, swaying slightly on his feet, a burning in his head like he’s coming on with a fever. “I think I need to sit down.”

It is too much for him to accept all at once, and the burning in his head is growing, slowly spreading downwards. It’s only through sheer willpower and a fear of the mortification it would bring that Harry manages not to faint on the spot, even if jumping across universes would be an entirely understandable cause if any.

His legs feel shaky and as if they’re about to give out, when suddenly he finds pleasantly cool skin against his palm and spindly fingers wrapping around his hand, offering him stability. Harry looks up at Tom who has come to his side in a second, almost a bit flustered by the attention he’s now given and feeling the fever in his head burn fiercer as he glances away from the handsome face with some timidity, muttering a soft, “Thanks.”

It almost amuses him how even in a situation as mind-boggling as this, his hormones still find a way to act up.

“Of course, you should go to the hospital wing as soon as possible,” the strange man whom Harry still doesn’t know his name says then, seeming to have regained some composure. “Merlin knows what crossing over a whole universe has done to your body. Tom, you won’t mind taking him, will you? I’ll have to go on ahead and alert the Headmaster of this as soon as possible.”

Hospital wing? Harry almost opens his mouth to protest, but faintly realising that he’s burning up for no discernible reason, quickly keeps it shut again. The flush on his face, while it might’ve been otherwise, is certainly not due to the fact that a very attractive boy is holding his hand. He can feel it spreading down to his neck and chest, his skin feeling tingly. Though he’s never been fond of doctors or nurses, but maybe the magical variety won’t be so bad? He definitely has to be looked at, in any case.

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Before Apparating with a crack, Lupin says the thing which Tom wishes wasn’t so damned necessary—it’s now time for Headmaster Dumbledore to be brought into the mix. The man will undoubtedly question why he wasn’t informed of the diary-portal sooner, which will likely ensnare Lupin in some lie that directs a negative light in Tom’s direction. How tiresome will that conversation be? Tom can only imagine. On the positive side of this unfortunate inevitability, he has time to walk alone with Harry.

His complexion is positively febrile, pink ruddiness peeking through a mess of discoloration. Tom scrutinizes him, observing the rash blossoming along the delicate nape of his neck. He secures his wand in his free hand. “Professor Lupin has just Apparated nearer to the castle; we’ll have to walk, but it won’t be too far.”

Tom senses something unusual inside of Harry, it’s comparable to the spread of a virus yet not quite as insidious. Complex medicinal charms are not in his range of spells, but he has skill
enough to heal Harry’s superficial wounds. Silently concentrating, he waves his wand before Harry, adeptly erasing the evidence of his previous battles, whitening the dark patterns, sealing his split lip. The one injury Tom cannot correct is the strangest one, the jagged cut like a lighting-bolt, but surely Madame Pomfrey will know the trick. This level of magic would earn him excellent scores in his Charms practical, it is a shame that Harry is too oblivious to know how impressive Tom’s prowess is.

“Can you walk on your own or do you need assistance?” Tom asks, hand squeezing tighter still around Harry’s own. “I could levitate you, if you’d like.”

“No!” Harry exclaims immediately. “No, I mean, that would just be… well, embarrassing. I can walk,” he explains, starting on ahead and ignoring the heat underneath his shirt burning him up, briefly squeezing Tom’s hand back. “See? It’s fine.”

Harry’s emphatic resistance startles Tom, annoys him. Hm. He can overlook the petulance for now—Harry has just traversed the fabric of space and time, heard news that his parents are alive, and witnessed two displays of magic within a short timeframe. He will surely tune up in time, after his afflictions are healed and his gaps are bridged. Still, with all the effort Tom has put forth for Harry’s sake, it is markedly unappreciative of him to refuse Tom’s support.

He follows Harry’s start down the mountain’s trail, relieved to notice Harry can see Hogwarts and is, in fact, a wizard. The chalky shale crunches beneath his boots as he walks. The pace is slower than he would prefer, but Harry’s in frail physical condition. Not for long, Tom suspects. He looks resilient. His body is toned, from football no doubt, and he appears strong, although perhaps undernourished. It’s a sight fairly reminiscent of Tom’s own mid-summer physique. Harry’s nevertheless a bit shorter, smaller. The difference increases Tom’s sense of maturity over Harry, his undereducated, under-skilled peer. It will be amusing to mentor him.

“Uh. What… what d’you reckon will happen to me now? That man from before mentioned my parents, but…”

That again. Harry is to be taken in by his parents, of course. "Professor Lupin will alert Headmaster Dumbledore. I can’t say for sure what will happen next, but I can guess they will contact your parents. If they can be called that, really. I mean, if they can be called that yet.”

Ah, so that’s how the seed gets sown. "I hope it doesn’t sound cruel to say that I worry about how they’ll react.” His smirk slices sharply, almost imperceptibly, before he contains himself. “Well, they’ll likely be delighted to see you. I’m just a bit of a paranoid person, you know that. After this, I suppose you’ll be prepped for starting at Hogwarts in the autumn.”

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Harry feels at once foolish, for even having thought of them as parents when the only thing binding them together is blood and nothing more. He learned ever since he was a young boy that blood means nothing, and ‘family’ has always been a very faraway concept to him. He just thought, assumed that maybe… well, clearly he shouldn’t have. Even if they’re alive here, he’s still technically a complete stranger to them. Why would they suddenly want to take on the burden of taking care of a grown teenage boy?

Harry is silent only for a moment before quietly replying, “It’d just be nice to meet them, is all. I don’t expect anything more than that.” He peers up towards the castle, feeling slightly winded already but not as bad as he’d expected. Despite the fever there’s a strange sort of energy in his limbs, like an odd electrical charge.

Attending Hogwarts isn’t even something he ever considered. Besides, how would he be able to?
Even if both of his parents in this universe are wizards, he wasn’t born one. He was born a… what did Tom call it again? A Muggle, wasn’t it? Could that have changed, when he jumped? But even if he somehow turned into a wizard –

“How on earth am I going to catch up on five years in a single summer?” Harry says faintly, knowing that he’d certainly try anyway, but even that being the case he can’t imagine being completely up to snuff by the time the first school-day comes around. He’ll have to be with his nose in a book for the entirety of the next few months and constantly practising if he wants to even stand a chance of catching up.

"I’ll help you, of course,” Tom assures silkily. “I won’t pretend it will be easy. I was reared by Muggles, too. I know how it feels to walk into a different world, though not quite as literally as you have. But I think you’ll find I’m an excellent teacher. Ah, here we are.”

Harry feels some relief at Tom’s assurance that he’ll help, not that he’d really expected otherwise—though Tom’s rather confident proclamation in his “excellent” teaching skills does raise his eyebrows slightly. Bit cocky, and a remark begging for derision, but before Harry can say anything on it he’s distracted by yet another show of magic, and following that, his first look at Hogwarts.

Tom unfastens the gateway with neither word nor brandish. The hall it leads him into is so huge that it could’ve easily fit the Dursleys’ house in it, flaming bright torches lit orange casting wonderful glows through the whole room. Harry’s gaze flickers from the grand staircase in front of him to the large oak doors on his right, left open to reveal what must be the Great Hall judging from the long, large tables within.

He isn’t given him much time to look around, however, with Tom already leading him into a corridor. Harry can’t stop looking wherever he can—at the students dressed in strange robes lined with different colours, the stone walls and moving and talking portraits hanging off their walls, through the windows out towards the grounds stretching in a green meadow towards a dark forest in the distance.

It all just seems far too… magical, to be real. Of course that thought is ridiculous. He is in a place where magic exists, has seen it before his very eyes, and yet it doesn’t feel like reality but rather like he’s walking into a dream. A sudden fear grips him; what if this is a dream? What if he’s seconds away from waking up in his bed and finding the police storming into his bedroom to take him away?

A short walk later where Harry is too distracted, both with his environment and his thoughts, to say or ask much more he finds himself being lead into a large room filled lined with beds, none of them currently occupied and the wing seeming otherwise deserted, save for the woman dressed in very old-fashioned nursing clothes who looks up once the two boys enter.

“Afternoon, Tom,” the woman says as she approaches, eyes already on Harry who at once feels the nervous habit of fidgeting underneath her critical gaze, unconsciously inching a bit closer to Tom’s side as she already has her wand out. “Here for your friend, I take it?”

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“Yes, Madam,” Tom replies and clasps his hands, subtly implying his gratefulness. “It’s a bit of a long story, but I know you’ve seen it all.”

She tilts her head, inclining toward Tom with mild disapproval. “Yes, and a fair bit from you alone, Tom. Likes to experiment with things he ought not to, this one.” There is no lack of playfulness in her motherlike regard, making way for Tom flash one of his cheekier smirks.
“Nothing illegal, I assure.”

The wooden entry slams open abruptly, breathing a light, yet ominous wind onto Tom’s neck. He hasn’t enough time to turn before he hears his name spoken, quietly but sternly, by the wizard he loathes most.

“Headmaster,” he says, pivoting to meet austere blue-eyes and an overlong, crooked nose. Dumbledore pierces into him with intense severity. There’s no glint of his typical benignity. Over half-moon spectacles, his sight flickers past Tom to the clueless Harry, a diversion that doesn’t last long. He speaks again with all the dour and command of a cruel tyrant. “Come with me now, Tom.”

Tom holds his breath until Dumbledore disappears into the corridor, using this second of privacy to exhale before bringing his boots to clack against the laminate cobblestone, sounding clocklike and prophetic as they move in slow steps. He wants to relay to him that nothing is wrong, that this is all fine, but his ears are tinted, cheeks flushed. He cannot bear to look at Harry, so instead he steps past the threshold and casts a weak Sound-Proofing Charm with a murmur.

“Explain yourself, Tom,” Dumbledore asks grimly.

“Explain what, sir?”

“Tom, with all due respect, I believe it’s quite unnecessary for me to specify.”

Tom tilts his head just like that, subtly pouts, looks straight into Dumbledore’s gaze. “I just found him like this, sir. Poor thing. He seems frightfully confused. May I return to him?”

At that, Tom is unsettled by a sudden intrusion, an unexpected pressure pouring against his eyes. Legilimency! And on a student! Tom defends against the offense with breakneck reflexes, mind wrestling frantically, hand clutching his wand tightly. The battle lasts briefly and, to his own amazement, Tom is the victor.

“Professor!”

“What have you done, Tom?”

Grave in countenance, Dumbledore glares from the top of his considerable height, reminding Tom of the moment they first met. Then, Tom was small and scrawny and weak. He was ignorant to a world that he should’ve known since birth and vulnerable to Dumbledore’s admonishments. He mocked Tom upon discovering a trove of stolen items in his shabby, roach-infested toy box, where lived all he owned, and forced him to return the items to the grubby, undeserving children he’d rightly pilfered them from.

Since this introduction, there was no salvation for their relationship. At that moment, in that fraction of time where he felt vulnerable and powerless, Tom resolved to hate Dumbledore.

“I’ve done nothing wrong, sir,” he says, hissing his last syllable.

“Do not lie to me, Tom. I know he put you up to this.”

Tom’s mouth splits in confusion. “Who? Harry Potter?”

There is a strange pause. Dumbledore softens considerably, and suddenly, Tom feel as though there’s more to this, that Dumbledore suspected him of something he was, in fact, innocent of. This is quite new.
“Where did you find the diary?”

Tom glances at Lupin, standing with deference in his gait like a lowborn swine. Great. He should’ve asked Slughorn about the diary all those months ago. “The room on the seventh floor shot it at me during the winter break. When I wrote in it, it wrote back. I’ve nothing to hide, Professor.”

“You should’ve come to me immediately, Tom. The diary could’ve been cursed. Do you truly think, even with all your cleverness and wit, you’re above consulting your Headmaster?”

Biting his cheek, Tom looks away, wondering how Dumbledore could fathom he’d earned Tom’s respect. This can’t go on. Sliding his face into one that’s not his own, Tom inhales his pride and turns back to Dumbledore, deceitful eyes glistening ever so slightly.

“Please, Headmaster. I didn’t mean to do damage, and no damage is done. Would you like to meet Harry?”

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Harry nearly jumps at the doors suddenly being slammed open behind him, whirling around just in time to see a very stern looking man in very bright green robes entering the room. There’s something very odd about the air around him, something Harry can’t quite put into words but is a distinct feeling nonetheless that makes his skin prickle like a static charge. When the man glances at him, he nearly shrinks back under the weight of his gaze, though it seems not so much directed towards him.

“Come here, lad,” the nurse then says quietly to him as the older man whom Harry assumes to be the Headmaster instructs Tom to follow him.

Tom isn’t going to be reprimanded because of him, is he? Harry watches him walk off without another glance, past the wooden doors and following the Headmaster for a private conversation. As Harry sits down at the edge of a bed as the nurse instructs, he keeps his neck craned to where he can just about see Tom’s back facing him, though he can’t hear any of the conversation taking place, stewing anxiously in his worry that Tom will somehow get the blame for this and be punished because of him.

“Hmm, how very, very odd.” The nurse pulls his attention away, having been doing something with her wand without Harry even noticing the bright golden glow it has been casting on his body, tinged green at the edges where it misses him and falls on the bed instead.

“I’m sorry, what’s odd?” he asks anxiously, and the nurse looks at him, her expression twisted in confusion.

“This light here, you see, it’s supposed to be entirely green, and highlight the problematic areas in red.”

“But it’s gold,” Harry says, and the nurse nods, now looking rather concerned.

“There are some instances where a person’s magical core can be so strong that it interferes with the light, but at most it’ll be a slight shimmer. I’ve never seen such a glow on someone your age before!”

“What do you mean, someone my age?”

“Well, usually,” the nurse starts slowly, “this kind of overactive magical core is seen in young children, who are at the most important point of their development, and even then it’s rarely this
blinding. Have you been having any problems with your magic lately, lad? Issues with controlling it, and such?"

“Er…” Harry blinks, trying to figure out how to explain that he hasn’t had any magic before this without possibly giving this poor woman a stroke, the nurse already looking rather bewildered by the mystery Harry has presented her with.

“Not to worry, Poppy,” a voice says from behind Harry, startling him so bad he nearly bolts off the bed. At the same time, the large window behind Harry suddenly cracking, its glass marred with a long, thick scar. The Headmaster, looking entirely unsurprised, makes a waving motion with the wand in his hand and the crack heals over as if it had never been. “I can assure you our young visitor is in good health, if that is the only oddity to his circumstances.”

Harry looks up at the tall, elderly man curiously, noticing at once that his demeanour is much gentler than the storm he brought when he initially came into the room. The piercing blue gaze meeting his has him a little unnerved, but the Headmaster seems in good cheer. Harry glances at Tom standing beside the man in some concern.

“Hello,” Harry says to the Headmaster, quick not to forget his manners as he stands up and plainly offers the man a hand. “I’m Harry Potter. Sorry for barging into your school.”

The man Tom referred to earlier as Professor Lupin stands off to the side and looks incredibly amused, making Harry think he must’ve done something enormously stupid. Do wizards not shake hands? But the Headmaster merely looks mirthful, taking Harry’s hand and shaking it with a surprisingly strong grip.

“A pleasure to meet you, Harry,” the Headmaster replies, looking particularly delighted for some reason. “My name is Albus Dumbledore, and I’m the current Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, as I’m sure Tom has already told you in your many weeks of correspondence.”

“He’s not in trouble, is he?” Harry asks almost reflexively, glancing furtively at Tom. “It’s not like he made me come here. I was the one who made the jump, and besides, the diary really saved my life to be honest, so…”

“He’s had a good scolding, I believe, but beyond that no one is going to be punished,” the Headmaster reassures him, adding with a more serious and knowing look over his half-moon glasses, “Least of all you, I imagine.”

Harry averts his gaze, shifting a bit uncomfortably on his feet at the implication that the man knows what his life was like before the jump. Tom didn’t tell him, did he? “That—that’s good, then. But now that I’m here, what happens next? The jump, er, it kind of happened without a plan.”

“To start with, as Professor Lupin has informed me, I believe you do have some relatives in this universe quite eager to meet you,” the Headmaster says, Harry’s jaw slackening in shock, and at that exact moment, the doors that had been slightly closed practically fly open again, revealing a couple—a man and a woman, standing on the threshold and both looking somewhat pale.

“Ah, one moment, Harry,” the Headmaster excuses himself, leaving to talk to the couple who both seem utterly frozen at the sight of him, the same way Harry is in a state of astonishment at seeing a man who looks like he could’ve been Harry’s future self and a woman whose face he’s only ever seen in old family photographs.

Those are, unmistakably, his parents—James and Lily Potter.
Chapter End Notes

Now that Harry is finally here, the fun can begin.

Thank you to everyone who left kudos, especially to Nenya_Galad, sourboy (jonashootme), ThornAngelic, and JukeSkylar for commenting. It warms my heart.

- Amelinda
The Potters stand at the door with their eyes fixed on Harry.

Panic seizes Harry. What should he say? How should he act? He’s too overcome with shock to even properly understand what it is he’s feeling, what he's doing, what to make of these faces staring back at him, those same faces from the picture Aunt Petunia gave him all those years ago.

James, his father—his father!—his spitting image, he looks absolutely amazed at the sight of Harry, wide-eyed and beaming and nudging the woman called Lily, his Lily, his beautiful mother, with auburn hair more brilliant than what was shown in that old sepia printout. She looks closer to the brink of tears the nearer she gets.

Harry stands in front of them at a loss. “Hello. I’m… well, I’m Harry, though I’m sure you already knew that. It’s—it’s nice to meet you, though I didn’t think I ever would.”

“Hello, Harry,” James greets him with a blinding smile, Lily too overwhelmed with emotion to even speak, clenching to James’ hand and squeezing it white. “It’s very nice to meet you, too.”

“Oh, well…” Harry hesitates, before quietly admitting, “I’m glad. I didn’t know if you even wanted to meet me, to be honest. I mean I’m practically a stranger, and I didn’t mean to-bother you, or—”

Before he can say another word, Lily breaks into a sob and practically launches herself at him, and Harry—who has never quite experienced this before, the warmth of a mother’s embrace and the scent of her that lingers and the soothing of her voice—has to blink away tears, the now two pairs of arms around him telling him everything words never could.

Yes, these are his parents, and despite of fifteen years lost to time, he is still wanted, still loved, unconditionally.

When his mother pulls away she cups his face in his hands, tear-streaked face bright with a smile.

“Look at you,” she murmurs in a quiet awe. “So much like your father.”

“Even the hair, unfortunately,” James adds wryly, ruffling through Harry’s already naturally-messy tresses with fondness as Harry grins so wide he feels like his cheeks might split, chest filled to burst and he’s sure he’s never known true happiness until this very moment. “And the glasses! I see you’ve got your old man’s brilliant sense of style as well.”

Lily snorts audibly, but is far too preoccupied with fussing over her son to deliver a proper rebuttal. “Oh, Harry, we have so much to tell you. And to ask you, of course. Albus explained everything clearly enough, but not the whole story, I don’t think. Did you take anything with you from the, er, other world?” She turns at once to her husband. “Do we have an extra room? You
could clear out the study, couldn’t you? You barely use it as it is.”

“Fine, but you’ll have to take him shopping,” James concedes. “I don’t trust myself in Diagon Alley anymore after buying that godawful singing clock, Merlin knows what I was thinking—”

“I… sorry, extra room?” Harry cuts in slightly dazed, both of his parents giving him surprised looks.

“Of course,” Lily says. “It’s to be your bedroom. You… do want to come live with us, don’t you? If not—”

“Yes!” Harry blurts out, feeling his cheeks burn red even if his eager reaction only inspires happy laughter. “I mean, yeah, I’d—I’d like that.”

***

As the Potter scene draws out before him, Tom slowly sinks on the nearest cot. It is situated rather low to the ground, making his long legs awkwardly cross at the ankle, but he is too rapt in the scene to care about the slow onset of numbness in his feet. The initial disgust he felt toward Harry’s family wanes by the passing moment, bemusement steadily filling its place. Laughter, affectionate words and jokes. More affection, keening, and goodwill. The three assemble naturally. Is this how families are supposed to be?

Tom wouldn’t know. His telly consumption from childhood inclines him to believe that this is the unit set everyone craves—beautiful mum, happy-go-lucky father and handsome, brave son. This is the first time he’s witnessed a family, whole and complete, gather in one room. Perhaps that is why he can’t relate to the tears shared between the Potters. Tom is, most fortunately, blessed with independence, never once having felt attached to someone. It’s a bullet he’s glad to have dodged, he supposes as he stares emptily at the clan.

It shatters Tom’s hopes for the summer, but what were his expectations, really? That Harry would live with him in London? Those Muggles he’s placed with keep eight children, the house is mess, and they’re all fed sparingly as it is. Tom pulls out his diary from inside his cloak. Maybe if it maintains its function, he can write to Harry.

“It’s to be your bedroom. You… do want to come live with us, don’t you? If not—”

“Yes!” Harry interrupts Lily, his cheeks blaring red. His parents laugh dotingly at the childish outburst. “I mean, yeah, I’d—I’d like that.”

“In that case—"

Harry’s father stops mid-sentence, interrupted by the rapid swing of the hospital door.

The man who walks in is someone Tom’s only ever seen in the papers until now: Minister of Magic, Gellert Grindelwald. He’s a tall, old man near to Dumbledore’s age, though in contrast his gray beard is kept neatly trimmed and his hair a short, slicked-back cut. Dressed in sharp, dark robes with the click of this heels sounding briskly against stone, he comes to an abrupt stop just several feet away and yet directly in front of the Headmaster.

Hands link behind his back, he curls his lips in what’s not quite a smile. A German accent plays on his words faintly as he says, “Ah, forgive me. I am not interrupting anything important, am I?”

“Regrettably, I believe you are, Minister,” Dumbledore tells him mildly. There is a certain tenseness between the two, thick in the air like the dew of humidity. “But since you’re here, tell us: To what do we owe the pleasure of your arrival?”
“I’m afraid our censors have indicated a strong surge of magic near Hogsmeade,” the Minister informs. “A surge tracing back to,” his eyes flicker again to Harry, “this room.”

The silence speaks clearly to Tom. It is not the Ministry’s business to meddle in affairs at Hogwarts. This must be what Dumbledore feared of Tom, that he was conspiring in the Minister’s unauthorized ploys. Are there agents within the school now? It perturbs Tom, and for this issue alone, he feels aligned with Dumbledore, who opens himself to the Minister with composed indignation. “I do not recall approving such measures, Minister.”

“I do not recall asking, Albus.”

The Minister revolves, his gaze shifting to Tom. Rather than look at him, however, his eyes linger on the diary, brightening sinisterly with realization. When he turns off Tom, swinging his attention instead to Harry, Tom suffers a brief loss of equilibrium. It is a chillingly familiar sensation, requiring a full minute for Tom to pin down, in which time the Minister says amiably to Harry, “How are you?”

Tom clenches his robes, wrinkling them in a tight, incensed grip.

The Minister is a master Legilimens.

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When the Minister’s eyes meet Harry’s, it gives him the strangest sensation of being seen through. Or, more accurately, like he’s being searched through. The sensation sends a chill down his spine.

“I’m fine, thank you,” Harry replies with composure nonetheless, refusing to be shaken. “Is there something you wanted, mister…”

“Gellert Grindelwald, Minister of Magic,” the man says, a glint in his gaze that Harry doesn’t much like, but he is too proud to break eye-contact, settling on a mild glare. He could be the Queen of England for all Harry cared. "And you would be?"

“Harry Potter.”

“Ah,” Minister Grindelwald nods, as if that answers any and all questions he had. “Quite fascinating—it makes one wonder how your parents have kept you a secret for fifteen years when it has been well-recorded that you died in your infancy. Unless there is another explanation for your sudden… popping into existence, as it were?”

‘He knows,’ Harry thinks in bemusement at the thinly-veiled question, Grindelwald still curving his lips in that barely-smile sort of way. ‘How does he know? How did he find out?’

“Is there a point to this line of questioning, Gellert?” Dumbledore asks sharply, drawing the attention of the Minister briefly back to him. “I’m sure you are aware of his circumstances by now.”

“Indeed,” Grindelwald says, turning back to Harry. “And I believe it would be most prudent for you, Mr. Potter, to visit the Ministry as soon as you are able, for your own health and safety. Universe Hoppers like you have been exceedingly rare throughout history. I believe the Department of Mysteries would know exactly how to handle your predicament.”

It is then that Harry feels a hand on his shoulder, his father subtly pushing him back as he and his mother come to almost stand in front of Harry.
“With all due respect, Minister,” Lily says to the man, her tone calm and measured even if the fierce look in her eyes tells an entirely different story. “You ought to be asking permission from his parents for any such visit, seeing as how he’s still a minor.”

“He is in a unique set of circumstances,” Grindelwald responds civilly. “While I am sure any blood test will point you out as his mother, Lily, the fact of the matter is that the boy is not registered in any records, neither that of the Ministry’s nor the Muggle government I suspect. He simply does not exist as a person in our world. Theoretically, it would be within my authority to claim him as property of the Ministry.”

The indignation swelling in the room is immediate, and in one case, even vocal.

James practically bristles with outrage. “Don’t you even think about–”

Lily grabs James’ wrist as reassurance before he can finish his sentence, her husband fuming but keeping his mouth shut lest he say something that might work entirely in Grindelwald’s favour.

“Theoretically, you could,” Lily agrees coolly. “And theoretically, I could sue you for custody, which would create a very public spectacle I’m sure we all would like to avoid, wouldn’t you say, Minister?”

Grindelwald’s pleasant countenance remains intact but the cold look in his eyes eclipses the faint trace of a smile on his lips as he turns to Dumbledore.

“As you can see, my hands are tied in this matter, Gellert,” Dumbledore says in response, looking not at all sorry for it.

“Are they?” the Minister remarks scathingly. “Surely you can see the benefits of having the boy come with me, Albus—a living link to another universe! The possibilities–”

“Would suit your political agenda magnificently, I’m sure,” the Headmaster interrupts evenly. “Unfortunately, the boy’s parents have decided.”

Grindelwald is silent for a long moment, eyes flitting from Harry to the diary in Tom’s hold, then to Tom himself with a piercing glare, saying, “I would take great care of that, were I you.”

With a slight bow to all in the room, his hands still folded on his back and his posture unbroken, the Minister then turns around and stalks off, his brisk pace betraying the dissatisfaction as his dark robe flutters behind him, disappearing through the doorway and out of sight.

Harry sinks down on the bed with a worn-out sigh as a pressure he hadn’t even realised was there lifts from his shoulders, looking in bewilderment at the everyone around him. “What was that about?”

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With the Minister’s exit, so too goes Tom’s last shred of fortitude. He turns to Harry and drawls, "He read your mind.”

Dumbledore sighs and shakes his head, fluttering his great, white beard. “Grindelwald is perhaps the most accomplished Legilimens alive, and most troubling, it is among his least threatening skills. I fear we’re now pacing dangerously into an unkind future.”

“He must be stopped,” Tom says. “He spoke of Harry like he’s property!”

Tom flushes with his long-held disdain. He despises the Crown and despises the Ministry of
Magic. Take a boy, throw him in a new house, let the family fidget and moan about how freakish he is, how his strange behavior is turning off the neighbors. Again and again and again.

“Fear not,” Dumbledore assures calmly to the Potters. “I guarantee that I will protect Harry to the best of my abilities.”

Harry’s father groans as he stands, raising his curled fist in emphasis. “The boy’s right. We can’t live on the defense, we have to face this head on.”

“I understand your grief, James,” Dumbledore says sympathetically. “I ask that you trust my judgement. Grindelwald will not forget this encounter.” He slowly blinks then saunters to the window, hands gripped behind his back as the Minister’s had been. “What’s coming will come, I’m afraid. But now is not the time to act.”

***

There’s wizards that can read minds? Does this mean the Minister saw everything, including what Harry did to Zeke? He feels slightly nauseated at the thought of the man using it against him, especially now the he has parents, a family. They can't know what he's done. He needs them.

It speaks perhaps to how long Harry has felt like he was all on his own that Tom and his parents’ fierce defence of him leaves him speechless following the incident. He’s never had anyone stick up for him like this before, or even be outraged on his behalf, and suddenly he now has four people all at once concerned about his well-being and not wanting to hand him over to some apathetic government. His eyes linger on Tom, feeling a flood of gratitude that he was the one that found the diary and not someone else.

“I suppose for now there isn’t much else we can do,” Lily breaks the silence after Dumbledore’s statement, putting her hand on Harry’s shoulder and giving it a reassuring squeeze as she smiles. “It’s alright, Harry. You’re safe with us.”

“I know,” Harry replies reflexively, slightly surprised by how at ease he feels with two people who really should’ve been strangers, and yet his connection with them clicked into place so quickly that he can’t help but think that fate might’ve played a hand in bringing them together.

“Well then,” Dumbledore turns towards him with the good humour that he first met Harry with. “I suspect you’re eager to go home with your parents, so I shan’t keep you any longer. I’m sure we will see each other again at Hogwarts at the start of the new year.”

“What? Really?” Harry asks, slightly baffled. “But I don’t know any magic! I’ll be way too far behind everyone else!”

“Of course, we will make some exceptions in that regard and help you catch up as quickly as possible, though needless to say, it will require a fair amount of effort on your part as well,” the Headmaster replies mildly, adding with a glance towards Tom, “And I suspect you’ve already found yourself a personal tutor. It’ll be good exercise for the both of you. I’m afraid Tom here is so far ahead in his studies he’s become bored with it all.”

Harry sighs and smiles in relief at that, standing up and taking the journal with him as he walks over to Tom, feeling slightly nervous for some reason. It’s easy to say thank you through the ink of a pen; it's different when faced with someone in person.

So instead, Harry says, “You’ll stay over during the summer, won’t you?” He glances back once towards his parents, his mother smiling in approval and his father ridiculously giving him two thumbs up. Feeling mildly embarrassed, Harry turns back to Tom. “Since, um, I’ll need a lot of
tutoring, and all…” he trails off awkwardly, not quite wanting to admit that he’ll be lonely and Tom is really the only friend he’s ever made.

***

Tom doesn’t know how to respond. Harry asks because he wants Tom there; his intention is reverential, seeking Tom for his presence and his skill. His parents, on the other hand, are little more than agreeable accommodators trying to establish their new son’s trust. For them, Tom is a pawn, a clever little maneuver to guarantee Harry’s kept in their fold.

It doesn’t sit well with him, but if he wants the opportunity to beat them in their game, only one answer will do. He smiles evenly, taking Harry’s verdurous eyes in his own. “I’d love to visit.”

Within two days of returning to the Muggles’ shabby stacked townhouse, Tom discovers his response was an astronomical understatement.

He loiters, unoccupied, by a bench near the home, cynically considering the irony of his situation. He spent months acquainting with a Universe Hopper—certain that his own life was more exceptional by far—only to deliver said Hopper to a universe where he was taken in instantly by a well-off couple and all their many friends. Indeed, Harry arrived to that, and Tom stands here, within stench reach of a vagrant, doing all he can to avoid the gritters who share his room. What a bloody joke.

His quills carefully locked away from filthy Muggle hands, Tom pulls a pen from his pocket and taps it against his leg. It’s a bit early to write to Harry. The vacation’s only just begun. It’d probably ring desperate. Should he write?

He scoffs and shakes his head.

What are these apprehensions? Of course he should write; Harry is probably lying in wait for Tom, wishing he was with Tom and not his cloying family. It’d be Harry’s pleasure to receive a message from him. Returning to the Muggles always influences Tom’s confidence for the worse.

He kneels on the bench, spreads the diary out with his palm and writes, ‘How are your studies going?’

***

Harry’s introduction into the world of magic has been nothing short of wondrous. From his arrival in his new home—which looks about as picturesque as any family home ever could, from its white picket-fence to the beautiful interior—to all the things he’s been taught so far. There are mornings where he wakes up in sheer awe at how quickly, how massively his life turned around.

The second day in his new bedroom that James quickly refurbished for him, his mother took him out for shopping, mostly to buy heaps and heaps of new clothes and books, and Muggle things like a radio and music CDs, and whatever else he wanted. Harry privately confided in her he really would like to visit Diagon Alley together with Tom (to his regret, she quickly started cooing about it), so they held off on that for now.

He doesn’t have a wand of his own yet, often practising with either his father’s or his mother’s, whoever happens to be home at the time and teaching him the bare basics, stuff first years learn. It’s only through Harry’s infinite marveling and curiosity that he doesn’t get tired of the textbooks, though the parts where he gets to perform a spell are his favourites, even if it doesn’t always go according to plan.

According to his mother, who Harry found out later was a Head Healer at a magical hospital, his
magical core wasn’t quite done developing yet, and Harry noticed as much when simple spells such as the Levitation Charm went way out of hand; once he aimed to try levitating a book from the table and ended up levitating the entire table and smashing it into the ceiling instead. His father thought it hilarious. Harry, not so much.

But aside from his studies, his parents have just been… well, too good for words. It became very quickly apparent that Lily is the more even-tempered responsible one, and though possessing her fair share of good humour, she is not as jovial as his father, who is incredibly fun-loving and seems to never run out of energy. Through his parents he meets many others, all friends, but the person that sticks out the most is the man who was supposed to have been—and currently is, he supposes—Harry’s godfather. Every time Sirius Black and James Potter come together is an experience.

“You can go higher than that, Harry!” Sirius cheered when Harry had taken his first ride on a broom, the feeling of soaring so instinctively natural and amazing that he made a few haphazard rounds around the wide, open backyard.

“Don’t encourage him,” Lily scolded playfully. “If he ends up flying into a tree, I’ll blame you.”

“Don’t be scared, Harry; go a bit faster!” James added enthusiastically as Harry happily sped up, the wind in his hair.

“Yeah, that’s it!” Sirius yelled. “Try doing a dive!”

“Sirius!”

“Do a flip!”

“James! It’s his first time on a broom, for god’s sake!”

But even with what feels like him fitting in perfectly with his new family, there’s still something, or someone, missing.

Harry keeps one eye on the calendar, counting down the days where Tom will finally be free to visit him. The only thing stopping him from writing him immediately on the day that Tom returns home from Hogwarts is his pride. He doesn’t want to come across as desperate (even if he is desperate to see him and experience what it’s like to have a friend whom he can hang out with in person). So, it’s to his sheer relief that he finds Tom’s message on the second day of his vacation.

‘How are your studies going?’ Harry’s home with both his parents as well as Sirius for the day when he sees Tom’s message, his heart skipping a beat at the sight of it.

‘Great so far. I’ve learned a couple of spells, though my magic is still acting up a bit so the results aren’t always the best,’ he writes back eagerly. ‘I could show you. Are you free right now? Would you like to come over?’

***

‘Yes, but I’m not hooked up to the Floo Network.’

It is a passive way of asking for Harry to arrange transportation. Had Tom not already earned a disciplinary warning for an earlier summer infraction, he’d neglect the stupid policy and Apparate himself. But with the Minister having recently assaulted his mind, he feels rather in contention with the Ministry and not at all interested in inciting provocations.

He’s certain Harry will figure something out. Adjusting the diary page so that he can see Harry’s
reply, Tom rushes into the loathsome house to prepare for his escape. Two steps in, and he’s quickly disgusted. Sprawled across the floor, a 5-year-old named Wayne screams at his loudest volume, pummeling little fists against the unswept tile. Is nobody watching this fool? Desperate to leave as soon as he can, Tom pushes the child with his foot, sliding him to the wall, and sidesteps an overturned bowl of cereal.

His door is wide open. Inside, two young men of about his age are engrossed in a video game. Tom realizes with annoyance that one of them, Eric Whaley, is sitting atop his school trunk. There’s only one way to deal with chavvy twats like Eric. Tom grips the controller from the idiot’s hand and tosses it to the carpet, eliciting protests from them both.

“Get off my trunk,” he demands.

"Hey! You’ve done lost me the game, Riddle."

“I don’t care.”

In times like this, Tom knows it was worth the slapped wrist to break wizarding law and instill a pinch of fear in these foster brats. Muggles are so fragile—all it took was one Levitation Charm and he was mostly free to do as he pleased thereafter. They were all Obliviated, of course, but the fear remains, vague and lurking. He retrieves his messenger’s bag and tosses in a few books with which to teach Harry.

'Do you prefer Charms or Transfiguration?'

***

“Floo Network?” Harry’s father says when he asks him about it. “Ah, that would require some paperwork at the Ministry to arrange, since he lives with Muggles. How about we just Apparate?”

Harry perks up with interest at that. He’s always wanted to know what Apparating feels like ever since Tom first mentioned it to him. “What, really?”

“Yes, if I’m familiar enough with the place. Do you know his address?”

Harry nods, faintly remembering the street name in Brixton. When he relates as much to his father, to his relief James seems familiar with the general neighbourhood, if only because it’s a more problematic block within London as far as wizarding crimes go. Muggle slums are opportune environments for wizards of all kinds to go about shady business.

It’s not exactly reassuring information. Tom rarely talks about his home life, but if he’s living in that kind of neighborhood, it can’t be all that good, can it? Harry does know he’s in a sort of care system, being orphaned much like him at a young age. He realises with some discomfort that while he shared virtually every aspect of his own life, Tom shared precious little in turn.

Harry looks back down at the diary, fountain pen in hand to write Tom, only to see another question. ‘Do you prefer Charms or Transfiguration?’

He doesn’t have to think long on that one before answering it. ‘Charms, definitely.’ Transfiguration is fine. Conjuring objects, for example, is a very useful tool, but turning rats into goblets (while an extraordinary thing he’ll never tire of seeing) isn’t exactly something that piques his interest as much as knowing how to jinx someone’s legs together, disarm someone in an instant or repair things with a simple spell.

'Dad and I’ll be outside in a minute,’ Harry writes, feeling a little nervous; not just about Apparating for the first time, even if it is Side-Long Apparition and he trusts his dad not to mess
up, but mainly about seeing Tom.

He can feel a faint brush of butterflies in his stomach, thinking nothing of it but anticipation at meeting with his friend again, who was nothing short of a lifeline for Harry. It’s strange to think that Harry knows so little about him, considering. It’s a good thing they have the entire summer just for that.

Harry puts the journal away and gets up from the couch, his dad already waiting for him, looking slightly amused at Harry’s nervous hair-brushing habit.

“Ready?” James says, holding out his arm to Harry, who awkwardly grabs the upper part with his hand. “Get a good hold of it, bit tighter. Now I should warn you, you may or may not end up vomiting once we get there, but it’s best to get you used to it sooner rather than later.”

“Wait, vomiting?” Harry repeats, alarmed. After weeks of separation, he really doesn’t want the first thing that Tom sees him doing to be throwing up in some old trashcan on the side of the road. “What—”

But before he can finish his sentence, he suddenly feels pressure closing in on him from all sides, and then they’re gone.

Securing the coded lock on his trunk, Tom inspects his bag, ensuring it is suitably packed. What is needed, but not there, can be easily transfigured: robes, a toothbrush, all the little things. Legs crossed at his side, back turned to the imbeciles, he rests his arm on the trunk and notices Harry’s handwriting. ‘Dad and I’ll be outside in a minute.’ How prompt. Harry must be desperate to see him. He rises from his spot and considers stopping by the bathroom, perhaps he can thieve some cologne before –

Whack.

A sharp pain thrusts him forward. He catches his step and turns, enraged, to Eric’s bold scowl. “Think you can go around tossing us about, yeah? Things’ve changed since you left, mate.”

Registering Eric’s appearance, Tom can see what he’s idiotically referring to; poking out of his sleeveless dago, his once wiry arms now bulge, muscular, swollen from all the hours that would’ve been better spent learning a sliver of common sense. The other teen, still mostly untouched by puberty, stares at them both, itching for a moment of excitement yet clearly unprepared to stir trouble himself.

Filthy Muggles though they are, who is Tom to deny them an ounce of romp?

Not wasting a moment to reply, Tom speaks with his hands, busting a hit across Eric’s lip. Blood spurts and prompts Eric to swing back—the first hit dodged, the second catching him in the soft corner of his eye. They grip and claw and shove, each attempting to overpower the other. With might, Tom drives his elbow into Eric’s gut, forcing him to cower back. It is the hesitation Tom requires.

His fingers, long and strong, grip the soft column of Eric’s neck, constricting around the squirming veins. The wordless sputters that fly are a sort of music that Tom leans into, eager, trading Eric’s neck for a fistful of hair to anchor his head to the ground. “Now, what did we learn today, Whaley.”

Slowly standing from his position, Tom looks down at the pitiful picture, an ugly boy all black and blue. In one last insult, he treads across Eric’s abdomen and retrieves his bag before sprinting
out of the house.

He winces when the sunlight hits his face, suddenly aware of the soreness above his right cheek where Eric landed his greatest hit. Fearing that it may be bruised, Tom almost returns inside for a glance at his reflection, but is then stopped when a faint *crack* echoes down the street.

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Apparating is far more unpleasant than he imagined it to be. Harry feels pressed very hard from all directions the moment it happens, like being squeezed through a narrow tube. For a split-second he can’t breathe, iron bands tightening around his chest, his eyeballs forced back into his head and his ear-drums pushed deeper into his skull.

But the strange sensations disappear almost as soon as they appear, and Harry lands on his feet, reeling and feeling more than a little sick. His father huffs a laugh of sympathy beside him, patting him comfortingly on the back.

“Alright?” James asks, and after a few seconds of trying to reorient himself and making sure he isn’t about to throw up his breakfast, Harry nods. “You’ll get used to it. The first time’s always the worst.”

Harry decides to trust him at his word for it and takes a deep breath before looking around down the small and narrow street. The houses are small, whatever front-yards there are clearly untended to, the alleyways within his vision littered with all sort of rubbish. Harry, while wearing new and fitting clothes as opposed to Dudley’s hand-me-down’s, blends right in with his simple jeans and shirt. His father with his fine woolen sweater vest, magical golden watch that doubles as a Dark Detector and shiny shoes, however, is another matter.

“Got any idea which house your friend lives in?” James says cheerfully, seeming to be oblivious to the stares they’re getting from the people passing them on the street. Harry nervously shuffles his feet as he peers at the numbers written on various doors, trying to remember which one was the right one when he spots the unmistakable figure of a tall young man heading towards them a few houses away.

“There he is,” Harry points him out to his dad, already starting to walk ahead to meet Tom halfway, feeling a kind of nervous excitement as he nears. He’s trying very hard not to smile like an idiot, until Tom is close enough for Harry to notice the red mark marring the otherwise handsome cheekbone, at which point his smile naturally fades.

“Hey,” Harry greets him as he looks at the newly forming bruise in concern. “What happened to your cheek?”

“Oh, this?” Tom says dismissively, gesturing to it. “What can I say? The house can get a bit rowdy. My foster brother became a bit too excited to see me. He was rushing to help me unpack and accidentally knocked me into the counter.”

Harry must fight not to make a face as Tom gives him a rather terrible excuse—he’s had enough of those kinds of bruises himself to recognise a lie to cover them when he hears one. At least he didn’t go with the age-old falling down the stairs accident.

Of course, asking him about it directly where his father (effectively a stranger) is present would be insensitive, and probably a stupid idea. Harry resolves to ask him about it later, memories of his own slowly inching to the surface in the back of his mind as he remembers all the hidden purple and yellow and green spots blotting his back and his chest, always places where they wouldn’t easily be seen.
If Tom is in a similar situation, and it pains him just to think about it, then Harry can’t possibly stand by and watch it happen. He isn’t entirely sure what he would do, but who could let a friend go back to an abusive home without doing anything at all?

Tom extends his hand to the elder Potter. “It’s a pleasure to meet you again, sir.”

His face creases in a smile and he accepts Tom’s handshake. “Likewise, son. Are you both ready to leave?”

“Uh.” Harry eyes his father a bit reluctantly, not eager on repeating the unpleasant experience that is Apparating but having little choice. “Sure.”

“Deep breath, Harry,” James teases him, holding out both arms now to the two boys, Harry taking his right, and once Tom has taken hold of his left, they Apparate to the Potter house.

Specifically, the middle of the living room, Lily having just been walking past holding a basket full of dittany leaves which she drops at the three suddenly materialising to the left of her.

“Goodness’ sake, James! Didn’t I tell you not to Apparate in the middle of the room?” she huffs, making the slightest motion with her wand. The fallen leaves neatly gather themselves back into the basket, which quickly flies back into her hands.


“You’re lucky I wasn’t holding anything volatile,” she sighs, before turning from her husband to the two boys on either side of him. She smiles softly at the sight of Harry before she turns to Tom, and while the smile remains, her gaze turns inquisitive as it flits briefly to the bruise on his cheek.

“Tom, was it? It’s very nice to see you again; I’m glad Harry has already made a friend he can turn to.”

Harry chooses to ignore the mischievous glance she gives him at the word friend, even if the redness creeping up his neck says otherwise.

***

Harry’s mother, who has made a mess of her dittany, gathers her spill and continues to chide her husband. It’s a milder form of spousal bickering than Tom’s accustomed to, but it’s annoying all the same. Discernibly the more dominant of the two, Lily makes a show of fitting into a comical stereotype; she’s the chiding, beautiful wife with a kind, yet mostly untalented, husband. In other words, they’re easy to manipulate. Tom smiles, buttery and warm at her welcome, but he can’t contain a blench at the quick notice she takes to his bruise.

“It’s my pleasure to be here, Mrs. Potter,” Tom says kindly. “Hopefully, Harry and I can make some progress in advancing his studies.”

Lily shakes her head, just slightly. “Don’t worry about that for now. I’m making dinner for us and a few family friends. Tonight will be an opportunity to get to know each other.” She makes a certain face in Harry’s direction, one Tom’s unsure of how to interpret. When she looks back, she twists her expression to one of strong sympathy, the sort someone flashes to make a point. “How about I heal that bruise, dear? It’s looks dreadfully painful.”

Before he can refuse her offer, she flicks her wand, instantly relieving Tom. “Run into a poll?”

“Silly accident,” Tom explains.

She’s plainly unconvinced, but smiles wider still. “You look a bit pale. Would you like a
Butterbeer?”

“Oh, no, I’m –”

“How about a glass of water?”

Tom blinks. What’s she playing at? He doesn’t respond quickly enough to stop her bloody doting. She summons a cup and casts water in it with a soft, “Aguamenti.”

Graciously, he takes her offer, but he doesn’t meet the rim to his lips, instead holding it uselessly. Whatever she thinks, Tom doesn’t buckle easily. He has no interest in helping her advance toward whatever the end goal is, and he’ll feign nothing more than mild politeness.

“Harry, honey, how about you show Tom around the house?” Lily says, not at all asking. “Get him familiar with the place. I expect you’ll come around often, Tom?”

He raises the glass slightly, sparing her the subtlest glint of knowingness. Just enough to let her know he won’t be so effortlessly plied. “Why, I’d love to.”

***

As James settles himself comfortably on the couch, Harry watches the exchange Tom has with his mother with great interest, and where he didn’t notice much from when Tom greeted his father as he’d been distracted by some nasty memories, here his attention is rapt.

Had he not known Tom before, particularly his disdain for most people, he would’ve found him charming and thought nothing further of it. But Harry by now has sat through so many of Tom’s criticisms of practically the entire human race that this exceeding politeness and smiling is an almost jarring contrast to the person Harry talked to through the diary.

It’s only logical that Tom would want to be in good standing with Harry’s parents since they are friends, but this is definitely not the same person who once described one of his Housemates as a “featherbrained trollop mostly dead from the neck up.”

When Tom says, “Why, I’d love to,” Harry struggles to keep his eyebrows from rising up to his hairline. He snorts and responds, “Sure, I’ll show him around. But who’s coming over today, mum? I thought it’d just be Sirius.”

“Speaking of which, where’d the old dog go?” James chimes in from the sofa, half-reading the Daily Prophet.

“Peter and Remus are coming over as well,” Lily answers Harry’s question, already heading towards the kitchen with her little basket. “And Sirius is out buying some things for the dinner tonight. If you’d been paying attention, James, I asked him…”

Harry loses interest in the conversation once his question is answered. He’s met both Peter and Remus before. The latter was, in fact, the second person he met after jumping. The former came by a week ago, a bit of a nervous man seeming to lack in confidence, but otherwise friendly enough.

“C’mon,” Harry says to Tom, moving towards the corridor leading to the backyard door. “I’ll show you the garden first, since I know how much you like Potions. Mum grows a lot of her ingredients herself. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind if you wanted to borrow some.”

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Tom follows Harry down the corridor. Once outside, he squints, adjusting to the setting sun, and takes in the sight. The backyard expands for an acre before cutting off in the gloaming horizon. There are clusters of bouncing bulbs, puffapods and other magical plants set in rows near to them. The space would be an ideal location to sunbathe or take up a round of Quidditch, if Tom was the sort who could be arsed to do either useless activity.

He leans in smiling, eager to point out the many slips and sprouts by memory and prove to Harry how supremely lucky he is to have Tom. However, before he can, Harry intervenes his train of thought, saying, “Bit much, don’t you think? Laying on the charm like that—you can just be yourself, you know.”

An instant rush of indignation overwhelms him, and he’s sure Harry won’t mistake his scowl as anything other than insulted. He is insulted. Be himself? How does Harry know who Tom is? All he’s encountered, really, are Tom’s honest thoughts, the thoughts that seemed to fade into space in their months of messaging. Had Tom really known that his sincerity would later be funneled back into his own world, Harry would have nary a clue as to who Tom truly is.

Oh. Be himself. Yes, like that will get him far. People are too naive, too prosaic.

Composing himself with more dignity than he’d truly like to, Tom draws his mouth in a line. “I wasn’t ‘laying on the charm’; I was merely being friendly.”

Gentle rustling noises sound from the front row of the garden. Tom strains his ears for better focus, and hisses grace him like tender whispers. Perhaps Harry would like a clearer view of what Tom’s capable of? He strolls closer to the source and calls in Parseltongue, “Come here, little friend.” A small English adder, scaled in hues of black and gold, slithers over the grass. Gingerly, Tom lifts the snake from the ground and drapes it around his neck, amused as it comments, “You’re very tall, Ssspeaker.”

Tom sneaks a grin up his cheek and asks Harry, “Do you like snakes?”

***

Refusing to be impressed out of sheer stubbornness (even if he is very much impressed and slightly amazed), Harry focuses his gaze on the snake, and answers in a very pointed manner, “Some of them; I don’t mind this one, for example.”

He tentatively reaches out with his hand, and when the snake seems mostly indifferent to the approach he carefully glides the tips of his fingers over the length of its small body. It feels nice and even in texture, and the patterns on it are truly very pretty.

Harry is so busy admiring the snake that when it shifts slightly his fingers end up accidentally brushing over the side of Tom’s neck. While curious to find how smooth his skin is to his touch, he quickly retracts his hand, feeling much like he just crossed some sort of invisible line he shouldn’t have, even when it hadn’t been his intent.

“Sorry,” he mutters awkwardly, shifting a bit on his feet, particularly away from Tom for some slight distance, suddenly acutely aware of the exact measure of inches between them. The last thing he needs now is for a nice afternoon with a friend to end up getting weird just because he had to be a hormonal teenager. “So, er, you can talk to snakes? Where’d you learn how to do that? Do they just… talk back?”

Not as if he wants to hear any more of the hissing because it’s ridiculously attractive, or anything. He’s not interested in that at all.
Under the flesh where Harry made contact, a delicate warmth swims beneath his skin. Tom’s not sure how to qualify the feeling; it’s foreign. By the way Harry apologizes and shuffles back, distancing himself considerably, Tom is persuaded to regard the accident as shameful, and swiftly focuses on Harry’s question.

“No, you’re mistaken,” he states mockingly. “I can’t actually talk to snakes, I just seized this adder and started hissing at it for fun.” Tom absently strokes his slithering friend’s length, earning himself a pleased hiss. “The language is called Parseltongue and it can’t be taught. Those skilled in magical languages may train their ears to understand it, but to be a true Parselmouth, you must be born with the gift.” He hisses to the snake, “Isssn’t thattt right?”

“Yesssss,” the adder hisses back, its tone a smooth, soothing pleasure.

Showing this talent to Harry isn’t without risk; grand and magnificent though the wizarding world is, most people within it maintain hidebound views of Parselmouths. Befouling his name before it’s even well-known would be imprudent, but allowing Harry this chance, the opportunity to keep his illicit secret, enlivens him so dangerously that he doesn’t care.

If Tom explains the sacredness of his little demonstration, Harry will feel special for knowing, he’ll feel bound to Tom with gratitude for the honor of this small covenant. It sends a small wave of excitement to his core.

He peers at Harry gravely. "I hope I can trust you not to tell anyone."

With his long fingers, Tom wraps around the trunk of the snake and sets it on the ground, freeing it to glide into the grass. “Even though it’s something we’re born with, we have a nasty reputation. You’ll find, wizard or not, humanity is deeply frightened of the unknown. Was I born Dark because my mother’s blood blessed me with a serpent tongue?” He scoffs. “Of course not. But stigmas pervade, logical or not.”

He crosses his arms, as though insecure, and adds a taste of uncertainty to his features. He lifts his head, eyes expectant, and says, “Will you promise, Harry?"

"Yeah, of course. I won’t say a word,” Harry vows. He sounds certain, but to Tom’s disappointment, he doesn’t seem to grasp the immensity of Tom’s oblation. He offered Harry a piece of information that could damage his reputation with centuries-old prejudice and suspicion. The resultant expression should be one of stammering gratitude, not casual fraternity.

“But how come there’s a stigma at all?”

Ah. Harry has no familiarity with the historical context. It was foolish of Tom to not account for the cultural deficit between them.

"Does it have something to do with Slytherin?"

Perhaps, however, Tom would rather him not have asked. All ancestral knowledge Tom has for himself is regrettably dubious. From the moment he uncovered his shared ability with Salazar Slytherin, he assumed wholeheartedly in the paternal nature of their relation, tracing lines down genealogy texts until the parchment glossed with grease. The final living line of Slytherin’s blood ends, officially, with one man called Morfin Gaunt, son of Marvolo for whom Tom knows he must’ve been named. He thought himself Morfin’s progeny until happening upon records of his imprisonment in Azkaban during the possible timeframe of conception, leaving him with nothing
more than the unproven assumption that there was also a Gaunt daughter—his mother.

Tom knows himself to be right. He knows his blood must be special, and that he will one day find Slytherin’s lost Chamber of Secrets at Hogwarts and confirm his theories. But without conclusively tying all loose ends, he’s at unease telling someone else.

If Harry understands this about Tom, will he feel even more indebted? Maybe one secret is not sufficient, maybe Harry requires more to be properly ingratiated to Tom.

(And maybe Tom wants Harry to acknowledge his dignified family history, allowing his own deplorable history to fade into the wayside.)

“Yes,” he says finally, unknitting his brows from pensive thought. “Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth, and it’s known that he passed the gift down to his children. Unfortunately, Slytherin was an early champion of what’s now known as pure-blood supremacy, the belief that Muggle ancestry dilutes a wizard’s power, rendering him inferior to those of nobler blood. Some still maintain these prejudices.”

Tom ceases his speech, deliberating whether to admit his possible tithes, then decides to say, “I believe that I’m the heir of Slytherin.”

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Harry snaps out of his thoughts and his eyes widen slightly in astonishment at the unexpected admission. “Woah… seriously?”

His first instinct is to question it, but as he thinks on it, if Salazar Slytherin was known to only pass the gift of Parseltongue over to his children then it would only be a reasonable assumption to make. Besides, wizards (as he understands it) are a very tiny fraction of a population compared to Muggles; it would only be natural for many to be related in one way or another.

“Does anyone else know?” he asks carefully. He can’t imagine it’s something you’d just go blabbing to everyone else when your possible ancestor was known for being a downright bigot. That would be a great way to gain a whole bunch of enemies at once.

Before he can hear Tom’s answer to this, however, the door to the backyard opens. Sirius stands in the door-opening, in contrast to James dressed in ridiculously expensive wizarding robes, his father once jokingly confiding in Harry that his godfather is “somewhat of a vain prat.”

“Ah, there you are!” Sirius exclaims jovially at seeing the two of them standing in the garden, approaching in great, confident strides. Harry knowns vaguely about the falling out between him and his family and being disowned by his mother, though he seems to make more than enough money to spend however he likes as an Auror. “Your mother mentioned you were frolicking about in the garden.”

“Frolicking?” Harry repeats indignantly, feeling the burn of mild embarrassment on his cheeks as Sirius playfully claps him on the shoulder, letting his hand rest there. “We weren’t—”

“Why don’t you introduce me to your friend, Harry?” Sirius interrupts him with a mischievous grin, Harry huffing half-annoyed and half-amused.

“Sirius Black, Tom Riddle,” he points out dryly. “Tom Riddle, Sirius Black—”

“You could at least pretend to look enthusiastic while you do it,” Sirius scoffs good-naturedly, then turning to Tom with a more inquisitive look. “Good to meet you, Tom. You’re the one who helped my charming godson jump a universe or two, as I understand?”
Tom nods his head. "You’re quite right, Mr. Black."

"Please," Black says, oozing melodrama and raising a glamorously ringed hand. "As they say, Mr. Black’s my father, and my father’s dead. You know," he waves his finger suggestively at Tom, "Riddle’s not a name I know, but you do have a bit of a Black family look. Lily tells me you’re in Slytherin."

"That’s correct, sir," Tom confirms, chin tilting.

"Ah, that’s a shame, that." Black swivels his head from side to side, bouncing his thick, coiffured hair. "I’m eager to see where Harry’ll end up. Gryffindor like your old man, I’m sure."

"That could be."

Harry watches the exchange between Tom and Sirius curiously as they go on, discussing their Houses and other nonsense, noting that Tom’s polite but doubtlessly exaggerated demeanour is back again, probably this time to make a good impression on his godfather. It shouldn’t be a problem, really; Sirius is somehow even more relaxed than his father is, though at the same time strangely more observant. Now that Harry thinks about it, that might be a problem after all.

"What does it matter? Houses, I mean," Harry cuts in with some irritation. "It’s all rubbish anyway."

Sirius sighs in fond exasperation. "Starting again with your attempted boycott? You realise you have to be sorted. Dumbledore won’t make any exceptions on that front."

"Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it," Harry responds stubbornly. "Putting children into little cliques like that does more harm than good. Giving people a reason to be nasty to each other and teaching mindless loyalty to something as silly as being brave or ambitious, what’s the use? You’re just dividing people."

"You never did explain why it is you feel so strongly on this topic," Sirius notes, his tone nonchalant but the look in his eyes sharp. Harry shifts uncomfortably on his feet, avoiding eye-contact with his godfather and instead glancing at Tom. He hasn’t told anyone about his exact background or the world he came from, not even his parents. Tom is the only one he’s ever described it to.

Harry shrugs awkwardly under Sirius’ subtle but heavy scrutiny. "It’s just an opinion."

"I do like the idea. Fight the system. Why not? We all have our rebellious streaks." Sirius shifts his gaze to Tom. "Can’t imagine our Slytherin here agrees, however. You’re rather big on House loyalty, no?"

"Well, however intriguing the idea may be, it’s unlikely to gain currency."

"That’s not quite an answer, but I suppose it’ll do." Sirius says, smirking. "Come on boys, why don’t we go back inside?"

Feeling a little disgruntled that his godfather is passing it off as some sort of act of teenage rebellion Harry can’t leave the garden in as good a mood as he entered it. Though in part, he supposes, that’s mostly his own fault. There’s really no reason he should be hiding his past, especially not from people who are supposed to be his family. Is it really a wonder Sirius doesn’t take his protest entirely seriously when he doesn’t know that Harry has been one of the foremost victims of the “us versus them” mentality that the Houses seem to instill in their students in his own world?
He follows Sirius back inside, and decides to show Tom the rest of the house to kill some time until dinner is ready. His father is the one, oddly enough, that’s cooking. His mother too busy with brewing some potions to refill the nearly empty stock in the hospital.

It’s extremely strange for him not to see the typical gender roles his uncle and aunt always played at reflected in his parents. Cleaning chores are so easily done with spells that either parent does it whenever they feel like. There aren’t any designated chores for who does what. Cooking seems to be the only exception as it is a more complicated task, but even then, most of it is still done with magic. His father has spelled the knife to do all the cutting work for him, for example, and is just waiting for it to be done before he can throw it in the pan.

Harry meanwhile shows Tom the ground floor with the kitchen, the small but comprehensive library, his mother’s potion-making room, and his father’s music room that doubles as a lounge with enchanted instruments that start playing as soon as they enter. On the first floor are where all the bedrooms and the bathroom are.

More specifically, the floor has his parents’ bedroom, an extra guest bedroom, a large bathroom with a tub and shower, and a room holding various magical objects and artefacts James inherited from his family, most consisting of enchanted jewelry or books, though there was a cloak Harry spied earlier which his father hadn’t wanted to tell him much about, saying with a mischievous wink that he’d find out later.

There is also what was once James’ study (which apparently went barely used) which is now refurbished into a very simple, cosy bedroom for Harry, all its furnishings made from oak, its almost bare walls painted a simple beige, windows facing the east to allow the sunlight to warm it in the mornings. It has a large single bed and a closet spelled with an extension charm to ensure he can fit as many clothes as he likes within it. The desk in the corner is littered with books Harry had been reading, taken from the filled bookshelves right above it. A magic calendar hangs right next to his bed, prone to emitting a bright golden light when he hits an important date he marked down, such as a birthday or when he finally leaves for Hogwarts.

“It still looks a little boring, but it’s a huge improvement from my last one.” Harry admits as he sits down on his bed, finding that it lacks a lot of colour and things like personal items and pictures that make a bedroom really belong to someone. “If you’d like to spend the night, you can use the guestroom across from mine,” he adds cautiously, not wanting to pressure him but feeling very strongly that Tom would probably be much better off spending as much time possible here and not in the Muggle home.

By this point it seems the other two remaining guests have arrived as Harry hears the bell go downstairs, a moment later the front door opening and two faintly familiar voices greeting his father and mother.

“We should go downstairs,” Harry says, getting up again. “Dinner’s probably ready by now.”

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His resentment thickly veiled beneath a charade of indifference, Tom tours the Potter house with as polite a smile he can muster. The house is magnificent. Never invited into a proper wizarding home before, Tom absorbs every sight and scene with rapacious eyes. There is a personal library, where Tom sees a few of his favorite titles peeking out of the shelves, and a spacious room with an enchanted violin playing a sonata. There’s a place for Lily to concoct potions, and a place for James to pile hordes of valuable, mysterious artifacts. Harry’s room, doubly larger than the one Tom shares with those two twats, is appropriately simple, an ideal haven in which to study, far from any rotten-toothed children and chatty indecision about which local girl is the most fuckable.
Harry regards his home as though he deserves it. How could he? Tom deserves this, this and more, much, much more. Yet all he’s entitled to once he ages out of the system is a few thousand quid and a class on how to behave like a normal citizen. He silently wonders how long it would take James to realize if one of his treasures, ah, disappeared.

Tom keeps his jaw tightly clenched as he trails Harry to the dining area, where sits the night’s guests at the fine mahogany table. Professor Lupin, dressed far more casually than Tom’s seen, waves kindly, accidentally elbowing the rotund, mousy blond to his right. Black, on the other side of the blond, claps before knocking back a glassful of a fermented burgundy drink.

“Ah! Nice to see you kids finally made it down. Wormtail here,” he pats the blond on the back, “was just telling us about an old witch named Bathilda Selwyn. She does some grading for the OWLs. Claims she saw the greatest Charms practical in her born days, all from a little Muggle-born she wants recruited into the Ministry.” His face darkens mischievously. “A little Muggle-born named Tom Riddle.”

Tom’s lip curls, lightening his mood as he takes a seat across from Black, who doesn’t seem quite as enthused to relay this information as he gabbles. Tom knew the old bint would be mystified by his wandless, silent Banishing Charm—elderly old fools were so attached to their wands, never willing to open their minds to new possibilities in magic. “I’m quite glad she liked my demonstration. She was a delightful examiner herself. Though, I don’t know why she assumed I’m a Muggle-born.”

Black’s brows raise considerably. “No? Well, you’ll have to forgive us old pure-blood types, we see an unfamiliar name and we just jump to conclusions. Who are your parents, then?”

Ah, what an opportunity to persuade. Black likes dramatic humor? Ask and ye shall receive. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Hm?” Black grins and swings his wrist in gesture, nearly spilling his wine. “Cheeky, this one. Very cheeky.”

A brief uncomfortable silence is broken quickly by the emergence of a roasted chicken, levitated by Lily. James follows with all the other makings of a meal: boiled greens, mashed potatoes, and a plate of treacle. In his peculiar, oblivious manner, James gestures widely to his guest, as though welcoming them, and says, “Dig in!”

“Who cooked it this time?” Remus says, skeptically eyeing a bit of boiled broccoli.

“I did,” James announces proudly.

“And you didn’t experiment with it, I hope?”

“It’s not my fault you people’ve got weak stomachs!” he defends, pride deflating as Sirius barks a loud laugh and Lily chuckles, Remus giving him a look of exasperation. “Lily tasted it and she said it was fine.”

“You didn’t tell me what was in it, and I only had a small bite,” his wife replies in amusement. “Not a whole slice. Who makes a Boom Berry pie, anyway? You’re not supposed to ingest more than three at a time.”

“Cheer up, mate,” Sirius comforts wryly. “It did taste quite delicious, best pie I’ve ever had. Until I had to throw up on your carpet, that is.”

“Boom Berry?” Harry asks, looking at his dad sitting next to him in question.
“It has restorative properties,” James explains. “Supposed to give you a nice kick if you’re feeling fatigued and tastes very sweet as well. I thought it’d be the perfect ingredient... maybe if I add less and replace some of it with—”

“No,” Remus says sternly.

“But—”

“James.”

“Oh whatever,” James huffs as Lily pats him on the arm. “Can’t appreciate creative genius when they see it... and what are you snickering at, traitor? Can’t believe this, my own son—”

“You’ve been awfully quiet, Wormtail,” Sirius says then, and Tom notices that he really hasn’t said a word or even cracked a laugh the entire conversation through. He’s barely even touched his food. A bit odd for such a fat, little man. “Anything new from the Daily Prophet?”

“Ah... well.” Peter clears his throat nervously. “I don’t mean to bring down the mood, but... I think you should know.”

“Well, go on,” Sirius prods in good humour. “We’re dying of suspense over here.”

“It’s about Harry.”

“Front page headline,” the man, Peter, says slowly. “The Boy Who Jumped Worlds, a special report all about Harry and... and the universe he came from, as directed right by Minister Grindelwald himself.”

Now that’s interesting.

His reflexes are sharp, but not sharp enough; before Tom can snatch the Prophet for himself, James has taken it in. Behind his lenses, his eyes flick from side to side, quickly skimming the content. Lily, Black, and Lupin dash quickly to the space behind James, all peering over his shoulders with great interest. As they read, their heads take turns lifting to flash Harry their horrified gawks. Once James lowers the paper to the table, hands trembling, Lily throws her arms around Harry, her lovely eyes aglitter with tears. James stands, but doesn’t move, as if unsure how to act, and the other three men merely stare with great pity.

Furtively, Tom pinches the edge of the paper, sliding it within his reach.

**THE BOY WHO JUMPED WORLDS**

*A special report all about Harry and the universe he came from.*

*Where Universe Hoppers are concerned, pressing curiosities often surface: Where do they come from? Why are they sent here? Could their presence be a warning for our own world? The case of recent Universe Hopper, Harry Potter, 15, begs each of these questions.*

*Hailing from a timeline not too different from our own, young Harry was raised among Muggles under a fascist political presence known only to us in fiction. In the totalitarian regime which governed Harry’s life, the state mandated strict regulations on all facets of life and performed routine slaughters against those who stood in opposition. Under the immense pressure of their austere measures, families fractured; at home, Harry was routinely beaten by his Muggle aunt and uncle, and at school, he had no option but to mask his bluing contusions. Life in this world was unfathomably dismal.*
However, everything then changed for Harry when he happened upon an enchanted journal linking him to us. With the help of an anonymous Hogwarts student, Harry learned more about our world—the world he was unknowingly destined to enjoy—and found in it the inspiration he required to make it through his dark days. On one fateful evening, Harry, after witnessing his classmates’ savage brutality against an innocent schoolboy, acted in the victim’s defense. He didn’t know it at the time, but it was this act of courage that triggered the chain of events that would lead him here.

The journal, deeming Harry worthy, transformed into a portal, and took Harry away from his cruel, subdued society and into our benevolent world. His parents, Healer Lily and Auror James Potter, who lost their Harry during infancy to a hereditary curse, quickly took in their alternate son and have since facilitated his smooth transition into good health and adequate education. Harry, grateful for his second chance at life, will start at Hogwarts in the autumn.

Happy though this tale ends, it is a cautionary one to wizarding kind. As Muggle technologies develop, as Muggle political systems expand, their untested power wanes ominously over our small, peaceable population.

Chapter End Notes

I don't believe there's a single universe in which Harry can avoid unwanted fame. I'd be pleased to hear more about things you'd like to see in the future. Most of the story is prewritten, but it's being edited as I post, so anything can change.

Again, thank you to everyone who left kudos, and especially to ThornAngelic, TheHauteur, PlaySetQ, Nenya_Galad, Tablekorner, and Oblivion9032 for reviewing. Your interest keeps my interest alive. ❤
The Locket

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Harry sits very still at the table, not even wanting to glance at the paper because he can already tell what’s in it from the looks he gets from his parents and their friends.

The pity stings the worst.

“Oh, Harry.” His mother pulls him into a tight embrace, eyes watery with tears. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Harry tugs away from her almost reactively, feeling like the walls are closing in on him, feeling trapped by a past that’s not going to go away no matter what he does. And now everyone will know, even strangers he’s never met before. They’ll look at him and see him as that pitiable poor boy who only by the grace of magic managed to survive, as if he were a helpless victim, as if he hadn’t nearly committed murder twice over.

“Mum, it’s fine,” he says, voice hoarse and he clears his throat, avoiding all eye-contact. “It wasn’t that bad, the article is exaggerating it–”

“Is that why you’ve been having nightmares nearly every night?” his father interrupts and Harry can feel himself paling slightly. He hadn’t realised his father had been awake all those times where he’d woken up after a horrible dream of being sucked right back into his old world, constantly making trips down to the music room with a glass of water to calm his nerves.

Harry opens his mouth to deny it, but the look his father gives him, empathetic and hurting, makes him snap his lips shut again and get up from the chair. “I need some fresh air.”

James frowns. “Harry–”

“I don’t want to talk about it, alright?” he snaps. “It’s all in the past now, it doesn’t matter anymore.” That being said, he turns his back on the party and stalking off towards the garden.

He remains just long enough within earshot to hear Sirius say to his dad, “Well, he’s definitely your son,” before he shuts the backyard door behind him, passing the rows of plants and bushes, sinking down onto the grass in the middle of the wide-open field.

Pity and sympathy is the last thing he wants to see. He wasn’t just a victim. He became a perpetrator, he became part of that ugly world for just a moment long enough to etch it into his memory forever. The last thing he needs is to be coddled for the scars on his back that hardly matter in the face of what he’s done, what he almost did.

He hears the grass rustle behind him with footsteps, but doesn’t want to turn around to face whoever it is. They’re silent as they walk up to him, so Harry can only assume it’s either Tom or Remus. Peter probably wouldn’t have come, and his parents and Sirius would’ve said something by now.

His former guess turns out to be true as he can see Tom sit down next to him from the corners of his eyes, but doesn’t turn his head to give him a proper look or otherwise acknowledge his presence. Still, he’s not averse to Tom’s company. If anything, he’d much rather it be him than anyone else back in the house.
“Bit embarrassing,” Tom says. “But the paper’s not about you, really, is it? It’s about your story, certainly, but not you. Still, I suppose if you want to talk about, er, how you feel… Then do.”

Harry can’t help but snort in amusement. Anyone else might’ve found the statement to be offensive, but in truth it does offer Harry some form of comfort. “Do you really want to hear all that? It’d just be a bunch of whining.”

He lets out a sigh, rubbing the back of his neck as he thinks on it. “I’m just… pissed off. Whatever Grindelwald’s up to, it pretty much ruined all my hopes for a clean slate. Thought I could start a new life, but now everyone’s going to know me as that poor kid that escaped some hellish Muggle dictatorship.”

Harry exhales deeply, lying down onto the grass onto his back and staring up at the darkened sky, glimpsing the few stars visible. After a moment of thought on why the Minister thought it a good idea to blab Harry’s story to the newspaper, he says, “I take it he’s not fond of Muggles. Is he trying to rile people up against them, or something?”

Tom hums in thought. “Maybe he wants to launch a takeover. There have been a few articles over the past year that sparked my interest. Little pieces about less-than-favorable things happening in the Muggle world.” He snorts. “All written with base complexity. You’ll soon find that wizards don’t understand Muggles.”

His long-fingered hands grip into the turf, plucking the blades in a tug. “I can’t say I’m thrilled to understand them,” he says impassively, slowly releasing a handful of grass onto the knee of Harry’s trousers. Harry can only make out a faint outline of the side of his face, but it strikes him as strangely charming that someone who looks otherwise so dignified can do something as normal and playful as plucking grass.

“I don’t think even other Muggles fully understand Muggles, to be honest,” Harry says as he reaches down to wipe the grass off his leg. The constant war going on in his own world is more than evidence enough for that. “The only difference between them and us is magic. If we didn’t have magic, I don’t think we’d be any different. Wizards, Muggles, whatever. We’re all humans, and humans just tend to be arseholes,” he says, hand feeling around the grass and finding the faint outlines of petals from a tiny patch of daisies scattered about.

He plucks one without thought, holding it up in front of his face for a moment, entertaining the idea of tucking it behind his ear when he instead has a much better thought and reaches the flower out to Tom with a slight curve of lips.

“Want one?” he offers in jest. “It’d look good on you.”

That not so much in jest.

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Closing his fingers around the white-petal flower, Tom eyes Harry with apathy before yanking the stem, tearing the daisy in two. “While I appreciate the charming banality in your sentiment, I can’t say I agree.” He withdraws his knees and enwraps them so that his ankles aren’t touching the grass. “There’s a distinction between Muggle mediocrity and the troubles afflicting our world. Muggles aren’t our equals.”

Neither are innocent of fault, but Muggles are worse. Muggles must contrive up little inventions just to do what wizards are capable of with the flick of a wand. Tom smiles slightly at considering how Harry would rebut, he’d likely say something like, ‘Well we would do those things if we didn’t have magic!’ and then probably ignore the glaring truth.
That is the difference: Muggles are the same as wizards, without magic. Without the one quality that upholds wizards in their superior class, safe from all the feeble inadequacies that define their non-magical counterparts.

It’s an argument to save for the future, one which Tom will inevitably win, of course, only further convincing Harry of why he should rally behind Tom’s causes. In due time, he’ll forget the moments he denied Tom’s ideas, and he’ll be better for it, more loyal for it. The timing isn’t ripe yet, however.

To soften the impact of his declaration, he amends, “Not any Muggles I’ve met, at least.”

Harry prides a daisy from the grass and chucks it at Tom’s head. “Why compare wizards and Muggles like that at all? It’s two completely different worlds using two very different means to get by.”

Plucking yet another flower, Harry tucks this one behind his own ear, shifting slightly to put his hands underneath the back of his head. Lit by the nighttime sky and resting so casually, Harry becomes the sort of image a photographer would capture and frame, though perhaps they’d adjust the luminosity, pull out the brilliance in Harry’s green eyes that is currently dulled by the darkness. Tom prefers his own appearance, but Harry’s has its merits, too. Boy next door, as they say. It’ll fair well with the cheap girls in Gryffindor.

Harry looks at Tom curiously. “What kind of person do you think you’d have been, if you were born a Muggle instead?”

“What are you asking stupid questions for?” he mocks, bending his lip to maintain the pleasant mood.

He focuses on the daisy poking oddly from behind Harry’s ear. Such a strange dissonance sounds between these two unlike things: Harry, stubborn and brave and masculine, and a dainty, little plant with all its frailties. How can Harry let himself look so silly? Has he so little regard for his dignity? Feeling audacious, and a bit unoccupied, Tom reaches forward and snatches the flower, entrapping its soft flesh.

Shifting, he pulls out his wand from his (illegally extended) pocket. With a jagged motion, he touches the flower and mutters, “Orchideous,” instantly conjuring a thick bundle of identical daisies. “Just think, for all the hours Muggles spend fussing about seeds and soil textures, and we could just give them what they want in a heartbeat. Poof.”

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Harry pushes himself to sit up straight, considering the small bouquet in Tom’s hands critically.

“Sure, we could,” he says, taking one out the bundle and twisting it around in his fingers. “But I feel like there’s more beauty in a flower naturally grown than one you just conjured out of thin air.”

He looks at the daisy in his hand for a moment longer, before glimpsing up at Tom in thought. On an inexplicable impulse and with mischief in his eyes he leans over, moves a bit closer until their knees accidentally touch, and tucks the small thing behind Tom’s ear, smiling brightly at the result.

As unapproachable as Tom appears usually, with a flower added to the mix he looks charming. Maybe too charming. Harry finds himself a moment surprised at how much he really likes the way it looks. The contrast between something so innocent-looking as a daisy and Tom, who is the last
person Harry would describe similarly, is disarming and for a second he just finds himself staring.

It takes him a moment to snap himself out of it. “For a person who doesn’t seem fond of nature, flowers really do look good on you,” he teases, hoping the (forced) playfulness might override the butterflies in his stomach.

Tom’s cheeks grow red as he brushes the daisy away, tinged in the process so that it incinerates on the ground. "Don’t do that,” he says gravely, using his wand to erase the flowers.

Harry furrows his brows as he watches the daisy burn up in flames within seconds, feeling slightly indignant on behalf of the poor thing. He’s seen it before, of course. His old classmates, the boys, were always so concerned with looking as masculine as possible that they’d get hostile at the slightest hint of softness. Another reason why Harry never fit in; he never much cared either way.

“With your affinity for flowers, I suppose we could all be wrong about Gryffindor. Perhaps you’ll end up in Hufflepuff with that crowd of duffers,” Tom sneers, and Harry’s frown only deepens.

“I’d be fine in Hufflepuff just as much as Gryffindor,” he replies with a shrug. It doesn’t matter to him either way. He’s not going to let House divisions prevent him from getting along with whoever he wants to.

He observes quietly as Tom gets rid of all the flowers, vanishing them one by one. He doesn’t think he’ll ever quite get tired of seeing magic, not after having missed out on it for fifteen years, and he still has so much to learn. He almost wants to ask what spell Tom used to make the flowers disappear, until he’s distracted by Tom, who says, “What are you in this universe if not a flower merely conjured out of thin air by magic? Are you less–”

Harry notices him hesitate for a moment, realising that he was about to call him beautiful and something about that makes his heart skip a beat.

“Are you less worthy than us humble homegrown wizards?”

He looks away, brushing a hand through his hair as is his habit when he’s even the slightest bit flustered, scratching the back of his head as he tries focusing on Tom’s question and not the sudden awareness of how close they’re sitting next to each other.

“Of course not,” he replies simply once getting his head on straight again. “If that were true then purebloods should be the worthiest out of everyone, but you’re a walking contradiction of that.” He raises his eyebrows slightly. “But I’ll spare you the comparison to a flower, since that seems to offend all your manly feelings.”

Harry belittling Tom’s turn down of those queer antics is more than worth the sweet sound of besotted admiration.

* * *

If that were true then purebloods should be the worthiest out of everyone, but you’re a walking contradiction of that.

The compliment flows smoothly down his body, encouraging his more radical thoughts. This is a sensation he’s missed sorely. He loves the man he has become, but he still longs for the cheap, juvenile excitement he once sought when he was a younger Tom. Binding his hands at the throat of a cat (or a dog or a rabbit), compressing until their life was on the fringe, his for the taking. He used to shudder with pleasure, devise new methods for facing animals with their inevitable deaths.

That doesn’t quite do the trick anymore, unfortunately. He’s since learned to refine his cruelty. It's
far more enjoyable to inveigle an ignorant fool and then suck something useful out of him. With Hagrid, it’s a kind word that gets him a discount on a vile of venom, with Slughorn, it’s a handsome grin that earns him an illicit incantation—of course, it’s all for research, Professor. Taking life is a cheap thrill, the act of a little sociopath, and fun though it was, it now seems fruitless. He doesn’t want to hurt Harry; what would be his in return? Instead, he wants to control him, prey on the budding fraternity glimmering in those green eyes.

But Harry could use some taming. Like a colt, he’s buck-wild, eager to lash out and reluctant to submit. He wants Tom to taste his adulation with a spoonful of impudence. And just as the largest animals were the most fun to maim, Harry is the most enticing challenge he’s yet encountered. He can’t be forced into a saddle, he must be coaxed.

So, with all the decency of a whorehouse dawdler, Tom turns his mouth into a frown and redirects Harry’s attention to that which makes him most vulnerable. “Sometimes I worry about that. It’s not hard to see how much better the pure-bloods have it. I wonder: Is the Minister trying to resurrect negativity about Muggles to put more heat on impurity?”

He sighs, shaking his head in a convincingly concerned manner. “A boy in my year, Draco Malfoy, claims those of us raised outside the wizarding world pollute the culture.” He didn’t quite say that; he just said that Muggles had no culture, his beady gray eyes flickering Tom’s way. Nevertheless, he’s a bloody prat, so Tom adds, “It’s not a drastic leap for someone like that to suddenly think we’re inferior.”

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“But it doesn’t make much sense in the long run. There’s so few wizards as it is; alienating anyone who adds to your numbers is just short-sighted. Unless this Malfoy bloke would be fine with inbreeding, I guess.”

He turns his head to look at Tom, not being able to make out much of his face in the dark, and the moonlight is hardly enough to provide proper sight. It surprises him to hear Tom is concerned about such things at all, as from what Harry knows he’s easily the top of his year and has the ambition to push it even further to boot.

“You’re not actually worried about that, are you? People like Malfoy are happy to sit around and leech off their parents’ wealth,” he says, having heard plenty of stories from his father and Sirius about pureblood circles to know he wants nothing to do with them. “Meanwhile you could make it all the way to the Ministry, if you wanted to. Kick Grindelwald off his throne.”

It’s meant as a tease, but Harry could easily imagine it becoming a reality if Tom set his mind to it. But maybe it should’ve went unsaid. Tom has a big enough ego as it is without Harry taking the time to stroke it on top of that.

‘Ah well,’ he thinks. ‘Plenty of time to knock him off his high horse as well.’

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The rush of the capture flushes over Tom again, positively searing his ears. He could tell Harry anything and it wouldn’t matter. That, according to lineage charts, he’s dangerously inbred, that he’s never once cared for anyone but himself. Harry wouldn’t care because the universe delivered him to belong to Tom, and with the Minister’s campaign for dominance swelling slowly but surely, it’s becoming clearer that Harry truly will be his instrument to acquiring power. And, best of all, he’ll like it, live for it.
The specifics are forthcoming, Tom can almost taste them. The meantime is for hints and slow, clever ploys. Yes, *coaxing the colt*, that’s all it is. “I’m not worried about morons like Malfoy. Talentless swine like him have no idea what I’m capable of.”

He stops to impart a wholesome smile, a handsome gesture to belie the burning, raging impulse to spill his plans to Harry now. “But they’ll see.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they will,” Harry says sharply, eyes lowering, his tone hinting at a new thought, “I, uh, wanted to ask you something. It’s about earlier.”

“Hm?”

“Did your foster brother really, er… Was that really what happened?” He shakes his head. “I mean, you don’t have to say. If you don’t want.”

If ever there was a time when Tom wanted to roll his eyes more than now, he can’t recall. It’s his own miserable fault for telling such a morbidly stupid lie, he supposes. “We had a row. Nothing serious. With three teen boys in one room, things are likely to get rough sometimes. I would have said as much, but I didn’t want your father to think that I’m some sort of thug.”

“Oh. Right.” Harry twists his mouth into a tight corner. “Well, if things ever get too bad, you can stay here whenever you like.”

“I think I can handle a few rowdy Muggles, Harry.”

“Yeah. I know. Forget I mentioned it.”

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It was shortly after this where the evening became too cold and windy, and they both decided to retreat inside. The adults were all gathered in the living room, having a hushed conversation amongst themselves.

Nothing about the paper was mentioned to the two boys however (to Harry’s great relief), and before it got too late into the night, Tom returned to his own home, though the following days prove him such a frequent visitor to the Potter home that the family all but becomes used to setting an extra plate at the table during meals.

It also prompts James to call in a favour at the Ministry anyway and allow for the fireplace in Tom’s house to be temporarily connected to the Floo Network for the summer, making it much easier for him to come over whenever he so likes.

His frequent visits are a relief to Harry, who is otherwise stuck in a rather tense atmosphere at home. Both his parents keep trying to find excuses to poke and prod at his past, wanting desperately to know all that happened to him and not accepting Harry’s insistence on privacy—after all, he’s their son now, and it’s their job to take care of him. It comes as a very alien thing to Harry, who has always been used to taking care of himself and having his own space and independence. He doesn’t know how to be dependent on other people.

Still, it’s not all that bad. With Tom now visiting as well, Harry starts studying even more rigorously than before. As predicted, most of the spell-work he’s catching up on is not a problem in the slightest. He’s a natural with Charms and a quick study with defensive and offensive spells. It’s the theoretical parts of the school curriculum that go down a bit less smooth, but fortunately, he has Tom to aid him in that department, especially when Harry must trudge through yet another chapter to catch up on History of Magic.
But Tom aside, his parents provide the needed support just as much as his friend does. His mother is helpful with Potions, and as brilliant as Tom is, Lily has had fifteen years’ worth of professional brewing experience and shows them both plenty of tricks and shortcuts to improve on the recipes written in the textbooks.

Harry’s father, swift and energetic, is a great help in Transfiguration. It turns out to be a specialty of his, as he at one point mischievously shows off his Animagus form in the garden—a great stag with majestic antlers, something he’s had to dedicate nearly two months to before he could fully master the form.

As far as his education goes, he’s thankfully starting to catch up quick, and it’s on an early Saturday morning that his parents decide it finally time to take him to Diagon Alley to buy his various school supplies, as well as the thing Harry has been looking the most forward to: a wand of his own. They’ve been reluctant to do so before, namely because of how much Harry has been talked about across wizarding Britain lately with the Daily Prophet article having come out.

It doesn’t help that the portal he travelled through apparently left a very recognisable scar on his forehead in the shape of a lightning bolt, which not even his mother, talented Healer as she is, could do anything to remedy. He’s learned to try and hide it under his fringe, which doesn’t do much considering the messy stubbornness of his hair, refusing to stay put. Just another thing he’ll have to get used to.

Sitting on the living room couch and nervously jiggling his right leg up and down as he glances towards the fireplace every few seconds, Harry waits in impatient anticipation for Tom to arrive so they can finally leave.

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Living with the Muggles has not become any easier for Tom. Leaning against the lavatory counter, comb meticulously coiffuring his black hair in place, he does his best to ignore the loud thumping that has persisted, on and off, for the past hour.

“Riddle! Get out the bloody toilet!”

He peers at his reflection in the floor-length mirror, which shakes with each of little Amy Benson’s reverberating knocks. In the trembling image, he admires his slim form, garbed in long slacks and a button-down that’s tucked in at the waist with a belt. As soon as he Floos to Harry’s house, he’ll cover the outfit in his finest slate robes. Then he’ll truly be the figure of wizarding perfection, completely without fault. An envy to all men, sought out by all women. He adjusts his collar as the banging goes on.

“Riddle, I’m this close to knocking the door down!”

He returns to the sink and wrenches open the cabinet, finding a small bottle of expensive fragrance. With discretion, he coats his fingers and pats it onto his cheeks, realizing that beside the cologne’s now empty spot rests a box of sanitary pads. Well, well, well, little Amy Benson. Not so little anymore, now are you? His annoyance with the girl at a peak, he trades the cologne for the box and stuffs it in the rubbish bin, covering it with a wad of tissue for good measure. If she needs the loo so badly, she can sit in here for a while then.

Waiting for her to finish the latest bout of pummeling, he stands by the door, opening it only when she’s stopped. Scowling with her arms crossed, small tears streaming, she shouts, “You couldn’t’ve got ready in your room?!”

He shoves the tween without answering her question, bee-lining to gather his things and leave.
The room has remained mostly vacant; since his altercation with Eric, the two boys made themselves scarce. He’s mostly glad for it, but was rather looking forward to one of them returning. Useless as they are, he can usually poach a few quid from them. Without their help, his budget for Diagon Alley is limited to the meager Hogwarts allotment. Tossing his bag over his shoulder, he grabs a pinch of Floo Powder from a ziplock beneath his pillow and turns back to the doorway, surprised to see Eric’s minion, Dennis Bishop.

“Where you going, Riddle?” he asks, as if he has some command over his strained, tenor voice.

“None of your business, Bishop,” Tom responds calmly.

“You look like a right ponce, you know that?”

Eyeing Dennis’s right hand, stuffed protectively in his tracksuit pocket, Tom smiles with realization.

“What you smiling for?”

In one movement, Tom thrusts his head against the doorframe then holds it in place with one elbow, freeing his empty hand to search the idiot’s pocket. Quickly, he snags a handful of bills, tosses Dennis into the room, shuts the door and runs for the fireplace. With no Muggles in the vicinity, he releases his clenched Floo Powder and almost shouts, “Harry Potter’s house.”

The emerald flames engulf him at once, transporting him in a cloud through the Floo Network, his destination ending at the home of his otherworldly companion, who sits in the living room with an impatient look about him.

Stepping out of the pit, Tom sneaks the money into his trouser pocket nonchalantly. With a smile, he says, “Ready to go?”

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“I’ve been ready for the past week,” he replies, having already gotten his Hogwarts letter, with an additional letter written by Headmaster Dumbledore himself.

Officially, he’ll be in the sixth year, but seeing as how OWLs are usually necessary to qualify a student for being able to continue taking a subject in their sixth year, there has been made a sizable exception for Harry, with approval from the Ministry.

The good news is that he’ll be able to take his OWLs at the end of the sixth year together with the fifth years so he’ll be in the same year as Tom. The bad news is that he’ll have to study for his OWLs as well as his NEWTs at the same time. His only saving grace is that the two exams involve a lot of coinciding curriculum, even if one is more advanced than the other.

All in all, it’s going to be an exhausting year, but Harry is nothing if not determined.

“Ah, there you are,” James says as he walks into the living room and spots Tom, Lily right behind him. “Good, now we can finally go before Harry implodes on himself.”

“Very funny,” Harry scoffs. “We’re using Floo, right? Can I go first?”

“Promise you won’t wander off?” Lily asks with a slight frown.

“I think I can manage staying in one place for a few seconds.”

“Alright, go ahead. You know how to–”
“Yes, mum, I know,” Harry says with an exasperated sigh, taking a handful of Floo Power sitting in a cup hanging from the side of the fireplace. He flashes Tom a grin as he passes him to step inside the pit, noting for a moment the pleasant scent of cologne. Throwing the powder down, he says clearly, “Diagon Alley,” before being covered in green flame and disappearing from the fireplace, to reappear seconds later at his destination.

Stepping out of the fireplace, Harry looks at the narrow street bustling with witches and wizards in wonder, glancing at the row of fireplaces out in the open that has people coming through them every few seconds or so.

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Two fireplaces over, Tom locates Harry.

Reaching a hand deep into his right pocket, Tom grabs the hem of his robes and yanks, pulling them out in a large swing. He tugs them over himself with contained frenzy. The Potters may have taken a liking to him, but James is an Auror, and Tom doesn’t fancy a lecture on the illegality of Extension Charms.

“Let’s find your parents,” Tom says to Harry.

It doesn’t take long for them to arrive, James stepping out within a second of Lily.

“Where do you kids want to hit up first?” James asks, straightening his glasses.

“Perhaps we should just start at Ollivander’s?” Lily suggests, gesturing to its weatherworn exterior.

“Oh, Lily, dear, it’s not customary,” James moans, shaking his head in disapproval. “We should start with the boring stuff first; that’s how my father took me.”

It’s rather impractical to shop for the heaviest items first. It’s not at all the order in which he did shopping for his first year. Still, he trails along, buying the rattiest used textbooks at Flourish & Blott’s and watching with quiet envy as James spares no expense for Harry to have the nicest version of all he needs. As Lily and James reminisce over some old story about Madam Maulkin’s, Tom considers Dennis’s stolen money resting in his back pocket and beams with a thought.

“Hey, Harry,” he whispers, low so the parents can’t hear. “After you get your wand, I could show you the most interesting part of Diagon Alley. I’m not sure your parents would approve, though.”

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Harry’s mischievous streak is greatly piqued with that bit of information, and he surreptitiously glances back to his parents behind him who are too caught up in conversation to notice.

“I’ll make up something,” he whispers back. Should be a simple enough task, really; if he just gives some excuse of wanting to explore a bit, they’ll probably leave them to it.

“Why don’t you three boys go ahead?” Lily then says once they arrive at the entrance. “It’s a bit too small for four people. I need to stop by at the Apothecary anyway.”

“Sure—see you at Fortescue’s!” James says, referring to the ice cream parlour they passed a while earlier. While Lily leaves the other three step into Ollivanders, a tinkling bell ringing at their entrance, Harry noticing that the shop is indeed rather tiny, with only one chair in the corner where James sits down to wait.
Harry is so struck by the dusty old place with shelves reaching up high into the ceiling, filled with thousands of narrow boxes that he nearly jumps when he suddenly hears a soft “Good afternoon,” from behind him.

An old man stands before them with pale eyes.

“Hello,” Harry says awkwardly.

“Ah, yes.” The man hums. “I thought I’d be seeing you soon, Harry Potter.”

“Still as weird as ever, eh, Ollivander?” James says, looking comfortable sitting in the chair. The man’s gaze turns to his father in some amusement as he promptly recites the exact measurements of both James and Lily’s wands.

“You just remembered all of that?” Harry asks incredulously, Mr. Ollivander’s eyes twinkling as he turns his gaze to Harry.

“I never forget any wand I’ve sold, Mr. Potter,” he answers, turning to look at Tom. “Your friend here, for example—a very powerful wand, yew, thirteen-and-a-half inches, phoenix feather. A potential for many great things; I hope you’ve been treating it well, Mr. Riddle.”

“Why, of course, Mr. Ollivander.”

“So, er, how do you pick wands for people, exactly?” Harry ventures to ask.

“Let me show you,” Mr. Ollivander says, and then proceeds to ask for his wand arm, measuring it from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head.

It is only after this rather strange measuring that he hands out wands for him to try. Harry eagerly attempts to brandish each of them, yet finds that before he can do anything, Ollivander snatches them out of his hand. The pile of tried wands mounts higher and higher, but the more wands Ollivander pulls from the shelves, the happier he seems to become.

At his eighteenth wand, Harry starts getting a bit nervous. What if there is no wand that fits him?

“Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we’ll find the perfect match here somewhere. I wonder, now…” Ollivander glances at Tom for some reason as he picks out the next wand for Harry to try, his gaze lingering there for quite a while until he decides. “Yes, why not. Unusual combination, holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple.”

Harry takes the wand from him, and feels a sudden warmth in his fingers. He raises it above his head, bringing it swishing down through the dusty air and a stream of red and gold sparks shoot from the end like fireworks, throwing dancing spots of light onto the walls. James whoops and claps, and Mr. Ollivander cries out, “Oh, bravo! Yes, indeed, oh, very good. Well, well, well… how curious… how very curious…”

He puts Harry’s wand back into its box and wraps it in brown paper, still muttering, “Curious… curious….”

“Sorry,” Harry says with a frown, “but what’s curious?”

Glancing once more to Tom before answering Harry, Ollivander says, “It just so happens, Mr. Potter, that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather. Just one other. It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother, why,” Ollivander points to Tom, “its brother belongs to your friend, here.”
Harry stares at the man in astonishment, turning to look at Tom with wide eyes.

“Isn’t that something!” James says, eagerly breaking the lull with a sheepish grin. “You boys really are meant to be best friends.”

The little piece of knowledge sticks in his mind on the way to the ice cream parlour. Was it really meant to be? Harry finds it difficult to imagine otherwise. Ollivander said something to him while he was in the shop that makes him hesitate, something about the wand choosing the wizard. If taken literally, could it possibly mean the wand simply sensed in some way his connection to Tom and was attracted to him because of it?

It seems too meaningful to merely be a fluke, not to mention the tidbit Tom told him earlier about how he acquired the diary, with the magic door basically spitting it out at him. Harry is no longer certain at all that it was just happenstance that Tom was the one to be there to pick the diary up. Is fate really at play here? It sounds so… so…

Harry feels a flush creeping up his neck as the word ‘romantic’ comes to mind, trying to shake it out of his thoughts. The very notion is absurd. Like his father said, they’re best friends and that’s all. Even if there is some sort of potential for something there on Harry’s end, he just can’t imagine Tom ever, well, feeling the same for him. As far as Harry knows, Tom is either straight or has no such proclivities at all.

Typical that his mind jumps right into romance.

Harry is about to put the matter aside when he suddenly feels a breath brush over the side of his neck and ear, a soft whisper inspiring a twinge in the pit of his stomach and making his shoulders tense, the flush on his neck spreading up to his cheeks.

“How do you suppose we get away?” Tom asks quietly.

Harry doesn’t glance or look at him as he quietly answers, hoping the blush goes unseen. “Just—hold on a second.” He approaches his parents, and it’s to his luck that the parlour is filled with customers, ensuring a long line. “Um, hey.”

“Oh, Harry.” James turns to him. “I was just telling your mother about the wand you got. A great coincidence that was, right, Lily?”

Lily has a very knowing and very amused smile on her face as she looks at Harry and then glances at Tom. “Very.”

“Yeah, great coincidence,” Harry mutters. “Look, er, I was wondering if I could explore Diagon Alley a bit with Tom? There’s a few shops I haven’t been to yet, like the one with the Quidditch supplies…”

“You don’t want ice cream?” James questions, looking confused that anyone should pass, but then Lily cuts in.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” she says, that smile that has Harry feeling a lot like a bashful child still on her lips. “It’ll be a while till we get our turn in the queue anyway. We’ll wait here until you’re done.”

James looks a bit put out at that. Whether it’s because he won’t be taking part in the exploration or because he was hoping for a family moment, Harry isn’t sure. Maybe both. “But Lils—”

“Please, James—when was the last time you and I had a date?”
His father perks up attentively at this. “Oh?” He smirks. “Well, in that case, who am I to say no to such a lovely lady?”

Harry’s mother winks conspiratorially at him and Harry grins back, before turning triumphantly to Tom with a quiet, “Come on,” and making his way out the packed store.

Once outside it starts sinking in that it’ll just be the two of them now, and he suddenly feels a bit nervous as he glances at his friend. “So, where to?”

Tom smiles. “I’m going to show you Knockturn Alley, just around the corner. It’s home to the more, uh, colorful establishments in London. But first, I need to exchange a bit of Muggle money.”

Following Tom into Gringotts, at least, proves an incredibly interesting experience, Harry must do his best not to gawk at the goblins; it’s his first time seeing a non-human, particularly one he previously considered to be creatures of fairy tales.

He watches as Tom trades his cash in for gold coins. Harry still isn’t quite of how it works yet. He’s been so busy with studying for Hogwarts that he hasn’t had a chance to become acquainted with simple things like the currency or the culture in this world. Seeing the strange robes people wear around him still feels surreal, as if he’s on the set of a movie.

He lets Tom lead him to their destination, and Harry feels at once wary of the shadow-covered street once they enter, keeping close to his friend as he avoids making eye-contact with any unsavoury figures milling about. Most are cloaked in dark colours, some faces even hidden.

“He’s got a bit of a reputation, if you can imagine. Anywhere catch your interest?” Tom says, not looking at all uneasy the way Harry feels, directing his attention to the shops instead.

Knockturn Alley stretches past a fork between itself and the rest of Diagon Alley, its murky dimness a contrast to the lively stir of the main street crowds. It’s not a far jaunt until they’re standing beneath the consuming shadows of towering outlets, each bearing varied signs in advertisement.

He nearly does a double-take when they pass a shop that advertises bones to be for sale, a large display of skeletons on the front window, and tries not to appear perturbed when he sees a man whispering into a hole in the wall beside it. His eyes linger a bit on the tattoo shop they pass, mildly interested until a man emerges with a forearm that glows a faint, eerie red, hunched over and muttering deliriously to himself.

Harry isn’t so sure about coming here anymore, glancing at Tom with some uncertainty. What on earth could he find enjoyable about this place? But, for the sake of not being a killjoy (and in truth he can’t help but be curious, even if it is a morbid sort of curiosity) Harry takes another look around as they pass various shops and his eyes land on what appears to be an antique shop, the most normal place he’s seen thus far.

“Borgin and Burkes?” he suggests, hoping he won’t find something gruesome inside.

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It’s endearing. Harry probably suspects that the antique shop is somewhat less sinister than the neighboring businesses. Smirking, Tom agrees, eager to inspire a smidgeon of Harry’s dishy squeamishness. He likes to watch Harry quail nervously in the presence of all that he personally considers rather comforting. Dark magic consumes the alley like a stench, pungent and alluring for those who know of its empowering nature, off-putting for those who don’t.
The interior of Borgin and Burkes is as Tom remembers it. A large glass display encases several Dark artifacts: a disembodied human finger fidgeting uncontrollably, a bloodstained animal skull, layers of jewelry. Medieval torture devices rest against the wall, spiked and menacing, beneath a hanging queue of theatrical masks. It’s everything and more than one could hope for from a dodgy Knockturn Alley relic store.

One of the shopkeepers, skeletal and crouched, leers skeptically at the two, but Tom ignores it and sets off toward an interesting item. Extending from the mantelpiece, a grisly, blackened hand reaches upward. A tag hanging off its side reads, “HAND OF GLORY, 23 GALLEONS.” Looking for once to purchase and not merely gawk, Tom ambles slowly, considering each price with interest.

In his periphery, he notices a miniature cheval glass. He turns to catch his reflection and snorts, amused to see it’s not his handsome face peering back, but instead a rather grim young woman, whose eyes are gouged, pouring blood over pallid cheeks. He chuckles and twists to beckon Harry over, certain he’ll be quite unsettled by the strange, little chit. However, Harry is out of eyeshot, looking at the least macabre selection, the jewelry.

His volume polite, but loud enough, he calls for his friend, “Harry, come look at this. It’s quite interesting.”

***

Aside from the fact that everything on sale is rather disturbing to Harry, it does offer up a new insight into Tom, though he can’t say he much likes it. Clearly, his friend is a bit of a nutter if he’s into things like this.

Deciding to play it safe he wanders over to the jewelry section, most of its pieces being unsurprisingly listed as ‘Cursed’ on the labels as he tries ignoring the glaring look of the shopkeeper on his back. He peruses the many necklaces and rings encrusted in gold and silver, covered in valuable stones but undoubtedly dangerous to wear. None of it much piques his interest.

That is, until an oval-shaped locket at the very edge of the shelf catches his eye. It sits behind the glass, appearing for all intents and purposes normal and the only item not labelled as ‘Cursed’, made of heavy gold with the letter S on its front, encrusted in glimmering dark green jewels. He wouldn’t have spared it much of a second glance, were it not for the ridiculous price-tag: ‘LOCKET, 8000 GALLEONS’. It’s easily the costliest thing he’s seen in the store yet.

“Harry, come look at this,” Tom calls, and Harry can barely tear his eyes off the ludicrously expensive locket to turn and walk over to where Tom is. “It’s quite interesting.”

“What is?” Harry asks as he approaches, glancing at the ordinary looking mirror until he’s startled by the horrifying face peering back at him within. “Seriously? Maybe interesting as a Halloween gimmick, but I hope you’re not planning on actually buying that.” Grimacing, he turns away from the glass, only to nearly jump out of his skin when coming face to face with the leery shopkeeper standing right behind him.

“Anything catch your interest, gentlemen?” the man scoffs, clearly unconvinced they have the means to buy much of anything in his store.

“Er… yeah,” Harry says after recovering from his brief bit of shock, glancing back towards the jewellery section of the store. “What’s with the locket priced at 8000? The one with the S on it?”

“Ah, yes,” the shopkeeper says with a glint in his eye. “An incredibly valuable artefact indeed. Its
contents are a mystery, as I’ve been unable to open it to this very day, though I believe it bestows upon its wearer all kinds of powers. While it is impossible to truly verify, I believe this particular locket might have even belonged to Salazar Slytherin himself. Interesting you should inquire after it at all, seeing as it is almost certainly out of your price range.”

Harry feels slightly insulted and almost wants to open his mouth to snap back at the shopkeeper when his mind tracks back at what the man said right before slighting him—the part of it being Slytherin’s locket—and looks to Tom, curious to what his reaction might be.

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A sudden, sharp inhalation breaks Tom’s mask, his eyes widening with derision. He attempts to raise a pleasant lip through a brewing snarl, but can’t quite manage to slacken his tension. Hands clasped tightly behind his back, Tom crosses to the encasement and says, "Is that so? And where, might I ask, did you acquire this locket?"

He identifies the locket immediately, its small, ovular surface inlaid with emerald jewels. Slytherin’s mark. As he stares, he hears the shopkeeper’s voice come nearer with the slow patter of labored footsteps.

"In this very store, though quite some time ago. Around Christmas of ’93, if memory serves me. A young witch came in, nearly busting at the seam… Going to have a baby, see, and needed some gold. Slytherin’s or not, it only took a few simple spells to confirm that it is indeed rather valuable.” He stops in line beside Tom, his awful voice inciting white-hot fury. “Poor, little fool had no idea how much it was worth. She took ten Galleons and left on her way.”

"Legillimens!" Tom shouts, raising his wand so quickly the old man hasn’t a moment to think twice. He peels through the memories in a craze, relenting only when he sees a woman. A round belly protrudes from her emaciated frame, her crossed-eyes mourning as she parts with the invaluable locket. There is no family resemblance; her awful, sullen face is unstructured and tired, her frame strangely asymmetric. But Tom knows, without doubt, that it is his unborn self inside of her, not weeks before taking her life in childbirth at a Muggle hospital just miles away.

Shuddering, he recedes from the sleazy, worthless man’s mind, repulsed by all he’s seen.

“Get out!” the man shouts, pushing Tom with a shove and stumbling a bit. “Get out of here this instant!”

“You had no right, you filth!” Tom bellows, poking yew into the man’s trachea.

“Put down your wand, boy!” he demands, now withdrawing his own. “If you don’t leave now, I’ll send for the authorities.”

A simple, five-letter incantation begs to fly from Tom’s mouth—an Unforgivable he almost casts. But, with a jerk, his head faces Harry, a witness to it all, loyal but vulnerable to inevitable interrogations. Restraint setting in, Tom pulls back his wand and, for some reason, grabs Harry by the wrist, storming out of the store with heavy stomps, painfully resisting the compulsion to Curse the man until he writhes and pleads for death.

"What did you see?" Harry asks, of course ignorant to Tom’s motivation.

Anger simmers in his veins and urges him to lash out, attack. In Harry’s hesitant green-eyes, however, he finds the resolve to soothe his ire. It’s this shade of green, the shade of the locket’s jewels, of the Hogwarts crest, that reminds him of his ancestry, his nobility. He’s not a poor Muggle head case, not an angry little boy who crunches cartilage just to watch other foster
children bleed. He’s a wizard, a descendant of the great Salazar Slytherin, and he can get what’s
his through more sophisticated means than brute force.

Curling his rather long fingers on Harry’s shoulders and holding him in place with severity, Tom
quietly explains, “That witch he spoke about wasn’t just some vagrant. In December 1993, a
pregnant woman walked into a hospital on the other end of Charring Road, almost too weak to
stand. She only lived long enough to give birth and whisper her son’s name to the midwife.”

He releases Harry and takes his wand from his pocket, deftly purling it in his hand. “That’s all I
knew about my mother until I investigated my lineage at Hogwarts. There I learned who I truly
am—the final heir to Salazar Slytherin.” He points his wand in the shop’s direction, punctuating
his words carefully, “I’m the rightful owner of that locket.”

Feeling properly calmed, yet intent on reclaiming his stolen property, Tom cannot hold back his
grudging realizations. “If he had paid her what she was owed, my mother could’ve lived. I would
have never been given to the state and raised by Muggles.”

Face unemotional, tone heavy, he explains his plan to Harry. "I’m not leaving London without
what’s mine. I’m going to march back in the store and cast a specific Curse; it won’t hurt him, but
it’s highly illegal, you can’t tell anyone I’ve used it. After that, I need you to run in and take the
locket, then I’ll erase his memory. No one will be the wiser.”

“You might still be seen while doing it, though, if someone were to look through the windows,”
Harry replies. “Tell you what, my father’s got an Invisibility Cloak we could use—a real one, not
a cheap knock-off. That way you won’t run the risk of witnesses or alarming anyone. We can
come back for it tomorrow, right? Not like it’s going anywhere.”

Tom will miss the satisfaction of addling the shopkeeper, but he agrees that Harry’s plan is touch
more prudent. Wizarding laws, for whatever silly reason, are quite strict about Unforgivables.
They leave for Harry’s home when the day ends, his parents ignorant to their misadventure, plot
through the night, and return the next morning with a carefully laid plan.

Rounding the corner to Knockturn Alley, Tom walks near to Harry, who’s invisible beneath his
father’s cloak.

"I hope you’re ready,” Tom whispers to Harry before entering the shop.

Immediately, the petty shopkeeper’s head rises, eyes narrowing disapprovingly. He is, fortunately,
alone. “You’re not welcome here,” he growls, hand reaching into his robe pocket.

“Forgive me, sir,” Tom says silkily, heading in with caution. “I only came to apologize for what
happened yesterday.”

“Apologetic?”

“Why, yes, sir,” he confirms, silently unlocking the case while the man looks with disbelief. “I
wasn’t myself. My brother had given me a botched Headache Potion and it muddied my senses.”
In a subtle gesture, Tom waves his hands, signaling for Harry to enter the store. “I really didn’t
mean you any harm, your store is among the finest in London.”

As the man responds with skepticism, Tom looks across the room to where the locket rests, now
accessible and ready for reclamation. If all goes well, if he can keep the shopkeeper’s attention
diverted, and everything will go accordingly.

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Keeping an eye on the man as Tom continues to talk to him, Harry looks towards the case that’s now been left unlocked, silently padding over to wait beside it until the opportune moment. It’s a good thing the floor is made of solid stone and not wooden floorboards, or he might’ve had a problem. Now it’s just a matter of the right timing.

As Tom continues to spin a story, Harry watches the shopkeeper carefully. Tom’s natural charisma seems to work greatly in their favour as the man is completely absorbed in the words of appreciation Tom boasts for the trade of dark artefacts. Typical smug wanker, likes to have his ego stroked.

Not even risking the sound of a breath, Harry tips the glass case open just enough for both hands to slip through the side, swiping the locket off its shelf while keeping a hold of both the chain and the locket to minimise the noise, and shuts the case again with a gentle press of a finger. He knew his quick and steady hands would be good for something.

It takes him all but three seconds in total. More than enough, as the shopkeeper seems not to have noticed a thing and Harry is already on his way out of the store, the locket safe in his hands.

He finally exhales a deep breath of relief once outside, not daring to take the cloak off yet. His heart is racing with the theft—8000 galleons!—as he waits for Tom. Once his friend joins him, he whispers a quiet, “I’ve got it; let’s go.”

In a scurry, they rush to Floo back to the Potter house, the locket carefully tucked away in Harry’s pocket until they’re both safely within his room. After some minutes of mocking the storeowner for every evident flaw, the two settle from the high, careful not to mention anything too incriminating. (If his mum found out what happened, she’d go mental.)

“You’ve been loyal to me today, Harry,” Tom says to him, lounging around on the bed, caressing the stolen locket. “It’s a rather important moment in Gaunt family history, the day we avenged my poor mother and salvaged an heirloom of the noble Salazar Slytherin.”

Harry, sitting at his desk, turns to look at Tom with raised eyebrows at the rather absurd remark. What, as if he were some follower? The thought alone makes Harry snort.

“How intriguingly fateful it is that you would notice the locket, Harry,” Tom says, dangling it by the chain, limning the body of the locket in the candlelight. “And this after a sequence of other strange, fateful happenings. The diary, our wands, the locket, these are all signs. But of what? That’s the question.”

Harry almost starts tuning him out; he’s gotten used to how much Tom likes the sound of his own voice, and figures it’s best to leave him be when he’s in one of those moods again.

“I treasure this little thing immensely, but I do wish I could open it. I thought for sure it would recognize its owner immediately.” Tom digs his nail into the locket groove for the umpteenth time, somehow thinking it will open. “What precaution must Slytherin have taken to ensure only the Heir could fully enjoy its properties? I’m a fool! Of course, the answer is clear. Hassie...hassie...hhhh.”

Without pause, the locket pops open. Harry leans a bit forward for a closer look, but it appears the contents are empty, two smooth concave halves.

“How uneventful.” Tom snaps it back shut and hisses again, causing it to unclasp once more. At least hearing Tom hiss in that strangely flowing language is enthralling enough to keep his attention.

”Come here, Harry,” Tom says then, gesturing with his hand as if Harry were some sort of dog. "I
want to see if it will open for you. Surely you can manage a word of Parseltongue. Try to say "hasssiethhhh."

"Oh? Does this mean you’re done talking?” Harry comments wryly, pointedly leaning back into his chair. “I’m quite comfortable where I am, thanks, but I’ll give it a try.” He’s heard Tom say it three times, now, so it shouldn’t be too hard. “Hasssiethhhh.”

The locket clicks open in Tom’s hands, and Harry can’t help but grin a bit in amusement.

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The foreign utterance of the Parseltongue sounds faintly strange to Tom’s ears, as if accented or lisped, but nevertheless, the locket snaps, hinge swinging open. Tom closes his fist sharply, locking his treasure shut. How very cute of Harry, opening the locket and smiling like that. It’s a subversion tactic. Tom understands this. Harry realizes the power Tom has over him, feels his defenses slipping, so wherever he can, he needs to shift the power dynamics to suit his ego.

“Looks like I managed,” Harry mocks. “What were you expecting out of it, anyway?”

Tolerantly, Tom explains, “I thought perhaps it would give some indication of its powers. Often, it takes time to really gauge the utility of ancient artifacts.”

Sliding over the comforter until his feet settle on the carpet, Tom leans with his elbow to his knees, the locket chain spread between his hands. “I’ll simply have to wait and see.” He sighs and lays the locket along the bed beside his thigh. “If I’ve learned anything this year, it’s patience. Much of which has to do with you,” he admits, feeling playful, lifting his head to where it’s level with Harry’s.

Harry has ripened since his arrival. Tom suspects it has much to do with nutrition. His face is stronger at the jaw, and his frame is fuller too; he’s all healthy lean muscle, athletic and capable. Other than that, he’s still boyish and modest, but the summer has warmed his skin some, likely from all the Quidditch he plays in heat of the evening.

Realizing that what was meant to be a pause has extended for longer than anticipated, Tom tugs his lips in a winning smile, his easiest method for dispelling unfortunate silences.

***

Harry meets Tom’s gaze and isn’t sure whether to prepare for an incoming insult or not, though from the rather light-hearted tone he figures not. The pause in conversation, however, seems a bit much. Harry ends up just watching Tom watch him for a moment, the lingering look making him feel a bit hot under the collar. The subsequently charming smile doesn’t help much for his composure either as Harry awkwardly looks away before an embarrassed flush can come on.

“Of course, I don’t fault you for this. Never has my life been so interesting;” he hears Tom add as he gets up from the chair, taking off his hoodie to only leave him in a thin shirt. Even with both his windows open, it still feels a bit too warm inside now.

“Interesting?” Harry repeats nonchalantly. “I guess that’s one word for it. You realise you made me into a criminal?” It’s said with obvious humour (mainly to distract himself) as he approaches the bed, walking around to the side that’s empty and lying down, hands underneath his head as he stares up at the ceiling.

The bed is just wide enough where he can stretch his legs comfortably without having one pressed against Tom’s back. “You know,” he starts, “I’d think your family must’ve had more heirlooms than just one locket. Wonder how your mother ended up the way she did, being from a whole line
of purebloods and all. My dad inherited a bunch of things from his, like the cloak. Some Peverell
guy in our family, centuries ago.”

***

"Peverell?” Tom repeats sharply, saved from those uncertain thoughts. “You’re a descendant of a
Peverell?” Shaking his head, Tom exhales in disbelief. “I have an ancestor—Ambivius Peverell. I
don’t know much about him, but he’s at the start of many lineage charts.” He closes his eyes in
concentration. The image of a faded, old parchment scroll appears, and his perception pans down
a queue of names until he sees what he requires.

"Cadmus, his son, spawned my line with a woman called Sedley Slytherin, whose great-
granddaughter married a Gaunt. If I recall correctly, Cadmus had two brothers, Antioch and
Ignotus.”

Tom turns his gaze to the Cloak on the dresser, thinking it far more interesting now than before.
He almost jumps to retrieve it, but instead stays where he sits, the motivation fleeting. He feels
comfortable on the bed, where Harry radiates heat, for even beneath his robes in the summer
climate, Tom borders near frigid.

Continuing his original train of thought, he says, “It could be that we share an ancestor. And since
you brought it up, allow me to remind you I’m an orphan; there’s not a lot I know about my
family. Though, if I had to guess, I’d say the precarious inbreeding wasn’t much help for my
mother. It’s probably hollow coming from a man without family, but from my experience with
foster sisters, I can’t imagine I’d ever want to fuck my own relatives. Purity be damned.”

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Harry’s almost taken aback by the curse word that flies out of Tom’s mouth, raising his head a
little to give him an amused look. "I can’t really imagine you wanting to fuck anyone, to be
honest.”

Harry stills, regretting the words the moment they leave him. Tom and fucking is not an image he
should be having in his head when the guy in question is sitting an inch away from him.
Unfortunately, his mind disagrees and he can’t get it out of his head, like it’s glued into his skull.
He really does try not to think about a bed creaking in a rhythm, and the curve of a pale back
glistening with sweat, and slender fingers digging into hips, and the sound of a gasp or a groan or
a moan in an intimately familiar voice –

Harry, his face burning red, nearly bolts into an upright position. “I, er–bathroom, real quick–” He
slips off the bed, leaving the room in quick strides to the bathroom next to it, closing the door and
locking it for good measure before letting out a deep breath, leaning over the sink and turning the
tap as he takes off his glasses.

Splashing cold water in his face helps a little, but not with the problem down south.

“Jesus Christ.” Harry glares down at the now obvious bulge poking through his jeans. “Get it
together. What are you, twelve?”

It’s embarrassing to be set off so easily, but having lived all his teenage years in a puritanical
society where suffered in silent repression, transitioning into a world with much more freedom is
difficult.

Then again if his best friend wasn’t so goddamned bloody attractive, he wouldn’t be having this
problem at all, so clearly, it’s Riddle’s fault. But that’s all it is, anyway. Just physical attraction.
Nothing more than that, no need to make a big deal out of it. He’s a big boy, he can handle this.

Once the “problem” has gone after he’s waited it out (imagining his uncle naked helped a lot to get rid of it) and his face isn’t flaming anymore, Harry pads back over to the bedroom, praying to whatever out there that Tom didn’t notice.

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At Harry’s strange exit, Tom wonders: What sort of bloke is Harry when it comes to the fairer sex? He’s probably the romantic type, lusting after girls with average bodies and sentimental personalities, never realizing he could find lusher soils to sow. Hm. At Hogwarts, will it happen? Will he find some girl to fawn over? It’s a tedious affair, young men and women squandering precious time to fondle, then whining at inevitably sordid breakups.

A tinge of disgust swells at the idea of Harry courting some unimportant Gryffindor chit like Granger—oh, she’d be just his type, wouldn’t she? How sad.

The urge to do that to anyone never quite flowered in Tom. All sexual excitation he’s known onset before puberty in the form of categorically nonsexual activities—insulting, hitting, choking, all that inflicted pain on the other boys. Since developing into someone physically capable of the act, however, all such proclivities vanished.

As Harry’s figure slips back through the door, Tom clenches his fingers in the mattress and swings his legs forward, pushing until his back is against the headboard and Harry’s in perfect view.

"Harry, did you ever have a girlfriend in your old world?” he blurts, not even certain where the question arose from. Still, better to gauge his sort, it could prevent something tragic like him stupidly enfeebling himself to Granger.

"Uh…” He blinks, taking rest in the desk chair. “No, never had one… though, there was a girl. Mary Ann, she had pretty curls. Fancied me a lot, I think. She was my first kiss but I wasn’t really interested; too gossipy. Broke down crying in the school hallway when I told her I didn’t want anything serious.”

He winces at what must be an embarrassing memory, leaning back into his chair with his arm crossed. A sudden look of certainty comes across his face and he goes to speak, but hesitates, just for a moment. Then, he says, “There was someone who lived down the street from me. Used to sneak off all the time to the city in the weekends to go out together. But he moved away months ago. A few weeks before Christmas, I think. I guess it was just a small fling though.”

Tom’s curiosity is peaked by a certain two-letter pronoun. So, Harry’s a ponce.

In his correspondence, he did tell Tom he was slandered with that variety of slurs, but he never hinted it bore any truth. Tom frowns, mulling over the implications, imagining Harry behaving like homosexuals he’s known with their high, silly voices. Clearly, he’s different.

But what if he ever developed affection for Tom? It’s a thought. On the verge of wondering how it could be advantageous, the deliberation is interrupted when Harry asks, “What about you?”

Tom scoffs, shallow recollections surfacing of silly, little Slytherin girls and their futile attempts to lure him to their dormitories at House mixers.

“It doesn’t affect me. I mean, of course, women have shown interest. Why wouldn’t they?” Blinking hard, Tom shakes his head slightly, dismayed he let his mask slip; he knows too well that others don’t express these things, that the words seem uninviting. Harry was in the diary for too long, it’s easy for Tom to forget.
It can be remedied. Now to smile, where brown eyes crease and straight teeth show. Make light-hearted conversation. "Bit of a shock to me, your being bent. You’re not like the other ones.”

Oh, bloody hell.

“Which isn’t to say I care,” Tom amends, leaning forward and crossing his arms. “It’s all brain chemistry, right?”

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Harry’s eyebrows arch up nearly to his hairline, a bit at a loss how to respond.

He probably wouldn’t have been amused had it come from anyone else, but it’s partly because Tom’s confidence is warranted, and partly because he already had a good sense of how full of himself Tom can be sometimes. The off-handed slight, however, is something else entirely, and probably the stupidest thing (the first stupid thing?) he’s heard Tom say.

“Foot-in-mouth comment aside,” he says, “I don’t know if I’m gay, really. Never thought about it that way. Gender doesn’t matter to me; boy or girl, as long as I like them for who they are.”

Still, the way Tom describes it as just brain chemistry does make it wonder. “Well, sure, but… I mean, have you never been attracted to anyone before? Not even just physically?” he asks, adding with a humorous smile, “Or are you above all that, unlike us lowly common folk?”

“I have greater things to think about,” Tom answers simply as he uses his wand to levitate the locket, and Harry can’t even imagine how it would feel to go through life without ever falling in love or at least being attracted to anyone. Everyone he knew in his old world was so repressed that it was bursting at the seams.

“And so do you, for that matter.”

Harry snaps back to attention at this, and he supposes Tom has a point. The coming school year is going to be utterly exhausting. He won’t have any time for things like dating and going out like a normal teenager.

“Relationships needn’t be romantic to be beneficial, or even important. Look at us,” Tom continues, pointing his wand in Harry’s direction, “our destinies are unusually convergent, almost like fate. It is fate.”

He looks down at his knees in thought. Fate. But why? For what purpose? Were they just meant to be? Harry almost cringes at the wording of his thoughts; that was too sappy, even for him. But what would fate care about bringing two boys together? Why specifically them?

“Do you really think you need some sexual tryst to be a part of something bigger, more special?” Tom asks, seeming to sneer at the very notion, and Harry looks back up at him with a frown.

"No, of course not,” he replies. “But that’s not what I do it for. Not that I’ve, er…” Oh, brilliant, he’s stammering now. “I-I mean it’s not why I would do it if I ever… you know. As far as… sex… goes, it’s just a basic need some people have, but it’s meaningless to me if I’m not, uh, in love with someone first.”

He shifts awkwardly in his seat, crossing his ankles together underneath the chair as he sits up a little straighter. Time to get away from that topic before it turns even more painfully awkward than it already is.
“What—what d'you think all of this means, anyway? With what you said about our destinies converging?”

Tom isn’t looking at him as he continues, “I think I’m fated to stretch the boundaries of magic, and I think that you’re here to help me. Even as a child, before I knew about Hogwarts or magic or anything, I knew I was special. Different.”

Harry considers poking fun at that, but something in the way Tom says it, his eyes turned downwards to his hands, gives the impression of it being something… something personal, and so he stays quiet, listens.

“If your destiny is woven to mine, then you must be special, too. And I know you’re worth something. I don’t choose cohorts liberally.” He meets Tom’s eyes for just a moment before they disappear again, head tilted down. “But you’re… a friend.”

It wouldn’t have been anything special had it been coming from anyone else, but Harry knows the weight of it. Tom doesn’t seem to like most people, so to be counted among the few he does like. Harry feels touched at the admission, as sappy as it is, like a warm glow in the centre of his chest. He’s never had a real friend before, either. People he liked, some he fooled around with, but no one he ever trusted so much of himself to before.

“Alright then,” Harry agrees after a short silence, already having decided before Tom even finished talking. It was never something he would’ve even had to consider, because it was always such an obvious thing to him.

With a mischievous smile and a gleam in his eye, he says, “Show me some boundaries, and I’ll help you stretch them.”

Chapter End Notes

Adolescent romance with all its prickly edges. Next stop, Hogwarts.

As always, thank you to everyone who left kudos, and especially to bloop18, Luna_sss, Dariahn, and KaiShiXara for reviewing.
The trip from Platform 9 ¾ is not the wearily dull episode it usually is. This year, Tom needn't halfway skim his textbooks between making rounds as a Prefect. He has Harry’s companionship to ebb away the boredom in their eight-hour journey. Slumping into the velvet upholstery, he watches the uneven Scottish landscape blur in passing. Across the aisle, Harry is quiet beside his stack of trolley confectionaries, probably still enamored by the novelty of the ride.

It was fun the first time, but now traveling aboard the Hogwarts Express is something Tom would prefer to forego altogether. Each second the chugging train steals from his precious time at Hogwarts is a second he mourns. Nevertheless, it could be worse. He remembers the irritation he felt in years past, when his peer Slytherins cooped together out of uncertainty of where else to sit. Their group must feign cohesion in the face of their enemies, but puncture the flesh of the surface, and one will find nothing but cold-blooded apathy.

Before Harry, that was the nearest bond to friendship he knew, and he never thought to look deeper. But things change.

The smooth scratch of the compartment door sliding open catches Tom’s attention. Standing in fine school robes with a smirk contorting his sharp, pale features is the loathsome face of Draco Malfoy.

Tom is quick on the offense. "If you're looking for a place to wank, I'd try the lavatory.”

It’s worth Harry’s amused snort.

Malfoy rolls his eyes and puts his sights on Harry. “I came to get a look for myself.” He edges slowly in, saying, “So this is the Universe Hopper.”

He *hmphs* with a pitch of humor, shifting his glance to Tom. “Wasn’t hard to guess who the anonymous Hogwarts student was, the way you kept to that diary.”

“Do you have a point, Draco? I mean, aside from your monstrously jutting chin?” Tom straightens his gait and slips his wand from his robes, not making a show but clearly sending the message that Malfoy’s provocations will not be tolerated. “Just leave.”

“Hang on,” Harry then says, “I’d like to ask you something.”

Draco glances at Tom with an altogether far too smug look on his face before turning back to Harry. “Such as?”

“Who are you, exactly?”

The gradual blooming of a furious blush on Draco’s cheeks makes it clear he’s unaccustomed to going unrecognized. “Excuse me?” the boy sputters. “I knew you’d probably be a bit slow, being from a filthy Muggle world—”

“Oh.” Harry looks back to Tom curiously. “So, *this* is the Malfoy dude?”

Malfoy scoffs. “Obviously!”
“My bad,” Harry amends. “Should’ve recognised you by the receding hairline, but the bigotry tipped me off first.”

Malfoy’s hands fly to his hair with outrage.

“What? Touchy subject?” Harry taunts. “Get out or sit down.”

“Better watch your words, Potter,” Malfoy hisses, seeming intent on staying as Harry takes the hint and smoothly moves to take the seat next to Tom. Sniffing indignantly, Malfoy takes the spot where Harry had been sitting a second ago. “I’ll tolerate it since you’re still… A condescending look. “… new, but others might not be so forgiving.”

“How very gracious of His Highness. I’m most grateful. Truly.” Harry replies in a tone of utter boredom, already having moved on to opening his Chocolate Frog pack.

“So, tell me, Riddle,” Malfoy starts, voice derisive at the first syllable, “how was summer at the orphanage? Muggles treat you well?”

“Orphanage?” Tom repeats mockingly. “What? Is this the 1920s? Do you think I sweep chimneys and tap dance to show tunes?” He directs his attention to Harry. “Which card did you get?”

“Nicolas Flamel,” Harry reads off the front, turning the card to the back.

Draco crosses his arms. “Like I’d know the first thing about what Muggles do with the left overs.”

‘Enemyyy of the Heirrr.’

The words slither up Tom’s spine, like a hiss resonating within his body. He furtively looks between Harry and Malfoy—it seems that they’re deaf to the lulling Parseltongue. In the hum of serpentine whispers, Tom struggles to make out distinct words over the train. He inhales deeply and concentrates on the sibilant, droning purr:

‘Untrussstworthyyyy foe. Bewaree himmm.’

“Father tells me there are going to be big changes at Hogwarts this year.” Malfoy raises his chin as though this insight elevates his status. “Not that you would know.”

Tom ignores the mindless chatter and tries to focus again on the hushed warnings, but now there’s only silence. He scratches his collarbone as he speculates, fingers brushing lightly over his thin locket chain. His hand pauses then hesitantly lowers down his chest, feeling the outline of the locket’s body beneath his robe fabric.

It spoke to him!

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“Well?” Malfoy pipes up again, irritated, as the compartment remains quiet. “Don’t you want to know?”

With a tired sigh, Harry turns to look at the third wheel. “Know what? That your only accomplishment in life is being born into a rich family? We were already aware of that, thanks.”

Malfoy glares daggers at him and turns to address Tom instead. “As I was saying before the former Muggle interrupted me,” he sneers. “There’s going to be an inspector visiting the school this year. About time, if you ask me—some of the animals they allow to teach at this place ought to be fired. A half-giant, and a part-goblin? Disgusting.”
“What are you doing still attending the school, then? Being part-weasel, and all?” Harry snipes back, considering the information in the back of his mind at the same time. Inspector? The year he goes to school? Installed by the Ministry no doubt, and certainly not a coincidence.

Malfoy’s jaw clenches. “I didn’t ask for your opinion, did I, four-eyes?”

“Yeah, maybe I should take my glasses off and make it two. Won’t have to look at your ugly mug anymore, then.”

When Hogwarts finally looms in its magnificence, twilight having set long ago, Harry feels his nerves begin to take over.

It was explained to him through a letter that he’ll be the very last to be Sorted, after the first years to spare him the embarrassment of standing next to a group of eleven year olds. On the other hand, it’ll definitely put the spotlight on him, not that it already hasn’t been what with the Daily Prophet article. Surreptitiously, Harry feels the lightning bolt-shaped scar on his forehead, hidden underneath his hair as he hears the doors of the Hogwarts express open, students exiting their compartments.

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At the slow of the engine, the train builds with racket and students eagerly gather their luggage. Assuming his Prefect responsibility, Tom bids Harry to stay near to him as he shuffles through the crowd, supervising the evacuation with little enthusiasm. One foot out of the compartment and Tom can already hear Professor Hagrid’s familiar call, "Firs’-years over ‘ere!"

Tom lights his wand and holds it straight in front of himself as he steps from the platform, occasionally reminding the others to keep pace. Once the plentiful lot of horseless stagecoaches are in sight, Tom lowers his wand and fades back into the jostling stream of students, right by Harry’s side.

“Riddle! Riddle, wait up!” calls a high-pitched voice.

Tom sighs at the realization of unwanted company.

“Hello, Pansy,” he offers politely to his fellow Slytherin Prefect.

“Oh!” she says suddenly, short finger gesturing at Harry. “Is this the–?”

“Pansy!”

Her mouth clamps shut and her brows furrow with distinct disapproval, swiveling on spot to meet Malfoy’s indignant glower. Apathetic beyond measure to whatever lovers’ row they’re engaging in, Tom gently wraps his fingers around the ball of Harry’s shoulder, directing him toward the closest carriage. Lifting himself onto the musty interior, Tom nods courteously to the single occupant, a blonde witch whose bugged eyes are apparent even in the darkness. She’s unlikely to pay him and Harry much mind.

“That girl back there is Malfoy’s love,” he informs, uttering the last word as if tasting vinegar. “She fancies me more, of course. But onto more important matters,” he digs past his neckline and withdraws the locket. He leans quite near to Harry and whispers, “When we were on the train, it started to hiss a warning at me. It recognized Draco as a foe. It called him an enemy of the Heir.”

“That girl back there is Malfoy’s love,” he informs, uttering the last word as if tasting vinegar. “She fancies me more, of course. But onto more important matters,” he digs past his neckline and withdraws the locket. He leans quite near to Harry and whispers, “When we were on the train, it started to hiss a warning at me. It recognized Draco as a foe. It called him an enemy of the Heir.”

“That’s a lovely necklace,” the witch says lightly, pulling out a chain of her own. It appears to be strung with Butterbeer caps. “I have one too, you see.”
“Er —” Tom quickly stuffs Slytherin’s locket back in its place. “Thank you.”

“I’m Luna, by the way,” she offers, tucking her wand into her berserk straggly hair. “I know you’re Tom Riddle. The other Ravenclaw girls think you’re very good-looking. And you’re Harry Potter.”

She pushes her neck forward and looks suspiciously to both sides, as though preparing to relay a secret. "Don’t worry, Harry. I know the Prophet lied about your story, and that you’re actually a Time-Traveler coming back from the future to cure the world of Dragon Pox. The Universe Hopper story is just part of Minister Grindelwald’s plot.”

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Harry blinks, entirely speechless at the absurd statement and not sure if the girl is being serious, glancing at Tom to make sure he heard correctly. "I… thanks?"

A moment later they’re joined by another girl with bright red hair and freckles, stepping into the carriage with a loud sigh. “There you are, Luna! I was just—” Then her gaze falls on Tom, and she seems to lose track of what she was going to say entirely, looking somewhat like a deer caught in headlights.

“Hello,” Harry offers, focusing her attention on him. “I’m Harry Potter. You can sit down if you want; I promise my friend here doesn’t bite.”

The girl seems to gather her nerve again at that and nods, but sounds more subdued when she replies, “Ginny, Ginny Weasley.” A moment later after she’s sat down: “Are you the…?”

“Universe Hopper?” Harry replies, saying with an amused look towards Luna, “That’s the official story.”

The horses start moving then, pulling the carriage forward and on the way to the castle. Harry glances behind him to take a good look at the looming structure, and it looks just as magnificent as he remembered when seeing it for the first time.

“Nervous?” Ginny asks, seeming to be doing her very best not to look at Tom. Aside from Luna Harry is beginning to suspect the entire female body must have some sort of crush on him—and the thought annoys him, just a little. If only because he doesn’t want to be dealing with a herd of admirers the whole year (or at least that’s what he tells himself). “Must’ve been hard to adjust, ending up here so suddenly.”

“Somewhat,” Harry admits, adding with a glance towards Tom, “but I’m not worried.”

Most of the carriage ride passes by in small talk, some conjecturing about which House he’ll end up, what year he’s in, what teachers to watch out for and which ones are more lax. By the time the carriages arrive any nervous feelings Harry might’ve had has been eased over through conversation.

To his surprise he sees that, when they arrive, Remus is waiting for him at the gates, giving him a short wave a small distance away. Being Sorted separately still isn’t a very pleasant prospect. Climbing out of the carriage, Harry looks with some reluctance to Tom. “Guess I’ll see you later?” he says with a slight smile, nodding to the two girls who accompanied them before turning away and walking over to Remus, hearing Ginny call, “See you in Gryffindor!” after him with some amusement.

“Hello, Harry,” Remus greets him kindly as he approaches, gesturing to follow him. “Hope you
had a good trip?”

“Yeah, it was fine,” Harry says, suddenly feeling a lot less relaxed as they walk towards a separate entrance the other students seem to be going through, probably to avoid him being gawked at like some sort of zoo animal. Not that that isn’t going to happen in a few minutes anyway.

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The company on the carriage ride seemed quite unsavory at the time—between the dotty blonde and gawking ginger, Tom thought his Slytherins would be a welcome change. Now, however, he feels foolish for the thought. Down the table, his housemates chat emptily, a bragging contest for who knows the most about all their summer gatherings. It’s pitiful. Not for the first time, Tom twists in his seat toward the entryway, anticipating Harry among the impending first-years.

"Draco received an O on his Potions OWL,” Pansy Parkinson says beneath the weight of Malfoy’s resting arm, clearly having reconciled their spat.

“Nothing to boast about,” Malfoy says, so obviously insincere. “I was shocked you only received Exceeds Expectations, Pansy; you’re probably the best in our year.”

Zabini, handsome face resting against his palm, scoffs derisively. “Please, even I’m a better brewer than Parkinson, and Riddle bests us both.” He looks directly at Tom. “Full round of Os, I expect?”

Tom smirks, pleased with Zabini’s instinct for accuracy. “Yes, it was a pleasant surprise.”

“Nice distraction from the Muggles, I reckon,” Malfoy says, thin lip curling.

“Don’t act so jealous, Draco,” Parkinson chides. “We’re all Slytherins. Now more than ever, we need to stick together.”

Before Tom can ask her to explain, another voice cuts in, “Look! The new students!”

The hoard of snot-nosed, too-short children amble in nervously, talking to one another in a frenzy. He scrutinizes the mob closely, trying to catch a glimpse of Harry.

Resourceful or not, the likelihood of Harry joining him with the serpents is slim. He lacks the finesse, the ambition. Then again, considering the inane housemates littering his table, that may not actually matter. The Sorting Hat is known to deliberate carefully, measuring factors that others know nothing about. It’s not impossible that the Hat will recognize how infinitely better off Harry would be in Slytherin, with Tom.

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The waiting doesn’t make Harry feel any better, even if Remus—or he should call him Professor Lupin now, he supposes—is there to distract him by talking about various things about the school, particularly the Quidditch try-outs for this year.

By the time they arrive in the Entrance Hall, the place is empty, the sole noise coming from behind the large double doors leading to the Great Hall. Harry can barely catch some of it.

“RAVENCLAW!”

Seems like the Sorting of the first years has already begun.

“You all seem pretty convinced I’ll end up in Gryffindor,” Harry says, trying to make
conversation as he waits. “What if I don’t?”

“You’re very brave for your age, Harry,” Remus replies, and Harry looks away, knowing that he’s referring to what was written in the Daily Prophet article, some of which he’s had to admit as truth. “Of course, it won’t be the end of the world if you don’t, though James might sulk about it for a while. One of your mother’s closest friends, in fact, was sorted into Slytherin as well.”

Harry mulls the bit of knowledge over in his head as he hears the faint voice of Albus Dumbledore, and the sound is muffled through the door so he can’t quite make out everything, but he picks up bits and pieces. “We’ll be having… Sorting… due to his circumstances… sixth year… might have read in the news lately… all welcome him to our school.”

Remus takes a sudden step aside, making a slight curl in the air with his wand, and suddenly Harry finds himself standing in the middle of the doorway as the heavy wood creaks open, revealing him to the hundreds of eyes turning to look at him at once.

Had Harry’s face not slipped into a blankly impassive stare at suddenly being confronted with a crowd, he might’ve scowled at Remus for not warning him, but a very severe looking witch at the very end of the tables is standing there waiting for him with an old hat on a creaky old stool, and so Harry walks inside.

He doesn’t even dare taking a deep breath, stubbornly refusing to show himself being nervous in even the slightest way as his eyes drift briefly over the crowd, finding their target sitting at the Slytherin table. Meeting Tom’s eyes, he feels at once calmer, striding over towards the small little stool.

The older witch standing there doesn’t exactly give him a kind smile, but neither is she looking at him with the unnervingly curious and interested stares of his peers. Her gaze is very even, and he feels thankful for it as she lifts the hat off the stool for him so he can sit down, and drops it over his head a moment later.

“Hmm,” he hears a small voice in his ear, jaw clenching rather than visibly flinching. “Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There’s talent, my goodness, yes– and a willingness to go the distance, to do what must be done… So, where shall I put you?”

Harry can’t help but frown. Tom had mentioned the Hat would be reading his mind to decide on his House, but it seems the thing is asking him instead.

‘You’re the Sorting Hat, why’re you asking me?’

“Choices say more about someone than you might think… I see, I see… already been marked for Gryffindor, have you? Want to do your parents proud, but Slytherin holds allure to you as well.”

‘Allure?’ Harry’s mild frown turns into a scowl. ‘Don’t—don’t call it allure, that’s weird.’

“He is in Slytherin, after all, and where else would you rather be, than by his side?” the Sorting Hat continues, and Harry’s eyes widen in flustered astonishment at the declaration. “Yet, becoming too attached unnerves you… you value your independence… yes, I think I shall put you in… GRYFFINDOR!”

The Hat is lifted off his face as the Gryffindor table erupts in applause and cheering, and Harry, still reeling from what the Sorting Hat has just told him, slowly gets up from the stool. He can’t even bring himself to glance in Tom’s direction as he forces his legs to walk to the table of red and gold. The orange-headed girl from the carriage ride, Ginny, waves and gestures to the seat beside her, saying, “Welcome aboard, Potter!”
He slides in, glancing nervously between the many faces staring straight at him. “Hello.”

“You’re a sixth-year, right?” asks a reedy, freckled boy who looks much like Ginny. “I’m Ron. Ron Weasley.”

“Nice to meet you,” Harry responds. “I’m Harry Potter, though I guess maybe you already know that by now…”

“Yeah, reckon we would,” Ron says, smiling crookedly, “considering Ginny already told half the table how fit she thinks you are.”

“Oh, shut it, Ron,” Ginny spits, rolling her eyes. She appears far more confident now than earlier, when Tom was around. Is he really that intimidating? Or is it merely the Slytherin reputation?

“Are you two related?” Harry asks.

“Yeah, but Gin here was adopted off an old hag, so not by blood.”

“Let him have his laugh,” Ginny says. “He’s just jealous ‘cause Mum likes me better.”

“Mum likes me best, though, if you know what I mean,” calls another Gryffindor, a sandy-haired teen with a rolling Irish lilt.

“Shut up, Seamus,” Ron and Ginny say simultaneously, causing the entire table to laugh in unison, Harry included.

He looks at the unknown faces, all warm and welcome with smiles, and the weight of his nervousness melts; perhaps the Houses are a stupid system, but if these are the people he’s to live with, then he really has nothing to worry about at all. Even still, as the ceremony continues, Dumbledore taking the podium, Harry can’t stop that single sentence from echoing in his mind.

‘…and where else would you rather be, than by his side?’

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Morning comes too soon for Tom.

For one, he’s minimally hungover with no time to brew a Replenishing Draught; the upperclassmen in Slytherin met for smuggled Firewhisky in an empty Dungeon classroom, and well, Malfoy’s drinking challenge was too smug to ignore. Additionally, he must now avoid nearing Daphne Greengrass for perhaps a week or longer, until he can be certain she won’t attempt to snog him again. Oh, what a mess. She looked so very annoying, crawling up his lap and clumsily rubbing where she was unwanted.

And of course, the boys did laugh when she cried and ran, rejected. Annoying indeed.

But no matter. The day shall go on.

He leans nonchalantly in the Potions dungeon and watches students pass through the corridor. His fingers drum against his bag strap in a pattern, a careless movement to underscore his thoughts. The Sorting Ceremony played on his mind all throughout the night, ever since he heard the Hat shout, “Gryffindor!” and send Harry to the lion’s den.

It was expected. He knew it would happen. It’s an inconvenience, that’s all.

Finally, he notices Harry’s black hair drawing nearer in the distance. It’s pleasant to see Harry
garbed as a wizard should be. Even if the school dress is a bit plain, it suits him to be out of those modest Muggle togs.

“Harry,” he calls in low baritone. “Come, I’ve saved our spots.”

“Good morning to you, too,” Harry replies dryly.

“Just up here,” Tom tells Harry as they enter the classroom, locating the desk where his books are spread in a territorial claim. He quickly gives the room a look over. It’s the usual suspects: Granger, Zabini, Corner, Patil, Boot, Zabini, and—oh. Nott, of course. Their unspoken agreement to partner up in all classes hangs broken in the air, but Nott, sitting alone, doesn’t seem at all shocked. He returns Tom’s empty stare with one that is somehow even emptier. Ah, whatever.

“By the way,” Tom whispers as he pats his bag, “if you’re ever struggling to find an answer, my assistance comes at no cost. Just give me some sign and I’ll write it in the diary. It won’t work for all classes, but Slughorn adores me. He’d never accuse me.”

Harry exhales a breath of air. “Yeah, alright. Hopefully it won’t come to that…”

“Potter,” a voice sneers from his right, and he looks up at Malfoy, looking rather agitated. “Where, exactly, do you think you’re sitting?”

Harry doesn’t miss a beat. “Behind a desk.”

“Don’t try and get smart with me,” Malfoy snaps, turning his glare on Tom. “And what do you think you’re doing? He didn’t get sorted in Slytherin, did he? Why are you sitting next to him?”

“Because Tom’s not a complete cock who wants to play house with you in your infantile little club, for starters?” Harry answers sharply, voice getting slightly louder.

His words spark a sharp jolt deep in the pit of Tom’s abdomen. It’s an almost electric feeling. Good, but… odd.

“Hogwarts has Houses for a reason, Potter,”

“What reason?” Harry grunts. “To protect your bloody ego?”

“To establish order,” Malfoy drawls, crossing his arms haughtily.

“Yeah? Then follow your own advice and piss off.”

The feeling strikes Tom again, even deeper, and he realizes at once that this can’t go on. He must act. He stands abruptly and shoves his chair back, shoulders wide and straight as he ambles slowly up to Malfoy, wand at the ready. No more playing nice. Nice isn’t a word Tom’s ever truly understood. Fear he understands. He can see it in Malfoy’s slight frown, the glint of doubt in his dull eyes, and he can feel his own reception of this delicious apprehension further excite the tingling Harry spurred.

He is intoxicated on the erotic rush of a predator circling its prey, and like an addict on withdrawal, he craves more.

“Please, Malfoy,” Tom affronts, tone infused with condescension as he takes slow steps toward the twat. “Drop the transparent ploy. You know you don’t give a damn about House loyalty. You’re here to prove something. You want to prove that you’re the biggest, baddest boy on the playground. That you’re somehow the one running the show. Unfortunately for your ego, you’re not. You’re a pitiful, spineless loser lacking the talent or tact to acquire power on your own. You
flaunt your pedigree and family wealth because they’re all that you have to distract from the cold, bitter reality of your utter worthlessness.”

“Tom Riddle!”

The class turns in collective surprise to the pale, gawping face of Professor Slughorn. His rotund form fills the doorway where he’s frozen in stupor. Tom inhales cautiously, evening his temper as his gut continues to pulse with the intense and heady thrill. The sensation is exhilarating enough to render Tom immune to Slughorn’s judgements. He’s never really cared what the man thought of him, and now he doesn’t care how this jeopardizes their professional relationship either. The only person Tom is concerned about is Harry, who his sights occasionally flicker to, attempting to gauge his reaction and see if Tom has excited him too.

“What is the meaning of this?” Slughorn questions indignantly, waddling in with visible disappointment.

Tom knits his brows easily, donning his mask as usual. “I’m dreadfully sorry you had to see that, sir,” he apologizes. “Draco was questioning my dedication to Slytherin because I’m sitting with my Gryffindor friend, and things just got out of hand. Again, I’m sorry. I think I’ve been under a lot of stress recently.” He subtly turns his head to Harry to make the implication obvious.

Slughorn sighs heavily, smoothing his mustache in thought. “Please, you two, make your ways back to your seats,” he orders. “I’ll forgive it this time, but just this once!”

“Thank you, sir,” Tom says graciously, taking off for his seat with a politeness that contrasts distinctly with Malfoy’s huffy stomps.

Eyes focused in a sideways glance, Tom lowers into his seat, noticing every centimeter of Harry’s profile. Tom may not comprehend his feelings, but they’re too profound to ignore. He’s still high on the stimulation of ridiculing Malfoy, and looking at Harry—seeing the short curve of his nose, the soft pout on his lips, the virtue in brilliant green eyes—tinctures the high with something warm.

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Turning his head to glance at Tom, the smile almost falters from his face when he finds Tom already looking, the second their eyes meet making it hard to breathe for a moment. Harry forces himself to shake the dizzying sensation off, to not pay attention to the exact inches between them as he says with a wide smile, “That was absolutely brilliant.”

Truly. Watching Tom, Harry couldn’t keep his eyes off the straight line of his shoulders, the confidence in his measured steps. He was never much impressed when boys like Zeke tried to posture, something about it always eyeing as childish to him, as if trying too hard. But the way Tom does it is entirely different; it wasn’t just posturing. He radiates genuine danger, like the way a king cobra raises its body up and flares its hood with a hiss right before it strikes.

It’s then that the Professor begins the lesson, introducing himself (solely for Harry’s benefit, he suspects with some irrational embarrassment) before moving on with actual substance.

“Now then,” said Slughorn, standing at the front of the class and inflating his already bulging chest so that the buttons on his waistcoat threaten to burst off, “I’ve prepared a few potions for you to have a look at, just out of interest, you know. These are the kind of thing you ought to be able to make after completing your NEWTs. You ought to have heard of ‘em, even if you haven’t made ‘em yet. Anyone tell me what this one is?”
Harry doesn’t even bother raising his hand. Tom and Hermione (who he’d been briefly introduced to last night) predictably end up in a competition of who can best answer Slughorn’s questions as he points to the cauldrons each containing different potions—Veritaserum, Polyjuice Potion, Amortentia and Felix Felicis.

“And that,” Slughorn says once all his questions have been answered, pointing to the cauldron holding the potion of liquid luck, “is what I shall be offering as a prize in this lesson. One tiny bottle of Felix Felicis.

“So, how are you to win fabulous prize? Well, by turning to page ten of Advanced Potion Making. We have a little over an hour left to us, which should be time for you to make a decent attempt at the Draught of Living Death. I know it is more complex than anything you have attempted before, and I do not expect a perfect potion from anybody. The person who does best, however, will win little Felix here. Off you go!”

Harry glances at Tom sitting next to him while he flips his textbook open, and wonders with some wry amusement whether he should even bother.

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The small, golden vial of Felix Felicis isn’t much of an enticement; that particular brew is one he taught himself as a fourth-year in exchange for enough Galleons to last him the summer. The Ravenclaw he sold it to thought it would power him through his History of Magic OWL. The daft fool was caught, of course but culpability never reached Tom. No, his motivation to win isn’t for the tangible reward, but for the pleasure of striking Granger back into her proper place. Plus, it doesn’t hurt to give Harry a proper demonstration.

Leaning over to Harry, he whispers, “The Advanced Potion-Making directions are passable, but I wouldn’t rely on them too heavily. Truly extraordinary potioneering requires intuition.” He casts a glance at Granger, whose fingers are already tracing the page in her book. “Simple minds look at rules to lead their path; great minds don’t have to.” He smiles cockily and rests his fingers, one after the other, on the hard cover of his textbook and pointedly slides it aside with dismissal.

From his ingredients, he summons Infusion of Wormwood and adds it to the cauldron, pairing with it a measure of powdered asphodel root. Granger and the others will, no doubt, stir twice clockwise, but Tom knows a better method; stirring clockwise once, then counterclockwise, then clockwise again sifts the mixture more thoroughly, enhancing their absorption of the Sopophorous bean’s juice. After tapping in the small, slimy bulb of the sloth’s brain, he begins counting his beans. Harry, impressively keeping pace, is at this stage, too, but his juice extraction is subpar.

“Don’t slice into the beans,” Tom says quietly, reaching for one of Harry’s. “Crush it with the side of your dagger,” he instructs, pressing silver flat against the bean, “like this.”

Doing so until he’s drained the moisture from precisely 13 beans, Tom stirs his concoction for the final instance, seven times anti-clockwise, once clockwise. He bends over the cauldron to appraise his work, unsurprised to see the pale, pink confirmation of his success. His satisfaction is increased by the confusedly furrowed brows obscured beneath Granger’s wily mane. A full five minutes remain until the hour has passed, but Slughorn is making his rounds, sparing a few discouraging admonishments at the contents of Boot’s efforts.

“Oh, I daresay boy, that’s not good, not good at all,” his small eyes shift, finding Tom, who keeps his hands behind his back to show he’s finished. Slughorn grins widely and beelines for his favorite student. “Oh, ho! What have we here?” He peers curiously into the pot and drops a single brown leaf, gasping with delight as it disintegrates. “Merlin’s beard, I think it’s clear who the winner is today!”
Putting his glasses back on, Harry watches as Slughorn hands over the tiny bottle with Felix Felicis, congratulating Tom on his excellent potion, declaring in fact, “I daresay one small drop would kill us all.”

Harry expects the man to move on, but Slughorn instead glances into his cauldron, and looks somewhat surprised.

“Er–I tried?” Harry offers awkwardly, and Slughorn looks at him with raised eyebrows.

“Please don’t mistake my surprise for criticism, Mr. Potter. It’s not quite there yet, but certainly not bad for your first attempt, not at all,” the Professor tells him good-naturedly, and he feels slightly better at that as he watches the man move back to the front of the class, ending the lesson.

He’s not sure he deserves the praise, anyway; most of what he did was either copying off Tom or following the recipe.

Before he can turn to his friend and ask if he already has something in mind for how he’s going to use the potion he won, their table is approached by Hermione. Her hair is frazzled, and she looks like she just fought through a battle, but she appears determined. Harry can’t help but feel far more sympathetic towards her rather than his friend, who looks far too pleased with himself.

“Hey,” Harry greets her, casting a teasing look in Tom’s direction before telling her, “Shame you didn’t win. Thought you had it in the bag.” It’s really just to spite him; Harry doesn’t want to deal with that kind of smugness on his first day.

“Oh, thank you, Harry,” she says in genuine surprise, a pleased flush coming over her cheeks. “But I couldn’t compare to Tom, really. How did you get it so clear?” Her last question is directed at Tom as she peers into his cauldron. “I followed the recipe to the letter, but…”

Typically, the sight of Granger admitting to the humiliation of her defeat would inspire Tom to accept his crown with grace, but Harry’s snide jab sullies his good mood. He stares at Harry for a long pause before looking at Granger, masking his irritation poorly as he says, "You’ve answered your own question, love.”

Her lips part in confusion. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

Of course she doesn’t. He snorts and turns to his desk, collecting his things with an air of impatience. “Have you considered that your potions turn out averagely because you insist on following the steps as they’re written?”

A scoff of disbelief escapes her defiant mouth. As if doing so to calm her temper, she runs her fingers through her wiry hair, somewhat flattening the mess. “I hardly think there’s any reason to distrust our textbooks.”

“Hermione,” Tom sighs, “I know you mean well, but your faith in others is hardly admirable.” He’s never spoken so openly to a student outside of Slytherin, and he knows he should stop, but the imminence of any repercussion feels absent under the goading pleasure that is her hurt expression. “To really make any progress, you’ll have to start thinking for yourself. Rote and regurgitation can only take you so far.”

The little gap between her bottom lip and chin trembles before stiffening tight. “Well,” she bites
sharply, “I don’t know what’s put you in a foul state, but don’t take it out on me.” Her robes flare as she marches away, muttering incoherently.

Petulant, tedious little bitch, that Granger is! Unthinkingly, Tom places his hand on the center of Harry’s back, lightly nudging him. It’s a small reminder of control, a signal to Harry that he should think more carefully about who he offers his praises to. How could he think Granger would come out ahead? Is this because they’re both in Gryffindor?

“Come now, Harry. We have Defense next. Hopefully in there you’ll be able to show a little more gratitude.” His fingers clench, softly, in Harry’s robe fabric. “How you thought Granger could surpass my skills, I’ll never know.”

Harry pushes the hand off his back, packing in his textbook with a frown. “Gratitude, seriously?” he scoffs. “I was just being nice. You don’t have a monopoly on compliments, you know.” Swinging his bag over his shoulder, he gets walking, thinking about how much he might’ve underestimated the size of Tom’s ego.

Luckily the next class, being Defence Against the Dark Arts, is taught by Professor Lupin. It mellows out Harry’s temper a little bit as he’s received by the man with a warm smile once they arrive, sitting down next to the windows near the front. Having not said a word to Tom on the way here, he still feels a lingering sting of annoyance, but is quickly distracted as Professor Lupin starts the lesson. The topic of discussion is Dementors.

“Dementors, as many of you know, are dangerous creatures. Their purpose? To feed off a person’s happiness. Remaining in close contact with one for an extended period may lead to several consequences, some of which are driving a person into insanity or draining a wizard of his powers. In rare cases, the damage is irreversible.”

As he explains, he asks questions to the students as well: What is a Dementor’s Kiss? What are the differences between Dementors and Lethifolds? Which spell should one use against them?

“Naturally I do not expect any of you to perform the Patronus Charm, nor is it a requirement to pass your NEWTs as it is a rather… well, ridiculously difficult spell,” Professor Lupin clarifies. “Most witches and wizards, in fact, are unable to conjure a Patronus of any form, tangible or not. It is generally considered a mark of superior magical ability for anyone to be able to do so, and would certainly guarantee passing the practical portion of the exam with flying colours.

“That being said,” the Professor continues with a slight smile, looking over the classroom. “Are there any volunteers?”

A small number of hands go up—two of the first ones, predictably, are Hermione and Tom’s. Harry, despite expecting one or the other to be picked, raises his hand as well, feeling much more confident in his ability to perform a spell rather than, say, brewing a potion.

To his surprise, however, Professor Lupin looks to him. “Very well, Harry. Come up to the front of the classroom.”

Oh. That’s unexpected. Harry stands up out of his chair, moving to the front next to the Professor.

“Now, you’re going to move your wand in circles, like so,” Professor Lupin explains, demonstrating with his own wand. “Concentrate, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory—the happiest one that comes to mind—and use the incantation, ‘Expecto Patronum’.”

Glancing at the dozens of eyes now on him, he isn’t so sure about this volunteering thing
anymore, but he does as asked, closing his eyes and trying to think of the happiest memory he has. It’s an easy task. What else is there, but the first time he saw his parents, his mother’s arms around him, his father’s happy smile? The feeling of warmth in his chest, of being loved unconditionally.

“Expecto Patronum!”

Opening his eyes, he finds to his shock a mist of silver and white pouring out of the tip of his wand like a fountain, briefly forming into a vague shape before his concentration collapses and the shape fades away again.

“Excellent, Harry!” Professor Lupin exclaims, appearing delighted, and Harry almost ducks his head under the praise, feeling a pleasant tingling left in his fingers. “Very good—you almost had it tangible for a moment there! Quite an extraordinary feat for someone your age.” He turns to the rest of the class. “If anyone else would like to practice, you can take the remainder of this hour to do so. The rest can get started on their homework for the next lesson—”

Harry barely hears the assignment as he returns to his seat with a slight redness on his cheeks, feeling exhilarated. He looks at Tom, a challenge in the smirk of his lips. “Well? Aren’t you going to practice?”

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"Gladly,” Tom says curtly.

If Harry was capable of what he’d done, then Tom could surely produce a corporeal body on his first try. He’s the most prodigiously talented and innately powerful wizard in centuries, since Merlin, since the Founders themselves. Among the handful of students, already trying their hands in vain, Tom stands facing Harry, happy to sanitize his face of that filthy smile.

First, all he must do is identify his happiest memory. He closes his eyes in concentration.

According to the text, it’s common for wizards to imagine their favorite childhood experience. Hm. Nothing there to draw from. Tom hasn’t a single worthwhile recollection in that sea of mundanity and disappointment. The first good moment of his life was discovering his true identity, but then Dumbledore had to piss on that with his compulsive despotism. He squints his eyes tighter. Hogwarts. His original sight of the castle, under dim starlight, the draw of stone walls welcoming him to the place where he always belonged. It should be sufficient.

Waving his wand circularly, he says the incantation and attempts to kindle affection for his home, but midway, he’s consumed with a bitter feeling.

Eleven long years he waited for Hogwarts. Eleven years he lived in the dark, thinking he alone yielded magic, that he was some sort of freakish anomaly. He opens his eyes in a sudden rush of fury, realizing he’s jeopardized his spell entirely. He snorts and tries again, muttering the incantation, thinking with fondness about his favorite parts of the castle. Nothing happens. He tries again to the tune of more failure.

“I don’t understand,” he spits lowly. It must be a sabotage, but how? He narrows his gaze at Harry. “Are you jinxing me?”

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Harry grins as he shows his hands, empty of his wand which he tucked back into the pocket of his robe. “I’m not doing anything,” he replies with an amused look. “It’s all you. Are you sure you’re thinking of a happy memory?”
Taking out his wand again, he says, “I thought of the first time I saw my parents, my mother hugging me and my father smiling at me.” He concentrates on the memory again, not bothering to close his eyes this time now he knows what to think about. His mother telling him to come live with them, in a happy home, together as a family he’s never had—“Expecto Patronum.”

Silver light bursts out of his wand, less a fountain now and more of a particular shape as he keeps the imagine of his mother’s teary-eyed laughter in his mind. For a moment, he thinks he can almost make out a set of wings as the shape soars a wide circle through the classroom, dissipating once it comes back to him.

He considers the shape with curiosity. Professor Lupin did say the Patronus would take the form of an animal they have the deepest affinity with, if they manage to conjure one at all. Is his a bird of some kind? Harry wonders what that says about him.

“Maybe you haven’t made a happy memory yet,” he suggests to Tom, feeling the urge to gloat for a moment but finding that it’s not in his nature to do so. Last thing he wants is to get into a pissing contest. “I hadn’t, until this summer.”

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“Oh, please,” Tom mocks. “Don’t equate my life to yours. I’ve had plenty of happy memories.”

But has he? Has he really? What the bloody hell does happy even mean? Tom’s attention is taken by a sudden wisp in his periphery. Granger produces a gentle, incorporeal Patronus, laughing giddily as it floats pours from her wand.

He scoffs. “This is a stupid charm anyway.”

“Don’t be too discouraged, Tom.”

Tom straightens his gait, perturbed by the sudden interruption. Lupin steps between Harry and Tom with a small grin creasing his cheek. “Professor,” Tom says politely, layering his veneer at once. “Excuse my outburst, I meant you no disrespect.”

“I’m really quite impressed that Harry picked up on it this quickly,” Lupin compliments, smile widening. “But his father was a quick study at Defense, and there’s not much Lily can’t do, so perhaps my surprise is unwarranted. Nevertheless, it’s still a highly complicated charm, most wizards are incapable of casting even a strand.”

The implication that Tom should resign to the status of most wizards annoys him immensely. “Sir, I’m sure I’m capable of creating a Patronus. Perhaps some direction could be of use. What sort of memory would you recommend?”

“That’s a difficult question,” Lupin admits, rubbing his chin in thought. “I personally like to think of my loved ones. You could give it a try.”

No, that won’t do. Happiness isn’t a definitive concept, it’s more a social construction. Joy is relative to the individual, and considering that Tom is a profoundly unique man, the standard merely needs to be adjusted to suit him. That’s more than plausible. So, what compels him to experience genuine glee? There is a memory from when he was young, before Hogwarts, that he can consider.

Raising his wand, he sinks into the image a little boy’s face, snotty with terror, begging Tom to forgive him, begging him to redact his command of a garter snake that hisses with its forked tongue flicking in warning.
“Expecto Patronum.” He whips his wrist in a flick, but rather than create his intended Patronus, there’s a brief flash and he suffers a harsh shock in his hand, forcing him to drop his wand.

“Fuck,” he hisses, pulling his wound into his chest. It left no mark but an uncomfortable numbness throbs throughout his fingers.

Lupin snorts, seeming a tad amused. “Maybe with practice you’ll get the hang of it. Harry will help you, I’m sure.”

***

It’s a miracle—they might have actually found a type of magic Tom has no talent in whatsoever. For someone who thinks he is a gift from God that must hurt quite a bit, and Harry rather than getting annoyed with Tom’s berating finds himself trying not to smirk victoriously instead. There aren’t going to be many things he’s going to be able to best Tom in, in terms of magic.

Harry turns to look at Tom again in consideration. It’s impossible to explain happiness to someone else, and that’s the entire crux of the spell. He doesn’t know which memory Tom used exactly, but evidently, it’s not happy enough.

A thought occurs to him. A Patronus is an embodiment of happiness, isn’t it? It *exudes* it. In that case, maybe there is a way he can demonstrate exactly how much is needed after all.

“Alright, look,” he says, shifting in his chair to face Tom and trying to think of another happy memory—not a one as strong as the one he used before, but something good enough. The first time he rode a broom, feeling the wind in his hair, his father and Sirius cheering him on. “*Expecto Patronum.*” A small flow of light pours out of his wand, just strong enough to fill the space between them. “Feel that? You need a memory that makes you at least as happy as this.”

***

Tom examines the incorporeal Patronus Charm with detached scrutiny. He opens himself to the experience, closing his eyes, concentrating on the happiness Harry casts between them. It is a foreign sensation. The sublime edge, the emanating warmth, it unfolds in his mind like a new concept, but as pleasant as it is, he steps back, brows furrowing with bemusement.

“I don’t want to learn this,” he says, keeping his face impassive.

For what may be the first time in his sixteen years, he sincerely doesn’t know whether he’s telling the truth or not. Around him students continue to light the room with their misty, uncertain charms, enthusiastically giggling, telling jokes and recalling their dearest sources of happiness. If what Harry has cast is what the others feel, then Tom thinks, somehow, the distance between himself and others is far wider than he realized, so wide that he has been justified in considering himself above them.

But does the pulsing, raging thrill of demeaning Malfoy feel better than Harry’s Patronus? It feels more natural, more familiar, more Tom, but no. Not better.

“Alright, students, that concludes today’s lesson,” Lupin announces, waving his wand to reorder the classroom.

Forcing himself to budge, Tom steps toward Harry, half of his bottom lip wedged between his teeth. Harry is different from Tom in facets he never thought to consider, in ways he’s not sure he can express. It nearly makes him feel nakedly vulnerable, but not in the usual sense. It’s purer than that. He gives his head a quick shake, shedding the skin of all that discomfits him and sliding back into the facade on which he relies.
“Let’s go, Harry,” he says genially. “It’s time for lunch. You can sit with me at the Slytherin table, I know how insipidly eager you are to defy convention.”

***

“It’s not insipid, it’s making a point,” Harry huffs without any real irritation as they start towards the Great Hall, giving a short wave to Professor Lupin as they exit the classroom. Tom’s empty words replay in his mind.

*I don’t want to learn this.*

He can’t be serious, can he? Why on earth wouldn’t he want to learn it? Unless he really, truly hasn’t felt anything like it before.

The strangest thought strikes Harry; does he just not understand it? There was a flash of puzzlement in the wrinkle between Tom’s brows as he felt the intangible stream of Harry’s Patronus. It’s one thing to not have felt it before, but to be confused by it? He wants to know, but decides not to comment on it.

“Erm.” Awkwardly clearing his throat, he tries opening a new subject. “So, what do we have after lunch? Transfiguration, right? Oh, Hermione, hey!” He hurries up a step to join Hermione in front of them, who looks up in slight surprise.

“Hello, Harry,” she greets him kindly enough, though casting a wary glance in Tom’s direction. “Did you need something?”

“Uh, just wanted to say hi. Where were you headed?” he asks, as she’d been going a different direction than the Great Hall before Harry catching up with her.

“The library. Just have to brush up on some things,” she replies, adjusting her bag on her shoulder, looking at Tom again. “I’ll, um, I’ll see you later, Harry.”

Harry watches her go in slight confusion. Now he thinks about it, he doesn’t often see her hanging around much with other people. It makes him wonder if she’s somewhat of an outcast. With her gone, however, he is left in a rather uncomfortable silence. On the way to the Great Hall he does greet some of his fellow Gryffindors, but most of them—even Ron, who he got on with brilliantly last night—seem reluctant to start an actual conversation with him, what with Tom walking next to him.

“I swear you’re like a people-repellant,” Harry says to his friend as he watches Neville scurry off to Gryffindor Tower, and sighs. “So much for Gryffindor courage.”

“It has nothing to do with me,” Tom scoffs. “I’m a Slytherin and all your little cohorts are Gryffindor. They’re just intimidated.”

The Great Hall is filled with students by the time they get there, and the Slytherin table is no exception. Harry walks beside Tom towards where the other sixth years are clustered together—several dozens of eyes turn in their direction, including some at the staff table—and sits down, right across from Malfoy’s reddening head, with a dark-skinned boy on his right, Tom on his left. A loud murmuring starts up at the Slytherin table, but it doesn’t seem like anyone actually has the nerve to say anything about it, most likely because of Tom.

Staring right at Malfoy’s scandalised expression, Harry grabs a biscuit off a plate and takes a bite. “You alright, Malfoy?” he asks when the rich heir glances at Tom and actually keeps his mouth shut for once. “Try not to explode your head.”
“What is HE doing here?” Pansy cries from beside Malfoy, looking at Tom for answers, and certainly not the only one at the table confused or outraged, or a mix of both. “Isn’t this against the rules, or something?”

***

Knowing good and well that there are no formal rules on seating, Tom shrugs innocently, pretending there’s nothing off. “None that I’m aware of, and certainly none that you can enforce.”

He knows it’s out of line for him to accommodate Harry in serpent territory, but operating within normal parameters when his will is at odds just isn’t his modus operandi. Nonchalantly, he adds a couple of bread slices to his plate, carrying on like there aren’t daggers bearing into him. He turns to Harry and asks, “Make any friends in Gryffindor yet?”

He doesn’t care to hear Harry jabber about the lions, but if ever there’s a time to make this point—the point that defying Tom’s choice of company is inevitably futile—the first day of class is it.

“A few,” Harry replies dryly, stirring his tea. “Though they’re clearly not very fond of your House.”

“It is rather unorthodox,” Zabini chimes in before taking a sip from his goblet. “But it’s not like anyone could really oppose you. I mean, you’ve even shut Malfoy’s up, and Merlin knows that’s a feat.”

“Shove it, Zabini,” Malfoy spits, breaking his pouting silence. He lifts his chin with a haughty demeanor, like he knows something nobody else does. “Let them act however they want now. They won’t be so smug when the Ministry steps in.”

“The Ministry?” Tom questions doubtingly. He knows there’s truth in there, but he can’t give Malfoy the satisfaction.

“Yes, the Ministry. Not that a Muggle-raised would know.”

“No,” Tom concedes. “I suppose they reserve sacred Ministerial knowledge for pure-bloods.” He smirks. “Even those pure-bloods who, despite possessing every possible advantage, fair far less well than us Muggle-raised pariahs. Strange, that. Has your father mentioned anything, Harry?”

***

Harry sips from his tea, taking another biscuit. He’s never been that big on lunch, and there’s way too much food on the table for just one afternoon. He listens as Malfoy sneers something about Muggles and the Ministry, finding his thoughts wandering as he glances at Tom beside him and suddenly realises that he’s rather tall compared to most of his peers, even while sitting down, posture straight-backed. His profile is almost too handsome, fit for a Roman coin—had someone painted a picture of him Harry wouldn’t have believed anyone could be that good-looking.

“Did you hear me, Harry? Has your father mentioned anything?”

“Hmm?” Harry blinks, snapping out of his staring. “Oh, about the Ministry?” He pauses, trying to remember if there was anything his dad said, aside from the usual complaints about the Ministry’s inefficiency. “I think so. Something about an inspector or something.”

Malfoy scoffs. “And where does your father work, exactly, that he’s privvy to this information? Janitor for the Minister’s office?”

Ignoring Malfoy completely, which seems to get on his nerves even more than had he sneered
something back, Harry says to Tom, "Dad seemed worried, said they’d probably be appointed by Grindelwald directly. But how much can an inspector really do? At worst they might get a teacher fired, and Dumbledore is still the Headmaster."


****

Hm. Tom swishes a gulp of tea through his molars, thinking carefully. Classic Gryffindor, his Harry is. Malfoy demonstrates his rather pathetically poor memory by doubting the importance of Harry’s family connections. Harry may not care to use his parents as social leverage, but to Tom who lacks such credentials, this seems regrettable.

So, he’ll do Harry and himself a favor. Lip upturned, he says to Malfoy, “You do realize he’s a Potter, don’t you? And his father’s an Auror, meaning he takes active interest in the affairs at the Ministry. He doesn’t just buy his way onto school boards and attend annual galas.”

“Who cares what his father does? Doesn’t change how he was raised.”

“What do you even know about the Muggle world, Malfoy?” Tom questions with a smirk. “I mean, you’ve never once come near my scores in History of Magic. But can you even name the Muggle Prime Minister?”

“You really don’t get it, Riddle,” Malfoy spits. “You can learn whatever you want, it doesn’t change your filthy upbringing. Consider that Granger,” he makes a disgusted face toward the Gryffindor table, despite her absence. “You know she’s trying to start a club to liberate house-elves? Calls it slavery. But how could she understand? I grew up with a house-elf, I know they’re not oppressed; they want to serve us.”

“That’s Granger’s view, not mine,” Tom says calmly. “I have deep reverence for our noble history, and certainly no interest in venerating house-elves.”

“*Our noble history,*” Malfoy repeats mockingly, jumping from his seat and tugging at Parkinson’s wrist. “Let’s get out of here, Pansy.”

And with that they leave, Draco indignant and Parkinson frowning uncertainly. Zabini clears his throat. “He has a point. Our frustration with Muggles isn’t erroneous—they pollute our culture. I don’t mind the Muggle-raised who acclimate to our customs, but Granger isn’t like you.” He turns with interest to Harry, “You’d do well to keep near Riddle.”

“Oh, shut up,” Harry huffs.

Zabini’s advice stirs a sudden urge in Tom’s gut, another foreign feeling to add to his recent list of dubious emotions: defensiveness. His fingers curl, imagining themselves on the curve Harry’s shoulder. If an anti-Muggle campaign takes root in their community, those safest will be those who keep their mouths shut, and Harry is vulnerable.

Pushing his half-finished plate away, Tom meets Harry’s keen eyes and speaks his demand with authority. “We need to find an empty classroom. You’re going to learn how to duel. *Properly.*”

“What, right now? What’s the hurry? It’s not like Malfoy actually has the guts to pull anything.”

Standing from the table, Tom shakes his head at his friend’s naiveté; for someone with quick wits, Harry’s often rather slow on the uptake.

"Will you just follow me?" Tom urges before bidding Zabini farewell and stalking out of the
Great Hall, aware that the whispering Hufflepuffs he passes are directing their fingers at him and Harry. Not so welcoming and inviting, are they now? Hypocrites.

Turning left at the first open corridor, Tom paces in a direct line toward the abandoned staff lounge he frequents. It lacks the spaciousness one would want for a dueling arena, but it has a high, vaulted ceiling, and a circular window that makes it ideal for potionering at full moon. As they walk, Tom explains, “I’m not teaching you to duel because I think Malfoy will pull anything. He’s an idiot, but even he knows better than to attack me. I’m more worried about the Ministry.”

Their destination is an engraved wooden door bearing a sign that says, ‘NO STUDENTS PERMITTED.’ Disregarding its decree, he wordlessly casts an Unlocking Charm and enters the empty room, snapping his fingers to set the wall-hung torches ablaze. "Don’t worry about the sign. Occasionally a Boggart sneaks in, but that would be good practice for you anyway.”

Tom strides across the room until he is meters from Harry, at which point he turns sharply, robes flapping with a snap. Harry looks rather softer when looked at like this, Tom notices—masculine but tender, not at all formidable. Ah, no matter how many Patronuses he can conjure, no matter how quickly he picks up on Light magic, there is no chance of him outmatching Tom in a fair duel.

“Now, first the rules,” Tom starts, dropping his informal disposition. “Universe Hopper or not, you’re still an Englishman. I’m sure you’ll be quick to understand the formalities. Before commencing, it’s customary to bow with respect to your opponent, like so,” he demonstrates, leaning forward with his wand arm tucked in. “In old days, it was common for people to have what’s called a second, a person to step in if you died. But these days most duels aren’t fought to the death.”

He expounds all other pertinent dueling information with great care, ensuring that Harry understands the full picture. “That’s all you need to know for now,” Tom concludes, raising his wand in front of his chest, the other hand hidden behind his back.

“Now for the practical. I’m going to shoot three simple jinxes in succession. I want you to block them like so,” Tom flicks his wrist, as if swatting a fly. “Then I want you to counter with a jinx. Ready? One, two, three – now.”

***

It’s a relief that the three jinxes aren’t sent back-to-back too quickly, because after swatting away the first stream of yellow dashing towards him, Harry is almost distracted by the almost electric tingle that shocks up his hand, just managing to swat away the next two. Being a goalie for several years, at least, has ensured a solid eye-hand coordination.

"Impedimenta!” Harry fires off the first jinx that comes to mind, and even if it is easily blocked, Harry is still relieved to have managed a counter with his hand tingling as it is.

He considers his performance critically, however, finding it rather lacking. Tom is going easy on him. Even if he needs the practise, it’s not a pleasing thought.

"Do it faster this time,” Harry says, raising his wand again–and somewhat regretting his request when after several minutes of practising it with Tom firing off his spells faster and faster his hand is actually starting to hurt, but he’s too stubborn to call it quits.

Tom isn’t exactly giving him any indication of his progress so far either, expression inscrutable, and Harry starts getting more and more frustrated as time passes. The only reason he’s keeping up is because of his reflexes, swatting the spells away feels a little like he’s flailing too much around,
expending too much energy. But he’s not sure how to correct it. He heaves a deep sigh in-between another round, rolling the shoulder of his wand arm and wondering what he’s doing wrong. He’s used to *punching* people when he’s fighting, not waving around with a magic stick.

***

Any other wizard at Harry’s dueling level would weary Tom into a state of boredom, but he is actually rather entertained by watching his lithe, robed form heave and fidget and struggle to keep in step. Spell-casting and blocking fade into Tom’s auxiliary functions and his concentration is intent on observation. What Harry lacks in technique he makes up for in talent, particularly his knack for reflexive defense. Still, he needs work. Suspecting Harry is past his peak, Tom ceases their session for a break.

"You’re not bad,” he admits, approaching Harry. “I think with more practice, you may even get quite good. I did notice something, though."

Mimicking how Professor Lupin handles his students, Tom uses one hand to straighten Harry’s posture and the other to angle his arm, wrapping long fingers around Harry’s dominant wrist.

"You put too much movement into it,” Tom explains. “Instead, try to keep your gait upright and reserve all of the effort for your wrist. Stay in place like this.” He unclasps his hands and joins them behind his back before stepping directly in front of Harry.

“Widen your stance and,” he brings a gentle touch to Harry’s chin, lifting it just so, “keep your head straight."

For one heartbeat too long, he lingers like this, fingertips against soft, dewy skin, gaze intent on penetrative green eyes. He bites the interior of his lip and inhales, taking in a deep breath of his friend’s perspirant scent. Abruptly, he retracts his hand and returns to his spot athwart the room.

“Now that you’re in a proper stance and have some practice, I’m going to try something else. In an actual duel, it’s not as clean as our back-and-forth. Most of the time both parties will spell-cast simultaneously, meaning you need to know how to defend whilst attacking. So, while I cast a Disarming Charm, I want you counter. *Expelliarmus!*”

Harry replies to the red spell bursting from Tom’s wand quickly, a blue jet of light blasting from just a split-second later. "*Stupefy!*"

The spells clash in midair, colliding with unusual force and shooting an unusual feeling up Tom’s arm. The wand shakes in his grip, his hand seizing up around it, and he realizes with bemusement that he can’t release.

Then, suddenly, a narrow beam of light connects their two wands. Not red nor blue, but bright, deep gold.

A moment later the thread splinters, though their wands remain connected, and the pair watch in stunned awe as hundreds of more beams arch high over them, crisscrossing all around until they’re encased in a golden, dome-shaped web of light. It’s only after this that Harry rips his wand away and shatter the connection with a loud *bang*, the dome dissipating into shimmering sparks in the air before fading completely, the force of separating sending him stumbling back a few steps, out of breath.

Harry looks from his wand up to Tom in astonishment. "What the bloody hell just happened?"
So, another chapter down. I’d love to know what you think!

Of course, thank you to everyone who left kudos, and especially to Luna_sss, PlaySetQ, AdharaSnow, DeepInLOve_MARS, oblivion26, Lili_Basilisk, and bbmunster for your lovely comments. It makes my day, every time. ❤
“Evanesco,” Harry pronounces carefully for the eighth time, tapping his wand against a small stone. It disappears at once.

The gratification of performing the spell is quelled almost immediately by a sense of dread. According to Tom, this is an elementary spell. It shouldn’t take him several attempts to manage it. Nevertheless, Ron—who Harry finds himself spending more and more time with—claps him on the shoulder and says, “Brilliant, mate.”

“It’s a bit pathetic, isn’t it?” Harry says sheepishly, sinking lower in his seat.

“What d’you mean?”

Harry quickly looks around the Common Room, ensuring that no one is listening to his self-pity as he tells Ron, “I’d probably be better off with the first-years.”

“Are you taking the mickey?” Ron says, red-freckled face scrunching in disapproval. “That’s bloody hard magic. Used it on my O.W.L. practical, actually.”

“Really?” Harry scrutinizes the study sheet Tom gave him closer, confirming that he did, indeed, categorize the Vanishing Charm in the ‘least difficult’ category. “Guess Tom has a different idea of hard.”

The parchment is snatched from Harry at once. Harry squirms while Ron’s eyes drift further down the sheet, one orange brow inching higher up his forehead as he reads. He snorts and hands it back to Harry. “Yeah, but it’s Riddle, innit? No one’s caught up with him since our first year. Except for Hermione,” he adds as an afterthought.

“Are they normal?” Harry questions aloud, realizing a second too late how ridiculous his question must come across. “Er, let me rephrase that. I mean, is it normal for magical people to be so…”

“Smart?” Ron suggests.

“Er, I guess that’s what I’m asking, yeah.”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Guess they’re just lucky. You know, Hermione can read a book and remember nearly all of it? Even the little facts, the ones in the margins that no one bothers looking after.”

“Yeah, so can Tom,” Harry responds immediately.

It’s amazing, really. Sometimes it seems like there’s nothing Tom doesn’t know. Though, if Harry’s being honest with himself, he is perhaps not in the best position to judge. It’s only his fifth day at Hogwarts now, and his knowledge of the curriculum is noticeably limited compared to his peers. He knows better than to be ashamed; he spends so much time adjusting to things everyone else is accustomed to—the translucent ghosts who strike conversation at dinner time, the portraits who comment on his messy hair as he passes, the impractical moving staircase that’s nearly impossible to navigate—that it’s often difficult to focus on the immediate and glaring tasks, like the hours’ worth of homework sitting unfinished in his bag.
A patter of footsteps sounds from the corridor, foretelling the arrival of a tall, dark girl with swirly braids. “It’s almost dinnertime, Weasley. Better eat up before we hit the pitch tomorrow. Summer made you too thin.” She then looks from Ron to Harry, brown eyes flitting to the scar, stern gaze softening a bit with realization. “Nice to meet you, Potter. I’m Alicia Spinnet, Captain of Gryffindor Quidditch.”

“Pleasure,” Harry returns. “Ron, you didn’t tell me you were on the Quidditch team?”

“I didn’t?”

Alicia snorts. “He didn’t? That’s a shock. Never shut up about it when he made the cut last year. Tryouts for Seeker and Beater positions are tomorrow, if you’re interested.”

The offer sounds more than inviting. Dad did buy him a new broom before the start of school, and it would be a waste not to put it to good use. But then he remembers who he is and shakes the fantasy with disbelief. He’s a lifetime behind his peers academically, he couldn’t possibly hope to squeeze Quidditch in on top of everything else. “I’d love to, but I don’t think I have the time.”

“No problem,” she assures. “As soon as the season’s over, you could always come play a few friendly rounds with us, if you want.”

He smiles. “Yeah? Thanks.”

“Of course. But for now, it’s time to get Weasley to dinner. Montague’s still captain this year and you know he’s going to keep those great apes, Crabbe and Goyle, in as Beaters.”

***

Seated at the Slytherin table, Tom keeps his eyes locked on the entrance, awaiting Harry with growing impatience. He really should be more prompt, more like Tom. Especially now, when Harry knows good and well that Tom’s found the answer to their little light show conundrum (he wrote it in the diary hours ago, and surely Harry bothered to look). He drums his fingers on the table as his Housemates tuck in, noticing with some curiosity that he is surrounded by underclassmen rather than the usual suspects.

“Hey, Riddle…”

He looks to his left, where stands the bane of his week, Daphne Greengrass. Her thin fingers fidget nervously with the hem of her robe sleeve. “Yes, hi there,” she says quietly. “Can we have a word?”

His eyes drift past her, back to the entrance. “My apologies, Daphne. Now’s not exactly a good time.”

“Please? I just want to talk about what happened last time, during the party. I want to say sorry.”

Oh, for Merlin’s sake. “It’s quite alright,” he says, regard shifting back to her for half a second before looking once more at the door and realizing that Harry’s black head of hair is bobbing in beside Weasley’s flaming top. Tom rises from his seat. “I must be going, Daphne. But have no worries, all is well between us.”

Run along now, you stupid, callow bint.

“Riddle?”

Her face, which is admittedly quite pretty, does not seem settled by his consolation. There is a
wrinkle between her brows, a bit of water welling in her blue eyes. Why would she be upset? He’s showing her mercy for her foolish acts, when he could instead treat her with the disdain she deserves.

“Really, Daphne. I’m not bothered.” Again, he searches for Harry, skimming over to the table where he sits among the obnoxious, little lions.

Brown ringlets swing sharply with the turn of Greengrass’s head, perhaps attempting to find what he’s looking at and, evidently, succeeding. After a small pause, she eases her attention back to Tom, something different about her expression entirely. The crease disappears, her mouth parts slightly. She no longer seems on the verge of tears at all. She exhales slowly, examines Tom, and then for some completely baffling reason, smirks quite subtly. “Right. I’m sorry for bringing it up. Er, I’ll be going too, then. See you around?”

“Why, certainly,” he promises, smiling sincerely until he’s walked out of her range. Stupid girl.

***

“Tom!” Harry calls when his friend is in view. The small gesture of Tom waiting for him to arrive, as wholly unromantic as it is, burns the back of his neck with a pleasant warmth.

“Hello Harry,” he opens evenly. “I assume you’ve read my message?”

“Uh, no. Sorry. What happened?”

Tom tilts his head and crosses his arms. After eyeing the table suspiciously, he whispers, “I’ve figured it out.”

“You mean you figured out what happened with our wands?” Harry asks at normal volume, unsure of why Tom’s acting so secretive about the matter.

“Oi!” Ron sounds. “He figured out why your wands went bonkers?”

The look of disappointment on Tom’s face nearly makes Harry laugh. Is this really something to be protective of? “I already told Ron,” Harry explains. “So, what was it?”

“Can’t we discuss it privately?”

“What’s the matter, Riddle?” Ron calls playfully, as though daring Tom. “Afraid of us, are you?”

At that, Tom’s honest expression – the unexpressive one that seems permanently etched when they are alone together – melts into a smile of deception. Both annoyed and amused at his friend’s effortless transformation, Harry flattens his hand, pointing to the empty space on his right, across from Ron, Alicia and Hermione. Tom takes the seat with a grateful nod and says, “It’s nice of you to accommodate someone from Slytherin,” but Harry can already hear the inevitable complaint that will surely come after dinner.

“Well,” Alicia starts, setting a bit of turkey onto her plate, “excuse me for eavesdropping, but now I’m dead curious. What happened with your wands, exactly?”

In the politest voice Harry’s ever heard, Tom answers, “It’s not too important. Harry and I practiced dueling a few nights ago and discovered an odd interaction between our wands. It’s called Priori Incantatem, a variant of the Reverse Spell. We thought it may be dangerous.” Dark eyes find Harry’s for a second. “But it’s not.”

The spectacle of the golden dome and their wands connecting burns vividly in Harry’s mind. “But
why did it happen?”

Tom, who is carefully cutting meat into small, neat chunks, doesn’t look up from his plate. “Our wand cores, of course.”

“That is fascinating!” Hermione exclaims. “You two share cores?”

“Yeah,” Harry tells her. “Phoenix feather, apparently from the same bird.”

“What are the odds of that, eh?” Alicia comments, smiling.

“Attention!”

From the lectern in front of the staff table, Professor McGonagall calls in austere Scottish tones for the students to turn, voice amplified by a wand at her neck. Harry has not yet become familiar with his Head of House, but there is an almost unnerving stiffness in her demeanor that demands his attention. Now that he is paying attention to them, he notices something off. For the first time since the term began, Professor Dumbledore’s high-backed chair is empty and an oddly squat woman stands beside Professor McGonagall with an expectant glint in her prominent, toad-like eyes.

Once the muttering quiets, Professor McGonagall addresses the students once more. “This evening, Headmaster Dumbledore and the Board of Governors were summoned for an impromptu meeting with a representative from the Ministry to discuss the standard of teaching at Hogwarts School. The negotiation ended in an agreement between the Headmaster and the representative to open Hogwarts for inquiry from the Ministry.”

The room livens with the start of outbursts from students, but before disorder emerges, the wand is back at Professor McGonagall’s throat. “Silence!” She takes a deep breath. “Many of you will have questions, I’m sure. I encourage you to take them to the Heads of your Houses. For now, it is my responsibility to introduce you to our guest from the Ministry – High Inquisitor Dolores Umbridge.”

There is an odd smattering of bemused applause, principally from the first-years by the looks of it. Most older students, however, simply stare. Harry braces himself for what the woman will say, clenching his jaw and exchanging worried glances with Tom.

“Ahem,” mews the woman’s shrill voice as she takes to the podium. “Thank you, Minerva. It is so very nice to be back at Hogwarts, and to see each of your smiling faces.”

As far as Harry can see, no one is so much as smirking.

“The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. Hence, when the school began accepting students who could not privately fund their education, the Ministry rose to cover the costs.” With her breathy, little girl-ish voice, she has a jarring habit of punctuating certain words with a shake of the head that makes the black bow atop her curls bounce precariously.

“The ancient skills unique to the wizarding community must be passed down generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure of magical knowledge amassed by our noble ancestors must be guarded, replenished and polished by those who feel it is our duty to protect what is ours to protect.”

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Her thick, wrinkled lips stretch in an awful smile as, again, a few nonplussed students clap
unenthusiastically. Tom imagines that if a fly mistakenly crossed her path, a long tongue would extend to capture it.

“To assist me, I have chosen a desirable selection of students based on O.W.L. scores, among other factors. These fine, brave charges shall serve under me, and by extension the Ministry, by surveying students and carrying out reform as it is deemed fit.”

The entrance door opens, making way for eight all-too-familiar twats to saunter up the aisle. Tom’s lip threatens to snarl but he knows he mustn’t let his frustration show too obviously. The Gryffindors are not so savvy. Their angry murmurs carry far while the Toad’s handpicked lot of fools stand in queue in front of her, each smiling smugly.

“What the bloody hell is this about?”

“The Ministry must be daft!”

“She’s having a laugh!”

“Ahem!” shrieks the Toad, her fat chin wobbling. “Please, give a warm applause for the following students – Millicent Bullstrode, Pansy Parkinson, Cassius Warrington, Graham Montague, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, Miles Bletchley, and Draco Malfoy.”

The Slytherin table alone claps and, annoyingly, several Gryffindor begin peering at Tom wearily. Tom clenches his fists with indignation: Why wasn’t he chosen for this? He is far above the morons standing there! He leans toward Harry and whispers, “They’re all pure-blood.”

Harry nods once tensely. “I figured.”

“I will begin formal Ministry inquisitions next week. Though we acknowledge that new times bring new changes to the school, we wish to ensure that our culture is upheld with the utmost respect. Progress for the sake of progress must be discouraged. Let us preserve what must be preserved, perfect what can be perfected and prune practices that ought to be prohibited. You may all return to dinner.”

The Hall buzzes with reactions, which Tom imagines vary distinctly by House. How utterly fortunate he is to be at the table most incensed by the Ministry’s intrusion. He straightens his back and continues eating in silence.

“The Ministry held an impromptu meeting?” Granger splutters. “Sounds more like Dumbledore’s been threatened into accommodating their codswallop!”

“Threatened how?” Weasley asks dumbly.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Harry says as he pushes his plate away. Tom looks askance at his friend, whose jaw is held tight. He’s going to give himself a headache, the fool. “She said the Ministry rose to fund Hogwarts – they threatened to cut the funding.”

“But they couldn’t do that,” Weasley says skeptically. “Half the school couldn’t pay for this.”

“Wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Spinnet argues. “The whole lot of Slytherin are filthy rich. I bet they’d be glad to pay premium for a purer school – no offense, Riddle.”

“I’m not offended.”

How could he be? She’s not wrong.
“Who’s on that Board of Governors she mentioned, anyway?” Harry questions.

There is a pause. Tom peers up and realizes that no one, not even Granger, is prepared to answer. He sighs quietly. “There are six besides Dumbledore: Thaddeus Warrington, Milton Nott, Cornelius Fudge, Bartemius Crouch, Orion Black, and Lucius Malfoy.”

Granger nods. “That makes sense. I read in Hogwarts, A History that Governors often inherit their title from a parent.”

Typical. She understands their function, yet makes no effort to learn who they are. It is the equivalent of learning how a wand is made without bothering to learn real magic. To know one without the other is utterly pointless; powerless.

Tom folds his serviette on the half-eaten plate. “Three currently have sons here, two of which now volunteer for Umbridge. Many Slytherins were absent from dinner before the announcement.” He peers over the crowd, confirming that his Slytherin peers now join at the table. “I can only guess that many more were invited than decided to accept the offer.”

“What do you think all of this means?” Spinnet asks in a serious tone. “I mean, do you think any of this is going to actually result in anything?”

“Yeah,” Harry mutters, lips pouting, eyebrows squeezing close together. “I think it will.”

The High Inquisitor, as he predicted, is every bit as unpleasant as her name implies.

The weekend passes uneventfully – students speculating and fretting and Malfoy boasting loudly of his meaningless position – and Monday follows it lead. On Tuesday, however, Harry and Tom walk into Transfiguration to discover the awful woman, Umbridge, lurking at the back of the class with a clipboard in one hand, and a fluffy, pink quill in the other. Professor McGonagall attempts to teach her class as usual, but Umbridge immediately interrupts the Professor with a maddeningly annoying little cough. McGonagall seems fine ignoring her, but by the middle of class, it’s obvious to see her patience wearing thin. When Umbridge interrupts her yet another time to no doubt ask for something else inane, the Transfiguration Professor has had enough.

“Hem, hem.”

“I wonder,” Professor McGonagall says in cold anger, turning on Umbridge, “how you expect to gain an idea of my usual teaching methods if you continue to interrupt me? You see, I do not generally permit people to talk when I am talking.”

Umbridge looks as though she has just been slapped in the face. She does not speak, however, but straightens the parchment on her clipboard and scribbles furiously.

Looking supremely unconcerned, Professor McGonagall addresses the class once more, returning to the lesson. The students’ amusement ends when, during their practising of the Vanishing Spell on the individual mice they’re handed out, Umbridge starts going through the classroom, apparently measuring each student’s performance.

Harry opts to ignore her, focused on listening to Tom’s guidance when the High Inquisitor comes to stand directly in front of their table.

“My,” she says in that high-pitched voice of hers, eyes on Harry, “and you must be Harry Potter.”

“That’s my name,” Harry confirms warily, about to have been attempting the Vanishing Spell for
a second time (the first time he only managed to vanish the tail) when she interrupted.

“I must say, it is rather disconcerting to me that someone of your…” She gives him a once-over. “…level, shall I say, is permitted to practise such complex magic at all.”

Harry slowly opens his mouth, glancing sideways at Tom, wondering if he just misheard. “I’m sorry?”

“I’m merely worried for your safety, dear,” Umbridge says with a smile that eyes about as sweet as sour candy. “Formerly being a Muggle of all things—”

“Formerly,” Harry emphasises coolly.

The smile slips off her face. “I’m quite frankly shocked you were let into Hogwarts at all,” she continues after a tense pause, tone still sweet even if her eyes aren’t. “It is a testament to how far the standards have fallen at this school, no doubt.”

“No further than the Ministry’s, I’m sure,” Harry finds himself biting out before he can stop himself, Umbridge appearing quite startled. “They must have, if they thought it a good idea to hire you.”

“Excuse me?” Umbridge repeats, the anger starting to grow on her face.

“Mr. Potter,” McGonagall snaps from somewhere behind him, nearly making him jump. “Just what do you think—”

“Please, Professor, I’ll handle this,” Umbridge cuts in icily, breathing in deep through her nose as if to calm herself. “Perhaps Mr. Potter here would benefit from a re-educational class—”

“Re-educational?” Harry exclaims.

Silence weighs heavily on the room, though heavier for no one more than Harry. He feels himself run cold and hot at once, a bit of fear and a huge amount of fury. He remembers the hollow texts of propaganda, and disobedient students disappearing, and Uncle Vernon’s toothless threats when the thick, leather belt came down on his –

He shivers. This can’t be happening, not here, not in this universe. And yet here this toad is, staring him in the face and declaring she’d very much like to indoctrinate him; one of his worst nightmares while growing up. It makes his blood boil.

Umbridge’s voice breaks in. “Students who are in need of correction—”

“You mean brain-washing!” Harry all but yells at her, at which point McGonagall puts her foot down.

“Potter! Outside, immediately!”

Harry, red in the face, shoves his chair back and walks around the desk still fuming, not a glance at Tom as he stalks off outside the classroom with McGonagall and Umbridge at his heels.

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Tom’s face remains indifferent as he sees Harry disappear into the hall with their professor and the Toad, door shutting swiftly behind them.

He pushes his chair back, casts a quick glance behind himself, then stands with intentions of
listening through the cracks. Before he can even turn, however, a sneering voice cuts across the room. "I told you there’d be changes."

Tom reveals his even expression to Malfoy, who flinches slightly at the impassivity. "You must be quite proud, Malfoy. Truly."

"It’s what he had coming to him! You heard what he said."

"I’m not pardoning his reaction, but her provocations were rather unprofessional," Tom deadpans.

"That’s an understatement," Granger voices from the far right of the room, brows knit in plain disgust. "What she said was vile!"

"And what bollocks was she talking?" Ron Weasley asks indignantly by her side. "D'you reckon those 're-education classes' sound like a right good time, Malfoy?"

"I reckon they sound necessary, given all that’s gone on lately," Malfoy huffs. "And what are you waiting for, Riddle? I thought you were gonna go look after your boyfriend."

Tom opens his mouth to respond, then closes it immediately. "Please spare me your fantasies."

His accusation is ridiculous, but suddenly Tom feels he doesn’t want to eavesdrop. He drops back into his seat and crosses his hands on his lap, deciding he may as well wait for Harry to inform him later. Boyfriend. What a fatuous insult for Malfoy to sling. But is that what others think? As close as he and Harry remain, whether at meals, or in classes, or during all the times in between, it must be plain that the two are friendly. It annoys Tom to think that the feeble, prying onlookers and gossips could possibly misconstrue his and Harry’s fraternal bond as something romantic.

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"I believe," Umbridge says the moment the door to the classroom closes behind Professor McGonagall, "that it’s quite clear Mr. Potter here has not yet been properly acclimatised to our world and is in dire need of further instruction on how to behave with decorum and respect."

How to behave? As if he’s some sort of animal! Harry almost opens his mouth to snap at the woman again when McGonagall shoots him a stern glare and he grudgingly stays silent.

The Professor turns to Umbridge. "I would like to point out, High Inquisitor, that this is the first time I’ve seen or heard of such behaviour from Potter." She gives Umbridge a pointed look. "Perhaps the problem lies not with him, but elsewhere."

"What, exactly, are you implying, Minerva?" Umbridge demands shrilly, not even the pretence of sweetness in her demeanour.

"Implying?" McGonagall replies in snipped tones. "I’m not implying anything. I’m stating very plainly that provoking students within my classroom is not something I can be expected to tolerate."

Umbridge looks positively livid, hands balled into tiny fists, breathing in deep before replying. "Be that as it may, as High Inquisitor appointed by the Minister himself, it is within my authority to re-educate students if I find their teachers to have failed them." She turns to Harry. "Mr. Potter, I expect you to report to Classroom 53 tomorrow afternoon at 5 PM sharp."

Umbridge, clipboard still in hand, turns away from them and leaves, the sharp click-click-click of her heels following her. Harry turns to the Head of his House, still fuming.
“My hands are tied, Potter,” McGonagall says brusquely, though she does not seem unsympathetic. “I’m afraid you have no choice in the matter.”

“But she called it re-education!” Harry insists. “You know who else used ‘re-education’? The dictatorship I grew up in! They’d pick out the weak kids and send them off somewhere to be re-educated. Most of them never even came back and the few who did were like, like zombies—”

"It was used in your world as well?” McGonagall replies sharply, suddenly very attentive, and Harry is too startled to be irritated at her interruption.

“Yeah, re-education camps. They were all over the country,” Harry clarifies, eyeing his Professor curiously. “Why?”

“I’m unclear as to how much you know about other Universe Hoppers like yourself, Potter. I admit I myself had little knowledge on the subject until I made some inquiries with the Headmaster,” McGonagall says, “and according to him, the very few Universe Hoppers that we are aware of throughout history have always appeared to have a certain purpose for why they came here. One of your predecessors several centuries ago for example, Gunhilda of Gorsemoo, came from a universe where dragon pox had virtually eradicated a huge chunk of the wizarding populace all over the world. With more resources available to her in this universe, she went on to invent the first cure once she came here, and saved hundreds of lives and prevented a possible pandemic.”

Harry stares at his Professor with incomprehension. “What—what do you mean? I have a purpose for coming here?”

Beyond his connection to Tom?

“Minister Grindelwald has been starting to expand his influence and power in worrying ways,” Professor McGonagall says. “Installing Umbridge at Hogwarts is just the latest. Perhaps, with your background…”

“Professor,” Harry starts slowly, “are you… are you saying I’m here to… what? Prevent a dictatorship? Topple Grindelwald?”

Professor McGonagall gives him a long look, and Harry feels his heart sinking into his stomach. That’s answer enough. She puts a hand on his shoulder, directing him back into the classroom. Harry numbly opens the door and walks inside, slightly dizzied by the information. Is that really why he’s here? To keep this world from becoming like the one he came from? It seems daft.

And apparently, he’s not the only skeptic.

“So, what, you’re supposed to be our saviour from an evil dictatorship?” Ron says incredulously during the dinner Tom passed on, Harry ending up sitting with his friends from Gryffindor instead. “You’re just sixteen. What does McGonagall and Dumbledore expect you to do? Assassinate Grindelwald?”

“Shh!” Hermione hisses from beside Harry, frowning at Ron and glancing warily at Umbridge sitting at the staff table between a very put-off Slughorn and uncomfortable Sprout. “Not so loud!”

It is strange how quickly he has come to trust Ron and Hermione. It seems the two didn’t take much to each other before he arrived, and considering their personalities, it’s not difficult to figure out why. But somehow, with Harry as the centre between the two, something just clicks.
“We’ll figure it out, Harry,” Hermione reassures him at seeing the troubled expression on his face. Harry isn’t so sure he believes her. He never asked to be some sort of saviour, as Ron put it, but can he in all honesty sit back and watch as Grindelwald twists this world into an eerie copy of his own? He already knows the answer to that.

Ron snorts over a mouthful of chicken. “I dunno. I think maybe McGonagall’s been pushed off her rocker. My dad always said that there’s not a wizard alive more powerful than Grindelwald. Used to work on the continent and got a bit of a reputation during that Muggle war.”

“A bit of a reputation?” Hermione repeats, implying his role demands more acknowledgement than Ron has given. “He was in command of the Special Forces during the war, all the way back in the 40s. Their operations were covert, so no one really knows what went on exactly, but he’s credited with leading the Siege on Nurmengard.”

“Siege on Nurmengard?” Harry asks for clarification.

“Yes, you see there was a nasty group of wizards in those days – called themselves the Guardians, if you can believe it – and they used the war as a cover to detain and torture Muggles without getting caught. Anyway, Grindelwald located them in this small town in Bavaria called Nurmengard, and had the whole lot of them arrested or worse.”

“Seems convenient, if you think about it,” Ron whispers.

Hermione leans in to the table. “What does?”

“That he was the one who caught them. I mean, he’s obviously not that fond of Muggles. Why bother intervening at all?”

“There’s a difference between some cult wrangling up Muggles for slaughter and what the Minister’s doing now. And he was a diplomat for years since that time…”

Ron shrugs. “Biding his time, I reckon.”

“Can we talk about this later?” Harry blurts, hands shaking with nerves. “I’m sorry. It’s just, y’know. Overwhelming.”

“Right,” Ron nods. “Sorry, mate.” His blue eyes look around the table during a brief pause, landing down the row when he smirks. He turns to Harry and raises his orange brows suggestively. “Any girl tickle your fancy yet? Reckon you can get into any set of robes you’d like, being Universe Hopper and all.”

“Honestly, Ronald!”

“What? It’s true!”

Harry smiles at the two fondly. No matter what happens, he feels a small comfort cool his tensions. He’s not alone here. He has friends, a family, and even someone in between: Tom.

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Emerald sheets sheath Tom up to the chest. While he thinks, he uses his wand to stream small beams of light in a pattern, writing his name and watching it dissipate. The other Slytherins are probably still at dinner, which he forewent entirely, disgusted by the prospect of worsening his already squeamish stomach. Since Harry relayed McGonagall’s insight on Universe Hoppers, he’s been unable to quell a certain aching nausea.
Could it really, truly be possible that Harry wasn’t delivered to help Tom achieve greatness? The parallels between Minister Grindelwald’s emerging world order and the universe that spat Harry are beginning to outweigh the number of his and Harry’s coincidences. Anti-Muggle propaganda. Re-education classes. Surveillance wards. The High Inquisitor. It is frighteningly reminiscent of that which Harry wrote to Tom about all those months ago. Perhaps Tom has been a fool, connecting dots without warrant and projecting juvenile fantasies onto Harry.

Maybe Harry alone is special.

Then why must Harry bother Tom at all? If he’s so bloody essential to averting the Minister’s impending takeover, then of what use is Tom? He will not be a babysitter. Nothing irked him worse in childhood than being saddled with tending to other children, changing nappies and mixing powdered formula until his fingers shook with rage. What, is this how the universe wants to squander his talents? By forcing him into an unending chain of looking after the incompetents who cannot make it on their own?

Footsteps approach the dorm, prompting Tom to shut his curtains and roll on his side, where he faces the black dungeon stone. He should distance himself from Harry. He’s little more than a gobshite determined to make his own life hell as the Minister increases his control of Hogwarts. Obviously, Tom is no more thrilled to watch an institution as inept as the Ministry corrupt Hogwarts than Harry is, but Tom knows how to hedge his bets; that’s how he survives. Keeping Harry near just because they share wand cores, among other silly flukes, would be foolhardy, and it would jeopardize Tom’s well-being.

Friends or not, no soul is more important to Tom than his own. That will never change.

These fatigued thoughts lull him into an uneasy slumber, where darkness melts into a hazy sunset.

He is sitting outside of Hogsmeade, right along the mountainside, and Lupin is there, too. Wait. He’s not really sitting, is he? He’s watching himself sit from the vantage of a specter, floating as a nonentity above the scene. His detached body is clutching the diary tightly, white-knuckled with anxiety.

Then it all fades to black.

Now, he’s not beside Hogsmeade, but at the Potter house, lounging beside Harry, who lays with innocent, green eyes set straight on Tom’s. A loud, thunderous noise cracks in the silence, startling them out of bed. From nowhere, a small, wispy creature appears and in its glowing resplendence, Tom can see that it is a winged Patronus, the bearer of Harry’s happiness. Tom clenches his teeth and lurches at it in an uncharacteristic display of desperation, amazed by its luminous warmth, amazed by the unvoiced laughter it inspires in the center of his chest.

But suddenly, there’s a snap, and the creature explodes, it erupts into a dome of gold, streaming light.

"Help!” Harry shouts. Tom turns to see that Harry is dissipating, evanescing as he begs Tom to grab him, prevent him from falling back into his universe. Tom doesn’t have to think twice. In an instant, he’s on top of Harry and straddling him, beseeching him to stay, but nothing is working, he has almost evaporated into nothingness…

But then it all goes away… the light and Harry and Tom, they all cease to exist.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Tom twists the cool steel of a faucet. He’s in a standard looking home lavatory like those he’s seen
on the telly, where the tile is polished and blindingly white. For some reason, he begins to speak, but he cannot even hear his own words. Warm hands press against the bare flesh of his back and he can’t see his friend, but he knows it’s him. He knows that they’re Harry’s hands. Just as he turns to face Harry, he falls back onto an unfamiliar bed in a room he’s never seen.

A room he can’t see. Everything is vague and untouchable, nebulous and unclear, except that he can feel… something.

Lips smack against his inner thigh, fingers dig into his waist, a white-hot need pulses beneath his skin.

He can hear his own voice tremor.


“Ugh!”

His unclad chest thumps painfully against the frigid stone floor of his dormitory. The sheets cling to his moist legs like stickers, which he peels off mindlessly as his mind recovers from the turbulent whirlwind he’s just escaped.

“Merlin, Riddle, are you alright?”

In the bed across from his own, Zabini peers at him strangely with an amused smirk, already dressed in his robes for the day. Tom shifts into a cross-legged position, realizing with chagrin that a warm mess awaits him in his night trousers.

“What time is it?” Tom asks, trying to sound casual.

“We have Potions in ten minutes. Do you need to see Madam Pompfrey?”

“Blimey, Zabini,” Tom grunts, picking himself up from the floor and muttering the incantation for a Cleaning Charm. In hurried steps, he prepares his appearance, begrudging Zabini for not awaking him sooner. A quick glance in the communal mirror reflects his image no differently than it did the day before, but as he sprints hurriedly toward Slughorn’s class, rashly attempting to make sense of what he woke-up from, he feels nothing at all like himself. There was a Patronus, and Hogsmeade, and himself and…

“Harry.”

Tom spots him beside the classroom entrance and hastens his pace. Once green eyes are looking back at his, the bitterness that rocked him to bed feels one thousand years away. He brims with the inexplicable desire to tell Harry everything that he dreamt.

For Merlin’s sake, no. What is the matter with him? He can’t tell Harry that rubbish.

Eager to smooth the edge off his mania, but unsure of what to say, Tom quickly begins speaking. “I’ve been thinking about what McGonagall told you.” He pauses uncertainly, searching his mind for something, anything that follows that sentence logically. “I, uh, I mean… If you were sent here to stop the Minister then that means I, maybe you…” His eyes widen with a plausible explanation, allowing him to firmly reclaim his confidence from that horrifying web of insanity. “I think we need to start organizing a resistance.”

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Harry stares at him in shock for a long moment, as that hadn’t quite been the reaction he expected.
"You’re serious?" Large part of him can’t help but feel relieved. If this is truly the reason he’s here, then he’s incredibly glad to have Tom by his side through it all. “Yeah, I mean if… if that’s what I’m here to do, then let’s do it.”

After a moment of looking at Tom in some concern, he adds, “You seem a bit distracted. Everything alright?”

"I’m quite alright," he responds sharply. “I stayed up late studying. Didn’t get an early start.”

“Class is starting, boys,” Slughorn then calls to them from inside the classroom. “Do take your seat!”

Once they oblige, the hefty professor beams enthusiastically. “Today, we’ll discuss a most enthralling concoction. Can anyone guess what substance I have here?” He raises his massive arm, showing a small vile of clear liquid. “I’ll give you a hint: It requires a full lunar phase to brew and you wouldn’t want to find it in your wife’s potion cabinet.”

Hermione’s hand is quick in the air, but against routine, Tom keeps his hands linked beneath the desk.

“Is it Veritaserum, sir?” Granger asks, voice confident.

“That’s right!” he confirms. “I’m sure many of you raised in the wizarding world grew up hearing stories about Veritaserum. My grandfather once snuck a few drops in my uncle’s oats, and boy was that an affair! For those of you who don’t know, Veritaserum is a most powerful truth serum, forcing drinkers to…”

Harry tries to listen attentively to Slughorn’s explanation, but he can’t help but be acutely aware of Tom sitting next to him. He does his best not to have his eyes wander at the slightest hint of movement. It’s a natural consequence of his current predicament; he’s completely smitten, he can admit that much. Though, he has to somewhat question his own tastes in this case; beneath the lie of a mild disposition, Tom isn’t exactly what your average person would describe as likable. He’s self-absorbed and controlling and rude. And yet, the thought doesn’t put Harry off at all. He instead feels strangely satisfied with the knowledge that he’s probably the only person here – or on earth, for that matter – who could put up with him.

“It’s important to know that there are defenses against Veritaserum,” Slughorn clarifies. “Powerful Occlumens, for example, are unaffected by its properties. It generally works best upon the unsuspecting, the vulnerable and those insufficiently skilled. I’m sure no one in this class falls into those categories, but just in case, today you’ll get some practice brewing the antidote to Veritaserum, found on page 323 in your textbooks. You may work in groups of two, and while you’re working, I’ll pass this vial around for you to get a closer look at.”

“Why don’t you try this on your own for a bit? I can just, er, supervise,” Tom says, another crack in that otherwise seamless composure, and now Harry definitely has the sense that there’s something else going on with him beyond sleep-deprivation.

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"Alright," Harry says with a tone of reluctance. If it seems lazy of Tom, then so be it; he needs to overcome this diseasing affliction before it gets the better of him. He flicks through the textbook pages randomly before settling on a distinctly unstimulating image, a fluttering swarm of Cornish Pixies. Then, as if to stoke his dying kindle, Harry dips into his personal space and asks in his kind, soothing voice, “You’re sure there’s nothing going on?” Alluring eyes stare straight at him, transporting Tom back to the nightmare. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”
Tom averts his gaze and clenches his jaw. "I have no idea what you’re talking about."

His feelings are beyond comprehension. He wants to trace them to their source, understand their nature, figure out how to quell the furious twinges, but he cannot fathom where to start. All at once, he feels muted anger swirl in his stomach as aggravation swells. It is Harry’s fault that this is happening to him. He never felt these things before meeting him. Everyone was content to let Tom live on his own, never seeking genuine companionship from him, never attempting to scratch beneath his surface.

Well, of course, there were those few who tried, but they were easily dismissed.

Knowing that his lie hasn’t landed, Tom sighs. “Look, I’m not feeling very well, but I’ll be fine. Just get started counting the Belladonna seeds, I’ll grind the Doxy eggs.”

Carrying on to his task, Tom is relieved to feel the distracting heat simmer down as he handles the ingredients. He trusts that Harry is a dependable confidant, but Tom is intensely private. There is already so much Harry can never know about him, and this glitch ranks well above even his cruelest moments.

Noticing the Veritaserum vial levitating their way, Tom takes it between his fingers to examine the substance. He’s never brewed it before, but it looks as he imagined it would. Eager to dispel the sour tension, Tom cuts a smirk and tilts it jokingly toward Harry.

“Say aah,” he croons.

From this innocent gesture alone, the warmth reignites in his stomach. He sets his bottom lip between his teeth in annoyance.

Harry stares at the bottle in between pale fingertips. Taking it from Tom’s hands a moment later, he sets it aside, and infringes on Tom without permission, placing his searing palm against the skin of his forehead. He almost swats Harry away, but before he can, the hand is gone.

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"You don’t seem sick,“ Harry mutters, wondering what else could possibly be wrong with Tom to be acting like this. An attempt at humour that’s not at the expense of someone else? It’s too strange for words.

Though still puzzled by the odd behaviour, Harry turns back to counting the Belladonna seeds, adding with a wry tone, “Well, if you really want me to tell you something, you can just ask instead of trying to feed me truth serum. Not like I’d ever lie to you.”

When he glances at Tom for his reaction, he catches the slightest glimpse of tongue tracing over lips, eyes flicking down to the movement that stirs a tingling heat in the pit of his stomach. Harry quickly turns back to the seeds, quietly taking a deep breath before he becomes too affected.

“Even if you tried to lie to me, it wouldn’t work. I can read you better than you know,” he hears Tom say from beside him, and even if Harry wants to frown and deny it, he knows he’s much like an open book in that department. It’s not much of an accomplishment for anyone to read him, honestly. Lying is just not his thing “And, for the record, when I said I wasn’t feeling well, it wasn’t an invitation for you to investigate.”

Harry almost wants to scoff at that—and how many times, exactly, has Tom put his hand on Harry’s shoulder or back without invitation? Not that he minded (not at all), but it’s the principle that matters.
“I mean, perhaps a few drops of Veritaserum would reveal your real motivation,” Tom continues as Harry gets done with counting the seeds and takes the bottle of Hippogriff saliva, starting to pour it in a measuring cup. “Perhaps you just like to touch me.”

The cup nearly slips out of his hands, Harry hurriedly putting it down before it can spill anywhere as he feels a hot flush building right underneath the skin of his face, giving Tom a wide-eyed, flustered look. The embarrassed protest is on the tip of his tongue when Slughorn interrupts.

"Not looking bad, boys, not looking bad,” Professor Slughorn says jovially as he collects the Veritaserum vial. “I know there’s quite a bit of a bug going around within the pure-bloods, but I’m beginning to think the opposite is true about you Muggle-raised students.” He points a waving finger at Harry, “I mean, your mother Lily was…”

Slughorn goes on about something that Harry can’t even properly pay attention to because there are just far too many ways his brain is interpreting the words that just came out of Tom’s mouth (‘Oh god, oh god, don’t think about his–’), and he can only nod dumbly to whatever it is the Professor is saying, until an actual question finally registers:

“Tell me, Harry, m’boy, how have you taken to Hogwarts so far?”

Harry blinks, startled out of his stupor as he peers up at Slughorn from behind his glasses. "Er–fantastic, really,” he replies timidly. “I’m learning a lot, and most students here are very friendly.”

Slughorn seems to take well to his modest attitude, smiling down at him. “Good to hear, good to hear! Keep up the nice work, you two.”

The Professor ambles away again Harry watching him for a moment, left in the silence between Tom and him. But is he really just going to let him get away with that stupid tease? Harry exhales softly, feeling his ears burning as he considers his next words, before briefly clenching his teeth in determination.

Returning to measuring the Hippogriff saliva, Harry, without looking at Tom, says boldly: “Well, maybe I do.” He allows his eyes to drift over once, adding with a challenging tone, “Like to touch you, that is.” He finishes pouring just the right amount into the cup and slides it across the desk over to his partner. “If you don’t like it, tell me not to do it again, and I won’t.”

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He stares at the cup, deliberating what to make of Harry’s teasing. With some irritation arising from how these words travel to his legs, he considers cutting into his friend, ordering him to stop his coquettish game and leave him be. But then he imagines how Harry’s lips would crease downward, how he’d attempt to brush it off. No. Tom doesn’t want that. Still, he can’t let him win. To avoid losing footing, Tom decides to stand his ground in their silly round of tug-of-war.

“I really would ask you stop, but I could actually use your advice.” He gently takes Harry’s wrist and pulls it until the back of his hand meets the groove of his neck. Controlling Harry’s limb, siphoning a modicum of his body heat—neither do much to help the throbbing. But Tom’s learning restraint, he can now suffer through while maintaining his cool. “Tell me, Harry, are you sure I haven’t got a fever?”

“Friendly, are we?”

Tom scowls intently and carefully sets Harry's hand on the desk. Malfoy may as well have silently Apparated.

“Why the sour expression?” Malfoy asks innocently as he crosses his arms.
“Forgive me,” Tom says curtly. “Your head is so very reminiscent of a lemon, I couldn’t help but be reminded.”

“Ouch, you pain me, Riddle.” He smirks and tilts his hideous little lemon-head at Harry. “Do try to be civil in front of your lady.” He lays a finger across his face, faking an overly curious expression. “Or are you the lady? Well, that’s your business, I suppose.”

“Draco, do come here.” Slughorn waves his hand, standing with a student across the room. “Since you’ve finished, I want you to help Ms. Patil. I need to step outside for a moment.”

Malfoy snorts and takes off for her desk, leaving Tom to swill his unspoken retort like bitter syrup. He takes the measure Harry slid to him before Malfoy’s interruption, infuses it with Extract of Wisteria, then dumps it carelessly into the cauldron. With sharp movements, he uses his wand to stir the mixture twice clockwise, and drops the yew in his lap, ensuring carefully that his gaze doesn’t stray where it could meet Harry’s.

The snide remark shouldn’t matter. Tom’s interactions with Harry are entirely platonic, never mind the rhythm they drum in his abdomen, nor the manner in which they broil his senses. This is all to do with his stupid dream. Oh, it makes him halfway consider obliviating a hole in his recollections. It’s altogether absurd that he should suffer shame for this. Tom Riddle doesn’t feel shame, never has. He nearly draws blood from scraping a layer off his tongue before he gathers the nerve to clarify his position to Harry.

“Just so you know,” he whispers, eyes trained on his lap, “I was merely playing around. What Malfoy implied has no truth to it, and I wouldn’t want you to have the wrong impression.”

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While it was something he’d already told himself numerous times over the past few days (‘Forget it, just forget it, he’d never feel the same for you,’) it doesn’t lessen the sting and the drop of disappointment in his stomach.

“Yeah,” he replies quietly, doing his best attempt at nonchalance as he goes on to measure the powder of crushed unicorn bones next. “I know; I figured as much.”

Opting to focus on his work, Harry tries not to linger on it. How long is he supposed to put up with these completely one-sided feelings? Unrequited love isn’t exactly something he ever saw happening to himself, and yet here he is, stuck. He refuses to let this ruin the friendship he’s built with Tom, of course, but it’s absolute torture to be having all these thoughts and wants and knowing none of it is ever going to be returned.

His pondering is only interrupted when he notices Malfoy walking back towards his seat at the very back of the class, having to pass their table again first and looking far too self-satisfied. Sitting closest to him and noticing Slughorn is still outside, Harry figures he’s as good a target as any to take out his frustration on.

The moment Malfoy passes, a condescending glare thrown particularly in Tom’s direction, Harry slips out his foot.

Malfoy’s ankle hooks over it and he trips with an undignified squawk, falling over onto the ground. Among the various snickers in the classroom and Ron’s loud “HA!” the rich heir seems rather humiliated (and furious) as he scrambles up from the ground, hair and robes slightly disheveled.

“Potter!”
“What’s the matter, Malfoy?” Harry mocks. “Forget how to walk?”

Malfoy looks completely caught up in his anger for a moment and Harry quickly spots him reaching for his wand, his hand shooting out to catch the wrist in a vicelike grip before he can pull it out.

“You might want to rethink,” Harry warns coldly, reminded oddly of Zeke and suddenly feeling fully prepared to break the bone underneath his fingers. Malfoy’s lips press into a thin line, hesitation in his eyes under the pressure of Harry’s very serious threat, finally jerking his wrist away.

As friendly as Harry chooses to be, it seems people are quick to forget that he’s from a place where death and torture were common. As much as he wishes he didn’t have to be, he’s been hardened by it.

“Better watch your back, Potter,” Malfoy snarls toothlessly, straightening out his robes before stalking off with his wounded ego. Just the perfect timing as well, as that’s when Slughorn comes back into the classroom.

No doubt Malfoy’s going to be thinking long and hard on a way to get back at him for that trip, but for the moment, the feeling of satisfaction was worth any kind of possible future repercussions.

Harry hands over the crushed unicorn horns wordlessly once he’s made sure to have just the right amount of the silvery powder, for once not looking at Tom as he leans back into his chair and exhales a deep sigh, head tilting back just slightly as he stares up at the ceiling, replaying the way Malfoy tripped and shrieked in his head.

“Totally worth it.”

Chapter End Notes

Had to end on a positive note! And speaking of notes, I should probably point out that this is the stage in the collaboration where I've had to edit quite a bit of the original story to make the narrative flow more coherently. The only reason this matters to you, the reader, is simple -- if Harry does anything you don't like, it could well be either of our fault. (Probably mine, though. Especially because I'm a really godawful proofreader. My brain corrects the craziest of mistakes.)

If, by now, you're wondering what the hell is going on with Tom, please trust me when I say that I have not clumsily glossed over the realities of psychopathy by making *~love~* cure all afflictions. The explanation is more complicated than that, and it comes on steadily within the next few chapters.

I really can't say thank you enough to those of you who left kudos and feedback. This time, in particular, the responses were really heart-warming, so a special thanks to the reviewers: Nenya_Galad, Oblivion9032, bbumunter, venusflytrash, miso-misi, Vacate, and VivyPotter (esp. since you caught my mistake in the last chapter!!!).

- Amelinda
"You should all know that when using the Chaldean Method, certain inaccuracies may…"

By the second hour of class, Professor Vector’s droning lesson rings numbly in Tom’s ears. To ebb away the boredom, he sketches patterns along an empty stretch of parchment and lets his mind wander. He loves mathematics, loves numerology. A double session of Advanced Arithmancy with this utter hag, however, is nothing at all like tucking away in a small library corner and reading through thick, leather-bound tomes that breathe on the pads of his fingertips. Her words do not thrum with the exciting pulse of ancient magic, as do his books. Her gobble is a slow waltz around the topic. For Tom to learn, he must run freely until his mind is consumed, swallowed whole.

Perhaps class would be less insufferable if he didn’t know that, at this precise moment, Harry is sitting through Umbridge’s so-called ‘re-education’ lecture. Why must Harry be so reckless? The toad was obviously goading him into a trap. If Harry couldn’t spot the lever lurking behind the bait ready to snap on his overreaching neck, then he deserves whatever nonsense he’s putting up with. He brought it on himself.

Tom shifts in his chair, uncomfortable. Where it was once simple for his mind to leave it at that, he doesn’t want to blame Harry for this. An odd sensation rings his stomach when he imagines that Harry is hurt or sad. Everything feels different, somehow.

Mrs. Cole, the Muggle social worker who arranged his upbringing from birth until Hogwarts, liked to call Tom her “little Oppenheimer.” It was one stupid joke in a sea of rather unfunny taunts. She was a sallow and thin woman. Unlike the others, she wasn’t afraid to look him in the eye, nor did she bite her tongue when she felt the need to candidly express her vapid thoughts. ‘You know, Tom,’ she would mock, hands on her hips, ‘if you could learn to understand people, you’d be a dangerous man indeed.’

He always considered that statement particularly idiotic. He is dangerous, and quite naturally skilled at getting what he wants, from whoever he wants.

“You may all work on your problem sets until the end of class,” Vector announces, magicking chalk dust off the blackboard.

Tom shakes the thoughts from his mind, a headache creeping hastily up his neck. He is reaching for a bit of parchment when he hears Granger’s grating voice. “Hey, Tom! Have you gotten to problem six yet?”

“No,” he says simply.

“Oh, well, that’s alright. That’s not really what I want to talk about.”

He looks up at her curiously.

She smiles. “I know we’ve had a bit of a rivalry going, but I think it’s time we call a truce. Permanently.”

“A truce?” he repeats.
“Yes, I mean, it makes sense. We’re the most studious in our year, we’re both friends with Harry, and more importantly than all that, we’re both Muggle-born.” Her face falls, a hint of determination in the curve of her frown. “You know Harry’s in a re-education class right now.”

“I’m aware,” he responds. And he’s sure it will be fine. The bigger threat is not that of Umbridge’s perversion, but that of Harry opening his own stupid gob and getting himself into more trouble. He smiles convincingly at Granger. “Though, we were never really enemies, were we Hermione?”

“No, no!” She appears embarrassed by this, shaking her head aggressively. “No, of course not. Would you like to sit with us again at the Gryffindor table tonight? I mean, me, you and Harry.”

And the rest of Gryffindor too, obviously. It holds no appeal at all. But, as Harry will likely be mouthy in a fit from whatever rubbish the toad feeds him, Tom doesn’t exactly want Malfoy or the others butting in.

“It’d be my pleasure, Hermione.”

***

When Harry arrives, he finds he’s not the only student to get saddled with Umbridge’s re-education class. Interestingly, however, of the dozen or so present, there are no Slytherin students among them. Harry recognises another sixth year, a Hufflepuff boy named Justin. Otherwise, the unfamiliar students seem to range from first year all the way through seventh. Umbridge is waiting for them at the very front of the classroom, seated at her large desk. Harry takes a seat somewhere near the middle close to Justin, trying hard not to glare in her direction.

It seems he was the last one they were waiting on, because once he’s down, Umbridge clears her throat in that awful little cough of hers and begins. “Welcome, students, to the Ministry-approved Re-Educational Class.” She flicks her wand. A small pile of textbooks sitting next to her desk float into midair, being delivered to each student.

Harry’s eyes widen with no small amount of alarm at the title on the cover of his book.


He hurriedly flips it open as Umbridge continues, “You were each selected for this class when it became apparent that none of you have yet acquired the proper tools and information to navigate our society. In light of this, I have decided that we ought to all return to the roots and work our way up.”

Harry skims the pages while she speaks, an unsettling sense of discomfort setting in. He doesn’t know wizarding history well enough to understand precisely how the textbook is lying to him, but he knows, beyond any reasonable doubt, that it is. It cannot be true that wizards are somehow both victims of Muggles, as well as all other magical creatures, while having maintained autonomy and power for so long. How could the Muggles be dangerous when wizards’ defenses are, by every measure, far more secure? How could the blundering trolls pose a real threat? Still, irrational or not, he has witnessed such ignorance firsthand his entire life and he knows the pattern well—create a mood of fear, and facts cease to matter.

When he is about to close the book, a bolded headline stops him. This, for once, is something he has read about. Hermione practically force-fed him all her notes on the topic last weekend. Harry raises his hand.

Umbridge pauses, giving him a long look, eyebrows arching slightly before saying, “Yes, Mr.
“Potter?”

“The chapter about the Goblin Rebellions is completely wrong,” he says in clipped tones. “In 1612, they weren’t trying to overthrow the Wizengamot at all. They were campaigning for representation and goblin rights when the Ministry started to push for a decree banning them from carrying wands.”

“Yes, that is the information Hogwarts has given you, and that the Ministry has found to be severely lacking,” Umbridge interrupts. “The truth of the matter is that the goblin uprising occurred when the Ministry rightfully imprisoned Hodrod the Horny-Handed for attempted murder on three wizards—”

“That wasn’t proven in court!”

“—after which,” Umbridge continues shrilly, “the goblins saw fit to rebel and cause a long and bloody war, spilling the lives of hundreds of innocents! That is the truth, Mr. Potter.”

“But—”

“Hand!”

Harry clenches his jaw, tempted to start an argument. Instead, he decides against it, understanding that nothing good can come of talking back, even if the woman is blatantly butchering history. He continues to listen to the lecture, silently fuming.

The stuff coming out of her mouth feels eerily like one of the history lessons in his old world: elevating pure-blood history, tearing down the “other” as corruptive pests to society, introducing new chapters into Muggle atrocities and theories on how to maintain discipline and order. A claim on the fiftieth page sets his teeth on edge: “Research has found rehabilitation to be lacking in the case of unruly and psychotic pro-Muggle agitators. Instead, strict punitive response is advocated by leading legal scholars, especially when the civilian population experiences an imminent threat.”

Harry’s struck rather suddenly by the memory of one of Uncle Vernon’s horrible diatribes.

‘If those batty boys and hooligans want to pollute Britain, then I say load the firing squad and let them have their fun!’

He can’t take it anymore. His hand shoots up halfway through the lesson.

“Yes, Mr. Potter?”

“Why are we talking about Muggles? Weren’t we supposed to be talking about A History of Magic?” Harry says loudly, starting to feel his temper building. “Why not focus on the fact that, oh, I don’t know, you introduced legislation barring werewolves from finding any kind of work while at the same time making it almost impossible to get any Wolfsbane Potion?”

Hermione’s research on the woman seems to do its trick. In fact, perhaps a little too well. The entire class falls into deathly silence and Umbridge’s bloated face reddens like a tomato. To his shock, however, she doesn’t stop class, and he feels a petulant urge to make a bigger statement. He wants her to react. He wants her to look like a fool. The compulsion -- almost foreign and too cruel for comfort -- vibrates beneath the surface of his flesh, begging to lash out, to hurt her.

Then he notices, at the front of the room, there is a younger girl trembling rather violently. The sight cools his temper to a tepid lukewarmth. He’s not the sole recipient of Umbridge’s ire, should he act up. It wouldn’t be fair to the others.
When the time comes for Umbridge to dismiss class, Harry grabs his bag and prepares to bolt. Unfortunately, he doesn’t get the chance. Before he can make the jump, she concludes with seven words that make his heart skip unpleasantly.

“Harry Potter, please see me after class.”

He exhales nervously and steps slowly to her desk as the students race for the hall, seeming as eager as Harry is to get away. “Yes, High Inquisitor?”

Her ugly smile wrinkles beneath powdered cheeks. “You interrupted me not only once, but twice during the lesson today. Now, does that sounds like acceptable behavior to you?”

Harry doesn’t respond.

Umbridge giggles. “No, I don’t think that sound acceptable at all, Mr. Potter. What I found quite interesting was that you seemed most upset by my work in protecting the wizarding community from dangerous and violent predators. Is there any particular reason for that, Mr. Potter?”

An image appears within his mind’s eye: faded scars his parents explained with hushed voices, a modest and kind smile.

Remus Lupin.

She inclines her head knowingly. “Yes, Mr. Potter, I believe we both know why.” There is a tense pause before she finally says, “You may leave.”

***

Granger, up close and personal, is as tactlessly common as Tom suspected. Roaming without hurry to the Great Hall, he tests her waters with mild interest to see what lurks beneath her bushy hair and facade of bookish superiority. It doesn’t take much prodding. Brought up modestly in the upper-middle class by dentists, she was led to assume the best of people. Then, between being alienated by her magic and half-Nigerian heritage, she developed a real sense of compassion. Touching.

"What about you, Tom?" she asks softly. “Where were you raised?”

She doesn’t even realize how vulnerable she’s left herself to his manipulation. He furrows his brows, as if troubled, and says, “All over the country, but mostly in South London.”

“Oh? You’re so lucky! I absolutely love visiting London. Do you live with relatives? I mean, I know you’re -” she stops mid-sentence, perhaps thinking ‘parentless’ seems too cruel of a word.

“An orphan?” he offers, smiling easily. “It’s not a sore topic. I was presumed orphaned at birth, so I was taken into state custody.”

This piece of information slumps her shoulders, as planned. “Oh.”

Yes, silly girl, fall victim to your emotions, perform the fidgeting act. Tom’s seen it all before. It creates an opportune moment for him to demonstrate his oh-so-very-brave resolve. “It’s fine, Hermione. I’m truly grateful there are other Muggle-raised students like you around. Our pure-blooded peers don’t quite get the Muggle system. They all seemed convinced of some Dickensian orphanage scenario.”

She laughs nervously. “Yes, they can be a bit thick, can’t they? Hey, is that Harry?”
Further ahead, Tom spots the unmistakable mess of black hair and hastens his step. “Harry!”

Harry’s usually warm, bronzed tint is flushed and pallid. Tom frowns.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Granger asks. “How… how did it go?”

Harry snorts humorlessly. “It was just drivel, really. I promise I’ll tell you about it later. I, uh, don’t feel too well, though. Nothing to do with Umbridge, probably just something I ate.”

“Do you need to go to Madam Pompfrey’s?” Tom inquires.

“No, I’m fine. If you’ll excuse me, I think I need to throw up. I’ll be in the loo.”

The one place Granger cannot follow. Perfect.

“I’ll come,” Tom offers, pacing behind Harry to the nearest lavatory.

***

It shouldn’t surprise Harry that Tom follows him. For all his wits and charisma, he certainly lacks self-awareness, and perhaps cannot imagine that Harry, for one moment, would prefer a bit of privacy. All the same, he’s not bothered. Harry could almost call Tom’s behavior endearing, but then he remembers Tom’s clear rejection from Potions and cringes, ashamed. The nauseating sting of lovesickness mixes painfully with Umbridge’s threat.

When inside the boys’ loo, Harry checks the stalls to ensure the two are alone before heading to the grimy stone basin and turning the faucet. He removes his glasses and roughly scrubs his face with water, as if to wash the filth of his emotions down the drain where he’d rather them be.

“Was it really that bad?” Tom questions, leaning on the wall beside the sink.

Harry rinses his mouth and spits. “I guess it was what you’d expect.”

“Muggles want to bake our children into pies?”

“Close enough.” Harry stops the water and wipes his face, perching his glasses back onto his nose. The mirror captures his reflection, with Tom’s flawless profile peeking somewhat on the edge. He sighs and looks at the basin. Should he tell Tom? His parents instructed him to keep this a secret. Sirius said that less than a handful of Lupin’s closest friends know the truth. But if that’s true, then how the bloody fuck does she know? Is it possible that, like the Minister, she can read minds?

He spits into the drain a second time. “Umbridge threatened me after class.”

Tom’s eyes darken. “Threatened you? How?”

“Blackmail, but not about me. It’s about…” He lowers his voice, stepping in so that his voice is as faint as his breath, “…Professor Lupin.”

Tom waves his hand dismissively. “Oh, you mean?” He gestures by wiggling his fingers over his head as if they are wolf ears. “I already know that.”

“What?!” Harry exclaims.

“I realized it in second year. He shows all the signs—fatigue, moodiness, aged scars.”

The insides of Harry’s stomach constrict nastily. “Then it’s probably just a matter of time before
he gets the sack.”

“Oh, now, I wouldn’t be so sure,” Tom consoles. “You’re forgetting that I’m exceptionally perceptive. It frankly wouldn’t shock me if I’m the only student who realized this by now.”

“And you never told anyone, did you?” Harry asks hopefully.

Tom raises a quizzical brow. “Why would I bother?”

“Right,” Harry huffs, running a nervous hand through his messy tresses. “Guess I just need to lay low for a while.”

If Lupin were to be ousted because of him, he could never handle the guilt. His mind already aches with fears he can’t control, like the safety of his family, of Tom, even of the horrid Dursleys, who he despises, but who were perhaps unfairly marched to the gallows for Harry’s bizarre disappearance. It weighs on him like the pressure of a million fragile bodies, lives he must bear with buckling legs when deep down he thinks he’d rather shrug the responsibility and relax into a normal life.

Still. Since someone must be the whipping boy, he’s quite glad it’s him; he knows he has what it takes to give his life for an important cause, he knows that he’s not too important to die for the right reason.

“Madam Pompfrey’s?” Tom suggests again. “I don’t have the ingredients for an Anti-Headache Draught, unfortunately.”

“No,” Harry says firmly. “I’m fine. Maybe a round of flying could do me some good. In my old universe, I’d just head to the fields whenever things got too stressful. Wait…”

A grin grows slowly on Harry’s cheeks as the inspiration for a different approach dawns vividly. “That gives me an idea. Tom, do you think you could transfigure a football?”

***

Merlin. Even if Tom could, he certainly wouldn’t. He hates football and always has.

But no matter for Harry, apparently. They learn at dinner that Dean Thomas keeps one in his trunk, and the nearby Gryffindors enthusiastically enlist their support for Harry’s harebrained scheme.

Ron messily sloshes back a goblet of fizzy squash. “You sure you don’t want to play, Riddle?”

“I’m more of a runner myself, thanks.”

“Lots of running in football, isn’t there?”

“I’m dreadfully sorry, but I don’t have the right shoes.”

“Could borrow some of mine.”

“I doubt they’ll fit.”

“Don’t tell me you can’t manage a Sizing Charm.”

“Come off it, Ron,” Harry jumps in, sounding far too parental for Tom’s liking. “He doesn’t have to play if he doesn’t want to.”
For fuck’s sake. It’s not as if Tom can let Harry get away with lording over him; he is still Tom’s inferior.

“I can’t believe so many people are interested,” Thomas remarks with a smile.

Nor can Tom. The sun glints dully from the waters of the Great Lake beside him. Tying Weasley’s trainers onto his own feet, Tom stares at the crowd of spectators, wondering how he, who is so great, could ever stoop so bloody low. The match was intended for a small handful of Gryffindors, but on Granger’s recommendation, Spinnet and Ginny Weasley weaved through the tables asking members from rival Quidditch teams to join. Evident by the thirty or so pupils sitting around the makeshift field, the response is overwhelming. There are Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, and a couple of Ravenclaws. There is even one peculiar and unlikely Slytherin attendant: Theo Nott.

Tom eyes him intently, waiting for him to turn his ugly rabbit mug in the appropriate direction so he can beckon him over.

“Hi!” Granger greets, robbing Tom’s attention from where it need be.

“Oh, hello,” Tom says, standing from his squat and rising well above her height.

“I’m putting Shield Charms on everyone’s shins and elbows. Would you like them, too?”

“Thank you, but I’ve already done so myself. Have you applied Harry’s yet?”

Before she can respond, Thomas calls for the players to meet at the midline between the goalposts, charmed pieces of crude netting that hover slightly off the ground. There are precisely fourteen student volunteers, including himself, most of which he recognizes as Muggle-borns or Quidditch athletes. Tom jogs to stand by Harry and notices him toying with his glasses. He gives an inquisitive glance.

“Er, not sure how I’m going to keep them on. I need goggles.”

Tom rolls his eyes and takes the frames from Harry, murmuring the incantation for a Fixing Charm and setting them back over his friend’s ears. “It should last for a couple of hours.”

A red tint brightens Harry’s smooth cheeks.

“Alright,” Thomas begins, “how many of you have played a proper game of football before?

Other than Thomas, Harry and Tom, three people raise their hands: Seamus Finnigan, the little Weasley, and a pasty boy who has a trifling Muggle-born look about him.

“You’ve never played, Ginny!” Ron bellows.

“I have!”

“Oh yeah?” he says disbelievingly. “With who?”

Her eyes flit to Thomas momentarily. She crosses her arms. “None of your business.”

“Can we get back to the point?” Thomas insists.

Tom reads between the lines on Thomas’s bothered face and files the discovery for a later time.

Thomas sighs. “OK, so only a few of you have played before, which is fine. Better to modify it a little anyway considering we don’t have that many players. Let’s see, I’m going to split the teams
by House…” He purses his lips, perhaps realizing that without the customary robe badges, he is unable to identify everyone. “Hmm… Oh, I see. Right. We have seven Gryffindors, so I guess we can just do Gryffindors against non-Gryffindors. Sound fine? The most knowledgeable player can explain the rules. Let’s reconvene in five, then I’ll give an announcement.”

A few heads nod in unconcerned agreement. Tom thinks the arrangement fair until he watches the few who raised their hands separating onto the Gryffindor side, leaving him with the inexperienced other half: the Head Girl called Cho Chang, three unfamiliar faces, one of the Patils, and a Hufflepuff in his year, Justin Finch-Fletchley.

“Finch-Fletchley?” Tom says with a courteous, but questioning, tone. “Didn’t you once tell me you’re a Muggle-born?”

“Well, certainly!” he proclaims, puffing up his thin chest.

“And you’ve never played football? Not even at school?”

His stiff lower jaw steers crookedly. “They made you play at comprehensive, did they?”

“Alright, never mind,” Tom says quickly. “But you’ve at least seen it, I’m sure?”

“Sure, a bit. But that’s not the reason I volunteered, you see. That great hag, Umbridge, took me into one of her re-educational classes earlier, and so when I heard about this I knew I had to join. What better way to show a bit of Muggle-born pride than our most esteemed national sport, eh Riddle?”

“You actually went to that?” Chang asks, horrified.

“Yes!” he shrieks. “And what a load of rubbish it was!”

A curly-haired girl near to Chang coughs impatiently. “I thought we were here to play a game, not talk about politics.” She turns to Tom with an inhumanly happy expression. “Riddle, could you please tell us how it goes?”

“Certainly,” he tells her smoothly, smiling back. “You see those goals there? We’re going to kick the ball with our feet like so,” he demonstrates, “and get them past what’s called a goalkeeper. Whoever feels the least confident kicking should perhaps do this part.”

A light-haired boy pipes up, “Can that be me?”

“Yes,” Tom agrees swiftly. “The rest of us are going to take turns passing this ball to one another and try to get it through the other side’s goalkeeper. The most important rule to remember is that you may not touch the ball with your hands. Head, feet, and knees are fine.”

“Why would we need to hit the ball with our heads?” asks a perplexed-looking Patil.

“Come back!”

Tom does so reluctantly, imagining the smug attitude of Harry once he claims victory; his own team is utterly hopeless.

Thomas jabs his wand into the side of his neck and clears his throat. “Thanks for coming! I know a lot of you have never seen a match of football before. In fact, I know a lot of you don’t know much about Muggles at all.”

An air of uneasiness rolls over the crowd, heads turning and lips frowning. It is clear that no one
desires to be lectured about their privileges.

“We’re playing until the fifth goal. Instead of explaining what this means, I want you to turn to a friend while we’re playing and ask them. Muggle-borns shouldn’t have to feel ashamed. We have knowledge of both worlds, and that’s something to be proud of.”

Granger starts the applause without hesitance. The players are the first to follow, clapping even more vigorously than she is, and soon half of the watching audience is joining in, too. One boy toward the back hollers in support, “Muggle-born pride!” and several of those around him punch their fists and chant the phrase. Nott, who seems determined to keep his eyes off Tom, does not sneer or react, but sits and stares in indifferent detachment. It is a behavior Tom will not accept. He jerks his chin up sharply, a feat of nonverbal, wandless magic that forces Nott’s to do the same. The Slytherin merely waves at him noncommittally.

This is not a good sign.

***

Thomas starts the match with a loud whistle through his fingers, and the levitating ball drops straight to the center.

Harry, feeling high on solidarity and the promise of a friendly match, jumps and bumps his head against the leather, directing it to Dean, who catches it on his knee before making off toward the goal. It is obvious enough that they should go easy on the other team, but with Tom in their midst, losing is simply too much to ask of him. Football is Harry’s domain, his saving grace. He catches Dean’s pass with the inner corner of his foot and continues striding quickly, attempting to keep his distance from Tom who advances rapidly on his tail.

When Tom gets near, Harry makes a pass toward Ginny. Rather than take it and aim, however, she swings her leg out clumsily, missing it narrowly and allowing it to sit idle on the field for seconds before another girl races for it. This girl, Asian and alarmingly pretty, kicks with as much grace as Ginny, but at least manages to hit it. The problem with her hit is that she aims for Tom. Harry seizes the opportunity at once, jumping in front of his friend with a smirk and passing to Dean, who quickly makes a goal past the timid blond Tom charged with defending.

The watching students laugh and clap as Dean walks toward them triumphantly, hands held high with peace signs.

“Gotta be quicker than that, Tom,” Harry teases, earning himself a handsome scowl.

As the match continues, there’s little deviation from how the first goal is scored. Harry suspects that without him allowing Tom and his pretty teammate to score a couple of pity shots, the whole thing could be wrapped up in fifteen minutes. The girl is a natural, but clearly inexperienced; her steps stutter with apprehension when approaching the ball, as if she’s not sure she’s allowed. And Tom, though brisk and alert, is -- to Harry’s amusement and slight surprise -- simply not very good at all. He distrusts the others, keeps the ball without passing when the timing is urgent. If he were faster, it would work more often than it does, but Harry was born with clever feet and high endurance.

Harry winks at Tom as he rounds on the ball that Justin fumbles. He positions it carefully beneath his foot and gives it a great kick before anyone can intervene. It flies past the goalie, who leaps in the wrong direction, and bounces softly off the netting.

The small crowd claps enthusiastically. Calls of congratulations ring fresh in the crisp, dimming night and a burst of cheerfulness captivates Harry. Of course, he is not proud to have won
against Tom’s considerably less practiced team. The cheers inspire a sense of accomplishment that has nothing to do with winning the match, and everything to do with winning the war. It may just be a fraction of the student body who rally among him, shaking his hand and patting his back, but he cannot imagine that anyone outside of pure-blood circles keeps callous prejudices like Malfoy and the Slytherin goons.

“Brilliant, Harry!”

“Nice match, bruv.”

“You’re even good by Muggle standards.”

“Harry Potter?” asks the pretty girl, extending her hand for a shake. He accepts it at once, noting how soft the skin of her delicate fingers feel against his own. “I’m Cho Chang. You were quite good out there, you know?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s not a fair comparison, really. I’ve played my entire life.”

Her bright, round cheeks swell with a beautiful smile. “Maybe you could show me a bit more sometime.”

“Yeah, sounds nice. This weekend is the first we can go to Hogsmeade, right? We could meet up at some point, er, if you’d like.”

He’s not entirely sure why he asks this of her.

She giggles and nods. “As long as you don’t mind my friends. I think Marietta’s got a bit of a crush on Riddle.”

Both look off to the others at this moment, perhaps comically expecting Tom to be caught in awkward conversation with the girl. Instead, Harry quickly finds that Tom is further than he realized, talking underneath a tree with the skinny Slytherin boy that sometimes lurks friendless in the halls. Harry excuses himself politely from Cho’s company and eases closer to the pair in discreet steps. The nearer he gets, the more he strains his ears, struggling to catch pieces of the hushed conversation.

“…think that the others can stop me from doing as I please?”

“I’m… telling … Riddle. I want to…”

Harry frowns. Nott is inconveniently quiet. He steps back ever so slightly, feeling more desperate to hear.

“Then politely tell Greengrass to shut her chatty cock hole.”

Christ.

“She’s just hurt, is all. She thinks if she can get people interested in calling you a mudblood-lover, it’ll be easier for her to forget what happened. No one really buys it. Although, you’re not doing your reputation any favors by prowling the halls with that Granger.”

“I trust you realize I wouldn’t waste my time on Granger if not for the Universe Hopper.”

His gut gives a painful lurch. The Universe Hopper? Like Harry hasn’t got a name? Like Tom can’t be arsed to say his bloody, fucking –
“I don’t claim to know your intentions, and I’m not asking what they are. I just want you to realize that Slytherin knows your loyalty is slipping, Riddle.”

“Leave,” Tom demands in a bold, perilous tone.

The statement sounds with such a force that Harry cannot help but wince. He edges to the Lake with a hollow pain; the football match is no more than ten minutes in the past, but it seems like it happened ages ago. He watches from the side of his eye as Nott returns to the direction of the castle, along with the others. Night is catching, chittering creatures from the far-off forest growing louder, little by little. He should leave, too. It’s almost curfew. The thing which stops him is a passive desire to have Tom come after him.

And predictably, it works. A familiar shadow soon looms overhead, the blurred likeness of Tom appearing in the dark, rippling waters.

Harry buries his chin between his withdrawn knees. “Piss off.”

“Did you eavesdrop on me?”

“It’s an open field,” Harry points out.

The shadow lowers as Tom convenes at Harry’s side, his long legs extended. “What did you hear?”

“I heard enough.”

His hand curves over Harry’s shoulder. “Don’t act so moody. If I don’t keep face with the Slytherins, it will create unnecessary conflict. Before you came along, I was arranging things rather carefully. Now I’m back to square one.”

“Oh, I’m really sorry about that,” Harry remarks sarcastically.

“Don’t be,” Tom says, oblivious to the intent. He smooths his hand down Harry’s arm and grips his forceps lightly, sending an unwanted rush of blood to Harry’s groin that he can’t quite force himself to break from. “My footing has always been precarious where they’re concerned. Pure-bloods all know one another. I’m an outsider.”

“Cute excuse,” scoffs Harry. “But you’re not a little boy hiding from bullies. I heard the way you speak to Nott. What is he, anyway? Your secret lapdog?”

Tom shrugs. “No, not quite. He’s merely gambling carefully. He knows I have more power than Malfoy. He also knows that all the power in the world is meaningless against the wishes of pure-blood money.”

Having gathered the will, Harry jerks his arm from Tom, fire burning hotly in his chest. “And what was that about Greengrass? Did something happen between the two of you? Nott said she’s been hurt, didn’t he?”

“It’s not like that, Harry.” Tom takes a deep breath, back aligning. “If you must know, we had relations together --”

Harry’s limbs go completely numb.

“-- at the start of the term. By which I mean she tried to have relations with me. In front of quite a few Housemates, mind you. I wasn’t interested so I turned her away. I suppose she’s still not over it yet.”
“Tried to have relations?” Harry questions, voice as level as he can manage. His heart flutters like he has just narrowly avoided a dangerous collision. “What do you mean?”

The unreadable expression of Tom’s livens with a soft, subtle trace of confusion. “Well, she sat on my lap, hoisting up her robes and rubbing her filthy knickers about my person. It was most unnecessary, I think.”

Harry must keep guarded fingers over his upward-twisting lips as Tom speaks. He doesn’t want to laugh, but the continued obliviousness Tom reveals makes it rather hard to stay angry.

“I whispered to her before I made a show of things, I told her I wasn’t interested. She seemed to think I was being shy, because in the next moment, her foul lips were seeking mine with gusto.” He gives a small, conclusive nod. “Yes, I didn’t like it much at all.”

“But she’s very pretty, isn’t she?”

“I suppose so.”

“So, you reckon you really just… don’t like girls?”

Tom scowls. “Not in that sense, no.”

“And not anyone else, right?” Harry asks casually, nearly shaking with nerves.

The mood shifts palpably. Darkness finally bathes the grounds and Tom, frowning, gives Harry a lingering, scrutinizing stare.

“Have I not clarified myself on the subject, or need you ask me another fifty times?”

“I was just asking because, uh... I’m going on a date.”

(Bloody hell, can he even call it that?)

“With Cho Chang. I thought you might want to, you know, take someone for yourself. Like a double date.”

“A double date?” Tom drawls, tilting his head and glaring askance. “Did you hit your head during that football match by any chance?”

“Jealous of my performance?” Harry teases, hoping to steer the conversation from his silly ad hoc proposal.

“Yes, of course. There’s nothing I envy more than a man who can kick a ball into a hole. Quite impressive.”

“How does it feel to know that a former Muggle -- an imitation of Malfoy’s pompous affect -- “is better than you at something?”

“Please,” Tom huffs, “you’re simply more practiced. With a bit of training, you’d stand no chance.”

“Is that so?” Harry queries doubtfully.

“Obviously. I’m faster than you, for one.”

“Wow. You’re really delusional, Riddle.”
“Am I? Let’s give it a go, then. I’ll race you back to the castle.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, starting – now.”

Tom takes off, springing out of place and sprinting across the field. Harry, taken aback but quick to follow, pursues him at top speed, trainers slapping hard against the cut grass with each step. The cool wind feels refreshing on his skin, whipping through his hair and shorts as Tom’s form becomes closer and closer. Tom’s fast, but like during the match, he’s not fast enough to win. Harry passes the line of Tom’s lead and laughs heartily from the base of his stomach. The giddy joy soon overtakes him and he’s laughing so hard that he doesn’t notice the uneven dip of ground, a new plane that catches his foot and sends him rolling, shoulder clashing painfully into the dirt.

He watches long legs leap over him, feet landing inches beside his head.

“Just pitiful,” says Tom, clicking his tongue.

Harry doesn’t respond, but takes Tom’s ankle and gives it a significant tug, making his friend fall unceremoniously on his side.

“Hey!”

Harry clicks his tongue, grinning. “Really, Riddle. Just pitiful.”

***

Bickering quietly, the two make it back to the castle within minutes of curfew and spend the remainder of their waking night in the library, Harry writing his Charms essay and Tom revising every third sentence with an admonishing sigh.

Though lacking the flair of drama that defined Tom’s first week back at Hogwarts, the rest of the month builds with considerable anxieties, both personal and political. Stalking the hallways on Prefect patrol, Tom occasionally overhears surreptitious whispers in the corridors. They range from Muggle-phobic paranoia (“Do you really think the Muggles would bomb Hogwarts?”) to what Tom considers much more reasonable concerns (“How many Weasley-made dungbombs do you reckon it would take to wipe the stupid smile off her face?”). His own peers, the Slytherins, do not seem quite prepared to confront Tom with the nasty insults that sleaze around when he’s not present. Nott, as Tom’s informant, has made it clear that not all have turned on him, but the suspicions are there regardless (“Why, oh why, does Riddle hang around with those Muggle-loving Gryffindors?”).

He would set them right but feels, regrettably, there’s no point. Tainting the Slytherin Common snacks with diarrheal hexes will have to suffice as punishment.

Rumors spread in abundance about Grindelwald’s motivations for installing the Ministry’s toad, the absurdest of which quickly gain traction. While Tom thinks it unlikely that the Minister intends to concentrate Muggle-borns in surveilled camps, like the chatty circulators insist, the notion does make him consider finding his uncle; if push comes to shove, he needs verification of his ancestry. Merlin, being raised by Muggles, in itself, may possibly condemn him. To keep what little distance he can between himself and pro-Muggle gestures, he opts to never watch the recreational football league Thomas keeps alive -- unless, of course, Harry is playing.

Staring at his reflection in the mirror, Tom commits to the finishing touch of his attire, clasping his mother’s locket around his neck. He hides it beneath his undershirt for safekeeping. It has remained mostly silent since hissing on the Hogwarts Express, even in the presence of Malfoy and
the toad. Strangely, it only spoke to him once, and what it said landed it a two-week stint in his wooden chest before he took it out again.

He had fallen asleep in his robes while studying for Ancient Runes, straight back into yet another nightmare involving Harry, scantily clad and suggestive. At the very second dream-scenario-Harry almost unclothed himself, the locket whispered something that shook him out of sleep.

*Loverrr of the Heirrr*

If he continues to encounter these unconscious scenarios, he might have to consider the possibility that he’s a homosexual, which would do him no good at all. He hates to watch the stupid romances flourish. Although, sometimes it’s a laugh. Harry had his try at Cho Chang on the first Hogsmeade weekend, and after hearing him retell the tale, Tom wished to turn the dial on time and watch the shame unfold for himself. One hour into the date, she started crying in the middle of Honeydukes! Apparently, her ex-boyfriend recently became such via the morning post.

(Harry was so mortified. Ha!)

Tom tucks a lock of hair behind his ear, admiring his appearance one last time before scurrying off to the Great Hall. As he enters, he surveys the students, noticing that they are oddly clustered throughout the table, hunching over copies of the newspapers and heatedly discussing its contents. Harry’s face, buried in his hands, prompts his hurry to the Gryffindor table. Granger is on the right, Weasley on the left, so Tom places a hand on Harry’s back and leans, eyes instantly finding the black-and-white headline:

5 WITCHES, 7 MAGICAL CHILDREN FOUND DEAD IN MUGGLE TERRORIST EXPLOSION, MINISTRY INVESTIGATION PENDING

It reads above a photo of a burning building, figures running in terror, their screams mute and morbid as they flee the shedding debris.

“What were seven wizarding children doing in a Muggle building anyway?” asks the little Weasley, gripping her freckled arms tightly. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t have to,” Granger says grimly.

Tom squints his eyes and reads the smaller print while the lions rant, lightly tapping a finger on Harry’s back in mindless repetition: The seven children, unnamed, were watching cartoons at the Muggle cinema when a young British male, strapped with dynamite, ran into the complex. The timing is all too perfect for the Ministry. Far too perfect to be authentic, he thinks. They probably assessed the response at Hogwarts, printed a few fluff pieces and read the flak and praise, before arriving at a plan.

The seed was there; they needed urgency, cause.

“What next?” Ron asks uncertainly.

Harry peels his hands from off his face and sets them calmly on the table. “We have to wait.”

And wait they do, though they needn’t wait long. The next morning at breakfast, the headline reveals: BLAST VICTIMS IDENTIFIED, WIZENGAMOT APPROVES AUTHORIZATION OF MINISTER’S EXPANSION. They are, in the span of a day, thrust into a supposed state of exigency. Tom never imagined things could move so quickly. The Slytherins rejoice in smirking satisfaction, and Tom keeps his eyes over his shoulder when he enters the Common Room. The boys of his dorm are split in halves — Nott and Zabini and Tom claim no stance, Malfoy and Crabbe and Goyle read aloud their letters from Umbridge, which encourage them to use their
newly promoted powers at the school to interrogate possible insurgents.

Nevertheless, life goes on as usual. For the most part.

"Excellent work, Mr. Riddle," McGonagall says as she passes Tom’s desk.

“Thank you, Professor,” he responds politely, turning to see if Harry has made progress with conjuration.

“Ahem!”

Coming down the aisle of the classroom is the High Inquisitor, as bulbous, pink and heinous as always. Though he’s avoided her path with some success, she is given to pop up at anytime, anywhere. She stands beside McGonagall’s lectern with her thick neck barely extending above its height.

“And what, may I ask, brings you here?” McGonagall asks tensely.

“I’ve selected a specific group of students for a very important purpose,” she squawks, foully grinning as she looks down at her clipboard. “It’s come to my attention that some students lack the appropriate guidance needed to be successful in the wizarding world, and will be required to attend a re-education class before continuing their studies at Hogwarts. The students I request are: Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hermione Granger, Harry Potter, Tom Riddle and Dean Thomas.”

“Excuse me,” McGonagall says sharply, “but on what grounds where these students selected exactly?”

“Because we’re Muggle-born,” Granger interrupts, standing at her desk with indignation.

Tom leans to Harry quickly, placing a hand on his shoulder and whispering softly, “Don’t do anything rash.”

***

Glancing sideways to Tom, for a moment he’s very, very tempted to just say, screw it, and tell Umbridge exactly what he thinks of her and her Ministry-condoned brainwashing, but he remembers, for the umpteenth time, there’s more on the line here than just him.

“Not because you are Muggle-born, dear; blood doesn’t have anything to do with it,” she replies, though the smile she gives eyes blatantly false. “Simply considering your various backgrounds. Surely you understand the concern, being raised by Muggles as you are.”

“Did you even look at our grades?” Dean Thomas calls angrily from the back of the class. “Hermione and Riddle alone are at the top of our year, why would—”

“Quite irrelevant!” Umbridge says, raising her voice to a positively ear-splitting tone. “Grades are not the only concern. It’s about adjusting to our society, acclimitising to our ways, a multitude of factors the Ministry is concerned about. I’ve made the decision, and there will be no further argument on the matter. Failure to attend will result in serious—” She glances an icy look towards Harry, “—repercussions.”

The moment the toad-like woman leaves, half the classroom all but erupts into protest.

“Where does she get off?” Ron cries angrily.

“Acclimitising. Yeah, right,” Justin grumbles. “She just wants to shove Ministry propaganda
down our throats.”

“Someone needs to send the bloody hag on a one-way trip to the Forbidden Forest.”

“I can’t believe this is tolerated! Why isn’t Professor Dumbledore doing something about this?”

Harry glances around at the angry faces of his classmates, and then turns to Tom with a meaningful look.

This might be the push they’ve been waiting for.

“You know what’s really unbelievable?” breaks a voice that Harry has never heard before.

Standing with her hands curled on either side, a brown-haired witch upturns her nose at the class, scoffing loudly. “Do you all really believe that we have nothing to fear? Do any of you even care that Jane Creswell’s little brother died in this attack!”

With widening eyes, he realizes the badge on her chest bears not a serpent, but an eagle.

“Creswell’s a half-blood!” another Ravenclaw, Anthony Goldstein, asserts. “Her mum’s Muggle-born! The last thing she needs is you making things worse for her family, Turpin.”

“I’m a half-blood, too,” she retorts angrily. “My dad comes from Muggles and even he says he doesn’t much like what they’re getting up to.”

“Enough!” Professor McGonagall calls sternly, quieting everyone down, though she too seems interested in hearing the confrontation. The class returns its superficial attention to the lesson, but Harry doubts a single sane person can listen while coping with the fact that it was a Ravenclaw, and not a Slytherin, who shrieked in the Ministry’s defense. He rests his chin on his hand and stares out the window, fantasizing about the long-gone summer evenings with Tom, when Harry could lounge beside the handsome face for hours and pretend to listen to his lengthy rants without a care in the world.

***

If not for the Silencing Charm weighing their tongues, Tom’s certain someone would have spoken out by now -- the High Inquisitor’s re-education class is unbelievably ridiculous. Sitting with the other outcasts, and blocking out Umbridge’s speech, he can only quietly laugh at some of the textbook content: “Muggle-borns who keep in contact with their Muggle parents have a 37% higher chance of committing crimes,” and “Goblins have been known to steal small children for illicit purposes.”

The least the Ministry can do is come up with accurate condemnations.

Tom could spare a few stories to help their cause against Muggles. Truthful ones. Some old Muggles he lived with in Croydon drank their own piss, insisting it had health benefits. Yes, Muggle are pollutants as far as Tom is concerned, but he struggles to understand how this propaganda specifically has gained purchase among the magical community. Is this what people assume of him when he mentions he was brought up by Muggles? That he’s some burgeoning criminal, some ignorant child? It is easy to conceive of prats like Malfoy lapping it all up, what with their feeble minds and fragile egos. But everyone else too? How disappointing.

“Now!” Umbridge shouts. Animosity is thick in the air. “If you’d be so kind, children, I want you to split into the groups listed on your assignment sheets. Once you’ve completed this, you are free to leave in an orderly fashion. I hope you all walk away with a firmer appreciation of the culture and customs you’ve been so generously welcomed to participate in.”
Two names slowly appear on Tom’s parchment, neither of which are Harry’s. He flashes Harry a smirk before locating the members of his group, quite antsy to finish quickly so he can reunite with Harry. Justin Finch-Fletchley saunters Tom’s way, followed in step by the strange bug-eyed girl named Luna that Tom met on the carriage rides. They push their desks together and dive into completing the dumbest piece of shite Tom’s ever touched.

“Such rubbish!” Finch-Fletchley mutters, squeezing his quill. In a mocking voice, he reads, “Which Muggle war yielded the highest casualty rate in the magical community? They’re just trying to direct hatred toward our families. You know, I was set on going to Eton when I got my letter from Hogwarts. I’m starting to think I chose the wrong school. I can’t help that my parents are Muggles!”

“It’s all a part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, you know,” Luna says dreamily. “Anti-Muggle groups are really gaining traction. They’re working to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a combination of Dark Magic and gum disease.”

What a nutter.

“What I don’t understand,” Tom says, “is how they identified the Muggle-born students. Do they keep a registry?”

“Oh, I’m not Muggle-born,” Luna informs. “Both my parents were in Ravenclaw. I suspect Umbridge chose the students without birth certificates at the Ministry. My father never filed the paperwork; he didn’t want me drafted in the covert war on the colonies of Manticore in Greece.”

Hm. A posh cock and a literal basket-case? Tom can work with this. Smiling kindly, he slopes and whispers, “How would you two be interested in fighting back against the Ministry?”

“Let’s just get this over with,” Hermione says curtly, eyeing the assignment sheet with the most ridiculous and blatantly propagandistic questions on it with pure disdain. She takes the sheet and furiously starts writing down answers, looking almost like she wants to shred the paper with the tip of her quill.

“Someone’s got to do something about this,” Dean mutters in a low tone as Umbridge passes near them, looking at another group’s progress. Harry looks up at Dean with curiosity, and after a moment of thought leans over.

“We could,” he suggests, Dean giving him a puzzled frown.

“What, you mean us students?”

“The teachers certainly aren’t going to,” Hermione cuts in quietly. “Not with Grindelwald’s attack-dog breathing down their necks. If they give Umbridge the slightest bit of trouble they’ll be playing right into the Minister’s hand. It would be just the excuse he needs to boot them out of there and replace them with Ministry cronies.”

“So, why don’t we do something about it instead?” Harry presses, Dean looking slightly unsure.

“Like what?”

“Sabotage her, work against her propaganda. There are people who buy into it, you know. Half-bloods and pure-bloods who don’t know any better and are easily scared by all the nonsense with that bombing,” Hermione explains, quickly catching on to Harry’s idea. “If we find some way to undermine what little support she has, preferably even discredit her, eventually she’ll have no
Dean seems to think about it for a moment, before nodding. “Yeah, I like that idea. But you’d have to get organised first, though, right?”

“Working on it,” Harry says, almost surprised that it worked so smoothly. Then again, Umbridge is horrid enough to convince anyone to work against her.

“All right.” Dean flashes him a big grin. “You know Gryffindor’s got your back, Harry.”

“T… yeah.” Harry blinks. He’s never really been part of a group before, but it seems House loyalty really is good for something after all. “Thanks.”

By the time the class is over and Hermione has grudgingly handed in the assignment, Harry is packing when he feels a hand on his shoulder, being able to tell just by the grip and the feel of long fingers who it belongs to.

“Want me to walk you to the Gryffindor Tower?” Tom asks quietly. "I’ve got a couple of people interested in, ah, joining.”

“Yeah, let’s just go,” he murmurs, briefly grabbing Tom’s sleeve to tug him along.

“Nothing to motivate a resistance of students quite like that quackery. If we’re truly going to organize a movement, we’ll need a space to meet,” Toms says, his volume cautious. “Preferably a big one, and one which won’t attract attention.”

Being that he’s only been in Hogwarts for all of two months and doesn’t know even a fraction of its secrets the way Tom does, Harry can’t really see himself being much help in this department, and if Tom can’t think of anywhere either, this might be a problem. Harry resolves to ask Hermione the next time he sees her.

When the sound of students nearby halts Tom mid-walk, Harry stops as well, ensuring that they aren’t overheard. “Probably not the best time to discuss things. How about we use the diary?”

“Certainly,” Tom agrees. “Though I hope you haven’t forgotten to practice conjuring ropes. Next time we duel, I have a bit of a trick to show you.”

“As long as it doesn’t involve turning the ropes into snakes,” Harry jokes, disappointed to watch the smile falter on Tom’s face. “No, Tom. That’s bloody disgusting.”

“Oh, you’re so closed minded, Harry.”

Their short journey ends at the portrait of the Fat Lady, who is snoozing prematurely beside a half-finished bottle of wine. “Quite the alcoholic, this one.”

“Nothing compared with one of ours, Saint Regius of Cyril,” Tom says somewhat absent-mindedly, eyes raking over the paintings that surround them. “New Year’s Eve of my second-year he became so inebriated that he told this busty fifth-year quite explicitly what he’d like to do with her, naked.” He grins and turns to Harry. “Don’t you just love magic?”

“Yeah,” he tells Tom. Their gazes lock. “It’s brilliant.”

They look at each other for one long moment. Magic is brilliant, as well as terrifying. The whiplash of all that has happened, and of all that continues to happen, keeps him breathless, alive. It is Tom, standing in front of him, that he can thank for it all. Harry’s thoughts race at incalculable speed with affections and desires that feel impossibly limitless. If Tom doesn’t feel the same, then
what is Harry supposed to make of this gleam in his brown eyes? He sure does seem to touch Harry an awful lot.

Maybe, somehow, Harry isn’t a randy idiot on the verge of ruining his closest bond as he steps in closer, inches between them and Tom not resisting, but standing his ground confidently as Harry almost –

“Well, good night,” Tom offers, patting Harry once on the arm and then setting off down the stairs.

Harry watches him go, eyelids batting dumbly. He shouts the password to the Fat Lady and enters the passage with a dampered mood.

Between Cho and Tom, it seems young love really isn’t his thing.

Chapter End Notes

Because I finally got together a comprehensive plot outline (lol), I can say with high certainty that there will be about 30 chapters in total. The first 22-23 are already written in our RP format, and I'm starting the last seven now.

And of course, thank you for reading! Your kudos are greatly appreciated. A special thanks to the lovely reviewers: Lili_Basilisk, chihiro, VivyPotter, Purpose, KaiShiXara, whenluvstrikespunchnface, Mighty_Potato, runqi, and axisflowershetalia.

- Amelinda
The Room of Requirement

Chapter Summary

Summary of Last Chapter: Harry and a few of the Muggle-borns in their year attend the Ministry's propagandistic 're-education' class, which gives him the idea of hosting a Muggle football match promote peace at the school. Over the next month, more animosity toward Muggles is stirred, reaching a height when the news reports that twelve members of the wizarding community were killed, randomly, in a Muggle terrorist explosion. The Ministry uses this to expand their campaign of hate, and Harry is brought to another re-education class, along with all other students suspected of being Muggle-born. Here, the boys recruit potential members for their resistance effort. Meanwhile, while all of this is going on, Harry goes on an unsuccessful date with Cho Chang, and continues to suppress his romantic feelings for Tom.

(Normally, I won't do summaries, but because of the space between these updates, it's probably a good idea lol.)

WARNING: Chapter 9 features a brief scene of animal cruelty relating to a cat. It's not horrifically graphic or anything, but it's kind of gross.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The very next morning, after a night of silent contemplation and restless dreaming, Harry is awoken by the sound of Seamus enthusiastically shouting. The other boys quickly hush him. Hidden behind drawn curtain, Harry remains stock-still and unnoticed, slowly opening his eyes to the painful glare of the sun pouring through worn crimson fabric. They’re discussing the anti-Ministry coalition. Hearing the formerly intimate and unreal plan pass into a conversation that doesn’t include him or Tom delivers him to a rather uncomfortable realization: they’ve already lost one critical element of secrecy—control of the rumor.

“You really think we could pull something like this off?” Seamus asks, voice still louder than the others.

“We have to,” Ron whispers. “Dumbledore’s hardly even around anymore.”


“There’s a reason for that,” Neville interjects sharply.

There is, to Harry’s astonishment, a smidge of fight in the teen’s words—since meeting the meek blond, he’s barely uttered more than a few stuttering pleasantries, and Harry had thought him a bit of a coward. Perhaps he was wrong.

“What do you know?” comes Dean’s question.

“You lot can’t tell anyone about this, alright?”

The three listeners – well, the three known listeners – swear to keep Neville’s secret.
“Dumbledore met with some of the aurors this summer,” he explains, “the ones he can trust. Mum and dad wouldn’t tell me what it was for, but I think he must be getting contacts together. He must’ve known something like this would happen.”

“Come off it, Neville,” Seamus sighs. “You think he could’ve known about that Muggle cinema?”

“Could’ve guessed Grindelwald would stage something like it,” Ron reasons in a stubborn tone.

The Gryffindors’ conversation dies out ominously, leaving the room with no noise but the clod of feet and occasional rummage. Harry continues to lie in bed until he is certain he is alone, only then throwing open his curtains to reveal the empty room. It’s an innocent scene: the mess of adolescent boys, with candy wrappers scattered on the floor and blankets balled and wrinkled atop their mattresses. They don’t need a bloody civil war; they should all be focusing on their tests, not their prospects for survival.

In his dreams, Harry didn’t envision the fall of Grindelwald, nor anything related to the effort. It seems, for the first time in a while, his subconscious allowed him a pleasant reprieve, though waking up has rather ruined the temporary and imaginary bliss of exploring Tom, naked. His broad, slim body felt flawless on the pads of Harry’s fingertips, light muscles taut over pleasingly chill flesh. Cho, just as naked, also made an appearance. Her delicate frame lowered itself on his lap as he closed his eyes and ran his fingers down her smooth back. When he opened them again, however, there was Tom.

In retrospect, it is obnoxiously symbolic; he used her just to distract himself, because for some fabulously stupid reason he assumed it would work, and could even make his friend jealous. And yet, all Tom did after the Hogsmeade disaster was laugh that high, callous laugh.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He really must stop thinking about Tom like this. It’s getting out of hand, and when he imagines voicing the obsession allowed, he cringes at how creepy he’s become. Nevertheless, being young and dumb, he feels he can’t quite give up the ghost today; plagued by the tempting images, he skips breakfast for the comfort of a long shower before hurrying to Potions.

“Good morning,” Harry says as he sits down next to the object of his fantasies, reminding himself that Tom is his friend, nothing more.

“You won’t be saying that for long.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Let’s just say it’s a good thing you missed breakfast.”

Harry isn’t given much of an opportunity to probe Tom before Slughorn somberly greets, "Hello class. Mr. Malfoy has an announcement he’d like you all to hear.”

Malfoy’s sneer is gravely smug as he clears his throat, taking a stand in front of the class, a little badge with an ‘I’ for inquisitorial glinting on his robes. Great. This must be what Tom meant. It likely won’t be pretty, but at the very least, Malfoy’s guff may clarify his uncharacteristic silence. He’s been different lately, less obnoxious. It seems acquiring his status within Umbridge’s ranks refined his childish bullying into a far more sinister state, one of subdued anticipation.

“As many of you saw, I was appointed this morning by High Inquisitor Umbridge herself to lead a new investigation against traitorous pro-Muggle activity. I merely want to clarify this to you all on a personal level before the proceedings commence. I am here to serve and protect,” his cold eyes
briefly dart toward Harry, “and you should all feel safe reporting suspicious activity to me, or the other Inquisitors.”

“Yes, yes, very good, you can go back to your seat now, Mr. Malfoy,” Slughorn says, looking not at all pleased with the announcement himself. “Now then.” He strolls over to a cauldron on his desk, covered by a heavy lid. “Today’s subject is a potion most of you have no doubt already heard about, particularly the ladies among you!” He chuckles, picking himself up from his irritated mood. “Most of the potions of this kind were invented, in fact, by a single witch; Laverne de Montmorency.”

Both Hermione and Tom’s hands are, predictably, the first up in the air. Harry sighs as he hears various answers and information being flung back and forth about what is, apparently, a Love Potion. More specifically, Amortentia, the strongest Love Potion in existence. Harry glances at Tom as Slughorn continues to expand on the illegality of the substance. Not because he’d ever even consider using it on him—the very thought disgusts him—but simply because being on the topic of “love” just pulls his attention towards his friend.

“Now, Amortentia in particular is known for its aroma, which varies greatly from person to person depending on the things they find most attractive or, quite simply, love the most,” Slughorn says as he takes the lid off the cauldron and spreads the spiraling steam throughout the class with a flick of his wand. “Have a whiff, and open your textbooks to page 278 for the antidote, which you’ll all be brewing today, though it should be noted a Hate Potion is just as effective at cancelling out its effects.”

The scent is one of the most seductive Harry has ever inhaled. Somehow it simultaneously reminds him of treacle tart, the woody smell of a broomstick handle, the scent of his mother’s flower-patch back at home, and a distinctly earthy, musky smell that has his cheeks flaring red as he recognises it instantly. Tom’s cologne.

Oh, he’s in deep.

***

Before Slughorn wafts the coiling cloud of steam throughout the class, Tom considers holding his breath; he’s always felt a special aversion to affection-inducing potions. As the Amortentia reaches his nose, however, this shallow conviction subsides, and he is utterly consumed by its allure. All at once, he is sought by his favorite scents—the must from centuries-old textbooks, the briny tang of the Great Lake, his own cologne, and strangely, a familiar scent he can’t quite place, something magical and raw and unperfumed.

"Um,” Harry mutters, clearing his throat. “Smells nice, huh?”

Tom snorts. “Well, that’s rather the point, isn’t it? Let’s see,” he traces his finger over the ingredient list. “I’ll grind the rat livers, you can slice the asphodel petals.”

He batters the little organs with his mortar and pestle, satisfied by the slimy feel of tissue popping, blood oozing. As he works, he considers Malfoy’s appointment. It could potentially serve their purposes if Tom opted to request a position, but with Malfoy heading it, Tom’s not sure he could charm his way under the stupid bitch’s wing. The nosy toad, who’s kept her beady eyes on Harry, has probably already jotted Tom as an enemy in one of her frilly pink notebooks.

Finished with the livers, he needs Ashwinder scales. He scans the desktop, sees them lying on the other side of Harry, and leans to retrieve them.
Hm. That’s odd. The Amortentia smells stronger where Harry sits, though he’s no closer to the brew than Tom. His sense of smell, having always seemed dull in comparison to others, could be playing tricks on him. Curiously, he leans slightly forward again, inhaling a lungful of the scent and judging its tone, texture. No, it’s not Amortentia, is it? But it’s similar. It’s the last thing he smelled from the steam, something he couldn’t – oh.

Oh.

He was willing to dismiss the dreams and the locket, but for Harry to be in his Amortentia, that means… ah, it’s meaningful, whatever it means. The boring love novels he read when he was younger, and stuck at homes absent of real literature, often discussed the onset of love as a magical blossoming, a gradual, but intense, spell that altered the very way one thought and felt. He dismisses this idea. He certainly doesn’t love Harry. But there is something between them, and if he intends to understand it, he must explore it. He loathes an unfinished project.

With his eyes averted, Tom invites his mind to a new experience: an intentional fantasy. What would it feel like for Harry to taste his lips? Tom imagines himself pulling off Harry’s robes, hands free to roam the firm, athletic body that belongs to him, and him alone. How would Tom like it if Harry touched him back?

Soft waves of arousal radiate throughout his lower half at the mere thought of this, and a certain, strange conclusion blooms with odd satisfaction.

This is; this is real. He feels lust for Harry.

Tom could reject the impulse. He could bury it in the back of his mind. But this seems a shit option, and honestly, why should he have to repress the urge? He wants it, which is reason enough to pursue it. Harry is from a noble family. Harry has fame and notoriety, albeit undeserved. Tom could plunge deeper, take more, be more. He flushes unexpectedly, entranced by the prospect of drawing Harry closer and breaking the façade of strength that masks the little abused boy from across galaxies. Harry simulates an independent exterior rather like all the other addled children Tom’s watched fester beneath embittering abuse.

Past the toughened layers, there is a desperation to please that runs deep into the marrow, into the fibre of Harry’s being. Yes, he now sees Harry clearer that before. He craves Tom, adores him. He would eagerly submit, devoted to Tom’s will, and no one in this world could ever hope to understand their bond.

It could be a special pact: their own little secret.

***

Trying to focus on what’s in front of him rather than get lost in the scent of cologne, Harry grabs a knife and the small pile of petals, starting his job of slicing them into little pieces.

While doing so, though, his mind can’t help but drift off towards his partner. He wonders what it is that Tom is smelling? Old books and himself, most likely. Harry snorts at the private jab, then stops as another thought occurs to him: Would it be so ridiculous to hope that he could be smelling something related to Harry?

He scowls, trying to shake the ridiculous fantasy off. Of course Tom wouldn’t; he has no such interests, he’s made it quite clear. Harry really needs to stop trying to humour the desperate hopes that keep bubbling up no matter how harshly he stomps them back down. It is obvious that he stands no chance at all, Tom seems about as asexual as they come, not to mention the fact that –
“So, Harry,” he hears Tom’s voice in his ear, a breath on the side of his neck that has him freezing up completely, "what did you smell in the Amortentia?”

Heart pounding wildly in his chest, and somewhat flustered with the sudden proximity, Harry quickly squirms a bit away so he can look at Tom, feeling a blush creeping up his neck.

It takes him a moment to register what Tom has asked as he half-wonders where on earth that came from. "Treacle tart,” he slowly starts summing up, “a broomstick, mum’s flowers, and…”

His heartbeat doesn’t slow down any as he wonders whether he should tell him. Telling him is as good as admitting he’s in love, isn’t it? But it’s not as if Tom couldn’t have noticed by now. Harry is sure he’s noticed at least something by how many times he’s been caught staring at his friend, or finding excuses to touch him. Besides, wouldn’t it be good to have it out in the open so he can deal with it?

For a moment, the thought of actually facing a downright rejection scares him, and it’s that exact bit of fear (hating feeling scared of anything) that drives him to force himself to look Tom in the eye with a stubborn determination etched into the furrow of his brow as he answers, refusing to be intimidated.

“And cologne,” Harry says, heart thumping against his ribs like a hummingbird and the blush on his neck spreading up to his cheeks. “Your cologne.”

He turns away with a soft exhale of breath, still dreading whatever response he may find as he goes back to slicing the petals of the asphodel considerably more vigorously than before. Maybe, if worse comes to worst, he can play it off as platonic? Say, ‘You’re like a brother to me,’ or something equally mushy but excusable.

Tom is silent as he nimbly sweeps the sliced asphodel into a measuring cup, no trace of emotion bleeding through until his lips twitch, almost a smile. “I told you that I can read you, Harry. I knew there was something going on.”

Harry sees the mockery growing on Tom’s face, recognizes the emerging malice. Should his cheeks burn any hotter, he might begin to steam. Can someone die of embarrassment?

“You know, I wasn’t lying when I told you I had never felt attraction to someone,” Tom whispers. He waves his wand to stir the mixture clockwise before pinching in the Ashwinder scales with a spoonful of Moonstone powder. “However, I’ve discovered that some things change with time.”

Harry’s eyes widen in astonishment as he turns his head to look at Tom, who looks entirely serious. But is he? If he’s really implying what Harry thinks? Hope blossoms in his chest, though cautiously and carefully. Tom has a nastily wicked sense of humor. Harry wants to doubt that Tom would jest about something like this, but in this regard, Tom is an unpredictable bully, and Harry would rather avoid the bitter twang of humiliation.

“I’ll admit,” Tom continues lowly, “I’m not really the romantic sort.” He squeezes in three globs of dragon blood with an eyedropper. They sizzle as they hit the pot. “But I won’t deny what the Amortentia helped me to realize.”

He smelled Harry?

Harry surreptitiously rubs a hand over his mouth to cover the huge smile on his face, biting down on his lower lip as he feels almost lightheaded with a kind of happiness he’s seldom felt before. It’s not a joke. Tom is being serious. This is happening.

Tom’s eyes catch his own and Harry’s heart skips a bit, the low, smooth tone of Tom’s voice
impossibly charming. “Maybe we should skip Transfiguration. We have much to discuss, I think.”

Harry briefly chews on his lower lip, inhaling quietly to steady himself before he nods. “Yeah, alright.”

While the thought of doing something more than discussing things is incredibly enticing, Harry resolves not to jump the gun the second they walk out of the classroom. With every brief affair he’s had so far, it had to be a slow and careful game of cat-and-mouse. Especially with the boys, as he could never be too sure about who’d give him up as being queer.

The rest of the lesson is an agony on Harry. The tension simmering unspoken between him and Tom is making it impossible to concentrate on much of anything. Harry is far too aware of every slightest move Tom makes, and trying to make small talk and pretend nothing is different after a conversation like that is downright impossible.

By the time Slughorn comes around to predictably praise them for the excellent antidote, Harry is getting restless, fidgeting with his quill, his textbook, his sleeves, his glasses and just about anything else in reach. When Slughorn finally dismisses the class, Harry nearly bolts up out of his seat and swiftly packs his things, unable to help the flare of impatience as he waits for Tom before they can leave.

The scent of the Amortentia lingers in his nose as they exit the classroom, making him almost subconsciously drift a bit closer to Tom to catch a bit of that scent from his cologne. The hallways are quickly filling with students on their way to their next lesson, not offering much privacy. Harry glances up at Tom in question. It would be nice not to have to talk somewhere in the dark corner of a corridor, though the visual is rather enthralling in its own way. Harry suppresses a shudder as his brain supplies him with several graphic suggestions of what he could do to Tom in such a dark corner, not unlike the fantasies he entertained little more than an hour ago.

This is bloody amazing.

***

The corridor bustles with their mediocre peers, stupidly meandering fools chatting like they’ve anything important on their minds. Tom tunes them out, everyone but Harry fading into a surreal background of animate, inhuman bodies. He takes pleasure in watching the skittish mess that is Harry James Potter. He’s cute, green-eyes urgent and so restlessly willing to please. The thrill of seeing Harry like this accords Tom the resolve he needs to breathe as though his heart doesn’t pound with the irregularity of a hunter meddling its prey.

Harry leans his head back, gazing up at Tom. “Where should we go?”

Tom’s smile feels positively predacious on his lips—hunter indeed. Tugging at the hem of Harry’s robe sleeve, he twists and walks to the left of Slughorn’s, assuring him, ”There’s an old classroom down here. It can get a little frigid, but nobody will find us here.”

The large, echoing chamber he takes him to is similar to the Potions room, except that it’s vacant. Tom snaps his fingers to light the surrounding candles before sending the door to creak to a close behind Harry. He looks at Harry, letting himself feel quite tall in the few inches of height between them.

“Fate has proven to be our fickle friend, Harry. While it has landed you here with me, away from the dregs of a distant galaxy, it has cursed you with responsibilities even greater wizards would shirk away from.
“Amid all this, I’ve been something of an aid; I united you with a family, furthered your education, became a friend. All the while, I’ve had to ask myself: Why me? Sure, I’m an excellent wizard, perhaps greater than Merlin himself, but that fact seems insufficient to explain why, of all people, the universe decided to pair me with you.”

***

Watching him as he speaks, Harry suddenly comes to an almost comforting realisation that Tom isn’t as sure of himself as he initially made it seem. Harry is the more experienced one here, he remembers with a start. If anything, he has the advantage. The fact that Tom is going on a speech is perhaps great evidence of this, and Harry feels a fond amusement as he patiently listens to whatever it is Tom is saying, even if it is a bit drawn-out. When an uncertain pause takes hold, Harry stares back at impassive dark eyes.

“So,” Harry breathes, shuffling awkwardly, “you like me?”

Tom blinks twice, empty until a smile inches up his hollow cheeks. “I thought I had been clear.”

Softly letting out the breath he held a few seconds ago, it feels like exhaling all the tension out of his body, a warm glow of sheer relief and comfort and joy settling in his chest like a beacon.

That’s all he needed to hear.

Harry’s legs almost move entirely on their own as he slowly steps toward Tom, moving closer until he’s standing right in front of him. He knows the steps of this little dance, even if it feels far more real with Tom. Not so much just a dance, or a game, or a play; not anymore. The flutters in his stomach are painfully genuine. He takes a moment to look at Tom’s face, his dark eyes, his cheekbones, the line of his jaw, lingering finally on his lips. Raising a hand, Harry carefully touches his fingertips on the pale skin of Tom’s hands, almost skimming over it as he’s not quite sure whether touching him is quite okay yet, but burning for some sort of contact. Longer fingers seem to hesitate before decisively interlocking with Harry’s own.

“Brilliant,” Harry says quietly, feeling the beat of a pulse thrum underneath his fingers. “This is almost too good to be true. I mean, it is true, isn’t it?” He peers back up, half-smiling. “You sure you’re… up to the task?

Tom’s smile loosens. “What do you mean?”

“Er… Right, not the best phrasing. It’s just a bit sudden is all. Which I don’t mind!” he clarifies, clutching his hand tighter onto Tom’s. “You said you’d never felt attraction to other people, boys or girls. If this is just experimenting for you then I guess…” he trails off, almost reluctant to go on, “…we should talk things through. If you don’t want to be tied down or anything, I need to know.”

“Tied down?” Tom shakes his head, eyebrow cocked tightly. “That’s rubbish. You don’t think that I’m trying to manipulate you, do you?”

That’s definitely not what he was trying to say. Harry sulks slightly, wondering if he just didn’t make it obvious enough, if he perhaps even phrased it incorrectly. Talking about his feelings has never been his forte, and Tom has never been in this situation before. He sighs softly, trying to think of a way to explain himself.

“What I meant was that… I don’t think you’re trying to manipulate me, I just want to make sure you know what you’re getting into with me.”

Harry reaches with his other hand, slipping his fingers in between Tom’s to carefully twine them
together. He then shifts ever so closer until there’s just a hair’s breadth between them, feeling the need to touch, to do so many things pulsing right underneath his skin with a heat and a want that coils in the pit of his stomach.

“Things wouldn’t really have to change between us. We’d still be friends like before,” he murmurs softly, a mischievous smile curving his mouth as he reaches up the slightest bit, briefly brushing lips against lips. Ever so slightly, Tom’s lips press back into Harry’s, a kiss that is light as a feather and chaste, making Harry smile, though only until Tom takes a step back again and looks down at him, almost unaffected.

“Alright,” Tom says, smirking. “Then I suppose it’s settled.”

What?

“Perhaps we can now discuss the conditions.”

Harry slowly opens his mouth in complete bemusement, wondering what he’s even supposed to say. “Conditions?”

He watches quietly as Tom steps closer, briefly looking down at the hand squeezing around his and back up at Tom, assuming a posture of poise that eyes rather contradictory to his uncertain words from just a few seconds ago.

“Relationships like ours don’t exactly reflect favorably. We must be careful to go undetected, especially where it concerns allies of Umbridge.”

Harry shakes his head with incomprehension. “Undetected? Tom, you’re overthinking this. It’s allowed here, isn’t it? We don’t have to hide.”

He pauses, thinking about it for a moment longer, trying to understand where all of this is coming from. Harry knows Tom likes to put on an act to others, but he doesn’t need to do that with him, or with this. It’s supposed to be natural, instinctive.

“I mean, we can be private,” Harry agrees plainly, frankly so dazed by their conversation—so utterly bloody thrilled that this is happening—that he doesn’t think there’s much he wouldn’t agree to when it comes to Tom. “We can take it at your pace. I just want you to be yourself, so if that means keeping quiet for a while, then we can do that.”

***

Patient though Harry seems, Tom cannot shed the skin of his agitation; he feels like a child who’s facing rebuke for not grasping some elementary concept. Be himself? He could laugh at that. It’s an ironic encouragement considering himself is the one thing he knows he really shouldn’t share with Harry. Honesty, companionship, commitment—he can offer these all, to a point. But Harry isn’t like Tom. He doesn’t know what he’s asking for, stupid boy.

Tom’s not sure why he bothers with him. It must be to do with the urges, the instincts. Fate, perhaps. Yet despite those changes, it seems he’s the same Tom. To develop a relationship like Harry desires, Tom will require his mask, and Harry’s suspension of disbelief.

He inhales a shallow breath and smiles, creasing both eyes.

“So,” Tom hums, rising with charisma as he cradles the supple arch of Harry’s cheek, “I can touch you, like this. Or,” he parts his lips and descends, his mouth tingling as it overlaps Harry’s, “I can kiss you, like that. Whenever I want?”
“Yeah,” Harry responds delicately, clear complexion bright and reddened. “Something like that.”

He’ll give Harry what he wants, and out of reciprocity, get what he wants too.

Of course. That’s how people are.

***

Harry lets out a quiet breath after Tom’s lips depart again, the small, almost innocent gestures filling him with warm affection. It’s not quite enough to satisfy him entirely, not when he’s been needing and thinking and dreaming about this moment for weeks on end.

“We could also do something like this,” Harry declares, cupping the hand on Tom’s cheek, gently pulling it down and daringly placing it on his hip instead. “Or even like this,” he says before closing the distance, and this time it’s not a brief touch or a caress or a small peck, but a careful exploration of soft lips, tongue teasing and tasting.

Harry tries hard not to get caught up in it, but something about it feels so relieving and yet makes him want so much more at the same time, a hand curling around the back of Tom’s neck. He almost loses himself in the scent of cologne, the taste of lips, the body close to his. He almost takes it too far, wanting to do so much more, lightly pressing his hips against Tom’s and just barely resisting the urge to grind into them instead, a quiet moan caught in the back of his throat. But then he finds himself exhausted, completely out of breath, and breaks away.

His heart pounds, lips prickling pleasantly as he licks them, and he peers up at Tom impishly. “I figured maybe you’d prefer it more like this.”

***

The lights in the Great Hall burn brighter when the two arrive at the Gryffindor Table, retaining the secret the others shan’t touch and stain with their greasy paws. Tom has been stolen from countless times before, in countless ways, but Harry is the one special possession of his life that cannot be purloined. Those feelings Tom had wrapped neatly and tucked away, they are no longer on reserve. He catalogs each of the unique features on Harry, the things he has which are superior: the eyes and the famous scar; the slight physique and sturdy arms; the lips that upturn in sync with his cheeks—sincere, never performing.

Tom learns later in the day, when their classes are complete, that Harry is quite fond of snogging. He likes it, too. What he likes more than kissing, however, is the possibility of more intimate contact, of getting Harry relaxed and vulnerable, divulging his innermost thoughts. When the two depart for the night, it is all he can consider. He enters the stone passage to the Common Room, finds an empty recliner, and opens his heavily earmarked copy of Magick Moste Evil. His thoughts, naturally, return to Harry.

It feels satisfyingly powerful to wield control through gentle means. With hurting others comes the possibility of having all that enjoyment judicially sapped and turned against you. It’s not like that with love, which is a curious situation.

Perhaps the goriest and cruelest damage Tom ever inflicted was on a mangy stray cat roaming around Bromley. Dull with boredom, he used his rudimentary magic to combust his unwary victim, setting aflame its innards to watch it melt, inside-out. He pinched his nose as the scent of burnt fur wafted in the wind, its fidgeting form not at all discomfiting to him. Had anyone caught him, it would’ve meant trouble: shouting, animal cruelty charges, more psych evaluations. It was a plain violation of social norms, punishable by law.
But what he did to that cat, illegally, is nothing compared to what he could do Harry, legally. Love is disabling. Love is what leads people to endanger themselves for others, sacrifice their happiness for others. With words alone, he could make Harry claw his skin to pieces until all that remained was a flayed mess, and yet this wouldn’t be a crime at all.

“Riddle.”

Theo Nott nods and sits in the chair next to his, extending a wax-sealed envelope.

Lowering his book, Tom takes the letter, skimming over the inky cursive on its front—*Tom Marvolo*, no surname. “What is this?”


“An invitation to what?” he questions suspiciously. He met him once, in passing, as a second-year, and their exchange entailed no more than succinct acknowledgments.

"Can’t believe Draco hasn’t gushed about it yet, but that’s neither here nor there. The Board of Governors will meet next month with the professors, and each may bring one student. I suggested he bring you since I have no interest, and as he was quite impressed by your theorems on unaided flight. The ones from the notes you shared with me last year.”

“Is he?” Tom runs his finger beneath the wax, unsealing the unexpected offer and scanning its contents. “Very well, then. I appreciate the consideration, Theo.”

At that, Nott’s face tics, the expression passing so rapidly that Tom barely registers the small smile. He leaves for their room without another word, and Tom follows soon after, an hour before midnight: the time he’s scheduled with Harry for their second goodnight through the diary. Crabbe and Goyle stand beside Malfoy, who sits on his bed with a tome across his lap. Their study sessions remind Tom somewhat of those zoologists who teach gorillas sign language. Zabini and Nott have the decency to at least remain quiet as they study, both reading on their beds.

Tom ignores Malfoy’s leer and changes into his night trousers, one leg on the floor as he curves the other atop it as a desk for the diary.

‘Alright, so I promise I didn’t tell Ron, but he knows something is up.’

‘Tell him to mind his own business,’ Tom writes back.

‘Brilliant. Wish I had thought of that myself, really.’

Tom frowns. ‘Then make him mind his own business.’

“Seriously?” Malfoy drawls, lowering his chin and eyeing Tom incredulously. “It’s bad enough we must watch you and Potter cream over each other during the day. Let the night grant us some solace, Riddle.”

Tom sighs, jots a quick message to Harry. ‘Wait a moment. Malfoy’s blathering.’

“Why are you so obsessed with Riddle and Potter?” Zabini cuts in. He glares at Malfoy with an intensity that is, for him, uncommonly hateful.

Malfoy fakes an arrogant smile and crosses his arms. “I’m not obsessed with either of them. And what’s it to you, Zabini? I believe I was talking to Riddle.”

“This is a shared room, you pillock,” Zabini bites. “Some of us don’t want to be lulled to sleep by
your insane pissing match.”

“Then let’s end it here,” Tom states simply, putting his quill to the vellum.

“Ha!” Malfoy roars before Tom can pen a word, earning himself a fierce scowl. “Would be convenient for you, wouldn’t it? Just admit I’m right.”

Tom hardens defensively; this isn’t posturing, this little bastard knows something. He sets the diary to his left and takes his knees in each hand, bending forward, examining the pure-blood impassively. “Admit you’re right about what, exactly?”

“Buggering Potter.”

“Bloody hell!” Zabini curses as Crabbe and Goyle begin to snigger wildly. Nott makes no noise but, like the others, watches Tom for his response. Tom bides his time as the anticipation builds, unflinchingly stone-faced while calculating his next move.

“You’d have to be bent to turn down someone like Greengrass,” Malfoy says, triumphantly grinning as though he’s discovered the cure for dragon pox.

There are three paths that could be reasonably taken, all of which end in confessing to weakness. If he sprints the easiest trail by assuming ignorance and brushing the topic off for a later time, his lie will be transparent, and he’ll later pay for its dubiety. The middle road of blatant rejection will require better explanations for his behavior than he has to offer. He could face the collision, head on, and hint at the truth.

He’s unsure of how to proceed. This last option admits to a shortfall he’s yet to even understand. Could he, of all people, be a true ponce? He must concede that dating another man carries with it these implications, but it simply doesn’t suit him; he is so far above others—so far above the muddy-blooded and the abandoned and the queer—that he cannot fathom being accurately classed with these inferiors, whether there are vague similarities or not.

“The fact of the matter is,” he finally says, taking the diary and folding back its cover, looking at it and not his Slytherin peers, “I’m not buggering Potter. Sorry to disappoint. If such a thing were ever to happen, I’d be glad to give you all a play-by-play, as it seems my personal business is of great importance to your own lives. Maybe even throw it in the pensieve! How does it sound?”

“Disgusting,” Malfoy snarls, probably sinking with disappointment. Tom can’t tell, as he’s quickly busied by writing to Harry.

‘Back. My apologies.’

Harry’s response comes swiftly, meaning that he likely stared at the blank page for minutes. Tom imagines the sight and shivers with pleasure, reading: ‘What took so long?’

‘Did I not mention that Malfoy was blathering?’

‘Right. Reckon I should count myself lucky it didn’t take an hour. What’d he have to say?’

‘Typical Malfoy rubbish, nothing worthy of discussion. Manage to get Weasley off your back yet?’

‘Nah, but it will blow over. He’s distracted. I think he’s got a bit of a crush on Hermione.’

Tom snorts, amused by the development. ‘Excuse me while I vomit.’

‘Don’t be a prat. They’d be brilliant together. Not as brilliant as us, of course. I mean the
universe literally split in two so that we could be together… ok, corny I know.’

A pause, then Harry continues writing, script progressively messier, ‘I still can’t believe that I have you. Not trying to ramble but I feel like this is the way things are supposed to be. It’s like we’re the exact same as we were yesterday… but better.’

To Tom’s amazement, Harry is more-or-less right; aside from the snogging and clandestine little glances they share, not much changes between them over the next two days. Who can say how things will transform in time? He could utilize his Arithmancy knowledge to make certain estimations, but not knowing what comes next stirs some excitement in him. It’s a brave new frontier, what he has going with Harry.

It is bloody distracting, though. Clearing his throat, he repeats an incantation, successfully transfiguring his rat into a snake on his second attempt. He adjusts his neck in aggravation. He really prefers to get things right the first time.

“I can’t get this to work,” Harry mutters while jerking his wand at the motionless rat.

“Well, for a start, you killed the bloody thing,” Tom mentions, picking it up by the tail and wiggling it between them demonstratively.

Harry’s nose wrinkles in displeasure. “Blimey, Tom! Put that thing down.”

Chuckling, Tom doubles the size of his petite snake with a quick charm and dangles its furry feast overhead, carefully lowering it into the serpent’s expanding mouth. The sound of Harry's groan inspires a tight smile on Tom’s face as he presses into the considerable lump budging against green scales, earning a loud hiss from the oversized mamba. He shrinks it back to its original size, then declines and whispers in parseltongue, "Hellloo friend. Do you ssseeeee the humann with bright haaairr?"

He subtly points at Malfoy, rapt in his spell and not looking up.

“Yessss,” the snake hisses back.

“Kissss him without bite.”

The snake slithers to the corner of the desk and slides, dangling halfway onto the floor as its long body dances. Tom, finding it too difficult to contain a smile, resorts to cupping his mouth nonchalantly. Beside him, Harry urgently whispers, “What did you tell it to do?” but Tom doesn’t dignify the question with a response; why not just wait and find out, Harry?

“SNAKE!” shrieks a high-pitched voice.

The plea is followed by a series of howls and cries, sending Tom headfirst into a sour mood. He should’ve concealed the stupid creature. He quickly attempts to correct his error, rising and sparing a disappointed glower at the so-called magicians now cowering on top of their desks – including Malfoy. From the back of the class, another caster seizes the opportunity from him, zapping a stream of bright blue to erase the animal. Tom follows the line of the spell up to the stern, unamused face of Minerva McGonagall.

“Mr. Riddle!” she barks. “Are you the student responsible for this?”

“It was an accident, Professor,” he lies, wringing his hands to seem nervous.

“Rather like the time you accidentally engorged a venomous diamondback to thrice its size?”
“Yes, I believe so,” he confirms sincerely, internally questioning how she dares to hold a grudge against his then twelve-year-old self.

She looks as though she’s about to open her mouth to reprimand him when a familiar rasp calls, “It wasn’t him, Professor McGonagall. It was me.”

Tom twists to see Harry standing, guiltily scratching the back of his neck. He’s taking the blame?

Her bearing softens. “You did this, Mr. Potter?”

“I’m sorry,” he sighs. “I was trying to scare Tom with the incantation. I had no idea it would actually work.”

Yes. Yes, he is. And so he should be—he’s pledged himself to Tom, something which no man should take lightly. Tom swallows and lifts his chin, pacing a sudden flash of arousal with tempered breathing.

McGonagall sharply scoffs. “Well, see to it that you never play with dangerous magic in my classroom, again. This is space of learning, not a zoo!”

The pandemonium calms in murmurs and contained laughter, Malfoy derisively piping, “Way to go, Potter,” and Weasley saying something quite similar, but with conviction and an impressed tone. They return to their seats and pretend to practice their spells.

“Well, that was quite bold of you, Mr. Potter.”

"What can I say? I'm an excellent wizard," his accent drops to a low, affected tone, "perhaps greater than Merlin himself."

“Was that really you?” Granger whispers at them as she approaches Harry’s side of the desk.

“Come now,” Tom says, "do you really suspect me of such reckless behavior, Hermione?”

Seeming stretched between an instinct for playfulness and lingering intimidation, she forgoes response and instead steps in front of them, bending on a knee and speaking in her lowest breath. “I discovered something last night. I wanted to tell you both at breakfast but you weren’t there.”

***

Harry and Tom remain quiet. Their excuse for having missed breakfast—snogging in an abandoned classroom—is something neither bother to cover for, though Harry privately wishes he could disclose their relationship to Ron and Hermione. As best as Harry can surmise, Tom is reluctant to expose his sexuality. It’s not exactly something Harry can bring himself to confront, despite harboring invisible doubts that Tom possesses an ounce of self-hatred. He is fairly sure he’s the most self-loving person Harry’s ever met.

“There’s a magical room on the seventh floor,” she explains, eyes wildly scanning past their heads, keenly watching for eavesdroppers. “It’s called the Room of Requirement. I was talking to the house-elves last night, figuring they’d know the castle better than anyone, and they said it would be perfect for what we have in mind. It only appears when a person is in great need of it, and it’ll transform itself into whatever you need it to be at that moment in time.”

“So,” Harry says slowly, to confirm he’s got it right, “if I were to go to this room, needing a place for an organised resistance group—”

“It should give you exactly what you need,” Hermione responds with a little smile.
“That’s fantastic!”

Harry is almost baffled at how quickly the conundrum was solved, peering at Tom to see if he’s pleased or disappointed that Hermione came up with it, and not him. The broad smile Tom offers Hermione, too sweet to be his own, confirms that his second guess is correct.

“Have you managed to gather more contacts in our year?” Tom quietly asks.

No doubt a ploy to see whether there is something Hermione hasn’t been successful at, all to reinforce some shred of dominance in his meaningless and petty game.

“Actually, I have!” she proudly states. “It’s too dangerous to approach most of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, but I was able to convince everyone who affiliated with the football club Dean started. Now that Malfoy’s foul little investigation has ruined their fun, I suspect they’ll have more time on their hands.”

“You really are brilliant, Hermione,” Harry compliments, sincere. “How about we have a look at it during lunch?

She nods, slowly easing back to her feet and stalking off casually.

***

“So, why do you suppose it’s called the Room of Requirement?”

Tom’s question rings nonchalant as he walks the seventh-floor corridor in line beside Harry and Granger. What he would rather ask falls somewhere between, ‘*How could a witless bint like you ever hope to master the door?*’ and ‘*Why not invest in a comb, you mangy beaver-of-a-girl?*’ He knows precisely which room it is—it’s the very door that entrusted him with the diary, with Harry.

“Presumably because it offers what the seeker requires,” she responds, flashing a toothy grin. “The house-elves are brilliant, aren’t they? I’m hoping that with our resistance, I’ll be able to build more support for S.P.E.W. Really, how is the maltreatment of house-elves any better than how we’re treated as Muggle-borns? Here!” she says abruptly, holding her arms in gesture for the three to halt. “It should be here.”

“Right,” he deadpans.

Other than a tattered tapestry, the wall is as blank as it was all the other times Tom sought to rediscover it.

“Chubby did say it wouldn’t just appear. Maybe we need an immediate reason?”

Tom takes a deep breath through his nostrils, debating if he should reveal his experience, and ultimately explaining, “I didn’t mention this before, but,” he sets his fingertips on Harry’s shoulder, just grazing fabric, “this is where I found the diary. I was exploring the castle during break and it just sort of, well… shot out, I suppose.”

Granger exclaims softly, brown-eyes brightening. “That’s fascinating! It must be to do with what McGonagall said about Universe Hoppers, that they come for a specific purpose. The castle could probably sense that we required some help, so it gave us Harry!” She snorts and specifies, “Well, it gave you, Harry. It knew you were dependable. I mean, really, can you imagine if someone like Malfoy found him?”

“Hm,” Tom hums, eyeing the wall, quietly wishing he could pry into it for answers. Not entirely without doubt, he suggests, “Maybe we should just ask it to let us in.”
“Couldn’t hurt,” Granger agrees, turning to the wall with a polite smile. “Hello, Room of Requirement. We need a space to meet in, us and a few friends. Could you possibly let us in?”

Before he can roll his eyes, his fingers are digging into Harry’s shoulder, clutching protectively while a grand arched door bleeds through the stone. Simple as that, then? They shall see. With a confident hand, he gently pushes against its front and flicks his wrist forward, forcing the door to creak slowly in and reveal a peak of their unknowable hideaway.

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Harry looks through the dark slit, unable to make out anything but shadows. Nothing happens, and it seems safe. Deciding that they won’t get anywhere by just standing and gawking at it, he shrugs Tom’s hand off and steps forward.

“Harry, wait!” Hermione squeaks as Harry shoves the door open.

A dozen torches light up the moment he steps foot in the door opening hanging off great stone walls. It appears to be a giant classroom, split in two parts.

The half on his right consists first of twenty or so chairs gathered near either side of a thick carpet decorated in runes. Behind this dueling spot is a wider space with glaringly pink practice dummies lined up against the wall, faceless with bodies shaped like the squat High Inquisitor. Harry even recognises a few of the books lined on the shelves of the walls in this part of the room, books on various hexes, jinxes and charms he studied through himself.

The half on his left, however, seems to be more of a large lounge with wide, comfortably cushioned couches and chairs, a softly crackling fireplace invitingly glowing heat into the room. There are glass cases filled with Dark Detectors, Sneakoscopes and Foe Glasses, large maps of both Hogwarts that seem to detail as well as highlight all of its secret passageways—possible escape routes!—as well as incredibly extensive maps of the Ministry of Magic itself, not to mention another huge collection of thick books.

Harry stands and stares around at the room for a moment, before uttering an awed, “Holy shit.”

Similarly, Hermione seems to be rather ecstatic, making a dash for the books on the left side, marveling over the giant Hogwarts maps of all its separate floors plastered all over the walls. “Oh, this is absolutely perfect! I wonder how it knew exactly what we needed? It must have read my mind–it couldn’t have known otherwise. Do you suppose it used Legilimency, like the Sorting Hat?”

“Whatsoever it did, it did it bloody brilliantly,” Harry says slowly as he wanders over to the dueling area, stepping on the carpet and realising that it’s essentially a mat disguised as fabric, soft enough to easily break a nasty fall. Glancing over to the dummies, Harry barks out a laugh when he realises they’re essentially modelled after Umbridge.

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The grandeur of the room strikes a smirk across Tom’s face as he evaluates its utilities. Its precise adaptation extends far beyond the capabilities of normal Legilimency, if it is Legilimency at all. He suspects it to be more complicated than that. There is a sentience, a beating heart, a billowing surge of old enchantments that moves palpably against his skin as he ambles. Whatever this room is, it is intelligent.

"We need to begin strategizing,” Tom says, squarely folding his arms behind his back. “Recruitment is only our first phase, and to even do that successfully, we’ll require a long-term
“You’re right,” Granger concurs, prying her attention from the arrangement of texts. “I think we can agree that the end goal is clear: Umbridge needs to go, and fast.”

“For the school year, sure,” Tom grants, tilting his head toward Harry. “But don’t tell me you think it ends there? You think the Minister’s going to stop pursuing Harry? Stop pursuing Muggle-borns? No. Getting rid of Umbridge is important, but whatever we’re starting doesn’t end there.”

Granger breathes deeply, her eyes straying as she thinks. She returns her gaze with determination. “Right.”

Tom continues plotting with authority, getting so enraptured by his plans that his tone hollows, becomes emotionless. “We have identified anchors in all of the Houses. My own House, Slytherin, is regrettably a lost cause; the propaganda isn’t yet dogma, but it’s settling quickly among pure-bloods. Once we’ve formally invited the anchors to join us, we need to ensure secrecy through whatever means possible.”

“So, what do we tell them? That we’re building an army?” Granger sounds skeptical.

“We tell them we’re building a resistance,” Tom clarifies. “We remind them of what we have to lose, and not just those of us raised by Muggles, but everyone else too. There needs to be fear. After our initial wave of recruitment, we’ll add nasty things to the mill of rumors, perhaps stage an incident that puts the Ministry in a bad light. For now, we run our operations like a boot camp by strengthening our soldiers and giving them a common purpose.”

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As Tom and Hermione discuss whatever the future of this resistance is going to be, Harry wanders off towards the books detailing various curses and hexes, counting the ones he knows versus the ones he doesn’t, fearing that the ancient looking volumes are almost on the verge of crumbling when he pulls them out of the shelves.

“There needs to be fear.”

Harry snaps to attention at the phrase, looking up in bewilderment. For a moment, the image of gallows on a TV screen flashes before his eyes. He relaxes when he remembers it’s Tom talking.

“Like I mentioned, we’ve already got a number of interested people in Gryffindor,” Hermione says and Harry takes a quiet breath, trying to shake the feeling of a chill off his spine, disturbed by the sudden memory. While the frequency of his nightmares has lessened, this one felt very much like one of them for a split-second, one that bled into daylight.

Brushing a shaky hand through his hair, Harry inches closer to the fireplace, the warmth coming from the flames against the skin of his hands grounding him in this reality.

“Write them down and add a couple of other names: Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hufflepuff and Luna Lovegood, Ravenclaw,” Tom commands. “Who were those you enticed, Harry?”

He blinks, glancing at Tom over his shoulder. “Er, there’s Dean, Seamus, Ron, Neville, and I think pretty much everyone else from sixth year, no?”

Hermione, furiously scribbling down names, briefly looks up at him and nods. “Yes, all the girls too. I’ll write down their names. I heard from Ginny there were plenty of fifth years interested as well, and some fourth years. I’ll have to ask her about that again.”
“Seventh years?”

“Not that I know of,” she replies, pursing her lips. “They probably don’t want to jeopardise their graduation.”

Harry ordinarily would’ve scoffed at that, but he feels uneasy, merely nodding at the response instead and turning back towards the fire, crossing his arms over his chest. He can’t shake the image of a noose out of his head, the tinny voice of a man behind the scenes narrating, “Crimes against the state will not be tolerated, and any perpetrator of such crimes should live out their final days in fear of what is to come; you will be found, and brought to justice.”

It’s strange that it didn’t hit him earlier. Maybe he just needed time to cool down, get used to the craziness of this world, but now, actively starting to think of how to fight an emerging dictatorship, it all hits a little too close to home.

*There needs to be fear.*

Harry scowls, fingers pressing into his arms.

***

"We should all have specific purposes. At meetings, I mean.” Granger scratches her scalp pensively. “I can develop the curriculum and help in demonstrations, but I’m not very, uh, I’m not –” she pauses, surprisingly aware of her own unpopularity. “Well, you should be the leader, Tom. You’re the most charismatic, even half of Gryffindor likes you. I mean, for a Slytherin, that’s really saying something.”

“You sell yourself short, Hermione. But I agree. You’ll be far better at outlining what to study than I would be, and I wouldn’t want too much falling on your plate.”

Modest lies, of course. This is what Tom was born to do; lead. Build networks of powerful, skilled wizards and witches. All his bookish years of solitude, all the sleepless nights of memorizing theory after theory, practicing spell after spell, they have led to this opportunity and he’s better prepared than ever before.

Nice as the thrill is, it would flow smoother through his veins if Harry would participate. Instead, he stands with his back to Tom, daydreaming to the fireplace. Supposing he desires a bit more purpose, Tom says, “Harry will lead basic drills. He can almost produce a Patronus Charm and he’s a decent duelist. More importantly than that, he’s gathered a bit of fame from being a Universe Hopper.”

There’s a wealth of untapped value there. A figurehead, perhaps?

“Yes, I think you’ll be absolutely vital in this, Harry.”

He doesn’t respond.

“Also, we’ll need a way to communicate with other members,” Granger says, tapping the edge of her quill on parchment. “Something simple. We don’t want to create suspicion.”

“A Protean Charm,” Tom proposes after a moment of thought.

“Oh, that’s brilliant, Tom!” Granger sets her quill and parchment down, hopping up from her cross-legged position. “We could use something like… Like fake galleons! One galleon would be the master and on its edge we’d send messages about meeting times to the other members. Let’s test it now. Do you know the incantation?”
Closing his eyes, Tom recedes into his memories, recalling the yellowing page of an old library tome. He recalls the words: ‘Protean was named for Proteus, the shape-shifting god of Greek mythology. Objects enchanted by the Protean Charm are magically linked together and will take on the form of their original item.’ No incantation.

“No,” he admits begrudgingly. “I don’t think I’ve ever encountered it.”

“Neither have I. I’m going to run down to the library and see if I can find it. I think I know just the book. I’ll catch up with you two at dinner, OK?” She all but throws her things inside her backpack, mouth stretched ear-to-ear. “This really is quite exciting, isn’t it?”

“Quite,” Tom agrees.

As soon as Granger’s trainers make their final squeak past the door, Tom directs his attention to Harry. Hands kept behind him, he walks slowly to the space beside his green-eyed companion, standing so that their distance is marginal.

"Don’t breathe a word of this to Granger, but I foresee a true future for our movement.” He swallows, keeping his power-high shudder at bay. “The Ministry is expanding its powers too rapidly. The pure-bloods may have the most capital and the biggest say in the Wizengamot, but they won’t be able to spread their support fast enough to galvanize the base population.

He snorts with humor and reaches his hand to blanket Harry’s shoulder, spindly fingers curving over the bone. “Together, we’ll create a new world. Us, who are fated for this.” At that, a log in the fire pops, crackling in two.

Harry jerks his shoulder, shrugging off Tom's touch. “I don’t know what you think this resistance is, but it’s not some sort of stepping stone for you to achieve whatever grand ideas you have in your head. The point of this whole thing is to fight Grindelwald, not to become him. Stop being such a wanker.”

Tom wants to snap, but stops himself. He cannot insult Harry now. Doing so will lead to nowhere safe. Harry must be dealt with gently, offered trite reasoning, fed the sort of fluff that tames keening little do-gooders like him.

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"I'm sorry," Tom expresses stiffly. "Perhaps I should've spoken with less enthusiasm."

Harry paces himself. He enjoys the apology, feels a sick compulsion to drag it out further, make Tom consider his words, consider how he would like to cower for his life. Except, he most certainly does not want to think of this. At all. Harry doesn’t even know how the thought gets into his head, but he quells it before it can worsen, reaching out to Tom and consuming him in a tight grip. He rests his cheek on Tom’s shoulder and sighs.

"Forget about it,” he tells him. “Fighting is the last thing I want.” Harry glances down at the couch and parts from Tom, holding his hand as he declines onto the plush cushion that sinks comfortably with his weight.

“’It’s understandable,” Tom permits, claiming the cushion next to Harry’s and laying an arm around his shoulder. “If you want to talk about it, then feel free. I’m an excellent listener.”

He shakes his head. “I’d rather leave the past behind me. It feels a little surreal, sometimes, but I’ve been so distracted with everything else that I don’t really have the time to think about it.” He reaches for the hand on his shoulder. “You can remember how it felt, I bet. Coming from
Muggles.”

In the pause that follows, Harry awaits a scoff that never sounds. Tom instead laughs and says, “It wasn’t that shocking. Anyone who spends their childhood questioning their sanity is likely to believe whatever explanations are offered.”

“Yes, I supp—”

Harry loses the end of his word as the world around him darkens, vision fading and his head drooping, scar prickling with electricity. The loud voice of a child rings painfully in his ears (‘I’m not mad!’). He winces and mashes his eyes closed, painfully stuck in the moment of this interruption as if crammed between two narrow walls, squirming desperately to escape when he catches a glimpse of a distant mirror reflecting a dark-haired boy, no older than ten.

Harry emerges from the bizarre daze with a gasp, calming himself as Tom’s blurred face comes into focus.

“Are you alright?”

“Um.” Harry doesn’t know what to say—is he alright, or not? “I think so. I think I just hallucinated.” Remembering Hermione’s speculation, he suggests, "If this place uses Legilimency, could it have given me a vision?"

“Yes, I suppose it could have been. What did you see?”

“A boy.” Harry tries to picture the face, memory scarce on details. “White. Black hair. Looked like a first-year, somewhere near that age.”

“A first-year?” Tom restates, unimpressed. “Was he doing anything in particular?”

“Er, no. He was just sort of standing there in front of a mirror. I think he said something.” He pauses, unsettled. “Something like ‘I’m not mad.’ It was pretty loud. I could’ve sworn he was speaking straight into my ear.”


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He watches the misleading advice settle on Harry, who shrugs and chuckles and moves onto the next topic. Tom doesn’t follow what Harry discusses too closely, nodding emptily at the cues while he mulls over the alarming vision. Tom thinks he can see the image too, but it is no hallucination. He remembers the mirror as it was with clarity, a cheap and cracked piece that draped over the back of Ms. Turner’s bedroom door. He had glanced at it while shouting at the barmy foster host, shouting those words still familiar to his lips though so much time has passed.

There is no reason for the Room to bother giving Harry a glimpse of this useless rubbish, and Tom chooses not to prod the sleeping beast—if the Room converges the experiences of those within it, Harry gaining awareness will not help matters.

They meet thrice more in the Room before the mission launches, perfecting the galleons with Hermione and pruning through lists of who to invite. At no other time does the Room show Harry another (and, to his knowledge, Hermione never experiences it either). Tom resigns to dismiss the peculiar happening, and keeps his Occlumency guards firmly in place on the Friday of their first convention.

“Password?” he requests, foot in the door, dark eyes inspecting the corridor.
“Come on, Riddle,” Finch-Fletchley groans light-heartedly, elbowing Tom in the waist. “You’re the one who invited me to begin with, remember?”

Tom simply repeats, “Password?”

He sighs exaggeratedly. “Can’t go making exceptions for friends, I understand. The password is toad.”

“Please, take a seat.”

The posh twat prances into the room with a cheeky grin, waving and calling out to his friends. Next comes a Gryffindor girl called Katie Bell, and he gives her the same treatment. Harry and Weasley patrol either ends of the halls, keeping students at unsuspicious distances from another, taking special care to watch for members of the Ministry’s squad of dolts. Eventually, when the final student has passed, Harry motions with his hand: all is clear and ready to go.

Tom rings his hands behind his tightly straightened back before disappearing into the Room, presenting himself with a militant composure that contrasts the informal gathering of students. Melted snowflakes drip from gloves onto the floor, heavy overcoats draped untidily onto unoccupied chairs, of which there are few. He counts nineteen heads. All of them recognizable for one reason or another. The Gryffindor and Ravenclaw girls of his year sit around the anchor of the Patil twins, one running brown fingers through Lavender Brown’s moist, frizzed mane. The Ravenclaw males – Boot, Corner and Goldstein – chat behind them with the Hufflepuffs and male Gryffindors. A few scattered souls lurk at the edges: Cho Chang and her friend, Edgecombe, nervously in one corner, and Luna Lovegood, gazing off dreamily in another.

When Harry stands opposite Granger on Tom’s left, the students look curiously between the three, waiting.

“Welcome,” Tom greets in a loud, clear voice. “We’re grateful to have you in our company this evening. I assume you all understand the nature of this meeting, so perhaps our time is best spent discussing our mission, and how we intend to achieve it. Pure-blood or Muggle-born, or somewhere in between, there is nowhere left to hide. In this, we all must be partisans.”

A hand snaps into the air. On the face of the interrupter, a derisive leer. Tom glares at him before patiently permitting. “Zacharias Smith, was it?”

“Yes,” he confirms brusquely. “Do you really think we should just take you on your word that we need this club to begin with? Where’s the proof that all this fear-mongering is worth the bother?”

The students surrounding him admonish the remark with irritable growls.

“What?” Smith cracks unapologetically. “I can’t be the only one thinking it.”

“Let me guess,” Tom begins, smiling dangerously, “you’re a pure-blood.”

“What if I am?” he retorts. “It shouldn’t matter. I’m not claiming that it’s easy to be a Muggle-born in this climate, but if you want to convince people of your cause, you need to provide more proof.”

“What?” shouts Finch-Fletchley. “Our experiences aren’t proof? Cassius Warrington on that stupid Inquisitorial Squad called me a Mudblood in front of the High Inquisitor and she did nothing!”

Smith rolls his eyes. “You call that evidence?”
“Let me ask you a question, Smith,” Harry speaks in a carefully measured tone, keeping the heat boiling in his veins to a minimum as Smith sits up. “Have you got any Muggle-born friends?”

Smith scowls, shifting uneasily in his seat. “I don’t see how that—”

“How would you like seeing them hanging off a noose?”

The silence in the room is almost startling, like an oppressive force smothering even the sound of whispers. That really caught their attention.

Looking away from a rather flustered Smith, Harry turns his attention to the rest of the people gathered, letting his anger form the truth into cutting words on the edge of his tongue as he continues to speak.

“I’m not saying it’s inevitable, but it’s what happened where I came from. People were scared for their futures, scared of terrorism, wanted desperately for someone to lead them through it. Then along came a man who promised them peace, security, justice. They were so frightened by the war and poverty that they gave him all the power in the world, and he turned my country into a hellhole.

"The first time I can remember being able to read the newspaper, I saw an article on the front page with a picture of a man hanging from the gallows. It never said what his crime was, or if he’d even had a trial. Only that he was the latest man to be executed by the state.

"Now you can sit there and tell me that won’t happen here,” Harry continues, looking at each and every one of them, “that you’re better than that, that you’d never sink that low, but that’s exactly what happened in my world. It didn’t start with executions, it started with small, subtle things: like cameras on the streets, devices used to record citizens. Sound familiar? Because we have surveillance wards set up all around Hogsmeade.”

“Surveillance wards?” someone in the back squeaks. “But they couldn’t have—”

“If you don’t believe me, ask Professor Dumbledore,” Harry replies evenly. “It’s not the only thing. Umbridge’s re-educational classes? That’s the way it started in my world, too. It was advertised as a program to help kids who were lagging behind. Usually, those kids tended to be different. Whether they were born that way or chose to be different, if you didn’t fit into the standard of the perfect model citizen, you’d be separated into a re-educational class. Which then turned into a re-educational school. Which then turned into a re-educational camp. I’ve never seen a kid go into one of those and return the same.

"And sure, you can shake your head and sneer at it all you like,” he says icily to Smith, who just did that exact same thing as Harry was speaking, “but the reason it got this far wasn’t because our leader was some sort of unstoppable super-villain who conquered the nation by force. It’s because people, good people, watched it all happen and stood by and did nothing, because they were too scared, because they convinced themselves it couldn’t possibly come to this point, but it did.

"So, if you’re one of those ‘good people’, if you’re too afraid of what might happen to you should you get caught, if you’re fine with standing by and watching all of this unfold the exact same way it did in my world—then leave,” Harry finishes curtly. "I have no use for you.”

Seconds of silence pass by.

No one moves. Not even Smith.
A smirk creeps up Tom’s face as he observes his peers shrink under Harry’s foreboding speech. For these select few, Tom’s own warning is now especially true: there is nowhere left to hide. The wards, the news, the pitiless toad. Smith himself cannot deny the building tension, the impending crack in their society’s stability. Before today, perhaps a few could veil themselves beneath their blood status, feign ignorance and ride the wave complacently.

“And so, there it is,” Tom concludes, his face like steel. “To be clear, we are not organizing a revolution. We are not attempting to usurp power for ourselves. This is a resistance, a youth defense league. We are a stand against the forces that intend to oppress us.”

“What are we going to do, then?” the little Weasley asks boldly. “How are we gonna run this?”

He smiles. “I’m glad you asked. Hermione?”

At her cue, Granger begins explaining their tediously drafted proposal. Tom uses his idle time to assess the recruits and evaluate their advantages and weaknesses. Quite a large fraction of their members are Quidditch players—they will flourish on the front lines of a skirmish, creating a first line of protection. For them, Tom will emphasize defense tactics. The others’ potential roles are not so clean cut. What merits rest beneath the Lovegood girl’s strange veneer? Intelligence? What use can Longbottom have when he can hardly cast a jinx? He’ll need to measure their value, perhaps ask them to report their O.W.L. scores.

The mention of his name directs his attention back to Granger. “….Tom will lead instruction on dueling and general defense tactics, and I’ll provide supplemental guidance on theory for those who require it.”

Smith’s hand stretches back toward the air. At Granger’s permission, he asks, “I get that you three are organizing this whole thing, but why does that make you the teachers? How do we even know that you’re any better than us?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say we’re better,” Granger says a bit timidly. “I mean, Tom and I have the highest scores in our year, and Harry, uh, he can…”

“Perhaps a demonstration would suffice, Smith?” Tom offers. "Would you care for a friendly duel?"

He gives his blonde hair a flip and scowls. “Against you?”

“Certainly. Unless, of course, you’re too afraid.”

"I’m not,” he spits.

With casual self-assurance, he saunters to the front of the room, sparing precious little space between himself and Tom. He doesn’t understand how dueling works, evidently. How adorable. Tom prepares to humiliate him with a fresh rush of adrenaline, though it doesn’t escape his attention that Granger is watching with dread, fingernails wedged between her mighty choppers. Just a little humiliation, she seems to warn, not too much. He privately agrees that it is the best course of action by nodding subtly.

“Back up.” Tom shoos him with his hand. Smith sneers and snorts, but abides nevertheless, walking backwards with his eyes set on Tom. He almost certainly believes this will be his moment of redemption from Harry’s verbal thrashing; he is mistaken.

After sharply bowing his neck, Tom flourishes his wand, gesturing for Smith to make the first
And he does. He throws his wand-hand, shouting, “Inflatus!”

Tom sidesteps the yellow stream smoothly. The next three spells come in quick succession, clumsily advancing on Tom from different directions. In a windmill-like sweep, Tom redirects their flow toward the seated students, inciting great shrieks before whispering an incantation to dispel the impact of the spells, causing the rays of light to break apart into glittering granites of sand.

Smith stops, gazes and takes a cautious step back with his wand arm held in defense.

Ah, so he gets it.

Lips clamped shut, Tom concentrates on his wand, forcing the magic to obey his silent request. With a flick, a great fire leaps from its tip, transforming into the vague shape of a serpent as it lurches dangerously at Smith. As the boy flinches and shouts, Tom tips his wand back, dissolving the flames into a shroud of smoke.

Smith, tremoring on the spot, lowers his hands in resignation. Tom officiates his victory with a lazy, “Flipendo,” knocking his opponent to the ground with a decisive thud.

“Brilliant!” the little Weasley shouts, jumping up with a clamped fist. “Can you teach me that, Riddle?”

He smiles. “Indeed.”

Graciously, he lifts Smith from where he was flung, levitating him to his still-shaking legs. Tom winks surreptitiously at Harry before returning to his flank beside Granger, allowing the rest of her speech to flow without interruption. It is obvious from the jittering excitement that no one cares too much for planning. Once the meeting has nearly adjourned, everyone (even Smith) lining up to sign the jinxed parchment, the feathery voice of Luna Lovegood asks, “Shouldn’t we have a name?”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” Granger nods. “Maybe like the Inquisitorial Squad, but different. The Defense Association? The D.A. for short.”

Dean Thomas weighs in, “No, it should be something the Ministry fears, something that really sticks it to them.”

“I like D.A., but how about we make it stand for something else. What about Dumbledore’s Army?” the little Weasley suggests. “That’s what the Ministry fears more than anything. Why do you think they set up the wards at Hogwarts? Why do you think the Minister installed Umbridge?”

Before Tom’s voice can dismiss the worst idea he’s ever had the misfortune of hearing, everyone claps and hoots, approving her idea with enthusiasm and passing the quill with joviality to mark the parchment Hermione’s entitled with, “Dumbledore’s Army.”

Chapter End Notes

So there it is! Prepare to cringe through the sheer awkwardness of budding love in the
coming chapters, and remember that I warned you.

As always, thank you so much to everyone who left kudos, and to all you kind reviewers: Primu, Riv, Anon, Eight7Seven, bbmunster, Huarta, and shez-dead. ♥

- Amelinda
Chapter Summary

Summary of Last Chapter: Following Amortentia-inspired discoveries made in Potions class, Tom and Harry commence a new type of relationship—a romantic one. Also, Hermione discovers the Room of Requirement, where Harry unwittingly experiences a confusion vision of Tom's past, and where the anti-Ministry coalition forms, dubbed: Dumbledore's Army.

NOTE: This chapter was revised on October 11, 2018. The original content remains fundamentally unchanged.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bits of bacon fly from Ron’s mouth as he hocks a critical scoff.

“Seriously? They arrested Fortescue?”

“It seems that way,” Tom confirms. He scans the paper intently. “The allegation is that he was attempting to start a business on the Muggle side of London with a loan from Gringotts.”

Hermione shoves her plate and whispers, “Since when is it illegal to take out a loan?”

“Since last week.” Tom folds the paper and places it beside his silverware, leaving right-side-up the disgruntled mugshot of the ice cream maker. “The legislative council granted the Minister special privileges upon declaring a state of exigency, and it looks like he made quick use of it. He banned the use of Gringotts money for pro-Muggle activities while no one was watching. Of course, it wasn’t reported anywhere. Fortescue couldn’t have known.”

Harry smiles into his goblet. The Daily Prophet hasn’t ceased its crusade by an inch, and he couldn’t be more pleased. It’s a smug sort of satisfaction, sure. If he’s cruel for thinking as much, then so be it; the world is cruel. For the cause to succeed, there must be awareness. The more the Ministry attempts to condemn pro-Muggle traitors, the deeper distrust burrows among his potential allies at Hogwarts. Because of the Prophet and its constant fearmongering, the union of Dumbledore’s Army has ignited like a spark in the gloom of their bitter Scottish winter. In the Common Room, and during meals, Harry is met by expressive smirks and four-finger salutes at the brow, small shows of solidarity in a school that seems increasingly flooded by Ministry sympathizers.

The presence of support comforts the impact when, a few days after their first meeting, Professor Lupin announces with an almost pained expression that there’ll be a change in lesson plans.

“What are these?” Harry asks when they’re handed out new textbooks. He blanches when he notices the words ‘Revised Edition’ on the front.

“Ministry-approved textbooks,” Professor Lupin replies. His frowns betray obvious dismay. “I’m sorry to say we’ll be doing a lot more reading and a lot less spell-work this coming year.”
“But how are we supposed to learn anything if we can’t practise?” Ron pipes out irritably from the back of the room.

Lupin gives the protesting students a sympathetic look. “Unfortunately, my hands are tied in this matter.”

It becomes quickly apparent that Defence Against the Dark Arts isn’t the exception; it’s the standard. Most of the Professors have a particularly sour look on their faces as they hand out the new books, and Slughorn—who, like Tom, lives in close quarters with the prejudiced monsters—looks especially tempted to drop them into a cauldron full of acid.

“That woman is starting to get on my last nerve,” Harry hisses to Tom in the hallways as he watches Warrington strut by with two other goons from the Inquisitorial Squad. They sneer at a group of second year Gryffindors to get out of their way, shoving them aside when the children do not respond fast enough to the command.

Harry mutters a hex under his breath just as he walks past the three Slytherins, wand subtly shooting the spell from underneath his sleeve to hit the stone beneath their feet. The floor becomes slick to the touch. With the next step, the frontman of the group falls, tripping the student behind him, and then the student behind her, too, until they’ve all collapsed atop each other, stupidly calling for help. The surrounding bystanders stop to point and mock them.

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The sound of Bullstrode’s immense arse thudding on the stone floor spreads Tom’s mouth in a smile as he stalks toward McGonagall’s. For all his heroics and morals, Harry is laced with a sort of poison, bitter virulence that can be stoked when necessary. Tom is beginning to see more clearly where Harry ends and he begins. Both subscribe to their own rules. Both live without petty fear of disapproval. The difference, however, lies in their motivations: for Tom to act out of spite, all one must do is annoy him; most interestingly, the catalyst for Harry is injustice.

It’s certainly an exploitable quirk.

“Think McGonagall might finally snap today?”

"Hard to say,” Tom comments mildly. “All I know is that you better not. Snap, that is. We can’t afford to have Umbridge breathing down our necks. No matter what happens, don’t lose sight of the bigger picture.”

The atmosphere in the classroom smacks with a tang of tension. The present resistance members—which is all they are to Tom, who refuses to regard them as Dumbledore’s Army—sit with rigidly straight backs and humorless expressions. He tugs at Harry’s sleeve upon noticing the books sitting on every desk: revised Transfiguration textbooks.

Softly, he whispers a reminder, “Don’t forget to stay calm.”

When Umbridge’s inevitable "Ahem!” beckons the attention of the classroom, Tom doesn’t bother turning. He opts instead to speed through as much of the book’s rubbish as he can: ‘Transfiguring Goblins is simpler than humans, as their molecular structure is less complex,’ and ‘Pure-bloods have accomplished more for Transfiguration scholarship than those of Muggle descent.’

“Yes, Umbridge?” McGonagall spits tersely.

“As you all know, I’m here to evaluate your ability to instruct from the new and improved textbooks.”
“Gladly,” McGonagall says wryly, opening the textbook to a page she instructs everyone to follow along in.

Tom thumbs to the page and snorts. It’s a lesson on the rules of elemental exchange: how to transfigure toads into water goblets. Her lecture proceeds to discuss the more scientific content in the chapter, keenly glossing over the dangerously stupid commentary as it occurs. Quickly bored by the rather elementary lesson, Tom taps Harry’s hand and pulls his diary into view.

“How would you like to make some alterations to these revised textbooks? Call it, re-revision,’ he writes.

“Ahem!” Umbridge calls, hoarseness churning from the back of her fat throat. “I can’t help but notice you’re jumping over large chunks in the curriculum.”

“Forgive me, High Inquisitor, but I see no reason to pollute my students’ minds with this drivel.”

“Oh? Well, my dear Minerva, I do hope you change your mind. I wouldn’t want to involve you in one of my intervention meetings this weekend. I know how much you love Quidditch.”

Her tone suggests a strange duplicity. McGonagall seems apprehensive of this veiled threat, chin jutting with frustration. Through lips that barely move, she says, “You’ll find that won’t be necessary, High Inquisitor.”

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Harry taps the tip of his quill on the page in thought, wondering at McGonagall’s strange reaction. When she replied to Umbridge it was as if someone was holding a gun to her head, forcing her to say it.

“She must have big something on McGonagall, just like she does with Remus,’ he writes down as the thought occurs to him and the Professor grudgingly continues her lecture in the background, ‘I bet she’s got blackmail on everyone else too.’

It would explain why Dumbledore hasn’t done much to at least limit Umbridge’s influence within the school. But where did she get all that information from? Harry looks up towards the front of the classroom, noticing that Umbridge has started to move just in time to subtly slide the notebook underneath his textbook, pretending to be reading. Of course, she stops by his desk anyway, arching her eyebrows. “Not taking any notes, Mr. Potter?”

The shrill voice is grating, and for a moment Harry opens his mouth to sneer something back out of reflex, but then remembers it’s not just himself he’ll be jeopardising if he says something stupid. He clamps his mouth shut again, reaching into his bag and irritably yanking out a bit of parchment.

Umbridge’s eyes narrow. No doubt she's suspicious of the lack of retort. She wanders off again nevertheless. Harry shoves the parchment aside as she passes, pulling out the notebook again.

‘One day, I’m going to shove her off the Astronomy Tower.’

‘Too merciful.’

The development is far from good, but given the inevitability of it all, he bears great appreciation for the timing. Incensed by the doctored textbooks, and high with excitement for the advent of the club, Dumbledore’s Army meets with unimagined regularity, nearly each night of the week. By the fifth occasion, their routine is down like clockwork; he lends his Invisibility Cloak to avoid arousing suspicion, and per Tom’s scheduling, they arrange specific lessons on a rotation. No one
can claim that the same students are missing at the same time every night, and as Tom – the lone Slytherin – has an established reputation for falling out of sight for days on end, the most worrying sets of eyes, his fellow Slytherins, have no motive to look twice at their goings on.

Having been tutored by Tom himself, Harry never doubted he would give competent instruction. He must admit, however, that he’s shocked by just how well he gives it. Not just knowledgeable and skilled, Tom is tolerant and forbearing, even with the poorest spell-casters among them. He tours the room with deceptive gentleness—correcting posture, slowly enunciating incantations, and explaining theory in terms easily understood. For students with special difficulty, he lowers his shields and stands, unarmed, to take the hit of their offenses. He insists that dueling is a test of casting and absorption, and tells them to accept that pain, inescapable, should be embraced to grow as wizards. The collective respect for his power is evident when the students convene as one, all watching him from their seats, rarely daring to speak without permission.

The magnetic charisma is a curious cocktail of soft-spoken modesty and unwavering confidence, vitalized further by unrivaled talent and undeniable good-looks. The combination could be dangerous, really.

(And small and pestersome part of Harry can’t help but fear that it is.)

“Can’t believe that ruddy hat put Riddle in Slytherin,” Seamus muses as the boys sit in their dormitory, sharing the overabundance of sugary snacks sent by Ron’s mother.

“Where do you reckon he should’ve gone, then?” Harry asks casually, privately finding humor in the misinformed statement.

“Gryffindor, of course!” Seamus declares. “He let Susan Bones put a stunner straight to his chest! Didn’t even flinch.”

“Yeah, but probably not the most threatening opponent, that Bones,” Ron says mulishly, popping the leg of a chocolate frog into his mouth.

“Someone’s jealous…” Seamus baits, getting Ron’s rude gesture in return.

Dean twists his lip in thought. “Dunno. I think he’s more of a Ravenclaw. Wasn’t he a hat stall?”

“Nah,” says Neville. “He wasn’t.”

“What’s a hat stall?” Harry asks.

“It’s when the Sorting Hat spends more than five minutes making a choice,” he explains, grinning a bit. “I remember Riddle’s sorting because we sat together on the Express as first-years.”

Harry’s mouth drops before quirking up with amusement. “What? Really?”

It is difficult to imagine an unlikelier pair.

“Yeah,” Neville confirms. “He was escorted by Dumbledore to the station, so Dumbledore asked Mum and Dad if I’d be willing to sit with him on the ride, seeing as he didn’t know anyone.” He exhales, almost a laugh. “He didn’t talk much, but he was nice—even helped me look for my toad. I was dead shocked to see him go to Slytherin.” He takes a generous bite of toffee into his mouth. “Sorted him in less than a second, actually.”

“Well, I think he’s got a bit of serpent in him.” Ron crosses his arms and nods decisively. “When we had that Muggle football match, he borrowed my trainers, saying he didn’t have any. Not one week later,” he raises his index finger high, “I saw him out on a run with some of his own.”
The circle erupts with snorts and laughter, and Harry teasingly tosses a wad of wrappers at Ron’s head.

“Blimey!” Seamus gasps. “Knowing that, Weasley, I can’t believe we ever trusted the scoundrel.”

Through his sniggering, Dean follows, “Quick, everyone! Check your trunks! Who knows when Riddle, the shoe-borrower, will strike next?”

Harry relaxes as their joking goes on, Ron growing redder as Seamus spins an intricate tale of once catching Tom rush out of the girl’s dormitories with Ginny’s pink, sequined sandals. The delightfully absurd joke diminishes whatever fears he had about Tom’s popularity – honestly, is he so troubled by the past, by that old and untouchable world, that he can’t bring himself to trust Tom, the very person he loves the most? It’s a barmy anxiety, and he’s being a git.

He opens his diary at the scheduled time and writes, ‘Hogsmeade tomorrow. I know you planned on studying and everything, but how about we have a date instead?’

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Tom considers the proposition with disappointment. Harry wants a date of all things? Quite a waste of time. Certainly not how he’d prefer to spend his weekend. But Harry, however needy and whinging he can be, belongs to Tom. All good belongings require proper treatment.

So, Tom layers his denim over long pants, fingers his tresses out of their loose curls, and sinks two feet into his black puffskein-lined boots. Their ridges crunch the granules of snow as he enters behind Harry, hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak.

Hogsmeade looks the picture of a Christmas card, its storefronts strung with candles, its paths blanketed by snow. Carolers intone outside the castle exit, inviting students to the road of thatched cottages and its weekend bustle.

He unclothes himself from the magical shawl once deep into the flow of students. “I can’t believe I’m a month away from seventeen and still need to hide from Flitwick’s checkpoint.”

Harry rubs his gloved hands together. “It’s a stupid rule anyway. I can’t tell you how many times my aunt and uncle wouldn’t sign my permission slips, growing up. But never mind that now. Where to? I’ll go anywhere but Honeydukes.”

“Ah, not interested in a redemption arc, are you?” Tom teases. “No, well then let’s see…” He pretends to think, knowing well and good where their destination shall be. “I’ve heard good things about Hog’s Head Inn.”

Upon Harry’s agreement, Tom leads him through the crowd that dwindles, scarcer and scarcer, until they’ve found it: begrimed and cobwebbed and theirs to explore. To allay Harry’s frowning face, Tom explains, “No one from school is likely to be in here.” He opens the door and smiles, holding it for Harry and entering afterward.

Queues of rough wooden tables form messy, cramped walkways for them to maneuver. There’s some lighting provided by the occasional candlestick, but it’s dark, only just bright enough for one to notice that the stone floor is filthier than the outside ground. Taking refuge at what may be the cleanest table, Tom snorts and says, “Cheer up, love. At least it has decent Warming Charms.”

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“Small mercies, I suppose,” Harry mumbles sardonically.
Figures that Tom took him to an inn that looks about as welcoming as a rickety old shack. Harry loosens his scarf as he glances at the cloaked and hooded figures at the bar. There are few customers present, and they are scattered about in solitude. He turns his gaze towards the pathetic single candle-stub sitting in the centre of their table and sighs. At least he has Tom, right? For a bit of contact, he casually links their ankles – a habit he’s grown rather fond of.

“Looking forward to your engagement with the pure-bloods?” Harry starts, affecting his voice to sound mockingly posh. “I should count myself perplexed that the oh so important universe hopper wasn’t invited to the proceedings!” He rolls his eyes and chuckles. “Bet your hands will be sticky after leaving that giant wank fest.”

Tom sort of smirks, and Harry braces himself; this is the look Tom gives him when he’s about to make a joke in poor taste.

“Perhaps I should drop to my knees, let them have a go on my face. Though as Dumbledore will be in attendance, I’m not sure such lewd practices will be tolerated. Perhaps I can set a price, and meet up with them afterward. What do you think? Care to join?”

“Oh, boy. I’d love to see that headline.”

“I think I can imagine. Model Hogwarts Prefect Forced into Prostitution by the Universe Hopper. Of course, sub-headed with: Beware of dangerous Muggle customs, or it could be your child next!”

“Yeah,” Harry nods, grinning, “or maybe something like – ”

“Oi!”

The mangy-bearded bartender continues with a sour expression, “You boys gonna order, or just loiter around giggling?”

“Our apologies,” Tom says consolingly, smile dulling into a benign, compliant expression. “I’ll order something.”

He rises and takes to the bar, leaving Harry to watch as he exchanges knuts for two frothy cream drinks (which, to his displeasure, come served in mucky opaque glass mugs).

“What’s with you and these shady-looking places, anyway?” Harry probes, looking off. Nearby them, a patron chugs down a mug of something green and slimy-looking. His eyes shift back to Tom, and they take a more teasing gleam. “You’re not a thrill-seeker, are you? I could thrill you plenty without having to go to places like this.”

"I suppose I like the company," Tom says, somehow thoughtfully. "I mean, think about it. Do you actually prefer the boring litter of crowds weaving in-and-out of Rosmerta’s?" He waves his wrist in the direction of a vagrant-looking woman, sitting at the neighboring booth and muttering madly as she knocks a beat on her withdrawn knees. "Or would you like to see people with a little more going on in their lives?"

If Tom means people who are absolutely off their rockers, then Harry’s answer is a resounding no.

“But,” Tom says, “I don’t consider this thrill-seeking.”

He reaches across the tabletop for his hand, causing Harry’s heart to skip a beat as he realises that even with this being a student-free, shady inn as it is, it’s still in public, and holding hands out in the open is a bit different from playing footsie underneath the table. But he doesn’t dislike the openness. Not at all.
Tom secures a tighter hold on Harry’s hand. “I’ll have you know, I’m a certified thrill-seeker. A Muggle psychiatrist told me as much. Kids under the Crown authority, we’re evaluated for a host of damages with their little diagnostics. I never said much, but it turns out I didn’t need to; when a foster mum blabbed that I liked to set fires, well.”

Harry raises his eyebrows slightly.

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It’s dangerously exhilarating, this liberating confession. He wants Harry to know him. Understand him. Accept him. It is not strategic to share like this. He doesn’t care. His body is a lit cauldron with bubbles swelling up inside. “To qualify as a thrill, I think something has to have an edge to it. With visiting a grubby pub, there’s no risk in that, is there? But maybe it doesn’t take much for something to qualify as a thrill with you.”

His voice lowers as he implores, “Tell me, what do you find thrilling, Harry?”

“Me? Hmm, let’s see…”

Harry leans his free hand onto his cheek, elbow on the table as he contemplates. Then, appearing to have made a choice, he sits up straight and slips his hand out of Tom’s hold in a sharp jerk. Harry gives a quick scan around the bar, then looks back at Tom, a roguish expression on his face as he folds in slightly, his hand lowering down under the table. Fingers land on a bent knee, and their warmth is prevailing.

Well.

“There’s a few things that come to mind,” Harry says in a casual tone, flashing Tom a rather brazen smile as his fingers slowly trail up the leg. “Most of them I wouldn’t want to tell you about in public, though.” He lets his hand rest just at the edges of an inner thigh, inches short of touching Tom where it counts.

Harry quiets his voice to a daring whisper, holding Tom’s gaze. "But maybe I could show you, sometime?"

Tom rests his hand over Harry’s, and squeezes. "Why not now? I mean, you have your Invisibility Cloak, we both have beds. Why not expand on my vast wealth of knowledge with a few of your, ah, thrills?"

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Harry’s eyes widen slightly, his surprise fleeting as it is brushed aside by a stirring below the belt. Is Tom being serious?

The hand on top of his own below the table seems to suggest as much.

He tries to think through the daze in his head, nervously licking his lips, which suddenly feel dry and cracked. He does want it. He wants it a lot. However, he told himself when this thing started that he’d take it slow, that he wouldn’t try to rush anything, that he’d treat this as more than just a boyish fling done out of necessity (because it is more than that). Maybe he’s a sappy romantic. He wants every moment to feel special, he supposes.

That is, until Tom snorts, smiles and murmurs, “Scared, are we?”

Harry impulsively shoves his fingers higher, running over unchartered territory, catching Tom’s
soft whisper of a breath, a slight tremor. Harry marvels at the fact that such a simple gesture can

crack through the composure of someone who seems to pride himself in always being in control. He slowly retracts his hand, staring.

The two smirk and vacate the grimy pub without a second word.

The outside air feels distinctly colder against his warmed skin than it did before. He shivers and wraps his scarf tighter around his neck. He’s about to pull out his gloves when Tom then takes the time to place a Warming Charm on his hands.

“I know you’re warm-blooded, but it gets a bit worse in the north than in England.”

The thoughtful gesture inspires a lingering gentle smile. As he follows Tom through the throng of students, he sticks close, and though they’re not holding hands, Harry allows the backs of their hands to brush together every now and again. He never thought it possible to be so content just by being around someone, walking next to them.

Tom’s hand pushes softly on the small of his back, nudging him to face the castle. “I can show you around the Slytherin dungeons. It is my inheritance, in a way.”

“Yeah, alright,” Harry agrees without having to think much on it. He can’t imagine other Slytherin students will be happy with it, but what are they going to do? Try and forbid Tom? Unlikely.

Harry reaches for the hand on his back, hoping that, like in the pub, the two can present themselves publicly. But Tom doesn’t abide. Instead he slowly pulls out of reach. “It would look a bit suspicious, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess,” Harry says. He bites into his lip and scrunches his rejected fingers. “Suppose I just kind of like being open, considering how careful I had to be in the past.”

Tom pats his shoulder sympathetically. “I understand. But don't kid yourself, thinking it's all fun and games here when it comes to such matters. Sodomy was only decriminalized by the Ministry of Magic forty years ago. Notice anything about that little godfather of yours, Sirius Black?”

“Yeah,” Harry nods, “I noticed that he’s not ashamed of who he is. Seems proud of it, actually.”

Their trek, now midway between Hogsmeade and the castle, comes to a small halt, with Tom smirking as he stands across from Harry on the trail. “Ah, but you see, he’s not. At least not in the way you imagine that he is.”

Harry perks a brow. “What do you mean?”

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Tom finds it endearing, how clueless Harry can be at times.

“Of course, in terms of severity, our society is better than the one you come from. We don’t summarily chuck people in Azkaban for being bent. That’s not our style. Instead, we attempt to reduce expression of the behavior. You don’t just get to sleep with whomever you fancy. The moment you make your preferences known, you’re locked in: homosexual, gay, queer, bent, whatever you want to call it. You’re that, and you’re that forever.”

Tom shrugs his shoulders, then pockets his hands nonchalantly. “Black had a few options: he could lie and be the pure, cousin-marrying toff his parents desired; he could stay in the family whilst resigning to celibacy and secrecy; or he could be how he is now, expelled and dishonored. And do you actually think he’s proud of the reason his parents abandoned him? Could anyone be
proud of being unwanted, Harry?"

“Look, if you don’t want to hurt your reputation, just say it.”

"No, I won't say it," Tom states firmly. "It's not about my reputation. It's about our prospects for
survival. The pub was fine, but anywhere there may be Ministry informants, we must be careful.
We don't want to give the Ministry anything resembling solid proof of a relationship."

Neither speak as they continue walking. Tom thinks again of Black. Perhaps it hits closer to
home. All state wards are brought up to see their existence as an aberration, a problem. Tom was
never wanted. His mother, pitiful and weak, chose death over him; his father disappeared; the
social workers dreaded his relocation, chewing through the caps of their pens while reviewing his
files with tense, wide eyes. Who could imagine the noble line of Slytherin ending with him, the
same boy once who slept for a night on cracked cement when thrown from the home of an
undeserving Muggle? Would his ancestor, Salazar, despise the Muggles more for what they’ve
done to Tom, or commend them for their service: ensuring that the greatest wizard of a generation,
Tom Marvolo Riddle, shall never be encumbered by the burden of a family?

He thinks with high certainty that Harry couldn’t possibly know where his thoughts have sailed,
but then the question that comes, comes in peculiar sequence with Tom’s thoughts:

“Say, since you’re the heir of Slytherin, d’you reckon you might’ve inherited more than just
stuff?” Harry asks curiously. “Like a title, or something?”

Tom thinks for a moment.

There is a House of Gaunt in the south of England, located in some town called Little Hangleton.
He read about it briefly, with all records indicating that there is little in the bones of their family
history to salvage. Perhaps he should pursue hidden riches, artifacts, things which are his when
that blood-uncle of his finally croaks. Tom’s latest considerations have been in opposition to that,
strangely. As the leader of a resistance for the protection of Muggle-borns, it could be more
advantageous to dismiss his noble heritage, bolster his stupid, boring name.

“Who knows, really? I suppose we may have had a title before the Ministry ended peerage.”

“Ha!” Harry breathes. "Don’t suppose you’d fancy me calling you ‘my Lord’ from now on,
would you?"

The crisp wind blows a cruel gust as an old parchment sheet flashes in Tom's mind, Latin and
French roots scrawled in black ink. He once told himself he’d be a lord. Rearrange Tom Marvolo
Riddle, scramble the name that’s caused him grief, rewrite his meager origins.

It was so long ago.

Against the whitened landscape of snowfall, Harry's green shines more brilliantly than ever. He
departures his head, level with his partner's ear. “I suppose you could call me that, if you wanted,”
he teases, though part of him wishes it didn’t sound facetious; part of him stirs at the unheard
sound of Harry addressing him as such.

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Harry sniffs. “I wouldn’t count on it anytime soon.”

God knows Tom’s ego is plenty big on its own. The last thing he wants is for Tom to start
thinking he’s above other people.
“I think it suits me quite well, actually.”

Right. On second thought, Tom already loves himself. And it’s one hell of a defense mechanism, Harry can’t deny that. Perhaps had he more of Tom’s confidence, he would not still fear the vile smell of Vernon’s whisky, nor quake at the memory of blood: Zeke’s, on his hands. People such as Harry and Tom, the prematurely independent, those raised to believe themselves abandoned or unwanted, must learn to do for themselves what no one else will.

“Use the Invisibility Cloak,” Tom advises once they’ve stepped into Hogwarts. "But don’t worry too much about getting caught. If anyone tries to say you’re not allowed, just tell them Slughorn permitted it. Everyone knows he’s six hard inches up my arse.”

Harry’s lips purse at the blunt comment, even though it’s the truth. Tom is nearly every teacher’s darling, save for McGonagall, who has none.

He wraps himself in his ancestor’s Cloak, and continues following. At the stone wall shielding the Common Room, Tom hisses the password, a subtle brag that is nevertheless enchanting as it shifts open.

Round, green-lit lamps hang off chains from the ceiling, giving it an almost eerie glow. Ahead of them is an elaborately carved mantelpiece, several young Slytherins silhouetted around the fire as they sit around it in carved chairs. The room, in contrast to Gryffindor Tower’s bright and lively air, has a grand but cold atmosphere. Harry’s eyes are drawn to the glass windows allowing a view out over the lake, the water adding to the green glow of the room, only contrasted by the orange glow of the fire and candles.

“When you’re done getting a look around, maybe we can, ah, tamper with a few of Malfoy’s things. That’s always a laugh.”

“Sure,” he agrees easily enough. No way he’d pass up an opportunity to mess with Malfoy’s stuff. Besides, he’s hesitant to poke around too much in the Common Room. “Which way are the dorms?”

It’s strange to navigate a House that’s not his own, even with Tom as his guide. It feels completely out of place. He feels out of place. Unsurprisingly, the dorms aren’t any less fancy than the Common Room is, and while the Gryffindor dorms look a bit similar in this respect, there’s still something cold and almost uninviting about Slytherin’s. But maybe that’s because he’s technically an intruder.

“No one’s here,” Tom notes. “You can remove the Cloak.”

After doing so, Harry takes a survey of the beds. He immediately notices the one with its curtains drawn and, making a not-so-wild guess, peaks through the slit. Ha, it’s definitely Tom’s. The emerald blanket covers the bed with immaculate edges at every side, made fit for a prince. He falls back atop it, smiling.

“This one yours?” he asks playfully, kicking off his shoes to lie down properly.

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Tom furrows his brows and scrutinizes Harry, checking to see if his wand is out, and wondering – with no shortage of doubt – if he broke the layer of defense Tom secured earlier this morning.

Harry crosses his arms, a pout. “What? You hogged my bed all summer.”

“It’s fine,” Tom mutters.
Except, in truth, it’s certainly not fine. Tom knows he warded his bed. He alone should be able to cross the canopy threshold. Trying to ignore it, he wandlessly straightens the shoes Harry carelessly kicks onto the floor, watching with lingering eyes as Harry arrogates his pristine space, springing on the mattress and wrinkling the silken covers. Annoyed as he is at the possibility of inadequate security, the side of his lip is tugged upward as the black tufts fall on his pillow.

“So, Malfoy’s stuff, right?”

“No, no, wouldn’t want to disturb your comfort,” Tom jokes, ambling toward the bed nearest the corner, glancing over his shoulder purely out of habit. It’s neither his first nor last time jinxing Malfoy’s belongings, but perhaps it’s worth getting a bit nastier this time, what with Malfoy’s inquisitorial nonsense. Taking wand to pillow, he explains, “The key to properly jinxing another person is to ensure that the effects are too personal to be complained about. With any luck, he’ll bed Pugface Parkinson and they’ll both get a dose.” Tom laughs. “The pillow will cause rectal blisters. Nothing serious, I assure, very curable.”

(Dreadfully painful, though.)

Harry’s expression contorts in a brief grimace before he laughs, too. “I’d almost call that cruel, but since this is Malfoy…”

“He deserves it,” Tom dismisses, a small smile, hand moving to untie his boot strings. He steps out, sends them with Harry’s beneath the lip of the bed, then unfastens the hook on his robes, using magic to unsew the seams and send them, folded, to the lid of his trunk. What’s left on him are belted trousers and a long-sleeved pullover, neither too thick for the matter at hand. Tom walks to Harry in a slow amble of clear intention. He climbs onto the bed, and then onto Harry, straddling him. Harry, for his part, is an eager, albeit idle observer, mouth parted, fingers drumming anxiously over the bedding.

“I warded the room, obviously,” Tom assures, gently sinking knees into the mattress. “If you hear three knocks, that means we have, oh, five seconds to hide you.”

Harry undoes the first clasp on own his robes. “Good to know.”

Tom almost leans in for the kill, but the motive to kiss temporarily flees when he indulges in a stare. It’s a sight he likes very much, that of Harry keen and wanting. Harry isn’t beautiful like Tom. He possesses an altogether different attraction. Rather than slope and hollow, his cheeks curve around the edges, adding certain boyish charm. His lips are fine and supple, and his straight nose is the perfect perch for round-rimmed that focus his best quality: refulgent green-eyes.

Tom takes Harry’s right hand in his own and interlocks their fingers. “One year ago, I laid in this very same bed, fixated on dangerous magic and completely ignorant to what I’d find on the seventh floor a mere two months later.” His free hand lightly grazes the fabric over Harry’s stomach. “What a turn of events though, really.”

“Dangerous magic, huh?”

“Perhaps I’ll show you sometime. Dark magic can be rather addicting. Narcotic, even.”

Harry must learn eventually. Tom’s allowed himself to get too torn from his true studies by doting on Harry.

“Yeah?” Harry breathes, fingers of his right hand slowly walking up the length of Tom’s arm. “Tempting, but I think I’ll pass.”
Tom frowns and peels up the hem of Harry’s shirt. He sneaks his hand beneath the fabric. “The Dark Arts are nothing to fear on their own. They are simply the branch of magic that should be approached with both intention and caution.” He presses his digits into the muscled flesh, deep enough to feel his pulse. “Prosaic minds misconstrue Dark magic. The word ‘dark’ itself is a misnomer.”

He trickles the faintest trace of static into the bulbs of his fingertips. A feverish swathe of red warms Harry’s cheeks. His lips split to slip a sweet gasp, a quiver. Tom savors the spiraling bloom of arousal in his own loins, but delays the urge, deriving greater pleasure from the intense pursuit. He slides his hand to the chest, so smooth, and spreads the wide span of his hand across Harry’s right breast.

“I prefer to call it intuitive magic,” he whispers. He closes his eyes and focuses on the steady thrum of the precious organ, visualizing the pulsing flesh, the twisting veins, the chamber cavities that sink, inflate. He raises Harry’s heart rate, just so. “Intuitive magic better reflects human nature. It talks and breathes and behaves with unpredictable attraction.”

“But it’s dangerous,” Harry mutters breathily. His expression is less decisive than his words.

“We’re dangerous,” Tom responds. He settling Harry’s pacing heart and slithers his hand out from the shirt. ”Transferring a soul across the universe isn’t exactly without risk, you know.”

Harry stirs. “Wait, do you mean that it could put us in danger?”

“No,” Tom says. “I can’t imagine that we are. We never attempted to bring harm to each other.” A familiar, yet somehow foreign, rush of affection kindles in his chest, and on a dangerous impulse, he can’t stop himself from saying: “But I’ve experimented with it.”

Curiosity touches Harry’s gaze. “With Dark magic? How?”

Tom checks each green eye for signs of judgement but, most pleasingly, finds enthusiasm instead. His heart skips strangely. “I’ve improved myself.”

He lowers his fingers through the partially split robes, between Harry’s belt and trousers, and grips it gently. “I’ve done a few things, but one such experiment comes to mind. No one other than Nott and myself had ever tried it before. It was my invention. We could try it on you. If you’d like.”

Harry shudders and bucks his hips, clearly aroused, but being a good boy, he hides it and asks with a petulant frown, “What are you going on about?”

Now or never, says a voice in the back of Tom’s mind. It is a moment when should and shouldn’t blend ominously, as Tom’s ears scorch hot and rage against his head, a ticking time-bomb, ticking and ticking while the pendulum swings. He slips free from his calm, collected mask and settles it carefully in the corner of his mind. Harry has nowhere left to go, and Tom shall soon have nothing left to hide. He unbuttons his trousers and tugs them down to where his hip bone peaks out of black elastic. With a quick incantation, he relieves the Charmed glamour.

“What did you do, then?” Harry asks evenly, tone and volume low.
“It was ingenious of me, really. In third-year, Nott managed to steal from his father’s potion cabinets some rare ingredients.” He rubs his fingers over the knotted skin, seeming nostalgic. “It was a dueling enhancement elixir, meant to last for about twelve hours. But as we spent four months brewing it, I didn’t want its properties to go completely to waste… so I enhanced it.”

Harry nods patiently, subduing his shock. “Yeah? How so?”

“You wouldn’t understand the specifics. The point is that I improved my magical stamina – permanently. You see, we didn’t just ingest the brew. We injected it into ourselves with syringes. Of course, Nott was stupid enough to miscalculate his blood volume and nearly died from the bloody thing, but with you, I’d do all the work, and there’d be no chance of that I assure.”

“Tom…”

“Yes, yes,” Tom shakes his head, still smiling, “I know what you’re thinking, and of course it hurts quite a bit, but once the pain has passed – ”

“No, Tom, you don’t – ”

“Honestly, Harry, it completely safe. I could probably acquire – ”

“Tom!”

Tom stops, hands frozen on the spot where they hold his trousers. “What?”

“I know I can’t control what you do to yourself, but I’m not injecting myself with anything,” Harry explains sternly. “And I’d honestly prefer if you didn’t mess with the stuff.”

"Please," Tom pops the elastic back into place, "spare me your lecture. How do you suppose people like Grindelwald or Dumbledore achieve their status? By following the rules?"

As Harry glowers incredulously, a knock, knock, knock sounds from the door – the warning Tom placed has been triggered.

"We’ll talk about this later.”

Tom closes the curtains and lies beside Harry, arms huffily crossed. Harry’s perfectly content when the door eases open, exposing the tail-end of something Malfoy’s saying—for all Harry cares, it could be the devil intervening now. Anything that ends Tom’s ranting is a bloody blessing in his book.

“Draco, this curtain’s drawn. Is someone sleeping here?”

Harry immediately recognizes the voice of Pansy Parkinson.

“It’s Riddle’s bed,” says Malfoy contemptuously. “He always closes it before he leaves.”

Their footsteps pass, ending when a soft creak indicates that they’ve landed on Draco’s bed.

“He’s been rather aloof lately,” Parkinson notes. Her disappointment is subtle but apparent. “He’s been hanging around the Gryffindors far too much. Do you think he could be working for the Minister, you know… Covertly?”

A loud scoff. “Mudblood like him? Please, Pansy. He’s just deranged. I read all about it in Umbridge’s file. Can’t say exactly what I saw, of course, Umbridge only entrusted me to see them. Let’s just say Mr. Perfect Prefect’s record isn’t quite so spotless.”
Harry’s eyes widen slightly in surprise; Umbridge has a file on Tom? What does Malfoy mean with “deranged”? It couldn’t be about his childhood, could it? Tom did tell him that he used to set fires as a kid… but where on earth would Umbridge have gotten that information from?

His nose wrinkles up in mild disgust when he hears the unmistakable, wet noise of lips meeting.

“Well, he doesn’t come from much, does he?” she comments defensively. “But I suppose it’s worth knowing. Does she really have dirt on all of the professors?”

“Every last one of them.”


In the silence of the pause, Harry finally forces himself to look over at Tom. He wears a stolid face, but his fingers are clenched tightly into the blanket. Harry takes them and squeezes in reassurance.

She gasps. “Draco! Draco, we should go…”

“What? Why?”

“Just look, will you?”

Harry tenses. Look at what? They couldn’t possibly see Harry or Tom, could they? Harry glances around, assuring himself that there’s a generous overlap in the curtains. A derisive, guttural chuckle from Malfoy fills the room. Harry’s stomach sinks.

“You’ve got to be joking!” he drawls merrily. “Are you two going to come out anytime soon, or do you honestly believe we’re daft enough to believe Potter’s trainers walked in here on their own?”

Harry brings his palm to his face.

His shoes are under the bed—distinct green-laced, black-and-gray trainers that look nothing at all like something Tom would ever wear. Harry silently discusses the situation with Tom through facial expression. They resign to exposure. Tom moves through the curtain and takes his stand with confidence, wand by his side. Malfoy mirrors Tom at once. The gesture seems less meaningful coming from him. He’s so weak and small by comparison. Harry doesn’t stand, but rests his feet on the ground and peers at them with a bored expression. Malfoy thrives off reaction; best not to give him the satisfaction.

“Please!” Parkinson cries. She hops up and tugs the back of Draco’s robe. “Don’t fight you two!”

“Oh?” Tom says curiously. “I’m surprised you care, dear Pansy. After all, I don’t come from much, now, do I?”

Her pugged face turns a bright red shade.

“Hmph,” Malfoy sniffs. “You’re really in no position to act tough, Riddle. I know things I’m sure you’d rather I not.”

Tom tips his head to one side before smiling. “That may be. But I’m certain you’re not permitted to run about spreading whatever it is you think you know. Isn’t that what you told Pansy here?”

“For the time being, perhaps.”
“I’d love to hear more.”

Malfoy scoffs. “Soon you’ll see. The world is beginning to realize what I’ve known all along. People like you simply have no business being at Hogwarts.”

The way Malfoy peers at Tom when he says it, so hideously conceited... it hits a nerve with Harry. Anger flares up his chest, pumping raw heat through his veins. “Christ, always about the blood-purity with you people. Are you that bloody insecure that you have to pick on others to feel good? Still vying for your worthless daddy’s approval, I bet.”

This sets Malfoy off in a way Harry doesn’t expect. His pale cheeks flush with fury and he raises his wand, pointing it at him. “You keep your mouth shut about my father, Potter! I bet you think you’re safe, don’t you? Famous Harry Potter, the Universe Hopper. You probably think just because your blood traitor of a father works at the Ministry you’re untouchable. Well, I recommend you watch your tongue.”

Harry grits his jaw, muscles taut, tensed up in preparation for what would usually be a fist to the face. Yet, instead, he takes a deep breath, and something calm takes over him, speak for him. “Funny you should mention my dad. He told me something rather interesting about Lucius Malfoy, you see.”

A total lie. His father rarely says a negative word about anyone, and has certainly never mentioned Lucius. Threats like this aren't usually the way Harry does things, not at all. But perhaps he should; it's working. Malfoy’s eyes widen significantly, then narrowing to slits. “What are you talking about?”

Harry takes a step towards him, just enough to break through his personal space. He continues in a low but almost casual tone. “I’m saying that you ought to tell your father to watch where he spends his money, if he doesn’t want to end up on a one-way trip to Azkaban. Dark artefacts are a tricky business.”

“YOU’RE the one who needs to watch it!” he all but shouts into Harry’s face. “Your father being an Auror isn’t going to save you or your Mudblood friends once the Ministry locks you away, and I guarantee it’ll be worse than Azkaban! You have no idea what they—”

His mouth clamps shut at once.

“What the bloody hell are you talking about, Malfoy?”

Malfoy knows he’s said too much. He throws one last glare their way before scurrying out of the dorm, Parkinson following nervously behind him and whispering furiously.

As Harry watches the slim back retreat, he looks to Tom with an uneasy frown. "Locked away, huh? Sounds like we've got something new to worry about."

"Yes," Tom agrees, massaging the tense gritting of his jaw, brown eyes trained on the floor. "Yes, I believe we do."

Chapter End Notes

Wow, this took longer than I wanted (got caught up with a random new fic idea and, yay, Tomarry Big Bang 2017). Because of the BB17, I recently encountered a lot of
new ship related blogs, and it got me thinking: "Wow, I should really try to find more fandom friends." So, if you're on Tumblr and ever want to chat about Tomarry, seriously come hmu (my handle is voldemrt).

Thank you so much to everyone who kudos'd, bookmarked, etc., and especially to the super kind commenters: niki, Tyassei, primu, invasionofprivacy, larkscope, Elastara, mimsical, and Ale. I seriously appreciate all forms of support for the fic. :)

- Amelinda
content warning: there is a VERY brief -- and not at all graphic -- mention of sexual abuse in this chapter. the survivor and perpetrator(s) are NOT named characters in the fic and the topic is not explored in great depth. i don't think the actual reference will be more triggering than this content notice but, just in case, i'm putting this here.

Malfoy’s warning lays dormant for the night—it is certainly there, it is certainly pressing, but it is also not a topic that either teen is keen to discuss. Least of all Tom, who spends what’s left of his weekend alone, in the library, while Harry and the lions tend to the distribution of their doctored textbooks copies. It’s not much of a task and Tom’s time is better spent here, at a secluded, low-lit desk behind the Old Cyrillic scrolls.

His fingertips sink into the index of Leonidas Greer’s Matters of Essence, following a trail of citations that have yet to supply him with the answers he seeks. Harry’s effortless breach of his Privacy Ward did, at first, seem to hint at a miscalculation of Tom’s own. Such errors are rare of him but quite possible. Further testing, however, proved this unlikely scenario to be impossible; the various charms went into full effect the instant Crabbe, thieving fool, was lured by chocolates set on Tom’s pillow, unaware of the Prefect hiding beneath Harry’s Cloak. Both Slytherins agreed to let bygones be that, for Tom’s wards are as much against policy as the gargantuan git’s thievery.

The stale parchment flaps open to Tom’s target at his command: Page 51, “Essence and Warding.” He reads the following carefully

“Wards are an elementary concept. We use them for three purposes: to protect ourselves from unwanted intrusion; to conceal locations; and to prevent the escape of persons, animals, or creatures. It does not escape imagination that there may occasionally be reason to invoke all three protections. Their design is, in all but few exceptional cases, fundamentally comprised of three interlaced charms that judge whether one should be permitted to pass their threshold. It does so by assessing the nature of one’s being – one’s essence.”

Essence, he considers. Waffling’s first law states “tamper with the deepest mysteries – the source of life, the essence of the self – only if prepared for consequences of the most extreme and dangerous kind.” Tom shifts to the front of the book, skimming through the introduction, finding:

“Henceforth our concern is wherefrom human essence derives its distinct form. Consensus among theorists suggests that it is, first and foremost, the soul that is our essence, though critics caution us to reduce essence to one factor alone. It could be that…”

Tom whips speedily through fifteen more pages before pushing the book aside and cupping his chin in thought. It is the first he’s read of elemental soul theory, a hypothesis that souls are built by organic compounds fixed to the individual—genetic, so to speak. It makes sense. Souls can also be split and placed in objects according to Secrets of the Darkest Art, a rare text he convinced Nott to part with for Moke skin shedding he charmed off Slughorn.
But how could this explain what happened in the dormitory?

He settles his belongings and leaves for the Dungeons. Before when reading, his focus was on how best to rend the soul. Small-minded of him, really. He should’ve then read further into the properties of the soul, but at the time, it did not quite capture his interest.

As he steps out of the library, he stops, catching a figure in the corner of his eye.

“Harry?”

“I was just coming to get you,” Harry says, sharing a sorry frown. “No point explaining. You’ve just got to come see this.”

Tom tracks Harry down the corridor without a word, and soon the two are within vantage of a crowd gathered outside the Great Hall. Their stares are set on a wall with queues of glass-encased posters. Tom, taller than the others, stops at the back and looks over their heads. Each poster is led with the caption **EDUCATIONAL DECREE** and bears a signature beside a red notary seal: Dolores J. Umbridge in loopy cursive letters. Unique to each page is a number and a different command, leading off from a perhaps uncontroversial ‘decree’ —

**EDUCATIONAL DECREE NO. 1**

*ANY STUDENT IN POSSESSION OF ILLICIT POTION INGREDIENTS SHALL BE EXPELLED*

— and last ending with a rather bizarre command:

**EDUCATIONAL DECREE NO. 28**

*YOUNG WITCHES & WIZARDS ARE NOT TO BE WITHIN SIX INCHES OF EACH OTHER AT ANY TIME*

“That last one’s conveniently heterosexual,” Tom remarks to Harry, discovering too late that his words come out rather less quietly than intended. The consequence is quickly felt when the chuckling commences. Seamus Finnegan remarks something to the effect of implying his penis is bigger than six inches anyway, and the little Weasley upsets her daft brother by implying she can hide comfortably beneath others’ robes. Tom pretends to laugh with them.

“It’s not funny,” Harry whispers. His arms are crossed over his chest. “Look at numbers fifteen and twenty.”

“And…?”

“Come on,” Harry pushes, “she’s disbanding unauthorized clubs and banning students from going into other Houses. She knows something. This had to be Malfoy’s doing.”

Tom pauses in contemplation. “That could be.”

Harry nudges the Weasley and Granger, and upraises his brows.

The four leave to the Room of Requirement without need for further explanation.
“So…” Harry trails off, looking expectantly between Ron and Hermione after explaining the blackmail threat. “What do you make of all that?”

Ron tosses another shredded piece of mistletoe into the crunching embers, slouching down the couch with laze. “It’s a lot to take in. I can’t imagine old Dumbledore getting up to something naughty. Don’t you think Malfoy could be bluffing?”

“No, I don’t,” Harry insists sternly, subtly watching Tom from behind as he practices some green-lit spell on the sparring dummies; neither Tom nor McGonagall would withdraw as they have if, in fact, they had nothing to hide. “Don’t you think Dumbledore must have his reasons for staying so silent about the whole thing?”

Hermione bites her bottom lip and wraps her hands around tucked-in knees. “It does make sense. Do you think Umbridge has been keeping tabs on the students as well?”

The target dummy at Tom’s mercy bursts to bits. Its bright pink pieces fly across the room and fall like plastic rain, one thumping Ron right on the crown of his head.

He groans and says, “Oi, Riddle! Watch it, will you?”

“My apologies.”

“No, I doubt it,” Harry lies. “I mean, what’s the worst it could say for the lot of us?”

“Oh, I dunno,” Ron says with sarcasm, “it’s not like we’ve formed an anti-Ministry militia or anything. That would be mental.”

Hermione scoffs. “If she knew that, we would’ve already been detained, don’t you think?”

Harry scowls at the word detained.

“He intends to start that soon enough,” Tom calls bluntly from the training area, slicing into one dummy’s head with a fiery whip attached to his wand.

“What?” shout Hermione and Ron in unison.

Harry lowers his head. “Er, yeah. He said something like that.”

“Don’t be shy, Harry,” Tom says tonelessly, walking toward the three, “Malfoy said, and I quote, ‘Your father being an Auror isn’t going to save you or your mudblood friends once the Ministry locks you away, and I guarantee it’ll be worse than Azkaban.’ Three guesses what that could allude to.”

Hermione’s face twists. “Oh, Harry! I wish you would’ve told us sooner! Umbridge is bound to go ballistic over those doctored textbooks, if I knew this, I would’ve told the others to hold off! I would’ve – ”

“Would’ve what, exactly?” Ron cuts in. “Told everyone to play nice? No, Hermione. Bollocks to that. We can’t let a little threat slow us down. Riddle,” he turns to Tom, “don’t you have that private dinner coming up? The one with the Board of Governors?”

Tom’s head tilts. “What of it?”

“You should just bring it up around that lot. Ask them if it’s true and see how they respond.”
“No,” Harry says, shaking his head. “That’s too dangerous.”

“Open confrontation could produce clear answers,” Tom weighs, “but, in the end, I imagine it would put too much attention on me. Why am I asking questions? What do I want to know?” He snorts humorlessly. “And that’s excluding the possibility of them attempting to, ah, quiet me on the spot.”

Harry’s stomach clenches at the very thought. “That’s not going to happen because you’re not going to make an impression. You’re going to sit there. You’re going to listen. You’re not going to give them any cause to investigate.”

“Who do you think it is that you’re addressing?” Tom challenges, linking his hands behind his back and raising a brow. “I’m not you, Harry. I don’t dance into trouble for the mere sake of making a statement.”

The tension pulls taut. Ron and Hermione become still and look between each other curiously, as if deciding what to make of the outburst. Both are unaccustomed to seeing this side of Tom, but Harry isn’t. This detached alpha male routine is as predictable as it gets once you know where to look.

“That may be how it looks to you,” Harry says tolerantly, “but I can assure you I don’t dance around anywhere. I’m just worried about you, is all. Sue me.”

Tom looks away.

“Well,” comes in Ron, “I don’t reckon we need to be all that direct or anything. If we can prove she has dirt on Ministry officials, we could boot her right out of Hogwarts. Those prats would be forced to lock the evidence away to protect their own arses.”

Hermione stares at Ron as if he’s just grown a second head, and his ears flush a defensive bright red.

“What?”

“I–nothing, it’s just a good point, that’s all,” Hermione replies, clearly bemused. “But how are we supposed to catch her red-handed, exactly? We can’t just go into her office and hope she happens to have some of the blackmail right in her hands?”

“I have an idea,” Ron says hopefully. “Riddle, do you still have Polyjuice? You sold some to my brothers, remember?”

Curiosity buds in Harry, who looks to his partner inquisitively. “You never told me you sell potions.”

Tom shrugs. “I once did, though not often and to a rather select clientele. They were supposed to stay quiet, however.”

“Oh, they did,” Ron assures. “Weasleys aren’t sneaks. Suspected they were mailing me dung-bombs – and they bloody were,” he glowers bitterly, “so I followed them to the owlery where you met up with them. Not the most private place for a trade, mind.”

Hermione giggles into her hands. “Tom! I had no idea you could be such a troublemaker. I knew those two were lying, claiming they brewed it themselves. What a load of rubbish!”

“Yes, well. Had I known what they had in mind, I would’ve refused their business.”
“What? What happened?” Harry asks, assuming from the amusement of Hermione and Ron that it could not have been too dark.

“Nothing worth mentioning,” Tom comments dryly.

Ron laughs, excitement glowing in his pale blue eyes. “It’s a long story, but basically what happened is we had this event, a big event, it brought in wizards from all over Europe for this tournament thing. Fred and George were dead angry about the fact they were too young to enter, so when the time came around for the ceremonies, they used Polyjuice to pretend to be two of the competitors. Snuck into the tents, met with a lot of important wizards.” He breaks into a fit of laughter, and barely manages through tears to say, “The real blokes were knocked out cold in a supply closet.”

Hermione and Ron fall into themselves, reliving what must have been an iconic moment he’s sorry to have missed. Harry laughs, too, though less at the story and more at the state of Tom’s empty glare; clearly things hadn’t gone as he hoped. It reduces Harry’s remaining frustration into a feeling less critical, and considerably more affectionate.

An innocent mistake, an innocent Tom – not deranged, whatever Umbridge’s barmy file says.

Oh, right. The file.

“Yes, the file,” Tom agrees. “How should Polyjuice aid us, then?”

Harry’s nose wrinkles with confusion. He didn’t say that out loud, did he?

“Right,” says Ron, composing himself. “So, I was thinking if the file is real, and if she really did let Malfoy see it, there’s nothing to stop him from getting another glimpse. One of us could just pretend to be him.”

Hermione nods. “Yes, that’s…”

“Yes. Yes, I’ll do it,” Tom volunteers sharply, lacking the silent moment of thought that usually precedes his decisions. It comes as no surprise to Harry—obviously, Tom wants to see what Umbridge has on him before anyone else can. “Give me a week or two to prepare. In the meantime, I have a few loose ends to tie up.” He lifts his leather bag from the couch and drapes it over his shoulder, and ends with a lazy salute, “See you at the next meeting.”

Ron and Hermione bid him goodbye, and Harry follows out into the vacant corridor.

“Hey,” Harry says lowly, reaching for his partner’s hand as he attempts to stride off. Harry reels him back at once. Tom first looks down at Harry with an unaffected gaze, but smiles as Harry goes on, “I don’t want you to worry about the files. Or about what Malfoy said in general. It’s, you know… It’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

Tom’s eyes, inscrutable, are untouched by the kind smile. “Harry, don’t worry. I’m sure there’s nothing to fear.”

A lie, of course.

In between his duties, to the school and to the resistance, Tom watches Umbridge’s schedule from a distance, noting each step, and especially the moments when she meets with Draco dearest. This undertaking is of the utmost importance, his top priority until he knows exactly what the stupid, horrid toad has against him. Deranged, Malfoy said. It’s not much to work on, is it? It could refer
to such a number of incidences. Weepy, judgmental fools have long looked at him with scorn. He cares nothing of their opinions, but where it concerns his reputation at Hogwarts, where it concerns Harry, he cares far too much.

The textbook fiasco is short-lived, and the copies quickly destroyed, but students respond positively and an anonymous tip prompts the investigation of a well-known misfit Ravenclaw bevy. The three boys are swiftly sent down with no one to speak on their behalf because, in a fortuitous twist, their expulsion prompts the testimony of a first-year who reveals the three boys once stripped her to her knickers and, well: end summary.

Tom, though not a vigilante at heart, is happy with the development. It’s his doing, after all. However, when he privately submitted the Ravenclaws for inquiry, he did so because he thought them annoying during Prefect rounds, with no knowledge of how sinister their tale would turn. Their lack of culpability where the textbooks are concerned does not seem to inspire regret in the resistance, who liken it to the murder of two birds with one stone. Just another vulnerability to exploit, he supposes; they (Harry) may talk of justice all they want, but no one shall stand to defend the worst among the felonious, those thought deserving of universal blame for crimes they didn’t commit.

But even Tom must admit the act is distasteful.

And quite unnecessary. Satisfaction of this sort needn’t be grotesque. He and Harry meet each day in far-off classrooms, where both are soft and neither pry. Their intimacy, a natural progression, grows bolder with dignity, and quite marvelously challenges the assumption of Umbridge’s twenty-eighth decree. Harry falls back into the wall, Tom’s hands snaking around his neck and pulling him in, their bodies brushing sensually, up and down and up again. The lights are dim but they can see. Their skin seems to sizzle—cool palms against hot hips, trousers pooling at their feet, oblivious footsteps passing in shadows where the door doesn’t quite reach the stone.

It’s a sensation that runs skin deep, past the wants of flesh. If Harry is on his left, and Tom inches to the right, the string that binds merely pulls tighter and cuts deeper than before, burrowing so deep by now that he thinks, somehow, the connection is truly inseparable.

Lines continue to blur.

In Potions, in Arithmancy, in the Great Hall, wherever. Tom feels it inside of him with increasing frequency—a foreign coil of sympathy, a brittle impulse that shirks all notions of rationality. He reads Secrets of the Darkest Art in its entirety, discovers a potion of interest (and shoves the word essence to the back of his mind). He watches Malfoy and grows murderous beneath his calm, hard stare.

And days from the evening Ron’s plan is hatched, he finally acts.

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God, Harry’s nervous.

There’s really no reason to doubt Tom, but there are so many things that can go wrong, and Harry can’t help but indulge the worry swirling into a tight ball in his stomach as he waits for him to return to the Room of Requirement. He’s barely able to focus on his studies, and Hermione has already given up on trying to get him to pay attention.

“Harry.”

He listlessly turns the pages in his textbook, scribbling down some lines for his Charms essay.
Harry wishes Tom could be back already to help him. Tom loves Charms and he loves to correct Harry, so it’d be a perfect combination, really, and it would mean this whole file nonsense could be behind them.

“Harry?”

He told Tom it’s fine because it is fine. It just reminds him there are plenty of things about Tom he doesn’t yet know, regardless of their blossoming relationship. They love each other, sure—and that thought still inspires a warm, fuzzy feeling inside his chest—but he can’t brush off the nagging suspicion that he hasn’t yet really gotten to know Tom. Or rather, hasn’t gotten to see every side of him.

“Harry!”

The slam of a textbook on the table startles him out of his thoughts. He looks at Hermione and blinks owlishly. “Er–yeah?”

She gives him a surveying look that he’s not sure he likes. “Were you daydreaming?”

“Yeah, sorry, I was a little–”

“About Tom?”

“–out of… wha-what?” Harry sputters. “Why, uhh, why would I be…”

Hermione arches her eyebrows.

He sighs. “Is it that obvious?”

She pats him on the shoulder before shoving her textbook back into her heavy bag of books. “I’m going down to the library for a bit. Try to get some work done.”

He watches her leave with a somewhat embarrassed flush. It’s the first time he’s heard anyone else comment on one of his relationships. The thought used to make him slightly nauseated, for it was inevitably linked to reactions that were either violent or disgusted. To have it accepted so readily, treated no differently than any given relationship between a boy and girl, is part startling and part comforting.

And, also, embarrassing—he knows he’s a love-struck idiot, he doesn’t need it pointed out to him by other people.

Not soon after Hermione leaves does Tom come back inside the Room of Requirement, Harry having traded the textbook in to practice some spells on the dummies. He lowers his wand and smiles.

“Success is our friend today,” Tom announces, approaching Harry, who feels no small amount of relief at the sight of him. “Where’s Granger?”

“Library,” Harry replies, putting his wand away in his pocket and watching curiously as Tom pulls out a roll of parchment. His mouth parts in surprise. “I can’t believe you did it.”

“Never doubt me, Harry. I got Filch to let me in – the idiot fears Malfoys – and Umbridge barely warded off anything in the office. Don’t tell Granger, but I made a copy of her files. I didn’t get a chance to see them all yet.”

Harry’s eyes widen slightly, glancing from the parchment back up at Tom. These are copies of all
Umbridge has on staff and students? He wraps his fingers around Tom’s and tows him along to one of the couches. “What did you read so far?”

“Better to show than tell,” Tom says. He unravels it slowly to a foot-long piece of parchment, where written in pink ink there are four lines:

- Ministry Officials
- Hogwarts Professors
- Hogwarts Students
- Muggles & Squibs

“I figured it out,” Tom explains, taking the tip of his wand to the second category. The category labels bleed into the scroll, not unlike how the diary’s ink fades, and words emerge as if filtered through mesh before solidifying into a list of the Hogwarts professors.

“McGonagall,” Harry requests.

Tom taps the name.

'Minerva MCGONAGALL, half-blood: Places illegal bets on Quidditch Matches; reference HAVIUS SELWYN for evidence’


“No, perhaps not,” Tom replies. “Don’t forget they’ve just locked Florean Fortescue for opening a bloody ice cream shop.”

“Next one,” Harry demands.

The file is extensive, and not all are so blameless as McGonagall. Flitwick, being part-goblin, is apparently a relative of some sort of notorious pro-goblin rights extremist who is currently locked up in Azkaban for allegedly trying to blow up a shop in Diagon Alley. Remus is stated, aside from being a werewolf, to have attacked and bitten someone—which Harry doesn’t believe for a second. Slughorn, allegedly, has a history of purchasing parts of endangered magical creatures for his potion brewing, and Trelawney apparently used to scam people with fake prophecies.

“Malfoy was right. She really has dirt on everyone,” Harry says with a shake of the head, eyes going down the list. “Even Dumbledore is on here, huh?” Harry moves on instead, looking at the Headmaster’s name written at the very top. “What on earth could she have on him?”

Taking the incentive, he taps his wand on the name.

'Albus DUMBLEDORE, half-blood: Past homosexual involvement with Elphias DOGE; reference acquired letters'

That in and of itself is astonishing enough for Harry, but underneath that, written in fine print almost as if a footnote:

‘FRAMING FOR ALLEGATIONS OF PAEDOPHILIA POSSIBLE’

“Hmm,” Tom hums. “So, Dumbledore’s gay, too.”

“Does that mean you’re...? Oh, never mind.” Harry supposes the comment doesn’t need further clarification. “She can’t be serious with this rubbish. Do you think the Minister knows?”

Tom smirks. “If he was willing to exploit you in The Daily Prophet like he did, I don’t see why
this would be any different. It’s actually ingenious.”

Harry looks at him blankly. “Ingenious?”


“Whatsoever.”

They move on to the students. There aren’t too many there—some names unfamiliar, a few belonging to the resistance. Harry is there, but this comes as no shock; it likely has nothing but whatever the Minister pulled out for that Prophet article. His gaze lingers on Tom’s name. He almost wants to ask, but decides against it. The answer to how she even acquired such information about Tom continues to haunt him. It is possible that the Minister gathered it in a mental knapsack when he saw fit to molest Tom’s mind, back when Harry first arrived.

When Tom is unmoving, Harry takes wand to parchment.

’Terry BOOT, pure-blood: Brews absinthe in the Forbidden Forest’

Harry laughs a bit but Tom stays stiff.

“I didn’t look at our names,” Tom admits, “but I suspect our written sins won’t look as innocuous as Boot’s. Well, they could just be lies anyway. Youngest first.” Tom taps Harry’s name, smiling wryly.

’Harry POTTER, THE UNIVERSE HOPPER: affiliate of werewolf REMUS LUPIN; two attempted murders; reference Minister's catalog’

Harry wants to turn his eyes from it, but he doesn’t. It’s a truth he must face, come to terms with. This is what he’s capable of.

“That’s nothing,” Tom mutters, his tone disappointed.

Harry’s face falls. “You say that like you wanted to see something worse.”

“No, don’t misunderstand me,” Tom says smoothly. “I just mean it’s nothing we didn’t already know. It’s a good thing.”

Watching Tom’s wand tip hesitate over the parchment, just above his name, Harry doesn’t argue the point. Instead, he sets down his wand and takes Tom’s knee in hand. “You don’t have to look now but remember I’ll support you, no matter what’s on there. It can’t be too bad, can it? Can it really be worse than two attempted murders? Honestly?”

At that, he taps his wand.

‘Tom RIDDLE, Muggle-born: affiliate of THE UNIVERSE HOPPER; documented history of violence, animal brutality, arson, theft, and compulsive lying; received Muggle psychiatric diagnosis; reference Muggle Jane Cole's records’

He, like Dumbledore, has a separate footnote in fine print:

’LIKELY LEVERAGE TO MANIPULATE THE UNIVERSE HOPPER’

Harry sits in silence. It’s more than just setting fires, then. The theft and lying are easy to overlook; he aided Tom in thieving the locket, and often witnesses his lies with a casual, if not fond,
acceptance—it’s just who he is. The violence strikes him as an odd indictment, as he never imagined Tom to be a violent person before, but still, it depends on context, and Harry can’t say the term wouldn’t have applied to him as a child either, thanks to Dudley.

Animal brutality, though. That’s a hard one to brush off. He’s seen it before, of course. There were often bullies going after a poor cat or dog that happened to wander the streets, perhaps to fend off boredom or show off their cruel skills. He almost can’t imagine Tom doing something like that, but then… there’s something. Something inside of him finds it so recognizable, so easy to see…

His vision dulls and his ears fill with a high, ringing pitch. Images flit by: a young child with dark hair, almost methodically plucking the wings off flies; him dropping a rock on a small duck and watching whether it will drown; him holding a dead rabbit by its neck and sliding its furry, white head into a noose and—

Harry blinks as the present comes back to him like an elastic being snapped back, leaving him dazed. He takes a deep breath, blinking several more times as the scroll, now lying on the ground, comes back into focus. “…Tom?”

Tom’s handsome profile doesn’t twitch, his eyes fixed on his own lap. Caught between the memories and this odd tension, Harry fidgets, distractedly reaching for Tom’s hand and linking their fingers together, palm to palm. It was a vision. Like last time. Only now he knows the identity of the boy; it’s Tom. It was always Tom.

The jagged scar on his forehead seers with a numb, tingling pain. He reaches for it with his spare hand and vigorously rubs over the marred flesh.

“She knows she can use you to get to me,” Harry finally says. ”If worse comes to worst, you’ll just have to disavow me. Pretend I forced you into this, or manipulated you. Whatever works best.” It’s a very grim but also very real possibility. He couldn’t live bearing the thought of something happening to Tom just because he was trying to protect Harry. It’s selfish, but if anyone had to keep the resistance alive, he’d much rather it be Tom than himself. He pulls Tom’s hand up to his lips and presses a soft kiss to the back of it.

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Tom could roll his eyes. This is perhaps the sort of logic Harry considers cunning, mistaking the sour aftertaste of sacrifice for a clever power move, when the fundamental premise of his stratagem is troublingly faulty. In hostage scenarios, the enemy’s aim isn’t to maim their piece of leverage into submission; their aim is to twist the whim of their opponent into an advantage. Harry’s so innocent, so bloody kind. He knows nothing of tactics, of cruelty, of ambition, and it’s daft, and yet it somehow makes the sensation of soft lips on cool knuckles feel invigorating.

“Remember what I said. This doesn’t change anything,” Harry murmurs as he looks up at Tom, kissing his hand once more.

Tom shakes his head and sinks deeper in plush cushion. He doesn’t wish to acknowledge it. Harry should’ve feigned ignorance, pretended there was nothing to be said. The saccharine sappiness of his little game wells shame in the bottom of Tom’s throat, urging him to tear his hand from Harry’s. But he doesn’t. He forces his lips, reluctantly, into a sad smile, capturing each nerve, each tic, and suffocating their will to reveal the truth.

This is Harry, right where he wants him.

Tom begins with a sigh, then says, “I was afraid you wouldn’t understand.”
“I don’t know that I do understand,” Harry tells him quietly. “But you were just a kid then, right? This woman, this Jane Cole – was she one of your caretakers? Do you think the Ministry, you know… investigated you?”

"I suppose they did," he reasons, frowning, "but they must’ve not looked too far. Ms. Cole is listed as my guardian for Hogwarts paperwork, but I haven’t spoken to her since I arrived. She was my caseworker, you see. What matters is that she still has access to my records, and obviously they don’t cast me in the most flattering light.”

Harry’s sympathetic sulk fills Tom with confidence. Lies are kinder to Tom than the truth ever was; lies grant him control.

“It was hard back then,” Tom says. "I once told you I went through thirty houses as a child. Suffice to say, that’s a highly unusual amount. I was thrown out by nearly every family that kept me long enough. I used my magic to do bad things. I suppose it was because I wanted attention.”

(No he didn’t. He wanted to be left alone and for them to live in fear, in fear of him.)

“Magical children don’t belong with Muggles,” he says firmly. “They make us ashamed, turn us cruel. Thing were different once I arrived at Hogwarts,” Tom bats his eyelashes softly, “and then even more different when I found the diary.”

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“That I understand,” Harry says faintly, a smile.

The loneliness manifested differently in Harry, true. But it was the same longing, the same desperation, that drove him into shame and secrecy that turned Tom to cruelty—but all that’s done with. Their path prepared them well to fight for truth and fairness, those things they were once deprived.

“It’s curious, isn’t it?” Tom says. “Our similarities, our entwining fate. The peculiar magic has fascinated me since the inception of the diary.” The thin, long fingers press against Harry’s cheek, caressing him and cooling him. Harry accepts the pleasant gesture by leaning his face into it, the gentle rouse stirring his affection.

Yeah, but I doubt we’ll ever really know why it happened, will we?”

Tom smiles sharply. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. I discovered something recently, a potion called the Draught of Vision. I wanted to ask you earlier, but I felt so insecure, thinking about Malfoy’s threat and all, that I delayed it.”

“Oh,” Harry says, blushing slightly. “You shouldn’t have worried, Tom. Do you need me to help or anything? I know I’m miserable at potions, but I could try. What does it do?”

“It offers a unique vision to whomever ingests it. For the average person, this vision will be a banal thing, a little self-discovery. But I think the results could be interesting for us,” Tom explains, sinking his fingers into Harry’s hair, massaging the scalp. “All I need from you is a piece of hair, willingly given. You must cut it off yourself for the potion to mature properly. Tricky brew, this one. It will take another month.”

Harry obliges easily enough and brushes the matter aside, thinking the prospect interesting but, all the same, figuring it will be of no value to him until Tom has finished. He prefers to relax his mind for now. He pushes Tom down onto the broad couch and rests beside him, lying his head on his chest and joking darkly about their greatest anxieties. Their interest turns too quickly to their
homework and spell practice and, again too soon, it’s time for the D.A. to arrive.

The Room of Requirement is still as Tom speaks, his demeanor militaristic, presentation impassive. “Now that you’ve all achieved mastery of the Shield Charm, as well as its variations, we shall advance to more advanced material. Remember, it is your responsibility,” he scans over each of them, “to reference the Defense theory abstracts Hermione has generously compiled for you all.”

Neville raises his hand. “Can you… uh. Can you talk more about what Hermione said? About the Ministry possibly locking up Muggle-borns?”

“No, I think not,” Tom says, diplomatic. “For now, we must assume the least of it and await further developments. Our time is better spent enriching our defenses than speculating without insight.”

Justin’s disapproval comes out in a burst, his head shaking. “I don’t know, Tom. I don’t know how to wait for something like this. What if they break our wands? Or Obliviate us? Or threaten our families?”

His fear is not his alone; several students, the Muggle-borns, whisper and nod.

“Let me be clear,” Tom says grimly, “I do not take the rumor lightly. I myself lack known magical heritage, and rather unlike most Muggle-borns, I have no family, no stake in the Muggle world. I am as much at risk as anyone.”

He allows this acknowledgement to sink in with the students, to quell whatever doubts there may be. “Nevertheless, I keep my head clear enough to remember the significance of vital information. This threat doesn’t offer us vital information—it offers us a warning.”

“Alright then, Riddle,” starts Smith. “What about the Education Decrees? I’d say there’s enough vital information there.”

Tom frowns. “Do you really think they warrant action?”

“Yeah!” calls Justin. “Why not a little bit of vandalism, eh, Riddle?”

“Alright,” Tom agrees. “But we can’t risk our exposure for something this petty, so the task force must be small. We need three to five volunteers. You must all be from the same House so that if you’re caught, you don’t attract attention.”

Several hands respond, from which Tom selects four Hufflepuffs before dismissing them to practice.

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As Tom assumed, the vandalism effort blossoms into more trouble than it's worth. Even Harry’s charming delight at the juvenile effort is not worth the increased tension. The morning after delegating the Hufflepuffs to deface the Ministry’s nonsense, all students awake to a mess—parchment decrees charmed with wings, words altered to read rather silly, vulgar tripe.

“There must be six inches inside girls at all times,” Weasley reads, guffawing. “Boys must keep their hands inside their cloaks for a quick wank between classes. This is bloody brilliant!”

But, upon the insubordination being met with Umbridge’s iron fist, the thrill subsides spectacularly. The new punishment for undermining the decrees—even those that are benign, like playing music—is hard expulsion. No second chances. Tom supposes that so long as no resistance
members are identified, all is well. He can’t worry about these little things in life; he has a potion to brew. The first stage is easy enough: his hair and Harry’s, willingly given; motherwort; doxy venom; bloodroot; bat blood; wizard blood. Indeed, it’s a very bloody potion. Nothing less can be expected from something taken out of Darkest Art, however. Part three shall prove the most taxing of all, but alas.

His private work on this rather advanced brew makes Slughorn’s class feel like child’s play.

“No, Harry, you must graze the blade along the top of the bean, like so,” he demonstrates, shaking his head. “You’re trying to get the peel of the skin, not hack into the seed itself. Your draught will never turn out.”

“I’m not hacking it!”

“Ahem!”

Tom and Harry sigh together, twisting to see Umbridge, who is carrying a large stack of scrolls.


She ambles to the front of the room, pink lipstick cracking in the stretch of her smile. “I cannot stay for long, so Draco, be a dear, please come pass these out.” Malfoy hops to the task, stepping with swagger and taking in an armful of scrolls.

“By decree of the Minister himself, it is now required that all students at Hogwarts verify their ancestry by enrolling in a registry. If you wish to be recognized as a born member of the magical community, you must fill out these forms and submit them no later than February 1 of next year to Bellatrix Lestrange, Head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission at the Ministry. Students unable to provide evidence of at least one magical parent will be required to spend a year in our most excellent re-education facility before returning to Hogwarts.”

What hurts more than the fact that this is happening, is that no one dares to speak out. She has too much power.

Harry stares down at the rather convoluted looking form with a scowl, wondering if they’d even accept him. The first thing his father did shortly after Harry arrived was officially register him as his heir, as Lily and James Potter’s only child. It would be a simple thing to ask his father for whatever records he has of their family lineage—

A thought arrests Harry in the midst of his annoyed inner monologue. They’re targeting students now, but there’s no doubt in his mind that they’ll be targeting every other civilian as well. Even if Harry’s form is accepted, seeing as how his father is pureblood, what about his mother?

His mother is a Muggle-born, so she has no magical ancestry to speak of. If this program spreads to the general population, even with her being a renown Healer and Head of a Department in St. Mungo’s, there’s no guarantee her reputation will be enough to protect her, not for long. She might escape by the virtue of being married to a pure-blood and an Auror—but how long is that going to stop the Ministry before they label his father a ‘blood traitor’ and force him into these camps as well?

The paper crumbles in his hands and he moodily shoves it into his bag, meeting Umbridge’s dismayed stare head-on. She says nothing, probably content in the knowledge he’ll end up in one of these no doubt barbaric re-education facilities soon enough.
He tears his gaze away from her, turning to Tom instead. “I doubt I have much of a shot. They’ll probably reject me out of some stupid technicality.” That’s just how these things go; he has a target on his back, and he doubts Grindelwald is just going to allow him to escape that. “What about you? If you could find evidence, there’s at least a reasonable chance yours would be accepted.”

But then Umbridge does her shrilly little cough again, demanding the attention of the classroom once more as she pulls out another roll of parchment. “If the following students would be so kind to come up to my office directly after the end of class—Hannah Abbott, Terry Boot, Hermione Granger, Anthony Goldstein, Parvati Patil, Harry Potter, and Tom Riddle. That’ll be all.”

Harry scowls, having expected this but feeling rather anxious all the same. If even one person talks, that’ll be the end of the whole thing. No doubt that’s what Umbridge is banking on, anyway. They’re taken to her office for little one-on-one talks, with nothing too baleful at play. His own conversation with her goes about as well as can be expected. He does his best not to rise to any attempts at baiting him, answering her questions with either a yes, a no, or an indifferent I don’t know. He refuses any tea or biscuits she offers him, and by the end she’s so aggravated by his tight-lipped silence she snaps at him to leave.

They sit outside the hall in wait for their turn.

“D’you think she knows anything?” Boot asks quietly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Granger says, sure of herself. “We won’t say a word one way or the other. Before you go in, I’d like to remind you all that you signed up for this, alright? You signed the parchment.”

Tom smirks; he didn’t. He would never dare sign his name on something that listed him as part of “Dumbledore’s Army,” even if he is their leader. And that’s not to mention the nasty jinx Granger put on it.

Perceptive, Goldstein pipes in, “What? Did you jinx it, Granger?”

“Never you mind that.”

Goldstein and Boot laugh to one another, each commenting on her unexpected venom. Boot questions, half-jokingly, “What’ll it do to us, then? Make us Squibs?”

Granger scoffs. “You know that isn’t possible. Even if it were, I couldn’t manage a jinx as complicated as that.”

His joke sets in Tom’s mind a rather nasty thought. His mother wasn’t listed on any genealogy charts, meaning her birth was never reported to the Ministry even though her brother was…

Was she a Squib?

Her brother, Morfin, would know, wouldn’t he? What if Tom found him and brought him to the Ministry for verification?

He snorts at his own childishness, how absurd he’s being. This hope is one stitch short of those fanciful dreams he thought of as a boy, imagining his father to be some sort of patrician in a lavish house near the sea.
Tom is next to go in. Granger’s whispered advice (“Just play stupid!”) is, indeed, what he does—for the three minutes of her petty questioning, he performs the part of a charming innocent. Before he leaves, he says, brows knit, handsome face gracious, “Thank you for your time, High Inquisitor. I trust you’ll find the answer to your problems soon. May I ask you a question regarding the Muggle-born Registration Commission?”

Her sharp teeth glint. “Why, yes, of course, child. You are Muggle-born, are you not?”

“I wouldn’t know, High Inquisitor. I ask merely out of curiosity: would the child of a Squib be exempt from re-education?”

The pouty lips frown, making her all the more a toad. “Squibs are by no measure proper members of the magical community.”

At that, he leaves with a “Thanks,” and a smile, scowling the second his back is turned.

He wishes it could be the last he sees of her before returning from Christmas. That, however, would exclude him from the festivity of the prestigious Board of Governor’s meeting, and that is something he would not miss for the world.

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“Think if I ask pretty enough, I can take the Cloak off?” Harry asks teasingly, poking his head into visibility, giving the impression he has no body. “Just tell them I’m your date. Should go over well enough.”

“Yes, and while I’m at it, let’s ask politely for the Minister to stop targeting Muggle-borns. Oh, who would wear this?” Tom pulls a gown from the wooden wardrobe, shaking his head with disapproval at its bright purple, floral pattern and tossing it to the floor, where it disappears. The Room of Requirement, a true thing of wonder, responded to Tom’s complaint about his lack of formal dress robes by presenting an entire selection for him to choose from. Harry takes off his Cloak and stands beside Tom, snickering as he thumbs through the other ghastly shades of bright pink, orange and green.

“This must be where Dumbledore finds his dreadful robes,” Tom says. “This one looks normal.”

Harry eyes the plain black hooded gown. “I actually like how Dumbledore dresses. I mean, we can’t all wear black all the time.”

“I don’t wear black all the time,” Tom says as he slips the robe over his standard button-down and black trousers. “I sometimes wear white, too.” He turns to his reflection, a Mirror Charm that floats beside the wardrobe, and adjusts the fabric to suit his form. It’s a handsome fit, though Harry thinks Tom could look well-suited in even the silliest of gowns. Which gives Harry an idea.

“Ha! How do I look?” he asks after pulling over a great, woolly magenta robe that is covered with square, orange patches and hemmed with frills.

Tom considers him, almost seeming unamused but for a slight smirk. “I dare you to wear it.”

Harry frowns and gathers it in his hands, pulling it up above his knees. “Why? It’s not like anyone’s going to see me anyway.”

“Then why not do it?” Tom retorts, looking back at himself and fussing with his coiffured locks.

“Alright.”
Tom’s expression goes inquisitive in the mirror. “Excuse me?”

Harry grins. “I’ll do it. Comfortable things, really. And like you said, it’s not like anyone can see me. Unless you have a problem with me wearing them.”

“No, not at all,” Tom responds unconvincingly, frowning. “Shall we go, then?”

“I’d love to.”

Snow pelts harshly against the frosty corridor windows as they walk toward Slughorn’s office, where the meeting is being held. Garlands of holly and tinsel twist around the stair banisters and candles flicker behind helmets and suits of armor, giving some semblance of life and hope to the dreary place Hogwarts has become. Harry is glad to soon be rid of it for the holidays.

“Now,” Tom says when they are within sight of the office entrance, “don’t forget to –”

“I’ll be as loud as an elephant,” Harry whispers dully.

The office is unexpectedly larger—perhaps a trick for the night, or maybe because Slughorn has earned seniority for his many decades of teaching. The ceiling and walls are dressed with crimson curtaining, giving the room some impression of being a rather regal tent. Beneath an ornate golden lamp dangling from the center of the room, there stretches a long table where sit three unfamiliar old men. One rises to shake Tom’s hand and then introduces him to the others, who extend their greetings. Harry steps quietly into the corner of the room, curling his back against a bookshelf’s side, careful to avoid wrinkling the drapery.

This is going to be a long night.

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“Ritter, you say?” asks Bartemius Crouch, leaning in and squinting at Tom over the tabletop as if he were a specimen. His wrinkled lip twitches beneath a narrow toothbrush mustache. “Your father. He works in the Department of Mysteries, no? Marius Ritter?”

“No, sir. I’m called Riddle,” Tom amends respectfully.

“Riddle,” says a man called Cornelius Fudge, adjusting his green bowler cap atop his balding head. “Don’t think I’ve heard that one before. What do your parents do, Mr. Riddle?”

“Let him be, Cornelius,” Milton insists, waving his hand as if to swat a fly. “He has a right to be his own man, doesn’t he?”

Milton Nott’s eyes, the scrupulous brown passed to his son, dart between the other men. It is the only likeness they share, for where Theo has his soft, discerning demeanor, Milton is bold, his shoulders held back with dignity.

“Yes, yes, fine,” Cornelius agrees, regard shifting to the door, where walks in a pair of witches. Cho Chang, shorter and prettier than the younger girl by her side, wears a blue dress embroidered with sequins, seeming to be in match with her friend’s accented gown. Tom smiles politely at them as Cornelius roars, “Ah, and there’s my pick: Ms. Chang, please have a seat. And who are you?”

“That would my niece,” Crouch says, pulling out the chair by his side for her to sit.

The others take not much longer; next, Thaddeus Warrington steps in with his son and Orion Black at his heels, filling the seats nearest to Tom and creating a lucky chance barrier between the
two Malfoys, whose identical pale faces are held with haughtiness when they make their entrance. Orion Black saves the seat next to him, and directly in front of Tom, with a serviette strewn on its front. Fudge takes a glance at it, and taps the table in thought.

“Who did you invite, Black?”


Tom’s brows twitch as his ears catch Draco’s derisive *hmph*. She comes in wearing pink satin, curly hair pinned into a bun, and she avoids Tom’s eyes with a casual air, all charming smiles for the powerful men around them. At least the pure-bloods raise their children with tact. As Tom plays the part—answering banal questions, laughing when appropriate, refusing to milk or sugar his tea—he inwardly contrasts their behaviors with the social environment of his youth. Magic is not the single difference. The girls’ laughter is *so girlish*, gentle with no teeth; the men all posture with titles and money, no mention of grit; no one once swears and, most compellingly, no one has yet asked where Slughorn is while aggressively shouting and gesturing at their growling stomach. Tom sips from his tea and surveys for sign of Harry with little success.

“Father,” drawls Malfoy, “do you know when the Minister will arrive? He owled you personally this evening, did he not?”

Tom clenches his goblet tightly. Neither Theo nor Milton mentioned *this* small fact—Harry has to get out of here, but how?

“Don’t boast, Draco. He’ll be here soon enough.”

“Am I late?”

The entire room snaps to the entrance, where the tall, pointed hat of Albus Dumbledore grazes the doorframe, bending and popping back up, ringing the small, seasonal bell on its top. He takes the seat at the head of the table, all eyes on him, and holds his wrinkled hands out welcomingly. “So very nice to see each of you. I quite like your bracelet, Ms. Chang.”

She pets it, smiling. “Thank you, Headmaster. It’s a gift from my mother.”

“Of the Changs?” Malfoy asks disinterestedly.

“Yes, that *is* my last name, Draco,” she responds curtly.

“Yes,” Dumbledore says, “it is one of those unfortunate facts of life that we cannot choose our names for ourselves. I might like to be called something a little more fashionable than Albus Wulfric Percival Brian Dumbledore, but it seems our attachment to a family is a strong force. But I don’t need to tell you all this; half of the room is related directly, and even more of us indirectly, I believe.”

His blue-eyes move behind half-moon spectacles, stopping momentarily at a spot in the corner of the room before moving calmly to Tom. “Mr. Riddle, pardon me if my request strikes you as eccentric, but I believe I dropped my knitting needle in the corridor, and trust me, it can’t be summoned. Would you mind getting it for me?”

“Yes, sir,” Tom agrees swiftly, picking up on the hint and pacing toward the door, praying that Harry is paying enough attention to realize what’s happening —

But the door opens of its own accord before Tom’s hand can reach the knob. A sheath of magic seems to cover the room, foreboding, falling on skin like sticky sap; it is the aura of the Minister, who steps into the entrance with his arms folded behind his dark robes, a slim smile sinking
beneath the pleats of his lined cheeks.

“It is an honor to be among old friends.”

Chapter End Notes

i'm so tired. this chapter was so hard to organize and write, but i totally loved doing it. i'm sure my dirty fingers will be coming back here tomorrow to make edits to the grammar but i just wanted to get this posted.

of course, much much gratitude goes out to all supporters of the story, and the lovely reviewers—Oblivion9032, KaiShiXara, ariesmoon (teambetterfriends), primu, mimsical, spoonring, and Firedraygon90. you are each greatly appreciated! it's so nice having people to share this story with. :)

- Amelinda
Introducing the Order

Chapter Summary

End of Last Chapter: Tom is attending a meeting with the Hogwarts Board of Governor's. Harry, who wasn't invited, comes beneath his trusty Cloak. The evening takes a turn when it is revealed that the Minister is coming. Just as Tom is at the door, attempting to discreetly sneak Harry out, the Minister arrives with the Toad in tow.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Harry holds himself still beneath the Cloak, careful not to budge, breathe or show any outward evidence of existing. The Minister steps in with his chin held straight, his hands cupped behind his back, Umbridge scurrying to his side. His shifting eyes are swift and sharp. Harry clutches the Cloak tighter in his grip. No one at the table dare speak while their heads are bowed in honor. Compliant subjects beneath the Minister’s gaze. Dumbledore is the exception with a calm and tranquil demeanor; he doesn’t need to play the game. Tom’s back is turned on Harry, but by the tell of his lax fingers and easy stance, he is self-contained. Confident.

Tom Riddle doesn’t get nervous.

“Ah, Mr. Riddle,” the Minister croons, settling his gaze on Tom, “leaving so soon, are you?”

“No, sir,” Tom says smoothly, no hint of tension. “I was just returning to my seat, you see.”

The Minister’s neck straightens and he hums curiously. Though he stares at Tom, his eyes tick to the periphery, looking past Tom and into Harry’s direction…but he couldn’t possibly see Harry, could he? No, Harry thinks as the Minister’s eyes shift around, examining the interior with what looks like trivial interest. The Minister smiles and sits at the head of the table, directly across from Dumbledore, Umbridge to his right. Tom makes his way back, too, blank-faced and stiff. Harry swallows dryly.

Coming here tonight may be the dumbest choice he’s made in the wizarding world yet.

“A handsome group of students,” says the Minister, “don’t you think, Albus? And smart, no doubt.”

“Don’t give them too much credit,” cuts in Fudge. “We looked like them once. Better, even!” He laughs at his own joke and the students smile politely, sparing a few nervous tittles. “Joking, of course, but not too much. Soon the lot of you will be as old and fat as I am.”

“Speaking of old and fat,” says Warrington, “where on earth is Slughorn? I really thought the ol’ chap would be eager at the door.”

Umbridge clears her throat. “He won’t be in attendance this evening. Spent a bit too much time handling Occamy shavings, could barely get out of bed to answer his door.”
“Oh?” voices Lucius. “That’s a pity.”

“A pity indeed,” says the Minister. “Albus, shall we commence?”

Dumbledore smiles faintly. “Certainly, Minister.”

He snaps his long, wrinkled fingers and a feast appears atop the long dining table. Three plump turkeys sit on ornate trays, each surrounded by steaming prawns and golden hooves of Yorkshire pudding. Harry wills his stomach to stay quiet as the guests fill their plates. It’s certainly not the first time he’s watched others eat while his own hunger stirred. (Uncle Vernon made sure of that.)

“So,” says the Minister sharply, “as I understand it, I’m sitting with the best and brightest Hogwarts has to offer. It is with high hopes I ask how your terms are going. It is time for finals, no?”

Lucius sips from his gauntlet and says, “Yes, that’s correct. I have it on record from the High Inquisitor that scores will be higher this year, thanks to the Ministry.”

“Well, that is obviously rubbish, Lucius,” dismisses the Minister briskly, the brunt of his otherwise faint accent peeking through. The room falls silent once more.

The High Inquisitor clears her throat.

“Of course, the education of students at Hogwarts could not have drastically improved in one semester alone. But we have, I hope, laid the foundation for further improvement.”

The Minister chuckles. “The education at Hogwarts was never a concern, I assure. There is no greater living wizard than the one who gifts us with his presence tonight.” He extends his hand in gesture across the table. “But never mind that. Tonight is a night of acquaintanceship. Please, Fudge, you can start us off by introducing your guest. It is Ms. Cho Chang, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” confirms Cho.

“Ms. Chang is the current Head Girl here at Hogwarts,” brags Fudge jovially, “and a right good Seeker, albeit for Ravenclaw. Not that we’re holding that against you, Cho.”

Harry rolls his eyes. Bloody wankers and their stupid little houses. After Crouch’s bland description of his niece, Warrington goes next, presenting his great lug of a son as if he were a god. Lucius isn’t much better (“Draco, here, is an excellent student, the lead investigator for the Inquisitorial Squad, and a rising Quidditch star as well”).

“And here, we have Ms. Daphne Greengrass,” says Orion Black, “but I think she may wish to speak on her own behalf.”

As she does, Harry stares at Mr. Black. He must be a relative of Sirius’s. Same hair, similar eyes, the same family name. He ponders it briefly, but when it is time for Nott to introduce Tom, his attention is fixed.

“This is – ”

“Not your son,” interrupts the Minister, leaning in, and slanting over the table with his elbows on the wood.

“Unfortunately, Theodore couldn’t make it,” concurs Nott. “He suggested I bring young Tom here in his place.”
“A good choice,” says the Minister, drumming his fingers, one after the other. “You’ve been well since our last, I expect?”

“Indeed.” Tom smiles and folds his hands before his plate.

“Mr. Riddle is an extraordinary student,” says Nott, “and a Slytherin Prefect. Theodore tells me he earned twelve Os on his O.W.Ls.”

Warrington coughs mid-chew.

“Is that even possible?” Lucius drawls irritably.

Harry smiles.

“Quite rare,” says Dumbledore, “but possible, yes. Special scheduling arrangements are made for students who demonstrate an interest. I daresay Tom won’t mind if I confirm the accusation is true.” He smiles fondly. “With great intelligence comes, I fear, a great burden to prove it isn’t a myth of sorts.”

Tom pats his lips with a serviette, though he hasn’t taken a bite yet. “Oh, I don’t feel this way, Professor. I simply work very hard.”

“Clever boy,” says the Minister. “I hope you have used this, ah, hard work to assist your friend.”

Harry tenses.

“My friend?”

“Yes, he is your friend still, isn’t he? The Universe Hopper?”

Tom nods. “Yes, of course. I would like to think I’ve been of some assistance.”

The Minister’s pale lips curve the slightest hint of a smile. “I’m sure you have.”

***

If the conversation could stray somewhere which didn’t involve Harry, Tom would be chuffed. Truly. Unfortunately his world is one of dizzy daydreams and broken wishes. He stares blankly at his plate, barely touched, and listens to the ceaseless currents of speculations.

“It is peculiar magic isn’t it?”

“I don’t really see how something like that is possible!”

“A Muggle acquiring magic, I mean, it can’t be true. He must have had some magic before crossing over, some sort of magical heritage.”

Tom lays his fork down and exhales through his nose. The most politically power wizards in Britain, in here with him, and they’re nothing but a bunch of babbling old fools taking turns at the bat. Harry is his business; not theirs.

“Could he not have, ah, stolen it?” says Lucius. “Accidentally, that is. I’ve read of it happening before.”

“Stealing magic?” asks Chang skeptically. “There’s no such thing as stealing magic.”

“Well,” mutters Crouch, folding his arms and shaking his head, “I’ve never heard of such a thing.
Sounds like utter hogwash to me.”

“Hogwash?” asks Lucius, pinching his brows together.

“You heard me, Malfoy.”

The Minister laughs. “Please, no fighting in front of the children, children. Especially not about something which neither of you seem to know a thing about. I think we’re overlooking a most qualified commentator.” He points his finger, thin and gray, at Tom. “What say you, Mr. Riddle?”

Tom perks. The room’s attention is his to command. He needlessly brushes a stray tress behind his ear and shakes his head, all modest and unassuming. “I’m afraid to say I’m not sure. But I can guarantee you that no theft was involved. In the literature, many believe Universe Hoppers are fated travelers—like messengers, if you will.”

“But why?” questions Greengrass. “Why him? If fate did just decide to pluck him up and send him here, shouldn’t there be a bigger reason?”

“Perhaps,” says the Minister. “Forgive an old man for his rambling tales, but I can’t help but be reminded of another type of magic which I witnessed in my younger days. Albus, in particular, quite likes this story, don’t you?”

Dumbledore says nothing. The Minister pushes his plate away from himself and leans in, face alight with enthusiasm, looking like a scout leader hunching over a campfire.

“You see, it was during the war. On the outskirts of Chemnitz, in eastern Germany. I was alone for the night, working on Hydration Potions, separated from my squad while they gathered intel. Just as I was about to fall asleep, a loud banging and knocking came at the front door to my cabin. Quite odd, I thought. You see, my cabin was well-warded; no one should have seen it. And yet, someone did. I carefully looked through the peephole, fully expecting to see a troop geared for combat, but then, on the other side, there was no such person. There was just a woman. A pregnant woman, grasping at her bulging stomach, squatting in pain.

“Trap or no, I gave her a chance. My own mother died in childbirth, you see. I had a soft spot for such a sight.”

(Tom imagines his own mother.)

“I let her in and settled her on the couch. I eased her pain with a Calming Charm before I asked her for her name. She told me, in English, that she didn’t know what I was saying. I asked her again in English, and she didn’t respond, just picking at her dress and tossing her fevered head. I sat with her like this for some time before she finally said something. She said, I’m not where I’m supposed to be. I’m supposed to be in London. What year is it? Can you get me to London? Odd, still, but fair enough. It went on like this for hours. Her rambling about being in the wrong place, the wrong plane, the wrong universe—delirious talk, I supposed—and no matter my attempts, she wouldn’t let me deliver her child. Then there was a period where she was quiet. Lasted about an hour or so. Just as I was about to offer her more care, she asked me to retrieve her rucksack. I did. She pulled out a cup and then, suddenly, her body erupted in lights and she was gone. Poof.”

“So, she grabbed a Portkey?” Nott suggests.

“No, not a Portkey,” replies the Minister. “I cannot be certain of what it was, but it certainly was not a Portkey. It was, I think, something not unlike the diary which brought the Universe Hopper to our doorstep.”

“How can you be sure she wasn’t Apparating?”
“Because, Cornelius, unlike most wizards, I’m both exceptionally powerful and highly learned in the magical arts. There is one wizard in our midst who bests me, and as I recall, he agrees with my hypothesis.”

“Is that so, Albus?” asks the elder Warrington.

“It is not a question which demands certainty, is it? Humbly, I think there may be truth to this. There have always been travelers, or Hoppers if you prefer. It should not be impossible that they are given to weave in-and-out at times.”

No one seems convinced of this but, of course, no one speaks against either man. Dinner ends not long after and Tom watches the bottom of Harry’s peaking trainer (idiot) scuttle through the door behind Dumbledore. Tom stays behind while the others leave because the Minister, and the Minister alone, stays seated, hands linked over the tabletop, eyes set interestedly on Tom. Tom smiles and approaches the Minister, tightening his Occlumency shields with full focus.

The Minister is intimidating in his old age. Even with the benign smile he shares, there is an edge to his expressions, a sharp corner of something dangerously playful. Tom doesn’t care. He meets the man with poise.

“Minister. I was not expecting your attendance this evening and so, please let me say, it is an honor. If you are not too busy, may I have a word?”

“You say that as if I had anything different in mind, Mr. Riddle.”

“Very well. I was curious about the woman you met those years ago. Was there anything else which led you to the conclusion that she was a Hopper? Anything specific?”

The Minister gives an askance gaze, a critical one. “Was my story not convincing enough for you? Ha! Well, what else should I expect from one so young? I cannot give you the answers to your own conundrum, you know. Whatever magical tether brought your friend to join us, I do not know. Maybe you never will either, and it’s no matter. You are your own man. His will, his destiny, is not yours to bear.”

A flush of heat fills Tom’s cheeks. “Perhaps that would be true if not for the present circumstances.”

“It is true regardless.”

“Then I suppose that’s where we part on opinion, Minister Grindelwald.”

“But isn’t it my choice to make, Mr. Riddle?”

Tom doesn’t speak another word as he passes the Minister, hand kept close to his pocket, close to his wand. He hopes the exchange is over, but as he crosses the threshold, he’s met with one final call.

“And by the way, Mr. Riddle, please tell your friend that I found his robes most fashionable. Quite a statement, if I do say so myself.”

***

A week passes.

It is, at long last, the first day of break. The Hogwarts Express is Harry’s ticket to paradise and
nothing, nothing at all—not the registry, not the Minister, not the stupid bloody Board of Governors—can steal his excitement to return home. It'll be nice to experience Christmas as it was intended. Of course, returning home means he’s forced to take on the embarrassing task of revealing his relationship to his parents (or rather, his mother, seeing as how Lily is the one who always writes as Harry quickly found his father’s handwriting to be completely illegible). It was painful and awkward and even though his mother wrote back a far too pleased response, inviting Tom for Christmas as well, Harry still can’t help but feel restless once they arrive.

He needn’t be nervous. Both his parents await them at the platform, greeting them cheerfully. Maybe a bit too cheerfully, as his dad nearly crushes him in a hug (“Dad, seriously, my ribs—”), but they act no differently than they did this summer, though his mother hugs Tom as well this time, much to Harry’s amusement.

For a moment, Harry thinks he’s dodged a bullet—until they Apparate to the house and his father initiates one of the most embarrassing moments of his life.

“So, you’re both dating, huh?” he starts casually, and Harry suppresses a groan.

“Yes, dad, we’re dating.”

“Ah.” James nods sagely. “Who are the lucky girls?”

Harry stares at his dad in sheer incomprehension as he closes the front door behind them, turning to look at his mother who sighs, pinching her nose between her fingers.

“Oh my god, James. Are you serious?”

“No, I’m Sirius,” Harry’s godfather chimes in from the living room.

“Shut it, Black.”

“What?” James asks, look in confusion from his wife, to his son, to Tom. “What did I miss?”

Lily is the paragon of patience as she slowly replies, “They’re dating each other, sweetheart.”

James mouth opens slowly, and it finally seems to dawn on him. “Oh. Oh! W-well, why didn’t you say so in the first place? You just said they were dating! I only assumed—”

“For heaven’s sake, this is sixth year all over again.”

“I’m not listening to this!” Harry declares with a red face, marching into the living room, thoroughly embarrassed as he all but collapses on the couch next to Sirius’s armchair. His godfather raises his eyebrows at him. “Hi, Sirius.”

“Hello there, kids,” Sirius says, but when he sees Tom his eyes narrow slightly and he takes a long sip from his drink. “Heard from Remus you had a bit of fun at school.”

“Thank you for reminding me!” Lily says as she walks into the room, looking rather sternly at Harry, the picture of motherly disapproval with her hands on her hips. “I can’t believe you, Harry—getting into it with Umbridge is one thing, but vandalism—”

“It wasn’t me!”

“Christ, you sound exactly like James.”

“I swear, it wasn’t!” Harry defends heatedly. “I-I mean, I might know the people involved—it, er,
it was a group decision. Come on, mum, she had it coming!”

“Harry James Potter,” she snaps, and he doesn’t know why that’s so effective at making him shrink, but damn if it doesn’t make him feel like a kicked puppy. “Tell me you did not organise some sort of rebel group inside your school—”

“It was Tom’s idea!”

“—when you know the Minister is looking for any sort of excuse to take you away from us!” Lily scowls at him. “So, if Tom jumps off a bridge I suppose you’ll just follow right after, is that it?”

“Well, that depends on why he jumped off in the first place. Like, is the bridge on fire or—”

“Don’t you get smart with me, young man! James, stop laughing.”

“Try ‘I’m sorry’ next,” Sirius advises Harry wryly. “It won’t help, but at least she won’t be yelling anymore.”

“Black, I will drag you out of this house by your hair so help me god.”

Sirius’ hands fly to his hair in a scandalised expression, and Harry sinks deeper into the cushions. His father sympathetically pats him on the shoulder.

Well, at least it’s good to be home.

***

The Potter home is decorated in the spirit of yuletide, the air is thick with spiced scents. It’s a scene from a Christmas special. Merlin. Tom nearly regrets leaving Hogwarts for the break. He occasionally brushes his shoulder against Harry’s simply to remind himself that there is reason to be here.

Potter clan banter is playful and not at all derisive, but everyone responds with exaggerated offense to, well, everything and anything said in a specific tone. Tom studies the rhythm of conversation, remaining quiet as he observes, trying his best to reconcile himself with the sad reality that Harry’s parents are young and Tom’ll be forced to endure their company for quite a bit of his life. What drudgery.

“So, Tom,” Black says sharply. Tom snaps to meet his gaze, which looks like it has been set on Tom for longer than a moment. Tom adjusts his neck, preparing to play the role they all want to see. “We’re all dying to know, I think: When did you find yourself taken in by the old Potter charm?”

His impassive face turns warmly pleasant. “We became rather close over the course of our correspondence. I suppose after Harry arrived, it was only a matter of time.”

“Oh, I see.” Black seems suspicious. Of what, Tom can’t say. “Invite all your boyfriends to join your anti-Ministry extremist groups?”

Tom blinks. “Err, it’s really not like that.”

Lily snaps her fingers once, flopping a splash of Black’s wine on his face. “Stop harassing my son’s boyfriend, Padfoot. Don’t mind him, Tom. Likes attention, that one.”

“Me?” Black says dramatically, putting a limp hand to his chest. “You wound me, Lily, you wound me.”
“You know, I didn’t even know Harry was gay,” James says unexpectedly, turning heads. The expression on his face—which Tom can’t really stand to look at, seeing as it’s unnervingly similar to Harry’s—is quite innocent. But Tom knows better.

Later, when the fire of the gathering has extinguished and the stupid dog Black has Apparated to his kennel, Tom mentions his suspicions to Harry. They are alone in Harry’s room. It’s just as it was in the summer, except there is a light blanket of snow outside the window and, well, everything between them has changed substantially. Tom lies with his back to the headboard.

“You know, your father doesn’t like us being together,” he says as he bounces a quill with his wand. “He’d rather you be with a woman.”

“I didn’t get that impression.” Harry frowns from where he stands next to his closet, having just put some of his clothes back, save for what he’s wearing to bed. “I think he was just surprised, that’s all.”

“No matter, of course,” Tom says. “He can’t control you. I do wonder why he continues to work for the Ministry though. Surely, he’s aware of what’s going on? Your mother’s blood status is as questionable as my own, if not worse. Have you asked him about it?”

Harry sighs, tugging his shirt up over his ears. “Yeah. Mum’s definitely a Muggle-born, so I did ask, but he was being weirdly evasive about it for some reason. Told me he had it handled, whatever that means.”

Tossing the shirt haphazardly into the closet, Harry slips into the new one and unbuttons his jeans, pulling the zipper down. “He also mentioned something about moving out for a while,” Harry says as he pulls his pants and lets them drop to his ankles, kicking them off his feet. “Said he’d tell us all about it tomorrow morning. Strange timing, right before Christmas.”

Putting his jeans away and slipping into his more comfortable pyjama bottoms, he wanders over to his bed, sitting down next to Tom with a thoughtful look. He plucks the quill Tom was messing around with out of the air, putting it away on his nightstand. “You wanna sleep here or in your own bed?”

“I think I shan’t sleep at all tonight,” Tom shifts his legs to the floor, standing and transfiguring his black trousers into soft cotton. He digs past the neckline of his plain jumper and unfastens Slytherin’s locket before laying it gently on Harry’s desk. “Our potion’s transport was mostly successful, but I’d prefer to supervise it. Moonlight will help me determine if I need to make adjustments.”

“You’re going to stay up all night?” Harry asks with a hint of disappointment.

“Feel free to accompany me. The guest room is an ideal potion room, perfect view to the night.”

Harry yawns and rubs beneath his glasses. “I’m good, actually. A bit tired from the journey.”

“Tired from sitting on a train?” Tom asks, judgmental as he smirks. “And here I was, thinking you were some great athlete.”

Harry takes a pillow from the bed and tosses it at Tom, who stops it midair and sends it back.

“Not a great athlete, no,” Harry says. “Just better than you, is all.”

“Well, at least you’ve got that going for you. Goodnight, Universe Hopper.”

“Goodnight, insomniac.”
Tom is no insomniac but, to Harry’s credit, he doesn’t sleep. Not much, anyway.

The potion is a dull gray, two shades from the sheen he needs. He spends hours with the damn cauldron—testing ratios, measuring evaporation rates, counting charred bone ashes and flicking them in, one by one. It is arduous, especially with the constant need to vanish the curdling odor, a smell which Harry’s mother, talented as she is annoying, would identify right away. He is careful when he sneaks into the garden, plucking the obscurest five-leafed clovertail and planting a false copy in its place. Perhaps, if she thought it was for banal purposes, Lily wouldn’t mind Tom’s using it. It may be worth five hundred galleons per handful, but the Potters are well off. He needs it more than they do.

Once its added, his potion is a reassuring glaze of silver. He covers the lid carefully with spell-o-phant and pulls shut the blinds. He half-sleeps with his back against the door, ear on his shoulder. Pressing thoughts prevent him from falling into the comfort of darkness. They hit him like little jabs of uncertainty, pinpricks of rage. The Minister. The High Inquisitor. Harry’s parents. Harry.

Morning blazes and footsteps scuttle. Tom ignores them until a brusque knock jars him from near-sleep.

“C’mon, Tom. Come put your clothes on. We have guests.”

The dinner party certainly sounds cheerful for a while, but as they both get ready, the noise dims down, Tom picking up voices that sound far more serious as they descend the stairs, walking down the corridor towards the dining room.

“…understand that he’s your friend,” an unfamiliar female voice says, “but I know what I heard, James. That wasn’t just some Ministry pawn he was blabbing to, that was Rodolphus Lestrange. You know his wife—”

“Yes, I know what she’s up to,” James cuts in irritably.

“Then how can you possibly trust that he won’t reveal any more than he already has? Especially now.”

Harry pauses by the wall next to the doorstep to the dining room, glancing behind him at Tom.

“He works for the Daily Prophet, for goodness’ sake,” Sirius chimes in, sounding just as annoyed as James. So, this is about Peter Pettigrew. “He has to give them something—”

“Something doesn’t mean giving away the whole Order,” a man’s gruff voice intercedes. “We can’t trust him anymore. Dumbledore—”

“Harry, Tom,” Remus’ voice suddenly calls from inside the dining room, cutting off all conversation. “Having fun eavesdropping?”

Tom scowls. How on earth did he know?

Walking into the room, Tom peers at a number of unfamiliar faces seated around the table which looks oddly longer than he remembers it to be.

“Uh, good morning,” he greets the room plainly. There are four empty chairs at one end of the table, including the head, as if the group is waiting for a few extra people.
“Sit down, kids,” Sirius calls jovially. “We’ve got a lot to discuss.”

Tom narrows his eyes warily, following Harry, who’s inching slowly towards one of the two empty chairs on Lily’s left.

“Like what?” asks Harry.

“Come on, now, Black! No need to scare them when we haven’t even started the interrogation yet,” an unfamiliar man at the other end of the table says in jest, appearance reminding Tom immediately of the Weasley brats with his fiery red hair and pale, freckled skin. He’s sitting next to another man who looks identical to him. Twins.

“Don’t worry, boys, you’re not in trouble,” James reassures them with some amusement. “Though I should probably introduce you all—”

Turns out the people present are all Aurors. The young couple seated across from them are none other than Alice and Frank Longbottom, Neville’s parents. The red-haired adult twins turn out to be Fabian and Gideon Prewett, Ron and Ginny’s uncles. There’s also Alastor Moody, and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

“Breakfast?” Lily offers after the introductions are over with, and Harry shakes his head.

“I’d rather not eat with a dozen people staring at me,” Harry says, looking around the table. “So, uh, what’s this about?”

“You mean, aside from the fact that you’re driving Umbridge up the wall with your little resistance group?” Gideon answers.

“I swear she’s been owling the Minister like mad,” Fabian chimes in. “Practically begging him to let her start expelling students and firing teachers she thinks are in league with the rebels.”

“Like I said,” James interferes loudly before either teen can ask for clarification. There’s a sound of fire flaring in the background—someone has just arrived through Floo in the living room. “You’re not in trouble. In fact, it’s the opposite. We wouldn’t have involved you in this ordinarily, but seeing as how you two seem determined to give the Ministry the finger anyway—”

“Just to be clear, this does not mean you’re full-fledged members,” Lily says with a sharp look towards James, who looks rather put off but doesn’t tell her otherwise. “We merely decided as a group it would be fair to inform you of what’s going on outside of Hogwarts, in case you decided to pull another reckless stunt without thinking about the consequences.”

“Okay, hold on, members of what?” Harry interrupts impatiently. “What’s going on here?”

“A fair question.”

Tom cringes at the sound of low, croaky English; it’s none other than the crooked snout of Albus Dumbledore, standing beside some rather dark, bat-like companion with a sour smirk. The two take the remaining seats—the man stationing himself across from Tom, Dumbledore presuming the head of the table.

Piecing together all that’s been said, Tom realizes, with no small amount of indignation, that Dumbledore is the head of some secret society. A real resistance of trained magicians, not his scrappy makeshift league at Hogwarts. He straightens his posture and smiles politely at Dumbledore, his unreadable blue staring through half-mooned spectacles.

“I trust you boys are willing to keep this information to yourselves,” Dumbledore says kindly,
graciously accepting Lily’s offer of toast.

“Yes, and while we’re at it, why not recruit from the playgrounds down the road?” the dark man sneers.

“With all due respect,” Tom starts, face collected, “I’ll be of age by the start of the term.”

The man sneers. “I fear you’ve proven my point,” he says, turning to Dumbledore. “Albus, are you truly willing to jeopardize our efforts by instigating mere children?”

“They’re not being instigated, Severus,” Lily cuts in sharply. “They’re being informed.”

“Excuse me, sir,” Tom says to Dumbledore, “I’m assuming you’re organizing a movement to undermine Grindelwald. Is this correct?”

“Perceptive as ever, my dear boy,” the codger confirms fondly. “You sit among the members of an order comprised of exceptional wizards and witches: the Order of the Phoenix. It has been brought to my attention that you’ve made something akin to an order yourself.”

“No, sir,” Tom lies. “It’s not quite so serious as that.”

“Ensure that it becomes no more serious than it presently is,” Dumbledore urges firmly, forcing Tom to suppress a scowl. He could remind that they’ve done nothing more than protect the students suffering under Dumbledore’s insufficient supervision, but alas.

Dumbledore shifts his regard to the rest of the table. “As you all know, you’ve been summoned today to assist in the procurement of a headquarters for operations. James here,” he gestures toward Harry’s father, “has generously offered an aged property of his family’s. I secured the Fidelius Charm this morning and shall remain its primary Secret-Keeper.”

He looks between Tom and Harry, saying, “As soon as everyone’s finished eating, we’ll Apparate to the old Potter Manor. I trust you understand it is best left to those who can legally practice magic.”

“We can still help,” says Harry quickly, eager to be some sort of hero.

“No need, no need,” assures Dumbledore. “I’m afraid you won’t be of much assistance without magic. The manor is, regrettably, in a state.”

“Just enjoy the day, sweetie,” coos Lily, hugging Harry from behind and kissing his cheek. “You’ll have plenty of opportunities to help out some other time.”

“But!”

“We’ll be back at dinner!”

And with that, they are off, all at once, cracks of different sounds echoing from the walls as the Order of the Phoenix leaves for their new Headquarters.

***

“That’s such rubbish,” Harry groans, kicking at the carpet. “They’re treating us like children. I’m the one who was spat across the universe to be here. Doesn’t that mean anything to them?”

Tom rolls his eyes. “You’re disappointed because you won’t be spending the day picking cobwebs off old door hinges? And since when did the grand Universe Hopper title start meaning
“Why so much to you?”

Harry shuts his mouth as his ears going red. It hasn’t gone to his head. He just thinks, of all people, he should be allowed to help. But Tom has a point. Seething around like an entitled brat won’t help his case, and it’s not like they’re up to anything that important. He’s just on edge lately. Since Grindelwald’s bloody story about the pregnant could-be Hopper, he’s felt different, stuck between the unending oscillation of fate and coincidence as explanations for his hop. It would be stupid—beyond stupid—to go on like he was fated to save the wizarding world if, in the end, it was just a fluke. Yet, if it wasn’t a fluke, if he is destined to play some large part in the correction of Grindelwald’s errors, he needs to take more responsibility, teenager or not.

“When do you think that potion will be done by, exactly? I wouldn’t mind a bit of insight right now.”

“Be patient,” Tom tells him, standing up from the table and stretching his long limbs. “It won’t be done until after Christmas, at the earliest. If we had stayed at Hogwarts, it would’ve been done a bit quicker, but, well.”

Christmas. Harry’s vision drifts, subconsciously, to tinsel hanging from green-needled leaves. Beneath the limbs, there are presents, well-wrapped and shiny in red. Different than at the Dursleys. He remembers opening leftover wrapping scraps to find old socks and tattered scarves while Dudley, the fat arse, shredded open gift after gift. In this universe, there are no Dursleys. At least, no Petunia Dursleys. She died as a teenager, due to some drunk driver; the same death which took Lily and James all those light-years away. Maybe Vernon’s out there somewhere, with another long-necked nosy neat-freak. Harry takes Tom’s hand and entwines their fingers, still looking at the presents.

“It’ll be weird. My first real Christmas. One where I’m not shooed back to my room after ten minutes of opening old stuff from my aunt’s junk drawer.” He squeezes his grip. “How was it for you? Any Christmas miracles as a kid?”

“Hardly,” Tom mutters. “I received presents most years—some charity company or another usually made the rounds through the estate housing—but I barely got to keep anything I owned. One year I was with this couple, a couple of drug-addicted Scousers. They locked me in a closet the whole day while their friends came ‘round. Thought I was possessed.”

Harry winces and shifts, the back of his mind tugged halfway into a tunnel.


The senses flash by in heartbeat, quicker than the flutter of a bird’s wing, and when they’re passed, his descent to the ground is stopped by Tom’s upward jerk. Harry catches his footing and shakes his head.

Another bloody vision.

“Sorry,” Harry says, shrugging off the odd sensation, “just lost my footing there for a minute.”

“You’re so clumsy sometimes,” Tom chides, tutting. “The evening ended well, at least. I blew down the door, broke my wrist, ran to A&E and said the bloke twisted it. Relocated that very night. No presents, but plenty of cheerful biscuits. Sound like a Christmas miracle to you?”

“This year will be better,” Harry consoles, half his wits dulled by the vision. “Let’s have look at the presents.”

“Oh, yes. The tawdry mystery of the paper wrappings. I can open and reseal them if you’d like.”
“No!” Harry protests, stepping up to the gifts and dropping to his knees. “I want it to be special. It’s pretty much our last time to be a couple of kids, we shouldn’t ruin it.”

Tom laughs and sits beside Harry, fingers finding the second home of his shoulder. “Thanks, but I think I stopped being a kid sometime around that aforementioned Christmas.”

“Look,” says Harry pointedly, “I know it wasn’t easy for you growing up; it was the same for me. We can’t let it stop us from enjoying our lives.”

He picks up the gift in front of him, a large rectangular box with a white parchment tag reading: TOM.

“Here, this one’s yours.”

Tom lifts the gift high as he assesses it. “I enjoy my life plenty, thanks.” He places it back on the ground and closes his eyes, dark irises replaced by the nearly-white shade of his eyelids. The slim blue veins beneath are stark.

“You’re tired,” Harry comments, pulling Tom down, placing his head in his lap. He halfway expects resistance, for Tom to suddenly pull off, but he doesn’t; he stays there and turns on his side, head resting on the padding of Harry’s thigh.

“The potion’s not an easy one.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Short fingers dig into the thick tufts, stroking out the loose knots and massaging Tom’s scalp. The privilege of touching another person, without the intent of sex or violence, is now common to Harry; natural. He grazes his fingertips down the hairline to the neck. Tom’s shoulders slack and relax.

“The woman in Grindelwald’s story…” says Harry lowly, almost at a whisper. “I can’t stop thinking about her. The way he described it, it sounded like she could hop intentionally. But that’s nothing like with me. I don’t think I could go back if I wanted to… though believe me, I’d rather spend my life as Draco’s servant than go back there.”

Tom inhales deeply, chest expanding and falling slowly. “I’ve thought through his bloody tale a thousand times. If there’s any truth to his babbling, it’s meaningless to us.”

A dull tingling pricks on Harry’s forehead, a small wave of nerves concentrated near the center. He touches his fingertips to the scar, the lightning bolt reminder of his journey.

“How does the potion work?” Harry asks, compelled back to the original subject. “I mean, you told me that potions can either add properties or deduct properties. Which one is this?”

“Additive,” Tom supplies, “but not conventionally so. It’s a revelatory brew, like Veritaserum, but more potent because the truth we’re trying to reveal if something neither of us know we know. Which is why it’s so intensive. It’s reading our essence, forming a familiarity with who we are so that when we ingest it, it can sift more easily through our thoughts, revealing patterns and observations we didn’t realize before.”

Harry sits in silence, recalling the grotesque scar on Tom’s hip. He’s no stranger to experimenting with dark magic… but, to Harry, he wouldn’t do something like that, would he?

“It can’t hurt us, can it?”
“No,” Tom responds gently. “No, I think it unlikely. The worst of it happens to people who use it for psychologically disturbing insights. That is, children who ask for the location of parents who abandoned them, adults who seek answers to the why of their suffering. If it supplies an answer which you don’t like, and you’re too much of a child to accept it, it can cause nightmares and the like. That’s why your parents can’t know.”

“Ok,” Harry agrees, thinking of how his mother would just coddle and baby him with no understanding of the stakes. “I can understand that. I just hope it doesn’t try to show me things about my old universe.”

“No telling what it will reveal. But it will be important; it must be.”

“Well, whatever,” Harry says dismissively, taking in two fistfuls of Tom’s shirt. “We’ll cross that path when it comes. We have a whole day to do nothing, don’t we? I say we make good use of it.”

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The day is not extraordinary but it is nice. Tom enjoys their useless lounging, trivial conversations, and brief excursions down the snow-laden roads of Godric’s Hollow. Dinner, unfortunately, is rather less nice.

James and Lily return from the Order, wearing faces of exhaustion and fingernails thick with grime. The Potter Manor is left imperfect, they admit—some plumbing issues remain unresolved and a testy ghoul continues to wail from the dungeons. For their purposes, all is usable, if not luxurious, and Dumbledore will keep Order members there on rotation as he returns to Hogwarts to deter Umbridge from getting up to anything in his absence.

Dinner is adequate in flavor, but sullied by the presence of the suspect sneak of morning gossip. At the request of James, the beady-eyed man was welcomed to dinner, requiring his insight to ensure that Harry and Tom evade the Muggle-born registry.

“I’m assuming you must have some known magical ancestry?” Peter Pettigrew suggests, digging jagged teeth into the meat of a duck leg.

“Yes, I suspect,” Tom tells him, eyeing the parchment with a scowl. “However, I don’t know how I could prove it. I was orphaned at birth.”

“Let me see,” Pettigrew says, reaching his greasy hand.

Lily sets her goblet down with a groan. “This is unthinkable. You two are students, you should be worried about your N.E.W.Ts, not this rubbish.”

“I know, Lily,” Pettigrew sighs, raising an arched brow at Tom. “On what grounds do you think you have magical ancestry, exactly? I, uh, don’t want to sound unkind, but…”

“I’m a Parselmouth,” he says decisively. “And I’ve investigated it. I know that my mother was a Gaunt, she gave me the middle name Marvolo, and a Marvolo Gaunt died in Azkaban around the time of my birth. She’s not listed on the genealogy charts, though. Her birth was never registered at the Ministry.”

“A Parselmouth?” James shouts through a mouthful of mash. “Harry, you didn’t tell us! Isn’t that something, Lilz?”

Lily smiles, her eyes the shade of Harry’s looking at him with pity. “Tom, dear, it sounds likely
that your mother was a Squib. Have you any living relatives?”

“An uncle,” he responds.

“Any reason why this uncle couldn’t have actually been your father?”

“He was, er…” Tom pauses, ears reddening. To the pristine, doting personalities of James and Lily, he must sound quite tragic. “He was in Azkaban. He’s since been released.”

“Right,” Pettigrew says, handing Tom back his parchment, tone clearly betraying that he considers this a lost cause. “I recommend you look for your uncle if you’re serious about avoiding the registry. Without his input, Bellatrix Lestrange will be difficult to convince, Parselmouth or not.”

“Right. Thanks,” Tom mutters hollowly, dipping a sugared spoon in his lukewarm tea and stirring as Lily continues to alternate between derisively complaining and seeking answers from Pettigrew. What has she to complain about? She’ll be safe. According to Pettigrew, there is a policy of amnesty for established Muggle-born professionals, securing their exemption from the coming investigations.

Those most vulnerable are the young unclaimed bastards and the spawn of Muggles, the ones with which the Minister can shape his regime. Well, if their backlash proves futile, Tom will merely escape—to the forests of Albania or the eastern mountain the States, anywhere else.

“What do you think’s going to happen at the Ministry, Wormtail?” James asks solemnly. “Do you think they’re going to try to go after Harry?”

“No,” Pettigrew assures, shaking his head. “No, I’m not sure what will happen, but I don’t think they’ll take Harry. You’re an Auror, after all.”

‘Liarrrrr….’ the haunted hiss of his locket whispers. ‘The mann liessss….’

Reflexively, Tom’s hand slaps against Harry’s arm. He bites his lip and explains his strange gesture away, waiting until they’re tucked beneath blankets and distant from untrustworthy ears.

Moonlight is all that illuminates the room, but Tom can see clearly the green in Harry’s eyes as he clenches spindly fingers into the hollows of his shoulder. “Pettigrew lied to us earlier. When your father asked him if he knew anything, or if he thought they may pursue you for the camps, he said he didn’t know anything. The locket called him a liar.”

“Wait,” starts Harry, “how do you know what he was lying about? Maybe he doesn’t know anything and was just trying to make my parents feel better. That could be a lie on its own.”

He inhales, sinking lower down the mattress. “Who knows? At any rate, I urge you to keep your distance from him. I’m leaving in the morning for Little Hangleton to look for my uncle.”

Harry, seeming astonished, looks at Tom wide-eyed. “That’s a sudden decision. Are you sure it’s a good idea? You said he went to Azkaban. What if he’s dangerous?”

“You doubt my power?” Tom grumbles irritably.

***

The conversation ends there, as Tom falls into quick sleep.

Lying awake, loneliness and doubt find Harry and hold him hostage.
By the time he finally falls asleep, the sun is close to rising, and by the time he wakes up, Tom is already gone.

Chapter End Notes

Heh. Anyone still around? It took me a long time to figure this chapter out (and yes, much longer than expected).

If you've noticed that there's only one chapter left, fear not. I'm not going to haphazardly close the story without resolution to, like, five hundred plot points. I've decided that the rest of the story would make more sense if I continued their journey in a sequel, which I'll call *Court and Essence*. Otherwise, this thing would be far too big for my tastes; I can hardly wrap my mind around the word count. I mean, yikes.

Please review if you liked (or, y'know) hated the chapter. After such a break, I'll be very honored if even a few of you are still reading lol.

- Amelinda
The Draught of Vision

Chapter Summary

CHAPTER WARNING:

If you've read up to this point, you're accustomed to T rated content. This chapter is much darker. Specific warnings include: gore, self-mutilation, and explicit references to child abuse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nervous for Tom, saddled with doubts about Pettigrew, Harry pokes his scrambled eggs listlessly. What if something happens to Tom? He could be maimed, injured, or otherwise trapped by his maniac uncle, and how would Harry know? How could Harry save him if he didn’t know where to look?

Harry gasps when a sudden hand claps him on the shoulder. Reflexively, he yanks out his wand, readily aiming it at the unexpected touch.

“Easy there, Harry,” Sirius says as Harry quickly puts his wand away, face growing red in embarrassment. Sirius looks impressed. “Good reflexes.”


“Most veteran Aurors have the same reaction.” Sirius smiles sympathetically as he takes a seat next to Harry. “Try sneaking up on Mad-Eye—on the off-chance that you take him by surprise, you’ll end up on a stretcher quick enough.”

Harry isn’t so sure what to think of the comparison, seeing as how he’s supposed to be a sixteen-year-old and not a hardened combatant, so he settles for pushing his eggs around a bit more.

“Didn’t know you were visiting today.”

“Call it a spontaneous visit,” Sirius says with a grin. “I wanted to see what my favourite godson was up to!”

“Do you have any others?”

“No, but that’s beside the point.” Harry arches his eyebrows in amusement as Sirius continues with an air of nonchalance. “I can’t help but notice that your paramour is absent.”

If he’d been actually eating the eggs on his plate, this would’ve been the part where he choked on them. “My what?”

“Your beau,” Sirius clarifies seriously, continuing to dredge up synonyms as Harry gives him a blank stare. “Your suitor? Your beloved, your flame, your valentine, your—”

“I get it!” Harry exclaims, thoroughly embarrassed as he glares at his godfather’s smirking face. “Tom’s not here, he’s, er, he’s looking up a relative.”
“Perfect,” Sirius decides, shifting to turn fully towards Harry, and with a very grim look, places a hand on his shoulder. “Harry, I need to tell you something very important. It’s about your sweetheart—”

“He has a name.”

His godfather makes a dismissive gesture with his hands. “That’s not important. What’s important is that you have to break up with him.”

Harry’s mouth slowly opens and closes in shock. “I’m sorry?”

“Look, I know how this game goes. I played it quite cleverly myself, when I was your age. But you mustn’t let a pretty face deceive you, Harry. That boy is a schemer, I can tell, you’ve got to watch out for this one,” Sirius explains, looking mostly sincere as he does.

And he doesn’t even know the half of it.

“Sirius, I, um, I appreciate your concern, but—”

“Yes, I know, you’re in love and whatever,” Sirius interrupts gaily. “But once he gets bored of the romping—”

“That’s it,” Harry declares, his face a bright red, “I’m not listening anymore!”

“What’s all that noise?” Lily calls from the living room.

“No, I’m not!” his godfather barks in protest as Lily comes walking in with a frown. “I’m just warning the boy about his snake of a boyfriend.”

“Padfoot, we talked about this! Tom is a perfectly amiable young man who has only ever been polite and respectful, just because you are a miserable dog doesn’t mean—”

“James, Remus!” Sirius cries indignantly. “Are you hearing this?”

“Well,” Remus’ amused voice comes drifting from the living room, “she’s not wrong, technically and figuratively.” James laughs loudly as Sirius throws out another protest, Lily’s exaggerated sternness only betrayed by the quirk of her lips.

Harry hides his smile underneath his palm as he listens to the playful back-and-forth, the day passing far more pleasantly than he anticipated with Tom gone, even if his thoughts always linger to what his partner is up to, hoping for his success.

***

At the tip of a hill, a feudal mansion overlooks the meager village of Little Hangleton, slush slopping down its sloped roof in the noonday sun. Tom treks its path with both hands shoved deep in the pockets of his coat, clutching his wand with one hand, rubbing his newfound heirloom in the other. The nearer he approaches, the more obvious it becomes that this home is the antithesis to the last one he entered.

Morfin Gaunt’s thatched shack is, by miles, the most horrid home he’s ever seen (and Tom thinks this condemnation means quite a bit coming from a lifetime ward of the state). At first sight, he thought it uninhabited: its front is mossy, its rafter bent and swarmed with overgrown nettles. Inside, however, he discovered the odious man he ventured to see. Dear Uncle Morfin is a cross-
eyed mess of overgrown, matted hair and grime-coated skin. Worse yet, he’s insane. Only through Legilimency was Tom able to acquire the information he sought.

Tom, now up the hill and on the stoop of the mansion, focuses his eyes on the door in front of him. Behind it could be nothing or, if Morfin is right, it could be something utterly unbelievable. Tom remembers the distant longing with detached interest. He is grown now: stronger than ever, better fed than ever, more admired than ever. But when he was younger, scranner, and weaker, he was not adored. He was hated. He had believed then, as foolish orphans do, that there was someone looking for him, who wanted him back. He outgrew this wish, turned it to spite, and reconciled himself to the knowledge that he, so special and brave, was beyond such childish fantasies. He assumed his father dead, because surely only a dead man could not want him.

Yet Morfin claimed Tom looks like the man who lives here. The ‘filthy Muggle’ who ran off with his sister but returned soon after.

A Muggle man called Riddle.

Tom knocks. There is brief pause, a clip of footsteps, and a moment of silence, as if someone is peering through the peephole. When the door opens, an elderly woman in a drab black dress speaks. “May I help —”

She cuts herself off with a small gasp, rubs her eyes and squints. “Tom?”

“Tom?” Tom repeats stupidly.

“No, no. I’m sorry, boy. I just thought, but no, that can’t be. MR. RIDDLE!”

Tom blinks. Two and two slowly piece themselves together. He resigns to silence as footsteps approach the door, but whoever’s there keeps out of eyeshot.

“Mr. Riddle,” the woman says nervously, “there’s a boy here. Come, get a look at him.”

“What boy?” smooth baritone asks with irritation. “We’re not buying anything from schoolboys, Mrs. Deavers. Shoo him.”

“No, Mr. Riddle,” Tom says calmly as he pushes the door open, stepping past the threshold. “I’m not selling anything.”

Tom’s mouth tenses in shock. He needn’t procure a sample to confirm paternity: this Mr. Riddle is undoubtedly his father. To call it a resemblance would be to understate their likeness. They could be twins, born twenty years apart, with the same black-hair, straight nose, dark-eyes and hollow cheeks. Tom scrutinizes his father with the same interest his father does him, absorbing his every quirk—the thin legs, the overlong fingers, the fair skin. Even the swathing blush which Tom feels heat his own cheeks is there, hot and red, on his father’s face.

This is his father. Alive.

“Well,” Mr. Riddle says stiffly. “Come in. If you must.”

He turns on the spot and stalks off through the foyer. Tom shakes his senses with a tight nod and follows him, unsure of what to do with himself. They stop at settee beneath a great oil canvass, one of many decorations that further prove the family is pedigreed. Just like he once imagined as a boy.

“I have no interest in beating around the bush,” the elder Riddle says bluntly, his voice so affected that it seems to parody his nonchalant leg-crossing. “What did she decide to call you, then?”
“Oh. You knew,” Tom deadpans in response, standing casually, peering down at the man with no visible interest.

“Know that she was pregnant? Yes, I knew.” His glare sharpens. “Do you know?”

“Know what? That you abandoned her?”

A flash of anger sparks across his father’s face, but it is quickly subdued, pressed behind an unaffected mask. “Don’t kid yourself, pretending your mother was worth saving. She hoodwinked me.”

“Did she?” Tom asks indifferently.

Mr. Riddle snorts and smiles, as if trying to find humor in this unpleasant encounter. “I presume your family are peddlers, no? Well, that’s beside the point. It took years of therapy to get my wits back, so whatever your mother told you, please spare me your troubled angst. I always knew it was just a matter of time before she sent you to face me. Was always a cowardly girl.”

“She’s dead, you toff,” Tom says plainly. “She died in childbirth. I never knew her.”

This visibly shocks him. “Then who brought you up?”

“The state. I’ve no family to speak of.”

Looking at this man, the man who spawned him but doesn’t want him, Tom almost thinks he should feel angry. Betrayed. Desirous for the wealth surrounding him, wealth which should belong to him. And yet, he really feels nothing at all, except for a longing to Disapparate back to the Potter home and see the one person who he’s certain he cares about.

“And I’ve also no business here,” Tom says, turning from his father and walking toward the door, where the maid waits with a nervous frown.

“Tom,” says his father.

Tom pivots, placing one hand on his hip and staring blankly at the elder Riddle.

“You’re called Tom, aren’t you? I think… I think I can recall her saying she would. It was hard for me to stay conscious in those days, but I can remember some of it.”

"Touching."

“Look. I can’t know how you feel, but I know it wasn’t your fault,” says his father, stalking up to Tom. His stature is similar, but broader, and taller just by the width of Tom’s wand. “I know you must be upset that I didn’t come looking for you, but please… you have no idea what she did to me, how she forced me to—” he turns his head, sighs. “It wasn’t my doing.”

The elder Riddle steps back. His faintly lined face falls into a haunted emptiness; a hollowness.

“I’m sorry,” he says thinly. “I should have found you. Brought you up properly. I always told myself you were off with her somewhere, getting by.” He peeks at Tom before scowling and turning his head again. “Were they at least good to you? The state?”

Tom doesn’t respond. He isn’t yet sure how he’d like to lie. Should he exaggerate, make it seem worse than it was? Or should he feign happiness, letting his father know his pity is unwanted,
unnecessary? He doesn’t want him to be comfortable. He wants the elder Riddle to feel like the filthy Muggle failure he is, but if that means Tom exposing his own vulnerability, then it can’t be done.

His father frowns. His question’s been answered by the silence. “Who are you staying with now? Are they kind to you?”

“That’s my business,” Tom says absently as he takes his leave.

From behind, the elder calls, “You should come back, you know. Mother moans that I never brought her a grandchild.”

Tom continues to walk, stopping briefly when the maid thrusts a photo in his hands: a photo of the elder Riddle, not much younger than thirty.

“A boy should have a photo of his father,” she says kindly, patting him on the shoulders.

He parts down the hill and Apparates directly into Harry’s room, where his green-eyed partner sits at his desk.

Tom tells him of the Gaunts, who lived in squalor. Of Morfin, who raped his mother, and of Merope, who raped his father.

Tom admits his sin: He implanted false memories in Morfin’s mind. The oaf knew of her leaving with Slytherin’s locket, but still treasured another of his ancestor’s treasures, a black-stoned ring from the Peverells. It was all too easy to pilfer the ring, erase their sordid morning exchange and leave Morfin with the delusion that Merope took both the locket and the ring. The punishment of thievery is less than he deserves, but all the same, it is as far as Tom will go to redeem his sorry, pitiful mother, who lurks in some nameless grave in her shell of a miserable life.

She’s of no use to him. The one gift she passed, the gift of her blood, is impossible to prove with no record of her existence. The only parent Tom has, he’s barely mentioned before he slips the maid’s photo into Harry’s hands. “Oh, and I met him.”

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Harry glances down at the picture and is momentarily taken aback at seeing—no, not Tom, but it could’ve been very well a version of him from some distant future. The tall, lean stature, the wavy black hair, the high slope of cheekbones and the shape of full lips; that is unmistakably Tom’s father. If Harry thought he looked a lot like James, then the similarities between Tom and his father are almost eerie. He supposes that might explain part of why Merope became so infatuated with him. It was just the man’s bad luck that she happened to be a deranged witch.

Speaking of which, Harry imagines discovering you were a child conceived by rape wasn’t exactly pleasant. He decides not to comment on it. He doesn’t know what he’d say, anyway. Trying to comfort Tom seems presumptuous. His partner looks decidedly displeased, but not particularly shaken or upset. He appears oddly calm, actually.

“What did he say?” Harry inquires, though he suspects it probably didn’t go that well if Tom’s cool mood is any indication. “He didn’t give you this picture, did he?”

“No, not him. His maid handed it to me as I left.”

“Maid?”

“Yes, maid. The irony doesn’t escape me—my mother, a pure-blood and a direct descendant of
the noble Salazar Slytherin, knew abject squalor, and this petty Muggle father of mine lives lavishly. The Muggle Riddle didn’t seem to know she was a witch. I suspect he believes he was hallucinating. He’s called Tom Riddle, too. He even invited me to return. Said my grandparents would want to see me.”

It’s too bad. Some naïve part of Harry thought it would be something like his own meeting with his parents, or at least that’s what he’d hoped for Tom, even if he isn’t exactly the family-oriented type. Harry tugs at Tom’s hand. “You can go back, if you want. It’s natural to be curious.”

Tom jerks his hand. “It’s about as tempting as a romantic dinner date with Granger. Our relationship is, and will always be, seminal. Nothing more. I mean, it’s not like he can do anything to—”

Tom stops speaking slowly, seeming snagged by a new thought.

“Wait a moment,” he says as he rushes to his bag and digs around, quickly pulling out a roll of parchment “There’s a section in here that says the Ministry will consider family interviews as secondary evidence. If I could explain matters more fully to the Muggle, perhaps I could convince him to write to the Ministry. He owes me that much.”

Harry holds his tongue even as doubt flits through his mind that the Ministry would accept a Muggle’s testimony. But the Parseltongue would have to make for a compelling case, wouldn’t it?

Tom drops the scroll back into his bag before ambling a few steps to Harry then leaning against his desk. “It’s a thought, anyway. Besides, I’m allegedly his only scion, and I’m not exactly above inheriting Muggle wealth; money is money. And speaking of,” he pulls out a ring and sets it on the desktop. “This is what I stole from my uncle. Bit ugly, but he said it’s a Peverell heirloom.”

Raising his eyebrows, Harry reaches over and picks up the gold ring, staring at the small, black stone. There’s a peculiar pattern engraved on the stone: a triangle with a circle inside, a single vertical line cutting through it. The band itself looks clumsily crafted, its metal unsuitable with the elegant small stone at its head—whoever made it had little knowledge of the craft, he suspects.

Tom ruffles Harry’s hair as he continues. “He called my mother a slut for running off with Slytherin’s locket. I’m certain that even someone as golden as you can see the appeal of poetic justice. The ring likely has magical properties, but even if it doesn’t, I thought it was worth having just so he can’t.” He lowers his fingers to Harry’s hairline, gently combing at the small hairs. “The Peverells are our shared ancestors, after all.”

Harry hums in thought, twisting the ring between his fingers, experimentally sliding it onto his ring finger and finding that it feels just as ill-fitting as it looks. “What’s this symbol in the stone?”

“No idea.”

“If you’re going to wear it,” he suggests humorously, “you might want to fix that band—maybe change the colour, while you’re at it. Something less gaudy.”

Tom shakes his head. “That wouldn’t be wise. Altering the ring’s color, however much it may improve the style, could damage any possible magical properties.” He picks it up and slides it down the length of his left ring finger. “Besides, I like it.”

Harry smiles. “You put it on the wedding finger.”

“Oh? Have I?”

As Tom leans, Harry rises, their arms curving into an embrace. Lips touch—tender, soft and dry—
shooting arousal throughout Harry’s body. The heat builds. Soon, Tom’s lifting him and kissing him, and laying him out over the bedspread. Harry lies back and watches Tom stand above, hands at either side. The scrutiny of his gaze forces Harry to shudder pleasurably. This is an unexpected turn, what with Tom having just discovered his long-lost father, but then, who is Harry to complain? And who is Tom to keep Harry waiting? Harry strings a finger through Tom’s belt loop and jerks.

“Ready to join me?”

“Ah, but patience,” Tom emphasizes, taking Harry’s intruding hand and putting it to his lips as he kneels, “is a virtue.”

In movements that are teasingly slow, Tom strips Harry bare. There is thrashing and calling, a tongue meeting sensitive flesh. They shift on the mattress, add more clothes to the floor, and suck and twist and pull and slap. Harry fills—with admiration, awe, desire, curiosity, love—until he breaks, gasps, and sighs. He folds into Tom easily, scooped up between his torso and legs.

This is comfort beyond comfort. This is where Harry feels at home.

But Tom is gone too soon. Back to the potion within ten minutes. Harry, craving the simple pleasure of being next to Tom, follows him into the next room over, where iridescent moonlight fans over the steaming cauldron.

“It’s close,” Tom declares.

“How close?”

“Closer than I thought,” says Tom, rotating his wand over the brew, stirring the contents inside. “At this pace, it will be ready for consumption in two nights.”

“Wow.” Harry scratches at the back of his neck. “Not that I doubt you or anything, but… how do you know when it’s right? It’s not like you’ve brewed this before.”

Tom smiles. “Intuition.”

“Right,” Harry says skeptically. “And what do you mean by that, again?”

“Come here,” Tom instructs, gesturing. “I’ll show you.”

Harry does as Tom says, and when he’s beside Tom directly, Tom pulls him down into his lap and wraps an arm around his waist. Harry closes his eyes and inhales Tom’s cologne, the beautiful smell he’d sensed in his Amortentia those months ago.

“How do you see the color of the potion?”

Harry squints. Beyond the rim of the cauldron, the grayish tint of the liquid is visible, reflecting the moon with a glittering aura. He nods.

“That’s how I know we’re on track. You see, if you understand the ingredients, their properties, and their reactions, you can navigate a potion recipe with ease. Most magicians think potions are just following a list, step by step. Not so. Such practitioners will never be truly master the art. Fortunately, I am not like most.”

Harry nudges Tom in the ribs. “That’s true. You’re a lot more arrogant.”

Harry’s brows fly to his hairline. Not for the first time, Harry cannot help but think he’s never met someone less self-aware than Tom in his life, and that’s a competitive list to top. Still, as always, this endears him. The warmth of Tom’s embrace, the sated pleasure in his gut, these things calm Harry as he stares into the pot’s broil. He is happier than ever, and as he stumble for the right words, he simply goes and says it:

“I love you.”

Silence basks the empty air. Harry blinks, wondering if he said something wrong, or said something too soon… Yet he isn’t self-conscious. He knows it to be true. He knows, knows deep inside, that he loves Tom as much as one person can love another. And he doesn’t mind the silence because, solemnly, he realizes: no one has told Tom this before.

“Love,” Tom says quietly.

The frailty of his absent genius has never been more evident.

“I mean it. I love you,” Harry repeats.

“Yes,” Tom says, nodding. “I was just concentrated on the potion. I love you, too, Harry. You must have realized by now.”

They sit in peace until it is time to sleep.

The next morning, Lily wakes them with tea and biscuits. Paper is slashed and thrown into a pile behind the tree. To Lily and James, from Harry and Tom, an assortment of photos taken throughout the semester. For Tom, a set of rare ingredients; a set of black dressing gowns; and three dense books on wand use theory, numerology, and human transfiguration. For Harry, the latest racing broom; dressing gowns a dark blue shade; an assortment of chocolates; and a pocket-watch heirloom from James’s great-grandfather.

And, something else. A wooden box with a faded ‘H’.

Harry opens it slowly, noticing how his parents watch him. As he examines the inside, a dryness creeps up his throat.

There’s an old storybook. A pygmy puff plushie. A toy wand. These are a child’s things. He takes out the book at the bottom of the box and opens it carefully. It is a photo album of little Harry, the boy who died and who Harry replaced. He is no older than a toddler in any of these photographs, but the relation to Harry is obvious, with great, big green eyes and a messy headful of untamable black.

He looks up to find Lily—lovely Lily, his beautiful mother—wiping a tear from beneath her lashes. James pats her back consolingly, a sorrowful smile on his face.

“We just wanted you to see,” Lily says softly, sniffing. “We wanted you to see what we lost, so that you know how important you are to us.”

When Harry blinks, a roll of tears stream down his face. He hugs his family, one by one, lingering the longest in his mother’s arms.

To be loved so wholly, and by so many, is a magic beyond the reach of man.

***

Tom returns to the potion as soon as he can. Harry, caught in his sentimentality, is just where Tom
wants him—bonding with his parents and away from the final steps. The timing of the potion’s brew and the Christmas spirit is luckier than he could have hoped for. All around the world, there are children opening presents and hugging their new bunnies, filling the air with joy. Equally to Tom’s benefit, there are lonesome widows filling their pillows with screams, and disenchanted husbands stepping off stools as ropes cinch and snap their delicate necks. Their passions and desires and horrors are fertile for potionering. It is a shame that mediocre wizards, those with the most to gain, value this holiday the least. Lily is the sort: talented, knowledgeable, skilled without power. Perhaps, for once in her life, she could make a special insight today, do something great. But of course she never will. She’ll hug her family and waste her time with trifle.

Tom closes his eyes and recalls the final step.

93. Make a sacrifice of the body commensurate with the request of the soul. Blood for lust. Flesh for gain. Marrow for gold. Leave it in the brew to simmer for one full rotation. Ingest within a fortnight.

The door’s lock is doubly reinforced with the flick of Tom’s wand. He wipes sweat from the side of his face and takes a deep breath. Pleasure from the gain shall outweigh the horror of the loss. With a swish, he transfigures a loose button into a switchblade—a sharp steel edge which will make this much easier. For the draught to brew, the sacrifice has to mean something; it has to hurt. From his sock, he transfigures a clean cloth and secures it tightly around his mouth, biting into its thick material with determination.

He puts the blade to his smallest toe and stalls, letting his heart rate rise, letting the fear emanate into the cauldron. The rush is as intolerable as it is exhilarating. For reference, he drags the edge of the blade over the skin, slicing a thin cut just above the joint. Warm blood runs from the incision slit. The sight pushes his heart harder into a rapid beating of thrum thrum thrum behind his eardrums.

Now.

He slides the blade in. The pain is immediate. His jaw grits on the cloth and he goes at it again, grinding against the small sliver of a bone, shaking as his teeth break into the fabric thread. He breathes to gather his wits. In and out. In and out, and in, and then: again.

The gruesome act is complete when his blade hits the wooden floor. Blood pools like a puddle beneath his foot. He cuts off the gag with his blood-stained blade and breathes in a lungful of precious oxygen. Next, he takes the blade to the ground and gathers the fruits of pain along its flat side. The metal clinks on the cauldron as his unsteady hand tosses in his flesh and blood and bone, causing a broil of steam to hiss from the potion, clouding the air around him. The horrid smell, a thick mist of rotting flesh, swirls slowly throughout the room. Tom grunts and wraps his toe in the gag cloth, standing on it and wincing as he sucks the potion’s fumes into the tip of his wand. The white fabric bleeds red onto the ground, causing him to nearly slip in its ooze as he frantically gathers the fumes, praying the Potters have wandered outdoors within the hour and cannot catch whiff.

Once Tom is certain the smell has cleared, he falls clumsily to the floor, gripping his foot and cursing in Parseltongue. He concentrates his wand on the gape of flesh. In and out. He sighs in relief as his toe regenerates, smoothing over the pain like salve on a wound. Where there was a stub of white, there is now a seamless toe. Tom lies back, triumphant, but not for long. He cleans the gore with a few lazy spells and leaves, closing the door behind.

He doesn’t want to reenter until tomorrow. He doesn’t want to look at this vile brew until he knows, with confidence, that it can be of use.
When the sun sets, Lily cooks, and Harry drags Tom into sunlight. If, at Tom’s request, Harry forces himself to tolerate twelve-hour library visits, then Tom can watch a bit of Quidditch.

“Wasn’t today great?” Harry exclaims.

The chill is fresh on his face as he soars. From up high, he can see half of Godric’s Hollow. And, thanks to his mother’s Disillusionment Ward, none of them can see him. Too many Muggles around here, he remembers as he spins, laughing as hem of his shirt fills with wind and puffs out. Having spent so much time at Hogwarts, and having never formally met a Muggle in this universe, Harry sometimes forgets they exist.

“I can’t believe it. This broom is even better than my last,” Harry says excitedly as he dismounts beside Tom. “You sure you don’t want to try it?”

“No,” Tom says decisively. His attention isn’t on Harry but on his shoe, which he fidgets with aimlessly.

“Alright there?” Harry questions.

Tom snaps up, as if caught in the middle of something shameful. “Quite. Done gallivanting yet?”

Harry scowls. “Just for that comment, no.” He slides back on the shaft of his broom and levitates so that his sight is even with Tom’s. “Out of curiosity, why do you hate flying so much?”

“I’ll give you a hint.”

In one swift movement, Tom takes his wand from his pocket and points it at the broom, and just as Harry jumps off it, in shock that Tom would curse his brand-new present, Tom laughs coolly. “Relax. I wasn’t going to do anything. But I’d like to think my point was well-received.”

“Paranoid much?” Harry mutters. “No one’s going to curse you in my garden.”

“Perhaps not,” Tom admits. “But one can never be so sure.”

Is he serious?

“I’ll never know what’s going on in that head of yours,” Harry sighs, stepping off the broom and setting it carefully in its case. The irony of his words bites him in sour aftertaste.

In fact, he does occasionally know what’s going on in Tom’s head. But he doesn’t want to let Tom know that it happened, again, when they weren’t in the Room. He had previously explained it as a quirk of the Room’s Legilimency, but if Harry’s most recent foray into Tom’s mind is any indication, the explanation extends beyond the walls of Hogwarts. It’s such an odd thing. Why only Tom? Why only distant memories?

Again, Tom’s fidgeting with his shoe.

“Tom?”

“Huh?” he says sharply, standing straight.

“Is there something wrong with your foot?”

“I just stepped on it awkwardly,” he says, tone straddling on defensive. “Is it really such a concern of yours?”
Harry has to laugh at that. “Guess not. We can go in. If you want.”

They step back into warmth and wholesome cooking smells. A small bickering is audible, James’s and Sirius’s voices carrying through to the back entrance. Harry follows it to find his father and godfather, opposites at the table, shouting at a small object in Sirius’s hands.

“Padfoot, it won’t work! If you want to get the ball out, you’re going to have to hold the lever. That’s at least the first step.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Sirius bites back. “If you’re holding the lever, then it can’t get past the valve in the middle.”

“Obviously!” James scoffs. “That’s why, when you get to the valve, you have to—”

“It won’t work!”

“What’s going on with you two?” Harry asks, grinning widely.

“It’s a toy!” Lily answers from the kitchen. “They’ve been going at it for an hour now.”

“It’s impossible,” James declares. “Leave it to you to buy a defective Christmas present.”

“It’s not defective. You’re just too thick.”

“If I’m so thick, then why don’t you do it?”

“You won’t let me!”

“Calm down,” Harry insists, taking the toy from the center of the table. What looks like plastic, feels like metal. It’s cool, smooth, and durable in his fingers. He assesses its inner-workings, a small system of slides, where obstacles correspond to external commands. “Can I try it?”

“Be my guest,” James permits. “It’s defective anyway.”

Harry fidgets with it, pressing various button combinations. He can get the ball midway, but once there, his strategy fails, sending the ball straight back to the start. He sets it back on the table.

“That’d take hours to figure out.”


“May I?” Tom asks politely.

“Yes, of course,” James insists, pushing it directly into Tom’s hands.

Harry’s partly surprised that Tom is willing to show a petty toy any interest. However, considering it is, to some extent, a test of intelligence, it is only expected that Tom should want to prove himself. Tom eyes it for a minute or so before adjusting the controls. He stops, then stares at it again, holding one hand to his chin in contemplation.

“Oh,” he says quietly, moving his fingers to the edges of the toy. He presses into the buttons, freeing the ball from its first chamber, then the next, and the next. In no more than a moment, the ball slides through a pit on the bottom of the toy and into Tom’s hand. He holds it in his palm and shows the others. “There.”

“Incredible!” shouts James. “Look at that! He’s done it, Lily. Tom figured out the puzzle.”
“Oh, very clever,” Sirius grants, slumping forward in defeat.

“Tom’s a genius,” Harry practically blurts. “I mean, there’s not much he can’t do, when he sets his mind to it.”

“Well, it’s nice to finally have a genius in the family besides Lily,” James remarks brightly.

“He’s blessed your wedding already,” Sirius says cynically, though not without a wink in Harry’s direction. “More than I can say for any of my former beloveds.”

“Tom’s first in his class at Hogwarts,” James says flatly. “Your last beloved lost his leg trying to steal from Gringotts. Got five years in Azkaban for it.”

“He wasn’t trying to steal from Gringotts,” Sirius denies, rolling his eyes. “He was trying to explore the bank. Take a jump from the carts and those bloody goblins assume the worst of you.”

“OK, so then what about the one before him? The bloke who was caught in an international conspiracy to assassinate the French Minister of Magic?”

“Oh, Trevor didn’t mean anyone harm,” Sirius says, flapping his hand. “Just a bit worn for wear. Took five stunners to the head, was never quite right afterward.”

“And the one before him?” asks Lily from the doorway, hand on hip. “The guy they caught streaking high on Harpy dung in Diagon Alley?”

Sirius shrugs, handsome as he bats his eyelashes and raises his chin. “So, I have eccentric tastes. Sue me.”

“Only a matter of time, Padfoot,” Lily says. “Only a matter of time. At any rate, dinner’s ready. Who’s hungry?”

***

When dinner is complete, and the house falls quiet, Tom and Harry head for bed with a fortuitous piece of news playing on repeat in Tom’s mind: Lily and James will spend tomorrow at the Order Headquarters. Before, Tom thought they may need to relocate to some distant woods—the potion’s potential side effects aren’t exactly discreet—but instead, the universe has, again, given him exactly what he wants: privacy, space, and freedom. It’s well worth a toe or two.

Harry rests, sweet and coiled, on the edge of the mattress. Tom traces his cheek with soft, delicate touches. Harry turns on the mattress and settles his head beside Tom’s chest.

“I love you, Tom.”

Tom scowls. The uncertain words come out obligatorily: “I love you, too.”

And soon he may know whether that’s true.

Once the sun is up, the anticipation grows. He forces himself to stay busy—reads half of his new numerology text, reorganizes his potion storage, bathes and grooms his hair. Once Harry is up, the wait becomes unbearable. After breakfast, they busy themselves on a walk, talking about nonsense, the subject itching beneath Tom’s skin. They return at noon and Tom swears, against all better judgement, he can smell it. It’s almost time. It’s almost time. It’s—

“—almost time.”
“That’s great!” Harry exclaims, picking his head up from the toy contraption, reset for further time wasting. “Do you think we should have a look?”

“Lunch first,” Tom insists. “We should take it on full stomachs, otherwise it could make us ill.”

Harry’s lip quirks down in an awkward frown. “You don’t make it sound like the most inviting potion.”

“What do you expect?” Tom questions rhetorically. “Ice cream? Don’t worry about it. It should be no worse than taking cough syrup.”

*Lie, lie, lie, Tom,* he tells himself as they eat, halfway unsettled by the fact he even cares. Lying is a necessity in this case—Harry can’t handle the truth! It will only set him on edge, and then where would they be? He’s not exposing Harry to something too bad, anyway. The potion is psychedelic, but not lethal. The only incidence of death, so far as he could find in the archives, was caused by suicide, after the fact. They leave dirty plates on the kitchen counter and, at last, take the short journey to find the Draught of Vision.

The door to his makeshift potion’s room eases open. A row of candles flicker into life.

“God, that stinks,” Harry complains, poking his nose beneath his shirt.

Tom expels the odor with a swirling brandish.

It smells perfect.

***

Harry, not tempted by the heinous concoction, lurks by the door and watches Tom approach the cauldron. His long legs take steps which seem hesitant, as if not sure whether he wants to see if the object of his passion for an entire month did, indeed, turn out how he expected. Harry almost starts to ask, but as he opens his mouth, his words are broken by a long, high belt of laughter. The glee etched in Tom’s face, so unlike his small smiles, does not befit his handsome face. It is the same unhandsome and bestial grin he shared with Harry the day of their Hogsmeade date, when Harry first learned of Tom’s dangerous brushes with Dark magic. Harry folds his arms into his chest and fends off the temptation to run off on cold feet.

Tom loves him. Tom would never hurt him. Harry promised he’d do this, and he will.

The brew is poured equally between two gauntlets. Harry, pulling a brave face, hovers his nose over its top and stifles the immense urge to gag. Tom sniffs in a deep breath through his nose without the slightest flinch. While swilling the cup, Harry notes a thick, inky consistency. Though the smell is intolerable, the sight of the dense liquid swishing has a certain allure. Tom takes a seat on the guest bed, where Harry sits beside him. After chugging this, he’ll need a little rest.

“I can’t believe we’re about to put this in our bodies.”

Tom doesn’t look up or respond, transfixed by the gauntlet delicately held in his two hands.

“Er…” slurs Harry uncertainly. “Ready to give it a go?”

Tom blinks softly. “Yes. I think I am.”

“Count of three, then. One. Two. Three.”

Harry pours it down his gullet in one go, anticipating a rupture of repulsive flavor to split across
his tongue as the sticky potion crawls down his throat. But that disgust never comes. So instant are the effects of the draught, the moment the ink meets his tongue, he ceases to taste anything at all.

His tongue does not exist. Nor do his hands, his toes, his lips, his ears… nothing, except his soul, plunged downward in an unfathomable recess of time and space, racing at the speed of sound to chase the bottom of a limitless pit until he lands softly on his feet: human again.

“Harry?”

Tom stands to Harry's right, cloaked in black and bathed in white. Indeed, but for Tom’s robes, there is nothing but the radiance of the room where they stand. It’s just bright, bright like a fireless sun and twice as stunning.

“Tom,” Harry whispers. “Is this the Vision? Is this what we’re supposed to be seeing?”

Tom raises a pointing finger in front of him. “That’s my door. That’s where I go.”

“What?” Harry questions, seeing nothing of the sort. In his next breath, Tom is gone. Swept up by the radiance and taken elsewhere.

The voice, purring and sibilant, raises the hairs on Harry neck.

“Harryyyyy Potterrrrr……”

He stiffens until rigid. This voice, he knows.

He knows to fear it.

A voice whispers next, “…the one with the power to vanquish the dark lord…”

Then another, overlapping, “…neither can live while the other…”

And then another, and another, and another until nothing is audible but a chorus of raspy murmurs, competing to be heard by Harry, who stares around alertly, seeking a source for the noise and finding nothing but white.

That is, until, an object appears. A large basin bowl atop a porcelain structure shaped like an eagle’s foot. Out of odd instinct, he steps up to it and peers inside. Vaporous hues of green swirl out of the clear liquid inside. They seem to pass through his face like wind-tossed steam, inviting him closer, nearer, dearer… The vapors constrict like tendrils and, before he can fight, he’s snapped into the waters of the bowl.

“…what you are looking at are memories…”

Numb and confused, Harry swears it’s Dumbledore talking, but he can’t see anything. His eyes are shut—like, shut shut. Sewn shut. He pries them open with the tips of his fingers, crying out in pain as he rips each thread at the seams of his flesh. With frantic fingers, he rubs the blood from off his eyes and searches his surroundings in pursuit of the Headmaster.

“Dumbledore! Dumbledore, is that you?”
“Dumbledore?” says a small voice. “What the hell’s a Dumbledore?”

Harry manages to wipe the last bit of gore from his vision, and realizes he’s escaped the white. He’s now somewhere else, in some city he’s never seen, where tall stacked townhouses leer over an empty street strewn with garbage. A young boy with dark brown eyes stares him down, head to toe. He is nothing more than a skinny child, but there’s something imperious about his stature—he’s arms are crossed, his back is straight and his eyes are unflinchingly locked on Harry’s. The rounded chin of boyhood cannot quite hide where sharp, clean lines are starting to form.

“Dumbledore’s a wizard,” Harry responds simply.

The boy raises an unconvinced brow. “A wizard. Right. Speak any louder and they’ll come ‘round and take you to bedlam.”

His accent is a soft and odd, vaguely reminding Harry of the television Cockneys. He wants to hear more.

“Come here often?”

The boy snorts. “Live here, don’t I? Only for another week, mind.”

“What happens in a week?”

His eyes narrow. “What you asking that for? Are you mental?”

“No, I’m not mental,” Harry responds curtly. “I just want to know why you’re moving.”

“That’s a bloody stupid question.”

“Why is it a stupid question?”

“Because I’m you.”

What happens next, happens too suddenly for sight. The young Tom Riddle is replaced by a new form:

Round-rim glasses. Messy black hair. Oversized jeans held where a belt hook sticks through a self-made hole.

“You’re me!”

The boy Harry shrugs casually. “I was always you. Come have a look.”

With that, his dirty trainers dash down the street. Harry’s not sure he should trust himself, but he follows nevertheless, chasing after the boy with the prevailing sense that something isn’t right. Yes, that’s true. Something isn’t right. Where there were streets, the world fades to black, transforming the open road into a narrow tunnel which shrinks more and more with each step. He perseveres at top speed, attempting to outrun the contraction of darkness around him, squinting his eyes on the ever-slimming sight of the boy.

“Harryyyyy Potterrrrr…..”

Terror sends him sprinting faster. He knows this awful voice but he doesn’t know where from, or why.

“freak….acting all high-and-mighty, fucking teacher’s pet, think you’re so bloody special...”
Harry stops dead in his tracks. “Zeke? ZEKE!”

He’s out of the tunnel. He’s standing in Surrey. He’s standing in Surrey and watching himself beat another boy to death.

A car turns the corner and comes driving up the street, startling Zeke long enough for Harry to grab for Zeke’s hand, the one holding the knife, and twist it mindlessly. There’s a sickening crack and Zeke screams bloody murder as Harry slips the knife out of his fingers, throws it away and punches Zeke.

And punches him. And punches him. And punches him. And punches him. And punches him.

“STOP!” Harry screams at himself.

And it does stop. Everything halts as if a god pressed pause. Harry struggles to breathe through his horror. There he is, fist held still in the air, prepared to land another punch on the near-corpse of Zeke Clark. Harry drags his eyes off the mangled, swollen face just quick enough to get a glimpse of a boy watching from the shadows.

The young Tom Riddle smiles and steps back, and then he’s swallowed by the night.

“Why are you showing me this?” Harry cries desperately. “What does it mean?”

Surrey bleeds into black. Everything is black. Harry sees his hands and nothing more.

“Harryyyyy Potterrrr……”

“WHO ARE YOU?” Harry screams.

A dislocated voice speaks.

“I told you already. I’m you.”

A thin mist of light then pours in at a slant. Harry twists to find the source and sees nothing but an infinite expansion of the obscure glow. His eyes follow the glow back to the space in his front, where the ray hits a hard surface and expands.

“No…” he whispers.

The football stadium at his old school. Him, landing that first punch in Zeke’s face. Outwardly he seemed a hero. He tried to think himself a hero. Inside, now, he feels the truest emotion of his violent rage—satisfaction. In this vacuum of nothingness, where he is shameless and nonexistent, his lower belly swells with pleasure, glory, the beautiful thrill and rage of mindless violence. He watches, ambivalent, as his ape-hands fulfill his sick desire to slaughter. The intoxicating ecstasy licks at Harry from within.


Another image flickers on: Uncle Vernon. Uncle Vernon, reeking of spirits, gripping Harry’s neck, pulling him in for a lecture. Meaty hands slapping him, punching him, striking him on his backside with the metallic horn of his belt. White-hot blisters of pain on his arse as he adjusts his seat in class, praying the wounds won’t open and spew. It’s a hot June evening and the other kids are wearing short-sleeves, but not Harry. Never Harry.

Bruises, burn marks, cuts, contusions—these are things he must always hide, for a boy like him is
too shameful to be seen for what he truly is.

worthless pathetic unwanted unloved unneeded pitiful disgusting repulsive freak freak freak

It is too much—the shame, the hatred, and the rotting remnants of his broken pride. He hates himself. He *hates* himself. Wants to reach inside his chest and shred the remainder of his heart, to stop it from beating and being a *freak*.

“Whatever you say.”

Harry slams his hand across his chest. He is out of that dark place and back in the light. It no longer feels splendid and stunning and bright.

It *hurts*. It hurts so much, too much, like his insides are being carefully and meticulously *slit*. A geyser of blood erupts in a guttural cough, splashing in stark red on the white ground. He falls to his knees and continues to cough until he retches, heaving acid and blood and bile as the itch continues to sear in his throat, hacking his lungs into shreds of meat. His throat constricts as a mouthful of organ tissue lodges up his neck. He desperately fights his own body for air, ripping at his exposed innards with fierce hands, struggling to stay up with his stomach bulging and contracting.

High laughter rings loudly and echoes in the great, white void.

“How do you understand?”

Harry Potter awakes with a gasp and frantic scream. He leaps off the floor, his vision blurred, seeking any clue or sign that proves he’s escaped the torturous hell of the white room. Skittishly, his fingers feel across his surroundings. His need to hyperventilate sends a brutal sting to his rubbed-raw lungs, and his limbs thrum with gnawing pressure.

“Harryyyyy Potterrrr……”

“NO!” Harry barks desperately. He throws himself to the ground and protectively tucks his head between his knees.

He can’t go back there. He can’t. He *can’t*.

“You have the answers you need,” a voice whispers, faint breath touching the lobe of his ear. “And you needn’t the answers you seek.”

Harry rocks feebly with his eyes squeezed shut. He feels his consciousness slip in and out of the now, burrowing back into that slim space where the pain and the anger curdled and stirred. He didn’t deserve to be sent there; has he not seen enough already? *Has he not hurt enough already?*

The skin of his nose inches into a snarl. It will *never* be enough. Where it concerns his pain, the world will never cease its conspiracy against him. *He* is the boy to be lashed at it; ridiculed; bullied; *deceived*. *He* is the toy for Vernons and Zekes *and*—

*And Tom Riddles.*
His shriek is that of a wounded wildcat—feral, injured, and forbidding. And then it touches him. The sickeningly cool hand touches Harry’s arm, unwanted and enraging. Harry jerks upright and glares at the monster before him. His blurred form lies feebly on the ground, grotesque fingers clawing up to siphon what little is left of Harry’s waning life.

No more.

Tired legs spring into action and Harry, flooded with a rush of exhilaration, punches his fist into Tom’s ribs.

“YOU TRIED TO KILL ME!”

He punches at him again, but misses as Tom rolls from the spot. Tom stands on his knees and hisses unintelligibly. Harry lunges forward again and gives him a great push, which Tom, now prepared, uses as an opportunity to grip Harry’s wrists. The long fingers curl easily around. Harry, struggling to loosen from steady hands, recklessly pitches his head, cringing as his skull collides against the crunch of cartilage. Tom grunts and releases Harry, trailing into a whirlwind of pleading curses.

Harry doesn’t care to listen. He reels back his fist and collides with Tom’s cheek. Then, apparently forsaking his passive tactic, Tom strikes Harry back, splitting his chin on impact. Harry can’t even feel it. He isn’t even Harry and this isn’t even Tom.

This is just another ploy of the fantasy realm, isn’t it?

Whatever restraint Harry felt before, he abandons. Tom is powerful, he thinks in a mocking tone. Tom is a wizarding genius. Tom is so bloody great with a wand. But where Tom is thin, where his waifish stomach curves into bone, Harry is compact with muscles, hewn to survive in a Muggle world. He slams Tom into the wooden panel of the floor, jumps atop him, and squeezes two solid thighs into the slim tapering of a narrow waist. Tom wriggles beneath, clawing and yelling for Harry to stop.

Stop.

Tom babbles, nearly incoherent, "I don't know what happened with the potion, I swear. I didn't mean to, I couldn't have known, I didn't think—"

Harry shudders and coughs blood onto Tom’s horror-stricken face.

“It was you,” Harry murmurs lowly, voice crumbling into the deep chasm of sadness the Draught inspired.

“What was me?”

It was Tom who inspired the rage, the flashbacks, the cruelty Harry never felt before the diary touched his hands.

*It was always Tom.*

“You brought me here. You…”

Harry’s head slumps forward as he slips into the unbidden comfort of dreamless sleep.
Where there was once nothing but Harry, there is Tom.
Where there was once nothing but Tom, there is Harry.

Tamper with the deepest mysteries — the source of life, the essence of the self — only if prepared for consequences of the most extreme and dangerous kind.

Chapter End Notes

This completes the first half of the duology. I thank everyone who read this through to the bitter end. In the next installment, the story will pick up exactly where it left off; in a fucking mess. Pleased to know what you think.

(And, as for the end, I'm sorry for abusing your muse, gray. I really just couldn't live happily without making Harry's life a lot more traumatic.)
UPDATE: Click to find the NEW FIC here.

In twenty minutes or so, I'll post the sequel to this fic (which I'll link in the author's notes). It is called Court and Essence. I’m adding this end note for two reasons: 1. This fic currently has 295 subscribers, so this is just a notice to anyone who maybe doesn’t browse the tag that often; 2. I want to give a broad recap.

For most of you, this end note is something which should just be ignored lol. This fic isn't terribly long, but I think it's long enough to justify this. Also, in case somebody wants to read the new fic, but doesn’t have time to plow through 119k words, you can reference this and (hopefully) figure out what's going on.

So, from the beginning, here are the major events of the fic. I've bolded major-major events because this is a bit boring to read through lol.

### Part I

- **Harry lives in an alternate universe without magic.** In it, the UK is a totalitarian state in constant conflict with the Soviets.
- **Tom attends Hogwarts circa 2011.** In it, the Minister of Magic, Gellert Grindelwald, is scheming a subtle anti-Muggle campaign.
- One day, they encounter twin diaries which allow them to communicate.
- Harry’s abusive aunt and uncle, as well as his bullying at school, make life unbearable.
- It gets worse when he intervenes on behalf of a kid getting beat up by Harry's soccer teammates, led by an OC called Zeke.
- Tom discovers that, in the past, witches and wizards have stumbled upon similar objects and used them as portals.
- Harry is walking home from practice one day when the boy, Zeke, violently attacks him.
- Harry suffers a nervous break down and defends himself, ultimately landing Zeke in the hospital with a coma.
- If he's caught for his crime, it will mean execution.
- Then, just as the cops are arriving to arrest him, the diary assumes its role: it transforms into a portal.

### Part II

- Harry arrives at Hogwarts through the portal. He's greeted by Tom and a man who recognizes him, via his resemblance to his father, as the son of James and Lily Potter.
- Tom brings Harry to the infirmary, where a medic confirms Harry is growing a magical core.
- Dumbledore comes shortly after with James and Lily, a couple who lost their baby, Harry, in infancy.
The pair immediately accept Harry into their family.
Then the Minister arrives. Behind Dumbledore’s back, Grindelwald authorized surveillance wards on and near Hogwarts grounds.
Grindelwald, a master Legilimens, scours both Tom’s and Harry's minds for information, so quickly the adults do not notice.
He threatens to take Harry to the Ministry, but stops short of attempting the plan when it is clear Lily, James, and Dumbledore will not allow it.
James and Lily welcome Harry to move in with them before he starts at Hogwarts in the fall.
His summer introduction to magic is brilliant. He has parents, a godfather, and many family friends to keep him company.
When Hogwarts ends for break, Tom becomes a regular visitor. He, himself, is a ward of the state, who annually returns to an unwelcoming Muggle family.
They spend the summer learning magic, learning about themselves. Harry's crush on the mostly oblivious Tom is almost immediate.
Then, one day, they read in the paper: an expose on Harry, revealing the most traumatic details of his life, written to frame him as a triumphant survivor of evil Muggles. This makes Harry an overnight celebrity of sorts.
It is a setback, but the summer is otherwise well. Harry earns Tom’s trust when he helps him steal a locket he believes to be a family heirloom from Borgin & Burkes.

Part III

On the Hogwarts Express, Harry meets Draco Malfoy, who warns him and Tom that Hogwarts will be different this year.
Harry is sorted into Gryffindor. He makes quick friends with Ron and Hermione.
In the first week of classes, it is announced that the Hogwarts Board of Governors have permitted a Ministry official to investigate the standards of Hogwarts.
Enter Dolores Umbridge, the High Inquisitor.
Muggle-borns and their allies grow hostile to Umbridge as she sets up ‘re-education’ classes intended to make wizards seem superior to Muggles.
As this goes on, Professor McGonagall speaks privately with Harry, revealing he may be destined to intervene using knowledge of his own universe.
This invigorates Harry with a sense of purpose. This purpose manifests in action when Tom —confused by an intimate dream involving Harry—randomly suggests the creation of an alliance.
Thus, the idea for Dumbledore's Army is born.
The Daily Prophet has, by this point, taken to publishing piece after piece about the dangers of Muggles, using the coincidental death of wizarding children in a Muggle terrorist attack as a major springboard.
Tensions rise, too, at Hogwarts, where even students outside of pure-blood Slytherin circles grow suspicious of Muggle-borns.
On a more personal level, Harry and Tom grow closer and closer.
It is when they are in potions class, learning the antidote to Amortentia, that Tom settles on a conclusion: he fancies Harry Potter. Their relationship commences in secret.
Together with Ron and Hermione, they gather their allies and meet often in the Room of Requirement, formulating resistance measures against the High Inquisitor.
They create general mischief at Hogwarts while better preparing themselves for one-on-one combat.
In a small break on Hogsmeade day, Harry and Tom meet at the Hog's Head Inn. Here,
Tom reveals proclivities to Harry that make him nervous, but he shrugs it off.

- That is, until, they're in the Slytherin dormitories, hiding from the inconvenience of Malfoy's sudden presence, when they overhear something: **Umbridge has a blackmail file on students and teachers, including Tom, and it's part of her coercion strategy for the coming storm--soon, the Ministry will organize 'camps' for witches and wizards to be 're-educated' at.**

**Part IV**

- They retrieve a copy of the file. It reveals to Harry that Tom was an extremely troubled bully as a boy, but he doesn't think too much on it. It was in the past, he tells himself.
- Tom, in the meantime, is conducting independent research to better understand strange quirks in his relationship to Harry. They have established by now that they share a distant ancestor in the Peverells and that their wand cores are identical. Tom suspects there's something more to his own feelings; never before has he cared, even minutely, about a person as much as he has Harry.
- **He decides to brew a Draught which may reveal the hidden root of their bond.**
- In class, it is announced that all British witches and wizards must register their blood status with the Ministry. This convinces Tom that it'd be fruitful to investigate his own origins with the little information he has of his uncle's whereabouts.
- Before the end of term, Tom is invited by his housemates father, Mr. Nott, to a meeting with the Board of Governors.
- There he learns that sometime long ago, the Minister encountered somebody he believes was a universe hopper like Harry.
- Harry and Tom stay together with Harry's family during the Christmas break.
- They learn that Dumbledore has established a group of witches and wizards not unlike their own resistance measures. They call themselves the Order of the Phoenix.
- Tom sets off the day before Christmas and meets both his Uncle Morfin (whom he steals a ring from) and his father, the Muggle Tom Riddle.
- The next day, Tom and Harry celebrate Christmas, but all Tom has an interest in is his potion.
- Because Lily and James will be absent on Boxing Day, Tom realizes he has the perfect opportunity to take the potion with Harry in their absence.
- The potion experience for Harry, however, is not at all fun. It is a nightmare.
- He awakes traumatized by the experience and attacks Tom, disgusted by what he's done to him.
- **It is here that he connects the dots between his own violent urges and the presence of Tom in his life.**
- **It is here that he realizes the 'bully child' never grew up.**
- **It is here that he realizes he is able to exist in this universe because the diaries fused their souls together.**

And that's, that. If you have any questions, feel free to shoot them my way. The next installment will start immediately where this one left off but there will, I think, be noticeable differences in the formatting, and each of the chapters will be shorter and denser than they were in *The Universe Hopper*. I wish I could make the sequel accessible for people who didn't read this fic, but I'm not sure that's...possible...all things considered. In general, *Court and Essence* will be noticeably darker and more adult than this story.
Thank you to everyone who read, subscribed, kudos'ed, reviewed, and all that! This wasn't originally written for any audience outside of myself and gray, but it's still really fun to share it with others, so I appreciate everything. :) 

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!