The Unexpected Lives of the Unliving

by Mistakes_and_Experiments

Summary

Magic/The Force Had Meddled (Because She's a Meddler), Master of Death Had Saved People Again (Because He Suffers from Chronic Heroism), and a Baffled Tom Riddle and a Confused Anakin Skywalker Have Lives to Live Whether They Like It Or Not. (Considering the Lady Magic/Force, They Better Like It Or Else).

In Which There Are Two Lives to Walk for Tom Riddle and Anakin Skywalker.
Skywalkers - Awakening

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In which childhood is not a merry romp with the adult knowledge of the monsters prowling at the edges.

Skywalkers

Awakening

People think that just because you retained some of your previous memories from your previous life, you would be self-aware once you were born.

That is painfully not true.

The average infant’s main concern wavers between getting food, getting sleep, getting their diapers changed and most importantly, getting more sleep. The earliest days pass in a blur, and whatever awareness you have drifts in and out like a jumpy unfocused dream. Things that you actually do are usually more of the automatic, unthinking variety, since anything more complicated usually gets lost on the wayside when stronger needs take over. They also get tossed out when something more shiny catches the eye.

Priorities… who needs them? Look, a rolling, glittering fruit!

This is why one of Tom’s earliest memories was of carrying a bowl of exotic space fruit with all the wobbly gait of a three year old who should’ve known better not to run with it. He took hold of himself just in time before he began to tip over, and would’ve been more annoyed had he been more aware. As his thoughts drifted away, all he could think about was ‘why fruit?’ and, ‘why turquoise?’

Anakin remembered dipping his hand to his breakfast and smearing them on his brother’s face with glee, laughing at the surly expression it earned him. He still remembered his mother’s voice though the words escaped him. Shmi Skywalker’s tone was a fond one, even as she reprimanded him not to do that again. Of course, there is no way he was going to breathe a word of this even when threatened to death.

There had also been several disjointed dreams in which both remembered they were moving fruits this way and that. And grains. And rations. Anakin had the context for them, so he could safely ignore them as reflections of everyday activity. Tom, however, was as baffled as he was annoyed. When his self-awareness was present again for a longer time period, Tom was nowhere near amused and the first thing he noticed was that he was sitting on a dusty, sandy floor staring at a crate of fruit.

What. The. Hell?!

Not so loud!

Tom blinked. He was quite sure he didn’t say that. It only left the person sitting next to him, a chubby, vexed… Anakin? Yes, it was a four year old Anakin; apparently he was blond when he was younger, as opposed to the brunet that Tom encountered at the Terminal. Tom stared at him
for some more, as he was sure he didn’t really hear the words.

What?

_Your thoughts_, the foreign thought surfaced in Tom’s mind, and he realised that they do sound more like Anakin’s voice than his. A grouchy Anakin, to be precise. _Stop yelling them. If not, put up some krethin’ shields._

Tom frowned. _What shields?_

_Your mind shields! What else?_

That one was a familiar idea to him. _Oh, something like occlumency, then?_

_What?_

_What what?_

This went on for a while, to the bewilderment and consternation of both of them. In the end, it was easily established that they were telepathic with each other. It was probably a convenient side-effect of being fraternal twins strongly bound in blood and magic, or the Force, as Anakin would put it. Of course once that was done, the blond got down to business and told Tom how to sort the fruit, and other food stuffs placed in front of him. Tom stared at him as if he was nuts.

Anakin rolled his eyes. _Don’t underestimate it. It’s also good coordination practice for this young body._

_Why are we sorting food?_

_Kitchen duty’s one of the earliest tasks they try to teach us even while they lump us in the holding pen for younglings. The ones better at it get a chance to get out of the place sooner. Looks like we’re one of them this time. The good ones are for the dinner table, the bad ones goes to the slaves. Not sure if there are any employees around here_. Anakin’s last words were tinged with bitterness.

Tom stared at him again, even as he mindlessly decided which fruit goes to the left and which goes to the right. Good; good enough; damaged… is that a bug biting its way out? _Damaged it is, then_. A little dent; slightly dryer than average…

_But why do we need to do this?_ Tom asked.

Anakin stared at him as if it was stupid. It was doubly more annoying when the one staring at you had all the features of a kid. _Wasn’t it obvious already? We’re slaves. I suppose at this point we’re still owned by Gardulla the Hutt instead of—_

_What??_ Tom stiffened.

The blond winced at the sudden assault of annoyance, not a small amount of anger and general wish to torture something until it doesn’t get up through their link. Anakin understood, because he was feeling more or less the same thing. It didn’t help much that they were helpless at this stage. Yet as he clearly told his twin, _he_ didn’t yell that out, even if it was only mentally. Anakin glared back at his twin and threw the emotions back.

_Stop projecting so loud! You really need to learn to put a lid on it._ He sighed. _Never mind, I’ll teach you how to form mental shields once we’re out of the kitchen._
I can occlude my mind just fine, thank you.

If you can, then how about doing something about the link, then? Anakin groused back.

It just had to be Tom’s luck that an occlumency shield does not take into account the presence of a telepathic twin, much less someone whose soul resonates so easily with yours. Anakin’s unimpressed look was one for the ages.

‘-

Chapter End Notes

I've got a decent amount of this already written down from last year, binge-writing when I was sick, so I'd be mostly uploading that. This is still unfinished, mainly slice-of-life. I started to slow down/get stumped around the time I realised that the Star Wars many-canon doesn't exactly have a single consistent timeline of events.

Odds are, I'll completely screw it up according to my plot needs when I get back to this. Not currently on my active fic list right now (though if anyone has any ideas, I might be persuaded).
Chapter Summary

*Anakin discovers that a bored Tom gets... nuts.*

*Tom thinks Anakin is exagerrating. Minions always make everything better.*

**Fruits**

The twins Anakin and Tamlin Skywalker gained a more consistent higher self-awareness when they were around four.

“Tamlin! Anakin!”

That was their cue to gather round with the rest of the slaves’ children in one corner of the kitchen again as a green-coloured woman with twin tentacles beckoned them (Tom stared a little longer than was polite. *She’s a Twi’lek*, Anakin informed him, and Tom was already getting annoyed at the number of new sentient species he had to keep up with). Shmi Skywalker gave them a nudge and her most encouraging smile. Tom’s relief as he noticed he was not being named ‘Tom’ this time around was palpable to his brother, if the curious glance the blond gave him was any indication. They walked away from their mother to whoever it was that was supposed to watch over them as she worked. She looked somewhat surprised at their action.

Anakin shrugged at his brother’s questioning glance.

*Maybe we usually try to hang on to her?* He guessed. Tom huffed at the indignity of the idea.

*Do we need to do that now?*

Anakin turned around, but their mother had waved at them and walked away. *Huh. I guess not.*

*I think she’d be thankful we’re less of a bother now than before,* Tom reasoned quickly, and he knew Anakin wouldn’t be able refute that. One less embarassing thing he had to do, he thought with satisfaction. It was enough of a pain that he apparently was accompanying Anakin through his life first and had to adjust to the alien universe the Jedi had come from.

“You know the rules, kids. Play nice with everyone else, no yelling or shouting or you’ll pay for it. If anyone cries, the bully and the crybaby earns some time in the closet, separately, you hear that?” The green woman eyed them with a stern look, hands on her hips. Most of the kids were cowed enough to simply nod. Tom couldn’t help but roll his eyes.

*I’ll gladly take the closet than stay here.*

*Leena’s not that bad, Anakin mentally said. Her bark’s worst than her bite, and she does care.*

*I didn’t say she wasn’t. I was talking about the brats we’re stuck with.*

The moment Leena left to collect whatever clothing she was going to mend that day or maybe some foodstuff for them to help sort, a six year old girl shoved a lizard-like younger one. He was
an inch or two from crying outright.

“Why didja do that for?”

“’Cause I don’t like you! Stay away from me! Or else!” The older girl yelled, in a voice not unlike nails scraping on a blackboard.

Tom huffed at the scene, raising an eyebrow at his brother. See what I mean?

Anakin only sighed and sat down next to Tom, not bothering with a verbal reply. He did agree with Tom, but if he said it out loud, his brother was going to be insufferable. This was going to be a long day.

The blonde terror’s name was apparently Tasha. The moment there was some sort of crisis distracting Leena on the other side of the kitchen, Tasha had cornered a furry kid, took a large bite out of his fruit and dared him to protest. He stared at her in silent, wide-eyed terror. Satisfied with his silence, she proceeded to do the same to the fruits given to two other kids, leaving a younger, dark-coloured girl to whimper quietly at now-missing chunk from her fruit.

She turned her attention to Tom. He tilted his head to one side and raised the fruit he was holding, dark blue eyes glittering. “Do you want this?”

At her nod, he pulled his arm back and lobbed it at her face. Hard.

Smack!

Several gasps went up around him as droplets of purple dripped by the side of Tasha’s nose. Nobody dared to make any sound, and some might even be holding their breaths. Tom could hear Anakin groan somewhere to his left side, and the black-haired twin couldn’t help an amused snort from escaping.

Please. Don’t tell me you didn’t want to do that yourself. The guilty feeling seeping from Anakin’s side of their mental bond told him enough about it.

But she’s a kid!

And right now she outweighs me by a lot and could probably lift and throw either of us if she tried. Tom said casually. I didn’t do anything an annoyed kid wouldn’t do.

Tom could see that Tasha’s green eyes were watery, and he hoped she wasn’t about to start the waterworks. His wish was granted—she rushed forward and pulled him up by his collar, yelling to his face. He winced at the volume, and the occasional rain of saliva. “No one hits Tasha! No one!”

“You know you’re wrong, right? ‘Cause I just did.” Tom said drawled.

Anakin groaned. Tom, shut up.

I won’t hit her, Tom replied with a mental eyeroll. He wasn’t threatened by a kid, even if odds are, he could still Crucio her wandlessly. He’d learned it by instinct when he grew up at the orphanage. Tom didn’t know it had a proper name then, but wishing pain on other creatures was effortless to him and he had taken to it like a fish to water. Not that Anakin needed to know that right now.
I’m more worried about her hitting you. Anakin remarked.

If she hits me, you get the proof you’ll need to tattle about how she was bullying the other kids, he said, not the least bit repentant or concerned about any possible bruises he would have to sustain.

Why do you even care about a bunch of kids and their fruits? The blond asked, disbelief in his tone.

Tom shrugged. I was bored—that earned him another long-suffering groan from Anakin—and I thought you’re heroic enough to want to do something about it sooner or later. I’m just helping it along faster. It’s better this than trying to get out of this damned kitchen, right? Or would you rather do that? I’m game with that too. Tom said.

The worry he could suddenly feel from Anakin was enough of an answer to his second suggestion.

“Shaddup, shaddup, SHADDUP!”

Tom got shaken around a bit more, along with more yelling and threats. It was all too predictable that he was beginning to get bored, again. The other kids were cowering in their respective corners and edges, while Anakin hadn’t made up his mind about what to do about the whole spectacle. Just before Tom decided that he’d like to get away before his eardrums suffer any sort of permanent damage, Tasha shoved him backwards. The force of it was enough to send him to the ground and stunned him for a moment. By the sting of it, he probably scraped an elbow or two.

She was staring at him with a look of challenge and satisfaction. He raised an insolent, unamused eyebrow.

That’s it?

To be honest, she had a lot of power in that small frame. Any other kid would’ve bawled their eyes out after that, though Tom was only mildly amused by her early start in thuggery. Well, he supposed everyone had the right to experiment with all careers paths they might be interested in, and thugs had to come from somewhere.

His nonchalance apparently got to her almost as good as any taunts could, as her face was turning into an unflattering shade of red, her hands curled into fists at her side. Tom sat up, but didn’t even try to move away. He still wanted to know about what she would do. Heck, he was intrigued by the violence she was all-too-ready to inflict on other people.

Smack!

A slap to his left cheek. Not entirely unexpected, Tom thought, though she was surprisingly fast for her age that he couldn’t move his body fast enough to avoid it—he kept forgetting that he had to get used to his new body and not expect it to move like his adult one. He saw her left fist raised and thought that maybe she wanted to follow it with a punch.

Anakin’s hand on her wrist stopped that.

“Leave my brother alone.”

Tom bit his lip and held back a snicker. His brother wouldn’t appreciate that, he knew, yet their
higher-pitched, childish voices made Anakin sound as if he was sulking rather than threatening. It was definitely a far cry from any self-respecting hero of the galaxy.

Anakin was casually throwing the fruit he held in his right hand while giving Tasha a long, knowing look. Under any other circumstance, he’d feel stupid for arming himself with fruits as projectile weapons, but eh, beggars can’t be choosers. Besides, it served Tom well before, hadn’t it? It would be enough. She sniffed at him.

“Or what, shorty?”

“Or you’ll regret it.” Anakin said, not bothering to hide the threat in his voice. “Tamlin, back me up here, will you?”

His twin sighed at that but did get up. Anakin sent him an annoyed glare. Only Tom could make it seem as if he was doing the blond a favour instead of Anakin doing his best to get his ass out of trouble.

“What now?” Tom asked. Anakin sighed and sent a mental reply. *Nothing. We just stare at her until she backs down.*

*What?? That’s so boring.* Tom groused.

*She’s a kid, Tom.*

Yeah, but you could let her get a few more hits in me, and the adults are going to go crazy.

Anakin rolled his eyes. *I still pity her to not pile that many punishments on her.*

To Tom’s surprise, it worked. All they did was stand there, being very silent and very still, and stare the heck out of Tasha. Apparently kids aren’t supposed to be that quiet because she backed away with a final surly glare at them. The other kids stared at the twins in awe, as if they were knights in shining armour, though Tom supposed the analogy wasn’t that far from what they just did.

“That’s it?” Tom murmured.

“Well, that, and waiting for Leena to come around so we can tell her what happened.”

He shook his head. “I’m sure you can tell her what happened. *I’m* going to take a nap.”

Tom proceeded to lie down with his hands behind his head and closed his eyes, ignoring the evil eye his twin was sending him. He had a good excuse; he was the one who had volunteered to be the human punching bag, not Anakin—*heh, some hero, he was.* He conveniently ignored the fact that it was a mere six year old that had been threatening him. He was *four,* she was definitely a dire threat to his physical body and he was sticking to his argument like the Forbidden Forest’s gigantic yellow-striped leeches.

“TASHA!”

Tom and Anakin didn’t bother to hide their cringing at the volume of Leena’s voice and backing
away; it was the normal reaction of anyone who got too close to her when she was this livid. Tasha dragged her foot forward, scowling at anyone who dared to even glance at her. That, of course, made Tom lazily stare at her as if he had run out of other interesting things to look at.

Which honestly wasn’t that far from the truth.

If looks could kill, then Tasha’s glare should’ve left nothing of Tom but a mushy puddle on the ground. Leena’s presence was the only thing holding her back from jumping at him right there and then.

“What happened here?”

“She hit Tamlin!” Anakin interrupted, before Tasha could even open her mouth. The blond was playing the role of the vexed kid who couldn’t accept that another kid had slapped his brother to a T, Tom noted. She redirected her staring to him now, instead of putting in more effort to intimidate Tom.

Leena stared the girl down. “Is that true?”

She pouted. “But he started it—”

“Is. That. True?” There was a clear menace in her tone, and yet for some reason Tasha plowed on. Tom couldn’t help but shake his head in wonder at the sheer lack of self-preservation that she displayed.

“No! I didn’t do anything to him!”

He felt their Twi’lek minder casting a glance at him—he was quite sure the last mark from her slap was still there on his face. Just how stupid was she? Anakin smirked as Tasha dug her own grave deeper with her denials. Leena sighed and turned to Anakin to ask for his version.

“She asked him for his fruit, but he didn’t wanna give it and then she starts shoving him around! Then, she hit him!” He said. His hands were folded in front of his chest.

“I did not!”

“You did too!”

“Did not!”

“Did too to infinity!”

“Children!” Leena snapped.

Anakin stopped the silly argument faster than Tasha—it was a ruse to get her to blow her top again, after all. He went on for a while with more explanations in a similar tone to the previous. The blond was indignant, but managed to stop just before being angry. Just the right amount to garner sympathy, Tom thought. She continued to collect the account of what happened from the two of them.

Tom only stood there, tuning his brother out and being completely bored once more, as this morning’s excitement seems to be the limit for the whole day. He fiddled with his fingers, trying to remember various wand movements and silently went back to riling up Tasha with strategically placed insolent glances. It wasn’t long before Anakin was done and whatever Tasha was saying in defence was found wanting; the last was easily achieved when the other kids were asked about their fruits.
All that was left was for Leena to approach Tom and start checking his face. It took some effort for him to not stop and freeze whenever she touched him.

He had improved, really. At least he didn’t cringe.

“Did it hurt?” She asked. He shrugged.

“Not really.”

“His elbow was hurt,” Anakin said, and Tom was only reminded just then, that yes, he did scrape them.

“Oh, yeah, the elbows. Just scratches.” Tom said, trying to ignore how cute his voice had sounded just then. He thought he was reluctant; he sounded like he was embarrassed. Just a little boy trying to avoid further scrutiny. He covered his face with his palms. *Urgh.* It was a good thing no one he knew witnessed this, least of all his Death Eaters. He would never live it down, much less take over the wizarding world this way.

Leena went to get some bandages for him, and covered them carefully, her eyes filled with so much concern that it was slightly uncomfortable for him. He was *fine,* really, and could she stop standing so close? Whatever it was that he had been broadcasting mentally, Anakin seems to have caught on to it, because he took several steps closer and placed himself closer to Leena.

“Leena’s too close,” Anakin said. “Tam’s doesn’t like it.”

She observed the two of them with some interest. “I’m making you uncomfortable, aren’t I?”

Anakin nodded, and Tom grudgingly did the same when the Twi’lek glanced at him. As much as he didn’t like admitting a weakness, he supposed his choice was either to inform her or suffer through it in silence. He was torn between relieved at having his brother able to adjust to it, and annoyed because Anakin had clearly found an exploitable *weakness.*

*Tom?*

*What?* He realised how curt he had sounded before he tried to correct it. *What, Anakin?*

*What’s wrong? I can still feel your restlessness—your Force signature is churning with an irregular pulse. It’s also a bit prickly.*

Tom mulled over it in silence as Anakin waited. *Damn it.* He should’ve known that there were disadvantages as well as advantages to having someone else tied so closely to your mind or soul. He made a passable excuse; not exactly a lie, but not the entire truth.

…*she’s still too close.*

*Alright. Just bear with it, I guess. It won’t be too long now.* Even as he said that, he subtly interposed himself between Tom and Leena as he pretended to enthusiastically try to bandage Tom himself. It was enough to ease her away from him that he was glad for it. Damn. It would seem that he owed Anakin something now.

…*thanks.* He grudgingly muttered with his mental voice.

Anakin shrugged—it didn’t seem to be a big deal to him. It was as if helping Tom was something that always came easily to him. *No problem, really.*

‘-
The next day started like the ones before it, with Shmi Skywalker dropping her children off at the kitchen before she went off to Gardulla’s quarters or wherever it was that she usually worked at—not that either Skywalker children knew. Tasha sent the twins evil glares which they ignored without a second thought. The next time Leena’s attention was taken away from them, it was apparent that the blonde’s time in the closet hadn’t improved her attitude any. When she walked over to the two of them, other children gave her a wide berth. She shoved them both at the same time.

“I don’t like snitches,” she hissed. “You’ll pay for that.”

Anakin tensed and tried to prepare himself for anything. Tom took one look at her, and laughed. It threw her off her stride—it threw Anakin off his. Everyone else was staring at him now. “What are you going to do to us?” Tom asked.

“I’ll hit you!”

Tom laughed even louder, and this time all the other children started to edge away from him too. “Hit me? You want to hit me? Ha! Go ahead. I’ve felt it and you’ve got nothing I can’t stand.”

Everyone except Anakin took a deliberate step away from him, their too-wide eyes hiding none of their fear or worry. Anakin dropped his face into his hands and didn’t bother to stop his groan, giving Tom a shifty sideways look.

Did you realise you’ve just gotten yourself labelled as crazy?

I’ve probably gotten us labelled as crazy, Tom corrected. Anakin glared.

Not helping, Tom.

Did I or did I not just solve our little problem without any violence? He asked, his tone smug. What would your venerable Jedi Order say about that?

Anakin was starting to not like the times when Tom was right—he was an annoying prat then. He sighed and took a deep breath, ignoring his high-and-adorable voice as he spoke to Tasha with the most serious expression he could manage.

“We’d also tell Leena that you hit Tamlin again. I bet she’d make you spend the whole day in the closet. Wouldn’t that be fun, Tasha?”

Anakin sent a mental poke to his brother. Tom!

What?

Did you notice that we’ve got tails now?

For some reason, three of the other kids to start following them around with a wide-eyed stare like cute, concussed baby womp rats behind their mother. Tom had the smirk of a man who’d just won the intergalactic lottery.

Tom spared Anakin a smug look. Of course—I’m not blind. It’s inevitable, you know?

Anakin found it even weirder when he noticed that two of the followers were older than the Skywalker twins. His brother was not the slightest bit fazed. The dark-haired Skywalker twin
considered it completely normal to give them small requests from time to time—can you please get that fruit on the table? I can’t reach it. Thanks. Sometimes it went, can I get a bite of your fruit? I always wanted to know what that glowy green thing tastes like.

The blond was amazed to watch the other kids scurry around doing his brother’s bidding.

What’s inevitable?

Minions! Tom replied, and he didn’t hide the glee that was leaking into his voice. It’s never too early to start our collection of minions. I love easily-impressionable children.

That had Anakin hurriedly trying to convince the three other kids to stop following them around, and that it’s okay to play on their own and not always follow the Tamlin and Anakin everywhere, really. No, they don’t mind at all.

Aww, come on, Anakin! It would be fun! Tom said, still too amused for his own good about the whole debacle. The blond rolled his eyes.

We are not getting minions.

It’s not as if we’re telling them to take over the world, or something. Tom said. They feel better near us. We’re doing them a favour for their peace of mind this way.

Tom’s ability to rationalise things were really kinda frightening. Anakin steadfastly ignored his twin and continued to assure the three children that they don’t have to follow them all the time, because he and his brother would ensure that Tasha wouldn’t bother anyone else.

“We won’t let anyone bother anyone else,” Anakin insisted. “Not just Tasha.”

“Really?” Asked an undecided Saurin boy.

“Oh shut up.”

“You can have half my bread,” the boy offered, even if he sounded as if he wasn’t sure he wanted to give it. Tom had taken it off his hands before Anakin could say anything.

“Thank you, now how about you, young lady? Do you want to give me that fruit?”

Tamlin!” Anakin hissed.

A small, dark girl whose name still escaped Anakin gave Tom her fruit with a smile. Tom smiled back and halved the fruit, returning one half to her, and it made her grin wider, all cute little teeth.

“Tamlin, we don’t take anything from them!”

“We’re not taking anything, Anakin. They’re happily giving it to us for our protection. You did gift the fruit to us, right?” Tom asked.

“Yes!” The girl said enthusiastically, complete with a raised hand. The Saurin boy only nodded halfway, unsure if he was supposed to say something else.
Tom’s grin was smug. “See?”

“Not really—” Anakin jumped, but missed. His twin sibling was surprisingly light on his feet and had easily ducked the blond’s attempts at relieving him from his bounty. Tom was already casually eating the half bread, to Anakin’s chagrin. It was probably a lost cause soon. “—we don’t need to accept anything for what we do!”

“Why not?” The little girl asked him. Tom stood next to her and gave a similar wide-eyed and innocent look. It was uncanny to see how well he could copy expressions.

“Yes, Anakin, why not? Please, do tell us? We do get hungry too, like other people. Why shouldn’t we accept the food? It’s tiring work, fending off Tasha and other idiots.”

“We don’t have to get anything for what we do. We do it because it’s right!”

“But whyyyyy?” Tom whined, mischief in his eyes. His twin brother turned to their minions—wait, not minions, dammit! Other kids! Tom was really infecting his brain with this. “Come on, do you get what he said? Because I don’t.”

“Nu-uh,” the little girl shook her head, pigtails following her every movement. “I dun geddit too.”

“Because we’re, um, heroes. Heroes do what they have to do because it’s right. They don’t do it because they want to get prizes for it!” Anakin declared. Yes. Heroes—that would’ve been a pretty good excuse for kids, wouldn’t it?

Tom only managed to hold back his laughter for two seconds before he almost choked on the fruit he was eating. He didn’t understand why his brother still looked on with glee—like Tom had seen him sitting on a pile of crap that he hadn’t noticed. He really didn’t have a good feeling about this.

“Yes! Like that!” the little girl said, to his chagrin. She still had a cute lisp. “We’s safe wid you. We follow.”

“Yes, yes you are. Smart girl. If you stay with us, you stay safe too. Keep following us!” Tom said with a grin. The Saurin boy now was completely dumbstruck.

“Heroes. You’re real heroes,” he breathed out, alternately staring between Anakin and Tom in disbelief.

Anakin cursed. Sithspit. He dug himself into this pit, didn’t he?

Who knew that children could be cute instead of just annoying little hellions? Tom commented to Anakin, his voice innocuous and innocent. The blond was steadfastly ignoring him now. He deigned to pat her head then, and received a suspicious look from his sibling. He grinned. Don’t you know that it’s alright to give little rewards to your minions? It helps ensure their loyalty. Anakin glared at him and bit out his reply.

“Not. Helping. Tam.”

“Sorry, but I’m still bored, so I’m not saying no to minions for my entertainment.” Tom was predictably unapologetic.
Chapter Summary

*A drink does not have the same meaning in Tatooine as it is in England.*

**Drink**

If the green woman didn’t pull him up by the scruff of his shirt, he would’ve toppled headfirst into the grain. He cursed inwardly. Damn lightheadedness and damn small body. Tom would’ve been more thankful if he wasn’t trying to keep his annoyance down (it was interesting to note how fast embarrassment could be converted into anger in his case). She lifted him up with just one hand (he hated his small size), set him down and knelt in front of him with a look of concern on her face.

“Tam!”

Anakin ran over as much as his short legs could carry him. Tom closed his eyes, feeling his sibling’s worry seep through their bond and forced himself to sigh instead of snap. “M’fine.”

He was fine, *really.* The woman placed a hand on his head, the crease of her forehead told him clearly not of the same opinion.

“You’re warmer than you should be. You’re not fine.”

“When did you drink last?” Anakin asked, quickly. Tom shrugged. He didn’t really understand why that caused identical looks of alarm to go up on Anakin’s face and the green woman’s.

“Is it such a—” he cut himself off before he showed his vocabulary too much. “Is it a big deal?”

“You’re dehydrated, little one.”

“He is. He’s not used yet,” Anakin said, his narrowed look a lot less intimidating on a child’s face.

“Used to what?”

“Drinking,” Anakin said, with such a reprimand in his tone that Tom couldn’t help but bristle. *What?* He knew enough about *drinking*, thank you. There’s water, and then you *drink it.* How many other ways of drinking would he need to know? But it wasn’t what Anakin meant, because soon he caught scattered images from the blond, the bleached bones of beasts left to dry under Tatooine’s harsh twin suns, the dessicated remains of travellers stupid enough or naïve enough to brave the deserts alone. The…

In the middle of the silent communication the two of them was having, he had been pushed to a table at the side of the room a drink pushed into his hand. Tom didn’t need Anakin’s glare to prompt him to finish it. Then, the woman gave him another one with the same look of such pointed concern that it took some effort to hold his tongue back (he didn’t need to be babied) and just drank it. Then, *Anakin* shoved him another one.

“You’re kidding me,” he muttered, but that was the extent of his protest as he started sipping in smaller quantities.
He would’ve been less obedient if he wasn’t baffled. He had seen that under Anakin’s glare were the first strains of fear. It was not fear of him, which Tom knew like the back of his hand and could recognise the moment a wisp of it drifted into another’s thought. It was a fear for him, and as such it took him some time to note.

And what was he supposed to do about that? He was trying to send Anakin some sort of message to stop it. It was distracting. Anakin only snapped out something close to stop being stupid and take care of yourself better—which really didn’t do a lot of good for his ego and the feelings of incompetence he’d been getting since he was here.

And thus; hello again, Anger. I thought I wasn’t going to see you again for some time, he thought dryly. He did his best not to snap. If he was actually a four years old, he would’ve scowled and let his temper get the best of him.

Leena let out a relieved sigh, the stare she gave him was still one of reproach.

“What are you thinking?” She snapped at him, and Tom stared up at her towering, glorious fury. “There might not be excess water here, but let me tell you the first rule of living here. When drinks are on the table, you grab one and drink, you got that?”

He nodded, too stunned to speak.

“Tell me the first rule!”

“Drinks on the table—drink.” The words escaped him before he knew it.

“Good! Remember that because your life depends on it. If I find you fainting again, you will be sorry, you understand?”

“He gets it. Sorry Leena.” Anakin said, saving his sibling from the need to reply. It was a good thing too, because Tom couldn’t decide between trying to kill her or just try to kill himself and stop the whole annoyance of living on Anakin’s dustball.

Sheessh, Tom, you gave us quite a scare, there. Please don’t take Leena personally. She’s just worried. Anakin said. Tom had to reluctantly admit that he was right, because even if he was only reaching out to magic slightly here, he could feel the small tremors of panic from her.

She was frightened for him. Huh. Wasn’t that interesting? He’d never known anyone being so concerned for his well being before. This planet was really convenient in the way its stronger magic field allowed them to easily get a read on other people’s emotions.

Was it really that bad? He asked Anakin.

Dehydration? The blond scoffed, but Tom could feel relief bleeding at the edges of his thoughts even as he lectured on. By the time you feel thirsty here, your body’s entering heatstroke. Anyone who is alive drinks by a disciplined habit—because they can’t afford to be careless.

That was when he realised how much Tattooine sucked compared to Earth.
Skywalkers - Sort

Chapter Summary

Low profile? What low profile?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sort

If Anakin knew what the future had in store for them, he wouldn’t be so enthusiastic in wishing that there was something substantial to distract Tom and alleviate his boredom. There is that well-known saying, after all, be careful with what you wish for.

It might just be granted.

‘-

Tom had been trying to ignore the blue girl beside him for some time and just focused on the crate of purple fruit in front of him. The way her tentacles moved independently of her hands and swayed to some nonexistent wind to her occasional humming still unnerved him. He’d never thought he’d admit this, but now he found that he’d be in a better shape interacting with muggles any time of the year than her species.

But when she moved yet another good fruit into the bad pile it was worse than a slight discomfort from unfamiliarity. Someone was blatantly incorrect right under his nose. His hand twitched and he gripped hers before he knew it. He did try to ignore her. Really. After that, though, it was only a matter of interfering properly.

“You’re doing it wrong.” His voice dripped with annoyance and he shook his head. “This isn’t supposed to be here—it’s not bruised nor is it discoloured. A bit soft at a spot or another, yes, but that only meant that it has to be eaten immediately. It could be served at the main table today and it would still be alright.”

Let it never be said that Tom Riddle ever stopped being a swot after graduating from Hogwarts. Voldemort, for one, had low tolerance for incompetence. Being reborn as Tamlin Skywalker had not cured him out of that tendency either. The blue girl (no, he did not remember her name and didn’t feel it was important for him to even find out) stared at him with a wide-eyed uncertainty.

“It’s not wrong,” she managed to squeak out. He narrowed his eyes and she took a frightened step back.

“Are you saying that I’m wrong?”

“It’s for everyone!” She squeaked again.

He rolled his eyes, hands folded in front of his chest. Did she think she could outthink him? His minions might be just as stupid as other kids, but at least they always followed his orders.
“You think no one will check your work? If anything goes amiss, it’s Elie that’s getting caned, not you. That’s why she’d take a look at your pile and see all the mistakes and decide that you can’t sort, not now.” He said, with a bored tone of voice. “All you’d manage to do is to get yourself out of sorting tasks—and that means you won’t get anymore fruits as your payment.”

The girl apparently hadn’t thought that far, as she scrambled to pick the better fruits away from the bad pile. Anakin had noticed the small altercation from his place where he was charged with sorting grains, and had ambled over to hs twin check. He sent a mental tap to Tom’s shields and waited for his twin to ease some of them down.

*Anything wrong?*

Tom rubbed the bridge of his nose. *She just tried to smuggle some good fruits into the reject pile.*

Anakin winced. He knew the consequences of that better than Tom, what with his first-hand experience with it. After all, he was the one who’d told his brother at the beginning.

“Calm down. You’d bruise more fruits that way,” Anakin settled himself between Tom and the girl. “I’ll help you go through it faster.”

“Don’t you have your own work?” Tom asked. The blond shrugged.

“It’s done.”

His reply was absentminded as he turned the fruits he was holding in his hands. Tom went back to his pile. There wasn’t that much left anyway that it was done quite soon and he was left to just sit around and twiddle his thumbs. He glanced at his brother, still preoccupied with the blue girl’s pile (*They’re twi’lek*, Anakin corrected when he overheard Tom’s thoughts, and Tom gave him a careless mental shrug of *yes, whatever*).

After a while doing *nothing* and feel boredom starting to sink its dull claws into his head and Tom pressed the palm of his hands into his eyes. Two of the kitchen staff a little farther on was getting nasty talking about a third girl they considered as ‘easy’, probably just because she was better endowed than them, Tom thought with a scoff. It was only a step above the two grocery deliverymen who were talking about someone who was easy, and the odds of getting her to agree to a threesome with another girl.

*Not until you earn a lot more than you do now, idiots*, he thought, grumpily. *She might be easy, but she’s not stupid.*

He wished they would shut up because their screeches and voices were too loud for him to stop noticing. Merlin forbid, at this rate he was going to remember every bloody detail of the little sordid lives of all the brainless idiots around them. He gritted his teeth. He muttered something in Latin about his not wanting to let life screw him as relentless and hard as Caesar’s boytoys would pound Caesar. What did he do to deserve this again? Oh yes, *being a dark lord in his previous life.*

*How did I ever forget that?* He thought dryly.

He could hear Anakin’s mental laughter over his choice of words, impressed as well as amused. His currently wide-open mental bond with Anakin probably made his Latin language skill accessible to his sibling, but he was too occupied to care about shielding himself (he still needed to access Huttese, after all, before he learned the damned language properly).

He dragged himself over next to his brother. Anything was better than the mindless gossip. *Anything.*
“I thought you were never coming over, Tamlin.” Anakin’s grin had got to be too wide to be comfortable. He rolled his eyes, ignored his brother and fixed a gimlet stare at the girl instead. His voice was pointed.

“I’m helping you this once only. Do not think this will be a habit, do you hear me? I see that you’re still sorting some of the fruits wrong, so I’ll show you how it’s done properly. Now pay attention.”

Anakin really could not complain about the state of Tom’s mood. He was always much more chipper when he could Crucio someone—just because he understood why he needed to avoid it as much as humanly possible does not mean it wasn’t as pleasant as getting splinched mid-apparition. It was perfectly normal if he was an arse without it.

Was it possible he was going through Crucio withdrawals? Hmm, no one had ever noted that before. Bears investigating once he gets back to Hogwarts.

‘-

The first rule of any bureaucracy and army was simple. Don’t volunteer for anything and keep your head down.

That way, you’d avoid getting more trouble shoved and piled over your heads than you can shovel yourself out of. Anakin was quite aware of it, thank you, as he’d been a part of the Republic army and the Imperial one after that. He’d never be caught dead volunteering anything to Sidious. He may offer some humble advice and suggestions, or might provide a list of possible alternatives and actions, but he would not offer a single outright working plan most of the time. If anything fell apart after that, it secured him from direct blame and the non-enviable personal question-and-answer session with the Emperor. Anakin knew this.

…well, he thought he did, at any rate.

Elie had come over again to check the work assigned to the children, beginning with the blue Twi’lek girl and she was very satisfied with how it turned out. “This is good work. You’ve gotten better, Mimuna.”

Of course, the little girl just had to turn to the Skywalker twins at the words, eyes sparkling with gratitude to their mutual unease, making the curious Elie follow her glance to the boys. “Did they help you?”

“Yes.” She said with a vigorous nod. “They helped everyone.”

Tom was sending him alarmed looks. Everyone? What did she mean everyone? But you’ve only just helped the Mumu… Mimi something girl?

Mimuna, he corrected, frowning. And I might’ve… helped some others before I came to you.

There was a loud huff from the black-haired twin in real space, and a slap that sounded like a palm meeting a forehead. You did not just help everyone, right? Tell me you didn’t. Please.

I was bored! Anakin said, a tad defensive.

Famous last words, Tom muttered, but Anakin continued on.

Don’t pretend like you don’t use the exact same excuse for pulling weird poodoo. Besides, you were the ones that got us friends, remember?
Minions—
—and they asked me for help when they get confused. Anyway, it’s easier than fixing an engine crapped out due to atmospheric reentry. All I needed to do was give them a few pointers and maybe check back once in a while—

Tom pulled his elbow. When Anakin looked around, all the other kids were looking their way. Not just in the sense of pointing-in-that-direction, but also that wide-eyed, star-struck hero worship look. Anakin could probably still identify that look from one light minute away, in a spaceship.

“They help’d us too!” the Isha, the small, cute little girl they helped some days before. A familiar Saurin boy some distance away nodded—wait, what was his name, again? Other kids were also nodding along and clamoring.

Anakin cursed in his head.

Twelve stablefulls of bantha poodoo and I still forget the first rule in the army—

“I didn’t know you were such helpful boys!” Elie said, delighted.

It was surprising to see the speed the small female could move with, as she was suddenly in front of the twins already. “You deserve a promotion. Let me tell you a little secret; if you keep being this good, you’d be a majordomo one day! The big guy above everyone else! The right hand man!”

Because of course I’ve always wanted to be a slave the rest of my life, Tom said, his thoughts as bland as his actual expression. Anakin sighed. He knew where she was coming from, but he’d be lying if he said the words didn’t grate. After all these years, the insinuations that he was always under someone’s beck and call could still rile him. Maybe because even Vader was never a free man either.

Let me handle this. It’s probably just a more complex task given to us. Something like running errands or assisting other servants—

Slaves—

—I know what I meant, Tom. He answered, baring mental teeth at that just to show his sibling how deep his old rage about his childhood still ran. He didn’t need any reminders. It was a good thing that Tom picked up enough to understand and backed away from the topic.

“…we always have to help each other because we only have each other. It’s nice to see that you’ve understood that already…” Elie said, still gushing at them. He’d been too busy talking mentally that he’d missed whatever else she had been going on about. Anakin saw his brother pinching the bridge of his nose. His shoulders were tense.

Yes, please handle this. Her chatter is making me want to throw her down a well, just so I won’t have to ever hear anything about it again anymore.

You can’t even overpower her. Anakin pointed out.

Doesn’t stop me from having the urge to try.

“I’m so proud of you two!” Elie said.

“Yes, thank you.”

Tom was smiling at her at this point, a tad too wide and sharp. It got her to take an unconscious step back, an awkward smile on her face. Anakin snorted—he could feel the chill Tom radiated through their link. He elbowed his brother.

Tom snapped his head to him. What?

Don’t smile when you don’t mean it. You’re just going to creep people out.

It earned him a look, but Anakin matched that easily. Tom’s expression changed into barely-hidden grumpiness that was more sulky than sullen on their young faces, but Anakin didn’t care. He noticed that Elie had relaxed. At least his twin stopped doing that half-baked imitation of what he thought a nice and harmless kid should look like. The only thing it made obvious was how he wasn’t exactly nice or harmless.

Fortunately, Elie perked up very easily. She clapped her hands together and drew everyone’s attention once more.

“Errr, right. Okay. Well. Oooh, I almost forgot! I never thought I’ll say this to any of you younglings, but Anakin and Tamlin have proved me wrong. You’re responsible. You’re good at helping other people. Now, you know that we’re having a party in a month’s time, right?”

The kids around them sported various expressions, from confusion to acknowledgment. Neither Skywalkers knew what they were talking about. Their habit of tuning people out when they got bored (especially over long-winded speeches) was biting them in the backside now.

What is she talking about? Tom asked.

I have no idea.

Elie turned to them again. In fact, she kneeled in front of them to reduce the height difference. She placed a hand on each of their shoulders. “I’m recommending you to be servers in the party, even if they don’t usually think younger kids can be trusted. I just know you’d do well.”

Mimuna’s eyes widened. “They get uniforms?”

Elie nodded. “Uh huh. They’d get uniforms. And bonuses. It comes with the uniforms.”

“Wow,” she breathed out.

All the other kids turned to them with varying degrees of wonder, and the best expression Anakin could give them was a grin and an awkward wave. Tom had his hands in his pockets and that too-blank face he used when he had no idea what sort of emotion was expected from him. Elie laughed and took their confusion in a completely different direction.

“Oh, come on. Say something! I know it’s such an honour, but it’s alright to share your excitement with your friends!”

He didn’t have to see to know that Tom was staring back at her with incredulity.

Anakin cleared his throat, “Um, yay?”

He elbowed Tom, who elbowed him back with not a little annoyance. “Thanks?”

Within a moment they were mobbed by squealing and screeching kids, alternately congratulating
them and telling them stories about older siblings or older kids who’d managed to be ‘in uniform’ and how much better that was for them, et cetera, ad nauseum. Tom’s mental voice was deceptively mild when he spoke up again in his mind, though his force-presence was certainly… prickly.

_Anakin, what on earth had we just gotten into?_

Anakin shrugged. _I have no idea._

‘-

Apparently, the young Anakin and Tamlin Skywalker should feel _honoured_ that they were part of the small group of children and adolescents chosen to serve at an upcoming banquet held by Gardulla the Hutt for the various minor crime bosses under her _glorified errand boys_, Tom had said, and Anakin didn’t disagree). Their now lofty-er position entitled them livery.

They had to hold back their breath when Elie unveiled the uniform to them because she was clearly waiting for a grand reaction. Tom had nodded his thanks and quickly ushered her away with the excuse he wanted to try it on. Anakin didn’t argue with him and did the exact same time, assisting his twin into a closet.

_Of course_ the colours in it followed the the visible spectrums of Hutt sight, coordinated in a way the aesthetics of combinations and patterns developed in their culture.

Tom labelled it as psycho paint plant escapee, and Anakin admitted he’d always thought of it as Dewback vomit camo. Tom couldn’t stop laughing for a whole minute and Anakin didn’t fare any better.

It took a while before they calmed themselves enough to wear it and joined the other kids gathered for the dress rehearsal. Everyone else looked so proud wearing their uniform that Anakin’s couldn’t help the mental chuckles building yet again. He knew Tom bit his lip to stop himself from giving in to the urge, and maybe holding his breath, if the puce-like tinge of his face was any indication—he’d given Anakin a mind shove for starting the hysterics again. It only made Anakin snicker.

When Ta’krul Has Dal, protocol master and Saurin in charge of the children (to be honest, to keep his fussiness out of everyone else’s hair) gave them a warning glare, Anakin and Tom only stared back with matching looks of innocence.

“Pay attention! You have no one to blame but yourself if you get punished for being careless!”

A chorus of sirs, yes sirs and the like filled the air immediately, with the twins following in perfect step with everyone else with just the amount of expected enthusiasm. Anakin could almost see old man Ta’krul’s puff of annoyed breath as he failed to catch them on anything and turned his attention back to the group as a whole as he started explaining to everyone how the banquet was going to go on.

_I can get used being a child again_, Tom mused aloud in his head. Anakin smirked. _Yeah, definitely._

‘-
Still not satisfied with the way it turned out. Decided to just upload it before I obsessively edit it to death.
Skywalkers - Banquet

Chapter Summary

_In which Tom figures out that they've been complacent. What happens next isn't pretty._

**Banquet**

Tom made sure that Anakin and Shmi were already out of the way.

There was an adult body motionless on the floor.

He should’ve known the apparently easygoing life they’d had so far couldn’t last. They were slaves, to one of the major crime bosses of Tattooine. Which part of that life did he not get?

How did they get to this point again?

_There are more than seven sentient species on Tattooine_, Tom thought back to all the things that Anakin had been trying to stuff into his brain.

_More than seven sentient, spacefaring species set on settling this sad planet, and half of the crime lords here are unsurprisingly human_, Tom concluded on his own.

He wasn’t sure that Anakin noticed that, not the way he did. Darth Vader still had ‘following orders’ to explain his career, no matter how shoddy the excuse; Voldemort has no such recourse. He was quite aware of humanity’s weaknesses and vices—and humans can be quite depraved indeed. He would know—he played his underlings against each other utilising them whenever he suspected that a coup was in the works, or someone was getting cocky.

Sure, Anakin might’ve gotten around this life once already and knew what to expect, but he was sure the blond had fallen back to old habits and patterns after a while without a second thought. It wasn’t such a bad thing to do when one was intent on merely surviving, but Tom was sure his sibling didn’t have _that_ many memories from around this age either, if the way he was unfamiliar with many of the staffs around were any indication. Children had a limited view of the world, and that would affect what memories they keep… as well as what they would not even remember because they didn’t even realise it then.

That Anakin wouldn’t know about some of the things that could prove to be a threat to them should’ve been his first warning. He realised that and increased his own awareness. He kept his eyes open and absorbed as much useful information as possible about his new surroundings and began figuring out how things worked—first in the kitchen and slave dining area they seem to be confined to, and then the greater compound of Gardulla’s. He’d thought it would be enough instead of bringing the concern to his brother and _talked_.

He felt like casting the Cruciatus on himself for that carelessness. _Why on earth did Harry even consider making the deal to you, if not for the gains of getting two minds on a problem?_ The overconfidence was going to be the death of him _again_ if he didn’t watch it.
Megalomania could possibly also evolve later on from that bad seed and mess with his actions even more, but this wasn’t the time for post-op analysis nor for being nostalgic and maudlin. You see, there’s this fracas that had somehow developed…

‘-

It began with curry.

Tom had a large dish of eeopie curry to balance as he dodged a panicked girl in the same livery already, urgently trying to locate a strategic place to set it down at, while at the same time ensuring that he kept an eye on his brother. From a distance and across all the people, all he could see was Anakin was staring a little too long at some spot to his left.

Anakin, someone’s going to be looking for their drinks soon. He tried his best to draw Anakin’s attention back to the bottle he was carrying. It wasn’t working. He pulled his mental shields down, not caring whether he’d be able to pull it back up without assistance later or not. There were no Jedis or Siths around to notice, were there?

Anakin!

That yell got his brother moving, but from his distant look, Tom knew that Anakin wasn’t fully here yet. He had to place the pot down for now. No one would be looking for him specifically back in the kitchen to bring food out. There were a lot of people serving as waiters today.

Anakin, what’s wrong?

His brother wasn’t answering and that was a cause of alarm on its own.

He could feel sparks brewing right across the bond he shared with his twin and backtracked his thoughts as he scanned the room again, trying to find out whatever it was had set his brother off. Right, the minor crime boss at one end of the table and the tentacled dancing girl he’d just dragged into his lap. Her face was thickly made up, and her clothes made him wonder how her assets had yet to spill out completely in that getup. She was playing coy, and he was happily trying to get his hands on her.

“You’re the prettiest girl here, you know that?” The orange-green crime boss said.

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Nooooo. You are. I challenge anyone to call me wrong!” He blabbed. She giggled at that. Tom scoffed. That set Anakin off? The scene was as predictable as it was nauseating, and they were…

Not everything in this room is as it seems; hadn’t he learned that lesson enough when he arrived at Hogwarts? Was he a wizard or a muggle? He was not a child, and neither was Anakin, and regardless of how they had acted so far, that was all it ever was—an act. He remembered the useful trick that the blond had taught him to use by connecting to the vivid magical field around them (this universe’s magical atmosphere was certainly stronger than what he was used to, or maybe it was earth that was weaker than general). It was not exactly legilimens, as they weren’t trying to read people’s minds with it, but one can feel the emotions of other people if one paid attention.

The dancing girl’s smile was a little too wide, her laughter a little too forced. He wouldn’t have noticed it if he didn’t pay attention, and he wouldn’t have if he hadn’t tried feeling her with this very convenient magic sense (Force sense, whatever, Anakin could correct him as many times as he wanted later on, Tom just wasn’t used to it yet).
Under the veneer of activity and poise, she was a turbulence of self-hate.

He twitched a little and studiously avoided sensing her again. Her emotions scraped at him like sandpaper—and he’d only scratched the surface.

Tom relieved another young servant of a dish that had to be delivered to the table, earning a thankful look from the boy. Tom paid him no mind—he was just too lazy to go all the way back to the kitchen when he had things to watch here and it gave him an excuse to approach the table to drop it off. His attention turned to the left from the blue girl and saw a green one, just painted and outfitted in the same way and with a different crime underling. This guy was all sleazy smiles topped with the unshakeable belief that he was the Universe’s gift to women. Unlike the other girl, the green one’s discomfort was palpable and she wasn’t even acting coy when she said no. Predictably, the guy wasn’t even listening to it. No one paid attention to Tom as he slunk around and dropped the large plate he carried on the table.

He checked on Anakin again through their bond and found that even if his brother was in a foul mood, he was also slightly distracted by something else somehow. No emergency there yet.

“I said I don’t want to—”

“Aww, don’t be that way, babe. I’ll show you a good time, I promise—”

“I said—”

He forced a kiss on her, and it earned him a slap. Tom couldn’t help but felt his senses on alert before the sleazeball laughed it off. He wondered if the girl knew what it would entail if he had complained about her conduct to Gardulla. Maybe she was new.

She met his gaze before pressing her lips in a thin line and looked away as embarrassment warred with anger, but what was unmistakable was her stubbornness despite it all.

It was Leena.

Tom stared for another moment before he shook his head, not quite believing his eyes. To know that the green female was someone he did know brought with it another layer of… wrongness he didn’t know was possible. Her shoulders were curled upon herself instead of the straight and unwavering mistress of the kitchen—an unconscious reaction for prey creatures to make themselves look smaller and hopefully less noticeable to a predator. She wasn’t the loud and insistent guardian of the kids, she was prey creature. Something was off in his universe that Tom didn’t like it. He liked things to be predictable and in their proper places.

But of course things weren’t right in the universe. It was the cynical voice he had developed since his first death, and here he thought he’d conveniently lost it somehow.

She is a thing, here, the same way that Anakin is a thing and Shmi Skywalker is a thing and we are. A Thing, that is. Things are there to be used and with no right to dissent or complain.

He gave her whatever wish she had to not be recognised, walking away without a backward glance as he searched for his brother through the crowd again. He didn’t know what Anakin would’ve done in his position, but he was quite aware that he was a mere four year old without a wand, without a competent hold on wandless magic either. Even Anakin was still spotty on that count. Interfering with anything now was more trouble than it was worth, though he wouldn’t say no to nuking this place from orbit if he had the opportunity to at some later date. Maybe even with the slaves and all. Surely an easy and quick death would scarcely be more miserable than continuing their pathetic lives?
…no, he didn’t hate this place.

Really.

_Hate_ implies that there is something very personal about the affront. To him, there wasn’t anything personal about his intense dislike of the hell-hole that Anakin had the misfortune to call childhood. His opinion that the place could use a little… redevelopment was a very sane, very reasonable assessment that he was sure any planetary development panel would agree with.

He would also admit that he had never even thought for a second about how slaves and other people living in indentured servitude lived before this—it wasn’t as if modern Britain and the wizarding world had _anything_ like it. Even house-elves were mostly out of necessity, as they fed on the magic of stronger beings to help sustain them (else they wither away or go mad, which was never pretty). The system was also not beneficial to any creature except the ones at the top, greedily draining the ones at the lower rungs out of anything worth leeching. Now that he’d seen firsthand how such an environment warped most of the sentients within it, he decided there was no good reason to allow it to stand.

It was a system that was not conducive to produce anything much out of it, if it ever did at all.

Oh, sure, it was better than outright chaos and war and people killing each other or tribes running raids and counter-raids against each other and killing themselves off into oblivion. Yet when that’s the best reason you have for keeping a social system around is that it’s better than _war_, there’s definitely something wrong with it.

Of course, the same thing could be said of Death Eaters and any other Voldemort’s force of terror, and how in the end, it was designed to improve no one’s lot but the dark lord’s own, but Tom was conveniently not-thinking about it. It _had_ occurred to him, yes, but as it was rather unpleasant to be reminded of one’s own incompetence and bad choices, he glossed over it. He thought he had a pretty good reason to do that too. _Focus_, he thought, _on the present, and not on the past._

So he pulled himself out of his thoughts and tried to locate Anakin again.

It was annoying having to duck or avoid some people’s steps just because they weren’t looking down. On the other hand, it made him completely free to walk around not doing his supposed job as most wouldn’t even spot him loitering.

He felt Anakin’s emotions _spike_, and Tom ran towards his brother without thinking.

_Anger_, as familiar to him as the back of his hand, but this time it was burning hot and swirling than his own cold and sharp-edged one and he knew for certain that it was his twin’s. There was a crash in the direction he was running to, but there had been more than a few crashes all around, considering that people had begun to get drunk. He counted that as a good thing, as it meant Anakin wouldn’t be drawing attention with whatever it was he did, and he found his brother soon enough after that.

There was a man coughing and gasping on the floor. Anakin was staring at the fool with an intense malice—Tom was sure his eyes were _not_ supposed to be yellow.

“Well! Ani, it’s alright, shhh, it’s alright. I’m here for you Ani. Everything would be fine…” Shmi hugged Anakin, running her hands through his features to ascertain her son was alright. Anakin blinked and his eyes were blue once more, and he stared at his surroundings like a man not fully awake from a nightmare. Neither of them had seen him yet, so Tom was free to continue to observe.
“Mom?”

With his light coloured eyes and blond hair, Anakin looked so painfully young and lost.

“I’m alright. Shhhhhh, my poor, poor baby. Everything would be alright…” She crooned and petted him like one would treat skittish wildlife.

He’d only noticed that Shmi was wearing the same sort of getup he had seen Leena and other dancing girls wore. He’d recognised the top, or the nonexistent scrap that it is, anywhere. He could easily guess the sort of task that was assigned to his mother.

It wasn’t hard to imagine what his brother would do if he saw a guest being stupid, and doing actions that can certainly be classified as tempting suicide-by-Skywalker.

The air reeked of the Dark Arts.

He twitched. Not good, he thought quickly, looking around. It would explain that blast of power he’d felt bursting from Anakin. If the way the closest slaves had backed away from them, he guessed it wasn’t unfelt either by the non-magic sensitives.

To his continuing surprise, Shmi was unaffected. He had no idea how ordinary woman like her could’ve shrugged away anything she’d been experiencing before and was more concerned for her son (who could certainly defend himself), than her own well-being. She fascinated him, this Skywalker mother of his, with her expression of endless compassion (how does she generate it without limit?). He looked away. There wasn’t enough time to analyse her.

They were in enough crap already.

Bollocks, Tom thought, pinching the bridge of his nose.

A quick glance showed that Shmi was uninjured, as was Anakin. So… priorities. Damage control it is, then, he decided.

It would’ve been better if the idiot was just dead—a corpse can’t talk, after all. With the feast going on, it would provide a lot of suspects to take the suspicion off them. He could bet that the man had made some enemies in the course of his chosen career. Unfortunately for him, the idiot was still breathing, him being flat on his back and dead drunk notwithstanding.

He’d just have to work with that.

Tom took a glass from the table. “Sir? Are you alright? You look like you could use a drink.”

He did his best to look helpful, even going so far to assist the man to sit. The idiot took it, and predictably raved about the unthankful serving girl who couldn’t see that she was being lucky that he had chosen her, and the boy who didn’t know his place and need to be—

Once the man was comfortable enough to relax his guard again, Tom walked right up to his face, held his temples and made sure the man stared into his eyes.

“Legilimens.” He enunciated.

“What are you doing?”

He cursed inwardly for his shaky control right now, but ploughed on. “Legilimens. Legilimens!”

“Stop that—”
He stopped reacting once Tom managed to launch himself inside his head, tearing his puny defences down and strolling through his thoughts and memories like he owned it. Then, he wrecked havoc with the man’s short term memories. If he tore thoughts instead of plucking them, threw entire memory sets in disarray instead of collating them aside, well, the man’s overall well-being wasn’t Tom’s concern at all.

Now, where is that memory? He thought he saw glimpses of Shmi Skywalker’s image, the man’s graceless groping that made Tom consider skewering his hand with a red-hot nail to teach him a lesson (she was his mother here, certainly not the stupid man’s property). He caught it, as well as several others where Anakin started to collect uncontrolled magic around him, in which not a little were tinged with darkness. It was not with little delight that he figured out his brother had unconsciously been applying a type of Cruciatus (who knew how similar they are?) At the very least the man had gotten what he deserved.

Tom shredded the memories until nothing remained but a fuzzy groping and intense pain. Let’s see if he learns from his lesson, shall we? He thought to himself, darkly amused. The man was swaying, his nausea beginning to be obvious. Some blubbering and headaches wouldn’t kill him. He thought he heard the man heave and backed away quickly, leaving him to puke his guts out. Some vomiting wasn’t going to kill him either, Tom noted to himself, not entirely displeased by the development. Now, to make sure that Anakin wasn’t still tapping on the Dark Arts. He strode quickly to where the remaining Skywalkers were sitting on the floor.

“Anakin. Anakin.”

His brother was shielding his eyes from the light, groaning. Some side effect of the power rush, maybe. He spoke quickly, in a lower tone to make sure only his brother heard it. “Take Mother out of here and make sure no one finds out where you’re both are. We need to get her to some place safer.”

He turned to Shmi. Taking a deep breath, he tried to remember how to look worried. He was supposed to be worried for his brother, right? So nervousness it is. The tremors were easy enough to show. He was still high on adrenaline.

“Mother, can you please take Ani back? He… hasn’t been feeling well.”

To his surprise, she pulled him into her arms and hugged him. He froze for three seconds, and thought it was really a matter of good luck that he didn’t have a wand on him or he’d have sent a curse her way. Her scent was comforting instead of unpleasant for reasons he couldn’t quite explain, and it was pricking his curiosity. She kissed his forehead and let him go.

“I’ll take care of your brother, Tam. Are you sure you’ll be alright?” She asked.

He nodded, and he couldn’t help a smirk from forming. Considering that the other option was for Anakin to use Dark Arts to kill idiots left and right, the situation was still an improvement over that.

“Of course I will. Don’t worry, Mum.”

‘-

So… where was he? Fracas, check. Unconscious idiot, check.

Right.

After seeing Anakin and Shmi off, he walked back into the banquet and considered watching the
vomiting idiot to make sure the quick mindscrew he did worked and he dodged the clumps of people and congregating crowds. The closer he got to the fool, the more lingering looks he noticed that he was getting from the other kids, and even some of the adult slaves. The guests were too occupied with their own entertainment and fun most of the times, but it still made him wary. He rolled his eyes. It was the orphanage all over again, though the difference now was that he couldn’t care less.

When his way forward was suddenly blocked, he looked up in annoyance, to the familiar lizard face of old man Ta’krul.

“Tamlin. I was looking for you.”

That sounded ominous. He kept his expression neutral. “You were, Sir?”

“Anakin’s behaviour to a guest is atrocious. I heard you weren’t much better either.” He said with a sniff, bearing down at him with the full weight of his gaze. Tom kept the slightly vacant smile he had, his voice pitched to be perfectly pleasant.

“I’m sorry that a guest was disappointed. But he did have a good time, didn’t he?”

Ta’krul huffed, his look turning into a full glare. “Enough. There’s no need to pretend anymore. We know you’ve been up to something, and it’s best if you were to admit it straight away.”

He sighed, appropriately morose, “Anakin can’t ever see Mother being sad, you see? He gets carried away.”

“Well he should think before he acts, then! All actions against the most honoured guests are fitting for punishments.”

“He didn’t mean to push the man out of his chair,” Tom said, keeping his face blank as incredulity flashed past Ta’krul’s face at the moment. “I helped him up, but he threw up. Maybe he drank too much.”

“He pushed the man out of his chair,” Ta’krul said slowly, staring at Tom. Tom nodded with the same smile he had the entire time.

“Yes. Why do you ask? What did the guest said?”

“You should make sure that it does not happen again,” the protocoler snapped at him, and Tom pretended he didn’t notice the not-answer given. *Old man Takrul didn’t have an ounce of proof, then,* he reasoned. “There are enough witnesses of the argument that happened after that.”

“Of course I will.” He held back from smiling wider. It would’ve been too obvious.

“You should count yourself lucky that you’ll only receive some lashes for it. Learn from it.”

His eyes widened, incredulous. Wait, *what? Lashes? What the hell?*

“Lashes?”

“We don’t believe in soft modern discipline, boy! Nothing makes slaves toe the line properly like a good lashing!” The Saurin retorted firmly, pride suffusing his voice. Tom was still staring at him in disbelief.

“Don’t worry, we have your size too, it wouldn’t be dangerous, not like if we used adult-sized whips tomorrow morning. We’re not barbarians, you know? Sleep well and tell your brother to
sleep well too—it would be your last chance for a good night’s sleep in more than a week.”

Tom held back from allowing his eyebrows to rise incredulously high on his face as he watched the Saurin walk away, the alienness of this world still jarring to him. *Is he even serious?* *Fuck it, he is.* *What sort of messed up place did Anakin grow up in, anyway?* He gave a cold glare to anyone bothering to look at him with schadenfreude, or even worse, *pity.* It wasn’t as if the punishment would kill him, he knew. He wasn’t an actual four years old and neither was Anakin.

It didn’t mean that he wasn’t pissed off.

*That’s it. I’ll find a way to nuke it from orbit years from now.*

‘-
Skywalkers - Punishment

Chapter Summary

Pain does not actually hurt that much compared to being powerless. This was an old lesson that the twins received a refresher on.

Punishment

The day had barely even started when the Skywalker’s modest room received an unpleasant visitor. When he made his way to the door, he could see his mother shaking her head, while a more annoying voice droned on. Tom didn’t need to hear the conversation from the beginning to know it was upsetting her.

“This is for their own good, Shmi. If you had taught them better they wouldn’t be in trouble now,” the grizzled Saurin said. Ta’krul stood with all the pride of pompous windbags everywhere. Shmi Skywalker gasped, hands covering her mouth in disbelief. “It’s better that they learn now to become better slaves.”

“No, no, no… it’s not true. Why my babies, Ta’krul?”

He scoffed. “They are not babies anymore. They are ruffians and a positive menace when no one’s looking. They need to be taught a lesson.”

“They didn’t do anything wrong!”

If Tom hadn’t clenched his hands around Anakin’s arm, the blond would have jumped ahead and tackled the geezer, four-year-old body or not. Tom sighed as he distributed his weight a little before his twin marched away and dragged him along. Anakin was still a little too touchy to anything and anyone that distressed his mother.

“Seriously, if we’re going to kill him, we should find a place without eyewitnesses,” Tom whispered. “You wouldn’t want her to see it, do you?”

Most people can’t tell a lie worth a damn, and any moderately skilled interrogator would be able to pry the truth from them without much difficulty. It wasn’t much of a stretch that Shmi Skywalker was as average as anyone else. Tension radiating away from Anakin in one final sigh.

“I really shouldn’t, not in anger” Anakin growled.

“But would you? I mean, it’s not as if he’s anyone too important, or anything,” Tom speculated.

Anakin sighed, even as they ignored Old Man Ta’krul’s further efforts to inform their mother of what their mistakes were, what their punishments were and the precise time and date for it. “We’re not risking Dark Side, Tam.”

He shrugged. “Well, I still needed to ask. I suppose it would be such a bother to drag him around with these chubby arms and legs, though. Yeah, not worth the bother.”

Anakin snorted, still too pissed off to correct his brother’s words. Even so, there was a glimmer of
a smile.

The twins would’ve been fine being ignored, but they attracted attention just as they were turning back. Old Man Ta’krul pulled himself to his full height and stared at them.

“You two! Listen and remember well! In two more hours you’d be taken to the Southwest kitchen to be punished. Remember your mistakes well and repent.”

Anakin balled his hands into fists, but only glared back. Tom settled giving him an unamused look. He could complain, but it would’ve been taken even more wrongly. It would’ve been a fiasco after that, and Anakin certainly didn’t need any more triggers. The silence stretched on to uncomfortable levels. They had unnerved the Saurin slightly—the leave he took was certainly awkward. Neither of the twins had blinked or took their eyes off him when he walked away.

Well, Tom thought, that wasn’t so bad. It was just tedious. It wasn’t as if he was unaware of what was in store for him today.

Then his Skywalker mother came over to the two of them, hugged them, and promptly burst into tears. Anakin hugged her back just as tightly while Tom gave an awkward wriggle from where he stood.

I take it back, he groused. This is... uncomfortable.

The Southwest kitchen wasn’t precisely a room as such, it was a small plaza bordered on all sides with a kitchen. The plaza itself was lightly covered with tent at all times, unless there was a sandstorm coming and then the tent would be lower in height and tightly wrapped. Its large size meant that it wasn’t often used, not when there were other kitchens in the complex just as large and outfitted with more modern trappings.

What it was still often used for was as an open-air abbattoir, and as punishment grounds. Tom walked into the plaza beside Anakin, shirtless, Ta’krul Has Dal walking in front of them. There was small channel cut into the stone on the grounds, painted red from the last animal they slaughtered there. The stone basin the channel emptied to was still half-filled with blood.

He stepped on something small and squishy. It was pinkish. He resolutely did not try to pick out the details.

The place stinks with blood too, as well as the half-rotten remains of the occasional forgotten offal and intestine. The miasma permeated uncomfortably to the back of his nose, choking. If he wasn’t as used to it, he would’ve been tempted to gag. The skins of various animals were piled on one corner. There was a skinned eeopie hung on a meathook, headless.

A man that couldn’t have been anyone else but the butcher (no one was as bloody as he is) looked disgruntled to have been usurped from his own grounds, but said nothing except for murmured curses as he stood aside. Some of the older children had been dragged there too, and they were looking at anywhere but the Skywalker twins. Several other adults of various species hung back, ill at ease. Two other women were alternately trying to hold back Shmi Skywalker and calm her down. He tuned them out. There was a loud argument between Leena and some furry guy that he could care less about, but it would seem that his rank won out in the end because she ended up getting the slave children to enter the plaza. The younger ones were in various shades of curious and alarmed.

It was probably all the blood and butchered parts. He could hear a young boy choke off a scream
from a skull at his feet.

There was that little girl with large dark eyes again, fear for them in her eyes and not a little worry too. She would’ve approached them and asked them what was wrong if her father wasn’t holding her by the shoulder. The lizard boy next to her clung to his mother’s skirt.

It could be due to the chains around his and Anakin’s wrists.

“Attention!” The old Saurin called out. It was without a doubt the beginning of another long winded monologue and Tom could almost feel himself being preemptively sleepy. “We are all here to observe Discipline meted out and enforced—”

“Speak for yourself, old man!” Leena snapped.

“—don’t be insolent, Caretaker, and know your place!”

Leena’s eyes narrowed, her tentacles twitching. “I don’t remember the punishments ever being this hard for anyone so young, Ta’krul. Why them, huh? Why not Akhee when he pinched one too many yoghurts from the kitchens?”

“He was lashed too! Sure you are not an idiot—”

She took a step closer, undaunted. “But not with this sort of audience! They’re only four! Have you lost your mind??”

“Are you challenging me?”

“Everyone, please calm down!” A third voice cut in. “Can’t we just finish this? Now?”

It was an orange-coloured, furry male who said this, and he reminded Tom of some bizarre bipedal dog of sorts. He did manage to represent everyone else’s distress with the rising animosity between the two. Most of the people there overruled the old geezer’s officiousness, though no one could get him to back down on the punishment. Other women held their children by the shoulders firmer now, or picked them up and hugged them. More people had to come out to hold back Shmi Skywalker once more, and Tom stared at her tear-streaked face without understanding what it meant.

“Now, turn around boys, and walk up to those two posts. Trust me, it would be easier this way,” the orange guy from before informed them. Anakin had gone ahead and followed the instructions, so Tom followed not long after that. “Thank you.”

Old Man Ta’krul muttered under his breath. “Really, this isn’t the way to do things…”

“Are we going to get this done sometime soon, or is this going to drag on until lunch?” Leena’s voice was snide as she asked.

“Well, then!”

He gasped in surprise. Tom staggered as the first lash of the whip hit and the pain seared his back. He gritted his teeth. He could hear a similar stumble next to him as the next crack fell upon his twin, along with a curse one wouldn’t expect to hear from a four-year-old. Then, it returned to him with as much force as the first, the pain more vivid, and then the lash fell on Anakin again.

He could hear someone’s choked sob and put it out of his mind, too focused on the burning sensation and too angry to care.
He could hear the youngest of the children crying.

It was too easy to change the pain into anger and use that to build a plan to erase this pisshole from the galaxy map some day. It had the beneficial side effect of stopping him from actually lashing out his uncontrolled magic.

It was certainly a lot easier than acknowledging just how helpless he was right now.

‘-

They did not get as many lashes as they were supposed to, because the old geezer’s hands were cramped after a while—yes, both of them, after he tried exchanging them.

Tom wasn’t sure if his magic was leaking again but he wouldn’t care if it was true. His entire back was throbbing and he could feel the occasional trickle of blood flowing.

The old man tried to get some others to replace him, like that orange guy, but almost everyone else had a good excuse or another and had gone off to their respective tasks. All that were left were people who clearly disagreed with him, like Leena.

Leena helped him up. “Are you alright?”

“Do you want me to answer that?” Tom asked back, voice raspy. It could just be the heat and he hadn’t drunk enough water. She flinched, but he had moved on before she answered. Elie seemed to be hovering over Anakin even as he avoided her. The guilt he could feel from her direction didn’t matter—what would he do, blame her? She was as powerless as any other slave her. Nothing mattered. He just wanted to lie down—

Tom hit the floor in exhaustion and passed out.

He would’ve been relieved to find out that Anakin dropped out not long after him.

‘-

When he woke up, he was lying on a cot, on his stomach. His back was burning a little less than before and the astringent smell of medicinal salve was in the air. Anakin was in the cot next to his, for some reason also waking up at around the same time. Tom looked around the room and saw Shmi sleeping on a chair. He dragged himself up into a sitting position, wincing all the time.

“Shit,” he spat.

“You could say that again,” Anakin muttered.

“Shit,” Tom replied, droll. His twin rolled his eyes.

“I remember being lashed when I was small, but I never thought it’d be this bad.”

Tom gingerly touched his back and regretted that decision very quickly. “We don’t remember a lot of things when we’re small.”

Anakin didn’t answer immediately. When the silence began to confuse him, he carefully shifted himself to sit face-to-face with his sibling. The blond Skywalker was staring at his hands, opening and closing them slowly like late-blooming flowers. He experimented with poking his twin through this weird magic-sense they have, he could sense Anakin’s emotion’s churning beneath the calm waters.
“I don’t know how long I can do this,” Anakin said, answering Tom’s unsaid question.

“Do what?”

Anakin looked up. “I can bet this wouldn’t be the last lashing we get. Yesterday wouldn’t be the last party Gardulla has either.”

“Of course not,” Tom replied. Some uncertainty lingered in his expression at Anakin’s statement. Anakin sighed and spoke up further.

“Tam, if I see another idiot forcing himself on Mom, I don’t know if I can hold back.”

*I don’t know if I want to hold back*, Anakin continued mentally. *Someone might end up armless, or even dead.*

Tom opened his mouth a little before he shut it again, thinking. “Oh, *that*. Not that it wouldn’t help weeding out the local idiots—”

“—that’s absolutely not low profile, *Tom*—”

“—but yeah, you have a point.”

Anakin sighed. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“But you weren’t with Gardulla anymore when you met the Jedi, right? So you did go away at some point.”

Anakin yanked his hair. “I was with Watto, but that’s still another year!”

“No, it doesn’t have to be so at all. If you can remember why you were transferred in the first place, we can try to make sure that it happens sooner, or find an alternative plan,” Tom replied. “Now, think back on it and tell me the details. We’ve got a plan to make.”

Anakin recalled both Gardulla and Watto’s podracing habit, and how they were never ones to leave alone any bet with attractive enough odds. They were still talking when Shmi Skywalker woke up and saw her children ignoring their wounds until she made them both lie down again. If she hadn’t been staring them down (or gotten one of her friends to stare them down), it was doubtful that they would have rested.

‘-
Riddles - The Drop

Chapter Notes

Still part of the big chunk of their slice-of-life I've written down more than a year ago. Just periodically dumping it here. Not beta-read, so the occasional mispelling and vanished word/weird grammar construction might occur.

Riddles

The Drop

Thomas and Anthony Riddle were found on the doorsteps of Wool’s orphanage in a classic case of knock-and-run on the orphanage’s worn front door. Mrs. Cole was particularly incensed about it, because she would swear on her mother’s china tea set that she had looked out of the window before she opened the door. There was a man there, and it took her but two minutes to get out. When she opened the door, there was nobody in both direction of the street for as far as the eye could see—a feat she would’ve deemed impossible if she hadn’t just seen it with her own eyes.

She huffed. The nerve of people these days! Couldn’t they actually be bothered to be polite, introduce themselves and stay for a chat over tea? It’s not as if she would deny any child that needed a place to stay in! She still had a heart, thank you. Her feet bumped into a basket at that moment and she forgot about her inner tirade against the running man. Shuffling the blanket, a pair of little heads met her—one fair-haired, the other darker. She was thankful that they both managed to stay asleep through their entire ordeal. Anthony was pinned on the blond’s clothes, while Thomas on the darker-haired one.

She stared at their peaceful sleeping forms of two beautiful little boys and felt her much-battered and often-fixed heart taking a beating again. If there was actually someone who can deliver them here, then they do have family, right? She had seen the man’s coat, and even if it was worn, it wasn’t threadbare or too cheap. Why would their family refuse to do more for them? Why would keeping them with family be a worse option than placing them in an orphanage?

Who could’ve abandoned such beautiful babies?

If there was something that Jemima Cole had learned from all her years overseeing the children here, it was that for many people, there were no happy endings. Sometimes, happy beginnings don’t exist either. She would just do her best for them and hoped it would be enough.

⁻
Riddles - Small Escapes

Chapter Summary

In which the twins are perpetually...misplaced, to the consternation of Mrs. Cole.
Yes, that's it, misplaced.

Small Escapes

Mrs. Cole was forced to admit that among all of the orphans, none could probably fit their surnames as well as the Riddle twins.

At a glance, they were unexpectedly well-behaved children, though not more obedient than usual. She had scolded Rosie for failing to watch the younger kids when it was her turn to do so, ignoring the girl’s protests that it was the twins that were impossible to catch (the girl had always daydreamed too easily). It had resulted in their escape from the room and Mrs. Cole catching them listening to the radio in her office.

Not long after that, she had to reprimand Talbot for the same problem when she noticed that they were in the garden alone without the company of older children—and of all the things they could be doing, they were sitting quietly side-by-side with their eyes closed. It was uncanny. To Talbot’s credit he kept his silence through her words, even when she could read his feelings of unfairness and the disagreement in his eyes. The last straw happened when they could apparently outwit even Meredith, the most vigilant and dedicated young minder the orphanage had ever known.

“Talbot, don’t tell me you lost them again?” Mrs. Cole asked as she dropped by the nursery. She had glanced around and found that the usual suspects were missing again. The thirteen year old boy minding the younger children harrumphed and ran a hand through his hair.

“I’ve said this before, Mrs. Cole. They run and hide real canny, like a fox.” Talbot said, barely hiding his sullen glare before he sighed. “Do you know anyone that can hold ‘em if they didn’t want it?”

It said volumes that she didn’t remind him to stop pouting before she moved on again in greater haste. Talbot had a point. The only time they didn’t get away from the nursery was when the twins were too tired to do so and was sleeping. Surely someone had succeeded in watching them, right? They were still small children…

Regardless of what she thought, doubt settled when she realised she couldn’t recall a single name. Nobody had managed to keep an eye on them for long, not since they turned four. She was forced to consider that perhaps the boy was right after all. They were rather… difficult to hold on to.

She’d only gone through three rooms when a boy younger than Talbot caught up with her, his eyes wild and his breathing short.

“Mrs. Cole! Mrs. Cole!” Greg called, pulling her out of her thoughts. She turned around at the gangly, rushing preteen and almost couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Greg Nesbitt, you know very well that no running is allowed in the hallways!”
Greg Nesbitt grew up as a sickly little boy, forced to entertain himself with what books he could find instead of running around like his friends. His love of literature had stayed with him over the years. To see him heedless of the rules like one of the hooligans was a sight too strange for her to contemplate.

“Please Mrs. Cole, please come with me even if it’s only this once.”

He had held onto her hand and started tugging before she had said anything. She would’ve corrected him of his presumption and gave him a telling-off about it if she wasn’t also curious.

“You have to tell him he can’t play with the books, Mrs. Cole, because he won’t listen to me and he’s going to go and ruin everything.”

She had to hold from sniffing at the statement. Ruin everything? She was perfectly aware of the habit of boys to make-believe adventures for themselves, and she hoped Greg did not get carried away in whatever fancy happened to be in vogue among them. She couldn’t imagine that there might be anything in Wool’s Orphanage that can remotely threaten British Empire, she thought dryly, though if Greg was playing soldiers too zealously…

They turned into the study hall, and Mrs. Cole understood the issue at a glance. Sitting in front of a pile of books was one Thomas Riddle, and beside him was his twin. By the way they angled towards each other, one would think that the black-haired twin was teaching the other, but it wouldn’t make sense at their age.

“He’s going to go drool over everything!” Greg declared.

The twins looked up. Anthony looked unamused while a frown etched its way on young Thomas’ face. It was at odds with his cherubic looks and small hands that Mrs. Cole had to stare for more than a few moments to make sure that the expression was actually there.

“We’re reading,” he insisted, before staring at Greg. “Could you please be quieter?”

Mrs. Cole’s eyebrows rose at that. She was sure that she hadn’t imagined the dry and cutting tone that accompanied it.

Greg spluttered, never having been put down by younger kids that often. “Stop pretending! I know what you’re doing. You think it makes the parents like you if you were nice, and quiet, and was always reading. It doesn’t. They want children that are perfectly charming too! And the two of you are lot of trouble that you’re certainly not. I heard Meredith say it.”

The two smaller children were staring at Greg with different amounts of surprise, but it was nothing compared to what Mrs. Cole felt as she strode right up to him and pulled him back from looming over the Riddle twins.

“Greg! I did not just hear you say such words to the twins! What have you got to say for yourself?”

Underneath her stern expression, Mrs. Cole felt an even larger amount of worry and concern for all her charges. It was one of the least spoken rules of the orphanage; no one should ever say words that cast doubts on a child’s possibility of being adopted. This rule was certainly also one of the most fundamental. All the kids knew it, even the younger ones. An orphan’s fear of abandonment was thick and visceral. It was hard to belief that Greg out of all people said it, and with an amount of vitriol that she couldn’t even imagine him having—certainly not to kids so young and impressionable.

She took a deep breath and spoke in a much calmer voice.
“Greg? Please tell me what happened. I know you’re a better person than this, Greg, I’ve seen you read stories to Marian and Fred. You’re—”

Greg burst into frustrated tears and ran away, leaving an increasingly confused Mrs. Cole in his wake. She gazed at the twins; Anthony seemed remorseful as his gaze followed Greg’s path, while Thomas was thoughtful. Something was still missing and the incongruity of the situation prickled the edge of her senses. What bothered Greg so much that he blew up towards two four years-olds?

Her breath caught in her throat when she noticed something else. She had been too relieved for their quietness that she hadn’t thought twice about it when she walked in, and she’d only noticed it properly now. Why had they been so unbothered by Greg’s words?

They didn’t even look at her for support, nor each other. It did not affect them. As lost in their own thoughts as they were right now, it was as if the room, its inhabitants, and everything else around them could stop existing and they might not even notice.

“Mrs. Cole, are you alright?” It was Thomas who asked that. His words were a little stilted and the tone was oddly imperative. She appreciated the thought and effort all the same; it was better to encourage him to practice more often than to quell his efforts with too-harsh a criticism. She shook her head and smiled.

“I’m fine, thank you, I just got carried away remembering things,” she said. “Are you alright?”

There was a line creasing his brow now, “Of course I am. Why shouldn’t I?”

He honestly doesn’t know why I’m asking, she thought, feeling more off-kilter. It began to feel more and more like she had found an important key whose door she had no idea about. Where does it lead to, and what does it hide? She heard some shuffling to the side and found Anthony had stood up and gotten around the pile of books on the floor.

“Do you think you know where Greg is, Mrs. Cole?” Anthony asked. She hid her surprise at that.

“Perhaps if I look for him first. Why?”

“I think we’ve offended him. We can apologise, and he can feel better,” Anthony said. She heard a snort from his twin. His hands were clasped in front of him, but she was certain if it wasn’t, he would be folding it in front of his chest.

“Why should we apologise? We minded our business. He got offended on his own.”

“He was just trying to help,” Anthony said.

“And we thanked him and said we’re fine alone,” his twin finished. “And we are. We didn’t lie.”

They fell into a staring contest. There was stubbornness in the set of Anthony’s jaws, and challenging looks on Thomas’ side. They went back and forth for a while, their faces so alive that it was mesmerising to see. For all the impressions and reactions passing back and forth between them, she could swear that they were having a silent conversation somehow. She shook her head and cleared herself of that thought. Oh stop that Jemima, she thought to herself. You’re tired and your mind is coming up with things that aren’t there.

They were probably just holding a staring contest with each other. Yes, that’s it.

“Fine,” Thomas bit out. From his frown, it was clear that he may be conceding the point but only
grudgingly. “Let’s *apologise* and get it over with.”

Anthony had a small smile on his lips. She was rather surprised that he wasn’t crowing his victory aloud, or at least be self-satisfied, but he didn’t. He only nodded in acknowledgment to his brother, nodded to Mrs. Cole, and walked on ahead. Thomas was still clenching and unclenching his fist before he took a deep breath and sighed. The dominant traces of anger ebbed away from his face, leaving him looking resigned.

“Mrs. Cole,” he said stiffly, and it was almost polite this time, before he walked away to follow his twin.

She shook her head to herself and decided to find Greg as well. She’d find out more, somehow, even if it meant trying to find out who the Riddle’s parents are. She began to realise why their mere existence was a mismatch to her—they didn’t act like kids their age.

‘-

*Why do we need to apologise to Greg, again?* Tom asked, projecting it in his mind to his twin as they stared each other down.

Mrs. Cole was standing somewhere to the side, undoubtedly concerned about them after Greg’s outburst to them, but he paid her no mind.

*He’d be fine. His ego had just taken a beating when he realised that our reading materials are certainly unlike his.* Tom said. It wasn’t as if he’d decided to make an example out of stupid Stubb’s pet again, was it? This was practically harmless.

He had taken to explaining what the world was like to the blond and included with that is the World War that he knew would come to pass during his Hogwarts years. So was it any wonder that he pulled his twin along to listen to the news on the radio in Mrs. Cole’s office? (The one in the living room was usually commandeered to play songs and radio dramas by the older kids). Was it any wonder that he dragged newspapers with him as he tried to remember whether the particular tension over the continent had a more-or-less muggle explanation, or whether it had the marks of Grindelwald’s rise all over it?

He could hear Anakin’s mental snort. *That had been our mistake. We should’ve been more careful.*

*He’d get over it. It’s not as if he’d matter in the grand scheme of things.* Tom pointed out. *We’d go to Hogwarts and get out of his hair and he’s free to continue his mundane life as before.*

*Considering that we’re the ones with more experience than him, we should’ve known better. We should’ve adjusted to him better than expect him to be able to adjust to us.* There was that familiar tinge of restlessness again, and Tom knew his twin well enough to know that Anakin had been as annoyed with Greg as he was when the boy was hovering over them. But why was he so insistent about the apology? And why did he have to stare at *Tom* that way? *He* wasn’t the one throwing a tantrum.

*He’s a complete waste of efforts—*

*We’re going to apologise because we’re doing things the right way and not the easy way,* Anakin said. *Tom knew* his twin had also thought Greg had been somewhat condescending in trying to help them—he could feel the emotions clearly through their bond. Yet Anakin persevered, and contradiction in his apparent stance was starting to vex Tom as well. The blond continued.

*You know how the Dark Side tempts you with shortcuts, right? A Fall starts more often through a*
hundred decisions made wrong, than a single major one.

Tom raised an eyebrow. And what does letting the frail self-esteem of a young Greg set on its own, had anything to do with a decision of Dark and Light?

*Pride*, Anakin answered, and its slippery slope. It meant deciding that our pride is more important than a young, insignificant boy’s. Why is not apologising to him more important than admitting that we might’ve made a small, careless slip in our cover when it comes to him? The mistake was clearly more ours than his.

Tom tightened his lips into a thin line. It wasn’t pride if it was well-justified *skill difference*. Yet he had to admit that one of the reasons he didn’t even consider about apologising was because he felt that Greg was so far beneath him as to be insignificant.

*Fine*, he bit out, *but you owe me one.*

A mental shrug, *no problem.*

When Anakin walked out of the room, Tom sighed, greeted Mrs. Cole, and walked out to prove that his pride was *not* a problem. Nope. None at all.

‘-
Skywalkers - Work

Chapter Summary

_A day in the Skywalker's household under Watto's ownership. Exactly what it says on the tin._

Skywalkers

Work

Tamlin and Anakin Skywalker woke up in their simple bed of two pallet beds shoved together. The dryness of Mos Espa was familiar to them, and Tamlin was the first of the five year old twins to groan.

Their mother was still asleep beside Anakin. Neither twins had much of an opinion even a year after their ownership had changed. On the one hand, Watto’s lack of imagination was better than Gardulla’s too-active, sadistic imagination as she schemed to make everything under her control a game, an entertainment. On the other hand, Watto was as stupid as he was poor, and food was thin under him.

Tom sighed as he rubbed his eyes. _Mos Espa. Watto. The familiar dull pangs of hunger that never truly disappear._ Watto was merely the lesser of two evils indeed.

Yep, this was Tatooine alright, in the Skywalker household.

“I hate Mondays.” Tom said.

Anakin agreed with his brother’s opinion, the same scrunched look on his face. He hadn’t bothered to remind his twin how too-strong emotions were a way to the Dark Side, because Tom could feel through their bond that he agreed with the sentiment wholeheartedly.

_Wow, I did not miss the vague feeling of having semi-parched throat_, Anakin had muttered through their bond. Tom was still trying to ease the headache he was feeling.

_Neither did I._

Both never liked Mondays, especially since it meant that they’d wake up in a completely different world from the one they fell asleep in on Sunday night.

They lived in one life for a week before shifting to the second one on the next.

On and on it went, back and forth between their two different and separate lives. First came the whiplash, then the resignation, and finally just complete annoyance as they readapted themselves to a different life whenever Monday comes around along with their grouchiness. If anyone noticed that the twins were always tetchy at the beginning of the week, no one had said anything. Tom had said more than once to Anakin that if he ever got to see Harry, Master of Death again, he’d tell him that he could shove his _ingenious method_ for living two lives at the same time up where the sun doesn’t shine.
Several minutes of grousing and adjusting were enough for them, because they needed to get things ready before the day started. Breakfast was one, and their mother’s change of clothes was another. They didn’t wake her up because they agreed she needed the sleep, and they needed the time to talk and plot with each other.

“Watto had started his complaints since last week,” Anakin said. “It wasn’t much and he’s still trying to be subtle—for him, anyway, but I don’t know how long his patience would last.”

Tom nodded with a grim understanding. Watto had made jabs about the amount of food Shmi needed to feed two growing boys, and how he certainly wasn’t a rich man (Anakin had some choice words to say about that, but they certainly didn’t bear repeating in front of their mother). He had started to notice how Shmi had tried to eat less than she usually did in order to spare more for the boys, but there was a limit that she could reduce without exhausting herself after each working day due to lack of energy. They had to put a stop to that several days ago by secretly putting things back on her portion—it helped after they insisted they can cook by themselves after all her demonstrations about it so far. Now, they had to do something before the situation reached a critical point, because even Tom could figure out what the easiest path for Watto was.

He could sell one of the twins.

That was an outcome neither of them wanted. The community here wasn’t much, and everyone knew everybody else. Even if it happened and the sale was done because some people decided they needed an extra hand to help at their shop or their house, it might not be that big of an adjustment to make if it was a matter of changing dwellings. Yet he was also quite aware that neither he nor Anakin was bad-looking, or even average—it hadn’t been pride at all there, just a realistic assessment. This conclusion was based on the number of women who’d seemed to only be too happy to approach their mother and talk about her kids or pinch their cheeks. If by some chance during the unlucky time one of them was sold, there happened to be an off-worlder passing through, interested in buying a young boy …

The consequences really didn’t bear thinking about.

It was also ironic to note that this was one of those small bumps in life that didn’t even occur to them before they were thrown down into their lives once again because they’d been so used to being men of power. Tom’s realisation that he couldn’t even reach many things in the upper shelves without his mother kindly picking them for him was humbling. The magic, err, Force control at this age was definitely inadequate. Anakin had given him a resigned look when he asked about it, saying that there really was nothing they could do but wait and do other things. Conclusion: they were sitting ducks. Tom didn’t like it.

“How did you end up working for him?” Tom asked. He didn’t need to add ‘before’ to clarify.

“We are working for him,” Anakin replied, referring to the stuff Shmi carried home and handed over to the twins (mostly Anakin) to fix, which she would carry back to the store on a different day. Tom gazed at the ceiling.

“At the store,” he corrected.

“I was a year older than now. Mom carried me to the shop as she worked, Watto started ordering me around. Then, he started giving me more tasks to do, and larger and more complicated machinery to fix,” Anakin said.

“But we don’t have the time,” Tom ran an impatient hand through his hair. Since it was more of a statement of fact than a complaint, Anakin didn’t say anything. “Might as well just drop in at the
store today and let it be done with.”

The two of them were still tense, unsatisfied with how far their plans went. Yet their mother had woken up and there was no more time. Tom went ahead to set the table for breakfast as Anakin concerned himself with the porridge. The look on her eyes when she saw him on the table was one that still surprised him.

“Oh, Tamlin, you don’t have to do that,” her voice was slightly breathy, her eyes glistening as she hugged him.

That wasn’t what had made Tom so uncomfortable, though he was certainly unused to so much personal contact. What made him feel even more awkward was the amount of love she was pouring. Even with his tenuous hold of the Force and nothing as deep as actual meditation, it was a warm wind embracing him gently and glittering with affection. It was wondrous, it was beautiful, and he never quite figured out what it was that he did that made her love him. What had he done to deserve it? The confusion had only earned him an eye-roll when he said so before to Anakin. His twin’s explanation hadn’t made much sense to Tom either.

Of course she loves you, you idiot. She’s Mom, he had said through their bond.

It was as if he expected that one word could explain everything, and somehow gave him the measure with which to fathom the depths of the affection she held her children in. Sometimes he found himself watching his Skywalker mother as if she was a very interesting transfiguration or topological problem; as in, how many dimensions does she have? How many were folded and hidden behind her mundane 3D shell of a human body? It was inconceivable for a physique that small to contain that much unbounded affection.

Really, why? Tom had wondered then, the same way he still wondered now, because it was nice to feel like you’re the centre of someone’s universe—it was an adulation magnitudes stronger than anything his followers ever managed to bestow. He wanted to preserve her perspective of him as a wonderful son who could do no wrong.

But seriously, what sort of subliminal positive reinforcement he could use to train her to keep doing that? Not that he could say it in those exact words to Anakin, but still, the principle was the same. What is it?

He still had no satisfactory answer.

“Where’s your brother?” Shmi asked, letting go. Tom had started to fidget a little too much and he was finally granted reprieve.

“He’s in the kitchen,” Tom answered rapidly, trying to avoid her gaze. He hoped that maybe he’d manage to distract her with Anakin, the golden child out of the two of them. Said blond had just entered with the food. He didn’t carry much and would probably need to do a few trips to get all of it, but it was as much as his child’s body could feasible carry. Shmi gave him a soft ‘thank you’ that made her son went red in the face, before she started to help him. She ignored Anakin’s protestations and annoyed huff at her interference.

She pulled her children into a hug, all three of them. Tom had let out a small surprised yelp, while Anakin embraced her back as easily. The darker-haired twin was still oddly stiff, but he didn’t back away.

“You don’t really need to do this, boys. I’m your mother. I promise I’ll take care of you.”

“But we’re family,” Anakin insisted, “That means we take care of you too.”
“Mom, do you think you could take us to work today?” Tom’s voice had been quiet, his words as awkward as the confusion he felt about his mother, but it didn’t change the intent in it.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Shmi said firmly. “I’ll take care of Watto and you can play with your brother.”

“Mom,” Tom said. He pulled himself away and met the gaze of her warm brown eyes. His small hands were raised up to cup her face now. Eye-to-eye contact, he had figured out in his Hogwarts years, made people consider you as honest and earnest.

“Yes Mom,” Anakin joined in. “There’d been stuff to fix that he got you to bring home all the time, right? And we did it, and it’s not so bad. What’s wrong with doing more of that? Please. I promise we can help. You’re getting too thin as it is.”

It was their quiet seriousness that undid her, probably because the most that most people could expect from children their age was tantrums and sulks. Right then, Tom could even see the moment where her resolve broke, the lines that age had carved on her face clearly visible now. She held the twins close to her and cried for a while, perhaps for the easy childhood that her children will not have, perhaps for their innocence that will not last for long in their enslaved life.

Anakin was distressed with their mother’s tears. Tom, on the other hand, merely looked grim. He had known that this world was a crapshoot. What else was new?

Anakin was surprised at the gladness that he felt when they’d reached Watto’s shop. Then again, he seemed to have erased from his memory how much sand was there in Tattooine and how they tended to get everywhere. From the way Tom had gritted his teeth and repeatedly brushed them out of his clothes, his brother was probably at the beginning of his hate-and-more-hate relationship with this little ball of sand at the edge of galactic civilisation. Shmi opened the doors and her children followed in behind her.

“What is this? You bring the brats with you now, to make a mess?”

He didn’t like the incensed dark look that Watto cast them. From the way Tom’s face had gone immediately blank and placid-seeming; his twin apparently had his own reflexive anger to shield. His mother had stiffened by a fraction. Her voice was still appropriately soft when she answered.

“They wanted to help, Master. They wanted to work more.”

The look on Watto’s face melted easily into one of intrigue and speculation. Should’ve remembered that he lived for nothing but profit, Anakin thought with contempt. A mental poke from Tom pulled his attention away from Watto and back to what he supposed they could do.

“Good, good. Better learn young. Makes them better workers.” Watto declared, and he ambled away. “Follow me, boys. There’s many things to do.”

The first task that was given to them when they were in Watto’s shop was shelving. The twin went at it with systematic determination that Watto had honestly said to Shmi that he was happy that her two freeloaders with bottomless pit for stomach were actually earning their keep. Their mother gave him a strained smile. Anakin had to consciously keep his mouth shut before he snapped back at the Toydarian about how they were barely given enough food as it is. It wasn’t as
if mother didn’t bring back parts home for him to work on wasn’t it?

It was only Tom’s hand over his arms that pulled him back from his thoughts.

_Breathe_, he could hear Tom’s voice in his head through their bond; _release your anger to the Force._

Anakin closed his eyes and did exactly that, though he couldn’t help a small smile from forming. It was odd to hear Tom say that, especially when he was still having trouble in deepening his meditation. Tom felt the amusement through their bond and rolled his eyes, but didn’t deign him with any other answer. The companionable silence returned to them again as they worked side-by-side. He could feel his mother hovering a few times in the distance, her anxiety almost palpable. He also knew that Tom could feel her too from the way he twitched once or twice or almost dropped what he was carrying. Tom sighed.

“We should go over there and smile. She’s not going to stop until she’s certain we’re fine and all the hovering is making me unable to think.” Tom said quickly. “Her Force presence is smothering right now.”

Anakin reminded himself not to snap at his twin.

He counted to five and then nodded, releasing more of his annoyance in passing to the Force. Tom didn’t mean anything when he said that, merely on edge, but he was still getting used to having a brother who was constantly swinging between attaching himself to their mother in utter fascination or pushing her as far away as possible. Sometimes he wished Tom would make up his mind—at least Anakin wouldn’t be so confused about how to handle it then.

They went around other shelves in the storage area to avoid her sight, surprising their mother with their presence.

“Hi Mom,” Tom ambushed her with a quick hug, his initiative a surprise to the other two Skywalkers. He had that stiff-as-board pose Anakin was beginning to be familiar with, his words no less stilted and said rapidly. “How’re you? As you can see, I’m _fine_, Anakin’s also fine. You can get back to work right now and stop _worrying._”

Then, he rushed off back to his sorting before she could even get a word in edgewise. Anakin smiled and hugged his mother in a far more comfortable way.

“Hi Mom. Yeah, what he said,” Anakin said with good humour. “If you’re worried, he gets worried too and you’ll both drive each other crazy. We’re _fine_, Mom.”

It was less his words and more of his relaxed state that alleviated her concerns faster than any words can.

“Oh _Ani_. You and Tam are my boys. I can never stop worrying about you.”

“Be happy,” Anakin said. It wasn’t the word he had wanted to say, but he realised that it was the truth, anyway. It was clear in the way that his throat felt tight as he said it. “The world never mattered to me when you’re happy.”

He ducked, not wanting her to see his blush and went back to his tasks, but he knew she did. He could feel the warm contentment no radiating from her, and he gave himself a pat on the back for successfully lifting her mood up.

The shelving was done sooner than Anakin had expected—at least as much as they could do it without reaching the higher shelves, especially without their ability to use the Force well enough
yet. The stools only went so far to help. He found himself approaching Watto of his own volition and asking about things he was fixing. Whichever worn outer-rim engines and system found their way to Watto’s shop was going to be his work once more. He might as well get used to it.

“Come, boy. You must be proud that you have a talented Master—there really is no one who could’ve taught you better than myself!”

After several days of instructing him on additional machinery that Shmi had been unable to take home before, Watto was delighting in Anakin’s mechanical genius. Apparently, he also felt that it was a testament to his ability as a teacher that the young human boy showed such level of skill. He crowed in delight and sang his own praises, and unconsciously trying to get Anakin to agree with it as he kept pulling him into ludicrous, compliment-fishing conversations. Anakin might not mind working for the man, but he drew the line at feeding his ego.

He wanted to snap and tell him how much of a pathetic waste of space he was.

Fortunately, Tom’s stepped in just then between their owner and his brother before his thoughts ran the usual gamut of running people through with a red lightsaber or ordering imperial troops to deal with a problem. Anakin winced internally. I really need to stop doing that. His brother seemed to have caught that last image, but all he got from the other end of their bond was only an amused chuckle.

“How did you fix this one, Master? I was sure that it was still broken this morning,” Tom asked, wide-eyed and innocent. The Toydarian puffed up with pride.

“That’s because no one fixes like Watto! It’s very simple. Here…”

He trailed off into further explanation while Anakin glared at the back of his head. That was just a krethin’ lighting fixture, you waste of bantha poodoo! Don’t act as if it’s as important as a battery or an engine part. I can fix that, take it apart and reconstruct it again with my eyes closed!

Tom didn’t act like he had heard him at all, though if the mental poke to his head was anything to go by, he heard it loudly enough. He did feign a very good impression of childlike wonder.

“Oooh, how about this one? I saw you fix it yesterday so Anakin can learn. I don’t think he could do it as good as you can yet, Master…”

Anakin stared at his twin, eyebrows twitching. You’re kidding me!

Tom was doing this on purpose, he decided, if the amusement leaking from him was any indication. Clearly unable to throttle his brother, he gave him a series of annoyed mental poke. Poke, poke, poke, pokepokepokepokepoke.

Stop poking, you’re distracting me. Tom said, his voice annoyingly level. Breathe, Anakin.

The dark-haired twin asked Watto to go on about all the things he could do, listening in rapt attention and interjecting at appropriate moments about how impressive it was. It was only thanks to his extended ridiculous effort that Anakin had enough time to collect himself instead of taking the closest thing he could reach and smash that on the Toydarian’s head. Just to keep it from getting any bigger. It’d be a pre-emptive strike, really. He took a deep breath. He always knew he had anger issues. He was a Sith Lord. He was practically required to always be angry, at varying degrees, if he wasn’t stuck in a loop of misery. But he’d never thought that Watto would be able to trigger that temper very easily.
In a way, it was worrying.

On the other hand, he’d never had someone read his temper as quickly as Tom did, though Obi-Wan was very close. It wasn’t just about speed, but also in the way his twin easily gave him space. A part of him suspected that it was partly due to the bond between them, forged of Force and Blood. Stars, was he ever so glad he wasn’t actually going through all of this again alone. It was so easy to snuff the life out of the Toydarian, even without resorting to the Force—there were too many tempting parts he could use at the junk shop already. Anakin supposed he would never know how Tom could look so attentive and interested at Watto’s exuberant showing of his mediocre skills, instead of wanting to puke his stomach contents out in disgust at the Toydarian’s feet.

When Watto left the boys alone in good humour, the blond didn’t even bother to hide his long sigh of relief, or the feeling of relaxation that had to be transferred between their bond.

Tom sent him an amused glance. “You’re welcome, Anakin,” he said dryly.

“Yes, yes. Thank you very much for your intervention.” He waved a hand at his twin, too relieved to care. “Somehow I didn’t remember him to be this annoying.”

“After visiting the ocean, the fish pond becomes claustrophobic and the aquarium nigh unbearable.” Tom replied, his tone all too aware of what Anakin was feeling. It was almost possible to see the weight of his years in his eyes as he lost himself in some faraway thought or memory. It was visible in the pensive and unreadable expression he had. He sent an odd look at his twin. Since when was Tom that perceptive?

“You know that this meant you owe me one, don’t you?” Tom smirked. Any and all appearance of wisdom had gone down the drain. Anakin rolled his eyes; and the smug prick is back.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.”

‘-
Riddles - On Homes

Chapter Summary

Some things have been unaccounted for by Tom.

Riddles

On Homes

“The Force really does feel different here,” Anakin said as he settled on the grass beside Tom.

They were in the backyard of the orphanage again, enjoying the spring sun and dodging Amber’s frustrated attempt at locating them. She was merely one among the many older kids that had failed to watch over them now. Just relaxing and spending a morning on what limited greenery existed was strangely enjoyable—then again, if one had slavery to compare to, an orphanage might just feel idyllic. The twins had a running bet with each other about how long Mrs. Cole was going to give up trying to corral them anywhere, payable in desserts. Right now, the blond wasn’t meditating yet, just experimentally feeling out. His twin nodded.

“Let me guess; it’s either a bit distant, or not as easy to manipulate?” Tom asked.

Anakin frowned in concentration as he closed his eyes again, trying to touch the flow that had always been so easy for him before. Here, he felt more apart from the Force than he had ever been, and he didn’t like the loneliness he felt. If he wasn’t so tightly bound to Tom, it would grow annoying very quickly, like an itch he couldn’t quite scratch. He opened his eyes.

“Yes, you’re right. It’s as if there’s a thick layer between or…”

“Harry mentioned something like that,” Tom said. “He said that there’s probably an explanation as to why wizards and witches have always had to use some sort of focus on our planet to do purposeful magic—” He smirked at the way Anakin wince at the word. “—as opposed to the instinctive bursts that people can access in life or death situations. Something about planetary structure, some combination of the composition of the core or the crust—the mantel, as it is. Not that I paid much attention to the details, as I was too busy not getting sick.”

Anakin was still muttering something under his breath about the Force. His twin was smirking.

“You know what? The Force is magic. You should get used to that soon. Everyone calls it that way here.”

“But it’s not really magic. It’s explainable—”

“Good luck in convincing everyone else,” Tom said. Anakin took a deep breath and gave up, admitting the point.

“Right. So, where we were the last time around? Meditating, right?”

The good humour left Tom’s features. With a disgruntled expression, he almost looked like a
normal five-year-old. “Why are we meditating, again? This is *boring.*”

“Because your Force—”

“—magic—”

“—training is behind mine, as is your control. We have more time to practice here than in Tattooine and I certainly don’t want to wait until the Jedi found us to begin. It would’ve been a pain to juggle that while balancing your Temple classes. I *know.* I experienced that the first time around. Unless you actually *enjoy* suffering, and if so, we’d probably need to have a different conversation about how masochism isn’t the way of the balanced Force, and excess pain is also a path to the Dark Side.”

That earned him an unamused look from Tom. “Very funny, Anthony.”

“Hey, spare me. I have to match your sense of humour *somehow.*”

Anakin had just finished relaying what he had overheard about the couple currently holed up in Mrs. Cole’s office. They were in backyard again, because he was relying on the older kids looking for them to not have expected them to hide out in the same place twice in a row.

“I don’t understand. Nobody ever wanted to adopt me before.” Tom said, frowning. The surprise and bewilderment was evident in his voice. If he was anything but worried about what they have to do now, Anakin would’ve laughed.

“You were a brat, *then,*” Anakin said, ignoring the cool glare Tom gave him. He rolled his eyes. “Hey, I *saw* you. You’re just a smooth talker now, but you’re a major bootlicker when you’re younger and hadn’t always fooled everyone. Then, there’s the anger issues and I bet Mrs. Cole would’ve informed them of how well you socialise.”

*Which was barely, if at all,* he thought, but that wasn’t what Tom seemed to notice.

“Everyone has some anger issues,” the answer came a little too quickly. Anakin shrugged. He wasn’t in any position to accuse people of it himself.

“True. Who cares? I was a bit of a brat too, anyway. Kids are always a bit rough around the edges, that’s nothing unexpected. What *is* annoying is how adults want to work with their ideal, well-behaved kid, but didn’t want to think about what one has to do to get there.” Anakin said, his voice surprisingly vehement. He couldn’t help running his hands through his blond hair.

“Speaking from personal experience?”

He shrugged, “Sort of. You remember the Jedi Temple and the Council?”

He had expected Tom to express his displeasure, true. He hadn’t expected his twin to have to take a deep breath and release it to the Force. He didn’t know Tom was that annoyed, and somehow it eased the worst of the feelings that he got from his own memories.

“They really went at it wrongly, didn’t they?” Tom asked.

“You know what they said; I was already too old for training. They didn’t know what to do. Now that I think of it again, maybe it’s just because they lacked experience in handling anyone like me.”
“Yet they made the call anyway so they have to own up to it, or admit their mistake. Probably both.” Tom said, firm and unyielding. Well, it was nice to know that someone didn’t think the Jedi Council had been all-knowing and all-correct, and could use a lesson in humility.

“They paid,” he said softly. “with their deaths.”

“So... adoption.” Tom segued rapidly as Anakin’s Force presence became increasingly choppy. “This would be the couple who came yesterday and looked a bit lost, I take it? I did ask them what they wanted, because they were milling around the hallway a little too long—”

“—and you don’t like suspicious looking people,” Anakin added, grateful for the change of topic.

“—and I don’t trust people who lurked around orphanages, true. I guided them to Mrs. Cole’s office while trying to fish information out of them in the guise of a chattering and curious kid. Then, she gave them a tour. I saw them again when they were passing the study hall. We were reading, then. That was it?”

This was another one of those things neither ever really thought about before getting reborn. The possibility that events may completely spiral out of control would scare him if he thought about it too much. So he didn’t—not too much. At any case, he was distracted as Tom mused aloud on the probable case of people wanting to adopt him, out of all things. He thought they were strange enough to put most people off.

“I still don’t know what made them interested. Were they book lovers? Are they looking for kids that like to read? We could just play in the mud the next time they come around and dissuade them with the mess.” Tom said this with distaste. He didn’t actually enjoy getting dirty.

“They might think it’s cute. Anything can be cute when you have a bunch of kids doing it.” Anakin said.

“Even being dark lords?”

“They will immediately humble themselves and pledge their eternal allegiance. Mothers will coo over your pictures and command their children and husbands to follow you.” Anakin replied with aplomb, a grin on his face.

“Damn. I should’ve tried finding an age-reversing potion than trying to live forever. At least I would’ve kept my hair that way.” Tom said dryly, not losing a beat. He was lost in thought again for a while. “What if I insist that I don’t want to be adopted without my brother?”

“They might gladly take you up on the offer, and where would we be, then?”

“Probably with a supportive family. It would certainly be more comfortable, financially speaking.” Tom mused. Anakin could see he was actually considering it and decided he had to stop this. He didn’t really feel comfortable pretending to be a child to a couple who wanted children of their own to love. The two Riddles weren’t exactly children.

“Yet we might drag them knowingly drag into the war, or whatever you call the upcoming conflict with Grindelwald.” The blond countered.

Tom paused, tilting his head to one side, staring unblinking at Anakin in a way that would unnerve him if he wasn’t so used to it. The dark-haired boy was just thinking as well as trying to gauge his twin’s reactions and feelings; Anakin knew this by now. He also knew that while Tom wasn’t particularly concerned about it, he’d still listen to his twin’s objections. This was proved this by his twin’s deft skirting of the issue.
“I still don’t know what I did to catch their attention this time.”

Anakin sighed. “They might have caught up with what we were talking about. We were reading the books we’d borrowed from the library. Stars, analog information storage is inefficient and unwieldy. I’ve never thought I’d sorely miss the ability to search for keywords in text.”

“We already have ways to do that, you know?” Tom said casually. “They’re called index cards.”

The blond made a horrified sound at the back of his throat, to Tom’s amusement, and continued on to another rant about low-tech worlds. Tom let him go on for a while before he said what was occupying his mind.

“What were we talking about, anyway?” Tom asked. His twin thought back.

“The treaty of Versailles? You were saying how it was unbalanced, and how it was a messy start to maybe a series of events that could lead to another world war. But then again, you went on and on about how the political, social and economic conditions in the continent were a pressure cooker waiting to blow.” Anakin paused. “By the way, what’s a pressure cooker?”

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose. “Damn.”

“I’m also emphasizing those words because I can’t remember if we treated it as speculation at this stage, or with the certainty of one that knew it would happen.”

“Double damn.”

“You got that one right.”

Maybe it was because they had seemed to be well-behaved and frighteningly intelligent kids, Tom thought, but there was a fine line between frighteningly intelligent and completely creeping people out. He would use that. Anakin didn’t know what he was planning, but agreed this once to follow his lead. The Hatfields were a young established couple, and from the slight but matching worry lines etched in their face, he suspected they’d been trying to conceive a child for a few years now and the time and effort had left their traces on them.

“Excuse me, Sir, but I’m curious. Is your house in the greater London area?” Tom asked, perfectly polite.

“Yes it is. Why do you ask? Are you afraid to be too far to visit your friends in the orphanage often?”

“Then it wouldn’t have made a difference,” he said. His tone was soft, as if he hadn’t meant for the words to be overheard. Mr. and Mrs. Hatfield exchanged a confused glance at each other.

“What wouldn’t make a difference, Sweetie?” Mrs. Hatfield asked.

“It would still be a bombing target, like the rest of London. Like this orphanage.”

He could feel surprise rising at Anakin, before he could feel his brother trying to knock some sense into him through the force. It was distracting, but he could ignore it for now. Really, he thought Anakin should know enough to trust him by now.

“Bombing?” Mr. Hatfield asked, amused this time. “Why are you worried about bombing? The war is over children.”
“Oh, not the last war. I meant the next one.” Tom said with a measured calm as he watched realisation that things were going out of control begin to unfold in their minds. “The last one that everyone calls the Great War? It would end up being World War I. The upcoming one is World War II.”

Anakin’s mental presence was banging in his head, so much that Tom had to turn and glare. The blond was unamused. What are you doing?

Freaking them out. Look, just observe for a few more minutes and then you can interfere to your heart’s content.

“I see it in my dreams, you see,” Tom said. His pose was calm and eerie conviction filled his voice. “I see the smoke rising from Buckingham Palace, the V2 bombs dropped over London. If I and my brother went with you, we would still not have enough time to be a family. We would’ve been evacuated to the countryside like the rest of the kids, split up so quickly after only being a family for a while. It would only be too sad. I’d rather stay here and do what we can to help Mrs. Cole when the time comes, not to mention that we’d probably be all evacuated together. There’d be more of kids like us, sadly.”

The two Hatfields were exchanging concerned and helpless glances. Mrs Hatfield knelt in front of Tom.

“Look, honey, I know that sometimes we have nightmares and they seem so real—”

“Watch for the rise of a man known as Adolf Hitler in Germany,” Tom said. “Before that, watch as inflation rises and Germany plunges into a recession. Watch as democracy fell into a gridlock there, and the tired masses longing for a saviour and someone to blame for their sorrows unknowingly chose the wrong man to be their beloved dictator. This I did see. This I know will come.”

He could feel the surprise radiating from Anakin through their bond. He knew that his explanation as to what happened in his world hadn’t reached this point, but from the echoes and flashes of memories he caught, he knew Anakin was remembering something similar that he’d witnessed in his own time, a shadow falling over the galactic republic. Talk about history repeating itself, Tom mused.

The two Hatfields were still confused, but now Tom could feel the beginning threads of their fear through his enhanced sensitivity to the magical field around them (and yes, Anakin, I know you call it the Force).

“I’m afraid we’re boring you. Please excuse me and my brother for now,” Tom said with a polite bow. “I’m sure you have many things to discuss with Mrs. Cole.”

And with that, he left the shocked couple and made his exit. Anakin said his goodbyes and caught up with him soon enough. They weaved their way through running children, the occasional knots of older kids talking, and all the way to the kitchen. Hilda Swinburn had never minded hiding them there as long as they could help out, especially once she figured out how she didn’t intimidate them and they were sensible around tools. The smell of boiling stock met their nose. Tom nodded to Mrs. Swinburn as he walked in with Anakin, his twin waved to the old cook. A crooked smile with some missing teeth rose on her usually fearsome visage.

“You know where the peelers are. Get to it boys.”

The kitchen could never have too many hands to start working on the potatoes.
“Yes Ma’am.” They said, in unison.

They found the peelers, the stools, and a single three-legged stool shorter than the first pair that they would nevertheless need to climb up and dragged them all the way to the pile of potatoes visible. Then, the brothers set to work. It was relaxing, in a way, as the Cook (as she prefers to be called) didn’t care whether they seem unusual for their age as long as no horsing around happened in the kitchen, no one was lollygagging and things are left in their proper places. Tom and Anakin, on the other hand, gained a comfortable nook they can freely talk in, doing things they were ironically already used to, if their time in Gardulla’s kitchen was any indication.

“So, how did the mad child-oracle act went?” Tom asked.

“Convincing—I’m surprised that they didn’t start running in the other direction. If you could actually feel the rolling mess of emotions they were in…” Anakin said. Tom only nodded as he knew Anakin’s Force-sensitivity was greater than his own. “…still, you could’ve said something! I thought you were going to blow our cover for sure.”

“Do we even have a cover?” He asked back, unimpressed. “We’re known as weird, unusually intelligent kids and it still fits.”

“What, being mad? Do you want us to be locked away, or something?”

The edges of Tom’s lips quirked up in amusement. “They wouldn’t. Imagine this, two adults who knew that things were unsteady in the continent, heard something so frighteningly outlandish that they didn’t want to even think about it. Yet the more they consider, the more doubt grew inside them, as some of the pieces fall in place. Now consider the next step that they’d have to do; in order to tell Mrs. Cole what happened, they have to admit to another adult that a kid had frightened them. A kid! Who was probably only having nightmares!”

Anakin laughed, agreeing with the point. “Yes, they would convince themselves that they were just overreacting to what you were saying, wouldn’t they?”

“Because most people wouldn’t want to consider that a child had a true vision of a nightmarish future. I mean, think about it, that’s the kind of stories pulp fiction are made of.”

“Pulp fiction?”

“Those entertaining novels you see around here.” He clarified.

“So, is this going to be our standing strategy for any possible adoption?”

“Why not? Unless you want to make up something else. If that’s the case, be my guest.”

True enough, when they left the kitchen an hour later, they heard from a mousy Amy Bennet that Caroline had been adopted by the Hatfields. Mrs. Cole came to find them later on to inform them about it personally. Tom and Anakin had been rather confused about it, though they hid it well. Then Mrs. Cole tried to carefully mention that it’s normal for potential parents to try to talk to many kids at once, just to get to know each other. She also said that it didn’t mean that there was anything wrong about the kids that weren’t chosen, just that they didn’t happen to fit with the character the parents looking, and that she was sure there are many people out there that would fit better…

Tom was keeping a face that seemed to be politely paying attention to Mrs. Cole, all while wondering when she’d end this weird lecture whose actual purpose he couldn’t even discern. He was still trying to make heads or tails out of it. Anakin figured it out faster than he did, though, and stepped forward to hug her.
“Mrs. Cole,” Anakin said, “thank you for worrying about me and my brother, but you don’t need to. We’re perfectly happy here to be honest.”

Tom was still gazing at them with a mildly confused look.

“Anthony,” Mrs. Cole started, but Anakin had rolled his eyes and turned to Tom.

“Thomas, do you want to be adopted?”

“No.” Tom had answered without thinking. He looked annoyed at being tricked to answer. “What are you—”

Anakin had turned to Mrs. Cole again. “See? We don’t really want to be adopted. Not yet.”

*What are you doing?* Tom hissed. *We’re supposed to want to be adopted! Everyone else does that. We’d stand out even more!*

*I know what I’m doing. Trust me.*

There was an implicit challenge there, right after Tom’s own request earlier when he hadn’t even explained much to Anakin. Tom knew he owed that much and complied, backing down.

“This place is home, Mrs. Cole,” Anakin said.

Tom would take issue with that, really, because he’d much prefer Hogwarts, *thank you.* It wasn’t as if he was free to practice magic during the summer hols here, and the boring children drove him out of his wits (the fact that the boredom also sharpened his cruelty as he sought other means of entertainment, and how that certainly contributed to the distance was something he was selectively not recalling for now).

From the way Mrs. Cole suddenly hugged Anakin, and then Tom (and she knew he wasn’t that comfortable with hugs) made him realise that Anakin had somehow found the right thing to say after all.

“Oh you dear, dear boys,” Mrs. Cole said. “Alright then. I’ll allow you to hide if any prospective parents were coming around.”

“Does this mean that you’ll forgive us for possibly scaring the Hatfields?” Anakin asked, his voice completely innocent. To Tom’s surprise, Mrs. Cole laughed.

“I knew something was up. No wonder they seem rather nervous and in a hurry after that. What did you actually do, hmm? Anthony? Thomas?”

Tom didn’t really think he should answer that at all, incriminating as it was, but Anakin’s blatant amusement at the whole scene relaxed him and made him less wary. *Go on,* Anakin said.

“I pretended I can see the future. A dark and scary future.”

It wasn’t a lie. He knew of a future, but he certainly didn’t know how this one will turn out after he changed things. His answer seemed to have amused Mrs. Cole, because all she did was ruffle his hair, earning her a scowl, before she also ruffled Anakin’s hair and walked away after telling them to behave. Tom didn’t take it too seriously because he saw the smile she had. She had even forgotten that the twins weren’t supposed to be running loose in the hallways.

“Wow, she didn’t even punish us,” Tom muttered. He was uncertain as to what exactly had
happened, and his twin could read it on his face.

“Of course not.” Anakin said. The ease with which he said that showed that he had completely expected this outcome. “Like you’ve said, it sounded ridiculous if one wasn’t there, doesn’t it?”
The customer was only looking for a little something he had read in magazines about how to improve his shuttle’s engine’s performance. After talking a while to him and listening to some of the problems he experienced at take off and landing, Tom managed to persuade him to let Anakin check the main coils of his internal gravity/anti-gravity field generator.

“It’s for free, I swear, since you’ve just made a solid purchase with us.” Tom insisted with the same charming smile. “My brother could go take a look and tell you what the problem is. We could give you an estimation of how much it would cost—whether you want to fix it with us or not is entirely up to you.”

Let’s hope he hasn’t thrashed it, Anakin thought. I don’t think I have the time to take it apart and put it together again in an afternoon.

That’s a very small possibility. He’d only complained of minor issues, not of objects floating away or pallets tossed, Tom said. Anakin gave a cautious mental acknowledgement of it as he walked out with the guy from Mos Eisley to go check his ride. Tom’s feelings was borne out, it seemed. It was just a slight glitch, because some of the parts generating the field were out of sync with the others. The frequency difference wasn’t much, but it was a difference and created a local area where the strength of the gravity there marginally cycled.

“It’s not much,” Anakin said. “I doubt you’d need any new parts to fix this. I can fix this.”

The man was incredulous. Anakin didn’t even know why he was incredulous and just gave him a flat stare. He’s probably a trader—he looked like a trader, from his dusty clothes to the vague smell of bantha on him, and as such he was definitely not the mechanic here. So why was the out-of-towner doubting his words, again?

“That’s impossible! She’s an old ride, I know, and this problem crops up every few months or so that I have to bring her to my regular place. But she’d always need some of the bridge-somethings around the coils replaced.”
Then you’ve been suckered, Anakin thought, stopping himself from rolling his eyes. Tom had somehow slipped around and stood between him and the customer before he said anything else. Probably because he heard Anakin’s unflattering opinion in his head.

How much is he paying that other guy? How much for service and how much for the parts? Tom asked, and Anakin did a light mental scan of him while Tom was placating the customer, assuring him that his brother was a talented mechanic and this wasn’t such an unusual case that they can easily take care of. He gave Tom both the amounts he was looking for.

Charge him a third of his usual service costs, Tom decided.

What? It’s probably only worth a tenth of that! I could fix it in ten minutes.

When you say that, I think you could actually do it in five, but we won’t get more credits that way. Tom replied. I’ll tell him that it would take three quarters of an hour, and you can finish it in a little under half an hour and impress him.

That’s too long! Anakin spluttered.

No it isn’t. Not if he still has business to tend to in Mos Espa, anyway, something that he’d been grumbling about a while. Plus, we know his mechanic’s lousy. Tom insisted, and he went ahead and say exactly those things to the man because he could sense Anakin’s doubt.

“…and that’s the cost to service the gravity generator. It can probably be done in a quarter of an hour, Mr. Yaller. Of course if it is too inconvenient for you, we understand. Perhaps you are in a hurry to finish your urgent business, Sir, then I suppose you can always visit your regular mechanic.”

Tom smiled and waited patiently.

Three… two… one…

His guess was not wrong and the man folded like a green private at a Sabacc game, even if he was still pretending to be considering it. Satisfaction radiated from his twin, and Tom gave a small shake of his head, his lips also twitching.

I still can’t imagine how you’re so good at this, Anakin mused.

Believe it or not, I once worked at a pawn shop. I’ve also noticed that people are the same everywhere. They want a good deal from a nice, trustworthy stranger.

Anakin gave a mental snicker at that and ignored the mock-wounded sigh that Tom gave.

So if I could give them that, I’m gold.

Tom could follow any of Anakin’s diagrams to fix or reconstruct something, but that was it, and he lacked Anakin’s more creative insights. Customers, however, were a different issue. Ever since Tom had started to take over counter duties from Watto, he had never ceased to be surprised by the ease at which his brother could close a deal, extend one deal to another, or intuit the price that would be profitable and yet was still satisfactory for the customers. One or two of their smarter regular customers had even timed their visits to the times that Tamlin Skywalker was certain to be manning the store instead of Watto. His preferred method to gaining more profit was to sell people more stuff, by finding out what else they need and see if they have it, instead of charging a high mark-up.

That way, he can use the excuse of giving them a bulk discount to Watto due to the size of their
purchase and everybody’s happy.

“It was good doing business with you, Sir,” Tom said with a smile and a handshake, and went back inside the store while Anakin took his toolbox and set to work on the shuttle.

This might have been a pretty regular task that Anakin could’ve done without thinking, but there had been others, shadow services that took all of his attention and forced Tom to practice perimeter sensing with the Force as he kept watch over his brother. It wasn’t just about selling parts or changing them, or fixing the parts left overnight in Watto’s shop. It was also fine-tuning or sometimes even doing complex upgrades, some of them were probably still experimental at this date (but since when Anakin cared about that minor detail?). It was mostly done on the sly and away from the slave-owner’s scrutiny. Anakin didn’t like Watto, but he didn’t feel quite comfortable with the subterfuge. Tom had came clean with his reasons then, on one particularly cold desert nights as they stared out at the stars.

“There are several future possibilities, yet one of the things that I’m not sure about is whether the Jedi Master that will free you will have enough credits to free the both of us.”

They’d finished dinner and made sure that their mother was asleep before going out. Anakin had gently lowered her into a deeper sleep through the Force.

“I’ve considered that,” Anakin said. He sounded calmer than he felt. “That was why I was always scrounging up parts I was sure Watto wouldn’t miss; I want to build a detector to locate our slave transmitters so we can extract them when the time comes and run.”

Tom nodded. “Good plan. Still, what about mother?”

“What about mom? She can come with us.”

Tom stared at him in disbelief. “You would bring her to the same planet that Palpatine is on? Why don’t you ask him for a slave collar you while you’re at it?”

He winced. “Urgh, I can’t believe I forgot about him.”

“I still think it was safer if she was here, away from his scrutiny and attention.”

“But the Tusken Raiders…”

“Let’s make a plan about that when you’ve started dreaming about it again. In the meantime, it’s still too far away. It’s also still a far more manageable problem than her being within reach of Palpatine, and able to be used as leverage.”

A Sith Lord and a tribe of Tusken Raiders—there really was no competition there.

“Not that I liked the man much, but why are we going to cut deals and stuff outside of Watto’s knowledge instead of just working at the shop as usual? I don’t like risking getting caught” Anakin wondered aloud.

“Because the money can go towards mother buying her own freedom from him, and it would stop us from being too valuable to Watto. We can’t be the goose that lay the golden eggs—”

“The what?”

“—it’s an old earth story, I’ll tell you later. It’s like… having a bantha whose milk is liquid gold. You wouldn’t want to sell it unless at a very high price, right? And how would anyone be able to buy us off if that was the case?”
Anakin sighed. He was starting to see the problem alright.

“Or we could just be honest about some of the things we could do for the shop, and if he didn’t want to sell both of us at the same time when Qui-Gon arrives, we’ll just escape right then, after taking our transmitters out. He would assume that we’d just been stolen, and if Mom doesn’t know about it, she wouldn’t be blamed since she wasn’t party to it. We could leave the extra money on the bed for her.” Anakin said.

“Alright, so it’s risky. What if we only do it for high-value jobs, especially those involving out-of-towners that don’t come here often and off-worlders? That way there’d only be a small risk of them being repeat customers, or meeting Watto.”

Anakin shook himself out of his recollection and turned his attention back on his work. *So, are we taking this for our own, or not?* Anakin asked. The answer was probably no, considering it was still pretty standard stuff that he could imagine a young Anakin doing without getting too much attention. He still asked out of habit.

*I’ll book it, Tom replied. But considering that he doesn’t seem to come here often, I’ll write it down as half the amount.*
Skywalkers - Podracing

Chapter Summary

Anakin revisits an old hobby. Tamlin tags along.

Podracing

If there was anything in his past that Anakin wasn’t sure what to feel about, it would be podracing. He couldn’t decide whether to get involved again or not, seeing as his childhood had already gone differently with the presence of a twin brother and all his previous adult memories. He hadn’t become close friends with the old crowd he ran with, as he wasn’t quite sure if he knew how to act.

Oh, they still know each other, as the place was too small for anyone to be strangers. Yet all it amounted to was an acknowledging nod or a greeting in passing, and small talk whenever there was an occasion for a gathering. There had always been some small, informal celebrations dotted throughout the year, and sometimes there were slightly bigger events like a slave wedding—not that they would ever be recognised by the law, but it was tradition. These would be the ones where the children get dragged into, no matter how annoyed they are at being forced to wear their best and behave.

That was it, though. That was the extent of most of his social interaction with people his physical age that wasn’t Tom. He had a feeling there was something else different with his childhood that he couldn’t quite recall, but he ignored it for now. If he’d forgotten it, it couldn’t have been that important, right?

He was fine with things as they were—between the two of them and their mother they never lacked company nor ran out of things to talk about. There was also the concern of their visibility. He and Tom might’ve been able to fool the adults as being especially precocious children, but he wasn’t sure if other children wouldn’t notice something off about them.

Considering the change that’s already in place, who’s to say that he needed to get into podracing again?

Ever since Tom came up with the idea of taking on difficult work on the side, in secret, they had managed to start building their little nest egg. They were a perfect team together. Tom did all the talking and dealing and barely any techniques was untouched from his arsenal of persuasion, even using his wide-eyed innocent kid guise that Anakin could never get around to doing. (Sometimes the condenscension just grates at him. Wasn’t it enough that he was condescended often as a slave?) Anakin thus concerned himself with the mechanical problems as well as scouting whether there are any potential customers whenever a new craft landed in town. Getting into podracing just for the money now sounds like more risk on top of ones he’s already taking.

Perhaps I should’ve just checked out the races and see what happens, he thought, deciding.

Anakin went to approach his brother and convinced him to close the shop right then and leave.

If Tom was left to his own devices, he would’ve kept the shop opened for at least an hour longer,
maybe more, before closing shop and trudging back home. With his zeal for making money, the
Toydarian was satisfied with Tom’s salesmanship, and his disciplined record-keeping convinced
Watto that he was honest and profitable enough to be trusted with the store. So Tom was there on
most afternoons now while Watto went off early and enjoy a good drink. Or thirty. But really,
who cares how much Watto drinks as long as he’s in a good mood the day after that? Anakin
would’ve been even happier if his liver failed on him, but then again, they might end up with a
new and unknown master, and that wasn’t guaranteed to be a better alternative.

Thus when Anakin told his brother that he had a plan for that evening, it was not hard to guess
that he would be sceptical. He did close the shop early by his standards, though, and Anakin
recognised it as the gesture of trust that it was. The brothers pulled the collar of their cloak higher
as the winds buffeted sand around them, their mutual sighs lost in the desert air. Sand. That was
one thing Tatooine was never lacking, more and more sand. Whenever Anakin asked himself
how he could ever forget its omnipresence, he found a different part of himself asking back do you
really want to remember all this?

He shuddered. No, not really.

“So, let me ask this once more: where are we going?” Tom asked.

“The podraces. You know, the one you saw me in before I left Tatooine?”

“You’re getting into that deathtrap that you built, again? Wasn’t once enough?”

“Ha ha, very funny.” Anakin muttered. Tom didn’t even spare the energy to respond, the sandy
winds wearing what little enthusiasm that he had. “I know better now that it’s a significant risk,
being an adult instead of a kid gives you a different perspective that way. What I want to know is
whether the gain is worth it. That’s why I need to go there again and see.”

He could feel his twin giving him a mental nod, along with faint background thoughts of, Sand,
sand… so much bloody sand… wait, how did it even get there? Argh, that is so uncomfortable…
Anakin coughed loudly, on purpose before he got too much information, and he felt Tom blinked
and put up better mental shields. The blond sighed in relief.

“The Raceway’s not too close, though. It would’ve been easier to go there on eeopies or
dewbacks.”

“Dewbacks?”

“Big lizards you can ride on?”

Silence and the ever present sand drifted between them as they walked on. Anakin was regretting
on not bringing his goggles, even when he knew the chance of a sandstorm was very low. There
was still enough wind to be annoying.

“As comforting as stories about hypothetical dewbacks are, I’m sure they won’t be enough to
soothe the ache of walking all the way there. Do you have some ride hidden somewhere that I
don’t know, or are they fictional?” Tom finally asked.

“How do you even say all that in one breath?”

“Practice,” Tom said, just as dryly.

“No, I have no dewbacks.”

“I am also not willing to part with the credits necessary to rent any.” Tom said without missing a
“Miser,” Anakin said, but in good humour. His brother only nodded and accepted it as a compliment to his sound economic principles. Tom wasn’t wrong.

“Seriously Anakin, are we going to walk all the way there? With these short legs, it’s going to take ages.” Tom complained again.

“What were you thinking of us doing?”

“Something with the Force.”

“The Force is not to be used for frivolous purposes! Physical work disciplines the mind and this is why we’ve always cared for the Temple traditionally.” Anakin said, copying his old master’s tone completely. Somewhere in the Force, Obi-Wan would be groaning into his hands if he had heard it.

“You don’t actually believe all that rot, do you?” The dark-haired twin was somewhere between exasperated and incredulous.

“Don’t let Obi-Wan catch you say that.” He said solemnly.

“Anakin.”

“We are supposed to be training in the ancient and venerable ways of the Jedi Order.”

“If you keep that up, the only ancient and venerable thing you would be is a fossil, because I will murder you and abandon the corpse in the middle of the desert.” There goes Tom’s odd sense of humour that he’d been waiting for. Anakin laughed.

His twin had actually stopped at that, dismay dawning on his face. “Please, please don’t tell me this is a great lark on your part. And here I thought I’ve done so well in avoiding violence. Let me remind you that I know how much blood a human body could lose before it becomes fatal…”

“Nnnooo, it’s not a—what do you call it—lark,” he said, in between his laughter. “I just… stars, you should see your face! It’s krethin’ hilarious!”

Tom rolled his eyes, “Yes, because not wanting to walk several miles in the desert is a completely unusual wish. Thank you for your concern.”

“Well, thanks all the same, I needed that,” Anakin said. “There is something we could try, though. You remember all the Force control exercises I’ve been focusing on this month?”

“Yes?”

Anakin walked to the shade of a store nearby, and Tom followed suit. When Anakin sat down and took a meditation pose, Tom copied faithfully.

*Immerse yourself deeper in the Force like usual. Then, to channel it to reinforce your leg muscles. Don’t worry if you didn’t get it right immediately, I’m here to help.*

‘-

The problem with force-assisted running on Tatooine was two-fold.

The first, one would ideally reinforce one’s leg muscles to benefit from the apparent increase in stamina. The second, one had to be able to focus on all the grain of sand one is about to step in at
the same time, because unless something was holding the surface tension together, a human feet is going to sink in it. Anakin still remembered all those annoying details from his class on ‘physical states of matter and Force interaction’. He gave silent and grudging thanks to Master Kelynn, no matter how pedantic she was.

Use too much Force to buffer the sand and it would drain too much energy and tires the technique user immediately. It’s a complicated game of Force marionette that most don’t bother with—there are such things called *speeders* that one can always use to travel. Anakin, however, had a lot of time on his hands after he followed Tom’s advice of faking the completion time of various fixing tasks he had, to avoid standing out too much. So he tried his hand at mastering one-and-half times the complexity of the first Force marionette. One actually manages to pick up a good running speed that way without tiring themselves out—Anakin was pretty satisfied with what he managed it.

Right now he was trying to control his movements as well as partially supporting Tom’s.

“Stop!” Tom shouted.

Anakin did, and they found themselves a few steps away from a boulder. A little later and they would’ve both bashed their heads in. The faint outlines of the Raceway’s canyons were visible already. His twin sighed.

“So this is fast, and it’s very good since I barely felt tired either. There’s still one problem, though; you can’t spare your attention to take into account where we’re going, especially at the speeds we went.”

“I knew it had been too easy,” Anakin muttered.

“Is it still far?” Tom asked.

“You could see the canyon right? It’s about there.”

“Let’s walk.”

“But there’s still this empty stretch of sand between here and that—”

“We’ll walk.” Tom insisted, marching ahead of his twin. Anakin sighed and caught up with him.

“Whatever happened to not wanting to walk several miles in the desert?”

“It’s overridden by survival instinct to *not die* from smashing into rocks or walls at high speeds,” he said, his tone only half-joking. The other half was well-represented by the hands that still had tremors from the adrenaline rush.

“It wasn’t that bad!”

Tom raised an eyebrow at him. “… Anakin, you *do* know that I can tell through the Force when untrue statements are made, right?”

Anakin cursed. He knew there were downsides to having a Force-sensitive as a sibling.

It wasn’t easy to find their way in a crowd of strangers, and adults at that, but they managed. The excitement was palpable in the air, and even Tom had to admit that it was hard not to get infected as conversations on various competitors droned in around them. Various smoke drifted in the air.
The scent of worn leather, artificial and real, clung to them. There was also the welcome scent of cheap food with even cheaper nutritional value—they probably still taste good, though, that’s what junk food is for, right?

“What, Teer’na’s odds are seventeen to one? How did he drop? I thought he did so well the last time against—”

“Fourteen-to-one on Ghodorra, eh? Not bad, not bad at all.”

“Whose pod was the second to the right? I thought I recognise the build. Was the one who made it the same one as—”

He pushed a little against a couple of old men of various non-human species holding up the flow to his left. They cursed, but moved, and Tom was glad that they could finally see down to the arena. It helped that neither of them were truly kids, and didn’t really mind shoving through people where it mattered and if they really need to get through.

Anakin had started to describe the details of the pods entering the race now.

“Wow, look at the middle one, Tom! Why close to a cigar shape? That is rare. It’s a good strategy to reduce the drag, I admit, but then how would it handle in terms of maneuverability?”

“Possibly not well?” Tom hazarded a guess.

Anakin snorted. “That’s putting it mildly. Look at the one to its left…”

The blond talked more about the possible reasons of changes in the aerodynamic drag that was considered when the shape of a pod was altered. He guessed the engines that could possibly be chosen for each pod, based on what would complement the weakness of its shape or sharpen its advantages to a razor edge, though the sacrifices made for that was definitely not small, and the people who did that are probably seven krethin’ kinds of crazy.

“Adding more turbojets is not the best way to gain speed! You lose too much control that way!” Anakin ranted at one point. “What good would all that speed be if you’re just going to crash into a canyon wall faster?”

“Maybe the pilot’s species’ is one with a higher reflex speed to compensate?” Tom guessed.

Even after the years he’d begun to spend in this universe, he still felt as if he was grasping at straws at how things worked here. It was only his knack for improvisation that saved him. His brother didn’t seem to notice.

Anakin scoffed loudly, his disbelief clear. “I know all the major species of the galaxy and trust me, nobody’s that good.”

Tom barely even knew most of the details beyond how he noticed there was the rare pod with four engines that his brother had probably been talking about, as well another that he now understood as completely suicidal with six. Anakin turned out to be looking at the exact same pod.

“Six? I don’t want to know how the crew would’ve balanced power couplings between them… wait, on second thoughts, I do want to know. I want to know the method they’ve chosen to kill the pilot.”

Anakin continued his speculation and rant about how each racer would probably fare in the light of some of the terrain features he had seen and heard.
Why Anakin still thought that Tom could follow all his technical conversation, he had no idea. He had a good grasp of it now, mainly through his twin’s relentless chatter, the occasional bleeding over dreams and endless instruction resulting in constant osmosis, but most of the time he only understood a third of what Anakin was saying. If he was lucky, he might even get a half of that, but that was a rare day. His brother seemed to derive a lot of joy just from talking to him (and talking at him, if the non-stop mechanical rant was any indication). The glow of Anakin’s happiness through the bond was certainly something he didn’t mind having around often.

Oddly enough, it was… comfortable.

That was it; it felt like the warmth of a comfortable hearth after one had been rained on for a whole winter evening. It had the unexpected ability to lull him into complacence. Thus Tom was entirely unsurprised when his selfishness won out. All Tom needed to do to ensure Anakin’s continued rant was nod at the right moments as well as approximate enough to ask questions at some points, just to show that he was paying attention. So as Anakin proceed to continue his commentary, Tom let all this and more just wash over him as he looked around and basked in his brother’s simple joy.

Anakin’s latest rant was about a pod’s completely embarrassing engine choice due to a well-known mechanical failure for that particular brand and model that tended to seize it at intense usage beyond two hours. He was willing to bet that the pod would certainly end last, he stated, as his argument was winding down. Tom found a natural pause and asked the question he’d had in his mind ever since he had sniffed out something close to uncertainty in his brother’s thoughts and couldn’t help but pick at it.

To be honest, picking at holes and weaknesses was his nature.

“Do you think you’d ever want to race again?” Tom asked.

Whatever sentence Anakin was going to say was lost at that moment. “It’s… it’s dangerous.”

“That isn’t exactly the answer to my question,” He said, his voice calm, patient. His brother didn’t immediately answer him, and Tom didn’t prompt him. A small argument broke up somewhere to their back and to the right. Neither paid it any mind.

“I wasn’t wrong with what I’ve said earlier either,” Anakin said at last. “It is dangerous. The only reason why it had seemed so fun was because I was too young to notice all the risks I had taken. I didn’t realise that I was quite lucky, or that I was favoured by the Force.”

Tom tilted his head to the side a little. “You’ve just provided the game-breaking solution yourself. All you’d have to do is use the Force—outrageously so.”

Neither said out loud the word they were both thinking, but he knew he had Anakin’s interest piqued already. His resolve not to race again was wavering.

“It would still take a while before I’d finish building a pod, though.”

Tom smirked. That wasn’t a ‘no’, and he had a better idea of what his twin’s concerns were. *Enough bothering him for now, then.*

“Excellent. Now, since I’m sure you’ve assessed all the competitors in the race, do you think you could give an educated guess on the winners?”

Anakin caught up with his scheme. “Winners? Why not just winner?”

“Too obvious. *Everyone* wants to bet on the winner.” Tom said. There were the beginnings of a
familiar smug smile on his face. “To tell you in detail: I haven’t done a more precise calculation, just based on the odds people had been giving to each other in the crowd. There are ten pods in the race right now, with three open winning positions of first, second and third. So far my rough estimate supported a betting principle I’ve read about once; too many people bet on the winner to drive the odds down. If you want to make a profit, you bet on who’s going to come second.”

“You did all that in your head?”

“No, on a secret datapad I tattooed on my face—of course I did it in my head. What else could I use?” Tom said with a roll of his eyes. He missed the dumbfounded look on his sibling’s face when he did that. “So come on, tell me. Who do you think’s going to come second? We have to move quickly if we want to locate some bookies in time.”

“Luccorod,” he said, naming a Dug he’d seen before.

“Now if he didn’t come in second, who do you think would?”

“We’re making more than one bet?”

“Because I don’t trust anyone not to try and rig the race,” he drawled. Anakin nodded at that. It made too much sense. All those parties Gardulla had held gave him a very good idea of the size of the crime syndicates around.

“Point taken. Try Khaz’bator too, then.”

Anakin had thought Tom was more than a bit paranoid in insisting that the bet be split among at least three bookies, and only on one bookie did they place the bet on the two second-place candidates at once, but he didn’t argue. In his previous lines of work, the paranoid were usually the ones alive. It also never hurts to be careful in a new place. The plan was for them split up and pretend they were placing their bets on behalf of their fathers. Tom’s rather off sense of humour reared its head at around that time.

“Let’s place the bet for Vader and Voldemort.” The dark haired-twin said.

He went on before his twin could say anything. “You have to admit, those two needed to relax and have fun sometimes. Getting people to quake in their boots and bow at you for hours can get tiring.”

Anakin froze several seconds when he heard his dark lord name mentioned, before giving in to small chuckles. If it sounded a bit frayed at the edges, Tom didn’t say anything.

“Fine. Let’s get the show going.”

Well, he thought, no harm in resurrecting them as old gambling addicts.

At the end of the race, they’d more than multiplied their money by six fold. It was a modest increase as gambling results go, but they didn’t care. As Tom had put it, they weren’t exactly gambling, after all. They were gaming the system in order to profit from the miscalculation of less fortunate sods.
Riddles - Freedom, Radios and Cookies

Chapter Summary

The scrapes and escapes of the Riddle twins.

Chapter Notes

Anakin/Anthony's adventures with radios is inspired by Richard Feynman's childhood stories. Also, there are cookies.

Riddles

Freedom, Radios and Cookies

The Riddle twins had escaped from the open windows of the east room.

They were silently glad that it hadn’t been raining in a while because it wouldn’t be possible to jump into an open flowerbed that blocked the exit that way; the mud tracks were hard to hide. Their current minder, Talbot, was already a little too used and a little too resigned about their escapades that they actually tolerated him better than most of the older kids. He didn’t panic, and he was rarely in a hurry to recover them whenever he recognised them as being missing from among his current charge.

It gave them enough time to practise lightsaber katas in the backyard with pieces of old brooms that they had liberated from the shed. That went well for only the first half hour. The next one had them messing around in mock sparring. Anakin might have more experience as a lightsaber fighter, but their different balance of his children’s body negated that a lot. Tom’s reflexes and reaction time were enough to match him at this point—and he’d admitted after many suspicious queries from Anakin that he used to fence too. Years from now, Tom might not be able to keep up with him in a pure saber fight if Anakin had had gotten even more used to his body, but that day was not today.

It was fun even if they had to brush grass away from their knees and make sure they didn’t leave too-obvious stains. It was no longer as tiring as it had been months ago, and they had barely broken sweat at the activity as they entered the orphanage again.

Mrs. Cole’s presence in the hallway was not an expected part of the plan at all. Her arms were folded in front of her chest as she stared down at them. Tom stilled, probably trying to figure out what face to present. Anakin didn’t bother holding back his sigh.

“Anthony and Thomas Riddle.” She greeted, a warning tone in her voice.

“Yes, Mrs. Cole?” The blond twin asked, some resignation entering his voice. He ignored Tom’s wordless warning as to how he should try to hold it back. It doesn’t matter, he sent his thought it’s
not as if she’d take special note of it. There were far stranger things about them that she could note, anyway.

She stared at them for a little longer without saying anything. The Riddle twins stared back, giving their best impression of harmlessness—not that anyone in the orphanage will ever consider them as harmless. Still, why admit more guilt than is necessary? Anakin could feel the artificial placidity his brother was subtly broadcasting and smiled inwardly.

“Is there anything you needed, Mrs. Cole?” Tom asked, perfectly polite and helpful in tone.

If Mrs. Cole thought they could be intimidated to spill their guts, she was sorely mistaken. She sighed.

“You do realise that you’ve just run away again, haven’t you?” She asked.

“We were about to go to the study hall, to be honest,” Tom said, glancing at his brother.

Anakin nodded. “Either that or your office, actually. Ma’am.”

He could feel rather than see his brother’s surprise while the one on Mrs. Cole’s face was visible. He explained further. “I’ve noticed that the radio gets wonky after a while, and it loses sound completely when it’s been turned on for too long. It sounds like it’s overheating and has faulty heat sink or circulation. If you have the tools, would you mind if I take a look at it?”

There was a mental nod from Tom. That explained the last book you were borrowing from the library.

He had chosen two books on electrical engineering; one was a comprehensive textbook that will provide him with the depth he was looking for while the other was a more practical and popular one that showed the examples of various projects that he could use immediately.

“Are you sure?” She asked. It showed how well she had known them that she didn’t meet his offer with looks of incredulity, just an uncertain one.

“Sure.” Anakin said.

It didn’t take long for Mrs. Cole to usher them to her office, nor for a toolbox to be located. Anakin had already rolled the sleeves of his shirt at that point as Tom sat in front of him and opened the box. The blond found the appropriate screwdriver to use and set forth to taking it apart, all while telling his twin what exactly it is that he was doing and asking for the occasional helping hand. Working on repairs was practically second nature to both of them after all the hours in Watto’s shop.

It was only when Mrs. Cole spoke again that the twins realised she hadn’t gone anywhere.

“Anthony… Thomas.” There was a strange note of finality in her voice that caught their attention. It was rare that she was this subdued “I think it’s past time for me to realise that neither of you are exactly like the other kids your age.”

It’s not as if we’re like other older children either, Tom thought dryly.

Anakin replied that with a mental eyeroll. It’s not as if we’re children.

“Perhaps I should take that into account, and allow you greater freedom—” Their faces lightened up at this “—and greater responsibility than is usually granted to your peers. You will have free passage throughout the orphanage at all times, because I trust that you can behave responsibly
without having people to mind you."

She received two nods at that. “From now, I will include your name in the weekly duty rosters as well. If you want to know what responsibilities you’d have to take on this week, you can ask Anderson about it. Please show me that I was right to trust you, boys.”

“Certainly, Mrs. Cole.” Tom said with his best smile.

“Of course, Mrs. Cole.” Anakin said.

“Right. I’ll leave you two to it, then.”

Mrs. Cole turned to leave. Anakin turned his attention back to the radio he was fixing while Tom was in a good enough mood to decide to humour him and keep him company for a while. For all the satisfaction the two Riddles exchanged through their bond, they might as well have been high-fiving and shaking each other’s hands in congratulations.

“We are finally free from minders.” Anakin let out a long, satisfied sigh.

“Which is long overdue.”

“But it’s not as if it was that much of a hard work to wear them down either,” he pointed out, taking more screws out. “All we had to do was keep evading a bunch of kids.”

“A bunch of taller kids with better reach. Being short really is a hassle.”

“So now you owe me some dessert.” Anakin smirked. He was wondering when his brother was going to realise that, but he was too impatient to wait. The dubious snort he heard was just as he expected.

“What dessert?”

“You lost the bet about when she’d given up on trying to lump us with the other younger kids. This is still within my chosen week instead of yours.”

The scowl on Tom’s face was usually enough to clear the way for them, but it only made Anakin laugh.

“Why are we spending our free time in the kitchen, again? We already did kitchen duties yesterday.” Anakin groused. It still didn’t stop him from walking beside Tom.

“I have a plan,” he said cryptically, which did not stop him from receiving a glare courtesy of his brother. “It will probably bear delicious sweet fruit tomorrow or the day after that, but it requires some effort now. Besides, we could always talk unhindered in the kitchen.”

“I haven’t finished reading the books and I intend to at least return one at the end of the week so I could borrow something else. Urgh. When would people invent datapads here?”

The dark-haired twin shrugged with no apparent concern. “You can go back and read, but you wouldn’t be part of my plan that way.”

“What is your plan, anyway?”

“That would be telling and I can’t do that, the walls have ears, you know,” Tom said mildly.
Then don’t say it out loud! Anakin gave a mental yell. From the way his brother winced and sent him warning looks, it was almost as annoying as actually doing it.

It’s less fun if it’s said out loud, even for me, he said. Come on, trust me on this. Or don’t, and go read your book, but no regrets if you do that.

Anakin was sure that this was payback from Tom for losing one rice pudding, one blackberry pudding, one jelly, and one apple strudel over a period of several days due to their last bet, but he didn’t have any proof. That said, Anakin knew that Tom never did anything without a good reason and thus there wasn’t any chance he was just roped into more work, not when Tom was right beside him. Yet he also knew himself well enough to realise that just as Tom revelled in secrets, they drive him up a wall. Probably the main reason why he did it anyway, he thought.

He sighed. “Fine. But if it’s not as great as you claim it, I’ll get you for it.”

Tom merely grinned.

‘-

We’re going to the kitchen? Again? Anakin asked with frustration.

What were the appropriate Jedi words, again? Oh, ‘patience, Padawan’. You should know by now that I play the long game.

Oh, did he ever know just how long a game Tom could play. If the way he had always left minor inconveniences to Greg Nesbitt for all the small troubles he made for them was any indication, it was too damn long for Anakin’s taste.

Just how long is long? Because if I have to do this for a week with nothing to show—

I think it’s today; just wait. Well, it’s either today or tomorrow, at any rate.

Mrs. Swinburn greeted them with a hearty slap on their shoulder, and they found themselves moving to their usual spot. Anakin went dragging around the stools while Tom went around finding vegetables that needed chopping.

There was a gangly teenage orphan with dirty blonde hair by the stoves; she was Liddie, if Anakin wasn’t mistaken. She was as almost a permanent fixture of the kitchen as the Cook, and one of the few who could care less about them that they soon found they could relax behind her. Both twins had tried scanning her surface thoughts once (legilimens, Anakin, you’d have to remember all the other names too somehow, Tom had said), and they’d found that her main concern was indeed tied to what meal she was working on right then. Their only worth to her was being labelled as ‘kitchen brats’. He wasn’t even sure if she’d remembered their names at this point beyond them being the Riddle twins to her, but he was actually glad for it.

The kitchen, as always, was one of their bolt holes.

“What did you want to talk about?” Anakin asked. It wasn’t that hard to put a low-level distraction field around them (harder than it would have been, what with the way the Force was difficult to hold here. Yet since it was a simple act that he didn’t have to think about, it didn’t exactly change much). Tom had observed it once and told him that it was definitely a notice-me-not charm, to use the wizarding world’s parlance.

“Talk about?” Tom asked.

“You wouldn’t have chosen the kitchen if there wasn’t anything we need to discuss properly,” he
said. True enough, the dark-haired Riddle had that vaguely amused smile on his face again. If he wasn’t getting so used to it and if he was as young as his actual physical body, Anakin would’ve wanted nothing more than to wipe it from his twin’s face.

“I almost forgot,” Tom started, which earned him a snort from Anakin, but he ignored it. “While I have no doubt that being able to fight with a lightsaber is useful, I’m not sure we can find lightsaber crystals around here.”

The blond sighed. “I know. You didn’t think that I never thought of that?”

“What I meant was, we might as well go to Diagon Alley sometime soon and get wands of our own.”

He was never quite sure what to think about this magic business, but since it felt exactly the same as the Force, he might as well start to get used to it.

“And the money?”

“I’ll take it from Slytherin’s vault,” the dark-haired twin said casually. His brother was still wordlessly staring at him, so he explained. “I thought I went over this with you. You know, Salazar Slytherin? One of the four Hogwarts Founders who made the Chamber of Secrets in the school? All four founders have their own family vaults in the earliest and lowest levels of Gringotts bank, being part of the old wizarding families as they are. The vaults also have a lot of gold in them.”

“And…?”

“I’m a descendant of Slytherin’s main branch…well, since now there’s also you, I suppose it’s more correct to say we’re Slytherin’s descendants.”

That seems to have broken through Anakin’s stupor somehow as his eyes widened in shock and, his eyes were closer to pale blue. “We inherited from a Hogwarts Founder? Are you telling me that we have lots of money? Why are we still even here?”

If it wasn’t for their notice-me-not charm, his rising tone would’ve drawn the attention of everyone else. As it was, they barely received a glance from Liddie.

Tom considered it idly, his tone flippant. “Hmmm, I’ve never really thought about the money—”

Anakin’s tone could’ve peeled paint.

“Tom,”

His lips twitched into a smirk. “—but I thought it was easier to keep a low profile when we’re just muggle orphans and not Slytherins’ underaged heirs running unchaperoned in the wizarding world.”

His twin threw his hands up in the air. “Oh come on! How would they even figure that out?”

“I’m not sure I know of all the ways they do, but I do know that some of the old pureblood families have sworn allegiances to one of the Hogwarts founders. If we were going to draw a lot of money, we would have to activate the vault and that would require a Proof of Inheritance document activated by blood. On the upside, it would formally cement our claim as heirs and all would have to admit what power and influence we can still wield. On the downside, once the lineage is confirmed to be active again and our blood registered, all sorts of other blood wards tied to other houses and families that are allied to Slytherin in various degrees will also become
active.”

Tom collected all the carrots on his chopping block and tipped it into the pot. Then he took the next bunch of carrots.

“All those people would immediately be informed of who the current, active heirs of Slytherin are—because vassals should obviously be able to recognise their liege lords and give them what bowing and scraping is their due.” Tom didn’t hide the dry tone of his voice.

“Yet we’d have minions. How can you say no to minions?” Anakin asked with over-the-top enthusiasm. If Tom had one weakness, it had to have been that.

“Said minions would also enthusiastically introduce us to their families. I could expect knowing their sons and nephews, but I don’t think I have enough patience if I was herded towards daughters, nieces, female cousins several times removed, et cetera.” Tom finished.

“But we’re kids!”

“All the more reason to start while we’re young and impressionable. The family could not afford to miss the opportunity to make such important connections. Then ten years from now, they’re well placed to act. ‘Look at those handsome young men darling, and do get to know them properly!’” Tom said with all the false cheer of a debutante’s mother. “‘We wouldn’t mind if you know them more thoroughly than other young men. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge, and soon you get more décolletage shoved to your face than you ever wanted. I knew I experienced enough of that when I was in seventh year.”

Suddenly he stilled at a particular memory, his expression was dark. Anakin wasn’t sure if he wanted to know what it was about or not. “Then, there’s the fangirls.”

His tone was ominous. The blond groaned at that and palmed his face.

“Even wealth comes with its own set of troubles, doesn’t it?”

“It would be easier to manage if we tell them we’ve only found out about when we’re teenagers. We’d have a better excuse since we can say we’ve researched our family history through the Hogwarts library. Others won’t be so daring in their manipulations, not after a good number of them snubbed us so obviously when we were but mudblood orphans. If we were just about to take small amounts of money once in a while, it would still be manageable without having to activate Proof of Inheritance. Thus, buying a wand is still achievable.”

“…but not living away on our own.” Anakin muttered from behind his hand.

“But not living away on our own. Correct.”

‘-

One meal later and several batches of cookies done in the kitchen, Anakin was almost certain he’d never be able to stop smelling like a bakery after all that. Mrs. Swinburn thanked them on their hard work, gave the three of them a bag of cookies each and sent them on their way. It was done in a whirlwind of activity that Anakin wasn’t sure if he’d had managed to say his thanks before he was suddenly standing outside the kitchen.

“What… just happened?”

“Plans bearing sweet fruits,” Tom said casually, raising his bag of cookies in a mock salute.
And then Anakin gets it. It was clear when it happened; his eyes lit brilliant blue like stars in the sky.

“Oh, wow. That was some pretty long plans. And here I thought Cook was famous for never giving anyone more desserts than they deserve. They say it doesn’t matter how much you try to sweet talk or charm her into it, no one had ever succeeded against her defence.”

“To be sure, she never gave anyone more than what they had earned,” Tom corrected, a smug smile on his face. “For some reason no one had figured that out before.”

He nodded. “Okay. Great plan. Now, we need a new plan. We have to find a hiding place for these and quickly.”

“Why for?”

Anakin stared at him in disbelief. Didn’t he know what other kids are like? The easy camaraderie, the food sharing and possibly food nabbing? Force, what was his childhood like? He stopped his thoughts of planning to correct possible defects in his brother’s childhood and returned to his initial concern.

“Here we are, carrying two bags of cookies that we’ve managed to acquire through mysterious channels? The curious and the desperate would be after us. We’d be mobbed. We’d have crowds baying for our blood and we’ll live a life on the run to secure our stash. Trust me, we better find some spare tins before any of the other kids sees us.”
A short talk over a broken radio.

School

The Riddle twins were in the living-room-cum-sitting-room, sitting on an old and worn Persian rug that had a small coffee table in the middle. A plate of cookies lay between them, hid under the table to avoid the notice of other children. Anyone passing the room can see Thomas Riddle sprawled on one side of the table with several books and, while Anthony Riddle was on the other side with an open toolbox and the radio he was fixing. He was a sight to see, a boy fiddling with tools that were a little too large for his hands, the same way his twin was casually reading books that were the size of his whole lap with a vocabulary that could still give kids older than them a headache.

They might’ve been a sight anywhere else, but the denizens of Wool’s Orphanage had long gotten used to the idea that that Riddle twins were anything but normal.

_Genius_ was a word that was usually bandied about by the oldest kids and maybe some of the adults. Mrs. Cole was currently deep in deliberation about whether she needed to get them tested in order to enter them in educational institutions that were more prepared to handle unusual children. Yet not many knew about her dilemma right now as she had not voiced it to anyone else, thinking she’d have a long time before they needed to go anywhere. The guests who were lucky enough to be able to see the twins (and not prompt them to hide in case anyone was looking to adopt) used it too. The orphanage kids usually settle with using _weirdoes_, or less commonly and much more negatively, _freaks_.

Tom was amused at how much less impact that word had on him now than when he was younger—he couldn’t help but wonder why exactly it had seemed so important to him then.

While Tom was reading and taking notes, after muttering something about finding parallel principles between arithmantic heuristics that he knew about and some algebra textbook he had found in the library, Anakin lost himself in the rhythm of his work. It was the third radio he had seen to this week as news of his technical abilities had spread after he fixed Mrs. Cole’s radio the first time around. This wasn’t even one that was in the orphanage—it belonged to Mr. Werther the milkman. It began with Mr. Werther’s small talk with Mrs. Cole in the mornings, and then the Missus’ complaints about the radio. Mrs. Cole found that to be the perfect opportunity to tell about her darling boys, like how Anthony fixed her radio a few days ago.

It ended with Mr. Werther enthusiastically handing Mrs. Cole his radio—the same radio that is currently in Anakin’s hands. The blond didn’t mind it at all; it was better than being bored.

The darker-haired twin made one more sweep of the room with the Force, to ensure that none of the older kids around had their attention on them. Satisfied with everyone else’s occupation, he took a cookie from under the table and started to munch again. Then he froze. Anakin looked up from the radio he was fixing when he heard a sudden sound from his brother.
“I knew I forgot something important about the orphanage,” Tom said with a huff.

“What is it?”

“School,” he said the words with such distaste that Anakin couldn’t help but furrow his brows.

“What’s so bad about it? I thought we were going to Hogwarts?”

His twin sighed. “We’re not going to go there until we’re twelve, but we already need to go to school before that; the government requires it. Hence we’d be sent to muggle schools. That’s a word for non-magicals, the mundanes.”

“Can’t we go to Hogwarts earlier?”

“’Fraid not. There are no classes available for younger kids.”

“Forge an acceptance letter, then,” he replied. Tom stared at the blond in surprise for a few moment, but the gears of his mind turned quickly.

“Forge… what? Alright, I can see how it would get us out of going into any muggle schools, but that means we’d have to go out of the orphanage for extended periods of time. That, in turn, meant we need to have a place ready, and I don’t see any easy solutions presenting itself other than to procure a place. It would require the activation of Proof of Inheritance again, either to get the money for rent or access to any Slytherin grounds that may possibly still be around.”

Tom shook his head. “This is a scheme that’s too complicated just to solve the issue of getting out of muggle schools.”

It was his brother’s turn to sigh. “Alright. Just how boring are muggle schools, anyway?”

“Pretty boring, I guess.”

“You guess?”

Tom threw his hands in defeat. “I can’t even remember a lot of details about it. If my mind had decided to start erasing parts of those years in large blocks, it’s safe to say that it’s rather boring indeed.”

Anakin scratched his head. They didn’t have time to go to school. They still have to plan to save the world while getting their bodies up to par. Tom was tapping his pen against the textbook’s edge, eyes narrowed in in concentration. The blond knew he was only going to think in circles when he was stuck like this, and decided to go back to the radio he was working on. The problem wasn’t hard, but removing a particular melted part took some finesse to do.

“We could get adopted,” Tom finally said. Anakin groaned.

“No, not by mundanes, but by magicals. It would provide us with a lot of leeway to practice magic, meditate, practice the Force, practice everything. We’d probably get access to whatever magical books they have too. Any wizard or witch would also be fully aware of any upcoming conflict with Grindelwald and wouldn’t exactly be sitting ducks when trouble came to Britain.”

Anakin wanted to offer his opinion on it before he saw Tom’s expression. It was still closed upon itself, bearing the weight of too many thoughts and his eyes darker and colder than Anakin would ever want to see in him. He felt along their bond and unsurprisingly found his brother’s emotions
swirling into a dreary vortex around the usual soothing cool core that was Tom.

“For someone who’d just set out a solution, you don’t look happy at all.”

“…I’m not,” Tom admitted after a while. He could see it already took a lot for his brother to say that instead of just clamping up.

“And?” he prodded.

“I don’t think it’s really a solution.”

Anakin sighed. Tom was not of the habit of sharing his plans, at all. He was getting better, really, but it didn’t mean that Anakin didn’t want to bash his head against a wall when he was getting close-mouthed again. It was also something his brother fell back on all too easily when he was under pressure.

“I don’t know what you’re krethin’ talking about until you decide to actually tell me. I can’t actually read you mind.” He said, blunt. Well, he could, but it would’ve been a battle and a half and wasn’t worth the hassle and pain.

You might also want to look at that storm that’s brewing around you. The emotional mess is not doing you any favours. Anakin said.

Tom closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and Anakin could feel the spike in conflicting thoughts dumped into the Force. It was unexpectedly large enough that he could feel the hairs at the back of his neck standing for a moment, and that slight tingle in the air that was familiar before a thunderstorm. He could see several other orphans in the room noticing it too, if some confused and wary glances were any indication. A boy closest to them rubbed his arms.

“You say that meditation solves everything, right?”

“That was Obi-Wan, not me,” Anakin said quickly. He wasn’t that much of a meditation enthusiast.

“Let me do that first, then. I want to make sure that my mind is clear when I talk to you about it.” The creases on his brow were noticeable now as he went halfway into full brooding mode already.

Anakin nodded, trying to hold back the urge to batter at their mental connection until he spoke up. “Of course. I’ll be here when you’re up for it.”
Skywalkers - Food Issues, A Chat on Padmé

Chapter Summary

Food security is not a trivial issue. Anakin worries about Padmé. Temptation is never very far from the surface for the two ex dark lords.

Chapter Notes

Oddly enough, this is one of the earliest chapters I've written, other than the early parts of both of them in Terminus. It's the chapter that convinced me to try writing forward and back from this point and to try stringing together a coherent story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Skywalkers

Food Issues, A Chat on Padmé

“Good morning and welcome to Mondays in Mos Espa at the Skywalker household,” Tom said with the aplomb of a BBC radio announcer (Anakin would know, he had listened to it often enough). He never figured out how his twin still managed to have a slight British accent when he spoke any other language too—though in Basic it sounded more like a Coruscanti accent.

The blond dragged himself up from sleep with the same reluctance beside his more coherent brother.

“Urgh, don’t mention it.” He groaned, still half-asleep.

Anakin still had to adjust from having a week without Watto to suddenly experiencing the Toydarian’s interference again as well as occasionally overbearing presence. Their mother never figured out how they would always wake up so early on Mondays. The brothers knew the answer but it was certainly not one their mother would hear from them—the difference in the hot, dry and dusty air always made them sleep worse after a week of getting used to London.

“Did you count the food we got last week?” He asked.

Tom shook his head. “Haven’t. I’ll get to it and breakfast. You can get the ‘fresher first.”

If his brother was suprisingly quick to volunteer today, Anakin somehow didn’t think too much about it, as he set off. Maybe Tom wanted to practise in the kitchen a bit more, who knows?

Finding their way around the kitchen in the orphanage was unexpectedly useful in Tatooine too; it showed in the surprised expression of their mother’s face several weeks ago when she noticed what they could do. Anakin was proud while Tom nodded in acknowledgement and looked away, as usual. It was already better than his effort to hold back the urge to avoid their mother from discomfort.
He would’ve minded his own business then if he didn’t catch the momentary stillness that caught Tom, a reflexive stiffening of muscles (and emotions) that occurred before he willed them away and relaxed again. If he was someone else and they hadn’t had the bond, Anakin wouldn’t have noticed. But since he did, he wasted no time in tracking his brother to their minuscule larder.

“What’s wrong?”

“I was just counting,” Tom said.

Anakin rolled his eyes. Yes, he could clearly see the small sealed sacks of radiated grain, designed to withstand long years of transport and storage, all piled on a pallet, but that wasn’t what he was wondering about.

“That wasn’t exactly an answer.” He commented.

“There’s nothing wrong with the grain, no opened or torn packages. The other dried foodstuffs are also just as well.” His twin replied.

“Tom,” he said with as much patience he could muster. He would curse Tom’s habits of slipperiness until the heat death of the universe, but not now. He sent an adequate amount of annoyance through their bond, certain that his brother would at least get that and stop evading. “What’s wrong?”

“I might have miscounted. We’re short of at least two day’s ration from this fortnight ration of food.”

He felt like gritting his teeth. If Tom said they were short on at least two day’s ration, he would bet his backside that they’re certainly missing three days’ worth of it. Tom saw his expression and immediately waylaid it.

“It’s nothing significant, we could still cover it with what credit we’ve saved.” Tom said.

Anakin let out a gusty exhale, doing his best to dump his anger to the Force. He was never more thankful for Tom’s resourcefulness to keep their own nest egg than then. Whenever shortages like these happened, Shmi never had to find out just how bad it went. It didn’t mean it stopped him completely from wanting to rage at the creature, though.

“I can’t believe he miscounted again. That man ran a store, for sithin’ sakes! How on earth did he even keep track of his profits that way?”

There was a hand on his shoulder. Tom’s expression was as clear to him as if his brother had said everything out loud. This is exactly why I didn’t want you to count the stock. You’ll just get too pissed off and loud in my head that I’ll get a headache unless I block you out completely. I know he’s an ass. You know he’s an ass. It really doesn’t help you at all to care about him that much.

Anakin sighed and didn’t even try denying it, focusing instead on just dumping his excess emotions into the Force. Tom observed him for a while. If he was looking for something, he didn’t say what it was. It did not seem long before he was satisfied, though, and he continued as if they never stopped their conversation.

“Watto kept track of his profits alright, but I suspect that’s mostly because Mum did his bookkeeping for him. It’s clear that he didn’t count all the junk he accumulated, after all, or we wouldn’t have been able to run our side operations that successfully.” Tom said.

“Right,” Anakin scoffed.
Tom was just as deep in thought, probably calculating how much they needed to buy and which other slave families would most probably have the excess food that they can buy from. Buy from a store when one’s a slave once too often and they’d remember, and would almost always report you’re stealing from your master (because how else would a slave have too much excess credits, hmm? And why would a properly fed slave want to buy and consume other things often if it wasn’t for their greed?). Under those terms, buying foodstuffs in stores were almost always a no go.

They’d also known by now that asking for more would only make him defensive because he either thought that: a) they were trying to swindle him out of more food, or b) he was insulted that they dare accuse him of carelessness, or c) defensive at being found out for his mistakes.

Thinking too much of the pettiness of that creature always made him want to rage—it was a good thing that Tom was there most of the time to handle the Toydarian by being his charming self. For all his model employee façade, there were still times when Anakin could see glimpses of glittering coldness in his brother’s eyes—a gaze like chipped azure. He knew enough that Tom didn’t have a better opinion about Watto than him.

“I’ll do the cooking,” Anakin volunteered, but Tom had barely budged from his position.

Anakin had started his breakfast preparation for a while. If Tom was any more still, he’d probably turn into a statue right there and then, so Anakin sent him a mental poke to nudge him out of the state.

You look like you have something on your mind, Anakin said.

Don’t we always, these days? Tom remarked dryly.

You should take the ‘fresher before Mom wakes up. Anyway, what’s wrong? Anakin had given up on prying answers from Tom subtly, as he heard his twin’s step moving out of the kitchen. His patience was never going to win out to his brother’s, and neither would his skill in subtlety.

Watto. Tom said.

A mental eyeroll and the equivalent of a light shove to the shoulder. Details, Tom, details. Tell me something I don’t know.

It’s the way he keeps ‘forgetting’ to account for our food properly. Regardless of his actual motivations—that prompted several unutterable curse words from Anakin—the effect of his actions jeopardises our food security and would mean that we’d have to account for that need when we make money. On his side, if we are covering for the results of his carelessness too well, he wouldn’t suffer its consequences. He is then unaware that he’s doing something wrong. Anakin thought that he could hear a slight rise in his brother’s calm and measured tone, but that was impossible. This was Tom, after all, level-headed to the extreme that he ended as a little too flat.

We’re risking his behaviour to set into a more permanent pattern. Tom sighed. We have to do something about it, and soon before it’s too late. It would’ve been much simpler if we could just kill him.

He ignored that last sentence. That was just the way Tom was.

Anakin tried to remember if there was a time of his childhood where Watto made the same set of mistakes. Considering that he remembered being hungry pretty often when he was a child, it probably wasn’t a stretch to know that it had happened too, and only his mother’s resourcefulness ensured that they survived through it. He never thought that his love for her could grow even
more, but apparently he was wrong. He ladled some of his cooking to a smaller pot and met his mother on the way to the dining room.

“Did you just make breakfast again?” Shmi asked, her eyebrows drawn together.

Anakin gave her his most winning smile.

“Good morning, Mom.” He hugged her, to her surprise. Then he walked away without answering her question to where Tom had set the table.

Breakfast happened with the two Skywalker brothers doing their best to hold two separate conversations on the dinner table; one psychic and one verbal. They made it work with the ease of long practice, and there was barely any awkward pause or a silence that was too long as they talked with their mother while mentally mulling over the Watto issue.

On the other hand, they should’ve known better than trying to fool their mother out of all people.

Just when they stood up to leave for Watto’s shop, Shmi drew her two sons into a hug. Tom was awkwardly patting her back with one hand while Anakin gladly glomped her even if he wasn’t sure what her reason was right now.

“You boys don’t really have to try to solve every problem we have, you know? I’m still your mother.”

Tom kept his mouth shut, as most of the time he was uncertain whether he’d ever find the right words to reply to her. Anakin was doing his best to look innocent.

“But we don’t, Mom.”

She pressed her forehead against his. “No, you’re meddling right now, Anakin. You’re working on something in that head of yours, the same way it’s being worked on in your brother’s.” She pressed her forehead against a wide-eyed Tom, before she drew away, holding them at an arm’s length to meet both of their gazes.

“You’re putting your heads together and trying to come up with something from it, aren’t you?” The twins identical expression of surprise drew a smile from their mother. “I know you, Ani. I know you too, Tam. You don’t get that chatty at breakfast over nothing in particular. Something’s troubling you both.”

*I knew we made a mistake*, Tom muttered.

*Aw, shut it*, Anakin replied.

“But I’m not going to force you to tell me what it is,” Shmi said.

“You’re not?” It was Tom who failed to hold his voice this time, and Anakin didn’t bother to hide his wince at that. *Way to admit we’re actually scheming, genius.*

*Tch. You started it. You’re probably careless enough with a worried look she could read like a book.*

Their mother fortunately stopped their mental argument from devolving into toddler-level insults. Her palm was stroking their cheeks and the gaze that she held them with was tender.

“I trust both of you,” she said. It prompted a pang of guilt on Anakin’s side, and something more obfuscated and complex on Tom’s. “I trust that you know you can come to me for anything, and
that I’ll wait for as long as you’ll need to feel ready. I won’t ever force you. You know that I love you, right?”

“I love you too, Mom,” Anakin said. He hugged his mother before taking his cloak. Tom stared at his twin with some annoyance for setting the bar too high for him if he didn’t want to stand out. In the end, he sighed and gave his mother a quick one-armed hug.

“Love you, Mother.”

Somewhere on their journey to Watto’s store, the twins hashed out their plan. If the Toydarian ever got careless again with their food supply, they were going to procure food on their own, yes, but they were also going to fake symptoms of lack of energy. Not enough to significantly affect their performance, but enough to be visible. If push comes to shove, Anakin was going to pretend to faint—he had a better control of his physical reactions through the Force, and he could fake the symptoms well enough. It would cost Watto some embarrassment if any doctor was to inform him that he had been negligent, but if that was what it takes to make him stop it, they didn’t mind.

Neither brother was really all there as they spent their day at the store. It was mostly going through the motions for them. Tom was checking the customer records to see if anyone had their collection date coming up while Anakin was fixing some of the things that the customers dropped at the store as well as nicking parts here and there for the detector. Both could do their activities with only half a brain on it.

I’ve been thinking, Anakin said. Watto’s not that smart. Who knows if this problem is going to be the only one we’d face for as long as we’re under him? I don’t remember much of my time as a kid, but I do remember the many little miseries.

Tom scoffed. That’s not hard to believe.

What if we get mom to meet the man who would eventually free her and marry her now?

The bond wasn’t completely silent; Anakin could feel the vague swirl of emotions that arose as his brother processed his idea. He knew when Tom was done too. The calmness returned and his Force presence cool once more, like the waters of Naboo’s lake.

I’d say it’s a good idea except for one extenuating circumstances.

What?

Mother herself. Do you think she’d gladly go off and be freed if it meant leaving her two small children as slaves under Watto?

Anakin groaned. Of course Mom wouldn’t want to do that. She loved him—loved them—too much. He was never happier than when he realised the depths of her affection (which was why he was getting all the hugs he could get from her now without any of the usual reaction of an embarrassed kid). At the same time, it certainly made things difficult. Anakin wasn’t aware that he was working up a storm in his mind until Tom gave him a mental poke, reminding him to release his emotions to the Force.

Watto was puttering around somewhere near Tom, disagreeing with some of his opinions and purposefully belittling some of them. If he hadn’t felt the dark-haired boy continuously releasing his annoyance and sometimes even anger to the Force, he wouldn’t have guessed what Tom felt at all. His face was simply a study of childlike attention. As someone who knew what Tom was actually like, it gave Anakin goosebumps. The blond was too grateful that Watto didn’t find him
interesting enough today to bother. His temper was becoming a problem again after this morning’s
discussion about their Watto-caused issues.

*You remember what we were talking about in London, right?* Tom’s mental voice came through
their bond.

*Adoption? Yeah. You said you were going to meditate on it.*

*I was thinking that the solution might be applicable here too.* Anakin snorted at that, but Tom had
continued on. *I know that we can’t really be adopted here other than being bought. But what if it
was the Jedi Temple that bought us? Mother wouldn’t have us holding her back once we’re out of
the way.*

*We’re in the middle of nerf-ass nowhere—I don’t think any of them visited this place often.*

*What if we send them a message?*

What if indeed. The more Anakin thought about it, the more possibilities seem to be attached to
going to the Jedi Temple earlier.

*Let me think about it first,* he said to his brother through their bond. He felt Tom give him a mental
nod, and they each put up more mental shields between them for privacy.

Anakin was alone with his own thoughts before long.

*But what about Padmé?* Another voice wondered inside him.

*What about her?*

*What if she gets stranded here at the time of Naboo’s blockade and she couldn’t leave the planet
quickly enough to reach the Senate?*

He scoffed. *The Senate wasn’t going to do anything. She put in that motion because of the
unhelpful delay, remember?*

*And that motion unfortunately made Palpatine Chancellor.*

He stilled. The resulting cascade of possibilities was beginning to bother him—all this infinite
chain of whatifs made him want to rage again, jump ship to Coruscant. He could use the Dark
Side and kill the man—it would be so *easy*. So very, very *easy*. His mother wouldn’t have to
experience such trifling issues as not eating well just because she was on the mercy of a fool like
Watto. Even now he could feel the heavy surge of power that lay so close to the surface as the
Dark Side had caught on his thoughts like hunters to a wounded prey, ever circling and biddable
to his command, practically begging him to use it.

The solution to all his problems had never seemed so close. He wasn’t alone either, was he? He
had a *brother*. Tom had been a dark lord as certain as Anakin had been one too. He knew just as
well what they could do with it and what powers were at their disposal. They could certainly take
on Sidious, couldn’t they? Darts Vader and Voldemort, Emperors of the Galaxy. He felt a faint
rap at the edges of his consciousness, right at his mental shields

*Anakin?* Tom asked, curious.

He closed his eyes and dumped the whole load of anger into the Force. No. He had been Vader
once and that was enough. He wasn’t going there just to end up hurting Padmé, or the twins all
over again. *Sithspit,* had he forgotten how torn his family had been? *Never,* he thought with
vehemence. *Never again.*

He threw more into the Force and he felt his mind cleared.

Yet all these choices were real, though. They were real and they were there. It was starting to present too many possible future changes and too many ripples. Urgh, he was getting a headache from all this. Maybe he needed to calm down and consider all about it later. *Meditate first, and then decide,* said an internal voice that sounded too much like Obi-Wan. Right. Meditating certainly beats making any hasty decisions.

‘-

It was just Tom and Anakin in the store now. Watto had gone off drinking much earlier in the afternoon, and Tom had promised him to man the store as usual. Shmi was always a little concerned when Tom did this, because Anakin generally stayed with him. Sometimes Anakin went home early and enjoyed his time with his mother, but other than that he went nowhere else.

Shmi complained that her boys didn’t play nearly enough and enjoy their childhood. *Why don’t you go play with other kids?* They certainly didn’t lack neighbours who had kids. She had asked them more than once, worriedly. Tom and Anakin, on the other hand, knew they had long burnt their innocence to ashes, sometimes by atrocities they themselves chose to commit while they forged themselves with the raw power of the Dark Side. The twins gave her nothing to go on but words of assurance; that they’re fine and are capable of taking care of themselves so she needn’t worry (Tom’s preference) and that they’d be fine and that they love her (Anakin’s preference). This was also what happened on the particular afternoon.

Both could sense through the Force that there weren’t any other sentient beings in their block.

“You have something to talk about,” Tom said without preamble. Anakin nodded. He didn’t bother hiding his restlessness and he was sure it was even more obvious through their bond. The blond sighed as he leaned on the counter with his head in his hands. He didn’t know where to start.

“I figured that it had got to be bad enough if I could smell the traces of Dark Arts on you.” Tom’s tone was casual.

Anakin groaned. “Was it that obvious? I meditated a while back then and released a lot to the Force, but there might still be some left over.”

From the sound he heard, he thought it was probably Tom giving him an experimental sniff. “It’s not much so I don’t think you have to fret about it. It had been worse this afternoon. I thought I needed to distract Watto even more to prevent him from even approaching you, in case you decided to kill him.”

“I was—”

“No need to explain anything to me. Please, for the love of magic, *don’t apologise.*” Tom said over his brother’s words, a slight aversion filtering in. “I don’t care. There are bad days and then there are the worst days possible. Anything can happen.”

He looked up, into the dark blue eyes of his brother’s and was surprised to find that they were as calm as always. Tom truly was unruffled when Anakin had been inches away from plunging into the Dark Side.

“Thank you.”
Tom furrowed his brows, genuine puzzlement in his tone. “For what?”

“For…” Anakin didn’t know if there were words for it or how to explain it. Tom was still staring at him with that questioning look on his face. He finished abysmally with a helpless gesture of both hands. “…you know what…”

“No I don’t.” Tom said. “In fact, I was just sitting here. Was that flapping thing you do supposed to be a bird? You want to be a bird? Hmm, I guess there is the animagus transformation that you might want to try.”

“It’s not that. It’s—”

Anakin was about to say much more until he saw the amused smile flitting on Tom’s face and knew he’d been had.

“Sithspit, you were pulling my leg!”

“You should see the look on your face,” Tom said evenly, “It’s krethin’ hilarious.” There was more wry amusement in his tone than Anakin thought was necessary… at least until he realised that his brother probably enjoyed throwing that phrase back at him when he least expected it. He rolled his eyes at that.

“Ha ha. Very funny, Tom.”

“Unfortunately I can’t even claim all the credit,” Tom replied dryly, “Since it’s your rather sad sense of humour that I was using.”

He gave up on winning this argument when Tom was in better form than him.

“So. Do you actually want to talk about what made you draw the Dark Side so close to you, or was it something else?” Tom asked.

*Also, please dump your guilt to the Force,* he said through their bond, speaking rapidly. *You’re oozing patheticness like a drenched kitten and it’s distracting. You don’t need it and I can’t even for the life of me figure out why you have it. You didn’t do anything. All those swirls of emotions and then, Merlin’s drawers, nothing! Watching you today was one of the most boring afternoons in my life—and I include my afternoons as Voldemort in it standing around all day listening to people grovel in their own excrement.*

…and there was the brutally honest bastard they know and love, Anakin thought with an eyeroll. He was bracing as always, like being suddenly thrown outdoors on Hoth. The distance was what he needed to temper his emotions and it brought his focus back as he did exactly as recommended; he released his guilt to the Force.

“So, to begin with what we last talked about: corresponding with the Jedi Temple.”

“Such that we might get out of this bloody sand ball sooner and mother would have no reason not to get away from Watto when she can. Brilliant idea.” Tom quipped. “What about it?”

Anakin sighed. “There’s some future complications. You know how I left Tattooine, right?”

“Step one: The Queen of Naboo had a stopover due to some engine problems. Step two: Jedi Master currently guarding the queen notices the poor slave with high Force potential. Step three: Extraction.” Tom nodded with an almost bored expression, waving at him to continue. Anakin had told him the story a few times already, trying to find opportunities within it that he might have failed to see before and getting another head on the issue.
“What I haven’t detailed was the reason for the queen’s journey to Coruscant in the first place. She was trying to appeal to the senate to procure help. Her people were suffering from the blockade done by the Trade Federation.” Anakin said.

“And…?”

“Without my assistance, they wouldn’t get off the planet at the same time—only later, probably. This would delay the request for assistance made to the Galactic Senate.”

“Did they actually receive any help on that quarter?” Tom asked. From the way he raised his left eyebrow, it was clear that he could already predict the answer.

“…no.”

“What’s the fuss, then?”

“The blockade was making people starve,” his voice was quieter than before. “People were dying off.”

Tom was listening to all this with nary any emotion on his face—all that was there was a searching expression. It was clear that he was trying to find a dimension to the problem that was relevant to Anakin that he wasn’t seeing. Probably because all those dying strangers weren’t enough of a reason for him and he was tactful enough to be considerate and not mention it.

“Padmé was from Naboo, wasn’t she?” He finally asked.

“She was the reigning queen then,” Anakin said, watching as his brother’s eyes widened and stared at him so hard as if he was trying to see if there was anything else he’d missed. He felt a tad defensive. He knew he’d never deserve her. So what if she was the queen? *They loved each other.*

“What?”

“She’s the *Queen* of Naboo?”

“Naboo elect their rulers, you know. The title is—” Anakin started, trying to head off whatever it was that seemed to have hit Tom all at once.

“The *Queen* of Naboo and the Jedi *Hero* of the Clone Wars fell *in love with each other.* Morgana’s *tits* you’re a sodding fairy-tale *hero.*” Tom was staring at him in disbelief. “An actual, honest-to-goodness, *Hero of the Light* with all the crap that goes with it. The adoration of the masses! The countless followers! The people convinced you could do no *wrong.* Practically ready made, voluntary *minions* with only a little jiggling necessary to get them to follow you.”

Anakin didn’t like the distance he felt grew between them, nor the pedestal he could feel he was being placed on. It might not be a distance made of awestruck hero-worship because after all was said and done, Tom was his brother, but it was distance all the same.

“I was a hero *who fell so hard he cracked the galaxy on his way down.*” Anakin snapped. “Being the Chosen One is a big fat pile of bantha poodoo when you just want to live a normal, *happy* life with your family!”

It didn’t seem possible, but Tom’s eyes only grew wider at that.

“The Chosen One? *Bollocks.* Tell me there isn’t a prophecy?” Tom had a palm over his face. His tone was the horrific curiosity used by a passerby seeing an impending crash in front of him.

Anakin sighed. “…there is. Though now that you’re *here,* we’re pretty much throwing everyone’s
plans into a black hole, aren’t we? What would they do with two Chosen Ones?”

“The Chosen Two,” Tom corrected, “As in, ‘You’re a Hero and I am Too’.”

Anakin couldn’t help making a childish snicker at that.

“The Council is going to have a nerf.” Tom continued flatly. “A prophecy. That’s the worst joke I can imagine the galaxy to play on me. A once-dark-lord as a Chosen One? Did they feel that this place isn’t burning up fast enough?”

“Hey, two ex-dark lords here,” Anakin corrected. “They could’ve done worse. They could’ve sent two active dark lords.”

The situation was so absurd that after a while they couldn’t help but laugh. Two former dark lords set as Chosen Ones—as Tom had asked before, whose bright idea was it? The air felt a bit easier to breathe in as they considered for a moment that things could have turned out worse.

“So… the issue with the blockade is that the death toll rises with every delay made,” Anakin said after a while.

“We could try to prevent the delay that forced them to land here from occurring in the first place—ensure that the engine doesn’t malfunction,” Tom said.

Anakin stared with a look of wonder, but Tom shook his head quickly as he frowned, correcting himself. “On a second thought, forget that. I know why you didn’t think of it before—it was a stupid idea. Who would we be at that time? Two kids without the required security clearance sneaking past several layers of perimeters to a royal vehicle. That’s close to an impossible job. What if there was more than one royal vehicle? I know I’d create decoys. What if there’s more than one royal hangar? The odds just keep mounting, doesn’t it? No, it’s not a good plan.”

He paused. “Not to mention that there is no way that we can ever look good if we get caught, especially once we’ve gone quite deep. No one would believe mere children to be capable of such feats of… Anakin? Anakin? Say something. Please don’t tell me you’re actually considering it.”

Anakin was lost in thought and hadn’t reacted until he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“No, you’re right. That was a bad idea, but it made me think of close alternatives to it. If we can’t prevent the engine failure, what about being there when the engine failed?” He asked.

His dark-haired twin stared at him as if he just volunteered to be the village idiot. “That would be risking extended life in Tatooine when we know that Watto’s an incompetent sod. I thought we were trying to avoid that in the first place?”

He shook his head as a grin grew on his face instead.

“You’re going the wrong direction Tom. Forwards, not back.”

Tom paused, his mind noticing something but wasn’t quite sure what it had been. “What…”

“We leave Tatooine earlier, but we go back.”

“Of course! You could pilot a ship, or hitch a ride. No high-profile infiltration mission necessary. As long as you’re in Tatooine around the estimated time period, you could help them.”

“We could help them,” Anakin corrected. His twin only shrugged, not quite interested.
“Yes, you’re there while I tag along with you, whichever. So we plan to be students at the Jedi Temple at the time? I can’t imagine they’d let us go off lightly playing intergalactic hooky.”

“The younglings are called Initiates,” he said. “We could complete all the homeworks ahead of time, plan the package to be delivered to the Temple and explain that we’re on a personal trip until a certain date. I don’t think they’d just let us be even then, but it would’ve lessened the impact to show to them that we’re capable of long-term planning.”

“Or it might make them worry that we might be a well-trained Sith cell.” Tom said.

He rolled his eyes. “Could you not be such a downer?”

“So the plan to contact the Temple is definitely on?” His brother didn’t seem to hear his protest, but the smirk on his face said otherwise.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, as well as making sure that mom and Cliegg Lars meets. We should even do that first, because it would provide us with the motivation to look for ways to get out of Tattooine so she wouldn’t have a reason to turn his offer down. Or at least that was how it would go, if we were normal kids.”

Tom nodded in agreement. Parallel construction of motives—Anakin was starting to get too used to this poodoo. He had wondered more than once why his twin never seemed to have any headaches about it.

```
Chapter End Notes

Reaching the end of my excess chapter stock because I'm not sure I know enough about the EU. Hmm. Still not sure what to do about it.
```
Riddles - On Adoption

Chapter Summary

Going cold turkey on power is not easy. Thoughts on adoption.

Riddles

On Adoption

It was strange to wake up to the cool air that was London on Monday mornings. The air wasn’t as bothersome as Mos Espa. Something stopped it from being completely comfortable—Anakin thought the bed still felt a bit too empty. He had never said it aloud and Tom certainly never mentioned it, but he suspected that he wasn’t entirely alone in that thought. At first, Anakin’s bed had been right next to a window with Tom’s right next to it. As soon as Anakin came up with the idea of joining it, his brother had pushed their beds together without an argument or question. Just like the pallet beds in the Skywalker home.

Only without mother.

Besides, not being completely alone helped with the nightmares of the future-that-wasn’t. It helped to have a familiar Force presence nearby, especially when it was one that was similar that it was easy to attune to. Mrs. Cole had taken one look at their interior rearrangements and didn’t say a word, so he supposed it passed her inspection.

Anakin covered a yawn and a sideways glance showed that Tom was also dragging himself up from under the light blankets.

“Mornin’” Anakin muttered.

“Morn’” Tom murmured, sounding worse than Anakin. “I swear the first thing I’ll buy in Diagon Alley other than a wand is coffee.”

“Or you could make a strong cup of tea right now.” He suggested.

“Good idea.” His twin answered, but still not getting up from the bed. He’d only turned to flatten his face further into the pillow. “…maybe a bit later.”

Anakin grinned in amusement. “How much later is ‘a bit’?”

For all his ease of waking up in Tatooine, he was bad at doing so immediately on Earth. Curiously, the opposite happened with Anakin—or perhaps it was one of the last vestigial familiarity each had with their native worlds. Tom pulled his blanket over him again. “Let me correct that—much, much later.”

“So you know the bathrooms are going to be a rush if you don’t wake up now, right?”

There was an unintelligible sound of protest, or maybe defence, but he couldn’t really discern it. No further movement happened. Anakin shrugged and considered that he’d tried his best,
deciding that now he can move on without any guilt and consider his obligation to warn his brother as already served.

Tom sat on the weathered old Persian rug in the study hall with the same bleary-eyed look he had in the morning, a strong cup of tea in front of him. If there was a hidden plate of cookies under the table from the Riddle Super Secret Stash (as other kids have called it), he certainly wasn’t telling anyone.

Food was generally a free-for-all affair in places like the orphanage. If you still want to eat it later, you eat it now. Leaving it around was an invitation for it to get picked up and eaten by someone else. There’s the possibility of keeping it, but it’s not as if it was easy to figure out a good hiding place for food except for the dry sort.

When a cup of tea was known to belong to Thomas Riddle, however, people generally left it alone.

The last time anyone tried to swipe his tea was done by Billy Stubbins. He tried it in a single large gulp, and it had him choking and spitting at once. Tom had reported the incident immediately to Mrs. Cole with an almost vindictive relish, and Billy received a telling-to. It all added up perfectly for him, as he had his fill of entertainment for the day by standing behind Mrs. Cole while sending Billy well-calculated looks of complete satisfaction—it was working so much that at the end, the boy was red-faced and was prepared to jump at him if Mrs. Cole wasn’t there. After all that, Billy was charged with mopping up the mess he’d created.

The boy retaliated the best he could by telling everyone that Tom drank the bitterest tea ‘in the universe’, to Tom’s amusement and Anakin’s laughter. He’d looked so frustrated at having his revenge foiled then that Tom was sure he would cry. The boy’s face was already beginning their strange contortions towards it and the young wizard watched in fascination, a thinly-disguised grin on his face. He was still waiting for the moment’s culmination when he sensed something through the Force and followed his instinct to duck—just in time before Anakin swiped the back of his head.

“Leave the poor boy alone.”

“I was only watching him,” Tom pointed out.

“He was going to fall apart if you watched him a bit longer.”

“Whyever would he do that?” Tom asked, his voice perfectly reasonable. “It’s quite harmless. I can’t set people on fire by a glance, I assure you, and not from lack of practice.”

Anakin gave an exasperated sigh. “Tom…”

Billy Stubbins had slunk away in defeat in the ensuing light argument between Tom and Anakin, to the first twin’s disappointment. His reactions were ever so funny; every time he noticed Tom now, he’d startle easily like a cornered rabbit. Every time the darker-haired of the Riddle twins turned his gaze on him, Billy started getting twitchy. Tom might’ve taken any other opportunities to scare the boy out of his wits if Anakin hadn’t pulled him away for some reason, or came up with more interesting things to do—it turned out that his blond twin had actually noticed what he’d been doing. One day his brother gave up with the distraction ploys and went straight to the point.

“Please tell me you’ve stopped trying to find ways to terrorise Billy.” Anakin said.
“Ask no questions and you’d be told no lies,” Tom said idly. Anakin rubbed his eyes.

“Tom, we’ve been dark lords. I know what power feels like with an army at hand, as I’m sure you do too. Now please tell me that you’re not getting your replacement power trip from bullying a five-year-old?”

That snapped Tom to reality quickly. Far too quickly. He remembered all too easily the men grovelling at his feet and the dark bitter honey sting of casting Crucio on incompetent fools and the obedience that followed. Good, he’d thought. He could remember how fear and awe tasted in the air, and it was all so close. He could do a wandless Imperius with barely a second of thought, his skill in it unmatched. He would bet a hundred galleons that he was still just as good even now. He was always just one such Imperius away from getting Billy Stubbins to dance to his tune until his feet bled. All it takes was a flick of his wrist and fine control of the mind. It would all be so very, very easy…

And would you willingly pay the price again for that power, when you know now what it would cost?

He raged. He might not channel it, but just because the conflict was inside did not mean that it was invisible outside. Other children avoided his path, even many of the older ones. Many didn’t dare to even meet his gaze. Tom wasn’t paying attention to them at all as he was lost with his own demons. He had found a quiet corner of the study hall to sit in, deepening his connection to magic as he meditated.

It was not fair! The power was there for his taking. Virtually no one else could wield it as easily, or understand it so intimately like a lover’s whisper in the night. The ordinary fools needed a firm hand to guide their lives. He could do so many things with it. He could change the world in his image.

But to take that power was to allow it to pervert his own image in the first place. What kind of world would abominations carve in their image?

So much power, and yet so much of it he couldn’t even use without falling into a slow spiral of self-destruction as the monster inside him subsumed his human side completely. It was not fair. But life rarely is, the thought floated gently in his mind, we do what we must, with what we have. The whisper had been so quiet that it was hard to be sure whether it was his own or not. But it was his own alright—usually he was not so attuned with magic that he’d notice all the softer voices in his head.

Would you destroy yourself once more by doing what is easy, instead of finding your own path to power that will allow you to live a whole and unpoisoned life with it?

He took a deep breath. Realisation allowed the rage to leave. What remains now was nothing but tiredness and an almost painful knowing. The answer was always inside him all this time; he wouldn’t do it. He wanted to be self-aware more than he wanted to be the mindless monster.

Anakin had known what was happening too well and left him alone. His brother had steered clear of him, and even took pains to inform other people to stay away as well and not bother him. He left Tom to decide when he wanted to find him. When Tom finally came out looking for his twin, looking worse for wear, Anakin had casually asked him if he’d like to meditate together. That was that. There was no judgment, and no efforts to get him to talk about what had happened and Tom was too relieved to even comment on it.

It was only on the next day that Anakin asked whether Tom was alright. By then, he was more certain of the answer already.
“I will be.”

Tom exhaled slowly. He shook his head as he dispelled the memories from some weeks ago and drank his usual strong cup of tea. Billy Stubbins was still avoiding him with almost exaggerated care, sometimes peeking around corners and scanning rooms through the door for a while before deciding whether to enter or not. Tom might have found it all funny if he was paying attention like he had, but therein lays the difference. Now, he wasn’t paying attention anymore. There were other things worth his focus; like the question that Anakin had asked him some time ago. He hadn’t been prepared to give the answer then. Hopefully, he had a better answer now.

“So, what about the mundane schools?” Anakin asked him.

They were in the backyard again, doing lightsaber katas of Soresu that would help with their current height disadvantage against possible enemies, using wooden sticks found of broken brooms. Thinking of brooms reminded him of magical brooms and wands again, but that particular issue could wait for now. Tom thought he caught glimpses of kids watching them from the windows, but he ignored them.

“Adoption, not by muggles but by magicals,” he said. “At the very least we’d get more relevant education.”

He could feel his twin’s mental poke, for using the word ‘muggles’ and merely rolled his eyes. *Yes, yes, I’ll remember better next time.* Anakin had pointed out that the use of the term was derogatory, or at the very least, condescending, and he wanted them to change the habit.

“Yet you said it isn’t a solution,” The blond Riddle answered.

He took a deep breath, all while letting his movements flow from slashing to parrying and then a thrust. It was an exact mirror to Anakin’s movements. “The first is the issue of a neutral family. Since we’d end up as Heirs of Slytherin, it would be too easy for any of the families interested in political gain to leverage it. We have to find a more-or-less neutral one. As far as I’ve researched the wizarding families of Britain, many of the older families who usually refused to take sides had either died out or gone defunct through various conflicts and wars.”

“I can’t ever imagine why,” Anakin replied, his tone insolent. Tom grinned.

“Because most people in a war doesn’t like them. It’s not a permanent problem, though. We can even resurrect some by encouraging the Ministry of Magic to track the surviving issues and descendants.”

Anakin caught his tone. “Encourage?”

“Encourage, because with the way that some of the unclaimed estates are lying fallow, the Ministry gets to manage them when they’re not placed in trusts and received their income. Thus they can be… unmotivated in finding the surviving descendants. Then, the families that do manage to survive are usually powerful enough that they represent their own faction or lead one.”

Anakin continued on until the end of the particular set of movements, and Tom followed suit. He had already memorised this one, his issue was just in making sure he did the forms right. Anakin set to the side and nodded to him, signaling him to start while Anakin stayed still to help him spot any weakness in forms.

“You sound like you already have a particular family in mind.”
Tom nodded, “I do. I have… issues with it, though. I know it’s one of the best choices possible, but it still doesn’t change how I feel about it.”

“Are you going to tell me now, or would you still need some time?”

Tom stalled from answering, even as he continued to finish his movement set. Anakin waited. When the dark-haired twin was done, he met his twin’s gaze. In a move that was irregular of him, he fought the instinctive need to hide or hold back his unease.

“It’s Dumbledore.”

He knew Anakin recognised the name from the concern on his face. They settled down and walked away, the leftover stick piled in a corner to be returned to the shed later. The two of them walked on, weaving past the manual water pump and the lines of laundry hanging to dry—laundry was part of their chores yesterday, and it would also be so two days from now, but not today. For some reason their steps carried them to the kitchen again. Mrs. Swinburn grinned her crooked grin to them, and they grinned back.

“Hello boys. Back again?”

Anakin shrugged. “We need something to do with our hands.”

“Good for you. You can start with the cabbages in the corner.”

They flowed with the easy rhythm of those that had worked together for a while. Anakin set the stools in place, including the small one they’d need to step up. Tom brought them the knives first and then the vegetables. This time, he was the one who created the distraction field around them as they immersed themselves in the work again.

“I thought you said Dumbledore never liked you?” Anakin asked.

“He was the one who found me here, the first magical I remembered meeting,” he said.

His brother noted that. “Just like Qui-Gon had been the one to find me.”

He nodded. “That’s true, I suppose, though you didn’t have Qui-Gon trying to kill you, or mentoring the person he thought could do so.” Anakin cringed when he realised what he’d done, but Tom was unperturbed. “I’d still say that he wasn’t wrong in his assessment. It was not exactly an inspired choice to bring me to Hogwarts.”

Anakin focused on his vegetables, but from his expression Tom could see that he was grappling with several things at once, but he was doing his best to think everything through instead of rushing it. Unfortunately, patience wasn’t his strongest virtue. The effort he put at it was visible from the lines on his forehead.

“Why would you say that?” Anakin asked.

“Say what?”

“That you shouldn’t have gone to Hogwarts. That was what you meant, right?”

“Did you know why he doubted me?” Tom asked. “It was because he saw how I interacted with the other children. It was because he knew that I was the one who killed Billy Stubbins’ rabbit.”

“That infernal rabbit—wait, you’re saying it belonged to that Billy? The one who seemed to be stupidly looking for trouble with you repeatedly two weeks ago before you start to terrorise him
back?”

Tom chuckled. “Yes. It was only a week, Anthony, you’re counting the same week twice. It’s strange to know how fate turns, doesn’t it? Perhaps there is a connection between us after all.” His tone was more mocking than serious. Anakin listened to all that without interfering or immediately replying.

“And that’s the only issue you have with him?”

“Billy is not worth my time. I couldn’t care less about his stupid rabbit now.” he said, as if he didn’t know the question better.

Anakin glared at him. “Not Billy. Dumbledore.”

“Well, the man dogged me through my school days, but that’s hardly a cause of concern. He was annoying, but he wasn’t wrong. He was watching a potential threat to his school—if I was in his position, I would’ve neutralised the threat far sooner than Dumbledore would go with his whole wait-and-see-until-all-hell-breaks-loose approach. How hard was it to kill a kid no one would miss or mess with his life in Hogwarts, when Dumbledore was a respected professor?”

His voice was casual and light, as if he was considering what brand of tea he wanted to buy this time. Really, it was nothing personal for him—

Anakin rolled his eyes. “Tom.”

“I know it’s not a path most people would consider. It does not make it any less true, or any other path more convenient to take than to just kill the problem. His problem has always been that he’s so… idealistic.” Tom said the last word with a visible cringe that Anakin couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re hardly allergic to idealism.”

“Not for lack of trying, I assure you,” he replied with a familiar dryness. The conversation fell into a lull again as each was lost in their own thought.

“So… contact him or not?”

“Contact him.” He said. The decision wasn’t actually that difficult to make. It was the best choice available to them and he already knew that—the problem was a matter of coming to terms with it.

“But I think it’s better if we try to make some reasons and alibies too, while we’re at it.”

Anakin tapped his chin as he mused on it. “I already have one. It’s one that I’d definitely use if we ever get dragged to explain the things we do to the Jedi Council. Visions.”

“Heirs of Slytherin and Seers as well? Interesting. People are going to flock behind our banner and make us into icons. Ergo, the other kids are going to hate us… on the other hand, I can certainly get used to the hagiography again.” He said, completely flippant.

He ignored the evil eye that Anakin was sending him. What was Anakin’s problem with minions, really? It was always nice to receive adulation, especially when he knew the masses could’ve chosen to give it to someone categorically worse—Cornelius Fudge, anyone? From the annoyance that was still twinging through their bond, it was clear that his brother was not of the same opinion.

“If it becomes public. For your information, I don’t want to become a saint, or icon. I’ve had enough of that to last through several lifetimes.”
Tom nodded. “Unfortunately, Anthony, gossipworthy news almost *always* becomes public. It’s merely a matter of *when*, and whether we can manage it to our benefit when it happens, or not.”
“Yes, that’s the correct flick of the wrist, but yours is still too wide. Try making a smaller half circle.” Tom said at the desk beside the one Anakin was using. They had commandeered two desks in the study hall, and no one complained, considering the battered couches were still more comfortable to sit in than the wooden chairs.

Anakin sighed and tried the movement again with his pencil, feeling rather foolish. Tom was drafting a letter; he tried to decide whether some phrases felt natural or artificial, cast away whole paragraphs in one go and then rewriting it again. Anakin grudgingly admitted that for all that it was possible to read and use information in Tom’s mind (or the other way around) when their bond was completely open, it was still slower than properly acquiring the knowledge and using it. It was why Tom studied Huttese and Basic properly, accumulating as many text as possible in both languages while speeding the process up with an intensive level of mental connection open. It was why Anakin also agreed to study English. It was why Tom studied lightsaber forms rigorously.

It was why Tom had been prodding him to learn how to cast spells with wands. Anakin still had to fight back the urge to yell that the Force isn’t magic, as the belief was too-ingrained for him.

After one final try of Expelliarmus, Anakin slumped on the desk. “This is stupid.”

Tom spared him a glance before going back to what he was working on. Anakin was throwing his fatigue and weariness through the bond at Tom, and it seemed to have been enough for his twin to give him a mental eyeroll and let off the pressure. For now.

“I’ve been wondering about something for a while. All your world’s uses of magic are mostly wandless and directly accessing it, right? And almost nobody uses a focus?”

“We use the Force—”

“And I’ll call it magic as long as we’re on this side of the universe,” Tom said with a flourish. “I’ll call it the Force when I’m on the other side. I’m hoping you’d extend the same courtesy.”

Anakin murmured something, but as it was mostly unintelligible, even he knew who actually won the argument. Tom’s smirk told him that he was quite aware of it too. The blond sighed.

“There might be someone using it for all I know, but it’s not common knowledge or instinctive to figure out.”

“I thought so. While here, magic is almost unusable in its pure form, hence the need to use a focus
to render them practical and useful. There must certainly be a common ground that will allow us to transfer useful methods… but I’m digressing and it’s useless for me to tell you too much when you haven’t actually seen enough magic in practice.” Tom paused, seeing just how his brother’s eyes had started to glaze the farther he proceeded into his hypothesis. He wrapped it up right there.

“We’ll get back to that later once we’re in Diagon Alley and get wands as well as everything else. For now, I want to ask what you think about the final draft.”

“Of the letter? Who are you sending it to?”

“Us.” He drawled, eyes glittering at an inside joke. Anakin pressed the heel of his palm to his eye and hoped for patience. Tom better started explaining soon or he won’t be blamed if he bit him. Fortunately, his twin did as he passed his notebook over.

“It’s supposed to be from our Gaunt mother.”

“Gaunt? I thought we’re Riddles.”

“That’s her family name. Riddle is his name.” Tom said. If Anakin hadn’t known of Tom’s personal history, he would never have guessed the distaste he bore for both of his parents; his voice had been perfectly even. Anakin glanced down at the precise and well-formed cursive script on the lined paper. “Ignore my handwriting. I’ll come up with the appropriate fake one when I write the real thing.”

My Dearest Thomas and Anthony,

If this letter reaches you, then I’m afraid the worst has happened. I’ve died. I’m sorry that I couldn’t see you grow up and I’m sorry that I can’t be there with you whenever you need me. Dearest, I swear I would have if I could, but fate chose differently. I hope that you’re growing into strong and intelligent boys with your father. I wish very much that it is so. Heaven knows how much I love him, but I have to prepare for possibilities good and bad. If he is with you, stop reading here and know that I am happy to have left you in the best of hands. You remind me so much of him, Thomas, even when you’re but a baby.

If your father is dead, then I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything. I never wanted my children to be orphaned. Know that I will always be with you wherever you are. You are never alone, Thomas, Anthony. I have a brother, your uncle, and I hope that he can take care of you. If you are not with him, bring this letter to him as proof. His name is Morfin Gaunt and he lives in Little Hangleton. Please stop reading the letter here, if your father is dead.

If you do not grow up with your father and he is somehow not dead, please forgive him. He would’ve wanted to raise you if he knew the darlings you both are. We got into an argument recently and I scared him. It was getting worse after I thought I could stop feeding him his special medication, but I was wrong. It was the wrong choice. It’s a long story, but I’ll say that I regretted it. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to find him and make up from our stupid argument because I feel sick now. I’ve been so sick this entire week. You will wonder how could I scare him—a small woman like me and a tall man like him! It’s unthinkable, I know. Normally it would be true, but we are anything but normal. It is time that I will tell you of our family’s secret. We Gaunts come from a long line of wizards and witches, and yes this means that we can do magic. If you don’t believe me, try to remember when the last time you feel strong emotions, like fear or anger. Remember if anything strange had happened at that time. Strong emotions can trigger uncontrolled magic. I believe that in time you will receive an admission letter from Hogwarts too—that’s my magical school and you’ll both go there too! It’s a great place and I’m sure you’ll love it. I hope the two of
you ended in Slytherin, where our family has always been, but I’m getting carried away. You see, your father was a muggle; he’s from non-magical people. His family has never approved of our relationship. I’m sorry if this means you will never get to know your cousins and grandparents on his side. If you want to know more of your heritage and meet your family, go to Little Hangleton and find the Gaunts.

Your Loving Mother,

Merope Gaunt-Riddle

Anakin stopped reading, still trying to process everything at once. He knew the letter was a fake. He had seen Tom composing it all the time he was practising his wand movements and spell pronunciations. It still didn’t stop his mind from conjuring the image of another mother, of a desperate dark-haired woman who only wanted the best for her children who died before her time…

“Finished?” Tom asked. Anakin only nodded, still staring at the letter and not trusting himself to speak.

“It’s probably not that accurate, considering it’s only an estimate of her acumen, but I find myself untalented at dumbing down my words more than that before it starts to sound ridiculous. We’ll have to settle with her seeming more intelligent than she actually is because of this letter. I’m sure that wouldn’t be too much of a disadvantage for either of us.” Tom drawled. His voice was acquiring a mocking tone.

“Notice the happy family picture she has successfully deluded herself; it is this delusion that she hopes to pass on to her children. Special medication indeed! He was her love slave for as long as she keeps feeding him her love potion. He would have wanted to raise us? The odds of that being true is less than a snowball’s chance in hell. He’d probably want to run as far away as possible to the other side of the country from the demon spawn of the woman that had bewitched him.”

He scoffed. “And I haven’t even started on the Gaunts. Morfin was a prime example of—”

“Tom.”

Tom stopped because he could feel a hundred emotions swirling around Anakin through his bond. He waited, because he was always polite that way, and Anakin sighed as he massaged his temples. The blond still couldn’t stop thinking that Merope, for all her faults, had still loved them, but he supposed he knew where Tom’s intense dislike came from, and the dilemma was putting him on edge.

“You really hated her, don’t you?”

Tom actually smiled in amusement at that. “Whatever gave you that idea? No. I think her foolish, certainly. Insensible, stupid, delusional and an incompetent parent, as well as a host of other flaws under the known universe. I don’t actually hate her. Hate implies that she was important enough for me to care.”

Anakin raised an eyebrow. With the strength of the emotions you’ve just dumped to the Force? You could’ve fooled me.

His twin exhaled and lowered his head a little, acknowledging the truth and tried to explain it. It’s
not hate. It’s... irritation, I guess, an annoyance that I have to somehow involve her in my life again, even after she’s dead all this time. That woman is an embarrassment—I’d be happier if I can strike her name and existence from my personal records permanently.

Anakin nodded. The source of the intensity he felt was suddenly clear now.

“Still, if she’s necessary for us to convince Dumbledore of how we found out about our magical heritage, it’s an acceptable sacrifice. Not to mention it is also a useful motive to use for our trip to Diagon Alley, if the people at the orphanage are panicking over our sudden, momentary disappearance during that day,” the dark-haired twin concluded, before he smirked.

“You don’t need to worry about me at all, Ani.”

He rolled his eyes. “Who said I was worrying about you?”

_I could feel it through the bond, remember?

He didn’t say anything, but did put up a few more mental shields between them, ignoring his brother’s smirk.

“It’s a very good letter,” he finally said, because saying that one can hardly portray someone else that well unless they love them or hate them deeply would not go over well with Tom.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d be convinced of its authenticity.”

His brother nodded in satisfaction. “I thought I did well with projecting her delusion. I’d make the final version once we’ve gotten to Diagon Alley and I can find a parchment that’s appropriate, and some quill too.”

He wasn’t worried about Tom, because he could feel that Tom truly did not feel anything for Merope. What he was glad that his brother had missed was the slight pity seeping into his concern. For him, it was a sad thing to realise that Tom Riddle’s parents had failed him since he was a baby, and that he’d probably never felt what a parent’s unconditional love felt like until he was reborn as Tamlin.

“I know that she’s dead, considering that we ended up in the orphanage, but what about him?”

“Who?”

Anakin gave an annoyed sigh. He couldn’t believe that his brother was that dense. “You know who, Thomas. The man Merope Gaunt married? Our biological father? Tom Riddle, Esq.?”

“Not important.”

“What?” Anakin asked. That answer had been given a little too quickly for it to be by accident.

Tom clicked his tongue and shook his head with a slight annoyance, but decided to humour him. “He’s alive, with his muggle parents. He’s probably trying to get into another advantageous marriage right now. He was on the verge of one before Merope dosed him with her love potion. Obviously that arrangement fell apart. His parents thus felt she ruined his future.” Tom said.

“Really, he’s not that interesting… besides the fact that he’d probably be running straight to the next county, in abject fear, if we confront him as his devil spawn. It’s not interesting as a sport either; he’s not exactly an athlete.”

Anakin wisely decided not to comment on that. Some morbid sort of curiosity prompted him to
“Ask, though. Perhaps he was guided by the Force—he didn’t know.

“How did you know how they’re like? You’ve met them before?”

Tom nodded slowly. The way he was carefully staring at his twin brother gave Anakin pause since he could feel the weight of Tom’s deliberation. The lack of emotion in it was slightly unsettling, but the intense focus that he put into it implied that at the very least, he took it seriously. Tom seemed to have reached some sort of conclusion after a while.

“I did say I won’t lie to you,” Tom finally said. There was the weight of long deliberation in his answer and he knew whatever it was, it was important.

And probably unpleasant.

“I did meet them. Right before I killed them.”

And by now, Anakin knew that Tom took his opinion seriously.

The sound of children playing at some corner of the room never sounded so distant, nor as alien as it did, then. It felt unreal. Everything felt unreal except for the two of them as Anakin touched the Force deeper, more completely, willing to find more strength through it and a way to understand the man who had become his brother and had always stood by him all this time and how he was once the same person who’d gladly hunt down his biological father.

To fuel his ambition to become ruler of his known world.

He started. “That was—”

“I wasn’t a dark lord then; not yet, not exactly,” Tom said, as if trying to head off whatever defence his brother could put for him. His dark blue eyes were open, frank and unclouded with soft pleasantries, and in its depth was an endless night.

“I hadn’t made my first horcrux, and I only did so after killing my father.” It was just me, the careless way he leaned back seemed to say. The intensity in his twin’s dark eyes spoke of an old, cold and calculated dislike.

“But you were already studying the Dark Arts, then.” Anakin said. It was not a question, and the blond had already felt the truth rang in the Force as the words fell from his lips. Tom nodded.

“Of course I was. I wouldn’t know how to make a horcrux otherwise,” he was still damnably calm, as if he hadn’t just handed Anakin an active neutron bomb with his words.

Anakin nodded. He didn’t know if he had anything to say. Yes, he could feel the odd clarity in his brother’s tone, because he was truly uninvolved in the deaths he had caused, as if they were just minor loose ends that he was trying to tidy up. Yet most other people would’ve missed the momentary flash of hate that Tom didn’t even want to acknowledge, but he didn’t. Some part of Tom still blamed his biological father for a portion of the bad luck of his childhood and he probably killed Tom Riddle Sr. with relish.

But Anakin had known how unusual his brother was, hadn’t he?

He took a steadying breath. Tom had told him that he wasn’t like most people in how he felt emotions—and Anakin couldn’t believe that his brother would tell the truth without his mask of genteel behaviour if Tom didn’t trust him. Tom had trusted him to do what was right with it, even if it meant showing him the killer that always waited underneath his skin. What he said next would carry a lot of weight with his brother.
Now, if only he could figure out what in the Force that was supposed to be.

What could he say now? He who had easily believed the lie that he had killed his wife, because in his anger he was krethin’ close to doing exactly that? That he would probably have killed her if he hadn’t been interfered with? He had been a killer too, and the responsibility over many of the deaths were not always something he could easily pass on to Palpatine. Many were born purely out of his anger, sometimes at people who stood in his way, most of the time at incompetence.

Who was he to comment on another dark lord’s path to the Dark Side and pass judgment? He knew a saying that Mrs. Cole had used once that seemed appropriate: *those who lived in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.*

“You’re not saying anything?” Tom asked, curious, and still staring at him intensely.

“What am I supposed to say?” He asked back.

His brother shrugged. “I don’t know. You know, something about not killing family members as they’re supposed to love each other or questioning how I could ever do such a horrific thing. Maybe some shouts of outrage. Maybe throw in several accusations about my evil-ness with that and cast aspersions on my humanity. You know, the usual?”

“Well, there are bad days and there are worst days,” Anakin said, and he could see that his brother’s smile grew slightly wider unconsciously. “Why are we here in the first place, anyway? To talk about days long gone? No, right? So I guess if I have to say something, it would be this; would you kill them again?”

Tom furrowed his brows at that. “What? No. Why would I? I no longer think that a horcrux is worth the price.”

There was a little more that was missing. Anakin wasn’t quite sure he knew what it was exactly until he carefully felt it through the Force, asking another question.

“And you’d stay that way? You know, not killing them?” He no longer knew who he meant by them when he said it, but he didn’t care. He knew that Tom had sensed the change too, but still chose to answer.

“Who knows what the future brings? I might succeed in staying my hand, or I might fail. Both possibility exists in superposition.” Tom glibly answered. Anakin had known him better now to not be so easily baited, not when they were immersed in gentle flow of the Force. To find his answer, he would need patience and the perspective gained by a clear mind. His brother was a man of many faces and to fixate on the first one visible was carelessness.

He only waited—and was rewarded for it when Tom continued.

“This is still worth doing, whatever happens.”

*Truth*, the Force spoke to him, as it had always done, and for a fleeting moment he could see the bright blue blaze that was his brother’s presence in the Force, with the darkness lurking somewhere in the background, hoping to catch him unawares. It was familiar to Anakin, because the darkness waited on him the same way. He blinked and saw the study hall once more.
“And that is the best any of us can do.” Anakin finished. The look they exchanged each other held a weight heavier than any oath.

“See? It’s not such a big deal. You know where to find me if you need me. I’ll leave you to dispose the failed drafts of the letter. I can’t imagine that it would be a good idea for Mrs. Cole to find them.”

Tom looked down, staring at the various versions of the letter as he lost himself in thought. If his gaze was distant, it did not concern his brother. On his face now, was the faintest trace of contentment.

‘-

Chapter End Notes

So, the boys have started scheming to get out...

...or more precisely, Thomas schemes and Anthony follows (and helps with filling the details).
Diagon Alley

There is a large difference in knowing that magic exists and seeing magic.

Anakin was currently having a firsthand experience with just that. He had stopped to stare at the magical establishment hidden between the mundane ones around it. The Leaky Cauldron, its sign proclaims. How could a place hold a Force-suggestion field over it permanently? He could see it shimmer in the air, a local distortion in the normal background wash of the Force that resides in non-living things. He saw how the non-magicals, which he supposed were non-Force sensitives, bypassed the place completely. He understood that a Jedi could suggest distraction to other people, but the flow of Force in the process was clear. The Jedi channelled it to the target. But a dinky pub?

It can’t possibly be sentient enough to be channelling the Force, is it? Is it even possible that there is a way to imbue buildings with sentience through magic, through some lost arts of the Force?

“Come on, Anthony. There’s a much better things to stare at inside,” Tom had said with amusement in his voice as his twin pulled him by the elbow and stopped him from speculating even wilder.

“It’s just—argh! How does it… what keeps that distraction field there, all this time? Nobody’s constantly charging it at every hour of the day, right?”

Tom scoffed, before it shifted into a wry chuckle. “Of course not. People have more important things to do, you know.”

They avoided the people passing on the pavement, their own minor distraction field active around them. Tom pushed the doors of the place and the distinctive scent of beer-soaked old wood and some fried food hit them. Anakin found his mouth watering slightly at the prospect. The furniture here was annoyingly large at his current size, but he was getting used to that inconvenience lately. What he couldn’t wrap his head around was why the lowly lit place used candles; what was wrong with putting in some lamps? He didn’t even care if they were of the archaic heated filament kind still in vogue in this era, it would’ve been better than these. Other patrons were having a meal or two, with mundane clothes that were somehow worn… wrong.

Like pyjama bottoms and dress shirt sort of wrong.

“They sell rather good fish and chips, but we’d stand out too much as unchaperoned kids,” Tom said. “Maybe later when we’d put on a disguise. Damn, I’m not looking forward to all the years
that needs to pass until I get my height back.”

The dark-haired twin walked out at the back into an alley leading into a dead end, pulling him along. Dead grass and a bricked up wall. He stared at his brother in disbelief when Tom stopped right there. This was where they were going? Is he serious?

“We’re waiting for someone to pass. Anyone would do,” Tom explained, taking pity at his sibling’s confusion. “Because we can’t enter without a wand. Well, not without letting out a too-large magical burst, and that would catch all the wrong attention.”

“Enter where?” Anakin asked.

He seemed to have been waiting for that question because he smiled. Used to seeing Tom’s rather dry sense of humour and familiar smirks, it was unnerving to be on the receiving end of the charm he usually turned on other people.

“Why, observe, Padawan.”

“Hey, who died and made you Jedi Master?” Anakin said, earning a smirk from his brother.

“I’ve never thought about it before, because I obviously have no idea about the Force approach to magic. If you enter a deeper connection with the Force, I’m sure it would be visible.” Tom said, walking right up to the wall. “This is the entrance… but would you believe me when I say that, while your eyes are showing you something else?”

Anakin took that as a challenge and deepened his connection with the Force. It wasn’t as swift here as it had been on other planets, but he could still manage it faster than many Jedi he’d known. He entered a lighter state of meditation and saw his surroundings on a different level, the Force interlaced in the environment. He gaped and hurriedly closed his mouth.

The wall was not there.

To be more correct, it wasn’t a wall, it was… made of rectangles of bricks, certainly, but the bricks weren’t bricks. There were Force-weave all over them, inside and outside that he couldn’t quite figure out what it had been before it was… Force-affected and turned into something brick-like. He saw his brother’s form, glowing slightly nearby, dimming for a moment as he could see threads of light reaching out from him before he brightened—seems like Tom was also entering a deeper state in the Force.

Look at all this little folds in the Force threads in the bricks... so it’s a concertina, eh? Ingenious. Tom commented.

He did see the pattern in the weave, lines like the clever folds some masters could do to paper to create towers out of them, but he wasn’t quite sure what that had to do with everything. Another person then walked into the dead end, glowing a nice pale yellow in a way that non-magicals didn’t. The woman had a wand in her hand, and Anakin watched with interest as he saw the vibrant Force-glow of the object, almost as bright as the person itself. Tom stuck to his side of the alley and Anakin the other.

Be prepared to follow her before the entrance closes, Tom said.

No more questions were possible when the witch tapped a brick. Somehow, she channeled the Force through the wand to the wall. That spark of pale yellow that she sent rippled outwards among the Force-weaved bricks of the wall...

…and the bricks folded.
As they folded and pressed against each other outwards, a hole emerged. He had no better way to describe it. So that’s what the patterns were for, he thought, while closely following her from behind into what he supposed was the entrance that his brother meant. Tom kept close on her other side, stepping into the cobblestones of a busy thoroughfare. When the witch walked away, the entrance on the wall started to disappear as the bricks unfolded into their original position.

Anakin pulled himself carefully out of the deeper connection with the Force and saw his brother doing the same. He stared back at the wall behind him, now looking completely ordinary.

“That was a really nifty trick! The brick had force weaves all over it! It could change shape. It’s —”

“Magical, I know. I did live here for a while.” Tom said with the same smug smile. He was inclined to forgive his brother for now, because it was very interesting. For all that, Tom’s eyes also lit up with the same excited glee as he explained. “That was what I meant by channelling magic using focus objects—you saw how the wand looks through the magical-sight, I take it? Then, there’s imbuing an item with magical properties—that would be the bricks. I know the theory behind it but I’ve never thought I’d be able to see what the actual, magical structure would look like. It was worth every failed boring meditation you dragged me through at the beginning —”

“Hey, you owed me those instructions in getting better.” He complained. Anakin knew he wasn’t always the best teacher for meditation, because his own methods were slightly unorthodox. Tom hadn’t stopped smirking though, and to his brother’s surprise, he nodded with actual acknowledgement.

“Yes, I suppose I did, didn’t I? Thanks.”
Then, he paused and turned around to face his brother, bowing with the flourish of a natural showman. “As the prior resident of the wizarding world, allow me to welcome you to Diagon Alley.”

Then, he stood aside and stayed quiet, allowing Anakin to pay attention to the buildings around him, all the people in robes outlandish and severe going on their business and clothes that were anywhere from being several decades out of date to several centuries away. If there was anything to be said about the wizards, it was how they loved colour. They proved that by using a great number of combinations, some not entirely sane—the twins found themselves wincing at almost the same time at almost the same time at the same wizard in orange, neon green and hot pink.

“The Hogwarts uniform is nothing like that, right?” Anakin asked.

“If they were, I’ll burn them myself.” Tom said. It was a good enough answer for his brother.

The buildings around them were the opposite of the clothing; most had been earthy and grounded in colouring, but what fascinated Anakin more was how some seem to teeter at the edge of falling over. Others looked reasonable enough—provided that one was standing one’s head when staring at it. There were enough constructions that seemed to defy gravity, and not due to any feats of engineering as he had often seen in advanced planets. These buildings seem to do so by sheer willpower, stubbornness and pure fancy.

Even without being immersed so deeply in the Force, he could feel it pulse in stronger waves around him than he’d ever felt it in the orphanage or other strictly non-magical places.

“How do some of those buildings even stand up? Not to mention…”
“Like I said before,” Tom said lightly, “Magic.”

- Anakin took one look at the Gringotts goblins, took note of their features and alert shifting eyes, and moved on to follow Tom through the great marble lobby of the wizarding bank. When one has seen more than a dozen sentient space-faring species before, a new one barely earns a second glance. He noticed their martial tendencies (goblins are conservative by nature—being over-armed is always better on their books than under-armed). He saw the unease some wizards or witches demonstrate to goblins that the goblins gladly return with their sneers. He also saw their professionalism, for the guards kept to their post and maintained their alertness and other than menacing the more spoiled children, they generally ignored the visitors.

The first rule of getting things done in the universe is to act like you know what you’re doing. If you can manage that people will generally leave you alone. As Tom moved with the distracted air of someone who already gone over what he had to do too many times now and just wanted to get it done quickly, he fulfilled that requirement admirably, even if unconsciously.

The goblins at the counter were usually of a more aware sort, though, and the one Tom encountered stared at them in suspicion.

“What d’you want?” The goblin grunted at them.

“I want to see Account Officer Dammerung,” Tom said. “I need a small, routine maintenance withdrawal from the Slytherin family account.”

“Look here, kid. If y’think this is a good joke—”

“Get me Mr. Dammerung. Now.” Tom cut in. “You don’t want to force me to invoke the Contract of Service here just to prove that I can certainly access to all the rights of a Slytherin retainer, do you? It’s still a blood contract, after all. If I did so, it might be a bit… messy here.”

He stared the goblin down and then smiled widely and flashing bright teeth. After three seconds the goblin was gone in a hurry to relay the message to his superiors.

It needed to be noted that in goblin culture, to show teeth is a sign of either aggression, challenge or danger—not friendliness.

“Still wonderfully speedy service, as usual,” Tom noted with satisfaction. Anakin watched all that with interest.

“Was he supposed to run and froth at the mouth like that?” He thought he could see fear in the goblin’s face. A lot of fear. On that note, he looked as if he was running for his life.

“Oh course. Goblins always respect a display of power. It’s practically part of their culture.” Tom said.

Anakin was eyeing him doubtfully even if he hadn’t said a word about it.

- Tom had always just sat tight and gritted his teeth whenever the cart ride down the bowels of the goblin tunnels came up. The death trap had always careened too fast and too close to the rocky walls that he can’t stop thinking about how he’d be minced meat if it went off rails. Thus, he was not at all surprised that Anakin’s response to the ride was to shout and holler with glee.
“That was awesome! Can we do that again?”

“Oh, unfortunately yes.” Tom said, his tone voicing the depths of his unsaid regret. “We still have to go back up, after all.”

The taller, graver looking goblin that accompanied them had gone down first before they followed. They did not spend a long time in his office after the scared front desk goblin had called him. Tom took a knife to the tip of his finger and left a mark on a parchment and passed it on to his twin. Anakin doubtfully did the same. The parchment had recognised them to have retainer rights and responsibility over Slytherin’s inheritance. Dammerung hadn’t been satisfied then, and he still wasn’t now.

“Messieurs,” He began in front of a gigantic door. “I saw that you are admitted as retainers due to blood proximity. It is my belief that you are far closer to the main line than that. If you would activate the Proof of Inheritance—”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. Dammerung,” Tom said. “Not now. We would gladly do so later, but to do so at the present would reveal too much to people that I prefer to be kept in the dark about our comings and goings.”

The goblin nodded in acquiescence. “That is a good decision, your lordships.”

“I am not your lord,” Anakin corrected softly. It was loud enough on goblin ears, and Dammerung’s smile was as sharp as the three axes he carried.

“Not yet a lord, but I am sure it will change very soon. Or would you fault my conclusion?” He didn’t give them the time to answer as he turned around and opened the vault, for only the formally recognised heirs could’ve opened it instead of relying on goblin assistance.

Anakin gaped at the gold and riches, but what caught his eye the most were the various heirlooms and relics. Specifically, the weapons rack; many of the objects on display were not just ceremonial ones.

“Let’s take—”

“No.”

“I haven’t even said anything!”

“I know what you were going to say. Where are we going to put them?”

“You said there are spells to reduce the size of objects or make them invisible?”

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose. “Oh, now you inform me that you’re actually listening when you complain that I was boring you with my lectures?”

“Are you actually saying no?” Anakin asked, a knowing grin on his face.

Tom sighed, well aware that he wasn’t going to win when he felt a similar impulse to his brother’s to practise his swordsmanship skills better. He knew he was going to regret this later.

“We’re taking the daggers, then.”

“Just daggers?”

“Are you telling me you have the height for a sword?” A mournful silence answered him. Tom
snorted. “Yes. I thought so too.”

Two mokeskin bags, a lot of galleons, several books some heirlooms and two daggers later, the Riddle brothers left the Slytherin vault with a satisfied swagger on their steps. Anakin was still putting things into his mokeskin bag and taking them out repeatedly.

“One galleon.” He called as he reached into the bag and pulled the coin out. He placed it back in.

“Seven galleons.” He managed to grab four of them, and the bag regurgitated the remaining currency he’d called out. Anakin caught that and piled them all back in.

“Vase of Preservation,” he called. His hand felt the lips of the vase, and he gripped it before pulling it out partway. Satisfied with it, he dropped it into the bag again.

“Would you please stop that?” Tom held his wrist to stop him from trying to take something out again from it as they walked the hallways of Gringotts again, this time unchaperoned. “It works. It’s not broken—I’ve inspected it myself and you’ve checked it several times already with a hundred and one inane orders. Now tell me what in Merlin’s underwear you are looking for before I decide to take that bag away because you’re driving me nuts.”

Tom’s smile was a little too wide when he said that. Anakin blinked. Wow. To think that I can actually reach the end of his patience.

“I just can’t believe that it is what it is. It’s pretty amazing stuff, you know?”

“The bag?”

“The dimensional storage—yes, the bag.” Anakin insisted over his brother’s completely blasé attitude. “I know you can make knots of space time; that’s the principle behind the repulsor lifts. It’s not easy though, nor is it cheap. I can’t even imagine how you can begin to fold space into itself without the technology level for space travel! If the bag has enough space to store all that while appearing to be the same small size from the outside, I’m beginning to suspect that it has more than three spatial dimensions. If you’re so willing to tell me everything about the wizarding world, then tell me how they managed to make that.”

Tom opened his mouth for a second before hurriedly closing it again. “That’s… I’ve never really studied it specifically.”

“So there is something magical you don’t know about,” he retorted with a roll of his eyes.

The dark-haired twin shook his head, his gaze already lost a thousand miles away as his hands moved with the fluidity of his thoughts’ outline. “No, no. I think I get the basic principle. It certainly relied on magic, so the level of technology was never the concern here. I’ve seen some of the arithmantic area folding arrays and the application of a very localised ward that I now know to be designed to envelop it properly. Where exactly have I seen it, I wonder? I have to locate the books. Now all I have to figure out is…”

Well, that didn’t make much sense, but Anakin thought he could leave Tom up to it. If they had one thing in common it was how once they managed to get their teeth into an interesting problem, they would gnaw at it like a dog with a bone until they can take it apart. If Anakin did it more often with machines and mechanical marvels and Tom more intrigued by magical manifolds and mathematics, that was for the best. It certainly made it easier to divvy up problems between them.
The two of them stood right outside Master Wandmaker Ollivander’s store, with Tom debating the merits of it in the luxury of his own mind—he could hear the various sides and arguments Tom was going through all the way over here in his own head, even with the slight shield that usually kept. It was driving him nuts. Was Tom seriously considering not buying a wand now? Wasn’t that why they took the trouble to go all the way here, halfway across London, getting on combustion-engine era public transport and their associated smog? Anakin rolled his eyes, his arms folded in front of him.

“Come on. We’re here and we’re going to buy a wand and that’s it.” He said.

“I’m not sure whether this is a good idea,” his twin murmured.

“Why not? It’s easier practising magic with a wand rather than a pencil. I know I’d feel less like an idiot.”

Tom still had a hand on his chin. “Maybe we’re supposed to buy it with our magical guardians. I’ve never really heard of anyone who bought their own wands themselves. Ollivander also has a long memory and acceptable observation skills. Do you know that every single magical on Britain has to have passed through his shop? And he remembers all the wands he’d sold to each and every one of them. I can’t imagine what he’d tell Dumbledore of this encounter if we did buy a wand now—”

“Wouldn’t he have some customer confidentiality agreement? Considering how crucial his job is, I thought someone would’ve offed him long before now if he was such a blabbermouth.”

Tom took this into account. “Good point. I think I did that, but to remove a wandmaker also has the strategic importance of restricting weapons supply. I wonder…”

The blond decided that if his brother wasn’t going to make up his mind anytime soon, then he will. He took hold of Tom’s arm and started dragging him forward, pushing the door open using the other hand. His prompt sneak attack had successfully brought them inside the shop. By the time Tom had succeeded in slipping out of his grasp, the dun-coloured, ageless appearance of Ollivander had already emerged in front of them as if he had been waiting a long time already. Curiosity shone in his eyes.

“Have you two lost your way?” He asked them. Anakin shook his head.

“No. We need wands. Uh, Mr. Ollivander, Sir.”

“A little young to get one, aren’t you?” He chuckled when he saw the fire in Anakin’s eyes and the annoyance in Tom’s. “Do you know why wizards and witches don’t usually get their wand until right before entering Hogwarts? Because their magical cores aren’t usually well-developed until a year or so before that, and sometimes earlier. A wand matched now might no longer fit you well years after.”

“Oh, it would fit us permanently, Master Ollivander. I can guarantee you on that front.” Tom said with a grim smile.

“Ah, the wonderful confidence of youth.” Ollivander sounded more amused than annoyed.

If Anakin hadn’t felt the edges of his discomfort brush across his own shields, he wouldn’t have known Tom was more than a little tetchy. Images of a destroyed Ollivander’s store went past his mind, sometimes superimposed on the present. Dissonance, Anakin thought, and he gripped his brother’s wrist without a second thought.
Two measuring tape flew out from behind a counter, floating in the air and almost taking Anakin by surprise. He really needed to get used to the idea of being in a Force-using population right now.

“Extend your wand arm, please.”

“He’s just taking our measurements for the wands, to make it easier to locate a match.” Tom said.

“Yes. Wandlore is an exacting art, young masters. It seems that your education has been sufficient for muggleborns. Who are your guardians?” He asked. Anakin had just batted the tape away after getting too close in measuring the width of his nostrils and he sneezed. How on earth does that have anything to do with the wand he’d use? He couldn’t have been measuring nose hair…

“We’re orphans. Anthony and Thomas Riddle,” Anakin said. “We don’t know our parents.”

“So you might not be muggleborns at all,” Ollivander noted.

“Mum said she’s a witch in a letter she left for us before, before she died.” Tom added quickly.

From the calculating look in his eyes, it was clear that he’d decided to start building their alibi for magical knowledge there and then. Anakin gave an approving nod to Tom. Smooth, he thought.

Why, thank you.

“What’s her name?”


“Ah, little Merope… eleven and a quarter inch ebony, swishy, with thestral hair core. Unusual core and unusual combination, suited for delicacy and precise work even if not built for power.” He sighed. “I’m sorry to hear your loss, boys. I’m afraid I can’t do anything about how death seems to follow her. One can already see the pall it casts even then.”

There was a solemn silence between the dust motes dancing in the afternoon light. Anakin stared at the wizened old man with uncertainty, while Tom did it with speculation. Ollivander smiled.

“Forgive an old man his ramblings, the past won’t be going anywhere for a while now, will it? There is always something to do in the present. You two, for one, hmmm… it seems that you’re correct after all, Master Thomas. Your magical cores have matured indeed. Surprisingly so.” Ollivander had reached his shelves already somehow, long, thin boxes piled on his arms. When he turned to them, there was a strange twinkle in his eyes. “And neither of you will let even death slow you down, would you? No, no you wouldn’t. I’ve only probed a little and I could already feel your power. It would be an interesting year in Hogwarts indeed when the two of you come around.”

The twins exchanged glances of alarm and speculation at that observation. Just what did the old man noticed?

“Could you please keep that to yourself?” Anakin asked. “We don’t know much about how the wizarding world is like. I don’t want to stand out too much.”

Fortunately for them, he looked only the slightest bit offended.

“Of course. I don’t rat out my customers. Your secrets are safe with me.” He started to create two piles of boxes on the counter. “Here, give these a try. Master Anthony’s pile is the left one while
Master Thomas is the right one."

Anakin’s eyebrows rose up. “A try?”

“Just give it a wave and a swish,” Tom said. His brother was staring at him with a sceptical look.

“How do I know I’ve gotten the right one?”

Ollivander had opened boxes and started shoving wands at them. “You will.”

“Not exactly inspiring a vote of confidence, there.” Anakin muttered.

Tom picked one, waved it with no reaction, stuffed it back into its box and had moved on to the next one already. The dark-haired twin had conjured pigeons flying out of a sprightly, light-coloured wand, and they all ducked as the birds made their escape. Anakin waved his first with feelings of uncertainty, and a bouquet of lilies popped up on one end.

“No, that’s not exactly a good fit,” Ollivander had muttered. “Try the next one.”

After being blown a little by an indoor wind, a fire that nearly caught a counter, three explosions and arc of electricity and two frozen counters later, the two of them were nearly ready to call it a day. This wasn’t counting the less dangerous reactions that by now have generated several bunches of flowers, herbs and grasses on the desk and some songbirds and a hen. The pile of wand boxes only grew higher.

“Does it always take this long?” Anakin asked, after cursing indistinctly in Huttese. What he didn’t mention was, was it always this unstable? Tom was already too annoyed as well to remind him to keep the languages of the different universes separate.

Ollivander was frowning. He’d gone away somewhere and reappeared in front of them with a pair of boxes. There were several more that he’d set aside for now. “No. No it shouldn’t, but perhaps it’s my fault. I should’ve seen something different about your magical cores before… here, try these at the same time.”

“What’s this?” Tom asked. He reached for his at the same time Anakin did and waved it. Golden light spilled from both their wands. It spread through both of them as their hands jerked to line their wands with each other’s. A fragment of a haunting bird song filled the air, speaking of journeys taken and heroics done. A yellow thread seems to bind them from the tip of one wand to the other. Disappointingly, there didn’t seem to be anything more.

“Holly, eleven inches, phoenix feather core,” Ollivander said, pointing to the one Anakin was using. “Thirteen and a half inches of yew with phoenix feather. Brother wands, made from the same core. I’d thought I’d have the winning combination for sure, but it seems that I’m mistaken.”

Anakin could feel Tom’s urge to laugh bubbling under the surface, the reaction almost as visible in the small shake of his shoulders. It was not an entirely pleasant sound, something sharper lurked beneath it.

*What happened?*

*This was my old wand,* he’d said. *And the one you’re holding was Harry’s. Interesting to know that Harry and I were given brother wands even as one of us were fated to kill the other, isn’t it?*

That snapped Anakin’s attention. Tom was still too placid for his liking.

*You’re not the same anymore,* Anakin decided. *If the wand matches the user, then it’s hardly a
A small nod was the only reaction he received from his dark-haired twin. Tom’s expression was less like cut glass and Anakin’s shoulders’ dropped down slightly. He hadn’t even noticed he’d tensed.

Ollivander was caught up in the fervour that is wand matchmaking to pay attention to them. Their wands had been snatched out of their hands already. He gave them both long appraising looks before musing to himself as he rush back and then returned with boxes that was at least from the last century, judging by the layer of dust alone. “I should’ve known, really…something from the old country should do the trick.”

“Now, try these.”

Anakin and Tom picked the wands up, and met each other’s gaze. They waved and flicked it to some unsaid signal at the same time.

Anakin could feel the Force ripple around the two of them from that simple act, and Tom’s surprised expression told him that he was feeling much the same thing. The Force wave did not spread out, it spiraled, circled around them, and as the two of them turned around they saw flickers in the store in the wave’s several fronts. When one went through the counter, he could see two steaming teacups there, but as the wave passed, there were none. In one front, chairs were set out for guests, and it disappeared again as it passed. In another, Ollivander was talking to a wizarding couple and child. In a different one, Anakin and Tom found their matches in Tom and Harry’s old wand and were walking out of the shop already as they’d made their purchase. Anakin’s eyes widened.

“These are—”

“—possibilities. All the probable futures.” Tom finished, his voice quiet and awed.

The glimpses of the changes that happened were more and more different as the wave widened, the images increasingly faded as the wave left them. There was one where the place was wallpapered in mauve for some reason. Ollivander blinked, his hands still clasped in front of him as he carefully looked down and took note of everything. For some reasons he seemed intent to make sure that his limbs was still attached.

“Well. That doesn’t happen often in my lifetime. It certainly hadn’t happened in the last century.”

Just how old is this guy? Anakin wondered aloud in his head. Tom sent him a mental shrug.

Even I don’t know.

“It seems that you have both found your wand, young Masters. Holly, twelve and three quarter inches and yew, thirteen and a quarter inches. Both have phoenix feathers for their core from the same phoenix. Your elemental affinities are just as I expected to, along with the fact that they’re brother wands.”

Tom recovered himself first. “Between those two sets of wand… what’s the bloody, magic forsaken difference?”

Ollivander chuckled. “I’m glad you asked. The phoenix was different, of course—the core for these is from the Scherezade of Araby. It took a while to reach her when one sets off from Suntown. She’s mite strange and others would just plain state her as off her rockers. I’d stopped using her feathers as core two centuries ago because most of the wands have never found owners! Do you know why phoenixes the creatures closest to Merlin himself?”
“No.” Anakin said, before Tom had the urge to disagree on the finer point of scholarly trivia or, heaven help them, ask for more details.

“They’re the only ones who could choose how they traverse time. Us ordinary folks can only go one way. I’ve had more than my shares of years, but it still doesn’t change that fact. Phoenixes, though, can choose which direction they travel for each life. Many are content with following us more mundane people.” He paused, rubbing his hand together as his eyes locked on to some unseen and distant vistas. “A few, for reasons of their own, go through their lives entirely backwards—they have memories of the future instead of the past along with other differences.”

He turned to them, amusement in his expression.

“Rarer still are those that can go back and forth on their whim within a single life. After all this time, I’ve met only one. You are now the proud owners of her essences.”

The wandmaker was entirely too proud over something so baffling. Anakin also knew the knowing look Ollivander sent them both was making Tom entirely too jittery and paranoid, and it was starting to bother him as well through their bond. He had to give the mental equivalent to an elbow to the ribs to shake his brother. Tom cleared his throat.

“Thank you. We’ll be taking the wands, then, Master Ollivander.”

“Of course. I wish you success on your endeavours and may your great deeds be many, Lords Slytherin.” He said with a full formal bow at them.

Tom probably made the land speed records at the haste he pulled galleons out of his mokeskin bag and placed it on the counter. Both Tom and Anakin found that they couldn’t get out of the wand store fast enough.

“Sithin’ creepiest old man I’ve ever met. If I don’t meet him again in this life, it would still be too soon.” Anakin muttered as they hurried to their next destination.

“I second that.”

- -

Chapter End Notes

This is really the last coherent chapter I’ve written so far. Trying to poke the rest of the ideas to congeal into something more solid.
Riddles - Diagon Alley II

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

To Kainee: Thanks for all the conversation! No, seriously, it gets ideas flowing again when I have none, or gets me off my bum when I can't find the power to do so. Your comments are real-life proof that reviews do affect writing speed.

I managed a rather long chapter this time, people. Probably because of all the historical accuracy I can't stop myself from inserting. Look, we have a real date, people! As you read, it would become clear that this is sometime in March 1933.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Diagon Alley II

Tom marched forward like a man on a mission. Anakin had to put some effort into following him because many things caught his attention; there were fireworks whose sparkles did not dim or fade during the day, for one, the seller casually lighting a few and let them burst above his head. He had paused at a small cart that seemed to sell small trinkets and jewellery. Nothing fancy, but some were just the right combination of elegant simplicity that he thought Padme would like. Or maybe it was that kind old lady with the flower cart, encouraging him to pause and take a whiff of what spring had to offer, flowers yellow and gay. He reached out at the blossoms with a light heart, the wand holster on his arm an unexpected and new weight.

He’d thought of giving some to Mrs. Cole – he’d bet ten to one that she didn’t have any family of her own, considering the hours and dedication she gave to the orphanage. But as much as he liked daffodils, weren’t they too common still?

“Anthony!”

Anakin turned around and found that his twin was easily three storefronts away. He stepped away with a sigh.

“What’s the rush, Thomas?”

Tom strode back in no time, not waiting for him to catch up. “Too many places to visit. There’s the bookstore, obviously, and I’d want to catch up with some news, but I think it’s better if we get some clothes first.”

“Clothes?”
“We look like muggles,” he said flatly. “Poor muggles, at that.”

“Non-magicals,” Anakin insisted. His twin waved it away.

“No matter how unnoticeable most small children are, I’d rather not take the risk.”

Anakin shoved his hands in his pocket and settled for following his brother for now. It was a lot more annoying to wait for him to get out of a strop than to prevent it in the first place. “Maybe you need to talk more like other kids too. You always sound too fancy.”

That earned him a snort. “And sound like an idiot? Never.” Anakin rolled his eyes.

And without a word, Tom marched off again...

...to buy some ice cream. And then he marched back, and before Anakin could express his surprise or even ask why, he had bitten off a good chunk out of it and slammed the cone on Anakin’s shirt. Ice cream side first.

Anakin hissed in surprise at the sudden chill on his shirtfront. “What the bloody hell?”

“Here, have the strawberry one.” Tom handed another cone over to him with aplomb. “I suggest that you eat that for a bit before you put it on my shirt. It’s a waste to use all of it without enjoying it at all.”

He narrowed his eyes at his brother’s complacent expression. No explanations, as usual. One of these days, he’d find a way to get him back for that habit or break him out of it, but that day was probably not today. He calmly licked at his ice cream as if that had been his plan from the beginning.

It didn’t mean he wasn’t going to go for payback, though.

“You’re right, this is nice.” He picked the chunks still on his shirt and ate it. The best part of being a kid was the ability to eat like a slob and barely anyone would notice.

“I think I like this brown thing better, though.”

“That’s chocolate,” Tom clarified, obviously holding back a twitch. Anakin licked his ice as if he had no other concerns or even noticed his brother trying not to start brushing off the remaining ice cream from his shirt. Tom’s brows furrowed, his hands twitching at his side.

“Anthony.”

“Yes?”

“The ice cream—”

“It’s delicious, thanks.”

“Put it on my shirt.” He insisted. Anakin made a show of staring at the ice cream and then Tom’s shirt, before he shook his head.

“I don’t know. I think I agree with what you said. It’s such a waste to not enjoy it, isn’t it? You didn’t even explain why I need to do that.”

His brother gave him a look of disdain so cold that any other kid would have frozen in place. Against him, however, he could still shrug it off easily and kept walking at the same pace they had before. Now, they were even at the ice cream place he’d dropped in at. Anakin glanced up at the
sign. It was made of wood and carved, and was probably as ancient as it looks. *Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour.*

“Look, we need to look dirty.”

He turned his attention on his brother once more and Anakin thought he could see the tension in Tom’s jaw.

“For?”

“Clothes. It’s not as if kids go off and buy clothes all on their own without adult supervision—not as if most would enjoy it either like a toy store. It’s our excuse. The shopkeeper wouldn’t be looking too closely at what we’re wearing if it’s dirty.” Tom said all this rapidly, as if he was racing against his annoyance to explain. Anakin was more interested in the dirty plates left on the tables outside of the ice cream parlour, no waiters have gotten around to them yet.

Anakin shook his head with a disappointed look. “You could’ve said that before.”

“I would’ve been done if you would just do it.”

“I don’t do things without an explanation.” With that, he casually dropped his left palm into an empty plate with lots of gravy, and proceeded to wipe that on his brother’s always-perfect hair. He knew just how much more careful Tom was with his appearance compared to Anakin, and that he actually combed his hair without prompting from their minders. That was also why he targeted Tom’s shiny black hair.

Tom looked murderous.

The blond grinned and finished wiping his hand on Tom’s shirtfront, making sure the hand print was wide. “And I can have all my ice cream to eat. No waste! A much better idea, right?”

Before he’d even finished speaking, his brother had climbed over a chair, taken a bowl of abandoned sundae from the table and dumped it on his head.

Anakin’s laughter rang in the clear morning, even as he dumped what remains of his ice cream down his brother’s collar.

Curses in English and Latin followed him as he ran.

’-

They ended up chasing each other on the streets and using any ammunition they could get their hands on. First were the leftovers in the ice cream parlour, but they had swiftly moved away before any waiters came out or anyone took a good look at them. It wouldn’t do to make people remember them, after all. Anakin had started for a side-alley more than once to find a puddle deep enough for him to kick mud at Tom, splattering his shorts. His brother picked that trick up quickly to pay him back and multiplied it by throwing dirt for good measure. Shocked ladies and outraged matrons followed them, with not a few reprimands by a wizard or two, but they ducked away from it all.

When Tom slipped into a clothing store, Anakin followed hot on his heels.

“And what do we have here?”

The snapping tone was enough to stop Anakin in his tracks. Tom had stopped much earlier, head tilted up at the middle-aged woman barring their way, expression not at all amused. Anakin
couldn’t even stop the slight guilt from surfacing within him, too used to hearing Mrs. Cole use that tone against them as he scrambled for an explanation.

“Um, we were just...”

“We need new clothes.” Tom rushed. “Because we have to meet Grand Aunt Livia. Not that we really want to, oh no, we just have to, no matter what. So I thought me ‘n Anthony here could look disresp—unrespec—dirty. We could look dirty and nasty and so we can’t meet Grand Aunt Livia like that, can we? But nooooooooooo. She just pulled our ears and scolded us to heck and back and said we could buy some change. Because she said we’d need wizarding clothes anyway. So she sent us away while she plays nice with our b—boring Grand Aunt.”

“That’s not a nice thing of you to say about your Grand Aunt,” the lady gave them a disapproving look. Anakin was generally immune to them as he put on his best expression of innocence.

“You can say that because you haven’t spent an afternoon with her.”

Tom shuddered, as if trying to remove the memory of a strict society matron that would force them to be on their best manners for the entire afternoon. As annoyed as he was, Anakin had to admit that Tom’s ability to make a story on the spot was incredible. He suddenly saw what they would be trying to sell.

“Are you going to throw us out?” Anakin asked. He didn’t even have to pretend to look hopeful, because running around like crazed womp rats had been more fun than he thought it would be. Even when Tom started playing dirty and tripped him more than once. He’d dragged his brother down with him when he fell on more than one occasion.

Even when they probably have more scratches now than even from their sparring sessions.

“I mean, we’d have to tell that we’d get thrown out, but then we won’t have new clothes.” Anakin said.

“And we won’t meet Aunt Livia.” Tom finished with relish.

The witch stared down what must have looked like two raggedy scamps on her front door. “I think...I think I will ensure that you look respectable enough to make up to your mother.”

It took some sleight of hand to hide their wands, but that was nothing beyond the ability of either Tom or Anakin. What was a little beyond their ability was to outmanoeuvre the stern and too-helpful owner of Madam Malkin’s from putting them into dress robes, along with her insistence that they either choose to take a bath on their own or she’d bathe them. The only concession Tom managed to get out of her was to get a few normal day robes as well, because they’ve been ‘growing so fast’ and all. It took a bit more customisation to get clothes that could adjust in size, clothes they wouldn’t need to change for the next two or three years, but beyond that it was too expensive to be worth it.

Anakin was far from comfortable with the pomp he was dressed in, even as Tom moved with the grace of one born into it. The Jedi had robes, sure, but they sure didn’t have this much lace trim either—he couldn’t see his wrist from all the froth. Even the coat had lace. They looked like some Coruscant nobs, for goodness’ sakes, not even mere senators.

“Don’t tell me we’re going to be wearing this all the way home,” Anakin muttered under his breath, trying to loosen his necktie (he could almost hear Tom’s voice correcting him in his head “it’s a cravat, Anthony”). How his brother could stand getting his neck wrapped and covered like
that, he had no idea.

Tom shook his head. “Of course not. We can change later. But it’s pretty convenient to blend-in this way. We look like a couple of pureblood kids out on a stroll.”

The dark-haired twin had picked up a newspaper left on a bench and tucked it under his arm. His pace had picked up again and Anakin had no problem keeping up. The first store he entered had an odd, almost unnoticeable curve to its front and window, its sign proudly proclaiming it to be *Scribbulus’ Writing Instruments*. The more he stared at it, the more it seemed that the walls were straight and normal, but eh, what did he know of this strange place?

He hadn’t even taken a step into the store before his brother came out again, a pile of scrolls at hand and more that he’d stuffed into his weird bag of the folded dimensions. And wait, were those *feathers*? Why on earth are they buying *feathers*?

“Right. That’s done. So, what do you think of having lunch?”

“Lunch sounds like a good idea.”

“Great. I can finish the letter while we eat.” Tom said.

That made Anakin slow down. So, Tom would be finishing the fake letter from their dead mother now. He knew it was foolish, but for some reason he couldn’t help wondering what their father was doing. Did he ever think about his children, at least, even if he didn’t care about the woman who forced him into a marriage he didn’t want? From the way Tom had talked of him, his brother was convinced the man was a coward and a fool.

It didn’t stop him from wondering about the man.

-.

Tom’s wand had almost started the beginning movements of apparition, he shook his head and stopped himself. The odds that the current him could apparate himself and his brother was not good. That was when he changed direction and headed for Diagon Alley’s Floo Terminal.

“Where are we going?”

“The Floo Terminal,” Tom answered.

“Is that where everyone goes to catch a cold?”

Tom turned at the lunacy in the question before he caught the sarcastic look on Anakin’s face. Tom tilted his head to the side as he thought. If he’d said *fireplaces*, Anakin was just going to keep staring at him as if he was nuts and demand more explanation. And the next one wouldn’t have explained it enough for him—there’d be more. And *more*.

“It’s...the hub of a...transportation system.” Tom finally replied.

“The pauses in your sentences are giving me *questions*.”

“I’ve never tried explaining it to someone who hadn’t grown up in the wizarding world before.” Then, he continued to mutter under his breath. “We’re going to need lots and *lots* of books. Look, it’s faster if you just come along and see how it works, alright? Time’s a-wasting.”

That seemed to settle Anakin for a while as Tom made quick work of their progress, cutting paths through side-alleys and even going through a rather sleepy store once and came out through the
back. Even after the years and through his death, he hadn’t realised that he could still navigate through Diagon Alley with his eyes closed. It was almost like a limb he had suddenly regained, 

*hello there old hand, there are uses for you that I miss having.*

A building grew into view, curling upward in the lazy way that whipped creams and ice creams does, as colourful as a dome of St. Basil’s Cathedral in the Red Square. Where an ice cream may have one biscuit stick on it, it was dotted with innumerable ones, with the ones at the base being stout and unimaginative and getting taller and fancier as following its spiral up. These, as could be expected, were chimneys. Generally, green smoke curled up.

“Ah, there it is. The Floo Terminal.”

“There’s no landing zones or runaways,” Anakin pointed out, still gaping at the improbably-shaped building.

“No extensive, large-scale travel by air yet, remember?” Tom replied with only half a mind. He was trying to remember where the short-distance fireplaces were, hoping his memory still served him. The larger chimneys are certainly for hopping across the Channel, or maybe across the North Sea and into Norway.

“I’ve been reading about trains and *there are no rails there.*”

“This isn’t the train station.” Tom replied, weaving through the crowd.

He preferred to side-step anyone who blundered enough to be unaware of them, but he wasn’t above occasionally shoving people either with nary a blink (really, it’s surprising how far a six-year old can shove given the lack of concern of whether it was right or wrong). Anakin gave an awkward apology twice to confused people before he caught up to Tom. The blond pulled him aside just before he was about to shove another wizard.

“Sheesh, save your energy. We’re not going to get there that much faster, and it certainly takes effort to go against adults, right?”

Tom blinked. “Ah, you’re right. Let’s move a bit to the side.”

“And I thought you were trying to keep a low profile.”

“Yes, thanks for the reminder.”

The gothic-revival archways in front of the building kept a steady flow of people coming and going from it. Anakin was obsessively noting the building architecture, probably trying to find some sort of garage.

Which he definitely will not find, Tom thought.

“There’s no multiple gates out of this place either,” Anakin said again, his voice strangely calm even if he was rapidly turning his head this way and that. “The only reason I’m not worried that maybe we’re walking into a giant oven that cooks people is because a lot of people are also heading out from it.”

That pulled Tom out of his head. His amused smile was replied with a demanding *look* from Anakin’s side.

“I guarantee you that we’re not Hansel and Gretel, walking headlong into a trap.”

“A line of ovens would explain the chimneys.” Anakin was as stubborn as they came.
“Well, we are looking for a fireplace to jump into.” His reply was too flippant that Anakin took a second look at him, clearly wondering if his brother had suddenly been replaced by doppelgänger. Tom rolled his eyes at the rapid steps back Anakin just took.

“No, I’m not suicidal, stop looking at me like that. We’re not going to die. This is magic, remember? Nothing is what it seems.”

“There’s ‘nothing is what it seems’ and there’s ‘no rhyme or reason at all’.” Anakin groused. “Guess which one is the wizarding world?”

He didn’t stop himself from chuckling. “Relax. We’ll be fine.”

“I’m not relaxing until I see you jump into the flame and not die.”

Tom nodded. “Fair enough. Let’s buy some Floo powder from the counter over…there, and then we can move on.”

Since he wasn’t an actual kid, Anakin could rein in his panic and just wander around and gather more information to settle his nerves while Tom went to get some Floo powder. A freckled teenager in livery and a perpetually bored look greeted him promptly.

“How much would you need, Young Master?”

“There’s me and my brother, say…thirty trips for two people.”

“Right-o.”

The respectful address made him blink, at least until Tom realised how he was dressed. He and Anakin was as smoothly dressed as any pureblood child. He pulled out seven galleons and waited for his change and bag of powder.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

“Have a safe trip.” The staff nodded at him and he nodded back. As he turned, the young man behind him greeted him with a casual nod before moving forward himself, and Tom found himself returning the greeting automatically without thought.

It was slightly surreal. Tom hadn’t realised that he’d gotten too used to wearing hand-me-downs from the orphanage, the clothes he had never quite fitting and his presence along with Anakin’s always easily ignored by most adults. Now, people’s glance actually stayed at him for more than one or two second, probably as they try to decide whether he was someone they knew or not (which would make them try to locate the responsible adult to catch up with some news if he was someone they knew).

It was a different sort of inconvenience.

As he walked onwards to find whichever chimney Anakin had gone off to observe (and hopefully also amuse) himself, he saw people with scruffier clothes mindfully taking themselves off his path. Mothers occasionally glance at him, sometimes at the same time that they are scolding their unruly offspring – he supposed it was either because they were running around like hellions or they had atrocious posture, because his was always perfect. Tom never really noticed the confidence that existed in his walk, but it had never mattered much when he was wearing second-hand clothes.
Now, with the velvet of his robe, his fine clothes and shiny shoes, he suddenly ceased to be invisible.

*Hmm. Isn’t that interesting?* He mused.

There is an opportunity now to fulfil one of the childish wishes he still remembered when he was but an orphan, ignored and unwanted. Even when he had gone to Hogwarts he had not the name of some great house to back him, nor any relation he can mention. Doors were closed to him, paths unavailable until he forged his own with power and blood (*let’s see them try to ignore this*) and forced them to pay attention.

Now, he could go somewhere fancy, like *Le Magicien Royal*, for one, and have the maître d' receive the two of them and seat them in the private and discreet restaurant as was their due. He could even watch as entertainment the occasional desperate and pathetic wizards (and witches) trying to beg, con or finagle their way in. He could watch them get turned away, or worse, kicked out. Even the discreet blood-and-magic test at the door would have allowed him in – Slytherin’s line will out, after all, even if the testers will never have any idea which family line had allowed him entrance. He could even avail himself to Donne’s legendary library on the upper floors, which was not surprising considering the club/ establishment used to be his house. Checking out that library was something he hadn’t thought about even in his previous life. *Hmm, more things to do this time, then.*

Now, Tom can easily slip among the select few and no one will realise that a mere boy or two from a muggle orphanage had found their way there.

The child that he was, young Tom Riddle, would have thought it was the greatest lark he could pull.

But he was Thomas Gaunt Riddle (Slytherin) and on his second trip through life. The complicated social dance of privilege and domination was one he’d gone through once and can easily go through again while daydreaming through two transfiguration problems.

Thus, the oddest feeling had just crossed his mind.

He wasn’t interested at all in visiting the better eating places in the wizarding world, or even the best eating place. He had been in many of them as a young man, in his other life. He could close his eyes right now and predict what he would see there. Wizards and witches, how outdated their clothes are compared to the muggle world subtly marked their age more than their physical appearance would. Most would be eating with their friends and families. More than half would be complaining about the Minister of Magic—but then, there would always be someone complaining about the Minister of Magic, whoever he or she was. There will certainly be conversation from members of the greater families of the Sacred 28 about where they’d spend their summer holidays at. The Blacks have their holiday home on the shore of the Caspian Sea, considering that they are always tightly-knit with the Russian Blacks (Чёрныйёв/Чёрныйёва) while the Malfoys will always have their Normandy estate from the time before they crossed over beside William the Conqueror. Many members of the smaller families, on the other hand, are often desperately going to the trendiest places, the cutting edge of holiday travel to beat each other out even as they realise that they can never be at the top.

For some reason seeing all of it play out again on the same stage was no longer so compelling. He was a disappointed theatre-goer whose feet was itching to run. He’d rather lose his money for the ticket than waste one more second seeing the clichés roll.

To just cut himself out from the old song-and-dance.
He was…bored.

The realisation was so strange that he turned it in his mind several times, slightly worried. He still wanted to be in the wizarding world, right? And be at the very top? Right. That settled his worries completely. Yet the feeling of listlessness at going to any of his old haunts remained still. He tried to see it from different angles, tried to find the root cause and he was so intent on backtracking through his own thoughts that he had unconsciously started slipping into a half-meditative state. Slowly, he lost track of time.

“Thomas,”

Thomas pulled himself out of his own mind and turned around. His twin had popped up out of nowhere.

“Ah, Anthony. Back so soon?”

“I got bored waiting for you.” Anthony replied, unknowingly mirroring his brother’s thoughts right then. “I followed a few people to some fireplaces and see them disappear. Then, I get to see more people coming from the fires, as crazy as that sounds. It just keeps happening everywhere, every fireplace I saw. People go into the green fires. People go out. So yeah. I think I got the hang of this. I’ve gone to even the farther, the ones with the larger chimneys and even ones where I swear you can spit roast a whole bantha in. It’s still more or less the same.” He shrugged. “That’s how the Floo Network works.”

“And you never came around so I just got back and saw you…staring at nothing.”

His twin was giving him a concerned look. He shook his head. “I was just…thinking. Memories, as usual.”

“Oh.”

His brother was looking too sympathetic that he had the strong urge to correct whatever misapprehension he was labouring under. “No, no. It wasn’t that sort of past. It’s nothing that interesting, actually. It’s only about where I should take you for lunch. I was thinking of all the places I’d have gladly given my left arm to be able to enter when I was a kid, places that had seemed so impressive then that I could scarce imagine any place better.”

The blond nodded in understanding. “Right. Found a place, then?”

“That’s the thing. They all bore me.”

“…huh. Right then, just find someplace else. Maybe try a new place?”

For some reason, Anakin wasn’t at all surprised. As if everything was truly that simple—oh, you don’t like those places? Let’s just not go there. And just like that a different idea spread like wildfire in his mind.

It was inconceivable for Voldemort. But what was he doing now if not trying out new methods and ways?

“Tell you what, let’s eat at some muggle place.” Tom suggested.

“Non-magical, Thomas.” Anakin didn’t lose a beat.

“Alright, non-magical. Let’s find a non-magical place,” Tom said, as careless as before, but
Anakin was watching him intently this time. “People have known that Grindelwald has a muggle cat’s paw, but they’ve never really seen him before. They’ve always considered him as unimportant and skimmed on the details in most of his biographies, but why, really? Might they have missed something?”

“So, we’re walking on the non-magical side?”

“Which shouldn’t be that hard. We do that all the time, don’t we?” Tom said. “The robes have got to go, though.”

“Yesss!”

“But don’t touch the cravat.”

“Damnit!”

Neither of them even turned at the middle-aged lady who gasped at Anakin’s curse, but they did leg it out of there faster than usual. No need for the witch to try remembering their faces, after all.

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“I do. It’s just that I need to match the landmarks now and the one in 1970s.” Tom insisted.

Anakin didn’t look like he believed him. “I visited it in the 1970s. Maybe we can sit down on that bench and I’ll show you the path I took.”

“Right; ‘cause two heads are better than one.”

They sat cross-legged on the bench facing each other, even if it was a mite awkward done while wearing shoes. He placed his right hand over Anakin’s left palm and Anakin did the same. They closed their eyes at almost the same time, with Anakin audibly counting to synchronise their breathing.

He tried imagining the street.

_Do you see that?_

_Hmm. It’s pretty dark, but I can see the buildings and the places under the streetlights. It’s not so bad._

_Alright. Here goes._

The first thing he remembered was the vague pangs of imminent hunger and the occasional scent of roast chestnut in the air. The cold air was…ah, the cold bothered him not at all. He had become far more cold-blooded, literally, after several stages of his transformation.

It was one autumn night right before he was off on one of his **excursions**, one of his more secretive ones that he scarcely broadcast to his underlings. He only had Wormtail (useless) and Regulus by his side, and the more Wormtail whined about the good food of Malfoy Manor, the less eager Tom became to fulfil his wishes. Regulus had recognised the area and said that there was a good restaurant that he’d been in. It was muggle, he explained quickly, and the only reason that he knew about it was because he’d followed Sirius there once, but what else were their purpose except to serve wizardkind, right? Regulus explained about how the food was delicious and they can easily cast Imperius on everyone in the place and eat their fill.
Wormtail looked revolted and talked against Regulus’ position. The younger Black son slowly sweat as Voldemort said nothing, only giving him a look with his cold baleful eyes. Right when Wormtail was at his most triumphant (Merlin’s underpants, he was strutting like a peacock), the Dark Lord shot him down with one line.

“Let us see how your suggestion fares, Regulus.”

Regulus smoothly bowed. Gone was the doubting youth – before him was a young man, one of the best borne by his society. “Of course, my Lord. Allow me.”

“Innovations have their own value.” Voldemort said. At which Regulus stood taller and Wormtail cringed as if his tail had been stepped on. He kept his face impassive and his grin unseen from his underlings but his steps was lighter as the three of them continued on their way. He didn’t particularly remember why he hadn’t impatiently asked Regulus to simply apparate him over (and pick up Wormtail after that), but it had its benefits now.

Tom opened his eyes, pulling both of them out of the memory. Anakin was slightly more dazed than he was, which wasn’t a surprise since he hadn’t exited on his own.

“It’s not that far from The Leaky Cauldron, as you can see, and we’ve already gone partway there.” He said this while standing up. Anakin followed suit a few seconds later.

“Yeah, I think I can recognise this…street.”

Tom held back his snort. “Sure? Right, go ahead. Your turn to navigate us, then.”

Three wrong turns for four correct ones later, Tom lost ran out of patience and meddled. There was a lot more pulling and arguing after that, but considering that they had gone three streets with only one wrong turn and one wrong almost-turn, that was an improvement. (It wasn’t completely their fault—the number of alleys they were counting before taking a turn was once wrong, because one of the alleys no longer existed in 1970 and they had turned an alley too early because of it).

When they found the restaurant, it was almost a shock for the senses – like a knight errant expecting a wizened crone for a witch and found an enthralling young woman instead. Its window-boxes were still freshly painted and red flowers overflowed. The chairs were still smart instead of the sun-faded ones in his memory, the checks of the table cloth still bright red and white. A hint of pie teased the air and the scent of gravy from the meal of a nearby patron was mouth-watering. It was nearing the end of the lunch hour and seats had started emptying again, just their luck.

“Smells good,” Anakin noted.

“Of course.” Tom nodded regally, a king graciously accepting that praise must naturally fall on his beautiful and well-managed realm. Anakin only gave him a weird look before he took another deep breath, savouring the scent of food.

For all its down-to-earth charm of the place, its sign was decidedly odd. A black bird perched proudly over a wall with a crown on its head.

“The Raven King,” Anakin read out loud. “Wow, that’s weird. Was there ever a raven that was a king?”

Tom raised one eyebrow. “You’re not seriously asking that question, are you?”

“Look, you told me about that horse that became a senator, why not a raven for a king?”
“Incitatus was rumoured to almost become a consul. And that was because the emperor was probably crazy.” Tom said. He had to admit that Anakin made a pretty good argument, though, and the way his brother was looking at him meant he knew Tom had just thought in that direction. He sighed. “Yes, yes, it’s not completely impossible, but I’ve never heard of any. Satisfied?”

“Well, it wasn’t as if he had any particular plans either, anyway. He hung around for a few more moments, observing the other shop fronts around the restaurant and trying to fix its current appearance in his mind. There was a millinery named unimaginatively as “Hatter’s Hat Shop”. On the other side of the restaurant was something that seemed like a solicitor’s practise and several other completely mundane office and businesses.

With a slowness borne out of feeling lazy than tired, he followed his twin, taking his time to avoid the chairs of eating businessman and solicitors. The first table he passed seemed to be two cousins who seemed to be working in their family’s company. Whatever they were talking about, though, he was sure it wasn’t business—at least, he didn’t think there were many business-related affairs that should make anyone be that frantic. Or speak of helping their cousins move to England.

There was the rarer woman or three. It wasn’t hard to surmise that the first was a writer of sorts, perhaps a journalist, based on the way she hurriedly scribbled in shorthand across her legal pad, almost forgetting her lunch quickly. Probably chasing a deadline, he mused. The other tables weren’t as interesting and he paid them less attention. A quick glance at the clock showed that they were five minutes or so shy of two o’clock. Tom breathed a sigh of relief as he sat down.

“We’re lucky we’re still in time.”

“In time for what?”

“For lunch. The lunch menu would have changed to the tea menu at two thirty.”

Anakin’s eyebrows rose. “What? Why?”

“Obviously because there’s not enough crowd to justify keeping the kitchen fully manned and prepared.” Tom replied, slightly surprised by the question. He was more curious of the cause, though, and decided to shift the conversation into a mental one, in case any of the answers are not of this dimension. Why are you even surprised? Surely it’s understandable?

Restaurants don’t really change their menus by the hour in Coruscant, Anakin replied, not bothering to use English. Tom mulled over his answer. Three seconds later, it was his turn to raise his eyebrows.

Because Coruscant the grande dame of all metropoleis, isn’t it? A city planet! With so many people living in one place, in such a hive of activity—

—there is always enough customers at all times of the day and night, if they so choose, Anakin finished. It was only a trivial puzzle, but it bought matching grins to their faces as they solved it.

I assure you, it wasn’t the case in the 1970s—London kept getting bigger, I suppose. I was too focused on taking over the wizarding world to pay attention to when it changed. Tom noted.

“You’re school leavers, aren’t you, boys?”
They turned at almost the same time to the waitress as she handed them the menu.

“Yes Miss. Lent Term is over,” Tom answered with ease. Anakin was mostly content to let Tom handle the interaction (and excuses). The waitress coloured.

“Oh, I’m not a Miss anything. Just Olive, please.”

“Why not? Someone as beautiful as you is certainly a young miss if she is anything.”

“Now, none of that Young Master,” she said, trying for stern and not quite succeeding, if the barely-suppressed smile on her face was any sign. “Heavens! You’d be a right lady-killer once you start growing. Now, what would you and your friend like?” She paused for a moment, observing Anakin properly for the first time. “Oh, you’re brothers!”

“Well, me and my brother would like to take a look for now, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course not. Call me when you’re done, alright?”

With those words, she walked away, identifying customers who were done or tables that needed cleaning.

“What was that for?” The blond asked. Tom seemed to be engrossed with the menu already.

“Hmm?”

“You know what, charming Olive?”

“To give a good impression and unsettle her, of course.” Tom replied easily. “Because I can’t actually remember when the Lent term ends this year. I have a feeling it hasn’t ended yet. Now, she wouldn’t even think in that direction. Now, let’s lift the seat of our chairs with a bit of magic, shall we? We won’t ever reach the table otherwise”

With that, he slid his wand out of its holster and started to surreptitiously transfigure the chairs larger. He only needed them taller, but it really was easier to make it larger in general than just in one aspect.

Anakin went with braised steak and carrots while Tom chose lamb with butter beans. For dessert they respectively chose red currant tart with custard and plum tart with custard. When their food came, it wasn’t just Tom who thanked her politely with a grave nod, Anakin gave her his full smile and called her Miss too until she corrected him.

This was when they figured out that sitting face-to-face was alright for talking, but when you were a child and you were trying to pick food from the plate across you, it was hard. They were of the habit of trying out each other’s food that it was something they did without thinking even now.

“This is awkward.” Anakin protested.

“Just move, then.” Without prompting, Tom had gone down from his seat and moved his brother’s plate to right next to his. Anakin changed seats without further thought.

In the middle of this move they were doing, the conversation in the table next to them turned interesting.

“The debate was an embarrassment, don’t you think so, Marsden? Never fighting for King and Country? What on earth possessed them say that?”
“It’s just the debating society, Collin,” The man called Marsden seemed to be more laidback than his two companions, his suit very well cut. Tom surmised that he was probably the more senior in rank among them. “University boys will be boys.”

“Well I say it’s all fun and games until they turn out to be supporting the reds all along.” The third man chimed in. His accent was less polished than Marsden’s, or even Collin’s.

“Where did you hear that?” This was Collin, being concerned once more.

“It was all in the papers, didn’t you know?”


“Well, did you know that Oxford’s mayor is ashamed of the communistic sentiments the university espoused.”

“Well of course he is. Is he an Oxford graduate himself?” Marsden cut in. “He has no idea what he’s blathering about and he’s pandering to the masses based on rumours.”

Tom placed his finger in front of his lips once the conversation begun to eavesdrop, and now his lips quirked up at the left corner as he shook his head.

Hmm, that’s a right nasty put down there. Look at how pale the other two is. Tom sounded more amazed than reproachful. Not enough finesse, though. That short guy is going to remember it for a long while.

What on earth are they talking about?

I vaguely remembered it at all, but I think I knew the source, Tom said. As they said, the Oxford University Debating Society passed the motion that ‘this house’ will not fight for King and Country. I don’t think it’s that significant because they probably passed all sorts of motions before and no one ever bothers with them either. Of course the conservatives got all prissy about possible communist associations and started yelling about red-sympathies.

Communist…?

That brought Tom to a pause.

Oh dear. We’re going to take ages if we have to go through that too. Just consider it an unsuccessful social experiment on a grand, country-wide scale. This is something I can say with the hindsight of half a century later. But until it falls, it’s pretty useful to use scare tactics.

Anakin didn’t hide his snort, but neither did he stop eating. And here I thought you don’t care for non-magicals.

Oh, no, I didn’t. I merely noticed that it was what the Ministry of Magic covered Voldemort’s activities as—either possibly-Russian infiltrators sowing terror or some Irish terrorists doing the same. Otherwise, I wouldn’t know.

No need for us to bother about the stupid debate, then? Anakin asked.

Tom picked some of the pieces his brother had cut up and set to the side of his plate for him to pick. Anakin did the same.

I feel like I’m forgetting something. It was quite a big deal for a while, as the muggleborns of
Hogwarts all knew about it if you happen to ask them about it.

Uh, that’s not good, Anakin pointed out.

He sighed. I know.

Their dessert came. Anakin had cut his tart in half and swapped that with half of Tom’s while his brother stayed deep in thought, eyes half-closed. Not even during the first or second spoon of Anakin’s consumption of his dessert, when he was intentionally making ‘this food is awesome’ sounds, were Tom affected. It was easy not to; for his attention was not on his table. He had concentrated the way Anakin taught him, of trying to deepen his connection to magic and allow it to access his sense, enhancing them.

He moved from one conversation to another around his table, from the tense trio of Marsden-Collin-Walker nearby, the mutterings of the woman writer who was on a deadline to other chitchats of less interest. Then, it circled back to the front, to the cousins urging their relatives to move.

Bingo.

In the end, Anakin placed his spoon down and just waved his hand in front of Tom’s face and Tom let his connection go. He’d heard enough, anyway. He let out a harsh breath.

“Dammit,” Tom murmured.

“What?”

“This is 1933, isn’t it? Did you notice the two men on the table out front that were having a rather intense discussion?”

“Yes?”

“Tell me, what are they talking about?”

From his tone, his brother knew that Tom probably already knew the answer to the question. Anakin closed his eyes instead. Tom knew he was currently sharpening his senses using magic, the same way he had before. Anakin did it at a faster speed he certainly envied, though.

“They were trying to get their…cousins? Cousins twice removed? Well, basically there’s this family they’re urging to move here. The Levy.”

“From?”

Anakin’s eyes opened slowly, understanding shone in their bright blue depths. “…Germany. People have already started moving? Thomas, what’s happening?”

Thomas shook his head as he began to neatly slice the halves of the fruit tarts on his plate. “No, they haven’t, not unless they were savvy enough to do so. Considering that the British Levy have very bad feelings from the recent Reichstag Fire Decree, they are perceptive enough. It must be said that they’re ahead of their time, though.”

“What is that?”

“I have no idea,” He shrugged, ignoring Anakin’s stink eye. “Like you say, I’ve never cared much for the world of the mundanes before. What snippets I heard from them sound like they’re bad news, though. The enactment of anything resembling martial law is never good news.”
“But we can find out further, can’t we?” There was a determined glint in his twin’s eyes that told him enough. Anthony was definitely going to go off on his own if Tom wouldn’t. He sighed.

“But of course, Anthony. I’m sure the library keeps all its older papers. The Fire Decree is only what, from last month? It should be there.”

Their tarts were excellent, really, but neither Thomas nor Anthony was paying much attention to their food now, their thoughts taken over by the unavoidable war that loomed ever closer.

“We could do something about it, couldn’t we?” Anthony asked on their way back.

This time, Thomas didn’t stop him from loosening his cravat and dropping it into his mokeskin bag. Knowing his brother, he’d probably forget it or lose it somewhere else if he didn’t allow it. Tom knew how to pick his battles too.

“Do something about what?”

“Grindelwald.”

He snorted. “As powerful as we could be later, I doubt that two children could have gone toe-to-toe against him and won. I have the suspicion that the only reason Dumbledore could’ve gotten close enough to fight against him was because they knew each other for a while.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Why else would he allow him to get so close? If I was a dark lord, I’d either stay in my fortress or always ensure I have all my men around me. But Dumbledore managed to ask for a proper duel.”

Anakin stopped. “Wait, did you say he asked for a duel?”

“Yes. It’s in the official testimony that he gave about it. He asked Grindelwald for a duel. He duelled Grindelwald. I mean, why on earth would anyone accept a duel from someone trying to kill them? I won’t.”

“Didn’t you?” Anakin’s tone was sly.

“We agreed not to touch our final years. Conclusion: Insanity through dark arts. Motion carried?”

“Ah, fine. Motion carried.” Anakin grudgingly agreed. Otherwise, they were going to start nit-picking each other’s stupidity again, and they knew how well that went in Terminus.

Tom had set up a minor location-confounding charm on both their wands. Anyone trying to locate their wand will get a location anywhere within a twenty-mile wide circle from where they actually are. Given that they were in the middle of London, most people would’ve just given up and called it a day. It still wouldn’t be a good idea to use their wand in the orphanage, though, where there are scarcely any wizard or witches around.

This was why they casually entered the Leaky Cauldron and simply tapped the brick that would lead them to Diagon Alley. The brick wall dilated in front of them and Tom could see that Anakin still enjoyed watching.

“So, sentiment.” Tom concluded as they stepped in. “There is history between Dumbledore and Grindelwald, probably friends. It’s not that hard to believe considering that there had never been a
comprehensive biography of the early years of Albus Dumbledore either. Perfectly possible.”

“Well, I wasn’t thinking of going against Grindelwald himself. I just don’t like to sit still, not crazy.” Anakin pointed.

“I wouldn’t be too concerned right now if I were you. There’s still a few more years to come up with something.”

“Really? When is it, anyway?”

“1939”

“Ah, still six more years, then?”

“Yes. We might as well prepare for Hogwarts first. So, our next stop: Books.”

“-

Chapter End Notes

Malfoy has always struck me as a rather French or Norman name, so it couldn’t be something dating back to the Angles and whatnot, all those speakers of Old English which is still mutually intelligible with the German of that era, so it makes more sense for the family to have come over with the Norman conquest. The Blacks...well, considering their lack of concern in dabbling with the darker side of magic and considering they’re an old family, they probably have relatives in Transylvania or Russia. This time, I choose Russia.

Man, never thought I’d start up here what has become my habit in A Few Screws Loose..., leaving long end notes:

The Totally Extraneous Glossary: (yes, you can skip this. No story to see here)

**John Donne:** An English poet and a cleric of the church of England, lived sometime in the late 1500s to the early 1600s. He was pretty inventive for his time, like the phrase *For Whom the Bell Tolls?* That was him. Hemmingway did mean to allude to his work (and quoted him too). Ironically, I first knew his work from reading *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Lord Peter Wimsey*. I mean, look at this:

Go and catch a falling star,
Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me where all past years are,
Or who cleft the devil’s foot,
Teach me to hear mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envy’s stinging,
And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind.

If thou be’st born to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand days and nights,
Till age snow white hairs on thee,
Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me,
All strange wonders that befell thee,
And swear,
No where
Lives a woman true, and fair.

The man's a magician with words, I tell you.

*Incitatus* is truly the horse of the emperor Caligula, and was said to be given collars with jewels, etc, etc. No idea whether his elevation to consul is merely a distortion by future historians who didn't like him/his dynasty, or just plain inaccurate story that gets transmitted word-of-mouth and then text-to-text until it was considered the truth, or if Caligula was just trolling *everyone*. His habit of provoking the Senate was well documented, though.

*The King and Country Debate* really turned into a national controversy at the time. Who knows why...

*The Reichstag Fire Decree - Reichstagsbrandverordnung:* To save you guys some time and effort from looking it up just to get the broad-brush picture, I'm putting this here. The Decree is issued by President Hindenburg on the Advice of Chancellor Hitler, in response to the Reichstag fire on the 27th of February 1933. The preamble and the first article is what we're looking for (verbatim text courtesy of Wikipedia, of course):

**Order of the Reich President for the Protection of People and State**

On the basis of Article 48 paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the German Reich, the following is ordered in defense against Communist state-endangering acts of violence:

§ 1. Articles 114, 115, 117, 118, 123, 124 and 153 of the Constitution of the German Reich are suspended until further notice. It is therefore permissible to restrict the rights of personal freedom [*habeas corpus*], freedom of (opinion) expression, including the freedom of the press, the freedom to organize and assemble, the privacy of postal, telegraphic and telephonic communications. Warrants for House searches, orders for confiscations as well as restrictions on property, are also permissible beyond the legal limits otherwise prescribed.

You guys got all that, right? *Habeas corpus* is a mere suggestion that people like Göring can ignore. Yeah, creepy. The press begins to feel the heat too. Privacy goes down the drain and...hmm, that's giving me a strong sense of deja vu. I think I should stop here before I accidentally Godwinned the thread.
Riddles - Diagon Alley III

Chapter Summary

Bookstores and Broomsticks. Anthony takes issue with (the lack of) Newtonian physics. Thomas returns to his cloak-and-dagger routines like a fish to water. In which we see that Thomas has perceived far more of Anakin’s world than is obvious.

Chapter Notes

For kainee, as always, because you're always checking to see whether I'm alive and is the best reader a writer could hope for. I'm looking forward for the inevitable back and forth we'd have in the comments, as usual :D

I've only written 50% of this chapter at New Year. When I got your greeting, I thought all my insecurities about how I don't know enough yet, and how I must inevitably screw up this chapter is really pretty ridiculous. I'm sure you'll set me straight if I ever screwed up a chapter. So I charged ahead and just finished it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Diagon Alley III

“Alright, we’re here.”

Anakin was too occupied in looking around, taking the sights in this weird, weird place that he hadn’t realised Tom had stopped if he hadn’t said so. As it is, he narrowly avoided crashing into his twin’s back.

“Here?”

“Yeah. Here.”

The dark-haired twin sounded curiously bored. And annoyed. This odd combination of emotions made him turn around and saw a building at the corner of the street. It had rounded walls of a tower than a store, stout and wide in the middle and reminded him of a giant pepper-shaker made of bricks. The other thing that Anakin noticed about the store was how there were brooms everywhere. Brooms? What…?

“I thought we were going to go to the bookstore?”

“We are. I just thought that if I don’t bring you here first, you’re going to mind if I spend too long in the bookstore and get jittery.” Tom answered with grim determination.

Anakin stared at him. “And we’re here to buy…?”

“Brooms.” Tom answered, as if that explained everything.
His eyebrows rose to his hairline. “What, Mrs. Cole asked you to get some? The ones in the orphanage have shed too much of their bristles?”

That snapped Tom out of whatever slump he seemed to be in as his eyes widened. He was rubbing his chin in thought as he explained.

“Well, people fly using brooms in the wizarding world. Most of my housemates are either fans of quidditch or outright players of it. They’d whine like you wouldn’t believe if I don’t drop them off here before I go off for books. They always complain I took too long, et cetera, et cetera.”

Anakin was staring at the cleaning implements sceptically. “How does that even work? Wouldn’t it fall apart? And why brooms?”

Tom shrugged. “I have ceased to complain about the idiosyncrasies of this world after a while. Not everything has answers.”

The blond grabbed his arm. “This is a joke, right? They could make planes here, right? Right? People don’t hang their lives on a stick of wood??”

The desperation in his twin’s eyes were real. Tom would’ve laughed in his face if he wasn’t concerned about Anakin trying to get him to pay for it later. He took a deep breath before answering instead. “People have flown a kilometre above the ground on broomsticks, you know? All the way across the English Channel too, for that matter.”

A sound akin to a dying wildebeest escaped from Anakin’s throat. Tom’s lips twitched at the edges.

“At the very least I can assure you that it’s more intuitive than flying an aircraft. It’s mostly just a stick.”

That sound of a beast choking and dying was turning into keening death throes now, along with some indignant trumpeting that would do an elephant proud. Tom had to look away because he was having a harder time not laughing.

“You can’t fly with just a stick—”

“Oh yes you can. You just ride on it, and then kick off. Whoosh. You fly.” Tom’s reply was nonchalant and it was decidedly weird seeing him pronounce something as plebeian as whoosh with the King’s English.

Anakin spluttered, his voice rising in pitch. “A broom can do vertical take-off and landing? Vertical take-off and landing??”

“Why not? Magic probably helped,” Tom replied, one hand covering his mouth as sniggers began to escape him.

“Without krethin’ propulsion? What in Bantha’s bloated backside is the fuel??”

Anakin’s cheeks were well beyond ruddy at this point. *Oh, he’s crossing languages now, his mind must be pretty screwed alright.* It surprised Tom since Anakin had accepted the existence of the Floo Network with aplomb once he saw the people going in and out. And wasn’t travelling great distances in a moment through who-knows-where, here one moment and then gone the next, is stranger still than merely enchanting a branch and some twigs to carry your weight and fly?

Now that he thought about the Floo Network, he started having some interesting questions about apparition. He supposed it could wait for now, though.
Tom had to bite his tongue once to keep his tone level and oblivious. “Well, kicking off with your legs is plenty propulsion, isn’t it?”

“Lift doesn’t work that way! Gravity wouldn’t let you out of her clutches that easily and a person riding on a broom is not even aerodynamic! Does drag even matter? There is no such a thing as Magic!”

It really should worry him that he understood every little thing that Anakin was complaining about, that he’d known much more about physics than he ever even cared before and knew just why Anakin thought flying broomsticks were ridiculous. Yet right now, he couldn’t care less. Tom finally gave up the battle against his stomach and just laughed, leaning against the wall of the store as the absurdity truly sets in.

It was not hard to surmise the reason for his brother’s breakdown, the images of all the sleek and highly efficient crafts that his brother had so enjoyed steering had begun leaking through their link... Anakin had lost all control at keeping his walls up (he probably doesn’t even remember that he needed to do it at all).

Apparently, magic was allowed to touch anything else in Anakin’s life but flying.

‘-

Tom’s laughter seemed to have broken the spell that have caught Anakin from the beginning, making him realise just how ridiculous he’d been. He huffed, folding his arms in front of his chest.

“Yeah, yeah. Go on. Laugh it up.”

“I’m sorry,” Tom said with an ear-splitting grin, his tone absolutely not sorry, “it’s just that…” he wheezed, before laughing again. “You’re just…”

He cleared his throat. That set Tom on a final burst of laughter. To tell the truth Anakin wasn’t as annoyed as he looked. He was still shocked, yes, and not a little bit flabbergasted, but he supposed he’d get over it with time. He was always good at rolling with the punches. What he just realised now was that he hadn’t really heard Tom’s unrestrained laughter before. Sniggers, maybe. He’d learned to appreciate the occasional chuckle along with his smartass quips, but it was not often that his bother sounded that free.

In a way, it was…sad.

“I was wondering when that would happen. At least it’s over and done with.”  Tom said, oblivious to the epiphany taking place in Anakin’s mind.

Anakin gave him the stink-eye. “You knew I’d find it impossible?”

“You’d find something impossible, sooner or later. It’s inevitable when you’re not used to magic. I couldn’t wrap my head around the moving stairwells of Hogwarts during my first year. I refused to accept that it’s real. Of course, avoiding them meant taking longer routes around the castle to get from one class to another, and that’s a pain and half on its own.” Tom said.

“Let’s not even talk about the library aisle that may or may not exist. Aisle number 13. Rumour has it that some witch of older times locked all her ex-boyfriend’s library inside it and threw away the key, robbing him of his store of knowledge. I’ve been trying to find it for a while, but there are stories of people able to take books out from it.”

“Huh. That must be some breakup.” Anakin replied, too surprised to really think.
“Yeah, that’s what I thought so too.”

The blond blinked. He hadn’t expected Tom to tell him a small piece of his own history either.

“Anyway, there’s a small field behind this store for people to try riding the brooms before purchasing. You’d probably want to do that before you swear off flying entirely here and regret it.” As he said that, his brother led the way into the store, with Anakin following him with a distinct sense of unreality.

“Are you sure we’ve got the budget for it?”

Tom shrugged. “Yeah, sure. As long as we don’t get the racing types. I think the Nimbus 1000 would be alright.”

He walked in, right into a store that had even more brooms inside than outside. There were brooms with smooth and polished handles and those whose handles are naturally crooked like the branch it came from. There were dark-coloured woods and lighter-coloured ones. The proprietor of the store was a middle-aged man as thin and dry as his wares. His eyes, however, were the liveliest thing on his face.

“Good afternoon, boys. What are you looking for? We have many of the traditional brooms as well as the new modern ones. Maybe a stable Comet? The latest Cleansweep?”

“Afternoon, Sir. Can we try out a few first?”

He observed their height with more scrutiny than he had. “Aren’t you a little too young to fly brooms?”

Tom shook his head. “Of course not. Might as well not have a broom than ride a toy broom. My brother is one of the best flyers I’ve ever seen. If you’ve seen him on a real broom before, you know how much of a waste it would be for him to use a toy broom.”

“Is that so?” The shopkeeper was non-committal.

A smile lit Tom’s face as he leaned forward slightly, as if taking the man into confidence. “Ah, it’s very much so. Come on, let us try your steadiest, most stable broom first and see what Anthony can do with it. The worst that can happen is what, a sprain? I’m sure that’s a trivial thing to heal for you, isn’t it?”

The wizard stared them both down with an assessing look. Anakin gave him an innocent and unconcerned smile while Tom was as unfazed as ever, a laid-back self-assurance drawn in his posture. Neither of them fidgeted and simply stood there, waiting. The way the shopkeeper mentally adjusted their age in his head yet again was almost visible on his face, and in the way he relaxed before finally nodding.

“Well, this way then, boys.” He walked out of the counter and they followed him to the back of the store. It involved jumping over brooms forgotten on the floor and pushing away bristles as thick as underbrush, but they managed. “Already planning on getting into the house Quidditch teams, eh?”

“No start is too early,” Tom replied with aplomb. “I believe Anthony could even be Seeker.”

Anthony could almost hear the chuckle in the man’s voice. “Sure you do. You do know that first-years aren’t allowed their own brooms, right?”

What’s a Seeker? The blond asked in his mind.
A position in a Quidditch team, usually considered as the most important position there.

“Oh, is that so? It's fine. As long as one is on the team, it doesn’t really matter, does it?” Tom said.

You could read about all that in any book about quidditch. I'd recommend getting “Quidditch Through the Ages” too, for that matter.

The shopkeeper was laughing good-naturedly again. “My, aren’t you very confident children?”

The farther back they enter the shop, the more it resembled a warren. Less light had filtered in from the storefront, and the lanterns used for lighting was more subdued. Anakin was sure that the store wasn’t supposed to be this deep...

“Ah, here’s the door.”

Anakin had expected a large backyard. Considering that the other stores on the street probably doesn’t even need as much backyard space as a broom store, he had expected the place to have also taken up the backyards to its left and right. And maybe a few more beyond that too.

He certainly didn’t expect to stare at a field. This was a field that couldn’t possibly exist behind the rows of shops in Diagon Alley. The grass was green, with an unexpected blossom of yellow or white poking here and there and the air smelled crisp. That was the final impossibility—he knew krethin’ well how London’s air always held the slight aftertaste of oil or grime. It was noticeable to people who hadn’t always lived there and paid attention. Trees dotted the edge of the clearing and apart from the door and the small house they just came out from, there was no other building next to the field.

“Thomas,” He ground out his brother’s name under his breath.

“Yes?”

“We really need to talk about what magic can or cannot do.”

The shopkeeper’s voice pulled them out of their conversation. “Now, what do you think, boys? Magnificent, isn’t it?”

Thomas was the first to overcome his surprise to answer. “Indeed, Sir. But this isn’t behind the stores at all, is it? There’s not enough room for it!”

The surprise he expressed wasn’t even half faked. The shopkeeper chuckled.

“Yes, it’s great, isn’t it? Thing is, this store’s been in my family for generations, and so is this Quidditch field. A hundred years ago after we can swear that neither land would leave the family, we finally had the license from the Ministry to link a door in the store to the field and create a portal.”

“You can actually do that?” Anthony asked.

“It’s certainly not cheap. But it’s more impressive than going through the floo here, don’t you think?”

The twin certainly gave varied sounds and comments of agreement to that. It was impossible not to. Even as they trailed the wizard to the door to the storehouse where he kept the brooms, their mind was still on that door that was actually a portal. On the upside, that meant Anakin wasn’t still
extremely hung up on the idea of brooms as vehicles. Tom took one, but he didn’t do much except hold it while the shopkeeper instructed them on how to fly.

“Say ‘Up’.”

“Up,” Anakin said the command sharply, and his broom snapped harshly into his hand, probably leaving some impression.

“You need to relax a bit in saying that, I think,” Tom commented. “That was a bit too hard, wasn’t it?”

His brother was mulish. “It works, doesn’t it?”

Tom shrugged. “Suit yourself. Now, ‘Up’.”

The broom he was holding rose at his command without a hitch. The shopkeeper certainly nodded with approval. “Seems like you both got it down well. Nothing else to do but fly, then.”

His twin was eyeing the broom dubiously. The black-haired Riddle sighed. He really did not make it a habit to fly. Why waste your time travelling when you could instantly be anywhere you need, through apparition? Anthony wasn’t going to get over his distrust anytime soon without an example, though. Oh look, the shopkeeper was demonstrating! Wasn’t that a good thing? The shopkeeper had taken off and was now sedately flying in circles above them. Thomas elbowed his sibling to make sure he was paying attention, but the frown on his face hadn’t let up at all.

“Fine. Please observe carefully, Anthony.”

Sighing yet again, he rode astride the broom, took a deep breath and casually kicked up. Wind rushed past his face as the ground fell away from him and the blue sky promised to take him into her embrace. He did not look down until he had gained sufficient altitude and he could see that Anthony’s gaze followed him. Right, flying for travel wasn’t such a complicated matter, was it? The broom was unfamiliar in his hands and he belatedly remembered that the Nimbus Racing Broom Company hadn’t even existed yet. The Cleansweep was solid and reliable, certainly, but it wasn’t going to be turning corners around any coins.

Even if the air was on the brisk and cold end, he did not mind. It certainly woke one up into attention. He made a circle around the field. Then, just because he was getting bored too, he sloped down at a faster speed than before and made sure he did a hairpin turn in front of Anthony.

“There. Not that hard, is it?”

Anthony was shaking his head. “I can’t believe it.”

He snorted. “I couldn’t have been much faster than the newspaper boy on a bicycle.”

“No, the way you turn. Your feet just barely touched the ground—”

“Well, that’s just the art in flying low-altitude.”

“—which was good control, by the way, but that turn doesn’t make sense.” Anthony started to circle him, still eyeing the broom with a mixture of wariness and curiosity.

“What doesn’t make sense?”

“When you turn.” He made a rounded motion with his hand. “There’s no extra swing or anything. It’s nothing like the way a star pulls its planets to orbit. Or if you pick up a toy on a string and
starts swinging the string around so it would pick up speed before you throw it somewhere. The natural direction and speed of a planet, or of that toy, is in a straight line, right? If you take away the object that pulls it to the center, which in each case is the sun or the hand holding the string, they’d run in a straight line, escaping their previously circular path.”

The shopkeeper seemed to be content to let them try the brooms out in the field, for he was peeking back into the store, probably checking to see if he had other customers.

“Yes, I think I can see that happening,” Tom said.

“But that doesn’t happen here. If you don’t pay attention after going in circle several times, what would the broom do? Go in a straight line.”

Tom paused as he’d begun to notice the strangeness that his brother was pointing out.

“…no. I’ve been in that situation more than once, actually, and the broom simply followed your previous paths if you’ve done it for a while. It would keep going in circles.”

Anakin shook his head as he walked back and forth, thinking.

“It can’t possibly be the presence of a perpetual centripetal force once one starts moving in a circle. For one thing, what’s the source of the force? Where the heck does it come from? How does it disappear again when people stop flying in circles? As crazy as it sounds, it’s even simpler if the…the broom doesn’t even consider centripetal force at all, whatever it actually uses.”

“Hence, there is nothing like the presence of centripetal force to keep circular movement, and there is also nothing like its absence to release the moving object to move back in a straight line.

Tom didn’t exactly have anything to say to that.

“Let’s take a different scenario. Say, if something forces them to stop, like say, a hand catches the toy in mid-swing, one could feel the jolt of all the mass and motion previously directed forward.”

“Of course.”

“But that doesn’t happen when you brake with that broom, does it? You don’t feel that jolt?”

Tom took off at a low height just to test out exactly what Anthony said. He picked up speed and then pulled the broom handle up and back to stop it and he simply…

…stopped.

There was no braking sensation that he was already very familiar with from riding on the non-magical bus. Heck, even the Knight Bus had a similar feel. He flew back to his brother.

“Huh. You’re right. There’s no jolt at all.”

The blond nodded, as if he’d expected this. His face was still completely serious instead of satisfied.

“I’m sure there would be a jolt if you crash into something. All that kinetic energy can’t just krethin’ disappear. But if you stop and rely on the broom to stop. You just…stop.”

He took a deep sigh. “Damn, how far in magic mushroom land are we in now? First, there was no centripetal force and now there’s no momentum. Sithspit. The frickin’ broom doesn’t even follow the classical mechanics of physics! The rules it follows is…something that came waaaay before
space-flight physics. It’s not even physics yet, it’s one of those old postulates, isn’t it? I vaguely recall it at some ancient history of science class in the Temple. It’s probably still called philosophy of nature or something. What in Force is it, Thomas?"

Thomas had dismounted at this point, watching his brother work himself almost into a frenzy.

“Merlin’s balls,” he said, dryly. “Magic, obviously.”

“‘Merlin’s balls’ is right.” Anthony said it with a vehemence that made it into a proper curse.

“Does this mean you don’t want to fly?”

Anthony’s blue eyes held a fire in them when he looked up. “Of course not. It just means I need to figure out a new set of rules while I fly.”

He picked up the broom nearest to him with a vehemence that Tom hadn’t expected and took to the sky with the fluidity of a flock of dove scattering and he corkscrewed up. To Thomas’ surprise, he was reminded of a rising rocket instead of anything else, either a memory of Anthony’s he’d seen often enough to remember on his own or something he’d seen in Terminus. There was grace in his chase for sheer speed, especially when he came straight down like a hunting eagle spotting a rabbit.

That had the proprietor running into the field until Anthony stopped a foot above the ground. Knowing very well about his brother’s flying abilities, Thomas set off at a sedate pace.

“You just shaved a few years off my life, lad!”

His smile was an embarrassed one. “Ah, sorry. I was having too much fun to notice. This broom is fun, though, I think I’ll take this.”

“Don’t want to try the other ones?” Thomas asked.

He shook his head. “I already did before I started flying. This one is the one that feels most right in my hands, and that was why I was flying with it. If I don’t take this, I don’t think I’ll take anything else.”

That must be another of that strange magic sense his universe had developed. He’d probably asked his twin about it later.

The shopkeeper accepted his reasoning easily. “That would be the Cleansweep, then? One broom or two?”

“Considering that first years can’t even bring their own broom, I think one is fine,” Thomas concluded.

‘-

The odd thing was, Tom hadn’t even remembered to ask for the man’s name until after they were nearly done. Mr. Gerard Forrester was a suitably mundane name for a rather mundane shopkeeper. What he found to be even odder was that he remembered to ask the wizard’s name at all.

Hmm. He’d never really bothered with people he’d considered he’d only have superficial contact before. This noticing-people thing he was developing was unusual.

Of course, there’s no telling when having the contact information for the owner of the Broomstix
would come in handy, so perhaps he was just being more prepared than he’d been before. Tom put further thought of it out of his mind, especially once they were done with brooms and could get down to business. *Books.*

‘-

Of course, Thomas’ idea of a bookstore wasn’t the same as Anthony’s. It wasn’t the largest bookstore he had seen (obviously), but there was something mind-bending in the way the bookshelves at Flourish and Blotts extend up…

…and up and up and up.

It was a three-story store, with its lobby area opening all the way up to its rafters and one can easily see balconies for the other two floors from there. The bookshelves in the lobby, however, grew up all the way to the ceiling.

“How does anyone take the higher books?” Anthony asked, bewildered.

“That’s the easiest part, with *Accio*, of course!” An enthusiastic staff answered. The witch had an easy and friendly smile on her face.

“It’s a summoning charm,” Thomas clarified. Now *that* was clearer.

“The harder part is in stocking it,” a different staff muttered from somewhere behind them. The witch shook her head.

“Oh come on, it wasn’t that hard—”

“Try flying a broom carrying an armful of the *Book of Slugs, Saps, Slime Spells and All-Sorts of Slippery Stuffs* and I bet you’ll change your mind.”

Those words had the Riddle twins turning around to face her fully. Sure enough, there was a broom in the young witch’s hand. What was more off-putting was the slime that coated her arms. The tall witch smelled…weird. There was something faint that made him think of slugs, but there was also something astringent that reminded Tom of herbs crushed underfoot in a forest. Everyone else stepped away from her. Her co-worker certainly looked apologetic. She rolled her eyes.

“See what I mean? Don’t worry about it, boys, we don’t really keep that many exotic books. Stick to the normal-looking ones and you’ll be fine.”

“But what if we *want* to read *Slugs, Saps, Slime Spells and All-Sorts of Slippery Stuffs*?” Anthony asked with complete innocence—nothing that his brother believed in, to be sure.

“Ask someone to *Accio* it, Merlin help you,” the witch grumbled. She turned to her fellow employee with the same annoyed look she’d been wearing all this time. “I don’t care what Mr. Fourish or Blotts would say, but I’m going out to the back to wash my arms and face, and change.”

“Yes, alright. I’ll be sure to tell them.”

She left a dripping track of slime from her broom. Thomas couldn’t help wincing a little. “If that slime is what I think it is, it’s going to eat through the parquet floor.”

“Oh, that wouldn’t be a problem for long. *Scourgify!*” A soapy wash certainly covered the floor area she gestured to. Anthony was staring at the wand and then the floor, not quite believing what he was seeing.
When the witch finished her hand movements with an upward flick, the soapy water vanished again. The slime was still there, though if one was generous, one might say that there was less of it. A bit less.

Thomas shook his head, “I knew it wasn’t mere slime—it dropped slower and was thicker. That was the sap of something close to the Devil’s Balsam. Soap’s not going to be that effective against it.”

“Surely the Scouring Charm can clean everything?” She asked. She sounded more desperate than anything.

“You’re better off with turpentine,” he noted. “Might as well fight fire with fire.”

“Or paraffin,” Anthony added.

“I think I saw that in the supplies room. I’ll be right back!” She rushed off to get one of the two solvent, whichever it was that she happened to have on hand.

Anthony saw Thomas cringe. “We shouldn’t have done that.”

“We’re just helping.”

“No. How many children our age are competent with ingredients?”

It was Anthony’s turn to wince after that. “Ah, basic chemistry. Right. Not exactly supposed to be common here, is it?”

“No.”

Neither of the twins wanted to hang around until she was done, and they moved away as quickly as they could, instead, hoping to not meet her again, if possible. They were generally following Thomas’ whim on which direction they should check out next.

“That book was…weird,” Anthony commented.

“And here I’d wondered in the 1970s why the S7 is hard to find,” Tom mused. “Turns out it’s just really hard to keep in inventory.”

“S7?”

“The Slime book. Did you count the number of S words on the title?” Tom asked.

“Ah.”

“Yes. It has many interesting spells as well as cross-applications of charms and potions.”

“Sure it does,” Anthony replied, his attention wandering to other shelves already as he drifted away. “But what could you do with it?”

“Figure out how to procure certain ingredients on your own instead of merely relying on store-bought ones,” Tom promptly answered. “It would be very useful considering that we cannot exactly withdraw near-infinite amounts of galleons. Also of note is how the trade of certain reagents are closely monitored by the Ministry.”

“We’re cooking? More chemistry?”
“Potionmaking,” Anthony. Potionmaking,” Thomas replied with unusual patience. He casually walked to the back of the counter with no regards to the employees only sign. He crouched down and looking for something resembling a rag. “Snape swears by it for any ingredients that oozes so I’m certain we’re off to a good start.”

When Thomas surfaced once more, it was apparent that the best he could find was several thick brown paper bags.

“What’s that for?”

His brother did not directly answer that and looked up the bookshelves instead. “Accio Slugs, Saps, Slime Spells and All-Sorts of Slippery Stuffs.”

Sure enough, a rather thick tome came zooming down and Tom moved. Anthony had seen the other orphanage kids play cricket often enough to realise that Tom had sharper eyes than many of them, and could’ve easily caught anything the amateur batsman could field. He didn’t even hesitate to catch it with only his left hand, even as the impact that such a large book, falling down, almost pushed him to the floor.

“Damn. I hate being small,” Tom complained.

The unnatural slime of the book was safely contained by the paper bags he’d covered his hand with. With a deft sleight of hand, he turned the bags inside out, and now the book was inside several layers of them.

“Here, you’ve practised your summoning charm after lunch, right?” Thomas suddenly said as he pushed a scrolled note to his twin. Anthony didn’t take it and gave him a disbelieving look instead.

“Yeah, but that wasn’t with anything serious! I still screw up from time to time.”

He shrugged. “All you need to do is repeat it after that. Failure doesn’t cost anything and you could use the practice.”

“And?”

“And we need to get all those books.”

“How the heck are we going to explain it to the store staff?”

“Oh, we’re not sending it to us.” Tom said easily. Anthony almost gaped, but he sighed and gave a weary look at this brother’s cryptic reply instead.

“We’re not?”

“No. I’ll need to contact a remailer I’d used before in Knockturn Alley—he’d renamed the package and will forward it to a second remailer I’ll deal with today as well, in a different part of town. Only the second remailer has the orphanage’s address, to Messrs. Riddles. For now, we’ll say that we’re running an errand for an uncle, an old family friend.”

“I’m getting really tired of all the subterfuge we need to do.” Anthony complained. He got the gist of it, of course, but he didn’t try to remember all the details.

“And yet they’re necessary, Anthony. Trust me on this.”

Considering that of the two of them, it was certainly Thomas who had successfully managed an
insurrection and guerrilla warfare before, he threw his hands in the air.

“Oh, fine. Hand me that list.”

“Excellent. These are the books that are on the western side of the store, as far as I can remember the layout. I’ll take the east. Let’s meet up when we’re done.”

“And I’m supposed to drag the books around while I go looking for the rest??”

Thomas was unamused. “Of course not. What use are floating charms, Anthony? Or weightless charms? The list of combinations you can try out is endless. Truly, the task isn’t that hard.”

The blond knew, from the bottom of their linked souls and the Force that they were in contact with, that his brother didn’t mean anything by it. Yet even he could understand in that one moment why many Slytherin seniors thought Tom Riddle an annoying and condescending ass who needed to be taught a lesson.

“You know you need to tone down your asshole-ness, don’t you?” He asked, curious.

“That is not a word,” Thomas immediately replied, seemingly out of reflex against any mangling of the Queen’s English than anything his twin had said. He seemed more perplexed than anything.

“What are you talking about, anyway?”

“It’s…oh, poodo. You really don’t get it at all, do you? Your ‘I am a Dark Lord, bow before me’ routine really stands out a lot from the background. I thought we were trying to keep a low profile?”

He snorted. “Technically, we’re not dark lords anymore, so no one can accuse us of that. Secondly, we’re wasting time. Come on now, we don’t have all day.”

And with that commanding tone, he turned around with a snapping stride that would earn the respect of any Stormtrooper, and marched to his side of the bookstore. Anthony stood there with a bemused expression on his face, as he wondered idly how the Jedi Temple was going to take the double surprise of their entrance.

It’s certainly going to be…fun. Yeah, that’s it. Fun.

Well, he might be stretching things a bit there. It was only fun the same way that trying to fly a craft leaking fuel and with half of its engine dead is fun, while trying to find an empty enough space in hyper-packed Coruscant for emergency landing that wouldn’t mean crashing right into something else. Basically, everything that made Obi-Wan swear off being piloted by Anakin if he could avoid it, and pitied anyone who had no idea what they were getting on to when they signed up to ride with Anakin for the first time.

And with those pleasant thoughts, Anthony Riddle smiled.

If anyone from their orphanage had seen him then, they would’ve thought twice about saying that he was the nicer twin. Right now, his smile was eerily similar to his brother’s.

‘-

Even after the day they had, Anthony still insisted on dropping in to their usual library before going back to the orphanage. Thomas had some issues with that, because hadn’t they just visited a bookstore in Diagon Alley?
With his hands in his pockets, he only gave Tom a side glance as he replied.

“Yes, but they don’t exactly have books on computation engines, do they? On anything even close to computers? I need to find my own books, Thomas.”

A second passed before Tom nodded without pause.

“Of course.”

It was clear from his expression that Anthony wondered why his twin was quiet after that, and the way he was instantly agreeable with the idea of spending not a little time at the library more than a mite weird.

But then, Thomas knew the loss Anthony felt when he turned around Thomas’ world and saw how analogue everything still is. Not that he thought he’d ever say it.

It wasn’t that Anthony told many stories, no. He wasn’t that good with them, not always knowing where to begin or where a tale should end. He was not a natural orator or charmer like his brother dark lord. And yet sometimes at the beginning of the week, when the weather difference between Tatooine and England was drastic enough to shock, Anthony had nightmares.

For other people, this would be where the explanation ended. For Thomas, twin and Force-bound sibling of Anthony, it was only the beginning. Both Anthony and Anakin’s nightmares were loud, for one. It wasn’t that he was screaming or shouting, or even restless in his sleep. It was that the nightmares bled over into Thomas or Tamlin’s dreams.

Neither Thomas nor Tamlin himself had mentioned it before to his sibling. It didn’t feel important, not when they were facing floggings and other various corporal punishments when they were under Gardulla the Hut. It was irrelevant when they both schemed to avoid starvation in Tatooine. It didn’t even feel that significant once Tom had to get Anthony up to speed with England’s magical world as well as its technological level, or what little of the muggle world about it that he knew, anyway, while at the same time always paying attention to the slightest signs of Grindelwald’s rise.

The nightmares were never coherent enough for Tom to figure out any particular story from them, not unless they involved people or events that Anakin had told Tamlin about. He didn’t feel Anakin’s privacy was leaking in any way. What he saw was usually just a fleeting scene. An intense feeling of fear or anger. Fights and battles. Deaths. Escapes. Endangerments of his mentor (the Jedi known as Kenobi). Multiple Crises. Torture under the hands of the Emperor.

(Now that he thought about it again, it was definitely the repeated tortures under irregular schedule with the Emperor that still left vestiges of PTSD in his sibling’s mind).

Loss of a son.

For someone who intensely disliked Tatooine for the way it stripped him of even the basic dignity of being a free man, the nightmares gave Thomas some control back—he regained some power in the raw form of knowledge. He had a vague memory of the cockpit layout of the spacecrafts that Anakin had piloted as well as engine configurations he was repairing in those dreams, and this made him able to absorb Anakin’s instructions at Watto’s repair shop faster. He saw the ubiquity of the automatic doors and their attendant electronic locks. He saw the ease with which Vader monitored the far-reaches of the empire with what he now knew as faster-than-light (FTL) communication methods. He had seen the moment-to-moment adjustments that the turrets of the Death Star took to keep track of the rebel starfighters, of which the precise calculations he’d seen more than once on a passing screen or two, calculations running faster than any mortal’s mind can
finish, whatever the race.

Thomas was not Voldemort. He was not delusional enough to think that even if his genius was heads and shoulders among the common people it meant he can also perform miracles such as that. No, he could not. It was not even due to any failing of his.

_It was simply not humanly possible to do so._

He’d seen Coruscant’s _air traffic controls_. It made him marvel at how all the people there could continue their lives so blithely when they don’t even have Anakin’s excuse of being able to call upon the Force if any of their near-misses turned into a string of meteoric accidents. And yet the traffic controls managed to keep accidents at a minimum, assisted with a significant, district-wide neural network that mapped out the movement patterns of different vehicles and people.

How did he figure this out? Anakin had a nightmare of losing a boy that he was tasked to protect there, in one of the traffic stations. From the glimpses he could see, it was highly probable that the teen was an unfortunate victim of Coruscanti politics. Tamlin lost his interest in the youth the moment he deduced the young noble’s background and how it relates to the circumstances of the death. Unlike Anakin, he was not obsessed with how avoidable or unavoidable the death was—what would the death of another stranger mean to him? The supercomputer spread below the balcony Anakin fought in drew his attention instead. The great computing machine and the staffs manning it, oblivious to the fight going on over their heads. The routes they mapped out for different traffic, easily changing minute by minute without holding anyone at bay for too long, was an elegant impromptu ballet with thousands of cast, in parabolic trajectories and hyperbolic jets.

All of which were impossible to construct without computers.

In that fragment of a dream, he did not feel inadequate. He was master of his fate, lord of what he surveys; he _did not_ do inadequate. He did, however, feel envy that he had always managed to carefully stifle in his waking hours, so deftly that even his conscious mind scarcely noticed it. He envied Anakin for being born in a world of such breadth and depth, a world with so much potential. And since it was his id speaking, he was certainly wondering out loud, in that rambling thought that one has in dreams, about how much greater he would have been as a dark lord if he had been born there.

This was why he walked by his brother’s side without complaint.

This was why he still hadn’t said another word as they entered the library, lost in thought, and why he made the habitual gesture of locating the topology textbooks that he’d been reading lately before he found his way back to Anthony’s side. Weeks before, he hadn’t commented on Anthony’s fervent search for any book that mentioned computers. When Anthony figured out with dismay that a computer was a person in this day and age, he couldn’t help but curse out loud of what had been a beacon of hope early in his search:

> “Force, has no one ever managed to make Babbage’s Analytical Engine? Bloody hell, it’s almost a century since he created the plans!”

For a moment, no words seemed adequate to Thomas. The helplessness he felt in the face of a stubborn, slow world that will not assist Anthony’s efforts to begin reconstructing pieces of his own world felt strange and unfamiliar to him. He did not like the feeling much.

He said instead, and only half-jokingly at that.

> “Well, it might as well be you, then.”
The smile it earned from Anthony was short and fleeting. If anything, the words became a spur to the other Riddle. A challenge. He became more agitated in his search, as he settled for checking out business machines for the time being.

Even if it meant reading up on punch-card based tabulating machines. These were pale imitations of the ideal, shades of the river Styx that tries to fool the traveller into thinking that they are as good as living.

They will undoubtedly be only a disappointment.

Yet by then, he was perceptive enough to not say that out loud, or at all. He even stopped himself from even thinking about it in his mind, in case his brother inadvertently heard it. Thomas did not miss the increased desperation in Anthony’s search. Just two weeks ago (or four, as he experienced it), Anthony almost filed an interlibrary loan request for the magazine *Business Machines*. It would have been notable in a young Englishman, for unlike the States, Britain was not as enamoured with new technologies to be obsessed in applying them everywhere, even when increased need had yet to exist to make it necessary.

Such interest would be downright alien in a very young English boy.

(Why Thomas Riddle even *knew* about the state of business machine technology in the *United States* was because Anthony Riddle had no one to discuss his readings and expound his dreams other than his brother. If he was still Voldemort, he would not believe that he would ever be that patient or interested in a topic so mundanely muggle. The first person to suggest it would be sent to the torture chamber for the affront, and as a lesson for everyone else).

Anthony was lucky that Thomas saw the application and quickly stopped his twin from doing anything rash. He managed to promise that it was easier and *safer* for them if he wrote to their office and requested for a subscription.

He didn’t even think twice about the cut such a subscription would inflict on the limited cache of money he’d planned on procuring from the Slytherin vault later on. The only thing in his mind then was that he could not let his brother’s increasing impatience with this slower, less-advanced world destroy him.

Thomas Riddle did not realise it then, and would not have realised it even years and years later if he did not make an effort to remember his past. Yet at that moment he had clearly thought of how Anthony was going to self-destruct sooner or later—and in the face of his twin’s possible demise, he’d immediately sought to prevent it.

It was the first time he did not automatically consider that he had to stop his brother’s downfall because it would mean his own as well, tied as their fates were.

At that time, he had not thought of his own fate at all.

'--

Chapter End Notes

Will probably add some clarifying notes in here later if my mind feels coherent enough.
I figured that, since flying with broomsticks is already pretty irrational, might as well make magical flight in the wizarding world to be completely unrelated with Newtonian physics. It works under some sort of weird, Aristotelian principles (but Anakin wouldn't exactly have known Aristotles or read much about him at this point). For a pilot and mechanic/engineer like Anakin, it's certainly going to piss him off. "Physics just doesn't work that way!" *hair pulling commences*. I had a lot of fun mindscrewing the poor guy.

Yes, I did brush up my reading on the history of computing before I wrote this chapter. I've been doing that since last one but it never feels adequate. Still don't. I just decided to bite the bullet and write it all down than keep delaying.

As usual, post any questions you have in the comments, or any clarifications you want me to make.
Chapter Summary

Anthony’s computer fever dreams do not survive contact with Reality. Fortunately, Thomas has an Idea.

Chapter Notes

Title is a random reference to a line in Shakespeare's Richard III:

"A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!"

Apparently, I'm feeling inspired and can thus bang out the next chapter really quickly. It's probably helped by the fact that I've already been reading up stuff/materials for weeks, I just don't know how to put it into the story until recently. Don't expect this stroke of good fortune to last, though.

My Kingdom for a Computer

Their visits to the library had become a lot more productive with slightly modified notice-me-not charms. It was better for whichever librarian on duty to not notice that the books and papers they requested had been asked for by kids that are not even in primary school yet. Now, it became a lot easier to use with both of them owning wands, enabling them to request a lot more (it was tiring to do wandless magic when you’re a kid without enough fine control yet). He had even modified their memories to recall the requesters as young men, completing the illusion.

Thomas had never thought he’d be happier seeing a pile of books and published papers delivered his way.

The comfortable silence that reigned as they both lose themselves in their respective readings heralded a productive and peaceful afternoon. Or so Thomas had thought. Apparently, he thought wrong.

“Thomas,” Anthony said.

“Yes?”

“Where’s St. John’s College?”

He tried to convince himself that the question was a perfectly normal one. There was something uncomfortable nagging at the back of his head, though.

“It’s one of the colleges in Cambridge,” it was one he was familiar with only because he’d been reading up on John Dee, Royal Wizard to Elizabeth II’s court. He was an alumnus of the college.
A spark grew in Anthony’s eyes. “It’s the Cambridge that you’ve told me about? One of the great centres of learning in this country?”

There really was no way to avoid answering the question. And here he had hoped he could stop raising any unreasonable hopes.

“Yes,” he reluctantly answered.

“I hear Oxford also has an excellent library.”

He left the paper he was reading with some reluctance (Kurt Gödel’s Theorem IV was fascinating). It was one he had waited for several weeks too, because this library wasn’t actually large enough to have something so new (it was published in 1931) and so esoteric in its own inventory.

“Anthony, what is this about—”

“You have a great idea. I need to make my own computer.”

He should get a prize for this, he thought—he didn’t groan or followed his initial urge to cover his face with his hand. He took a careful breath instead and squarely met his brother’s gaze.

“Alright. What has this got to do with Cambridge? Or Oxford?” Thomas asked.

“Leslie Comrie graduated from King’s College and if he can build his own rudimentary computer, I bet I can too. All I need to do is figure out what he knows and use that.”

Thomas shot his hand out instead as he gestured to the paper that Anthony was holding.

“Let me see that.”

Anthony handed it over to him without complaint and he began to read. His brother was barely still, though. He was walking back and forth, excitement thrumming under his skin. Leslie J. Comrie, HM Nautical Almanac Office at the Royal Greenwich Observatory…hmm, actually a reasonable position to require increased computing ability—he moved on to check the title after that. On the Construction of Tables by Interpolation—

“Oh, I know! We should visit the Greenwich Observatory!”

He almost groaned. Morgana’s Tits.

Thomas bit back a curse and interfered. “No, we’re not visiting the Greenwich Observatory—not yet. Do you even know what his so-called computer looks like?”

“The algorithm is right there.”

That brought Thomas’ attention right back to the paper. Sure enough, there was the algorithm that needed to be run. Yet since creating tables of the moon was what sounded like the job for something named ‘nautical almanac office’, that algorithm had certainly existed and refined for years if not decades. It all depended when the office was made in the first place. What was more important was whether it was automated.

He had a feeling his brother still underestimated just how un-automated everything is here.

“There’s several off-the-shelves machines involved here. He didn’t really make anything new because he was also aiming for cost effectiveness.” Thomas said as he scanned through the article.
Government procurement budget being what they are, he wasn’t surprised. Heck, even Fudge still underfunds the DMLE (and as a consequence, Auror training). That’s when he’d heard that Voldemort was back and on the rise.

“Yes, still, I want to know which machines he used and how he put them together.” Anthony pointed out.

Well, that was the rub, isn’t it? It’s not ‘put together’ in any way Anthony was thinking. It’s certainly nothing like the droid prototypes Anakin is working on.

The thought passed in a flash in Thomas’ mind. It would be hard to notice if they had their minds open to each other, much less when they’re putting up walls for privacy. He desperately tried to search through whatever basic programming knowledge Anakin had passed to him during all those hours in Watto’s shop.

“You’ve once told me that one of the basic principles of computer programs is branching, right? If it can only receive several orders in a list, run through all of them and then spit them out, they’re just dumb calculating machines. They become so much more once you can put conditionals in them. If result is negative, execute subroutine A, if result is zero or positive, execute subroutine B.”

Anthony nodded. “Yes. And Loops.”

Well, he can’t exactly be relied to remember a lot of those extraneous details about programming. “And loops, of course. While x is still under 100, keep running the subroutine. Usually every time that subroutine is run, x is added by 1 and gets closer and closer to 100.”

“Yep.”

Now, for the bad news, Thomas grimly thought.

“That’s just it, Anthony. These machines can only be programmed with a few branches, if they can even take branches at all. These are just…” he sighed. “These just aren’t the computers you’re looking for. Not yet.”

Anthony shook his head. “No, that can’t be. Look at the algorithm again, it clearly has them…”

Thomas only gave him a long, unreadable look, waiting until his brother trailed away into silence. “Well, you know what the oldest meaning of the word computer means, right?”

“What does that have to do—”

There really was no kinder way to put this. Thomas went in with the cold hard truth.

“They use clerks, Anthony. The branching points of the program? Clerks. The loops? More clerks. They just need to sit next to the machine, wait until it spits out the result from the last run, and then decide what subroutine needs to be run next based on the answer. Or keeps feeding it last operations input until the n-th iteration is achieved in a manual loop.”

Hadn’t he crushed the lives and dreams of enough Aurors foolish enough to think they can take him without appropriate back up? He’d even straight out cracked someone’s spine under his booted heel and laughed at the screams of the man’s family. Now, Anthony’s dreams fell apart, his bright blue eyes turning as sombre as England’s January skies. For some unfathomable reason, the sight did not give him any joy at all. It wasn’t just the lack of joy that disturbed him, it was the bile he could taste welling up inside.
It’s probably the magical connection, he thought to himself. Of course it was. They were more attuned to each other’s extreme emotions than anyone.

“Look, maybe you shouldn’t try to keep up with what’s already extant in this world right now.” Thomas hurriedly replied as his mind raced ahead. “You should dream bigger. Look ahead to the next jump in technology after this one. These computers are certainly still too big, right? It’s a far cry from the handheld technologies of the Republic.”

“It’s still going to be more than a generation behind what we have there.” Anthony replied with uncharacteristic bitterness.

“Then find out. It’s not as if you can’t look it up on the HoloNet.”

That sentence brought a sharp look from his brother, but he was adamant.

So far, it had been an informal rule of theirs to not cross worlds. Thomas now was of the opinion that the rule had outlived its usefulness; he ruthlessly discarded it the same way he discarded other useless things in his prior life.

“Read it. Try constructing some prototypes. Carry the memory with you back here.” He commanded, with more confidence than he felt. “I dare you to tell me that it can’t be done.”

Anthony’s eyes were bright blue fires of hope once more.

“Of course it can be done. But you don’t think…?”

“What?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Are we supposed to do it, though? I mean, two worlds?”

It was Thomas’ turn to shrug this time. “If we’re not supposed to do it, why give us two lives to live? Why make us live it interleaved with each other. Of course we’re meant to do it.”

Anthony was eyeing him sceptically. It was certainly for a good reason, as Thomas was straight out cajoling his brother with his oratory skills there and sheer guts and self-confidence. Yet he could feel his brother’s opinion shifting slowly, regardless whether he wondered if Thomas was bluffing or not. For him, that was good enough.

Anthony stared at the piles of readings that Thomas had now made obsolete in one stroke. Clearly, he wasn’t looking forward to returning all of that at once.

“Well, I can’t do anything about it until next week.” Anthony complained.

“Just read something entertaining for now, then.”

He ignored his brother’s annoyed look as he returned to the paper ‘On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems I’ that he had abandoned earlier. Mission accomplished and now he can get back to his own reading. Thomas blocked out the world as he immersed himself formal systems, much more content now as he realised that his discomfort was also due to the churning emotions that Anthony was experiencing.

Thomas didn’t really pay attention when his brother huffed loudly and started returning his pile of books and papers. He certainly didn’t look up when Thomas went back and forth to find new materials to read. He was already engrossed in an idea that would be known Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem in the later years, a principle that would shake mathematics as it showed that no mathematical system will ever be Complete/Perfect.
This was also the reason why he didn’t notice Anthony somehow procuring a large map of Great Britain for their corner of the library, as Anthony tried to locate a place that had been piquing his curiosity ever since Thomas wrote that fake letter from their mother.

*Little Hangleton.*

-'-

Chapter End Notes

The paper by Kurt Gödel that Thomas was reading does exist. *On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems I* became one of the revolutionary works in mathematics. Wikipedia informs me that the Roman numeral I in the title was on purpose, because he was afraid the ideas was hard to stomach that he’d had to clarify and defend them in a second paper. To his surprise, they were a hit, and that second paper was never written.

The paper by Leslie J. Comrie that Anthony was reading also exists. *On the Construction of Tables by Interpolation* actually details one of the earliest and revolutionary uses of business machines of the era for scientific computing. His other contribution was that he did construct it from off-the-shelves machines instead of having a custom-built one. Unlike some other pioneers of the era, it wasn't as if he was sponsored by IBM who would gladly bankroll any machine he needed to build to his own specifications.

And yes, John Dee is an alumnus of King's College, same as Comrie.

Last, to kainee:

So, when Real Life doesn't get in the way, I either reply to your messages or stop and write when I have the inspiration for it. Well, here it is! Another chapter, albeit back to the shorter ones like before.

'-'

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!