

Custodarium

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by [Tina48](#)

Summary

Have you been missing a time travel Tomarry where Harry and Tom are on somewhat equal footing? Where Tom is a plausible budding political leader? Where Harry can stand up to him and their relationship doesn't seem toxic? Where the surrounding events and characters don't go unnoticed? I have, so I gave writing one a try.

“The war is over and the Wizarding Britain has been slowly rising from the ashes. Harry just wishes none of it ever happened – what will he do when he's given a chance to change the past? Was Dumbledore right about “the power he knows not” after all?”

Notes

A/N: I couldn't find enough well-thought-out time travel Tomarry fics, so I gave it a go myself. I tried to stay as true to canon as possible, but I moved one event to accomodate the story: In my version, Myrtle Warren died in June 1944 instead of 1943; Tom was therefore in his sixth year, Hagrid in his fourth year. Underage warning because Tom is sixteen.

- Translation into Español available: [Custodarium](#) by [AlexaR2914](#)

Chapter 1

Harry Potter stood face to face with Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks, Fred Weasley, Lavender Brown, Colin Creevey and more than forty other brave witches and wizards, some of whom he knew by name, some of whom he remembered seeing in the corridors, some of whom he didn't recognise at all. But unlike Harry's rapidly blinking eyes, theirs were unblinking... Unblinking, unmoving, dead.

It was the day of Hogwarts Reopening Ceremony and the memorial had just been revealed. It was a majestic sculpture set in the centre of the Entrance Courtyard. Fifty brass figures stood side by side, wands pointed towards the gate in a protective manner. At their feet lied a large golden plaque with their names, superscripted with the date of the battle and a large Latin *Custodes de Hogwarts*, "Guardians of Hogwarts".

Snape was there, too. He wasn't included in the original design, but the sculptor owed the concept to Harry, asking for his opinion, and Harry insisted that Severus Snape belonged there with the rest of the war heroes...

In fact, an awful lot of people asked for Harry's opinions nowadays, most of which he was not as eager to give. The first few weeks after the battle flew by in a blur of funerals and Death Eater trials. Haunted by grief by day and nightmares by night, Harry was grateful to drown himself in work when the reconstruction finally started. His already broken heart throbbed when he saw the ruin of what used to be his first real home...

But all was not lost – crowdfunding, namely the very generous donations from Malfoy, Black and Potter vaults (the latter only accepted thanks to Harry's stubbornness), secured enough manpower from Britain and abroad alike to make the castle pristine by the end of the summer.

Harry had spent most of the time working with Hermione and Professor Flitwick to restore the permanent charms in the Great Hall; make candles float again, repair the holes in the ceiling enchantment, reconnect the magical channels that made food from the kitchens appear on the tables, that sort of thing. It wasn't overly complicated, but it required concentration, and that was just what Harry needed to take his mind off the bad stuff. He was fairly certain Headmistress McGonagall had assigned the task to him and Hermione for that reason and appreciated her thoughtfulness a lot.

Several fireplaces had been temporarily connected to the Floo Network for the helpers to go home each night, but there was an offer of accommodation in the Slytherin dormitories as the dungeons were the least damaged part of the castle. Harry took it – he was past petty house rivalry and he had nowhere he'd rather stay anyway: The Burrow was gloomy, Fred's absence still almost palpable, and his shoddy attempt at a relationship with Ginny... That was a sad story of its own. Grimmauld Place was no better, and he wasn't of the mind to go looking for a new home just yet. He was rarely alone at Hogwarts, the trip from the dungeons to the Great Hall was short enough not to bring out too many of his bad memories and seeing freshly repaired spots almost every time he'd made it was uplifting.

Still, he couldn't keep himself distracted constantly. Oftentimes, a small event during the day, a mention, a situation, a sight would be the trigger and he would find himself spiralling, staring into the greenish shimmer of the Black Lake late into the night, suffocating on grief, anger, guilt or anxiety. He faced his demons valiantly, silently, because he was *alive* and that was more than he'd expected for months. It would feel ungrateful to complain... He clenched his teeth and waited for the restless sleep to claim him, so he could get back to work again tomorrow.

Today, though, Harry woke up in a strange room... Or rather, a very ordinary room, as far as wizarding residences went (reminded him of Ron's), but he didn't recognize it. Curious and curiously not completely freaked out, he left the room and took the stairs behind it to find himself in a cosy kitchen... Not that he'd noticed anything about it, because in its right corner stood a red-haired woman, waving a wand to manage the ingredients levitating around the stove. She glanced around her shoulder, smiling.

"Good morning, birthday boy! Slept well?"

His eyes widened in wonder, he wanted to say something, but he choked on his words and the scenery suddenly twisted. His mum was there again, and his dad, Sirius, Remus, as well as all of his friends, lifting their glasses for a toast. Another cut, he was with Ron, George and Fred, oh Merlin, they were about to prank the hell out of Malfoy and his cronies...

Harry woke up with a jolt, back in his bed in the dungeons, as tears filled his eyes from the sheer force of how much he wanted, *needed* to go back. Back to his parents, back to Remus and Sirius, back to the world where Voldemort never existed.

Although his internal voice begged and pleaded, no such luck. Sleep wouldn't come to him again; it was almost time to get up anyway.

So he did, and now he was here, facing the life-sized likeness of his lost friends and losing the already fragile grip on his emotions all over again – this was going to be a long day. Hermione beside him squeezed his hand, she felt like a lifeline and he was just glad he refused the request to give a speech, because he knew he would be giving it in a broken, shaky voice and today was supposed to be about closure and new hope.

A banquet in the Great Hall followed, but Harry didn't have much of an appetite. Besides, he'd made a little plan of his own for today and he wanted to get on with it – he usually tried not to stray from his route lest he saw more battle scars, brought out more nightmares... Today, however, the castle was proclaimed fully restored, and he wanted to bask in the normalcy to treat himself to a closure of his own.

Harry threw the Cloak of Invisibility over himself to make sure no one, not even the portraits, would interrupt his pilgrimage, and set off. He roamed around the ground floor, the courtyards, the Transfiguration classroom, he even made the trip to the Quidditch Pitch. Then the first floor, Defence and History classrooms, the Hospital wing... It was surreal how normal everything looked. He was taking it all in, trying to imprint the image into his mind, overwrite every bad memory.

Finally, he found himself on the seventh floor, staring at the wall opposite to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. This was the venue of many of his nightmares, and today, he would face it. As per Hermione's observations, the Room of Requirement had not been destroyed; it contained the Fiendfyre (as needed), forever lost were only the objects in the Room of Hidden Things... and Vincent Crabbe, of course. Harry wondered if it would feel like he was standing on the remains of a person, even if he summoned a different room.

Though apprehensive, he wanted to give it a try... What did he need at the moment? His mind kept drifting to that morning, the dream he had – a world without Voldemort. Lamentably, that was beyond the Room's power, so he'd settled for a comfy, quiet room instead. *Without* Voldemort, *with* a cup of strong tea – damn, he definitely needed *that*.

Sure enough, after the third time he'd walked past, a door appeared. Harry took a deep breath, grabbed the handle and pushed. The room he found inside was just as he'd imagined – with cosy red armchairs, a conference table and an unlit fireplace, it was a miniature of the Gryffindor common room. On the conference table sat the desired cup of hot liquid. Harry slumped into the chair, took a sip and tried to sort his feelings.

He felt surprisingly good; soothed, peaceful, like there really were going to be brighter tomorrows and everything was going to be okay – was that the Room's doing, too? Tired from the emotional strain and the lack of sleep, he must have dozed off, because when he came to, the sun was looming just above the horizon.

Harry got up, stretched, wrapped himself in the Cloak and slipped out of the Room, feeling like his mission had been a success. The trip down would be the start of a new chapter in his life, he told himself, a fitting start to the upcoming year of his return to Hogwarts to complete his education.

It felt so. Well, it felt a bit off, but it would for a while, right? Too casual.

He reached the Great Hall and peeked inside. He was a bit surprised to find it empty and cleaned up, but then again, a few hours must have passed since he'd left the banquet.

He absently cast a Tempus charm. Sparkles shot from his wand, forming an *18:46* in the air. Wow, he'd better find Ron and Hermione, they'd probably been probably worried since he snuck out on them like that.

He was about to cast a Patronus to find them when something in the corner of his eye caught his attention and he did a double take. Bellow, in smaller, now fading golden letters, the Tempus charm read *27 August 1943*. What the hell? That couldn't be right!

He re-cast the charm, but the error was still there. Chills ran down his spine as he quickly strode to the nearby Entrance Hall, to one of its windows that oversaw the Entrance Courtyard.

His heart shot to his throat at the sight: everything was there, the viaduct, the gate... but no memorial, the very memorial he had watched being revealed mere hours ago.

Panic swelling in his stomach, he cast a Patronus, succeeding out of habit despite the absurdity of the situation. A magnificent silver stag appeared before him.

“Tell Hermione,” he stammered, then steeled himself with a deep breath, “Tell her: ‘I need you to meet me by the front gate, it’s urgent.’”

But the stag only bowed its head sadly twice, then blinked out of existence, confirming Harry’s horrible premonition.

He stood there, dumbfounded. As it appeared, he really was in 1943.

A dream, then, this must be a dream.

Since he couldn’t think of any reliable way to prove or disprove that he was dreaming, he would just have to wait it out. This was better than his usual nightmares; way better, actually – it was wicked!

The familiar thrill of a budding adventure gradually replaced the panic in his mind. He could make use of this playground his mind had created – what would he do if he’d appeared over fifty years in the past? Harry’s mind was soon filled with possibilities: see Dumbledore again, get rid of Tom Riddle before he became Voldemort, stop the basilisk from hurting anyone, meet his ancestors, ...

Still, there was this annoying little voice in the back of his mind telling him that this felt too real to be a dream, that it wouldn’t be the first time his Potter luck defied the borders of what even wizards thought possible, and that maybe he should not take this too lightly.

Harry felt the Cloak’s pocket for the Marauder’s Map which he usually kept there and was relieved to hear the familiar rustle of parchment. He pulled it out and muttered the password. Black ink blossomed across the yellowish background. Harry examined it.

There were only four dots in the castle: Armando Dippet in the Headmaster’s Office, Galatea Merrythought and Isidor Rakepick in the Professor’s Quarters, Harrold Picardy on the school grounds. If Dumbledore was a Professor at this time (or rather in Harry’s mental image of this time), he wasn’t present.

By the dot of Harrold Picardy, Harry had noticed another anomaly – no Whomping Willow and no passage beneath it. Now that he thought about it, he remembered the tunnel was only constructed for Remus to sneak out into the Shrieking Shack... By this logic, shouldn’t the passage on the fourth floor that caved in in 1993 be clear now?

Harry decided to find out. He followed the Map until he reached a large, ornamental mirror. Now what? Since it was useless in his time, the twins never bothered to mention the opening mechanism. Harry gripped at the edges and struggled to push it aside. The mirror wouldn’t budge no matter how hard he tried. Groaning, he relaxed his arms and leant in to rest his head on the mirror surface...

...and fell right through, barely managing to stop himself from falling on his face.

“Lumos,” he whispered once he recovered from the fall.

He found himself at the top of a short staircase which led to a dusty medium-sized room, no doubt the place Sirius described as *large enough to hold a meeting*. The room ended in a ~~significantly longer~~ seemingly never-ending staircase.

Lots of stairs and two levelled passages later, Harry reached a liquescent, silvery surface he recognized as the inside of a one-sided magical illusion. Bracing himself, he stepped through and found himself at the bottom of the rock formation connecting Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, facing a plain stone wall of a house which upon walking around to see the front turned out to be the Three Broomsticks.

Chapter 2

By the following morning, Harry made two significant observations:

One: The wizarding culture wasn't as dynamic as the Muggle one. People dressed more or less the same, the Three Broomsticks looked the same, Butterbeer and accommodation cost the same.

Two: He was still in 1943 and almost certainly not dreaming.

Well, *fuck!*

It must have been the Room of Requirement, Harry mused over his breakfast. Maybe it could bend not just space, but spacetime... Maybe it would take him back if he asked nicely.

But Harry was reluctant to ask, because as soon as he made peace with the thought of being thrown fifty-five years into the past, he was hit with an overwhelming temptation to change the future. He thought about the dream, the world never tainted by Voldemort. What if his little trip was that world's only chance?

He knew little about time travel or the nature of time in general, but he was quite certain that if he had changed the future too much, he wouldn't be able to go back to where he came from. He also remembered Hermione explaining the grandfather paradox to him and Ron once in third year – it was entirely possible that if he changed the future enough, he would get sucked into the paradox and disappear.

His heart sank – if he succeeded, he would never see Ron or Hermione again and possibly die...

But they would get to see him! His future self would grow up playing with Ron, getting pranked by the twins, being called “cub” by Sirius and Remus, being loved by his parents, looking up to Dumbledore... Maybe even Snape would be a smidgeon less grumpy in that future. Maybe, if he managed to reconcile with Lily over the years, Harry would even get to call him *Uncle Sev*.

Harry choked on his toast at the thought and earned himself an alarmed look from a middle-aged witch sitting at the neighbouring table. Fair enough, he *had* just choked on his food laughing while also looking like he was about to cry at the same time.

He was wearing his formal robes, a pale green shirt and black trousers, a rather timeless look; definitely better than his usual muggle T-shirt and jeans would have been, but he still felt underdressed compared to the wizards in the streets in bowties and vests.

...Which lead to another issue: if he did choose to stay, what the hell was he going to do? If his calculations were correct, Tom Riddle would be starting his sixth year in a few days, and Harry was no cold-blooded assassin to go throwing deadly curses at sixteen-year-olds... Okay, not *intentionally*. He was a nobody here – no family, no history, almost no money.

If he was going to do this or at least buy himself more time to decide, he should find himself an ally.

The first to cross his mind was Dumbledore; he would understand, he would try to help... But he probably had his hands full with the ongoing war against Grindelwald just about now and whatever Harry did (and almost inadvertently messed up), he didn't want to ruin the man's prospects.

He tried to gather what little he'd known about his family history – his grandfather Fleamont Potter was born in 1905 and he would now be building his Sleekeazy Hair Potion empire. His wife Euphemia should be a bit younger, but still well into her thirties. Harry had been told they'd had trouble conceiving a child, gave up, then were taken by surprise when Euphemia got pregnant with James in 1959.

They were both presumably Gryffindors and Fleamont's father, Henry Potter (Harry wasn't sure whether he'd been alive by 1943), was known to have argued in favour of aiding Muggles during World War I – they seemed to Harry like a nice sort.

Besides, he was dying to meet his family. To *have* a family.

Recent Potters (before James and Lily went into hiding) had been known to reside in Upper Flagley, a small wizarding community in Yorkshire, so Harry decided to try his luck there. He paid for the services of the Three Broomsticks (leaving himself with the total of ten galleons and five sickles) and stepped into the fireplace.

He Flooed into the local pub, the Bard's Barn.

Greeted by the smell of ginger and something sweet mixing with the lingering smell of Floo powder, he stepped from the fireplace and glanced around the room. It wasn't too big, just enough to fit five round tables and a bar. It had a cosy and slightly antique vibe. The furniture and decor were wooden, the walls were plain white except for the left one which was decorated with a tapestry. Before Harry could notice anything else, the sound of a lute resounded through the room and a sing-song voice boomed:

"A newcom'r! Welcometh to Bard's Barn, ðe is, mine own Barn! How can this humble troubadour s'rve thee?"

"Er... I'm sorry, sir, I was just hoping to find whether the Potter family lived around here," Harry answered the portrait, taken aback.

"The Pott'rs, thou say? Valorous folk, lad, I even have a song or two about them. Hark, har-"

"Maybe next time, Morgan, give the poor lad a break," interrupted a female voice from the left. Harry followed it with his eyes and saw an elderly lady coming from what would be the kitchen with a steaming baking pan in her hands. She set it on the counter before turning her grandmotherly smile at Harry.

"Sorry about that," she said. "Morgan here gets a little over-excited with new guests. Did you say you were looking for the Potters? A relative, might I guess?"

Harry nodded.

“Oh, my condolences, dear. Poor Harry, he was far too young. Really, running around, chasing dark wizards at his age...”

She paused, probably because Harry was staring at her like he'd seen a ghost, then hesitantly added, “You've heard that Henry Potter passed away, haven't you?”

Oh. *Oooh*. Henry, pet name Harry. Merlin, that almost gave him a heart attack!

“Y-yeah, I mean, of course,” he stammered, “I've come to see... *Uncle* Fleamont, but I've never been to his place and lost the directions. Could you please point me to his house?”

She walked Harry out to the front porch and directed him to a house at the end of the street. It was built in the handsome style typical for British villages with stone walls and white window frames. It looked spacious, but nowhere near as big or fancy as the Malfoy Manor.

Harry took a deep breath and rang the doorbell. Today was a Friday, it was entirely possible that no one would be home and he'd have to wait – with his heart in his mouth, he was almost wishing it to be so just to delay the turning point. This would decide the course of his trip to 1943.

The door opened to reveal a man in his late thirties wearing a plain cotton shirt and slacks with suspenders. He had jet-black hair like Harry, though his was elegantly slicked back, and he wore a matching moustache. Their heights, their noses and jaws were also similar, their lips and eyes, however, were different in both shape and colour.

“Good morning, lad, what brings you to our doorstep on this fine day?”

“Good morning, sir, sorry to bother you. I have something important to discuss with Mr. Fleamont Potter,” said Harry sheepishly.

“Well, you've got the right person,” Fleamont smiled. He had kind eyes, Harry noticed, and it made him a tiny bit less nervous. “What's your business?”

Harry shifted on his feet uncomfortably. “Could we talk somewhere more private, please?”

Fleamont looked surprised by the request, but he invited Harry in and offered him a seat in a comfy living room. He settled himself into an armchair opposite to Harry and raised an expectant eyebrow, beckoning him to speak. Harry channelled all his Gryffindor bravery into his next words:

“My name is Harry Potter, I'm a time traveller and I need your help.”

Fleamont blinked incredulously.

“Excuse me?”

“My name-” Harry began, but Fleamont stopped him, now frowning.

“No, I heard you the first time. Look, mate, if you just came here to pull a prank, you needn’t have bothered with the secrecy.” He started to get up, probably to usher Harry out.

“I have a proof!” said Harry urgently and reached into the inner pocket of his robes while Fleamont waited with a sceptical expression. That expression vanished from his face, though, when Harry pulled out the Cloak of Invisibility.

“Impossible,” Fleamont breathed out and ran out of the room. He returned a short while later, holding a Cloak of his own. Looking confused, he sunk into the armchair he’d sat in before. He processed the news silently for a few moments, opening and closing his mouth as if to say something but aborting the thought before he could voice it, until he finally settled for:

“How? ...How long?”

Harry winced. “I can’t tell you exactly, just know that it was a unique occurrence and nobody is likely to follow... I’m not even sure I could do it again. As for how long – a lot. Decades.”

Fleamont nodded, stroking his moustache with a shaky hand. “Right, if this is past for you, there would be secrets... So, you’re stuck?”

“Maybe,” answered Harry honestly. “There’s something I need to try before attempting to go back. I can’t do it alone, though – it would be easiest if I could attend Hogwarts, but I have no background here...”

“Oh! Of course! I’ll do what I can, just, Harry, could you perhaps tell me... How are we related? You see, me and my wife...”

“I know,” Harry said quickly, scratching at the back of his neck. “I shouldn’t tell you that either, just, uh... keep trying, eh?” he offered.

Fleamont’s face lit up.

xXx

Harry and his grandfather(-to-be) spent the next two hours coming up with Harry’s cover story – Fleamont would introduce him as a second cousin whose family branch had lived in New Zealand for many years but had maintained some contact with the homeland. When Harry’s parents, Magizoologists, suddenly died in a very unfortunate accident involving Antipodean Opaleyes, Fleamont offered to take him in to finish his education at Hogwarts.

They chose New Zealand because Harry wouldn’t have to pretend to speak a language he didn’t know, and he’d only have to change his accent a bit. Also, New Zealand currently had the population of just over 1 500 000 people and only a couple hundred witches and wizards, not nearly enough to sustain a wizarding school – the Kiwi wizarding youth would be home-schooled or taught in small groups, so it wouldn’t seem strange for Harry not to have sat a standardised test before.

Considering his new mission and the sorry state of his education, Harry thought it best to join Tom Riddle in the sixth year. By noon, Fleamont had already sent an owl to Headmaster

Dippet, informing him of the situation.

The only point they couldn't agree on was whether to let Euphemia in on the plan – Fleamont didn't want to keep secrets from his wife while Harry thought that any extra person in the know would be an unnecessary risk. Harry eventually gave in, settling for the compromise of Obliviating her if she didn't take it well.

After a quick lunch, they set out for Diagon Alley. Fleamont had a business meeting at Gringotts at two o'clock, so they arrived in advance to withdraw some money for Harry's supplies. Today, he would only buy the bare necessities – clothes and a New Zealand travel guide. He couldn't buy any school supplies until he'd received the list.

He was pleasantly surprised to find Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions where he'd remembered it, though he discovered upon entering that the Madam Malkin he knew was still an apprentice at the time and the shop was run by her mother. He purchased a set of school robes, casual robes, shirts, trousers and, to be à la mode, two vests.

Feeling brand new in more than just one sense, Harry stepped out of the fashion store and set out for the bookshop. He quickly found what he came for: *Magical New Zealand – The Ultimate Wizarding Travel Guide*. He still had some time left before he had to meet Fleamont back at Gringotts, so he used it to roam around the bookshelves, looking for anything useful. He ended up buying a *Beginner's Guide to Occlumency* as it hit him that he would be exposing himself to a potentially hostile Legilimens – Hermione sometimes made him practice while they were on the run, but with the secrets he'd been hiding now, he felt like he needed a more solid foundation.

He didn't meet anyone else he could recognise, though that group of lanky redhaired boys gushing over the broom display positively brimmed with Weasley spirit.

Fleamont had already been waiting in front of the bank. Together, they Apparated back to the Potter residence in Upper Flagley. Fleamont led Harry to a guest room – Harry's room for the foreseeable future, er, past, whatever. When he was done unpacking, he joined his grandfather in the living room and used the time left until Euphemia's return to find out more about his family.

As Harry had already known, Fleamont was a potioneer and the inventor of Sleekeasy's Hair Potion. He'd started the brand in 1928, securing a contract with one store and two beauty salons in England, then gradually expanding. By 1940s, he'd been exporting his products to the whole of Europe and America. He was currently employing a team of potioners to run the mass production and mostly busied himself with development and new contracts.

Euphemia McKinnon used to be a hairdresser at one of the first salons Fleamont worked with. Fresh out of Hogwarts herself, she quickly fell for charming young potioner and married him two years later. She now ran her own beauty salon on Horizont Alley, the street intersecting Diagon Alley in its southern part, and was soon due to come home after the day's work.

Fleamont was in the middle of a story about his duelling adventures when the fire flared green and an elegant witch in her thirties stepped out. She was wearing light summer robes,

her hair falling to her shoulders in perfect dark brown curls.

“Hello, dear. You forgot to mention we were expecting guests.”

“We weren’t, but I’m sure you will excuse this lad’s hastiness once you hear his story. Why don’t you have a seat and let me explain?”

xXx

Euphemia listened to Fleamont and Harry’s story in a contemplative silence, shifting her gaze between the two men suspiciously. Once her husband was done, she said:

“This isn’t some elaborate joke, is it?”

Fleamont merely looked amused.

“Not this time, darling, I promise.”

Harry had sensed a story behind that, this was the man who raised James, after all, but this wasn’t the time to ask. Euphemia measured him from head to toe one last time, as if deciding whether she wanted to believe those words, then smiled.

“Well, then. Welcome, Harry, I’m looking forward to getting to know you. Now, I bet you’re both hungry – how about we start over a dinner?”

Harry’s jaw dropped and Fleamont gave him a victorious look.

Just like that, Harry had found himself casually dining with his grandparents, chatting about casual things like Quidditch, school, politics...

The bizarre casualness of his interaction with the Potters struck Harry a few times and he found himself zoning out, overcome by the complicated cluster of emotion. He was doing that now, too – hours later, staring into the ceiling of the guest room, slowly drifting asleep and, for the first time in months, feeling genuinely excited about waking up.

Chapter 3

Harry's acceptance letter arrived the next morning along with a shopping list. He'd be allowed to attend sixth year N.E.W.T. level classes, though he'd have to arrive earlier on the 1st of September to demonstrate his abilities and (re)sit his O.W.L.s in June to be eligible for N.E.W.T.s the following year. He had signed up for Defence Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration, Care of Magical Creatures, Herbology and Potions. He was fairly confident in everything but the latter; fortunately, Fleamont had offered to help him review the potions they were most likely to ask about.

Granted, Harry didn't know if he'd even be here, exist, by June... Myrtle Warren would die in June if he didn't interfere. Now that he had more time, he pondered his course of action:

He could just kill Riddle (again) and be done with it, but there was a major hole in that plan. If he killed the Heir of Slytherin and for some reason didn't get sucked into a time paradox, he would likely spend the rest of his life in Azkaban. Worse yet, if he tried and didn't succeed, he could end up in Azkaban without even changing the future. Harry decided to set murder aside as the last option.

Second option: he could come out as a time traveller and share his memories with the wizarding authorities, but what if, as soon as he opened his mouth to say it, the subsequent time paradox would catch up with him, making both himself and his memories disappear before he could prove anything?

No, that wasn't ideal either.

A crazy idea found its way into his mind.

He could try to lead Riddle off the evil path by... *befriending* him? Or the contrary, giving him something to hate more than Muggles? Maybe both? It would be a dangerous game, but the idea of pranking the baby dark lord made him grin every time it crossed his mind.

Harry was strangely tempted by this approach, not only because it avoided the possible paradoxes of the first two, but also because deep down he'd felt sorry for a lonely orphan, forced to spend the summers without magic, World War II raging behind his windows, then having to fight for his place in a rather exclusive society for the rest of the year.

Shitty summers and tough school years? Harry could relate.

...But friends with Voldemort? It was mad, it was barmy, it was completely bananas, it was-

The right thing to do. It was what Dumbledore would have wanted... It was what *Harry* wanted in his heart of hearts. Plus, if he succeeded and didn't disappear, he would be able to make a life for himself here.

Thus, Harry had spent the rest of August 1943 shopping for school supplies, bonding with his grandparents, dusting his O.W.L. skills, reading up on New Zealand and strengthening his

Occlumency shields. The meditations lulled him to sleep each night and before he knew it, it was the 1st of September.

He exchanged goodbyes with Euphemia and side-along Apparated with Fleamont to Hogsmeade, his shrunken trunk in his pocket. From there, they walked to the castle gates where they were greeted by Headmaster Armando Dippet. The headmaster stood straight and tall even in his old age, wore traditional robes, long grey hair and a short beard, looking less grandfatherly and more authoritative than Dumbledore had.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter, it is a pleasure to see you again on these grounds. And this must be Harry. Welcome to Hogwarts, young man, I am sorry it is under such dire circumstances.”

“Thank you for having me, sir,” Harry returned politely. After a quick exchange of pleasantries and a goodbye to Fleamont, the Headmaster led Harry to a classroom with his N.E.W.T. level selection of Professors gathered at the head table.

Harry choked at the sight – Dumbledore was there, alive and well! *No, you can't afford to get all emotional now*, he told himself, but he suddenly became very nervous.

He needn't have been. He wowed everyone with his practical Defence skills, he was even lucky enough to get a Charms question about conjuration and got to show off his Patronus. He answered Professor Kettleburn's questions on Griffins, Hippogriffs and Pixies, then successfully Transfigured a cup into a chicken for Dumbledore. Potions came last – young Professor Slughorn was radiating favouritism as much as his older self, asking rather simple questions about the O.W.L. potions and commending overenthusiastically when Harry knew the answer. Finally, he asked Harry to brew a Pepper-Up, the quickest (and easiest) of the curriculum.

Harry had a good feeling about the whole ordeal, which was confirmed when the Professors turned in their marks and the Headmaster solemnly congratulated him on being admitted to all of his chosen classes.

“Only one thing left, Mr. Potter. Please follow me.”

He led Harry to his office and took a shabby old hat from the shelf. Harry was too busy examining the office (he'd seen it under three different Headmasters now, Dippet's version was organised and sort of classy) to feign surprise. Fortunately, the Headmaster was also too busy explaining about the Sorting and the four Houses to notice.

Someone, however, did notice, because once the Sorting Hat was on Harry's head, it started with:

Oh my, at least you have a good reason to be looking so unimpressed.

Bugger, sorry – I'll have to work on that, thought Harry in response, hoping his lack of reaction didn't actually hurt the Hat's ego.

Yes, you will, or I will make sure not to even offer you Slytherin next time.

But... are you offering it now? 'Cause if you are, I would rather like to take it.

What else would I offer to sneaky time travellers? Very well, a pleasure doing business with you again, kid. See you in half a century – until then, better be

“Slytherin!”

xXx

Unsurprisingly, Slughorn was delighted to have *such a promising young man* Sorted into his house. As a transfer student, Harry would have his bed added to his year’s prefect’s room in case he needed some extra help adjusting; he was just surprised to see his luck moving along with his plans for once. A wise man once said: Keep your friends close, your enemies closer and aspiring dark lords that you are trying to sway to the good side the closest.

(That man was Harry, he just made it up.)

Slughorn kept him company while they waited by the Great Hall for the other students to arrive and used the time to alternate between useful information about the school and his favourite topic; his collection of successful ex-students. By the time the first arrivals walked through the door, Harry was eager to trade his companion for Tom Riddle, and wasn’t *that* saying something?

Harry could spot Tom Riddle immediately as he entered and couldn’t stop a sharp intake of breath. Tom looked exactly like he had in the Chamber of Secrets back in Harry’s second year – tall, neat and so very handsome with his wavy dark brown hair, high cheekbones and balanced, not-too-sharp-not-too-soft features. No wonder most people would miss the symptoms, it was difficult to see the devil in the face of an angel.

He’d been mentally preparing for this moment for a week, but there were things in life nothing could prepare you for – like meeting your parents’ murderer’s sixteen-year-old self. *Come on, Harry, calm down. You beat him once when he had sixty years on you, you could beat him again if you needed to.*

Slughorn spotted Tom shortly after Harry and promptly stood up to catch him in the crowd. Harry followed.

“Tom! Good evening, it’s a joy to see you in these halls for another year! Did you have a pleasant summer?”

Tom smiled disarmingly, a perfect illusion of polite amiability. “Good evening, sir. I did, did you?”

“Oh yes, my boy, very pleasant indeed, and an even more pleasant start of the year! This right here is Harry Potter, a transfer student who has been Sorted into Slytherin earlier today. He shall be in sixth year with you and we thought it would be a good idea to let him room with you as well. You wouldn’t mind looking after him for me, would you?”

“Of course not, sir, it’s what prefects are for.” He turned to Harry, smiling amicably. “Nice to meet you, Harry, my name is Tom Riddle and I’ll be your guide during your first days of school. How about we head in and talk more over dinner?”

“Yeah, er, nice to meet you, too. Let’s... go in then.”

Harry let himself be ushered into the Great Hall and to the Slytherin table, adrenalin coursing through his veins, although after the slip-up with the Sorting Hat, he remembered to look accordingly wide-eyed at the “first” sight of the impressive ceiling enchantments (which he’d spent the past month repairing).

They sat down and Tom introduced him to the other Slytherin prefects and several other sixth and seventh year students. Harry recognised Fulcran Lestrangle and Dalamar Avery as the two boys from Slughorn’s memory and he assumed they were also a part of Tom’s first gang, the Knights of Walpurgis. Based on their behaviour and the allegiances of their unborn descendants, his other guesses were sixth years Tristan Mulciber and Christopher Nott, seventh years Isaac Rosier and Maximillion Dolohov and seventh year prefect Abraxas Malfoy.

“So, what made you join us for our sixth year?” asked Tom with what looked like genuine curiosity. The students in their vicinity seemed interested in the answer, too.

Harry had practiced for this. “I was born in New Zealand and was home-schooled until now, but last month, my parents...”

He trailed off, thinking about the victims of the Battle of Hogwarts and the friends he’d risked never seeing again to be here – a radical but effective strategy he’d come up with to compensate for his shoddy acting skills. His eyes welled up and when he spoke again, his voice sounded fittingly strained.

“...had a dragon-related accident. After that, Uncle Fleamont offered me stay with him and complete my education at Hogwarts.”

Someone gasped and the people around looked uncomfortable or hastily gave their condolences. Tom winced. His acting was on point, it made even Harry doubt whether it had been acting at all, but he knew better.

“Merlin, that’s terrible. Sorry for asking, I shouldn’t have-”

“No! No, it’s fine, it would have come up sooner or later... So, what do you lot do here beside studying? Quidditch, anyone?”

Harry’s attempt at changing the subject was a great success. They discussed brooms with Lestrangle for a while before Headmaster Dippet beckoned everyone to quiet down and began his welcome speech.

After the feast, Harry followed his housemates to the dungeons. He was rooming with Tom Riddle, Fulcran Lestrangle, Dalamar Avery and a quiet boy called Clarence Pebblestone who’d reportedly spent most of his time in the library. The dormitory, originally meant for

four, magically expanded to accommodate Harry's bed and wardrobe. The rest of the night was uneventful, Tom had left to tend to his prefect duties, Harry made small-talk with his new roommates, then closed the curtains and practiced Occlumency – the book was way more helpful than Snape's lessons... or perhaps it was the horcrux that used to keep him from improving; in any case, he was close to being able to maintain a passable passive shield at all times.

He went to sleep with a single thought on his mind: *The fun is about to begin.*

xXx

Harry grinned at his Potion's textbook – Professor Slughorn hadn't disappointed, he gave them the same speech as the first time around and asked them to attempt the Draught of Living Death. While Harry inevitably forgot some of Snape's notes on the potions they'd brewed later in sixth year, that first time he'd followed the mysterious Half-Blood Prince's instructions was burned into his memory. Crush the Sophorous Beans, use thirteen instead of twelve, add a clockwise stir – piece of cake, right?

He couldn't wait to see Riddle's face when he beat him in their very first class. He tuned out everything else and concentrated solely on his potion – this would cost him too much fun to mess up.

An hour later, a perfect pale lilac liquid was bubbling in his cauldron and a perfect giddy feeling was bubbling in his stomach.

"Alright, you lot, time's up! Let's see how close you got," announced Slughorn cheerfully. "Valiant effort, Miss Bell, next time ground the root of asphodel more finely... Miss Black, looks to me like you added the beans before the sloth brain, hence the redness... Tom! As expected, the closest I've seen in my years of teaching! But you'll need smaller Valerian root pieces to smooth out the texture," he went on, commenting on other students' potions until it was finally Harry's turn.

"Harry, our newcomer! I've been curious to see how you fared," he winked at him jovially, then he looked into his cauldron and his eyebrows shot up. "But, my boy, this is..." He picked up the ladle and watched the liquid pour down from it. "Exceptional! Perfect! One drop could knock out the whole room! I haven't seen one quite like this brewed by a student! Potions must run in your blood, well, I hope not literally, at least in this case..." He kept on babbling.

Grinning despite himself, Harry couldn't resist the urge any longer and glanced in Riddle's direction. There was a smile on his face and he nodded to Harry, a picture of good sportsmanship, but a small crease between his eyebrows, like a crack in his mask, gave him away.

Suddenly, Harry felt a familiar touch on his mind, a subtle but not yet undetectable probe. His Occlumency shields sprung up as if on instinct, and he physically went for his wand before he'd caught himself, his hand stopping mid-air. Wordless Legilimency at sixteen? Seriously? Harry's smile froze, then went up again...

Because Riddle was staring at him wide-eyed, obviously dumbstruck, his mask of indifference shattered. Harry could swear Riddle's mouth even fell slightly open.

"-rry, is everything okay?" he heard Slughorn say and it brought his attention back to the situation at hand.

"Erm, yes, sir. Sorry, sometimes I get these cramps in my arm after brewing," he said, lifting the hand that was frozen in the air to scratch the back of his neck apologetically. He shot Tom a pointed look with raised eyebrows, as if to say "*not nice*" and "*we'll talk about this later*", then diverted his gaze and, deliberately not looking in that direction again, paid attention for the rest of the class. He walked out with a vial of Felix Felicis tucked safely in the pocket of his robes.

Chapter 4

Their next period was Charms with Professor Kamelion, and instead of pretending to follow Tom's lead, Harry pretended to follow a group of the other sixth years who'd been also headed there. The class was uneventful, mostly theory, Harry had plenty of time to consider the situation. Should he confront Riddle later? Should he wait for Riddle to confront him? Because there *would* be confrontation, their beds were thirty sodding feet apart – Harry wasn't sure he could sleep a wink until that incident had been resolved.

Maybe he should step back for once, wait and see how Riddle deals with it.

He didn't have to wait long. They had a lunch break after Charms and while he was headed to the Great Hall, Tom caught up to him.

"Harry, can I have a word?" he said in a neutral voice.

A direct approach, huh. This should be interesting.

He nodded and followed Riddle into an empty corridor. They came to a halt when they were out of earshot.

"So, what do you have to say?" Harry opened.

Riddle's gaze dropped to the ground for a second, then back to Harry in a (presumably fake) hesitant gesture. He slipped his hands into his robe's pockets, but before he could do or say anything else, he had the tip of Harry's wand pressed firmly into his neck, Harry's left hand on his wand hand's wrist and Harry's eyes watching him, narrowed in suspicion.

"I don't know where you intended this conversation to go, but it sure isn't going anywhere if I can't see your hands," he warned as calmly as he could manage.

Instead of threats of his own or downright curses, Riddle raised his empty hands into the air innocently.

"My, you're a jumpy one. I just wanted to apologize, okay?"

Apologize? ... I see, that's how you're going to play it. Not bad, Harry appraised the situation wordlessly. Riddle must have taken his silence as a cue to continue.

"I'm really sorry, it was very rude of me. It's just that I've been studying Legilimency for a while now and you looked really happy in Potions, I thought it would be nice to feel your emotions. I shouldn't have done that without permission."

"... Someone would give you a permission to do that?" Harry gave him an incredulous look.

"Fulcran and Dalamar did," he offered. *Sure they did.*

Tom gulped and Harry's eyes were unwittingly drawn to his Adam's apple as it was just below their level. Had they been standing this close the whole time? If he lifted his gaze just a little higher, he could see the traces of a stubble on Riddle's jawline – the wizard had an unreal jawline-

"Would you please lower your wand now?"

"Er, yeah." Harry let go abruptly and ran his empty hand through his hair. "Just, um, don't do that again."

"I won't, I promise. If that's settled, shall we head to lunch?"

"...Sure."

Somewhere along the way, Harry noticed that Tom's hands were clenched in fists. He smirked to himself.

xXx

Who the fuck was that menace? *What* was he?

When Slughorn first introduced them, Tom noticed nothing out of ordinary about the transfer student. He seemed like yet another kind of person Tom hated – a sheltered pureblood with a sob story (probably something to do with that funky scar on his forehead) and a passion for Quidditch...

Fair enough, aside from the easily manipulated, there weren't any kinds of people Tom actually liked. Since Slughorn had been sucking up to him right from the get-go, the newcomer must have been from a wealthy or otherwise influential family – Tom was going to explore the option of using him the same way as Malfoy or Nott.

Then the bastard went and beat him in Potions. *No one* had beaten him in Potions since first year! If he ever hated anything, it was losing.

But Potter didn't stop there. He had to flash him that smug smile, like he knew exactly what he'd just done and wanted to rub it in. That was what made Tom snap – he needed to know if Potter did it on purpose and was itching to try that neat little trick he'd read about in the darker books on Legilimency that allowed the caster to torture their target with horrible images.

How did it backfire so badly? Not only had Potter sensed the attack, he deflected it, and by the way his hand shot to his wand, he almost cursed Tom back. What kind of life had he lived to get reflexes like these?

Tom got another taste of those when he went to resolve the situation. He had the whole Charms lesson to come up with a suitable solution and eventually decided to get Potter alone and Obliviate him before he could tell anyone or make a back-up. How the hell did Potter get so (rightly) suspicious? And so quick? New Zealand suddenly seemed like much less friendly a place if it popped out kids like that.

He had to go for a plan B, a bloody humiliating plan B – apologising at wandpoint. Tom was burning with anger for the second time in one day, but he had to walk and eat side by side with the four-eye like everything was okay when everything was most certainly Not Okay.

It would require careful planning, but he'd get his revenge eventually. All the Felix Felicis in the world couldn't save Harry Potter now, he'd make sure of it.

xXx

Harry made it through the first fortnight of school without getting maimed or cursed... That was worth something, considering his situation. He'd made a habit of sleeping with his curtains closed because of the Silencing Charm he'd been using to prevent waking up his roommates if he had a nightmare – it could only be cast on enclosed spaces... And so could the Intruder Alarm Charm he got used to casting just in case. It was like a tamer version of the safety measures he and Hermione had taken each stop while they were on the run last year, but he *was* laying just metres away from Tommy-dearest, so he didn't think it was an overkill. Constant vigilance!

That didn't seem to be enough for his ~~apparently suicidal~~ Gryffindor part, because he also got into the habit of following Riddle wherever he went – it was sixth year all over again (literally)... Except this time, instead of doing it surreptitiously, he followed Tom around unrelentingly like a lost puppy during the days – most notably, he made sure to be there whenever Tom went to the library since he needed to know how far the aspiring dark lord had been into the research of his ancestry. Riddle was bound to discover his blood link to Salazar Slytherin one of these days, then piece it together with the legends of the Chamber of Secrets and start looking for it...

After all, Harry had a pet project of his own and it absolutely needed to be finished before Riddle's.

He could just kill the basilisk with a rooster before Tom had the chance to set it free, save Myrtle's life, save Hagrid from getting expelled, but then he'd be risking an untimely paradox – who knew how his original timeline would have played out without the giant snake still in its lair and Hagrid as the Groundskeeper?

At first, Riddle had presumably pinned Harry's constant presence to the fact that he was assigned with showing him around. A week into the semester, when Harry clearly no longer needed guidance, he caught an occasional "*Are you really going to be like this?*" look. Currently, whenever he got up to follow Tom or sat beside him at meals, he got a resigned "*You really are going to be like this,*" look, and he was perfectly content with that.

To his credit, he wasn't doing anything to annoy Riddle during their time together – they talked when it seemed appropriate, he was nice to Riddle's ~~friends~~ cronies, but otherwise maintained a companionable silence... Or an illusion thereof, because Harry *was* watching Riddle carefully and knew that Riddle was watching him – he suspected the other wizard had only acceded to the game because Harry had piqued his interest after the incident in Potions.

The only times Riddle was sure to lose Harry were the classes they didn't share and his prefect patrols... or so he would think. On those nights, Harry would study (or laze around,

depending on his mood) within the safety of his drawn bed curtains, keeping an eye on Tom's dot on the Map. He'd watch with a bated breath whenever they passed the second-floor girls' lavatory. *No, not yet*, he would tell himself. Harry hadn't detected any suspicious behaviour so far – the books Riddle was borrowing from the library had been purely homework-related, he'd never strayed from his path while patrolling the corridors, he was perfectly polite and never showed open hostility.

Harry learned a lot about Riddle both as a person and a persona. Riddle's persona rather ironically reminded him of Cedric Diggory; outgoing, responsible, chivalrous, academically accomplished, popular with both students and teachers. His real character only leaked through little gestures that Harry was starting to recognise – if he was annoyed, he'd scrunch his nose almost imperceptibly. If he was angry or indignant, he'd clench his fists. If he was amused, he'd lift his eyebrows just a little, and conversely, if he was faking amusement, he'd keep them down.

Watching Riddle as closely as he did, Harry also noticed unnecessary details, like the way his hair formed a cute little curl in the back of his neck – whenever Harry sat behind him in class, he felt a bizarre urge to stick his pinkie through it... or the way Riddle absently caressed his lower lip with the vane of his quill, how clear and pale his skin was, how he managed to look lean and fit without a shirt on even though he wasn't particularly muscular... Harry was more than a little disturbed by the way these observations stuck to his mind, and also sort of mad, because bugger, if he was forced to reconsider his sexuality over *Voldemort* of all people, he wouldn't be able to look his parents or any of his friends in the eye once they were born...

...or Dumbledore. Harry sometimes zoned out in Transfiguration at the sight of him, reminiscing because of something he'd said, though it helped that the man had really been a little biased against Slytherins at the time.

It was on Friday night, the 17th of September, that something on the Marauder's Map caught Harry's attention. He was scanning it briefly for Riddle who should have been returning from his patrol any minute.

Instead, he found Riddle's dot on the sixth floor, in the company of Lestrangle and Avery's. Last he knew, those two were in their beds – they must have taken extra care not to alert him while sneaking out.

It's happening!

Harry quickly threw the Cloak of Invisibility over his pyjamas, cast a Silencing charm on his feet and rushed out of the dormitory with the Map still in his hands. Upon closer inspection, he saw Malfoy with Rosier and Dolohov leaving the dungeons while Mulciber and Nott with someone called Aaron Morgenstern waited by the familiar spot on the seventh floor. *Of course* Tom Riddle would hold a meeting there, the show-off.

Harry's best hope was to catch up with Malfoy's group before it had reached the Grand Staircase, fortunately they didn't have much of a head start. He'd followed them all the way up to the Seventh floor where the others waited, the door to the Room of Requirement already there. Now for the trickiest part: entering unnoticed. He readied himself on the side, but he didn't get a good-enough opening until the second to last attendee had stepped in –

adrenalin-infused blood pounding in his ears, he had to chance it. He slipped through with only a second to spare. He slumped against its frame in relief and examined the scene before him.

The room was small, only spacious enough to accommodate the meeting. The proto-Death-Eaters occupied two long sofas with a corresponding conference table in between. Riddle was sat in an armchair at its head, looking so nonchalantly imperious, like he'd been born for it. When he spoke, it was in a solemn, firm voice:

“Knights of Walpurgis, I have summoned you to welcome a new semester of our reign – together, we shall return the lost order to the Wizarding World and unite it in the ultimate battle against Muggles.”

Talk about dramatic.

“Our operation has been going smoothly – the Knights who graduated last year have been successful in securing perspective positions. At this pace, we shall be ready to propose an alliance with Gellert Grindelwald after he wins the war in continental Europe. Until then... Have you done what I asked of you in our last meeting?”

Several “Yes, my Lord”s chorused through the room.

“Report. Isaac?”

“I had my sister ask around the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, as you requested, my Lord. No cases of necromancy or related dark magic have been detected in at least a century.”

Riddle merely nodded in acknowledgement. “Tristan.”

Mulciber winced. “I am sorry, my Lord, I’ve mentioned it to my father multiple times. He wouldn’t talk to me about anything going on in the Department of Mysteries, though he insinuated it possessed nothing of interest to our cause.”

“Disappointing, but understandable. Christopher.”

“There were a couple of mentions of the Philosopher’s Stone in our family library with only vague information about its creation. I also found three rituals that could procure a body, though neither could fully bring back the dead or reverse the aging process.”

“Good, provide me with further detail on those rituals later. Fulcran?”

“I wasn’t able to meet the Flammels in person, but I’ve asked around in the French wizarding circles – the effect isn’t ideal, as you suspected. They never stopped aging and are currently extremely fragile.”

“Abraxas.”

“Our library contained these two books of dubious quality on Necromancy, no useful mentions of the Stone. But it had the book you have been looking for.” He laid a black book

Harry had recognised as *Secrets of the Darkest Art* on the table before Riddle, who smiled in satisfaction.

“Excellent. Morgenstern?”

The Knight in question wore Ravenclaw colours and a prefect badge. He looked at least sixteen, but he wasn’t in any of Harry’s classes – a seventh year, then. “As expected, the legislation regarding unicorn blood is tight – just being caught with it, or any potion that is known to contain it, could earn you years in Azkaban. No loopholes.”

“Very well. I will go through your findings and let you know if I need anything else. For now, concentrate on your studies – work hard to demonstrate to the public what the Knights represent. Meeting dismissed. Abraxas, you stay.”

Harry stepped aside to let the others leave the room. Once they were alone, Riddle spoke again.

“What do you know about the Potters?”

Abraxas looked thoughtful for a moment. “An ancient pure-blood house, reasonably influential, typically Gryffindor. Henry Potter was a blood traitor, publicly criticized not helping Muggles during their war. He died in a duel against one of Grindelwald’s men in France not long ago. His son is now running a prosperous cosmetic potions business. Nothing is known about the side branches, but based on the recent revelations, some Potters presumably left the country at least two generations back... This is about the transfer student that’s been pestering you, isn’t it? Should we do something about him?”

“Thank you for your concern, I am perfectly capable of cursing him myself, but now is not the time. There is something... *off* about Potter, but I’m already keeping a close eye on him myself.”

Harry smirked. *Who’s keeping an eye on whom again?*

“I see.”

“That will be all for now. Let’s get on our way.” Riddle rose to his feet, heading for the door. Harry moved to step away from it but halted abruptly when he felt a slight tug from behind.

Shit. *Shit!* His Cloak must have gotten stuck in the door when it closed behind the members who left. What now?! If he pulled on it, he’d risk revealing his feet, if he opened the door, it would look suspicious...

With no time left to think, Harry pressed his back into the wall, feeling the door’s edge in parallel with his right shoulder, his right hand almost touching the handle.

Then Riddle was there, mere inches from Harry, in all his darklordiness. If, by chance, he turned just a bit to the left, he’d bump into Harry and *know*...

...But he hadn’t. He simply opened the door, holding it to show Malfoy out. Harry, heart still beating wildly, took the chance to slip out. One group of the Knights, Morgenstern’s group,

had already left, leaving four people waiting for their respective prefects. Harry didn't see the necessity of such system, but honestly, he didn't care – all he wanted now was to run back to the dungeons as fast as he could, so he went straight for the Grand Staircase and rushed down.

He made it to the dormitory with at least two minutes' edge – he wouldn't know precisely how much, because by the time the others returned, equally stealthily as they'd left, he was already in his bed with his curtains drawn.

Chapter 5

Tom pretended to sleep in the next day, nothing conspicuous about it since it was a Saturday. Instead, in the privacy of his drawn bed curtains, he devoured the first few chapters of *Secrets of the Darkest Art*, then reread the chapter on Horcruxes two more times. This was perfect, exactly what he needed. If he could tie his soul to the realm of the living, he'd have the trickiest part down; while procuring a surrogate body was no walkaway, there were several viable options he could explore.

The principle of the ritual was to first sever whatever bonds naturally held a soul together, then very carefully break off a fragment, place it into an object (the more meaningful to the caster, the better) and restore the bonds. Murder was essential to it, because it severed one's bond to their humanity. Tom had never killed anyone, not even a fellow mammal – could he do it? But if it was his (eternal) life for a life of another, there was only one option, really.

He also had to ritually cut the soul's tie to his blood, which required, among other things, denouncing his parents. That posed a problem – Tom didn't bear any feelings towards them to let go of, but he needed their names as a part of the chant. He had always assumed they were dead, or that if they weren't, he wasn't worth their attention, therefore they weren't worth his...

Either way, he had to find them now. The best clue he had was his own name, he could start there.

He returned the book into the hidden holder attached to the underside of his bed and covered it with a whispered protective charm. He opened the curtains to the sight of Potter sitting on his bed with a book in his lap.

Harry Potter, the mysterious transfer student and an unwelcome distraction from Tom's schemes. He caught his eye (in the most negative way) on the first day of school and had since become even more intriguing. For reasons unknown, he kept following Tom everywhere. Still more curiously, when he *wasn't* following him and shouldn't have had any idea where Tom was, he tended to appear out of nowhere, acting like it wasn't peculiar in the least.

What puzzled Tom even more were the glances - the *knowing* glances when he shouldn't have known *anything*. Like when that group of obnoxious fourth-year girls asked him to resolve their petty fight, or when Slughorn started joking with Tom in Potions. He handled each situation with his usual grace, his demeanour was flawless... But afterwards he'd turn to see Potter with his eyebrows raised and an amused smirk playing on his lips.

The unwelcome distraction lifted his eyes from the book he'd been reading to meet Tom's.

"Good morning. How unusual for you to sleep in."

And there it was, that *knowing* look. Did he know about last night's meeting? No, that was unlikely, Tom made sure they hadn't been seen or heard, and the idea of Potter just randomly

checking their beds was ridiculous... Still, as it seemed, nothing was impossible with Potter.

“Yes, I just had a nightmare and needed to sleep it off,” he lied without missing a beat and started changing from his pyjamas.

“I see, sorry to hear that.” *He doesn’t sound sorry at all.* “I get those a lot, too.”

Nice, an opportunity to probe. “Really? What about?”

Harry stared at him thoughtfully, then shrugged. “Oh, about being kept prisoner in a cupboard, going on suicide missions against dark lords, flying through Fiendfyre, watching my friends and family die – you know, the usual stuff.” *That is not usual at all and also oddly specific.* “You?”

Before Tom could realize what he was saying, the words were out of his mouth. “Slughorn’s hairpiece coming to life and inviting me to its own club, the *Hair Band*.”

Potter’s eyes widened and he seemed to choke on air, then burst into a surprised laughter. “Ew, you win,” he gasped as he laughed.

Tom was probably even more shocked. Did he just unwittingly joke with Potter? He never joked with anyone unless it was a plot to win them over, not really what he had in mind for Potter at the moment – it was bad enough that he sometimes found himself amused at the jokes Potter had made.

He instantly hated his brain for making that joke, he hated Potter for laughing at it, and most importantly, he hated how pleased that had made him feel. Something was going seriously wrong.

He finished changing and retrieved his hygiene bag to head to the bathroom. Meanwhile, Harry caught his breath enough to say, “So, Quidditch try-outs today. You coming?”

“Why would I be? You know I don’t fly or have much of an interest in Quidditch.”

“I don’t know, to see me kick arse?” Potter wiggled his eyebrows while Tom just barely hid his exasperation behind a snort, “I thought you might be coming to show support as the prefect, you know, for house pride’s sake.”

House pride, my arse.

xXx

Tom came to watch the try-outs.

Was Harry allowed to feel smug about it? Victorious? Happy? Either Tom was just that curious about him, or Harry’s unorthodox friend-making strategy (*force it 'till you make it*) was working... Maybe both.

The school-owned Cleansweep Threes were incomparably worse than the modern-day broomsticks Harry was used to, but he *was* a natural flyer, it only took him a couple of

practice loops and dives to get attuned to it. The Snitches were probably still as fast, though, so he'd have to adjust his strategy – gain speed from a dive first, then go for the chase.

He was competing against four other Slytherins, none of whom he'd known, but a brief observation told him he only had the lanky fourth-year girl to worry about unless the other three got really lucky. There would be three separate skill tests: manoeuvring, speed and observation skills, then a Snitch would be released for them to catch while the try-outs for other positions take place.

A familiar rush spread through Harry from flying competitively again, washing away the bitter taste of the few friendly matches they'd attempted at the Burrow to take their minds off the bad stuff, but which only ended up emphasising Fred's absence.

He flew like the wind! He hunted like a hawk! He... did an alright job in the skill tests, he supposed.

The real trial would be the Snitch, though. It was set free by the team captain, circled around each of them as it sometimes liked to do and disappeared in the distance.

The Seekers scattered across the pitch – Harry took a position high above the ground with the sun in his back, hovered there and scanned the pitch in concentration.

About thirty minutes into the final trial, he finally found what he'd been looking for – a brief flash of golden light near the Blue East Tower. He spared half a second to check on the other Seekers (all circling the pitch below him, not looking in his direction), then shot towards the Tower. When the air was already whistling in his ears, he caught the flash of light again, and this time, he'd been close enough not to lose sight of the source.

He chased it around the Blue East Tower, then across the tribunes heading to the Green North Tower, vaguely aware of the fourth-year girl approaching from the behind – she didn't matter at this point. The Snitch took a sharp leap up, then changed the course to fly towards the ground, but the fraction of a second it needed to compensate for its momentum was enough for Harry's hand to close around it.

Harry held it up and waved his hand happily at Kevin Planck, the team captain. When he refocused on his ambience again, he noticed he was hovering close to the spot where Riddle had been sitting with Avery (Lestrangle wasn't there as he'd been trying for a Beater). Harry pondered whether it would be a good idea to stop by – he wasn't sure, but he flew over anyway.

"Hi. Thanks for coming to see me kick arse," he shot Riddle a cheeky grin. "It's fun, you should try it sometimes... Quidditch, I mean," he added, realising he just insinuated Lord Voldemort didn't kick arse... actually, wait, it was correct both ways.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I haven't come to see *you* kick arse, I've come to support the team – for house pride's sake, you see? I'm the prefect, after all." There was an amused smirk on Riddle's face and, for once, Harry believed it was genuine.

“Right, excuse my mindlessness. Of course you’d come to support the team, you are such a *kind soul*,” he bit back and chuckled at the alarmed twitch in Riddle’s features.

“You’ve certainly come to kick arse though, Harry,” Avery chipped in, “That was some wicked flying.”

For a group of Slytherins who’d become the Death Eaters, some of the Knights of Walpurgis seemed surprisingly decent.

“Thanks, mate.”

“Yes, well – congratulations for making the team, Harry.” Riddle’s voice was even, but there was that little twist to his eyebrows. Was Harry’s last comment too revealing? Or was Riddle simply uncomfortable acknowledging other people’s accomplishments? He’d have to find out later.

“Thanks, Tom. See you around,” he shot a grin to the pair and turned to fly over to the centre of the pitch.

xXx

Harry took a quick shower, changed into his casual clothes with a robe thrown over them and scanned the Marauder’s Map in the privacy of a loo stall for Riddle’s name. He found it in the library. *Bugger*.

Harry rushed to catch him there, curious about his selection of books after last night’s meeting.

He wasn’t disappointed, but it wasn’t what he’d been expecting either. Riddle was sitting at the table with at least thirty piled-up books surrounding him. While Harry wasn’t exactly expecting them to scream “Dark Arts”, this selection appeared completely innocent and with no common topic – *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*; *Basics of Cursebreaking*; *Prince of Enchanters: The Complete Biography of Merlin*; *33 Bedtime Stories for the Wizarding Youth*; *The Ultimate Wizarding Travel Guide to Egypt*,...

Harry sat down opposite to him, opened his Transfiguration textbook and started working on his essay, but he was also surreptitiously analysing the titles Riddle had brought. The younger wizard only read the contents of some books, skimmed through others, rarely paused to actually read a paragraph. He was obviously looking for something.

Well, since Harry knew what Tom should soon be looking for, it didn’t take a genius to figure it out – he must have summoned all the books that mentioned a Riddle, or in practice, a riddle. The books about Egypt and Magizoology would pop up because of Sphinxes, the rest just happened to have contained the word.

At this point, Riddle probably still believed he was a pureblood, because he was a great wizard and purebloods were supposed to be the greatest, at least from the supremacist point of view which some louder Slytherins kept spewing. If that assumption had been right, the

surname would have returned at least a few mentions... But the way things really stood, this was a very ineffective way of investigation.

Riddle, too, seemed to have realised this after a while. There was the familiar little quirk to his eyebrows to give away his annoyance. He stood up, took one of the three piles of books and walked over to the shelves to return them to their places. While he was gone, Harry had finished writing and put his things away. He picked up one of Riddle's piles and turned to see the other wizard watching him calculatingly.

"What are you doing?" Riddle said neutrally.

"Helping. You're returning these, aren't you?"

"Yes, but... Why would you do that?"

"It's what friends do – especially the hungry friends who want to go to dinner as soon as possible," Harry winked at him and carried the books away.

xXx

Today was exhausting – anything Tom did only unveiled new problems. In the morning, he learned about the Horcrux ritual obstacle, then in the afternoon that obstacle proved to be more difficult to solve than he'd anticipated. Why was it so difficult? There should be at least a couple of books mentioning a bloodline like his must have been. Were they foreigners? Americans, perchance? Australians? *New Zealanders*?

Speaking of, the whole Potter enigma grew exponentially as the day progressed. The looks, the innuendos; it couldn't be a coincidence – he knew something. How the fuck did he know? Tom had checked the enchantments under his bed, they'd been intact.

And the way Potter acted... Tom had never seen anything like it. He was good at identifying other people's agendas from the way they interacted with him, but Potter made no sense. He would provoke Tom (almost certainly on purpose), stalk him tirelessly for two weeks, but act perfectly friendly in the meantime. It was infuriating – why hadn't he found a way to curse him yet?

Except he didn't quite feel like cursing Potter when they were together. He wanted to joke around with him, apparently. He wanted to come to his silly Quidditch try-outs. Was this how people felt about their friends? He'd never had an actual friend, never seen a reason to want one, but Potter had just called him that, hadn't he?

Friends, the people you cared about, were a nuisance, something that could be easily used against you or stab you in the back. If Tom had unintentionally befriended Potter, it only made his mysterious behaviour less acceptable.

Tom kept getting more questions and no answers – that wasn't how he operated. He needed to turn it around, for the sake of his sanity.

They'd been walking from dinner back to the library, by the sound of it, alone. He knew trying to intimidate Potter or attacking him outright could go awry very quickly, but what was the harm in a good, honest chat?

xXx

Riddle suddenly changed course and walked into an empty Charms classroom. What was going on? Was it a trap? Just when Harry thought the prospective dark lord had actually started warming up to him... He followed Riddle in anyway, albeit with a wand at the ready and an Expelliarmus on his tongue.

When the door closed behind them, Riddle straightened just a bit and acquired that regal air he had in last night's meeting. There was a cold, calculating glint to his eyes. Harry's heartbeat quickened.

The expected curse didn't come though. Instead, the younger wizard looked him in the eye and began calmly but firmly:

"The game's over. Who are you really? Who sent you?"

"Who... sent me?"

"Quit playing, Potter. You follow me everywhere, you knew about yesterday, you knew about the book and you are no ordinary student. Why are you here?"

Harry and his big, stupid mouth, now look where it got him – he shot right past the desired impression of '*intriguing*' to '*a spy*'. Was there a way to save this? Riddle was watching him with the uncharacteristic expression of open hostility.

"You... wouldn't believe me even if I told you," Harry said squeamishly just to buy himself some time. *Think, think, think!*

Riddle raised an eyebrow, "Try me."

"I..." The much-needed idea suddenly came to him. He didn't have much time to think it through, but it was as close to the truth as he could get.

"I'm your guardian angel."

Chapter 6

“Excuse me?”

Riddle was frowning incredulously – one of the most genuine expressions Harry had seen on him.

“You’re joking? At a time like this?”

Whatever Harry had gotten himself into this time, there was no turning back now. Oh well, in for a knut, in for a galleon – there was one thing that would add credibility to his story, though he was reluctant to use his trump card this soon.

§Not joking§, he hissed in Parseltongue. There, now he’ll never get to follow Riddle around the halls under the Cloak and hiss nonsensical instructions, watch him trying to figure out why Dumbledore’s left sock was essential to open the Chamber of Secrets. Such a pity...

A sharp intake of breath reached Harry’s ears. Even in the darkness of the classroom, he could see the widening of Riddle’s eyes. Harry wondered if he’d blink out of existence any second.

“Guardian angels... are real?” the younger wizard breathed out.

“Yeah... Well, no, not as much as I am, usually, you’re a very special case – you get to meet your angel in the flesh.” Harry went on bullshitting. He had to turn away, not sure how much longer he could hold the hysterical grin that was threatening to spread across his face. He was only twisting the truth a bit, that just made it all the more hilarious.

“It’s complicated – I’ve lived my own life, but I’ve also lived bits of your past, present and future, all the way until...” *your death*. The humour seeped out of Harry at those unsaid words. He cleared his throat, thinking hard – he *must not* screw up now.

“I feel a purpose, too, I’ve felt it ever since I’ve awoken,” *in 1943, about a month ago*. “Um, you know how Veela or Seers awaken? It was similar, like getting an extra identity. For all means and purposes, I’m as human as you... As mortal as you,” he added softly.

If the paradox theory was right and his words made a difference, these could be the last seconds of his life. He turned back to face Riddle who tried his best to look impassive, but Harry could see that his hands were shaking. He mustered up his Gryffindor courage and took a step closer, meeting the younger wizard’s wide moonlit eyes determinedly.

“I can’t really order you around, and my magic won’t let me reveal the future, but the path you’re on... The pursuit of grandeur and immortality, they will only lead to death and misery – yours and that of many others.”

Harry dropped his gaze to Tom’s shaking hands. Using the last spark of his courage, he reached up to touch them in what he hoped was a reassuring way. They didn’t flinch away, so

he took it as a good sign, squeezed gently as he continued:

“I’m here to help you.”

He was touching a younger version of Voldemort, but he didn’t feel horrified or disgusted, just... sad. Sad and sorry for the boy who had to suffer through a loveless childhood and, unlike Harry, had no one to turn to. It occurred to him that Tom had possibly never been comforted by a friend before and he wished he was a real angel at that moment – he willed his whole body to glow like a Patronus, take all the bad stuff away.

“Please, just... let me,” he tried to say, but it came out as a whisper.

For a second, Harry could feel Tom’s quickened heartbeat on his fingers, smell his mild cologne, and he couldn’t help but notice how nice it felt... But then he also noticed how tense Tom had been. Suddenly feeling very awkward, he let go and stepped back to behold the other wizard.

Tom was obviously overwhelmed – he was still staring at Harry absently, wheels in his head turning furiously, his mouth partially open, as if he wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words.

Bollocks, if Harry was in his shoes, he’s be stupefied, too. Feeling ashamed of his (yet again) rash actions, he bore his eyes into the floor and scratched the back of his neck.

“Sorry, this must be a lot to process. It’s okay, take your time, I’ll just, er, see you in the dorms... Or the library, if you still feel like searching for your family.”

With no idea how he could make the situation less awkward, he simply fled the room.

xXx

Tom didn’t come to the dormitory until much later. According to the Map, he remained in the Charms classroom for a while, then apparently went to get some fresh air – Merlin knows he had a good reason to. When Harry finally saw his magical dot approaching the dormitory at half past midnight, his anxiety forced him out of his bed and under the Cloak of Invisibility. Tom’s were the only curtains left undrawn.

The door clicked and Harry’s heart shot to his throat. However, the young man who stepped in didn’t look nearly as bad as he’d feared – a bit tired, but not like he’d gone through a breakdown or anything. He made a beeline for the wardrobe and quietly changed into his pyjamas, making Harry feel like a right pervert for watching, but he couldn’t tear his eyes off the naked form.

Tom wasn’t too muscular, as could be expected since he’d been more of a scholar than an athlete, but he had a broad bone structure and the overall impression was lean, handsome, elegant,... Harry should really jump off this train of thought before it reached the station of Something He Wasn't Ready To Admit.

Fortunately, Tom was done changing and moved to sit down on his bed. He looked in the direction of Harry's drawn curtains, staring at them for a moment. Sighing softly, he rubbed his face with his palms, rested them over his eyes, then climbed into the bed and spelled the curtains shut.

Harry, slightly reassured but still nervous as hell about the next day, sneaked back into his own bed.

Its curtains remained closed until after 10 o'clock on Sunday morning, but unlike Tom's yesterday, it was because Harry had actually slept in. With all the thoughts cluttering his mind and the nightmares that followed, he didn't get much rest.

When he finally let the dimmed sunlight into his den (Slytherin dormitories never got very bright naturally, the main sources of light there were candles), he was greeted by the sight of Tom sitting at his table over a parchment. He set his quill aside and turned to face Harry with a neutral expression. Harry's heart shot to his throat.

"It's late," Tom said, "The breakfast ended ten minutes ago."

Harry expected it to take more time before Tom was ready to talk to him again – he could have used it himself to sort his thoughts.

He stretched and answered as nonchalantly as possible, "Yeah, tough luck. I'll just have to catch up at lunch."

Tom was considering him pensively.

"I have questions," he said finally.

Here we go, straight to the point.

Harry put his glasses on and sat up on his bed, trying to repress the nervousness. The others were apparently gone – Avery said something about an inter-house Exploding Snap tournament.

Harry was deliberately not looking at Tom, fidgeting with the hem of his pyjamas instead. "Er, sure, ask away."

"Is there a god?"

Harry froze. How the hell was he supposed to answer that?

"That's... not for me to say," he began evasively, then he straightened and met Tom's eyes, adding with determination, "There is good and evil, though, and the evildoers get punished eventually... I've seen that much."

Merlin's pants, am I turning Voldemort religious?

Tom nodded. "In other words, there is an afterlife."

Harry smiled sadly as he repeated the words of a dead person to the wizard whose curse led to their doom: "To the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure."

"Your real reason to transfer to Hogwarts was me?"

"...Yes."

"Was it a lie when you said parents died, then?"

Harry dropped his gaze and shook his head, not trusting himself to answer that without hinting at the truth, especially considering who the question had come from. That part wasn't a lie, the circumstances, on the other hand...

Silence stretched for a few moments. Not wanting to look at Tom, Harry stared out of the window into the Black Lake's greenish depths and its sparkling surface, wondering how he got himself into a mess of this caliber yet again.

"So, you're here to keep me off 'the evil path', but not by 'ordering me around', correct?"

"Correct."

"How are you planning to do that?"

Good question, Harry wanted to know that, too.

"Er, I thought... if you could see me as a friend; an actual friend, not a minion; it would be a nice start."

"You've been trying to *befriend* me?"

"Yeah..." Harry assumed from the tone that his friend-making strategy wasn't so ingenious after all.

"You realise that won't be possible, right?"

Harry's chest tightened. Was this how Malfoy felt when Harry refused him seven years ago?

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Tom's voice was calm and sure, like when he explained a piece of magical theory. "As you seem to know, I've never made 'an actual friend', it's not certain I could.... And even if it had been possible before, now that I know you're only trying because I'm your *mission*-"

"That's not how it is!" Harry snapped automatically.

But... wasn't it? He *did* approach Tom because it was his self-proclaimed mission...

He sighed and ran a hand through his morning hair. "It's not like I didn't have a choice, you know? Think of it this way – I've seen the worst of you, worse than even you have. I know

you; not perfectly, but better than anyone else. I still chose to seek you out and want to be your friend. Doesn't that count for something?"

"... You had a choice?" Tom asked slowly.

"Yeah."

"What were the other options?"

Oh, you know, killing you or returning to the future and effectively letting my friends and family die.

"You have a choice, too," Harry said instead and diverted his gaze, heart pounding against his ribcage. It was true, all of this depended on Tom's choices, but what if he actually refused to try?

A few beats of heavy silence passed. Finally, Tom spoke:

"How do I know I'm doing the 'right' thing? It's not like I've been *trying* to be... bad, evil, whatever you'd call it."

That wasn't a rejection, not the response Harry had feared, though it was a worrying one. He stood up, grabbed his toiletries from the shelf and turned and met Tom's eyes with determination.

"I wouldn't be here if the fates thought you were beyond salvation," he said and pointed the tip of his toothbrush down at Tom dramatically.

"I *will* become your friend and I *will* see that clever mind of yours put to a good use!" he proclaimed with exaggerated solemnity.

Riddle was watching him with his eyebrows furrowed, but the corners of his mouth twitched the next moment and the gravity of the past few minutes blissfully dissolved.

"That *does* sound like you ordering me around."

"Ugh, why am I even trying!" Harry groaned and strode out of the door.

There was a smile on his face as he headed to the loos.

xXx

Tom's plans were in shambles and it was all Harry Potter's fault... again. He couldn't even blame him – if what Harry said was true, he was saving Tom from the very thing he most wanted to avoid: premature death and a punishment for his actions in afterlife. Fuck, he'd been mentally preparing himself to murder someone in cold blood, not to mention the revolutionary ideas he had in store for the future.

That was part of the problem – Tom had viewed his ideas as revolutionary and self-preservative, his methods as justified and necessary for the continued prosperity of

wizardkind, the objectively superior race... Of course he *wanted* the immortality for selfish reasons, but he also needed it to lead the war against Muggles that was, in his opinion, inevitable, and each day less in favour of his side.

He'd seen it, read about it, *felt* it in the streets of London, the ever-growing destructive power of Muggle weapons. They outnumbered wizards by multiples – if they found out about the existence of magic... Tom had felt their fear of the unknown, their foolishness and their cruelty, too.

He gave himself a fortnight trying to rethink and reassess his plans, yet he still had trouble finding a fault in his logic. The concepts of “good” and “evil” were simply too vague. The way Tom saw it, harm for the sake of harm was evil.

Harm for the sake of gain wasn't evil – killing animals to eat their meat wasn't evil. Killing animals for research wasn't evil if they were killed as swiftly as possible. Hurting annoying kids at the orphanage wasn't evil, it was practice, a mark of dominance, a prevention of future problems (Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop in the cave, well, that was an accident – he didn't know he could speak to snakes until then and he might have gone too far when Dennis called him a liar).

If killing for self-defence wasn't evil, how could killing Muggles and Muggle-borns be? Surely, dilly-dallying with your guardian angel while watching the magical world head for destruction couldn't be a lesser evil than *doing something* about it.

Causing harm didn't bring him satisfaction. Good deeds didn't bring him satisfaction, either. Accomplishing his goals, thriving, had been his sole source of positive emotions, and now that he wasn't sure what his goals were, he felt lost.

“Harry, what exactly is evil?” he asked, taking advantage of a rare moment of privacy with just the two of them in their dormitory.

The bespectacled wizard pondered the question silently for a long moment. Finally, he said, “It's doing something you wouldn't like having done to yourself.”

“Even if you had a good reason for doing it?”

“Like self-defence? Hmm, I suppose you could break that rule then, but only to the degree that wouldn't be overall more harmful than the offence.” Harry gave him a speculative look. “Did you mean something in particular?”

And so Tom explained why he, the Knights of Walpurgis and probably also Grindelwald thought persecuting Muggles and Muggle-borns was “good”.

Harry heard him out and didn't say anything for a while. When he eventually did, it was, “So the most immediate concern is a breach of the Statute of Secrecy, right? Is that why you and your lot hate Muggleborns – because their families pose a risk?”

“Yes, basically.”

“That’s unfair to them, they’ve done nothing wrong – imagine how you would feel if someone hurt you just for existing!” Tom didn’t have to imagine and yes, it did feel horrible, but still... “Also, the Muggleborns make up at least a tenth of the wizarding population, don’t they? That’s a lot of manpower. Couldn’t you just come up with a better protection of the Statute instead?”

He could, couldn’t he? That approach occurred to him before and he deemed it an ineffective then, he’d have to look into it, but...

“Maybe. Better surveillance system, more wizarding oases like Hogsmeade in more secluded places... We could give the parents of Muggle-borns a choice – move to the wizarding community and live there like Squibs do or give up their child and their memories of it.”

Harry winced, “That last part is still a little radical, but... you’re getting there.” He shot Tom the kind of smile that had been giving him a strange pleasant sensation for the last couple of days. He’d known the high of achievement, of victory, of revenge, this was... something new, perhaps the “true friendship” Harry had been so insistent on achieving between them. Tom suspected this new occurrence had something to do with the nature of their magical bond – there were no books mentioning guardian angels in the library, so he could only guess.

He’d also observed that the feeling was addictive. Harry had stopped following him everywhere, but instead of being relieved, Tom started hating everyone else he hung out with, which was an annoyingly wide spectrum of people from all houses. Like one of the trinkets he’d hidden in his room as a child, Tom hated sharing him with others – Harry was *his* angel, why should he make Abbott laugh? Why should he high-five LeStrange after Quidditch practice?

He knew all of these feelings were irrational, so he did his best to stifle them and bring his focus back to the discussion.

“There’s also the fact that Muggle blood dilutes magical power. Crossbreeding should be outlawed to boost our chances.”

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. “Since when is that a fact?”

“Don’t be naïve, Harry, everybody knows that – it’s an open secret.” Surely, a pure-blood couldn’t be that ignorant.

“Is it?” Harry said unusually sharply. “Where I’m from, we call that purist propaganda. What about you, aren’t you powerful? How can you be so sure you’re a pure-blood?”

That disarmed him. He was sure, felt it in his bones and his magical core, his middle and last names sounded magical, but he didn’t have a proof, so he wisely decided to drop the conversation until he found one.

He went to the library the next day, this time summoning the books with the name Marvolo, as he’d been planning to do before he got discouraged from the Horcrux ritual. Three books came flying: *A Wizarding History of the United Kingdom*, *Pure-blood Directory and Herbs for Advanced Healing*. There was a total of four Marvolos mentioned: Marvolo Zampadorso,

an Italian healer who first described the magical properties of juniper in 1672, Marvolo Lloyd who played a role in the Second Goblin Rebellion, Aristeus Marvolo Ollivander and Marvolo Gaunt, both already dead and only mentioned in the family trees of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. Marvolo Gaunt was the most recent one and the best candidate, although the Ollivanders were also known to recycle names from their ancestry, so they weren't completely eliminated yet.

Marvolo Gaunt had two children, a daughter who died shortly before the book was published and a son, both reportedly childless. Any of them could potentially be Tom's parent. But where did his surname come from?

The most obvious option was to contact Morfin Gaunt, but he needed to get his address to do that and it was a certain risk – if the Gaunts really were his biological family and everything had been in order, he wouldn't have been left to grow up in a Muggle orphanage. Could it prove disadvantageous if Morfin learned of his existence?

Conclusion: If he had to employ a third party anyway, he should try to get as much information and hopefully avoid having to contact an unfamiliar fourth party.

He pulled Isaac Rosier aside after lunch.

“Isaac, I need your sister to research something for our cause. Ask Eleanor to look up any recent documents concerning the Gaunt family. As always, *do not* mention me or the Knights, just have her owl you a copy of anything she finds in a separate envelope and pass it directly to me. You shall learn the contents in due time. Understood?”

“Understood,” the boy bowed minutely. He wasn't exactly the brightest snake in the den, but he was loyal, and his sister was a valuable contact; after all, what's better to a leader than a docile sheep?

xXx

Being friends with Tom Riddle, in the light of recent events, had been... nice; nowhere near as warm as with Ron or Hermione, but surprisingly nice and peaceful. With no more suspicion on Tom's side and a semblance of truth on the table, some of the tension had melted off Harry's shoulders, although he still had to watch his tongue – he'd probably have to forever.

Tom was pleasant company except for that one discussion about his politics, and even then he'd been civil and reasonable – Harry had understood his arguments to a point where he had to wonder if Tom wasn't swaying him to the dark side after all, but he was sure his moral ideals stood firm and strong even as he sat beside the prospective dark lord in the Great Hall.

He didn't criticise Tom for putting up a front in public if that was how he felt comfortable living (Hermione would have given him a dozen speeches by now), though he'd somehow found himself liking his real personality more – the contrast of his studious, systematic, prideful, irritable character with the biting sense of humour he only seemed to let loose when he was alone with Harry.

Like this particular chilly October Saturday they'd been spending in the dormitory – Tom's request. Harry had thought it curious; they would usually go to the library on days like this.

The reason soon revealed itself when someone knocked on the door. It was Rosier. He only passed Tom an envelope and retreated – it reminded Harry of old espionage films Aunt Petunia used to watch.

"What's that?" he asked inquisitively.

"It's the proof," Tom answered with a hint of smugness in his voice. He tore the envelope open. He was sitting at his desk and shielding Harry, who'd been practicing Charms on his bed, from view of what was inside.

Harry expected Tom to say more, but the silence stretched as the younger wizard examined the contents. Unable to take the suspense anymore, Harry got up and walked over to peek over his shoulder. The first thing he noticed was the slight shake to Tom's hands where he was gripping at the document. *Uh oh, not good.*

It was a case report.

Offenders: Marvolo and Morfin Gaunt

Victim: Tom Riddle (Muggle), Merope Gaunt

Charges: 003 Magical assault, 004 Assault on a Muggle, 014 Physical assault, 035 Assault on a Ministry Official, 095 Resisting arrest, 141 Breach of the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy

Additional notes: Muggle assault was detected on 20 June 1924 in Little Hangleton. Auror Ogden was sent to investigate. The suspect Morfin Gaunt was not cooperating, making hissing noises instead of answering, his father Marvolo Gaunt justifying his actions and delaying his arrest. Morfin Gaunt then proceeded to reveal an alleged romantic infatuation of Merope Gaunt towards the victim Muggle, Tom Riddle. He hexed Auror Ogden whilst Marvolo Gaunt physically assaulted his daughter by strangling. Auror Ogden Apparated to the Ministry for reinforcements. Special Force Team 3 was dispatched to handle the situation and arrest the offenders.

From the corner of his eye, Harry caught a movement of Tom's arm. He glanced down at him, registered a wand pointed in his direction and had the shortest of moments to dodge as the younger wizard whispered, "Obliviate."

In a single following second, Harry jumped backwards and drew his own wand while Tom shot out of the chair so abruptly it was knocked backwards.

"Stupefy!"

"Expelliarmus!"

Harry was faster at both dodging and casting – Riddle could thank his future self for those reflexes. The yew wand went flying to the other side of the room, but that wasn't the end of

it. Tom quickly regained his balance and used it to physically grab Harry's wand hand and his collar.

Harry was too slow to struggle and ended up getting tackled to the floor, vaguely registering a collision of his shoulder against the footboard of someone's bed. Riddle was straddling him, one hand pinned his right wrist to the floor, the other went for Harry's neck and *squeezed*.

"No one can know," Tom whispered icily, his eyes intense and pupils blown wide, like a predator mid-hunt.

"W-won't... tell..." Harry choked out, pulling at the hand on his neck, but Tom was leaning on it with all his weight.

"It's... o... kay," he tried again, patting the hand frantically, but Riddle's grip wouldn't budge. Harry was starting to get light-headed, he needed to get out of this and quick. He should be stronger than Riddle...

He let go of the hand on his neck abruptly and pinched Riddle's side instead to gain an element of surprise, simultaneously bucking his hips up with all he had to throw Riddle off balance. Once his attacker was in the air leaning forward, he pushed from both the left and underneath, managing to roll them over and get ahold of his wand with his free hand.

"Incarcerous!"

Chapter 7

Harry's magic twisted in the air into thick ropes that bound Riddle's arms to his body and his legs to one another.

"What the fuck!" Harry snapped in a hoarse voice as soon as he caught his breath, stifling the cough.

Riddle looked like a deer in the headlights, breaths quick and shallow. "Harry... Forgive me, Harry, I didn't mean to..."

"Strangle me? Oh, I guess you just tripped and fell on my throat!"

Harry was burning with anger. He was angry with Riddle for betraying him, attacking him for the umpteenth time if he counted the future, but he was mostly angry with himself for building a trust that could be betrayed; a hope. It had been going so well... or so he'd thought until now. He should have known there was no hope for someone like Voldemort.

He fixed his crooked glasses and sucked in a shaky breath.

"I can't do this."

He climbed off Riddle and stood up, sparing one last look to the bound wizard bellow him whom he'd been trying not to hate (and almost succeeding)...

He rushed out of the room.

xXx

Tom was lying there helplessly; left to the mess he'd been in physically and as well as the one in his head. He was as close to panicking as he could remember being, but he was Lord Voldemort, and *Lord Voldemort Did. Not. Panic.*

When it became apparent that Harry wasn't coming back, he took a deep breath and considered his options. Like hell he was going to wait until someone found him, but the other option was just as fucking humiliating. His wand was lying by Avery's nightstand, about four meters away. He would roll barrels, but the beds were in the way, so instead he had to crawl in an undulating motion like a goddamn caterpillar. If Avery or Lestrangle walked in on him, he'd go from the admired Lord Voldemort to Lord Crawldemort in an instant. He should have killed Potter just for this.

Right, he almost killed Potter... or actually choked him unconscious and Obliviated him, as was his impromptu plan (afterwards he would have made Eleanor destroy the document, under Imperius if necessary, and Obliviated both her and Isaac), but that wasn't how it must have looked from Harry's perspective.

To put it mildly, he was fucked, perhaps irreparably this time. He acted rashly, most unlike him, but he was faced with a threat to everything he'd built for himself and his first impulse was to deal with it immediately. In retrospect, he should have played it cool and waited for an unguarded moment. What had he done? Where did Harry run off to?

Feeling accordingly silly with his arse in the air, he finally reached his wand. He rolled over and positioned his hand over the familiar yew wood. Holding it at an awkward angle, it took a couple of tries before the magical bonds finally loosened under his Relashio.

Now what? He could go after Harry, try to appease him somehow, but he had no idea where the other wizard had gone; whatever he decided to do, he had at least a ten-minute head start. Had he run straight to a professor to report? If Tom played it right, maybe they wouldn't expel him, but...

A chill ran down his spine. *I can't do this*, Harry said. Had he given up on Tom? Did that mean Tom was beyond salvation – his immortality attempts would fail, and he'd be headed for an eternal punishment for what he'd inevitably end up doing?

No! No, no, no, no-

He ran out of the dormitory, earning himself a couple of alarmed looks by the Slytherins in the common room which he was in no state to give a damn about.

He checked the Headmaster's office, Slughorn's office, the Great Hall, the library, the courtyards, the grounds, then broom cupboards, classrooms... Tom looked everywhere, but Harry was nowhere, nor had he told any of the professors, apparently.

He didn't come to lunch or dinner, his bed remained empty long after curfew.

By the end of the day, Tom felt like he was going to lose his mind from the anxiety.

xXx

Harry was fed up with everything, disillusioned, disappointed. He was wondering lately why he hadn't been sucked into a time paradox yet, now he had his answer: the future hadn't been changed yet. He felt like he'd been living a lie these past few weeks, a foolish dream he had just woken up from. He'd thought Riddle had been changing, reconsidering his values thanks to what Harry had told him, but the moment he felt threatened, he cast all that aside. Was it this killer instinct which had cost Myrtle Warren her life when she surprised Riddle by the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets?

He's a murderer and he'll always be.

Oh, how Harry hated this! He was starting to *like* Riddle... *Tom*. The bloke was funny and smart and, what the hell, handsome, too. Now Harry felt as if to protect many of his friends, he would have to kill one.

Kill him.

Harry wasn't sure he could. It was one thing to face the Dark Lord, a snake-like weapon of mass destruction, another to kill a sixteen-year-old boy with whom Harry had joked, studied and lived for weeks. He couldn't cast the Killing Curse even in the first instance, how was he supposed to do it now?

No! You must do it. For mum and dad, for Dumbledore, for Sirius, Remus, Fred, Tonks...

For everyone.

He went for a long walk around the castle under the Cloak of Invisibility to gather up the courage. He lingered in all the most emotional spots: the Astronomy Tower, the lakeside, the Great Hall, he even went to the spot where the Shrieking Shack would later stand, everywhere he watched someone die in the war Voldemort caused. He went to see Myrtle, Hagrid and Dumbledore eat dinner, but he only stayed for a minute before he had to leave, because it meant watching Riddle eat dinner, too. He had that little crease to his eyebrows, obviously not in the best mood, and checked the door every few seconds. Was he expecting Harry to walk in? What would happen if he could see through his Cloak?

Harry told himself he didn't want to know and carried on to the Entrance courtyard where the *Custodes de Hogwarts* memorial would have been.

He paused by the second-floor lavatory. There was one decidedly deadly spell he could cast without problems, deadlier than Diffindo and far less messy than Reducto or Bombarda Maxima, plus it wouldn't have a counter-course for the next thirty years. It would be almost symbolic since that spell was invented by Severus Snape, a man the Dark Lord himself would have killed.

You're a Gryffindor. Do what's right, worry later.

Harry pulled out the Marauder's Map and his wand.

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

How morbidly true.

Riddle's name was moving down the third-floor corridor. Was it his patrol night? Harry headed to the staircase, heart racing. Meanwhile, Tom walked into an empty classroom, then left promptly and repeated with the one next to it. When Harry turned the corner to get a visual, Tom was walking into the girls' loos.

Huh, maybe that's how he'd found the Chamber, then? Girls' lavatories were his thing?

Of course, Harry soon realised what really was going on: Tom was looking for him. He was now standing just a few feet behind the young Dark Lord and he could see he was distressed – he was even running his hand through his hair; a new gesture... a nervous one, Harry deduced. It didn't matter anyway; those rosy cheeks would soon turn ashen as the blood seeped out of his chest.

Harry's hand was sweating. He was gripping at his drawn wand so hard his knuckle turned white.

Tom had just walked into another classroom.

Do it once he comes out!

Harry waited, and sure enough, Tom stepped out seconds later.

Sectumsemptra!

He thought the incantation, but his lips and wand remained still except for the shaking. His cheeks were wet.

Oh, who am I kidding?

He turned on his heel and ran away. He ran and ran, and before he knew it, he was by the Room of Requirement, hot tears still streaming down his face.

I can't do this, I need to go home – please, let me go home!

He felt a more urgent need than any other time he'd summoned the Room, but no door appeared. Harry remembered what he'd wished for the day he travelled through to the past and tried to summon the same room, but this time *with* Voldemort.

Still no door.

Desperate, Harry just wished for the same room. Three is the charm, as it seemed, because a door finally appeared, and yes, everything was the same, including the cup of tea... Not that it mattered, because he walked in, let the door close behind him, then immediately walked back out. With bated breath, he cast the Tempus Charm.

Still 1943.

Harry went back into the Room and collapsed into the armchair. He was stuck in the past and it would make no difference, because he was a fucking coward. Maybe that cuppa wasn't such a bad idea, although it was quite late-

Oh, right! He fell asleep the first time around – maybe if he fell asleep again...

His mind was too troubled, so before he managed to fall asleep, half the night had passed.

When he woke up, it was to the sharp, midday sunlight. He cast the Tempus Charm as soon as he came to, his heart sinking at the sight: 11:13, 24 October 1943.

He rubbed his face in frustration and considered what in Merlin's name he was going to do now.

Tom had a restless night, he'd been anxious, haunted by nightmares of hell and futile searching. He kept waking up throughout the night and peeked out of his curtains to check Harry's bed each time, to no avail – the sought-after Seeker wasn't there.

He was staring into his bowl of cereals, pondering the meaning of life miserably, when Abraxas Malfoy leant towards him discreetly.

"I see you have finally cursed the Potter nuisance, though it might attract attention if you keep him *busy* much longer."

If looks could kill, Malfoy would have dropped dead on the spot. That posh son of a bitch was the only Knight with the guts to talk to Tom like this, he sometimes needed reminders that they weren't on the same level...

The glare was apparently enough of a reminder this time, because Malfoy recoiled. "It is none of my business, of course, just showing my concern. People are starting to talk and besides, you... don't look so good, if I may say."

No shit, Sherlock.

"I appreciate your concern, Abraxas, but it's indeed none of your business." He rose and walked out; he hadn't had much appetite anyway. He headed to the library and tried to busy himself with schoolwork, but his focus kept slipping away. How was he supposed to live now? He felt like those prophets who peeked into their own future and went crazy...

No! He was, objectively speaking, a genius – he always found a way. He would reflect and prove to the Fates that he was worthy! He would never slip up like he did yesterday! He would try and teach himself *care* about people – some sacrifices were not worth the gain... like Harry. He messed up so badly, he needed to fix it somehow-

Needed...

He stood up abruptly and ran to the staircase, the all the way up to the seventh floor.

I need a room with Harry in it, I need a room with Harry in it, I need a room with Harry in it!

xXx

Harry jumped as the door swung open, but the sight that greeted him was even more surprising. A dishevelled and panting Tom Riddle stood there, his forehead glistening with sweat. Shit, Harry was about to find out what he'd do if he'd found him after all. He was on his feet the next second, "What-"

Tom shot towards him, but he made no attempt to draw his wand. Harry was confused and about to get even more so, because next thing he knew, Tom had one hand wrapped around his forearm, the other resting on his chest, watching it raise and fall, then lifting his gaze to meet Harry's eyes. "You... you're really here," he breathed out.

"I am... As much as I'd rather not be," Harry admitted, not quite succeeding to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Tom showed no signs of letting go – he was staring at him with wide, honest eyes, and Harry could feel that the hand on his chest was shaking.

“I...” *The Dark Lord himself at loss for words?*

“Please don’t give up on me, Harry,” he said in a low, serious voice – there was something desperate about it and it tugged at Harry’s heartstring just a bit. “I don’t know what came over me yesterday, I imagined everything I’ve build in the last few years crumbling and... I panicked. I swear I will never lose control like that again.” He dropped his gaze to the hand which rested on Harry’s sternum. His warm, elegant hand travelled up Harry’s chest to his shoulder, the other joined it shortly after sliding up the arm it had been holding. Together, they reached the neck and their thumbs traced the bruises Harry only now realised he had. Tom sucked in a breath, caught Harry’s eyes again and said firmly, “I swear I will never hurt you again.”

Hell, if this was an act, the bloke deserved an Oscar. He seemed so genuine with his brown doe eyes looking into Harry’s all determined, his eyebrows raised in expectation and slightly curved with worry, his hands warm on Harry’s shoulders.

Why, oh why was Harry always so quick to trust, to sympathise, to love? He was quite certain it would only bring him pain in this case, but he did it anyway. He was overflowing with emotion and his whole body vibrated with the atmosphere of that moment – the moment felt right, the place felt right, so Harry decided to *do* what felt right and worry about the practicalities later like the Gryffindor he’d been telling himself to be.

“Okay... I’m not going anywhere,” he said softly and experimentally raised a hand to touch Tom’s bare wrist. It was thin, smooth and so very human, not at all scaly or ashen, and Harry suddenly knew he needed more of that.

It would have been easier to resist if Tom hadn’t been looking at him like *that* – eyes intense, lips slightly parted and quivering, hands still gripping at his shoulders like he was scared Harry would be less real if he let go. Harry could relate since that was how he felt about this distinctly un-voldemortlike Tom...

This distinctly kissable Tom, he thought as he leant in.

xXx

Tom had always found it annoying when his classmates wouldn’t shut up about dating or when girls flirted with him – he was never interested in any and only saw girlfriends as potential weaknesses. Now, though, he understood what all that jazz had been about.

Harry was kissing him... softly, carefully, as if waiting for a permission. To his own surprise, Tom eagerly gave it. He pulled Harry closer by the back of his neck and pressed against the silkiness of his lips.

It was *delightful*.

Like suddenly getting what he needed without realising he’d needed it...

Like the whole of Harry.

All that possessiveness Tom had been feeling lately came back at once – he wanted to mark the other wizard, bind him, make him his and unable to leave again...

He contented himself with kissing him harder.

The kiss turned breathier and open-mouthed, both wanting to deepen it but neither quite bold enough to involve tongues. Harry's hands found Tom's hips, Tom had one hand on Harry's jaw and slid the other into his thick black hair – that turned out to be the right thing to do, judging by Harry's reaction, which was to dig his fingers into Tom's hips and pull them flush against his own.

... Or maybe it wasn't the right thing, because then they both got a *feel* of the gravity of the situation, and it was simply too much.

They pulled away quite abruptly and were left staring at each other, suitably dishevelled and breathing shallowly.

Before things could get more awkward, they were saved by Harry's vocally grumbling stomach... or Tom was saved; Harry was just absolutely mortified. His ears turned bright red, and Tom, possibly for the first time in his life, found something *cute*.

"We should go grab something to eat," he said amusedly, "It's almost lunchtime anyway."

"Er, yeah," Harry stammered, then practically ran for the door, but he was stopped by a hand around his wrist.

"Wait."

When he turned, Tom had his wand at his throat. He visibly stiffened and a hint of panic flashed in his eyes.

"Episkey."

The bruises on his neck gradually paled until only his honey-toned skin was left. Tom let go of him and made for the door himself, leaving the stunned wizard to gather his wits and follow after moment later.

Chapter 8

So, *that* happened.

Now Harry was even more confused – was it a good thing? It certainly *felt* good (better than, actually) and Tom seemed to like it just as much. Was Harry corrupting him after all? Or was Tom corrupting Harry? Wait, did this count as seducing Tom to achieve his ends? Should he be feeling like an asshole? Merlin, Ron would go mental if he knew Harry went gay for Voldemort...

Bollocks.

Harry went *gay* for *Voldemort*.

Holy shit, *Voldemort* went *gay* for *Harry*.

It would take more than the walk from the Room of Requirement to the Great Hall for that sink in. To his relief, Tom was blissfully silent on the way down, he probably had some thinking to do as well... like why he hadn't cursed Harry when he had a wand to his neck inside an untraceable magical room. That and Harry's gut feeling was currently his best evidence that maybe what happened there was real, maybe there was still hope for Tom.

He hadn't even seriously considered he could be into blokes before, but if he thought about it in retrospect, it made a weird sort of sense – he might have found Bill a little too cool when they met, he might have looked up to Oliver a little too much, he might have followed Malfoy's arse a little too literally last year...

He might be bisexual, of course, but then again, it did seem rather suspicious that both of his ex-girlfriends just happened to be some of the most masculine girls he knew; athletic figures, flat chests, square faces, into Quidditch. He'd blamed the wishy-washy attempts at intimacy with Ginny on the pressure of his quest, then the post-war dreariness, but now he had to wonder...

While he was both grieving the loss of his friends *and* on a quest at the moment, there had been *nothing* wishy-washy about that kiss. It was spontaneous and exciting and, bugger, this was going to end so badly, but Harry couldn't shake the feeling that he'd live for every second of it.

He sure was living for every second of lunch. Since he didn't have any appetite yesterday due to his mental preparations to murder the person he ended up snogging today, he hadn't eaten anything since yesterday's breakfast – a bloody eternity, if you asked his stomach.

He had an extra Quidditch practice in the afternoon, a drill session for the upcoming first match of the season against Gryffindor (yes, it felt like a treason), so he stuffed his face, deflected the curious questions of his housemates-who-weren't-Tom's-minions with an "I was summoned to the the Ministry to sort the inheritance, sorry I forgot to tell anyone," and

left the Great Hall alone to grab his Quidditch uniform, eager to be in the air again – flying always helped him clear his head.

Everything seemed so small from up there. So, he fancied men, no big deal – he died, like, four months ago and came back, only to be thrown over fifty years into the past. He was *not* going to have a fit over potentially liking cock.

Potentially liking Tom Riddle's cock, on the other hand, was at least a medium-sized deal... In fact, from what Harry felt back in the Room of Requirement, it could very well be an above-average-sized deal, but that was beside the point and he'd appreciate if his brain kindly stopped bringing it up, thank you very much.

But you know what? He thought he'd die today. He thought he'd die yesterday, and the week before. He was flipping eighteen and he'd already died a virgin once, the least he could do was to treat himself to a bit of fun. Who knows, he might even end up "defeating Voldemort with love" in a rather different fashion than Dumbledore had in mind... at least Harry bloody hoped that wasn't what he had in mind, for the sake of his sanity.

Oh well, enough with the distractions – he had a Snitch to catch.

xXx

Tom had spent the afternoon in the library over his Arithmancy essay, though his gaze kept slipping to the window and towards the Quidditch pitch. It was very unlike him to be so distracted, but he couldn't help it, could he? It wasn't every day that he'd apparently successfully repented, found his lost angel and got his first kiss on top of that... The first kiss he'd let happen.

It was so peculiar he'd eventually given up his half-hearted effort at schoolwork and simply sat back, watching the Quidditch pitch where he could vaguely see the silhouettes of the Slytherin team. Tom knew very little about the sport (only enough to make a conversation), he found chasing flying balls silly when one could use that time to master useful magic – a Muggle-raised student like him had had a lot of catching up to do.

He could only guess which dot was Harry, but he watched anyway. He had mixed feelings about the new development. He'd thought himself above the frivolous crushes and foolish pining his classmates seemed so caught up in. He could recognise beauty or charm, but never actually felt attracted to the person possessing it, even his occasionally necessary masturbation was an impersonal, strictly physical act. He'd taken pride in his superior control, adding to his mental image of everyone else as "weak".

This morning was quite the wakeup call; in fact, the whole weekend had been – so much had changed he didn't even know from which end to start processing it. First, he'd learned he was a half-blood, quite a shock, but after he'd given it more thought, it really wasn't that catastrophic if he played it well (as he always did). If Harry was right and Muggle blood didn't dilute magical power, there really was a hole in his philosophy, and he should be glad to have caught it before it had done too much damage.

That only made yesterday's slip-up worse; he'd done something regrettable for a petty reason and it easily could have been even worse – Harry saved them both when he broke himself free.

Then, he gave Tom a second chance with a cherry on top; an unexpected but unexpectedly welcome cherry. It opened a hidden door to Tom's sexuality and possibilities he only just found out he might want to explore, but it was also a complication.

For one, Harry was a man, and while the wizarding society in general wasn't as prejudiced as the Muggle one, the pureblood community (that Tom had mostly been associating with) was, since more acceptance would mean fewer heirs. If this *and* his blood status came to light, he'd lose a significant amount of the influence he'd been building.

Wherever this thing between them went, Tom would make sure it wouldn't become a liability. Harry was valuable as a source of information and maybe excitement, Tom would *not* let it go beyond that – the tension between the British factions, the war on the continent and the impending great war against Muggles, this wasn't a political climate to allow weaknesses.

Speaking of, there was this last minor issue... He didn't know how much more experienced Harry was, but he sure as hell knew he wouldn't let him have all the initiative, despite being completely inexperienced himself.

He was a leader, not someone to be led – if they were going to do this, he'd have to step up his game. He could make it... a side project.

A secret little side project.

Yes, that could work.

xXx

They'd seen each other again at dinner – it was surprisingly pleasant, not as awkward as Harry had feared. He smiled hesitantly at Tom upon arriving at the table, Tom gave a little smile back and asked conversationally about his Quidditch practice. Harry said it was good, that they were ready for the match, Fulcran (who'd made Beater) then proceeded to diss the Gryffindor players one by one, others had joined in and the conversation picked up from there...

Except sometimes their eyes would meet and there would be this *something* in the air that hadn't been there before. Tension? Anticipation? He couldn't quite put his finger on it, he was just suddenly way more conscious of Tom's presence.

They went back to the dungeons in a group and Harry had spent most of the evening doing last minute homework for Monday – man, being back at school after a year's break was a drag.

It was Tom's patrol night, so Harry retreated to the privacy of his curtains and worked while occasionally checking up on the moving dot. As the time was nearing midnight, he'd seen

Tom approach their room and heard the door click. He tucked away the scrolls and stretched from a long evening of hunching. He touched the Map with his wand, whispering “Mischief managed,”...

...and literally a second later someone opened a crack in his curtains. Harry jerked in surprise, instinctively pointed the wand that was already in his hand at the intruder and simultaneously shot his left hand over the Map in a protective manner.

Tom watched him with a raised eyebrow.

“What’s that?” he asked in a low voice as he very casually sat on Harry’s bed and closed the gap in the curtains.

“What’s what?”

“That,” he pointed at the Map.

Harry made his best impression of Hermione’s are-you-daft face. “It’s a piece of spare parchment.” He turned to put it into his bag, but Tom snatched it from his fingers.

“Great, I just ran out of mine, surely you won’t mind sharing.” He had a victorious glint in his eyes when Harry leapt to get it back. Tom blocked him with his shoulder, wand already out.

“Revelio.”

They both watched as the black cursive blossomed across the parchment.

Mr. Moony presents his compliments to Lord Voldemort, and begs him to slither his way out of other people’s business.

Mr. Prongst agrees with Mr. Moony, and would like to add that Lord Voldemort is a slimy wanker.

Mr. Padfoot would like to register his astonishment that the anagram “I am Lord Voldemort” was chosen over the much more fitting “Mr. Molded Violator” and “Marmot Dildo Lover”.

Mr. Wormtail bids Lord Voldemort good day, and advises him to take his Knights of Well-poor-gits and sod off.

Tom was staring at the parchment in bewilderment, Harry peaking over his shoulder, and it was all he could do not to burst into a fit of laughter. He settled for a muffled snicker, which had still earned him a dirty look.

“Very mature.”

Harry grinned, “Oi, it’s your own fault for stealing my stuff!” He snatched the Map back and put it into his bag, inwardly sighing in relief.

Outwardly, he turned back to Tom just in time to see his wand coming to a stop from a movement. Did he just cast a spell? Harry hadn't noticed any difference and it made a knot of uneasiness swell in his stomach.

“So, erm, what made you barge into my bed in the middle of the n-”

He was silenced by Tom's lips.

He stiffened for a moment before he remembered to kiss back, because what the hell, he *wanted* to.

He let himself be pushed back, part lying, part sitting. Tom shifted to be on top of him with one knee between Harry's and one elegant hand propped against the headboard for support. He brought his other hand up to Harry's neck, running his thumb along his jawline and beneath to cup it, the slight pressure holding it in place. That casual little display of dominance was enough to send pleasant shivers down Harry's spine.

He sighed minutely into the kiss, tentatively opening his mouth more. Now that he wasn't as overwhelmed as the first time around, he could truly savour the sensations; the softness of the kiss contrasting with the roughness of Tom's freshly shaven face where their faces happened to brush against each other, the sweet, soft lips and hot breath on his cheek – Harry had never felt anything so *right*.

He let his hands wander, resting one on Tom's hip and running the other up his torso to eventually curl in his hair. It was every bit as silky as Harry had imagined it to be.

At that, Tom's tongue finally asked for permission and Harry gladly granted it, connecting in a heavenly yet sinful dance; a slow, sweet, urgently sensual dance like the tango.

It was about then that Harry had left all his caution behind and had completely given in to instinct.

xXx

Tom thought his midnight detour was going rather well when he heard Harry's sharp intake of breath. The next thing he knew, he was on his back with Harry on top, pressing wet kisses into his neck and rutting their hips together.

Tom moaned into Harry's hair.

He fucking *moaned*.

Embarrassed by the sound (and very glad for having had cast the Privacy charm beforehand), he was determined to even the score. His right hand went pull on Harry's hip, his left to grip tightly at his hair, then he thrust upwards, grinding their cotton-covered erections against each other.

He was rewarded by a most delicious grunt, accompanied by the arching of Harry's back. “Merlin...” he heard him whisper.

Encouraged by the reaction and unbelievably turned on, Tom used the hand he had in Harry's hair to drag him up for another breathy kiss. The other slipped under Harry's shirt to get a feel of his bare body. It was lean and burning hot against his fingers, it made Tom want to fucking *inhale* the entirety of it... He did the next best thing and kissed Harry some more while rutting their hips together again.

This wasn't like anything he'd ever felt – he knew accomplishment, pride, victory, revenge... Never had he felt this alert, alive, conscious of every cell in his body, and still more surprisingly, someone else's body. *Harry's* body. Never had he needed something as urgently as he needed to touch that body now, except perhaps those few times he'd been attacked and needed to protect his bare life; that's right, just like then, he felt like he'd die if that need wasn't met.

His hand travelled down Harry's side, savouring every curve of his ribs, the way they swelled with his breaths, then the firmness of his obliques. He reached the line of his pyjama bottoms and slowly threaded along it to the narrow gap between their bodies.

Harry pulled away, propped on his elbow, and thank fuck for the Lumos charm, because wasn't he a sight to behold – his already unruly hair even more dishevelled, his face flushed and starting to shine with sweat, his lips wet and parted, but the best thing were his eyes, unobscured by glasses, the emerald green almost entirely consumed by the black of his blown pupils, watching Tom with wonder, anticipation, plead,...

Without further ado, he slipped his hand past the waistband and wrapped it around the delightful hardness he'd found there.

He was holding another man's cock and absolutely living for it.

Damn.

He moved his hand experimentally. Harry's eyes squeezed shut, he let out deep groan and dropped his head into the pillow beside Tom's, breath hot and ragged against his neck.

xXx

Harry was sure heaven must smell like shampoo, cologne and a hint of sweat. He involuntarily thrust into Tom's hand; he couldn't help himself; the sensation was that overwhelming. He was apprehensive of this turning too sexual too soon, but now that it was happening, he immediately wanted to return the favour. He wanted to touch Tom more, but he needed one hand to keep himself up, so he rolled them over so the both laid on their side facing each other.

Yep, he was definitely gay... or he had some weird dark lord fetish. In any case, he couldn't imagine ever feeling like this with Ginny or Cho – namely, loving the way their hard cock fit into his hand, long and smooth and *perfect*.

Then they both started moving their hands and Harry was lost in a consonance of low grunts, he wasn't even sure whose anymore. He pulled away once more to drink in the sight of Tom – if Harry had thought he was handsome before, this ruffled, blissed-out version was

absolutely breath-taking. There was no way this beautiful man and the snaky terrorist from the future could be the same person, not in Harry's mind at least, not anymore.

He was too close too soon, but it was literally out of his hands, so he just met those intense brown eyes as he picked up the pace, then leant in to kiss the younger wizard one last time... and he was coming, letting out a deep groan he would probably be ashamed of if his mind wasn't too busy having the best orgasm of his life, although it was functioning enough to register Tom's soft little whimper as he, too, reached his climax just seconds later.

As he came down from his high, he found himself leaning against Tom's forehead. He pulled away to take a better look – the brunet was still catching his breath with his eyes closed. They were both still fully clothed, but their middle sections were a sticky mess – Harry couldn't bring himself to care, but he haphazardly waved his hand to vanish it anyway. When he looked up again, Tom was watching him back with a strange expression. Harry was hit with a sudden wave of self-consciousness.

“What?”

“...Nothing.” Now, that pause suggested there was *something*, but Harry decided not to probe lest he tarnished this memory. “I was just thinking I should get back to my bed now, if we don't want the others to find out.”

“Right, okay.” The implication was clear, but it wasn't like Harry wanted to tell them either. He watched Tom sit up and fix, getting ready to leave. The new-found anxiety was bubbling inside him though, so before he could think better of it, he caught him by his wrist.

“Wait, so... is this, like, a thing now?” That was as eloquent as he could manage.

After a few excruciatingly long seconds of silence, Tom, with his back still turned, said “Yes, I suppose it is.”

Something warm blossomed in Harry's chest. Then, just before Tom left, he met Harry's eyes one last time, smirking, and added, “Don't you dare cheat on me. I don't share.”

It was said in a light tone, as if joking, but Harry could sense the underlying truth of it, maybe even a hint of insecurity.

Wow... I guess possessiveness really is hot.

Chapter 9

In contrast to the previous night, Tom woke up on Monday morning feeling well-rested and ready for... he didn't even know what anymore, not since Harry had come and turned his life upside down.

The morning started out pretty normal though. He, Dalamar and Clarence Pebblestone started getting ready right after the general wakeup call while Harry and Fulcran snoozed until quarter to eight; not being a morning person was apparently a common trait in Quidditch players. They went to the Great Hall together (except for Pebblestone who was used to keeping his distance), complaining about Mondays or otherwise chit-chatting.

Harry was sitting opposite to Tom at breakfast, nothing unusual there. He was talking to Avery about the spell they were supposed to practice for today's Transfiguration class, Tom was eating a toast in silence, when suddenly he felt something warm touching his calf. Thinking it was just someone stretching their legs, he instinctively moved it out of the way, but it was blocked on the other side, too.

He looked up at Harry, who was still chatting casually with Dalamar, though when he met Tom's eyes, the corners of his mouth twitched... That utter tosser. He closed in, now touching Tom's calf on both sides, and started slowly sliding his left ankle up.

Salazar help him – Harry was *playing footsie* with him in the middle of the Great Hall. Tom didn't know whether to be amused or appalled.

As he was coming to understand, Harry never did things in halves – once he set his mind on something, he was a man on a mission. At the moment, the mission was apparently teasing Tom to the point of insanity. Over the next few days, he never missed an opportunity to brush their fingers while handing him ingredients in Potions, rest his knee against Tom's under the table or throw him one of those warm little smiles. It kept Tom on edge, wondering if this wasn't too risky after all, but he wasn't someone to back away from a challenge...

So, he gave as good as he got. When Harry was doing the footsie thing again during the dinner on Wednesday, Tom actually slipped out of his shoe to trail his foot along Harry's inner thigh and eventually press it to his crotch, all the while innocently eating a pudding, registering only the satisfying hitch in Harry's breath. He kept his foot there, stroking gently, and when he finally looked up, Harry was sporting a most delicious blush, looking much too interested in the apple pie on his plate.

Tom was yanked into a broom closet on their way to the library (honestly, he was kind of expecting it).

"You complete wanker! That was just evil!" Harry chided, but he was snogging Tom breathless against the wall seconds later. As an apology, Tom kissed him back just as fiercely while undoing their belts and enclosing both of their cocks in his right hand. Harry moaned into his mouth, and Tom wanted nothing more than to watch him come undone by his hand again.

...Tom always got what he wanted.

xXx

It was Friday, Tom's patrol night, and Harry had been restless since dinner. He'd spent the week exploring his newfound attraction to Tom, and he was, quite frankly, hooked. It was a bizarre thing to be in his situation, but then again, his whole situation was bizarre.

Would Tom pay him a visit again? The memory from the dusty closet was still burning in the back of his mind, and while apprehensive, now that he'd gotten a taste, he was eager to try *more*.

He couldn't wait, but it was only quarter to eleven.

Screw this.

He literally couldn't wait. He put on the Cloak and sneaked out of the room.

Tom, being a Slytherin prefect, would usually patrol the lower levels. The ground floor was too risky with both the staff room and the caretaker's office being located there, the dungeons were a popular place for students to sneak out to, but the first floor was usually perfectly serene at night – the History of Magic corridor was apparently so boring even portraits didn't want to hang(out) there. It had no hiding places, but Harry didn't really have to worry about getting caught by the prefect, did he?

In fact, he just got a brilliant idea – for once, the hunter would become the hunted.

xXx

Tom was walking down the silent corridor, trying to come up with new, more durable incantations for the Levitation Charm. Could one cast it on themselves to fly without a broom? Suddenly, a strong push from the side threw him off balance and against the wall... A wall covered in a powerful Sticking Charm, as he found out when he attempted to move. Pretty much everything was stuck – his back, his arms, his hair, the part of his right leg where the robe flew open... like a giant fly on a paper strip. Adrenalin shot through his veins, heart beating fast and magic flaring in the self-preservation instinct.

"Relax, it's me," a familiar voice whispered in his ear.

Hold up.

"...Harry? What the hell are you doing here?"

Invisible hands ran down his torso and gripped at his waist. They rested there for a moment, then travelled to his buckle and worked on undoing it. Tom's eyes widened.

"Surely you don't plan to, here... Are you insane?"

"Yes," Harry's voice said without missing a beat. One detached hand came into view, pulling Tom's trousers and pants as far down as the Sticking Charm allowed, his warm fingers gently

stroking the newly uncovered skin.

Tom hated his body for reacting, because he was a goddamn prefect with his dick out in the middle of a very public corridor... and also, because he was Tom Riddle being stuck to a wall, completely in Harry's mercy.

He heard a small thud of something heavy dropping to the floor and had about two seconds to wonder what that was about before he learned exactly what it was about, and consequently became unable to wonder about anything at all.

xXx

Feeling equal parts eager and nervous, Harry used his free hand to lift the cape out of the way without revealing his face in the angle of Tom's gaze.

The cock in his other hand was now almost fully erect and even prettier from up close: a pink, symmetric head on a thick body, stemming from a base of thin, dark hair. Harry wondered if wanting to stuff it in his mouth was the standard gay reaction to penises.

He gathered up his courage and gave it the first, tentative lick. It... just tasted like skin with a hint of salty sweat, although there was this musky element to it that did strange things to his brain.

Emboldened, he took the whole head in his mouth – he was really glad he had the Cloak shielding him from view, he was self-conscious enough without the added worry about how he looked while doing this.

Tom was watching anyway, as much as his Stuck hair allowed him. From his point of view, it must have looked like his cock was disappearing into thin air.

Harry slowly slid further down the length, glancing up for the reaction. It was gorgeous; Tom's eyes fluttered shut and a low sigh escaped his mouth. This was a really weird angle; how could his face still look so perfect? Mild candlelight danced on his skin; a couple of dark curls hung over his forehead.

Harry did his best to relax his throat and leant forward – he wanted to take it all in, let it stretch him and fill him, but most importantly, he wanted to see Tom react like this.

He still had about two inches left when his gag reflex kicked in, tears welling up in his eyes, and he just barely stopped himself from actually gagging. He pulled back and closed his hand around the base instead, pumping it and focusing his tongue on the tip.

“Mmm, Harry, that's... *fuck*...”

That was the first time Harry had heard Tom swear, and it was such a contrast with his usual composed self that it went straight to Harry's aching-hard cock. Unable to hold back anymore, he reached down to touch himself while sliding up and down Tom's length, finding a rhythm and meeting each dive of his head with a stroke, at which delightfully dirty noises escaped Tom's mouth; low grunts, breathless gasps, a muttered word here and there.

At some point, the Sticking Charm must have worn out; it wasn't particularly long-lasting; because he felt a touch on his head.

xXx

Tom was finally free, and thank Merlin for that, because he was just dying to see, to bury his hands into Harry's hair and thrust deep into that hot, pliant mouth. He felt for the cape and pulled in off, revealing the most amazing sight: Harry's moonlit face, glasses crooked, cheeks flushed and wet with tears, enthusiastically sucking Tom's cock in. Hell, it took all his self-control not to come from that sight alone.

He snaked both of his hands into Harry's hair and met his movement with a thrust. Harry moaned around his member and lifted his glassy eyes to meet Tom's. That was all it took.

"I'm...fuck, I'm close," he ground out, trying to pull Harry off, but the other wizard just stiffened, groaned, sheathed Tom's cock in that divine heat one more time... and Tom's entire groin area exploded with the heat of his orgasm, one hand flying up to muffle the groan that forced its way out of him as he came down Harry's throat.

He slumped against the wall, riding out the high, and absently ran his fingers through the wild black locks, this time more gently, as if trying to sooth the coughing he'd caused. *Idiot, why haven't you pulled off?*

Then he noticed the beads of white liquid glistening on the floor where Harry's Invisibility Cloak fell open.

Harry liked sucking my cock so much he got off on it. Now wasn't that a lovely thought?

He sighed, "Merlin, Harry... You'll be the death of me one day."

He didn't honestly think it was so funny, but it made Harry choke even more, the cough now combined with laughter. He scrambled to his feet, still laughing, "You said it," he managed to get out in a raspy voice.

The eyes of his bodiless face met Tom's, still glinting playfully, "Now, Mr. Prefect, shouldn't you be escorting stray students to their dorms?" then he gasped dramatically and made a mock-horrified face. "Will you be taking points?"

Tom sighed exasperatedly and flicked the cape of Harry's cloak over his head, rendering him fully invisible again.

"Let's just go," he said and started walking towards the dungeons. "How did you even get one of those? I thought they were supposed to be rare and expensive."

"It was an in-... er, a gift," Harry's sourceless voice replied. "From my father."

"I see... sorry for asking."

"Don't worry about it."

Giving his teenage son an Invisibility Cloak... It made Tom wonder what kind of man Harry's father must have been. Harry didn't really fit into the stereotype of a spoiled pureblood though – so much was strange about him...

A thought emerged in his mind.

“Harry, you said your knowledge of me comes from my past and future memories, correct?”

“Yeah...?”

“How did you know I was a half-blood? Would I have found out later?” He couldn't be sure that Harry had known and waited if he would call his bluff, but he didn't.

There was a pause. “Yes.”

“Do you know if my father's still alive?”

An even longer pause. “Does it matter?”

Did it?

“Not really.” *Maybe.*

“Right.” He felt a cloth-covered hand close around his and squeeze gently. “I... guess if he was worth meeting, you wouldn't be spending the summers where you do.”

Tom had thought those words many times, of course, but they carried a strange sense of finality from Harry's lips – it made him feel like he was truly better off without his biological family.

They were almost in the earshot of the portraits in the Tapestry Corridor, so the conversation cut off, but Harry didn't let go of his hand all the way to the dungeons. It was silly, but... also kind of nice.

Chapter 10

The first Quidditch match of the season, traditionally Gryffindor versus Slytherin, took place the next day; not that it usually affected Tom, but this year was different.

Harry had been inexplicably grumpy since morning; not nervous, not ill, just in a foul mood. Tom couldn't understand why, the weather was ideal, and he was usually so passionate about flying. He just hoped it had nothing to do with last night or him in general, though he wouldn't admit the slight insecurity even to himself.

Now that he'd gotten (and thoroughly enjoyed) one blow job, he sincerely hoped it wasn't the last, but that didn't stop him from being mildly irritated by having Harry lead the way again. Hufflepuffs would say stuff like "Sex is not a competition," well, it was to him – in every relationship, there was always the stronger and the weaker side, the dominant and the submissive, the leader and the follower. Tom was *never* the latter; not if he could help it.

Sexual attraction was such a strange thing, it came out of the blue and made even the most disciplined individuals distracted, turned even the most reserved into perverts – Tom was speaking from experience. He hadn't made any progress with the Ministry or his research projects and just barely maintained his academic excellence, because apparently Harry's every word, smile or action were now the priority for his brain.

Worst of all, he was flooded with such a load of friendly hormones that he was struggling to bring himself to care – he blamed it on his teenage body. The only logical (though however distasteful) solution he could come up with was to wait it out.

So, he went to see the match.

Harry took to flying like a duck takes to water, even an outsider like Tom could tell – not that he showed it off before the final chase, most of the time he would just hover above one of the towers and dodge Bludgers while scanning the air.

Fifty minutes into the game, the teams had been almost tied with Slytherin leading by just one goal 110 to 100. Tom had actually become absorbed in it (he never said it was completely boring, just that it was a waste of time), so he only caught the movement from the corner of his eye. When he fully registered it, he saw Harry falling... no, deliberately shooting towards the ground.

"And Potter dives! Did he spot the Snitch?" the commentator's voice boomed.

But Harry wasn't stopping, not fifteen metres above the ground, not ten metres... Tom's stomach lurched and his hand instinctively grasped the wand in his pocket, but just when it looked like he would surely crash, Harry pulled powerfully on his broom, levelling it with the ground, and then it was just one loop around the goal basket's base before he had the Golden Snitch in his hand.

“Harry Potter catches the Snitch after a hair-raising dive! What a show, ladies and gentlemen! Slytherin wins today’s match by 160 points!”

The Slytherin tribunes burst into a deafening sea of cheers. Tom usually hated that, but now he was feeling a twisted sense of pride, because they were cheering for Harry; *his* Harry, *his* angel, *his*... were they *boyfriends*? What a strange thing to say about himself – “boyfriend” was never on the list of titles he’d aspired to earn, yet no matter how he looked at it, that’s what he was now.

The players got off their brooms and started flocking around Harry, patting his back, giving him high-fives, Fulcran even wrapped his arm around his shoulders and shook him excitedly. Now, that wasn’t fun anymore; it made Tom want to curse the bastards who touched what was his.

He wouldn’t, though. Since he apparently wouldn’t be achieving immortality, he had a record for the afterlife to worry about. Plus, Harry would hate that, and he wouldn’t willingly risk the consequences his hormone-propelled body would bestow upon him if Harry left again; just the idea of it sent cold shivers down his spine.

Patience, wait it out... and meanwhile, if you want it, take it – like you always do.

He retrieved a small piece of parchment from his bag and dictated a short message that magically etched itself on it. He Transfigured it and sent it on its way.

xXx

Harry was heading from the pitch with the rest of his teammates, happy to have won the game but still a little bitter about having won it for Slytherin.

A buzzing to his right caught his attention. With his Seeker reflexes still on, he easily spotted the source – it was a bumblebee. It circled around his head twice, then flew straight into his collar.

Harry yelped and swatted it with his hand.

“You okay, mate?” asked Kevin Planck, the team captain.

“Yeah, just a fly,” he said, feeling the spot for the poor insect. Instead, he found something flat and smooth. Frowning, he pulled it out – it was a folded piece of parchment. He turned away to read it discreetly.

Good flying today.

For a special reward, wait in the locker room until everyone’s gone.

T.

All the bitterness was instantly forgotten – just the mental image of what that could mean was giving Harry a semi; he didn’t know how he’d survive the showers. When he lifted his eyes back to Kevin, the Beater was grinning mischievously.

“Ooh, getting fan mail already? Lucky bastard, and she’s good at Transfiguration, too – could come in handy if she’s ugly,” he wiggled his eyebrows. Harry shot him a dirty look and ribbed him with his elbow, but he was quite sure his face was as red as a beet.

He deliberately took his time undressing, he was the last to get into the showers (thank Merlin for stalls), and even there he dragged it out, trying hard not to think of anything hard in case it made his already embarrassingly hard situation even harder.

With just a towel wrapped around his waist, he opened the door to the locker room with both anticipation and trepidation. It was empty. He sighed, part relieved, part disappointed, and adjusted the *situation* that had been trapped uncomfortably under the towel.

“Eager, aren’t we?”

Tom was standing beside the closing door which had previously blocked him from view, smirking.

Harry was caught by surprise and didn’t know what to say to that. Thankfully, he didn’t have to say anything as Tom locked the door, closed the distance and occupied his mouth otherwise.

He kissed gently, leisurely, kissing away the surprise. His elegant hands ran down Harry’s bare chest and stomach, eventually coming to cup the bulge in his groin.

“Just thinking about me makes you this hard?” he hummed in Harry’s ear, squeezing lightly and earning himself a soft moan.

Harry’s hands in turn found the firm globes of Tom’s arse, grabbed at them and used the leverage to pull him flush against himself. He laughed into the side of his neck, “The pot calling the kettle black.”

He was pushed back until his calves met the bench and with nowhere else to back away to, he fell into a sitting position, the cock he had been sucking less than twenty-four hours ago at his eye level once more. He would be more than happy to do it again and was already reaching up to undo the buckle, but it dropped, together with the rest of Tom.

Tom Marvolo Riddle, willingly kneeling before Harry Potter in a humble locker room. It was almost therapeutic.

He was watching in wonder as the other wizard undid the sole piece of cloth keeping Harry from being stark naked. They’ve caught glimpses of each other (naturally, since they were rooming together), but this was... different. Intimate.

Tom’s expression was confident, but his hands were shaking; it was becoming Harry’s favourite of all the small telling gestures – seeing Tom agitated was strangely adorable. He couldn’t help but thread his fingers through those dark brown wavy locks gently.

“You know, you don’t have to, just because I did it yesterday... if you’re uncomfortable-”

“No, I want to,” he said so insistently it made Harry’s heart skip a beat... Or maybe it was the touch Tom had finally bestowed upon his rock-hard cock.

Mesmerised, Harry slid his hand lower, so its thumb was grazing Tom’s lower lip. Recalling the Great Hall incident from earlier that week, he shifted his right leg to provide his length with some friction.

“You want to suck my cock?” He let his thumb brush across that perfect mouth, feeling on edge just from the thought of it around his member. He forced himself to stop in case Tom was actually planning to answer the question.

Sweet Merlin, he was. He met Harry’s eyes with his beautiful, predatory brown ones, an amused smirk playing on his lips.

“I want to suck your cock, Harry.”

He leant in at that, not even bothering with caution – he just *devoured* as much of it as he could before he would choke; Harry wasn’t exactly small either. Harry groaned, letting his head fall back and gripping at the bench for dear life, even as Tom started moving.

He kept staring unseeingly into the ceiling for a while, simply savouring the hot, wet, *incredible* sensation and trying not to come from it embarrassingly soon. But then he realised he was probably missing out on quite a spectacle, so he dared look down.

Big mistake... the *best* mistake of his life.

The upside: Tom Riddle was actually sucking his cock and looking bloody gorgeous while doing it. The downside: He was now seconds from coming.

“W-wait!” he pushed Tom off by his shoulder, his breaths shallow. For a second, there was a look of genuine confusion on the other wizard’s face.

“Sorry, it’s just... too good,” he bent down to drag Tom into a heated kiss. Once he felt the crisis had blown over, he straightened again, carding his fingers delicately through Tom’s silky hair, keeping it there even as he felt the hot heaven return to his cock.

“Mmm, so good... You’re doing... so well,” he coaxed, running the hand back and forth in gentle caresses. “You look so perfect like that.”

Tom looked up at him and Harry was suddenly afraid he’d said too much, but there was no reprimand in those eyes, they were just gloriously lustful. Reluctantly, as if he’d been resisting the urge, Tom retreated the right hand he’d been resting on Harry’s thigh, reaching down to his own trousers, moaning softly as he did.

Encouraged by the reaction, Harry kept on. “You like it when I talk, eh? Well, I like what you’re doing with your mouth, too,” he couldn’t stop a grunt from escaping his mouth, “Yeah, take it, it’s all yours.”

Tom’s eyes fluttered shut and his breath hitched – that last part specifically seemed to be doing it for him. Harry remembered his suspicion about Tom being the jealous type and

grinned mischievously. He didn't even know where it was coming from, that he had it in himself, but "You own it, you can, ahh, do whatever you want with it... You could do whatever you want with the rest of me – it's all yours, too."

Tom's fingers dug into his flesh as he shuddered, practically purring around his cock, and Harry was near again. "Tom... I'm-."

The warning didn't register for a second too long, because when the brunet eventually pulled back, it was to have Harry's seed sprayed all over his flushed face, some even landed in his hair.

Harry's hands shot to his own horrified face.

"Shit, I'm so sorry!"

He was, but he also wasn't; Tom's handsome startled face covered with Harry's cum had to be the hottest thing he'd ever seen – hell, he'd probably never masturbate to anything else from now on.

He had about four blissful seconds to burn the image into his memory before the other wizard remembered himself and pulled out his wand to spell the mess away – to Harry's relief, there was also some on the floor, suggesting his fist attempt at sex talk couldn't have been too awful, though his own words were making him blush now that he'd replayed them in his head.

It hit him that he was still embarrassingly nude, so he hurried to address that. He stood up too quickly, though – his head spun, and he staggered, feeling like an idiot. Warm arms wrapped around his waist and steadied him.

"Er, thanks," Harry mumbled into the taller wizard's shoulder. When he looked up, there was an odd expression on Tom's face – softer than he'd ever seen him make... entrancingly, dangerously so. Harry didn't know how to handle it, so dropped his gaze and he turned away to get dressed. Tom meanwhile schooled his mussed hair into its usual deep brown perfection. Then, they set out on their way back to the castle.

A few minutes into the walk, something caught Harry's attention. A Thestral herd came into sight to their left, in the direction of the Groundkeeper's Hut. There were at least fifteen of them, with two foals hopping playfully in the grass. They reminded Harry of Luna – maybe she was right, there was something beautiful about every creature... Like how these spooky, bony carnivores could simultaneously appear so peaceful.

"What are you looking at?"

He turned to Tom, who was watching him curiously.

"Just the Thestral herd." *Is he blind? They're right here.*

A realisation dawned on him as soon as he said it – Tom couldn't see Thestrals, he hadn't seen death, let alone caused it. Harry's chest tightened; he inwardly swore he would keep, *protect*,

Tom from seeing them.

“You were there when... your parents?” the younger wizard asked softly.

That's not really it, but “Yes.”

“Harry, that's-“

“Okay. It happened, nothing you can do about it.”

Exactly. Do nothing and they'll live.

Harry checked the surroundings to make sure nobody was around, then threaded his fingers through Tom's, watching their hands intertwine. He stroked the warm skin he'd found under his thumb and lifted his gaze to meet Tom's with an unusual solemnity.

“I really, really hope you'll never get to see them.”

Tom had that strange look about him again. He simply nodded and squeezed Harry's hand in acknowledgement before they had to separate again, walking the rest of the way in a contemplative silence.

Chapter 11

They were returning from dinner when Harry heard it.

“No, please... please, let me go!” A whimper coming from behind the door of their room.

“You are a disgrace to house Slytherin, you filthy blood traitor! Diffindo!”

A pained scream followed.

Harry had a wand in his hand in less than a second, rushed through the rest of the corridor and slammed the door open.

“Expelliarmus!” he shouted immediately, disarming the offender first before pausing to assess the situation. Clarence Pebblestone was cowering on the floor, wandless and clutching his cut arm, before Abraxas Malfoy, who was now wandless as well. Fulcran Lestrangle, Dalamar Avery and Christopher Nott were all standing aside, presumably backing Malfoy up.

“The hell are you doing, Malfoy?!” Harry growled. *Damn, the nostalgia.*

“I am defending the good reputation of our house. What are *you* doing, meddling in prefect matters?” he sneered in a distinctly Malfoyish manner that had always made Harry’s blood boil.

“Prefect matters?! You-”

“Abraxas, explain,” said Tom’s cool voice from behind him.

“Gladly. Turns out books are not the only thing this sissy likes – he is also into filthy Mudbloods. Namely, Claire Jenkins the Hufflepuff.”

“You *cut* him for dating a Muggleborn?! Are you mental?!”

Abraxas kept looking expectantly at Tom. “This has gone on long enough. It is beyond me why you even keep him around, but you should at least teach your pet blood traitor his place.”

Harry turned to Tom as well, eyes aflame. “You side with him?!” *We talked about this*, their warning glint seemed to say.

Seconds dragged while everyone’s attention rested on Tom, who remained silent for a long moment. Finally, he took up the same regal air as Harry remembered from the Knight meeting, and said gravely:

“It has come to my attention that Muggleborns are in fact not detrimental to our Cause, and therefore shall not be persecuted by us. Leave Pebblestone be.”

There were several sharp intakes of breath in the room, though one unmistakably belonged to Malfoy. The seventh year straightened his back and set his jaw, fuming.

“It has come to my attention that *your* Cause no longer coincides with the interests of house Malfoy,” he spat and stormed out of the room.

“And house Nott,” said Christopher, who promptly followed suit.

Tom raised an expectant eyebrow at Fulcran and Dalamar.

Dalamar immediately bowed his head in silent submission – he must be very loyal to Tom personally, Harry thought.

Fulcran didn’t look so sure, but he eventually allowed, “The cause is above everything... although an explanation would be appreciated.”

“I am aware, and I shall explain in a meeting tonight – same as usual, but Aaron brings Tristan and Isaac, Maxmilion will arrive with me beforehand. Pass the information to the others.”

The boys nodded in acknowledgement and retreated from the room. Harry was already crouching by Clarence, helping him up. When he noticed Tom was staring at him, he gave him a reassuring smile.

You did the right thing, he tried to comprise in it.

Tom’s expression didn’t brighten at all. In the same, serious voice, he said, “You come, too.”

The younger wizard then turned on his heel and left without another word.

xXx

What have I done?

His mind was in such a turmoil that his inner monologue turned into a dialogue.

It was inevitable.

But it cost me the two most influential followers, maybe more.

The ideology was faulty, you couldn’t have avoided that revelation.

I certainly would have told them differently, manipulate them into cooperating anyway.

But you couldn’t have done anything else. Harry was there.

What does Harry have to do with that?

He promised himself he’d never allow his fling with Harry to stand in the way of his plans. Had he acted rashly because Harry was there? That was inexcusable!

Yet the idea of what would have happened if he'd taken Malfoy's side... It sent chills down his spine.

What's wrong with me?

Nevertheless, he had to come up with an emergency plan for the Knight meeting. He couldn't tell them he was a half-blood himself, that would have made them think he was twisting the facts in his favour... He needed data to support his change of heart.

He was in for a taxing couple of hours.

xXx

Harry was waiting by the already summoned Room of Requirement, feeling quite out of place with Maxmilion Dolohov eyeing him curiously. Finally, they heard footsteps echo from the direction of the Grand Staircase, and Aaron Morgenstern's group came into view. Together, they walked in, Harry taking the seat that had previously been Abraxas's.

"I am sure you've all heard of today's events," Tom began once they were seated. Most of the Knights nodded.

"As I implied, I have discovered new facts that have changed the direction of our future efforts significantly. The Cause, of course, stands – the ultimate survival of the Wizarding population. However, it has been suggested by Harry Potter, who is hereby initiated as your fellow Knight of Walpurgis..."

Harry nodded to the others awkwardly. *Am I a Death Eater now?*

"... that a dangerous misinformation has spread among the British wizarding circles. My subsequent research, though cut short by today's incident, has confirmed this theory." He spread out a set of parchments covered in handwritten notes on the table.

"I have found that Muggle blood not only does not dilute magical power, it actually lowers the chances of a Squib or otherwise impaired offspring, as illustrated by the family trees here," he pointed to one of the parchments, "and the list of the most magically powerful wizards with their respective blood statuses here.

"The Muggleborns also represent a significant portion of the manpower necessary for the continued prosperity and defensibility of wizardkind. Therefore, we shall instead push for their best possible assimilation and concentrate our efforts purely on the cultural separation from Muggles."

He looked around the completely silent room with a solemn expression. "Sadly, two of you have shown today that they valued their prejudice over the Cause and had left our circles. I trust no one else wants to follow in their footsteps..." He raised his eyebrows in a silent challenge and took care to meet the eyes of each Knight.

Nobody moved to leave or demur.

Wow, he can be really persuasive.

“Very well. If you have any questions, ask them now... Yes, Dalamar?”

“How are we expected to treat Mud-, I mean, Muggle-borns now?”

“With respect and helpfulness, obviously. We need them to integrate well into our society and never think of returning to their Muggle ways.” Some of the boys appeared a bit uncomfortable, but no one spoke up.

“If that’s all... Feel free to do your own research in case you still have doubts. I would also like to stress the importance of the upcoming Slug Club Christmas party; use any means necessary to gain connections, we need to compensate for the loss of houses Malfoy and Nott – our new ways might appeal to a different sort of influential wizardfolk. Meeting dismissed.”

xXx

Tom was lying in his bed later that night, staring blankly into the curtain. His body was tired, but his mind wouldn’t let him sleep.

His new policy was just what was best for the Wizarding World, it had nothing to do with the Muggle-borns themselves, did it? He wouldn’t care if he had to oppress “innocents” to achieve a greater good, would he?

What would Harry think?

Wait, why does it matter?

Speak of the devil – he caught the movement of his curtains as the newly knighted wizard slipped in and whispered a Privacy Charm. Tom didn’t even bother to roll over.

“Not today, Harry, I’m tired.”

“Oh, er, no, I just came to talk.” The other wizard invited himself to the bed anyway. He settled behind Tom and laid a hand on his shoulder, stroking lightly, as one would when trying to sooth someone. Tom was not some upset schoolgirl and felt silly in the position, but he didn’t move away, because... because...

Why wasn’t he moving away? Why was Harry’s touch so bloody irresistible?

He sighed, “Couldn’t it wait until morning?”

“No,” the stroking stopped for a second, then resumed, “Maybe, but I really wanted to tell you now. You were brilliant today. You did the right thing.”

His heart sped up – it wasn’t the first time he noticed that occurrence lately. He didn’t believe any of what happened today was beneficial for his goals, why did those words make him feel as if he’d actually accomplished something?

“If the angel says so.”

“...You don’t believe it?”

Tom finally rolled over to see Harry. There was no Lumos this time, so he only discerned the outlines of his face in the dark, but he could tell that he was frowning.

“I do. Anything that will help us in the war is the right thing.”

Harry sighed, “Why are you so set on having a war?”

“Harry, I am a Slytherin and you know better than anyone exactly how much I don’t want to die – I don’t *want* the war, I just think it’s inevitable and aim to maximise our chances. In fact, Grindelwald’s about to start it anyway.”

“... I don’t think it’s inevitable.” *Oh, here we go.* Tom’s head was starting to hurt after the long day. *Wait, doesn’t that mean he knows Grindelwald won’t start it?*

“We can’t hide forever. Especially not with such a lousy Statute protection and the progress Muggles are making with their technology.”

“Exactly – can’t we just hide for *long enough*? The Muggle society... it’s changing, I think it will even more after their world war is over. It’s growing more humane and accepting, if we could just remain hidden another century or two... maybe we could simply come out.”

You naïve fool. “Harry, that-”

“Think about it, Tom.” Harry’s voice was resolute. “What is the wizard to Muggle ratio?”

“I... don’t know exactly.”

“It’s about one to *ten thousand*... Do you really think, with whatever precautions you take, that one wizard could fight off ten thousand Muggles in a war?”

“That’s why we need immortality-”

“Which is not achievable,” finished Harry firmly.

A heavy silence stretched for a long moment.

“You think we don’t stand a chance,” Tom breathed out, the devastating prospect turning his insides cold.

“I think we have a better chance waiting than initiating a conflict.” Harry brought a hand to the base of Tom’s neck, keeping it there.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to trouble you even more after today, it’s just...” He closed in and laid a chaste kiss on Tom’s lips while stroking his hair where it met the bare skin.

“It made me really happy when you stood up for Clarence... and me.” The hand squeezed gently before it let go as Harry got up to leave. “Goodnight, Tom.”

As soon as Tom was alone, he realised he missed the distracting voice and touch, because without it, he was fully exposed to the anxiety coiling in his stomach – a similar one as he'd felt when he felt threatened, though this time, there was the added sense of powerlessness. No matter how he thought about it, like a hot iron, the truth of those words burned in the back of his mind.

Damn Harry Potter, nothing's been going according to the plan since he'd appeared. Tom fucking hated him – he hated how righteous Harry acted, he hated how Harry disproved his principles, he hated how he craved Harry's touch, and most of all, he hated how a progressively louder voice in his head kept whispering that he didn't hate Harry at all.

What the fuck are you doing to me?

Chapter 12

A week went by relatively peacefully – after the Malfoy incident and their consequent conversation, Tom became broodier when they were alone, but he would still spend time with Harry and exchange handfuls or mouthfuls of pleasure during their late-night visits. As far as Harry could tell, Tom had been on his best behaviour – he actually seemed progressively less devilish and more devilishly handsome every time Harry looked.

Unsurprisingly, the word of the incident had spread like Fiendfyre – some of the more bigoted Slytherins distanced themselves and started throwing them indignant glares, which was unpleasant, but more than compensated for by the large number of people from all houses who seemed impressed by the clear pro-Muggle-born stance.

New friends (“allies”, Tom called them) approached them, mostly through Harry as he had been the one who stood up for Clarence. The rumour must have reached the staff, too, because he repeatedly noticed Dumbledore eyeing them pensively during the meals and Transfiguration classes.

The height of it had been the Slug Club party – Tom was all smiles and clever courtesy (Harry couldn’t decide if he wanted see Tom in the formal robes all the time or rip them off him on the spot). Fleamont unfortunately couldn’t make it as he was on a business trip in the United States, but Harry didn’t mind, because they spent the evening having a *pleasant chat* with *Septimus Weasley*.

It was disconcerting. It was going *too* well.

If Tom had been reformed, why was Harry still here? Shouldn’t he at least have noticed some change? His scar disappearing or some other freaky sign... The lack of it made him feel like he’d been dreaming, in danger of waking up any minute.

Was he just falling for one of Tom’s infamous illusions? Could he be this good an actor? Would he go this far? The possibility of it made Harry’s heart sink. At this point, there was no denying he was falling in one way or another – even Harry couldn’t be *that* oblivious after hardly thinking about anything but the man for weeks on end... He just didn’t know whether it was falling in love or falling from grace.

One Tuesday night, the 14th of December, found Harry shirtless in Tom’s bed, absently drawing circles into the other wizard’s wrist with his thumb, uneasiness swelling in his chest. After their little stunt in the locker room, Tom seemed to have owned up to his possessiveness, which (among other things) manifested as the habit of pulling Harry into a tight embrace for a while after they’d finished their less innocent activities. Had it been in anyone else, Harry was sure he’d hate the trait, but he just found it endearing about Tom – knowing where he’d come from, it made sense for him to be like that.

“I’ve been thinking,” he started reluctantly.

“About what?” He could feel Tom’s lips moving against his hair.

“You usually stay here over the Christmas, right?”

“Yes?”

“Then I’m staying, too,” Harry said and turned to see his face. “Unless you’d like to come over?”

Tom frowned, “You live with your aunt and uncle.”

“Yeah, they’re really nice.”

“That’s not what I mean. You know my resources are limited, I can’t just-”

“I’m sure they’d understand, but if you think it would make you uncomfortable, I’m not forcing you... It was just a suggestion.”

Tom stared at Harry’s face, one of those strange, thoughtful looks he’d started giving him recently.

“I’d rather stay at Hogwarts,” he said finally.

“Alright,” Harry nodded, not quite ready to let go of those dark eyes, darker still in the dim, intimate light of Lumos.

There was a pause, then, “Harry... Is there anything you want for Christmas?”

Harry blinked in surprise, “You’d bother to get a gift for me?”

Tom smirked amusedly. “I’ve bothered to do a lot for you lately, haven’t I?” he let his hand slide down Harry’s spine to the small of his back, resting there warm and heavy.

Merlin, please don’t let all this be fake. A confirmation, that’s all I want!

Suddenly, he got an idea.

“I’d... actually like for you to *do* something for me... I want to see what your Patronus looks like.”

The frown was back on Tom’s face. “I don’t know either. I tried to learn it last year, couldn’t produce one.”

“I know, but I can. I’ll teach you.”

Tom looked sceptical. “Isn’t that more of a gift for me then?”

“No,” Harry thought about it, “Er, we could make it a shared gift, if you didn’t have anything else in mind?”

“...Okay.”

Harry’s eyelids were getting heavy – he had to leave soon. He smiled tiredly as he sat up.

“Let’s try tomorrow and see.”

xXx

They entered a spacious room with a set of dummies on the right and bookshelves on the left, easily larger than most classrooms. Was that really necessary for practicing a benign charm like the Patronus?

Harry must have noticed Tom’s confusion (how could he always see through him so easily?) because he made an apologetic face. “Sorry, I thought about needing a room to practice defensive magic,” he said sheepishly.

“Defensive...” Tom mused, “I always thought it was more of a communication charm.” At Harry’s enquiring look, he elaborated, “I know it repels Dementors, but one would much more likely use it to send a message. Isn’t that why you learned it?”

Harry scratched the back of his neck, appearing quite uncomfortable. “Er, not really. I had a bit of Dementor problem when I was fourteen.”

Tom raised his eyebrows. “Seriously, Harry, what else did you fight when you were fourteen? A dragon?”

The look Harry gave him at that was outright alarmed.

What are you not telling me?

*...And what the **fuck** is up with New Zealand? Why bother building Azkaban if you could just send people there?*

“Right. Well, it’s a defensive charm, not just against Dementors. Have you seen someone else cast it?” Harry asked evasively.

Tom decided to let it go for now. “I’ve seen it relay a message between the Professors once.”

“Have you felt its aura?”

“Aura?”

“I suppose not... Let me show you then.” He pulled out his wand and drew a slow spiral. “Expecto Patronum.”

Immediately, a thick stream of silver light shot from his wand, twisting in the air into the shape of a majestic stag. It took a few steps towards Tom, and he felt peace embrace him from all sides, with a small touch of something else... of Harry. It reminded him of those lazy, post-orgasmic moments when they just laid there, holding each other, like no one else in the world mattered.

Just as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone. Tom let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“It should make you feel peace and happiness. Did you get that?”

Peace and *happiness*. That touch of something else... He felt actually *happy* with Harry? What the hell did that mean?

Stop lying to yourself, you're not good at it – you know what it means.

Absently, he muttered, "... Yes."

“Good, now you need a memory that feels like that, but stronger. What memory were you using when you tried before?”

“Coming to Diagon Alley for the first time.”

“Okay,” Harry nodded thoughtfully, “I used a similar memory the first time I cast it. Concentrate on the memory, try to relive it. Close your eyes, if you need to.”

Tom did, trying to imagine himself as the wide-eyed orphan he'd been when a whole new world of possibilities opened before him... A world full of people like him. He'd been more excited than ever, eager to prove himself, to make a place for himself.

“Does it feel like the Patronus?”

Feel? There's excitement and some happiness, but not the same kind... There's also envy for those who'd lived their whole life in that world and who could afford all the cool magical stuff from the displays, the fear of the unknown.

Even his happiest memory was tainted.

“No,” he admitted.

“Oh. You'll have to pick another memory, then... Memories involving the people closest to you usually work the best.”

Harry was watching Tom with a strange look, kind of hopeful, kind of worried...

He's hoping I'll think of him, he realised.

He tried – eyes closed, he went back to last night, when he had Harry on his back, moaning Tom's name as he came apart by his hand. The way Tom pulled Harry to his chest afterwards... Other memories followed naturally; Harry in the Great Hall, smiling at him brightly while secretly touching Tom's hand under the table. Harry in the Room of Requirement, kissing him after Tom thought he'd lost him...

This was what the Patronus felt like. Eyes still closed, he raised his wand into the initial position.

“Expecto Patronum.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath. He was almost scared to look, but his curiosity won, and he opened his eyes.

There was a small disc of glowing mist shooting from the tip of his wand, swirling slowly.

It wasn't a nothing like before, but it wasn't anywhere near Harry's.

"I'm... sorry, Harry, I don't think-"

He couldn't finish the sentence, because Harry was kissing him, but not like they usually did; this kiss was chaste, closemouthed, tender, his lips were quivering. When they separated, Tom could see those emerald-green eyes glistening. Harry seemed to notice it, too, because he hurriedly turned away.

"No, Tom, that... was brilliant," he said in a tight voice. "It took me ages to get there – you'll definitely have a corporeal one before the holidays are over."

He cleared his throat and spoke more clearly. "Alright, give it a few more tries before we head back."

xXx

The students who were going home for the holidays left in the morning on Saturday the 18th. Harry had sent an owl to Fleamont a few days earlier, explaining he had business at Hogwarts that "could decide his future" and suggesting they meet for a Christmas lunch in Hogsmeade instead if they wanted, to which his grandfather cordially acceded.

It hit Harry while their roommates were packing that they'd have the room to themselves – no sneaking around, drawn curtains and Silencing Charms for two weeks, like actually *living together*. The thought roused the butterflies that he was getting used to having in his stomach.

Falling for Tom Marvolo Riddle... had anyone said it a year ago, he'd call them barmy and direct them to St. Mungo's. Maybe Malfoy and Snape were right with their "Harry Potter, always something special," remarks, though it was true that he'd always yearned for normalcy, and now perhaps more than ever, because it seemed achievable – he could save everyone with the Wizarding World being none the wiser and move on with his life... Where to, he didn't know, but he hoped he'd finally get to figure it out for himself.

So far, his heart pointed in the direction of "somewhere with Tom", but the more he thought about it, the worse he felt. Tom could cast the Patronus Charm, now a large shield, the future was probably changed, what they had going on between them was probably real and Harry hadn't disappeared... It was more than he could hope for, so how come he couldn't be happy about it?

Every time he kissed Tom, every time he'd seen him make progress or show previously unimaginable gentleness, his heart got heavier. Harry had been lying to him, and it felt so, so wrong. He was rubbish at keeping stuff from his friends, how was he supposed to keep such a massive secret from a lover?

It certainly wasn't helping to wake up to Tom's face – his gentle face that now had a matching gentle smile as he, already awake, looked at Harry and wished him a good morning. Then they'd eat meals together, practice magic, do homework and overall act terribly homey, sending Harry further down the spiral of guilt.

He didn't know how much longer he could take this.

xXx

It was the third morning after the other students had left. The two of them came back back from breakfast and went about their new routine with Tom practicing the Patronus Charm in the centre of the room and Harry Transfiguring his hand into the respective appendage of various animals on his bed.

Tom closed his eyes and dove into his memories, gathering all the happiness in his chest like he'd been practicing, until it felt like it would burst. *Plenty of wizards can do this, so you can, too – for him.*

“Expecto Patronum.”

The light that shot from his wand formed the familiar disk, but just as he was about to dismiss it, silver threads poured across the edges and undulated through the air before settling into a new place. He forced himself to stay focused.

What eventually appeared before him was a beautiful silver... *lion*.

Not so long ago, he'd be annoyed to end up with the Gryffindor mascot, but now he held his breath as he took in its noble features, its good-natured face, its wild mane, and all he saw was

“Harry.”

The other wizard looked up from his almost-done dragon claw and actually dropped his wand when he saw the noble animal. The lion circled the room once before it climbed up Harry's trunk, towering over his bed. It bent down and nuzzled its head against Harry's reached out hand-claw, forcing a surprised little laugh out of him.

Then, just before it blinked out, it looked at him affectionately and said in Tom's voice:

“I think I'm in love with you.”

Chapter 13

Harry blinked.

Holy. Shit.

Did that just happen?

Fuck, that actually happened.

Tom was just standing there stiffly looking almost as surprised as Harry had felt, wide eyes darting from him to the floor. It was the most vulnerable, openly nervous look Harry had seen on him; he could discern the shake of Tom's wand hand from all across the room.

Nope.

Nope, can't do this.

The thick silence made even the air feel heavy as it entered his lungs in shallow breaths. Harry's face felt hot, his eyes burned, his vision blurred.

You have to say something, idiot.

"Oh Merlin, fuck, I'm in love with you, too, I'm so sorry," he blurted out as he pressed his palms to his eyes, effectively hiding his face in them and haphazardly pushing his glasses out of the way. He felt like his heart would jump out of his chest, he felt giddy with elation but at the same time it hurt so much, because he knew there was no way he could keep lying after this and felt more scared than ever before.

He could hear Tom's deep exhalation, then approaching footsteps.

A warm hand closed around his left wrist and pulled gently.

"You'll hurt yourself."

Harry uncovered his eyes to see Tom cast a Finite onto his claw of a hand that he'd completely forgotten about. His glasses slid back to their place on his nose, crooked, but he couldn't be bothered at the moment.

"Why would you say you're sorry?" Tom pulled him into a side hug, and it was so bloody sweet Harry thought his heart would explode.

"For lying to you," he forced out, "or for being too weak to keep lying to you... both." He was deliberately not looking Tom in the face, but he felt his body against himself tense.

Deep breath; brace yourself; one, two-

“The truth is, I’m not your guardian angel. No angel at all... I’m a time traveller from the future.”

xXx

“A... *what?*”

Tom had been on a wild emotional roller coaster ride – first, when he cast the lion Patronus, he was overcome by the feelings he’d been trying (and obviously failing) to keep in check. As the Patronus faded, he was hit by the gravity of what he’d just admitted to himself and, worse yet, to Harry, by a sudden surge of panic and fear of rejection like he’d never experienced before.

When Harry first answered, Tom felt a rush of something warm and overwhelming fill his chest, like maybe there really was someone for him, maybe some weaknesses were worth having, before the rest of the sentence registered to him. Then, he was confused. After learning Harry had been lying to him, there was a pang horror, betrayal, and an internal told-you-so. Now he was back to being confused again.

Tom was *not* used to emotional roller coasters, and he’d been finding he certainly wasn’t built for them.

When Harry finally looked at him, there was so much emotion reflected in those eyes; no wonder they were overflowing. He dropped his gaze again and kept it on the fidgeting hands in his lap as he reluctantly started to elaborate:

“Where... er, *when* I come from, about fifty years from now, there was a war against a Dark Lord, a very powerful and very cruel one. Lots of people died fighting him – my parents, my friends, my mentors...”

And Tom realised right at that moment where this was going.

Salazar, no...

“There was also a prophecy about a boy being born that would vanquish him... and the Dark Lord decided it was, well, me.” He scratched the back of his neck, weighting his next words.

No, please, no.

“And I did, erm, vanquish him a few months ago – here at Hogwarts, in a great battle, after years of horcrux hunting and with the help of many others.”

No, no, no, no, no!

“The war was over, but then in August, I accidentally travelled to 1943, and I thought, ‘Maybe there’s a better way,’ and now I *know* there is, and...”

He tentatively laid a hand upon Tom’s forearm, looked up at him with honest, apologetic, anxious expression, and half-whispered, “Please don’t hate me for this.”

Tom stared at his face incredulously, finally dropping the arm that had been frozen around Harry's shoulder. He felt like he was forever unworthy of touching Harry; beautiful, kind-hearted, not a bit less angelic Harry that *his own future self* had taken *everything* from.

"Me... hate you? How..." for once, he was lost for words, "How can you even stand the sight of me?"

He ran a shaky hand through his hair; in fact, his whole body was shaking. He moved to get up, probably to crawl under a rock and die like he fucking deserved, but Harry caught his wrist and tugged, making Tom fall against the time-traveller's chest, strong arms trapping him there.

"Don't leave," Harry ordered against the back of his neck, voice still tight.

"Let go, Harry." Even the name tasted wrong now, too sweet in contrast to the bitterness in his mouth. "I took everything from you, how can you-"

"The future you who never knew love did – in a way, it wasn't even his fault he turned out like that, but the point is... That's not you anymore," he paused, then added in a less assured tone, "is it?"

Fuck no!

He yote all the remnants of caps and stoppers on his feelings out of the window and let himself feel everything – feel how he wanted to protect Harry, cherish him, hold him tight at night and see his face first thing in the morning. He wanted to never disappoint him again, bring a smile to his face and make it stay forever.

Hell, he wanted to *grow old* with him – if Harry was by his side, he wouldn't even mind that.

But how could he do any of that now? He felt like he would never be able to look at Harry again and not feel like a piece of rubbish.

He had to, at the very least, do one thing.

"I... want to take a vow," he said slowly.

"A... vow?"

"Yes, an Unbreakable Vow," he freed himself from Harry's grip to look into his eyes. "I want to swear not to harm you or anyone else."

The green eyes were surprised and soft. "You'd do that...for me?"

Tom sighed, letting the wave of affection wash over him once more. How could he have ever believed he could contain it?

"Honestly? I think I'd do *anything* for you at this point."

Harry's breath hitched and a new set of tears fell down his cheeks, even as a smile spread across his face. Tom dared to reverently brush them away with his trembling thumbs, effectively cupping Harry's face.

Harry sighed at the touch, "Merlin, I have it so bad for you."

He closed in to lay a lingering, meaningful peck on Tom's lips, and Tom felt like his soul had been ripped into pieces, only to be reassembled into a newer, better one by Harry's touch. Harry himself felt like a Patronus at that moment.

"Does anyone else know? Anyone who could witness the Vow?" he asked when their lips separated.

"... Yeah, I had to tell my grandparents... or officially, second cousin and his wife," Harry paused, looking thoughtful. "We were actually planning to have a Christmas lunch in Hogsmeade together, you can just come along if you want."

"... Okay."

Tom let himself be manoeuvred into a half-lying position with his head on Harry's chest, where he was left to process the revelation, soothed by the heartbeat and the warm arm wrapped around his shoulder, but at the same time unable to comprehend the unimaginable forgiveness he thought no one but Harry could be capable of. His body was singing at the touch of the first person he'd ever loved while simultaneously screaming that he wasn't worthy of it.

They remained silent for a long while, though not nearly long enough for Tom to make peace with the news – he wasn't sure he ever would.

He let his mind replay the events of the past four months, seeing them from a new perspective... So many things made sense now – Harry's initial vigilance, the defence reflexes, the way he immediately singled Tom out and followed him everywhere, the knowing glances and remarks... He wondered how much Harry found out about him in the future and what he must have gone through to do that, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know. The curiosity kept growing with each unanswered question, so he eventually found the voice to say:

"You're not from New Zealand, are you?"

The chest shook under him with Harry's chuckle.

"Nope, never been there. I've never even left Britain."

Because of me.

"...I see."

"Yeah, I grew up with my Muggle aunt's family, they weren't exactly eager to parade their wizard nephew around."

I'll take you anywhere you want.

“Wait, so you’re a-”

“Half-blood like you, yeah. We have lots in common.”

“...Like Parseltongue?”

Another chuckle. “Also, but that one was actually a gift from Voldemort.”

You really believe I’m not him? I’ve been going by that name already.

“A gift?”

“Er, he might have left a bit of his soul with me for a while.”

What?

“Like a horcrux?” Tom breathed, both intrigued and appalled.

“Exactly like a horcrux.”

“With you, as in...”

“As in, in my head – you know, the funky scar on my forehead?”

WHAT?

“But you said you vanquished him... how’d you get rid of it?”

“Simple, really,” he snorted, Tom could feel the sharp stream of air in his hair. “With an Avada Kedavra.”

WHAT?!

“Hey, it’s complicated – you can watch my memories later, if you want... Not today, though, I bet you have enough on your mind as it is.” He carded his fingers through Tom’s wavy locks. “Just... Don’t feel bad about what my time’s Voldemort did, okay? You’re not him. *He’s gone and you’re going to the lunch with me.*”

There’s no way you’re not an angel.

xXx

They waited by the gate that connected Hogwarts to Hogsmeade on the 24th of December – Harry had Firecalled Fleamont to tell him that Tom would be coming, and inform him of the Vow, which he honestly didn’t think necessary anymore, but Tom insisted. Fleamont suggested doing the Vow first somewhere more private, then meeting Euphemia at the Three Broomsticks.

Sure enough, at half past eleven, Fleamont appeared with a loud pop of Apparition. His eyes lit up as he saw Harry.

“Good day, gentlemen,” he greeted in his usual jovial tone. “Long time no see, Harry.”

“Hello, Fleamont, it’s great to see you again. This is Tom Riddle, the student I’ve told you about. Tom, this is Fleamont Potter.”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” said Tom politely and minutely bowed his head as they shook hands.

“My pleasure, lad. Now, are you ready to do the deed?”

Harry gave Tom an unsure look.

I already believe you; you don't have to do this.

Tom simply nodded.

“Alright then,” Fleamont cast a Drying Charm on their perimeter, making a small clearing in the snow. “On your knees, right hands joined by the wrist.”

They knelt, grasped each other’s wrist and held each other’s eyes, the air heavy with tension.

Suddenly, Fleamont’s voice boomed, “We are gathered here today to celebrate one’s-”

“Fleamont!” Harry shot him an exasperated look.

“Oh, wrong vow,” he grinned, but even his face grew solemn as he unsheathed his wand and cast the charm over their joined hands.

Harry sighed softly and concentrated on not to messing up the formulation they had agreed on.

“Will you, Tom Marvolo Riddle, never intentionally, by direct or indirect means, kill a fellow human, unless you do so in immediate defence of yourself or your dear ones?”

“I will,” said Tom firmly.

He held his breath as a thin stream of fire shot from Fleamont’s wand and weaved around their hands.

Tom maintained the eye contact, even as Harry let go of his hand.

“That’s it?” said Fleamont as they moved to stand up.

Harry shrugged, “That’s all it took to prevent a war.”

“Oh...” Fleamont appraised Tom cautiously.

Harry frowned and nudged him on the way to Hogsmeade. “Come on, he took the Vow, actually suggested it himself. He’s not a bad person, just needed a push in the right

direction.”

The older wizard’s eyes softened at that. “I suppose he got it,” he winked at Harry. What was that supposed to mean? “Let’s not keep the lady waiting, eh? And while we’re walking, you could explain how the hell you ended up in Slytherin.”

xXx

The afternoon turned out to be surprisingly pleasant. They had a lunch at the Three Broomsticks, Tom mostly listened while Harry and his grandparents talked, but at one point he got pulled into a discussion about the newly discovered properties of the Idaho Horned Serpent scales.

Fleamont then insisted on taking them shopping, so they roamed around the shops, Harry and Tom politely declining all the Potters’ offers they could, but they still ended up with a new merino scarf and a bag full of sweets each.

Fleamont and Euphemia walked them all the way back to the gates, where they said their goodbyes and Disapparated. The two young wizards then set out on their way across the snowy grounds.

“They really seem... nice,” Tom admitted.

“Told you,” Harry grinned and shifted the bag from his right hand to the left, so it was free to wrap around Tom’s. “Does that mean you won’t refuse when I ask you to come over for the summer holidays?”

I can’t possibly ask that of you, he thought, but Harry wouldn’t have that, so he settled for a “Maybe.”

xXx

Harry landed on his back in Tom’s bed with the younger wizard on top of him, kissing him heatedly. Tom seemed to be lost in thought these past few days, and the last thing Harry had wanted at a time like this was to push him, so they’d been neglecting their nighttime endeavours, but now that the tension had finally somewhat loosened, the deprivation showed. In fact, Harry felt like the giant secret had been weighting him down all along, because he never quite needed Tom’s lips on his skin like today.

He rolled them over and practically tore Tom’s shirt open, nipping at his neck before moving lower and repeating the action just over his collarbone, letting his hands slide down Tom’s lean form, drinking in the smoothness of his skin and the contrast to where the thin line of hair divided his stomach – Harry’s own body hair was scarce, but more dispersed, and he found the little “path home” irresistibly erotic.

He kissed his way down to Tom’s nipples, the sensitivity of which they’d just started discovering before their explorations went on pause. Tom, being the pale type, had such deliciously pink nipples, and the moan he got when he sucked on one, oh god, he needed him so badly.

“Harry, I want to...” Tom started saying, but a hitch in his breath interrupted the sentence. “Would you like to go all the way?”

Hell yes, Harry had thought about it every time they were like this, *maybe today*, but then he got scared, or maybe it was the uncertain nature of their relationship – maybe it was a silly thought at this point, but you only lose your virginity once and he didn’t want to ruin the memory for himself by rushing into something... and for Tom, too?

He licked his lip nervously. “Um, have you ever...?”

“No. Have you?”

Holy shit, I would be his first.

“No, but... Merlin, I want to.” He leant forward to kiss him on the mouth and whispered, “I want you.”

Tom slid his hands to Harry’s arse, squeezed it and pulled Harry’s hips against his own, making both of them grunt as their cloth-covered erections made contact. He practically purred into his ear, “Then take me.”

Harry couldn’t help the sharp intake of breath when the implication eventually registered with his lust-addled brain. He propped up on his hands to see Tom’s face.

“Really? I, er, thought you might want to... you know...” Bugger, he hated his lack of eloquence at times like this.

Tom’s eyes were sure and there was a smile playing on his lips.

“Top? I did. I still do, but,” one of his hands reached up to the back of Harry’s head, pulling at his hair and drawing him closer.

“Tonight, I’d like *you* to fuck *me*.”

xXx

I want all of you.

Harry moaned at the blatant statement, ground against him again and kissed him wildly, passionately, like he was trying to devour every bit of Tom’s being through his tongue. Fuck, for all of how reluctant he’d been a talker, he made up for by how fantastic he’d been a kisser.

But I don’t deserve you.

He didn’t even know when he got his shirt off. He did know how Harry got his shirt off, though, because he watched his flexing muscles and thought it must be the nature’s ultimate masterpiece.

So you take all of me.

Harry's capable hands made swift work of Tom's buckle and bared his rock-hard cock in one move, together with the rest of his legs. Tom arched his back and let out a low groan of appreciation when Harry's hot mouth closed around his aching cock. He felt the gush of air on his wet skin when Harry momentarily released it to mutter a spell, then the blissful heat was back.

Take everything and erase the dark that hurt you.

The pleasure of receiving a blowjob easily drowned the mild discomfort of the first finger breaching him. He had only a vague idea of what he should expect, but the sensation so far had been... neutral; neither painful, nor pleasant.

It wasn't long before Harry had added a second finger and started moving his hand in rhythm with his head. That felt okay, too, except once or twice, when he pushed deep enough and his fingers brushed *something* inside (presumably his prostate, from what he had read for "research") – then it was *very* okay. It made him want *more*, something longer to reach even deeper. It made him want-

"Harry... That's enough," he breathed out, suddenly impatient.

But the other wizard held Tom's hips down and added another finger. There was a stretching sensation bordering pain, though it was somehow also good and made him want to press into the intrusion.

Unable to take it anymore, he yanked Harry up by his shoulders and rolled them over, now straddling him. Wide green eyes were watching him behind crooked glasses, his face was flushed and frozen in an expression of breathless wonder.

Their sudden withdrawal made Tom want to replace the fingers even more urgently. He quickly slicked Harry's cock with the conjured lube and before the other man could do or say anything in protest, he positioned himself over it, holding it upright with one hand and feeling the pressure of the tip against his hole.

Then, he let gravity work its magic – slowly, he sunk down, grunting from the stretching, filling, slightly burning, *beautiful* sensation of being impaled on Harry's cock.

And Harry, the sight of him was priceless. His eyes half-lidded, his hand gripping at Tom's thighs, his lower lip trapped between his teeth.

"God, you're so tight," he moaned when Tom sunk and inch lower, finally having taken in the whole length.

The sensation was so overwhelming Tom had to lean forward and support his weight with an arm propped beside Harry's head. He was suddenly unsure if he'd even be able to move, but just as the thought crossed his mind, the feeling started to fade. Once he was comfortable enough, he experimentally lifted himself and guessed an angle that would be most likely to hit that sweet spot, then let himself fall.

The result was delightful and far more intense than he'd imagined. He shuddered and groaned in sync with Harry, whose nails dug painfully into his skin, but he didn't mind at all, because he was in a goddamn nirvana.

He propped his other hand on Harry's chest to give himself more leverage and tried again... then again, and then before he knew it, he was just straight-out fucking himself into the next century on that magnificent cock.

In the back of his mind, he could hear Harry's voice moaning his name like a mantra.

That's right. Even if I don't deserve you, you belong to me.

"Harry... Touch me."

Give your all to me.

xXx

Harry's mind was barely functioning at this point, probably due to his blood not supplying it with oxygen as it was all jammed his cock, but he somehow managed to process the command and wrap his hand around Tom's lasciviously bouncing erection.

He was on edge, he felt like he'd been there for an eternity, grinding his teeth to delay the inevitable for another second. He pumped frantically and started meeting Tom's movements with upwards thrusts, earning himself some most deliciously dirty moans.

Who wouldn't have been on edge with that sort of view? Tall and lean and gorgeous, Tom's skin glistened with a thin sheet of sweat. His face was flushed, the wide curls of his dark hair sticking to his forehead, the lips Harry had assaulted a short while ago now remaining parted.

Finally, the brunet on top of him reached down for one last hot kiss, moments later interrupted by his groan as he shuddered and sprayed his cum all over Harry's hand and abdomen.

If Harry had thought Tom was tight before, it was nothing compared to when Tom's muscle convulsed around his cock now – he managed two more thrusts and finally let go, allowing the resulting explosion in his groin to blow him away, stifling his moan in the crook of Tom's neck where the other wizard was collapsed on top of him.

Harry absently ran his clean hand up and down Tom's back soothingly as they slowly came down from their high. His softening cock was still inside Tom, who was panting, but otherwise unmoving.

Harry chuckled groggily, "It seems you ended up topping after all."

Tom, equally groggily, finally rolled off him. "Is that a complaint?"

"Hell no," Harry gave him a cheeky smile and pulled him into a lazy kiss.

Tom retrieved his wand from the bedside table and spelled them clean, then used it to turn off the light. As was becoming a habit, he pulled Harry into a tight embrace, effectively rendering him the small spoon.

Harry was exhausted and already one foot in the dreamland, but he managed to thread together, "Happy Christmas, Tom."

The last thing he remembered was Tom's warm lips pressing a gentle kiss into the back of his neck and saying:

"Happy Christmas, Harry."

Chapter 14

The aftermath was... not what Tom had expected.

Harry had been growing distant in the days following the Christmas Eve.

Why? Was the sex bad? It certainly didn't seem or feel so, but maybe Tom was just too distracted to notice... Or had he done or said something wrong? Or did Harry finally realise he didn't want to have anything to do with the murderer of his parents? Tom still had trouble wrapping his mind around it, so how must it feel to Harry?

It started with him "going for a fly". That would have been all well and good, but he'd been gone for hours on end, and again the next day, and the day after. When Tom ran out of patience the fourth day it happened and went to check the broom storage, none of the school broomsticks was missing and neither were the broomsticks of anyone Harry was friends with and could have borrowed one from. He knew for a fact that Harry didn't own one, and he wouldn't borrow anyone else's without permission, which meant...

He hadn't gone flying at all.

To add to that, there was also this new glass ceiling in their sex life. After what Tom had thought was a solid step forward came a sudden fall – Harry would still do intimate stuff with him, but he would hit the brake whenever the situation took turn towards penetrative sex.

Why?! What changed? Why would Harry lie to him again?

It made Tom's chest tighten almost to a point of physical pain... Anxiety, unlike any he'd known before Harry.

He concluded he had to confront Harry once he returned. He waited in the dormitory; by the time the door handle clicked, the winter sun had long since set and the dinner had already started.

"Where have you been?"

The other wizard froze at the door.

"Er, flying? I told you I was going for a fly, remember?" His voice was a little too defensive. How'd he manage to keep Tom in the dark for so long if he was this bad a liar?

"Don't take me for an idiot, Harry. Where have you *really* been?" Anger and betrayal were bubbling in his stomach. He hated this – this was why he never let anyone close in the first place.

But the time traveler just sighed, he wasn't as affected as Tom had expected him to be once he'd learned his lie had been discovered. He didn't even appear annoyed, there was resignation on his face, but he also a smile.

“Okay, you caught me,” he raised his hands in mock-surrender, “I have something to show you, and I promise to explain everything, but I’m starving, so can we please do that after dinner?”

What the hell is going on? “... Fine.”

The dinner was a silent event, Tom was still lost in thought and rather mad at Harry. It didn’t help that Harry was in an infuriatingly good mood. He stood up right after he’d finished his first plate, the dessert hadn’t even appeared yet – it was very unlike him to skip it.

“Well, come on,” he nodded to Tom. It was also unlike him to order people around, but Tom was too strung up about the whole thing to protest.

He followed Harry to the second floor and into... the girls’ loos?

“There’s something special about the interior of these loos; can you spot it? Take your time, I give you,” he cast a Tempus charm, “five minutes to look around.”

Tom gave him an odd look, but he stepped up to the challenge, examining the ceiling, the stalls, the windows, the floor, until he finally concentrated on the the central sink and noticed the snake engraving on one of the taps.

“Is this about the snake?”

Harry was grinning so widely it was threatening to split his face.

“Congratulations, you found it! Now, they say no one knows the Hogwarts castle quite like you, but could there be a place that remains... *secret* to even you?”

It took him a moment to catch up with the implication, but once he did, his breath hitched.

“The Chamber of Secrets...” he breathed out.

Harry walked over and hugged him from the behind, resting his head of his shoulder. “Good. Only the Heir of Slytherin can open it, if you know what I mean... Will you do the honours?”

§...Open,§ he hissed, awestruck.

Sure enough, the top of the sink rose and levitated off. Harry’s arms pulled him backwards as the whole structure came apart, revealing a large shaft in the floor.

“Harry-“

§Hmm, a little something to let us go down would be nice.§

§Stairs.§

Thick stone blocks extracted from the walls of the shaft, forming an airy spiral staircase.

§Go on,§ Harry coaxed, still in Parseltongue. Had the snake language always sounded so damn hot?

They descended into a giant dusty pipe. Harry led him further with his strong Lumos floating ahead of them. Tom's mind was in a turmoil – had Harry found the Chamber? Was he absent because he was looking for it? Or had he known about it from the future? That was more likely, but what would he disappear for if that was the case?

He was also quite elated, because, sweet Merlin, he was about to see the fabled Chamber of Secrets!

They reached a large metal door with seven snake-like locks. Tom ran a hand across one – they were masterfully crafted and emanated ancient magic.

§Open.§

“Incendio,” he heard Harry cast as soon as the door opened fully, making a row of torches along a tiled path light up to reveal the Chamber.

It was every bit as impressive as he'd expected of someone like Salazar Slytherin; towering stone pillars entwined with serpents, a giant statue of the founder's head in the front.

What was entirely unexpected, though, was what he saw in the clearing bellow the statue. There was a blanket, with green cushions and pillows arranged on it, two large baskets and a... cake?

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear Tommy, happy birthday to you!” sang Harry cheerfully and slightly out of tune as he wrapped his arm around Tom's, who was utterly stunned.

“Surprise! Sorry I was, er, busy these past few days...” His face grew a little unsure, “Do you like it?”

At that moment, there was only one thing Tom could do.

He burst into a fit of laughter. He laughed whole-heartedly, genuinely, like he couldn't remember laughing ever before.

“Only you, Harry,” he wheezed, “could use the legendary Chamber of Secrets... to set up a goddamn *birthday picnic*.”

The other wizard looked a bit sheepish at that, so Tom took his hand, and, still chuckling, lead the way to the blanket. Upon closer look, he recognised the cushions as those from the Slytherin common room.

“This is where you were disappearing to?” he asked amusedly as they sat down, “To smuggle cushions and cake?”

“...Among other things.” His ears were red. *God, he's adorable.*

“Other things?”

A quiet hissing came from somewhere nearby. §Speaker, have you returned? Do you bring fish?.§

Harry was fidgeting with a button of his shirt nervously. “Er, that would actually refer to you from now on... if you want to, of course...”

Tom identified the larger basket as the source and cautiously lifted the lid, beginning to feel a little overwhelmed. “Hello?”

§Hello, Speaker. Are you the Speaker who shall become my Master?§

He removed the lid fully so he could see the snake and sighed in wonder. It was a tiny one, only about eight inches long and as thin as a pinkie. Its body was white with brown, almost maroon circular spots along its spine, but what really caught Tom’s attention were the two little horns protruding from its head. §You are a... Horned Serpent?§

§The Idaho Horned Serpent of the Snake River, or so I am told.§

§You are beautiful,§ he said, picking it gently with his right hand, then switched to English while the snake hissed its appreciation, “How the hell did you get your hands on an ‘Idaho Horned Serpent’?”

“Er, it’s a bit of a long story, you sure you want to hear it now?”

“Positive,” Tom nodded, not taking his eyes off the fantastic beast.

“Okay... well, I wanted to get you something for your birthday, and the first time I went ‘flying,’ I actually went to Hogsmeade, but I couldn’t find anything good enough, I had no ideas what to owl-order either, and I was getting a bit desperate,” he explained, squirming.

“So, the next day, I thought ‘what the hell,’ and took a sip of the Felix Felicis potion.” *You what?!* “I suddenly remembered how you discussed Horned Serpents with Fleamont and had the urge to Firecall him and ask about them.

“He said that it was an interesting coincidence, because his potioneer friend just imported some eggs of the more docile subspecies. They’re pretty rare and expensive, so I obviously couldn’t ask him to buy one, but I had a feeling I should take her address.

“Then I had the urge to Firecall her, too, and I basically said: Hi, my uncle told me you have some Horned Serpent eggs, want to trade a hatchling for an ounce of basilisk venom?” *Idiot, that’s probably even more expensive!*

“She said yes, so I came here and awoken the basilisk to extract the venom – don’t worry, I told it to go back to sleep – and as I went here, I found out I could make the stairs appear, and I thought it would be a nice place for a private birthday party, so I brought the hatchling here after I made the exchange in Hogsmeade yesterday. I spent today... ‘smuggling cushions and cake’, I guess.”

Tom was staring blankly at the snake coiled around his fingers, trying and failing to process all that.

He'd never gotten a genuine gift in his life, let alone something of this caliber. How was one even supposed to react to something like this?

"... I overthought it, didn't I? Bugger, I'm sorry, sometimes I get too excited-"

"I love you. I love you to a point where I don't know what to do. This is... Thank you," he managed to get out, his voice tight and not sounding like him at all. Harry's shoulders slumped with relief, and he smiled brightly.

"Well, you can do whatever you want since you're the birthday boy, but I'd suggest naming your serpent, eating the cake and shagging 'till we pass out, preferably in that order."

He couldn't oppose to that.

§Are you male or female?§

§Male.§

§... I shall call you Voldemort.§

Harry made a choking sound. "Really?"

"I don't think I'll be needing it," Tom shrugged. He and Harry shared a meaningful look before he added, "I still think it's a perfectly good anagram, it would be a shame not to use it." He was now smiling as well.

Harry snickered, and offered the serpent his hand, §Nice to meet you, Voldemort.§

The lizard extended and flicked its tongue to taste the nearest finger. §Two Speakers. I am confused... Which one is Master?§

§Both,§ Tom declared firmly, §I am Master Tom and this is Master Harry."

§I see. Have you brought me fish?§

§Yes, actually,§ Harry took a magically isolated sphere of water with live fish in it out of his bag and released them into the small pool inside the basket while Tom lowered his hand to let Voldemort slither off it.

§Masters are kind. May Masters enjoy their prey, too.§

And so they did. It was a red velvet cake, one Tom would always pick if it was in the dessert selection – it wasn't strange for Harry to have noticed, but it nevertheless added a little tingle of that warm, fuzzy feeling Tom still hadn't quite gotten used to experiencing. Harry even brought a matching bottle of Sugarplummet wine and glasses.

While they enjoyed the picnic, Harry told him about his misadventures in the Chamber and a funny but sad story about his accidental magic when he went to the zoo with his adoptive family.

“So, are you telling me you’ve known about a reliable source of large quantities of basilisk venom, and you haven’t exploited it until now? What kind of a Slytherin are you?”

Harry huffed indignantly. “The kind that spent six years in Gryffindor, obviously. Besides, I had a time paradox to worry about.”

“But you don’t have- Wait, *six*? How old are you?”

“Er, eighteen,” Harry admitted, “I attended Hogwarts until the end of sixth year, then spent a year pretty much on the move... What’s with that frown? Does it bother you to be the younger one?” he grinned teasingly.

It bothers me that you lost so much of your youth fighting me.

“Oh no,” Tom retorted instead, “I was just wondering if I’m qualified to start saying I’m into older men.” Harry choked on his last spoonful, his face reddening. Making him blush amused Tom to no end – he decided to push further.

“You know, I could call you ‘daddy’ when we’re alone,” he proposed, managing to keep a straight face.

Harry sputtered, but he was laughing the next moment.

“Ugh, no thanks!”

Tom put the leftover cake aside and let his hand travel up the other wizard’s thigh. “What should I call you then?”

Harry’s laughter died down, and he locked his eyes with Tom’s. He was obviously tipsy; both of them were. Without a warning, he grabbed his wand and flicked a quick Silencing spell at Voldemort’s basket.

§Yours,§ Harry hissed then, deep and sensual.

Tom had him on his back and pressed into the cushions before you could say Salazar Slytherin. He was kissing him like his life depended on it, nipping at his lower lip before delving deeper with his tongue, and it literally had to be the sweetest kiss they’d shared.

§Mine.§ Tom hissed into Harry’s ear as he moved to kiss the sensitive skin bellow it. When Harry buried his fingers in his hair, Tom slid lower and bit into his neck maybe a touch harder than he intended, but if the moan echoing through the vast chamber and the arching of his back was anything to go by, Harry didn’t mind.

§I want you inside me,§ he whispered, the green of his eyes almost entirely consumed by black.

Fucking hell.

§I hope you meant it, because I won't be able to hold back now.§

Tom tore the older wizard's shirt open and attacked his nipples, his hands meanwhile going straight for the kill, pulling Harry's trousers and pants down in one go.

Harry was so gorgeous and lustfully pliant beneath him. §I've been holding back the whole week. Merlin, I want it so much.§

If he could speak, Tom would say he was the luckiest fucking wizard on Earth or some other cheesy phrase, because they all seemed true to him at that moment. Thankfully, he had his mouth full of Harry's cock, so he was spared of the embarrassment. Harry did mutter something between all the other delicious sounds he was making, an incantation of a modified Scourgify created for occasions like this – he'd obviously been preparing for this, and the fact did strange things to Tom's brain and cock.

He wanted to drink Harry in. He wanted to swallow him whole. He wanted to take him apart and worship every piece of his being separately.

He released Harry's length and pushed his thighs up, resting them on his shoulder as he dove lower to get a taste of that cute hole he couldn't wait to debauch.

He licked the pink rim, sucked on it, letting Harry's soft moans guide him. He slowly breached it with one finger, watching Harry keen, squirm and adjust, then added a second one, licking the stretching muscle around it or sucking on the perineum to accompany every move.

By the time he worked a third finger in, Harry was reduced to a hissing pile of pure want. §Ah, Tom, please... please, just fuck me already...§

Fuck, but if Parseltongue wasn't hot. Tom reached up to kiss him on the mouth while his hand fumbled through the discarded robes for his wand. When he finally felt the hardness of the wood (still nowhere near as hard as his cock was right now), he hurriedly muttered the Lubrication charm and covered his erection in the slippery substance.

He positioned himself as carefully as his current level of patience allowed while Harry arched into the touch and hooked his legs around Tom's waist.

He was irresistible in his silent anticipation; glistening honey-toned skin, heavily rising chest, lean abdomen ending in a soft V shape of his groin, and his face – flushed cheeks, green eyes glazed over with lust.

Tom had wanted to go slow, he really did, but his body acted on its own accord, thrusting into that tight heat, there was nothing he could do to stop it – he could only pray the preparation was enough.

Harry let out a long, guttural groan, and dug his nails into Tom's biceps where his hands had rested. The pain made him remember himself, and he immediately regretted the slip-up.

“Fuck, I’m sor-”

§No, don’t stop!§ Harry gasped, §Oh god, please, keep moving...§

The last thread of control he’d had over his body snapped. Acting purely on instinct, he pulled out, then thrust back in fiercely, and what followed couldn’t be described as anything other than *mating* – messy, primal, passionate, fucking his cock deep into that lovely body, hitting home with every other thrust.

The sounds Harry was making were just... *Merlin*. Unrestrained moans, whimpers, mostly unintelligible hisses along the lines of §Tom§ and §please§ – they were driving Tom crazy.

He couldn’t even bring himself to interfere when Harry reached down to touch himself – Tom wanted to make him come with his own hands, but all they wanted to do at the moment, along with the rest of his body, was support him while he pounded into that tight asshole.

Harry didn’t mind, apparently. Harry took it all and begged for §more§ He only had to stroke himself a couple of times before he was coming magnificently, with his head thrown back and cum spraying all over his stomach.

Tom felt the muscle around his cock clench, and he leant down, fingers in Harry’s hair and lips on the crook of his neck, laying a kiss-turned-bite there. They both groaned, and not a minute later, Tom was also spilling his seed into the tight heat that was Harry.

He reluctantly parted with it as he pulled out and collapsed beside Harry, resting his head by Harry’s recently assaulted neck.

“...Did I hurt you?” he asked, overcome with sudden apprehension. Now that he wasn’t drunk on lust, he could see clearly how harsh he’d been.

“No,” Harry huffed a breathless laugh in response, and added, “I mean, I’m definitely bent, but I’m not broken.”

Tom sighed, even as relief flooded him. “I was being serious.”

“And I was being Harry,” Harry retorted and laughed even more for some reason.

“Excuse me?”

“I really have to tell you about my godfather sometime, he loved that joke... will love, whatever.” Harry tilted his head to see Tom’s face, still smiling dazzlingly. “I love you.”

Tom had to kiss him again. Harry then spelled them clean and Summoned some blankets from the other, snake-less basket he’d brought. They ended up *talking* until they passed out, yet to Tom it somehow seemed just as pleasant as the original plan.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry used to look forward to the start of January when his friends would finally return and there would be Quidditch, games in the common room and everything fun again. This time, it felt just the opposite – with the return of the rest of the students, him and Tom were back to their previous secrecy, even though Harry had to admit there was something charmingly naughty about sneaking into each other's bed or taking detours to the Room of Requirement; snogging or wanking with a Silencing Charm was doable, shagging would make the whole bed creak and alert their roommates, not to mention poor Voldemort.

Tom kept the serpent's nest Disillusioned under his bed – they came up with several options of where they could keep him once he got too big, but they probably wouldn't have to worry about that until at least next year. A fresh supply of fish, a Heating Charm and a daily chat were enough to keep the hatchling happy.

So, they'd gotten into a game of hide-and-seek with the rest of the school, even taking advantage of cleaning cupboards or empty classrooms here and there, and yes, it was mildly annoying, but it was also *fun*. They'd been fooling around like a pair of teenage lovebirds, which was exactly what they were – Harry couldn't shake the thought that this was what his sixth year was supposed to have been like... Tom's, too, for that matter; the time traveller was glad to see him let loose a little and vent his energy into something less serious and more age-appropriate than saving and/or dominating the wizarding world (same thing in Tom's opinion; they were still working that one out in their late-night chats).

The Knights of Walpurgis hadn't been very active except for following through with Tom's orders and hanging out together, but then again, Harry wasn't sure what they'd actually done at Hogwarts originally – he doubted Tom would trust them enough to let them help petrify Muggle-borns, but it was a possibility.

The idea made Harry shudder whenever he remembered it, because this time around, he found himself at the Three Broomsticks with Fulcran Lestrage to his right and Maxmilion Dolohov to his left, joking in an undertone about Max's new crush, a Muggle-born Hufflepuff girl sitting further down the table. It was nice, the Slytherins were nice, and Harry was struggling to wrap his mind around the fact that they currently would have been on their way to become some of the most infamous of Death Eaters in the alternate reality.

While their inter-house friendships kept blossoming, the situation within Slytherin seemed to have settled into a new normal, that is, two strongly divided groups who avoided each other as much as possible; one consisted of the most radical blood supremacists, the other was Tom's progressive fellowship.

When it came to blood supremacism, there was no grey zone left in Slytherin anymore; you're either with us, or against us. To Harry's astonishment, about two thirds chose their side.

He wasn't aware until then just how much respect Tom inspired among the Snakes outside of the Knights of Walpurgis – Harry had thought it ended with Tom's original eight, but the boys were apparently just the tip of the iceberg.

To an outsider's eye, the division was subtle, mostly just changes in who hung out with whom and sitting arrangements. That wasn't quite what Harry was used to from Slytherins – judging by his experience with Malfoy and his squad, he had a mental image of them being rather vocal about the people or ideas they disliked... Apparently, he still had a thing or two to learn about his transfer house.

"They're... surprisingly civil," Harry voiced his thoughts during one early January dinner, indicating towards the far side of the table. "I thought Malfoy would give us shit for openly standing up to him."

Tom smirked, a hint of malicious self-satisfaction seeping through his amiable façade, "Oh, he hates our guts, he just can't do anything about it."

"He can't?"

"He has nothing on you, and contrarily, the two of us have too much on each other... though I made sure I have more on him, of course,"

"... Do I even want to know?" Harry sighed, wincing.

"Nothing too drastic," Tom leant in conspiratorially, §I made the Knights practice the Imperius Curse on each other. §

"So you could truthfully claim you've seen them cast it, and they couldn't?"

Tom nodded with a smug twist to his smile, "Good, we'll make a Slytherin out of you yet. He obviously can't go for an open war, though we can expect some closed doors at the Ministry – we'll just find a way around them."

Speaking of Slytherin, they'd started profiting off the founder's basilisk, as per Tom's suggestion. They learned it was a she, not that Harry cared much. They would awaken her every few days to harvest the venom, occasionally bringing her a few rats or even a hare to compensate for the energy output.

It was the most insufferable serpent Harry had met, though. She kept pleading with them to send her to kill Muggle-born students and muttering how she'd like to tear them, rip them, swallow them,... They had to lie about their purpose, promise they were collecting the venom in order to get rid of all Muggles and Muggle-borns at once in a grand scheme. Harry had found every visit downright disturbing.

Harry wasn't fond of killing magical beasts, but even he had to admit they should put her out of her thousand-year-long misery at some point so she would never again pose a risk to the students in the future. Tom promised to do it when the time came.

At least her venom was useful enough to compensate for the inconvenience. Some famous potioners of the medieval times were known to be Parselmouths, kept basilisks and used their venom in their potion recipes. As Parseltongue became scarce (possibly due to the inbred Slytherin lines not being able to produce suitable heirs anymore) and several people who had tried to breed basilisks died when they accidentally looked at their serpents unshielded, most countries banned the beasts and their venom's price shot up dramatically.

Naturally, it would have been very suspicious if two Hogwarts students suddenly started selling the substance in large quantities – Harry assumed this was one of the possible reasons why Tom hadn't made profit off it in his original timeline. That's where Fleamont came into play. Harry explained the situation to him and the potioner was eager to help with the distribution, in exchange keeping a small volume for himself and talking Harry into sneaking him into Hogwarts one Saturday afternoon to see the legendary Chamber of Secrets.

Fleamont claimed to have secured an exclusive contact on one of his business trips, someone from Morocco, where the wizarding law regarding basilisks wasn't as restrictive, conveniently close enough for delivery by owl post, which underwent no customs.

Money started pouring in. One ounce of their product was selling for a whopping 500 galleons, the equivalent of about 6000 pounds in 1997, or about 200 pounds in 1944. Fleamont, being a seasoned businessman, advised them not to offer too much of it as they would flood the market and the price would drop drastically, but they weren't planning to stay "in business" for too long anyway, so they happily sold at least one ounce a week. They side-along Apparated to Gringotts one Hogsmeade weekend to set up a vault for Harry and give his legal consent for Fleamont to deposit the profits there.

The real treasure they'd been sitting on, however, was the serpent itself. Basilisk hide was one of the most magically resilient materials in existence, even sturdier than dragon hide. There hadn't been one large enough to make an actual armour in centuries, but the Serpent of Slytherin would suffice for at least *five*. The poshest wizarding families of the world would fight tooth and nail to get their hands on it. Tom got very excited at the prospect and started looking into skinning spells while Harry just wondered why the hell had his timeline's Dumbledore left something so incredibly valuable to rot.

They could also get a good collector's value on the skeleton of the "Serpent of Slytherin", provided they could sell it. That one was uncertain as the giant bones would be difficult to smuggle out of the castle, and proving it was the real deal would be tricky without revealing too much.

It was on Thursday, the 10th of February, that Headmaster Dippet with a pair of Ministry officials and the Charms Professor Gemma Kamelion in tow entered the Great Hall, all sporting similarly grave expressions and looking their way. Harry's heart shot to his throat, thinking their operation must have been discovered.

He watched with bated breath as the Head of Ravenclaw approached their table, the three men waiting by the door... or as it turned out, approached her own house's table. She laid her hand on one of the younger students' shoulder and bowed to tell her something in a low

voice. The student shot her friends a nervous look and stood up, following the adults out of the room.

The Hall burst into murmurs, speculations flying left and right. Harry and Tom just shared a relieved look – apparently, the other wizard had been thinking along the same lines.

The student, a second year named Sarah Jacobs, had been absent for the rest of the day and missed all of her classes. When she finally returned for dinner, she was puffy-eyed and ashen, surrounded by an accordingly sullen group of peers.

“They say there was an attack in Brussels, Grindelwald blew up their Ministry.” said Isaac Rosier in a low voice, “Her parents worked there and didn’t make it. On top of that, she’s a half-blood; the wizarding side of her family said they won’t take her in, and there’s no one left of the Muggle side, so...”

“Merlin, that’s horrible.”

“But she’s just twelve! I don’t know what I’d do...”

“Poor lass.”

“Will she end up in a Muggle orphanage?”

Harry wasn’t there when such occurrences became more frequent in his seventh year, but he remembered this helpless feeling from when he’d been listening to the victim count on the radio.

A good part of Slytherins had been rooting for Grindelwald’s side, but there was generally a lot of hate directed at Dumbledore from all houses.

“Why won’t he do something?”

“The whole world’s begging him, how can he be so selfish?”

“Coward! Where’s his Gryffindor courage now?”

Harry saw the reason behind such comments, but he mostly just felt sorry for the man. He wanted to reach out to him, having fallen for a budding Dark Lord and defeated that same person himself, admittedly in reverse order, but he honestly had no idea how to go about that without appearing weird or suspicious.

It was torturous to just sit through it, watch tragedies happen as the Daily Prophet reported two more attacks in late February and mid-March – in his timeline’s war, he at least felt like he had the power to do something about the situation.

He tried to drown the helplessness in studying, flying and sex... It mostly worked. He started reviewing for his O.W.L.s while also keeping up with his sixth year curriculum, then just when he thought his head would explode, he would blow off some steam by riding either Tom or a broomstick.

The Ravenclaw team wasn't in their best form during the match a week after the Brussels incident, but their Seeker got extremely lucky, finding the Snitch just metres away from where he'd been hovering, thus Slytherin eventually lost 150:180 – they could still win the Cup if they beat Hufflepuff in April and Ravenclaw lost to Gryffindor in May.

Harry had also finally gotten to deciding on the direction in which he was going to steer his life. After giving it some thought, he discovered the destination was No Sodding Clue.

He tried to imagine himself as the Auror he'd originally wanted to be. Helping people was a nice thought, but literally meant dedicating himself to fighting dark wizards, something he felt like he'd had enough of for a lifetime.

Helping others was a good reference point, though, he liked that. What else could he do to make himself useful? He wasn't studious enough to become a Healer or go into research, and he hated politicking and paperwork, which ruled out the Ministry.

He could get a mastery in Defence and teach it, he supposed, but he'd be spending most of his time at Hogwarts – he loved the place, but maybe it was time to move on? Wait, did Tom still want the Defence position in this timeline?

“Have you decided what you want to do? After Hogwarts?”

They were snuggled up in their usual Room-of-Requirement-provided bed one lazy Sunday afternoon, basking in the mild April sun after a hot shagging session. They each had an arm wrapped around the other, Tom's head resting against Harry's bare chest and tickling his chin with its curls.

“Other than you?” Tom smirked, letting his hand slide to the globe of Harry's exposed arse and squeeze.

Harry was barely clinging to his train of thought, his body not at all adverse to another round, but he managed, “Yeah, like, for work.”

“... I'd obviously like to go into politics at some point, but not as a nobody. I want to enter from an established position; what position, I'll decide based on the offers I get, but I've been thinking Hogwarts professor or some other sort of academic.”

Harry hummed thoughtfully. “Well, if we make as much money off the hides as Fleamont says we will, you could just stay, er, home and invent stuff or invest.”

“Yes, that would work, too,” Tom agreed, then paused for a moment before adding in a very casual manner, “Would you like to buy a house?”

Harry inhaled sharply in surprise. Wasn't this a massive proposition? How could Tom sound so calm? “Um, buy a house... together?”

“Of course... Unless you don't want to live with me,” he shifted backwards to be able to see Harry's face, watching expectantly for a reaction.

“No! I mean, yes, I’d love to live with you,” Harry squirmed under Tom’s scrutiny, trying not to give away just how excited he was at this development. “It’s just... other than that, I don’t really know what to do with myself.”

“There’s nothing you’d like to do?”

“Help people, I guess, but I don’t really see myself as an Auror or a Healer... Seems like too much drama, you know?”

“Makes sense, after what you’ve been through...” Tom dropped his gaze to Harry’s chest, making a strange, too-blank expression which had made Harry wonder what was going on in his head the few times it appeared. “What about teaching? Or cursebreaking?”

“Would you laugh at me if I said I don’t want to be away from home for so long?” *Away from you*, he actually wanted to say but was too embarrassed to.

As if reading his thoughts, Tom looked back at him and smiled. “No, I’d say I don’t want to be away from you either.” He closed in for a gentle kiss. Harry welcomed it with a contented sigh, revelling in the warmth spreading through his chest and stomach. He loved moments like this, just the two of them in their own little world, and a promise of bright tomorrows.

“I guess I still have time to decide,” Harry said once they separated. “... And we still have time for round two, if you’re up for it,” he added hopefully.

“I don’t know,” Tom grinned, a spark of challenge in his brown eyes, and rocked his hips against Harry’s warm, bare thigh, the hardness of his cock unmistakeable. “Am I?”

Chapter End Notes

According to my calculations, the value of one ounce of basilisk venom would equal 10 000 £ as of 2019.

Also, I couldn’t quite fit the full explanation into the story, but there are multiple reasons why Tom wouldn’t have sold the venom in the original timeline, from practicalities (like not having a trustworthy distributor) to his obsession with grandeur (Heir of Slytherin stuff) and the fact that he surely wouldn’t want to risk indicating a basilisk was behind the petrifications he’d been using it for as that would make Dumbledore (aware of Tom’s being a Parselmouth) wonder.

Chapter 16

The annual Apparition exam took place on the 24th of April, of course, both Harry and Tom got their licenses without breaking a sweat. Tom owned up to the challenge of house-hunting and made the trip out of the Anti-Apparition wards almost every day to collect all sorts of wizarding and Muggle newspaper that had real-estate advertisements in them.

He skimmed through all of them, but he hadn't relayed any offers to Harry yet – naturally, he asked if Harry had any preference, but the time traveller couldn't come up with anything other than “nice” and “quiet”. Tom apparently had a more specific idea, but he'd remained mysterious about it, silently dismissing one offer after another.

Harry left him to it, he had enough on his hands with the upcoming O.W.L. exams anyway. So much, in fact, that he'd almost forgotten the significance of the beginning of May until it hit him on the 1st of May afternoon.

“I can't believe it's only been a year... it feels like ages ago,” he sighed, staring out of the library window, memories flashing before his eyes – all the horrible events seemed distant and surreal after finally spending most of a school year in peace.

“Or like a whole different reality?” Tom supplied lightly as he laid a comforting hand on Harry's knee surreptitiously under the library table, though Harry could tell he wasn't completely comfortable with the topic.

He gave the younger wizard a small smile, “Yeah... Hey, would you go for a walk with me tonight? To the Forbidden Forest?”

There was a hesitant pause, barely there but long enough for Harry to catch it, before Tom said in his usual decisive baritone, “Alright.”

xXx

They reached the edge of the Forest hand in hand a little after eleven o'clock, finding themselves at the beginning of the path featured in so many of Harry's nightmares, now also faded in his memory. When did they even stop? He couldn't determine the exact point.

He felt a bit silly for doing this and hoping it would help him make peace with the place, but simply ignoring the anniversary felt disrespectful to everyone who had died last year. The last time he walked this path, he had the spirits of his parents, Sirius and Remus to keep him company. Walking this path with Tom by his side today felt really symbolic.

Harry lead the way to the clearing in a solemn silence, too heavy and accentuated by the dark silhouettes of the trees looming over them – just when he thought he couldn't take it anymore, he remembered something he'd been wondering about.

“Why did you never ask to see my memories? I meant it when I offered.”

“I know,” was all Tom had said for long moment, only the rustle of the Forest resonating through the night. Tom was staring ahead with a conflicted expression, weighting his words.

“I didn’t want to see you suffer because of me,” he admitted finally, sounding resigned, as if it hurt him to say it.

Harry squeezed Tom’s hand gently, even as his tone was firm when he said, “Voldemort from my time *is not you*.”

Tom turned away completely, so Harry couldn’t see his face, and muttered, “He had been until a few months ago.”

“Tom! We’ve been over this!”

“And I understood your points, it’s just difficult not to feel the guilt nevertheless.”

They’d just emerged in the moonlit clearing. Harry overstepped Tom’s path and took his other hand, too, to keep him from turning away again.

“You’ve been feeling guilty? All this time?” He ran his thumbs across the skin of Tom’s hands, his heart sank at the thought of his lover bearing such feelings in silence.

Tom met his eyes reluctantly, sighing. “Of course I have.” His voice was dead serious as he said, “If you told me someone hurt you like that, I would *murder* him.”

Harry felt his blood run cold, eyes widening in shock at the brutal statement. “You-“

“But then I’d die and hurt you as well, because, though I’ll never understand how, you love me, so I’d have to Crucio the motherfucker out of his mind or something. Knowing I am him is...” Tom’s hands were starting to shake against Harry’s – he must have been bottling this in himself for a while. Shit, how had Harry not noticed?

“Why haven’t you told me anything? I would-”

xXx

“Do what, Harry?” Tom all but snapped, his hands slipping from Harry’s hold to fold his arms across his chest. “Voldemort – I – did nothing to deserve a second chance or your forgiveness, let alone your love. You can’t change how I feel about that, but you’re a goddamn angel, so you’ll try anyway,” he huffed, trying to reign his unusually misbehaved emotions under control.

Harry’s eyebrows arched up in compassion, then furrowed in determination and borderline anger – pretty much what Tom had expected. He was already regretting he’d told Harry at all.

“I would tell you you’re being an idiot, for one. What did you do to *not* deserve the love every child should get? What did you do to deserve growing up in a Muggle orphanage? The circumstances made you who you were, made Voldemort who he was – it’s *not your fault*,” Harry said firmly, eyes ablaze.

Tom took a moment to process that, frowning sceptically. "...By that logic, nothing is ever anyone's fault."

"That's right! I've already forgiven Voldemort, all three generations of Malfoys, the Lestranges,... What I did is like eliminating a whole chain of misfortune in the future by cutting one loop now. Can't you just accept being that loop and enjoy life? Please?" Harry finished appeasingly, looking so sincere it hurt.

Tom closed his eyes and took a deep, shaky breath – beautiful, sweet, kind-hearted Harry, somehow always finding the right words when it mattered. Tom was momentarily overcome by the surge of affection he felt for the wizard.

He smiled, although it probably ended up a bit on the sad side, "I've been trying to."

He heard Harry's feet shuffle, and the next thing he knew, warm arms were enclosing his waist in an embrace.

"Try harder. I love you, you just said it – I hate it when you're not happy." Harry's warm breath caressed the side of Tom's neck as he spoke.

Tom felt himself relax in Harry's arms, resting his chin on his shoulder. "But I am happy."

Harry seemed to acknowledge the answer, but he wasn't done. "I also hate that I didn't know you were troubled – tell me everything from now on."

Tom smiled despite himself. He'd never known before Harry how good it felt to have someone truly care.

"Yes, my Lord," he returned lightly, attempting to change the atmosphere.

Harry snickered into the base of his neck and let his hands slide lower to Tom's arse.

"I just got an idea of a nice way to overwrite the memories of this place," he teased.

Tom caught the implication and dropped to one knee right away, bowing his head deferentially and biting back a laugh, too. This wasn't the change in atmosphere he'd been going for, but hell if it wasn't a welcome one. "Brilliant idea, my Lord."

"Indeed." Tom couldn't see Harry's face, but he could practically hear the grin from the tone of his voice. "Now tell me truthfully: have you been a faithful follower and deserve a reward... or have you been spying on me and deserve punishment?"

Even in such an inherently dominant role, Harry was letting Tom choose the course, the precious bean. Now, what should he choose? Naturally, he should say reward, no self-respecting spy would give themselves away like that, but... For once, Tom decided to let go and simply act on his current mood.

"I deserve... punishment, my Lord."

"I knew it!" Harry exclaimed triumphantly, "Petrificus Partialis!"

Tom felt his whole body freeze in place, only his head and neck had been spared of the spell's effect. He usually hated not being in control, yet it was somehow thrilling, not terrifying at all, to surrender to Harry.

A hand ran through his hair and down his jaw to push his chin upwards. Harry was using his other hand to undo the button and zipper on his trousers, letting them slide to the middle of his thighs together with his pants. His rapidly filling cock was now just inches from Tom's face.

"I shall punish your traitorous mouth now," Harry announced dramatically and pushed the tip of his thumb into Tom's mouth, prying it open – not that it was necessary, because that traitorous mouth was actually very willing and hungry for anything its Lord would give it.

The thumb was promptly replaced by the head of Harry's cock, which Tom took it in just as eagerly, living for the gasped curse that escaped Harry's lips and the way his fingers dug into Tom's hair. He wished he could move, make Harry feel even better, but all he could do was relax his throat as much as possible and let Harry fuck it as he pleased.

He couldn't help but choke once on one especially hard thrust, and he couldn't help but love it – sparks of arousal shot straight to his aching cock, trapped uncomfortably under the tight fabric of his trousers.

His Dark Lord (or was Harry technically a Light Lord?) suddenly pulled out. When Tom looked up, there was a gleeful smirk on Harry's face – apparently, Tom wasn't the only one getting into character.

"How do you like your Lord's cock?" Harry asked, his voice deep and breathy. Had he not been Petrified, Tom was sure he'd physically shiver.

"I love it, my Lord."

Harry loosened his grip on Tom's hair and caressed it slowly instead. "Will you serve it dutifully tonight to repent?"

"Yes, my Lord."

Harry made a show of leisurely walking around Tom in a circle – when he reappeared in his field of vision, he was missing his outer robes. Before Tom had the time to wonder what happened to it, Harry cast a Finite on his body and simultaneously pushed him backwards. Tom landed on the soft pillow of grass covered by the dark cloth with a quiet yelp.

Harry was straddling him the next moment, attacking his lips and his clothes all at once – between the kisses, bites, strokes and muffled moans, Tom hardly knew how he'd wound up naked.

Then both of Harry's hands were sliding firmly up Tom's sides and eventually pushing his arms up. He inhaled sharply as magical rope coiled around his wrists and bound them to a nearby root protruding from the ground. He shot Harry a surprised look – the older wizard

was looking entirely too pleased with himself for as long as he'd let Tom look before he bodily flipped him over.

Tom, now lying face-first on his stomach, was pressed even harder against the ground as Harry leant over his back.

"That guilt you told me about... We can even the score," Harry whispered in Tom's ear. His hand traced the depression of Tom's spine, all the way to his arse, but to the younger wizard's frustration, it slid back up and into the gap between his body and the black cloth, pinching his hard nipple lightly. More of Harry's arm disappeared beneath him and when it pulled up to lift his hips into the air, he let it.

He was rewarded by a number of firm strokes, and although he was bound, he never felt so free, moaning his approval... That is, until he heard a whispered incantation from behind and felt something wrap tightly around the base of his cock. He grunted, even as Harry continued:

"I'll make you die and come back again."

He pumped Tom's restrained cock again. There was a broken whine Tom would never admit to have come from himself, then a slightly more coherent "Fuck!"

"Tsk ts, all in right time – we'll have to work on your patience." Harry admonished and removed the hand from the front in favour of the back. Two slick fingers slipped past the rim of Tom's arsehole and went straight for the kill. It was maddening how the contact with his prostate sent the usual waves of pleasure through his groin, but there was a perceptible ceiling now, a cap on his pleasure.

Harry was running his left hand across Tom's body while he worked it open with his fingers, thrusting, scissoring, occasionally returning to his cock to give it a few agonising strokes, showing no signs of stopping anytime soon.

Ten more minutes of this, and Tom felt like he'd go crazy with lust. He didn't care about pride, dignity, the sounds he was making or words he was saying anymore, he just wanted, *needed*,...

"My Lord... ahh, Harry... *please*."

"Begging for my cock already?" Tom heard him chuckle deeply from behind – the tosser was obviously having a blast watching him come undone. He didn't know if he'd been begging for Harry's cock or just his own orgasm, but he was in no state to think about it and happily went with the other wizard's choice. "Yes! ... Please, fuck me!"

The intrusion was abrupt, and if it wasn't for the magical cock ring, he'd probably have come just from the force of it. Harry grabbed his hips and slammed inside in one go, groaning – Tom could tell from how hard Harry was inside him that he'd been on the edge, too, though not quite like himself. He'd been discovering that being kept on the verge of orgasm but unable to come while someone's fucking you hard in the arse is simultaneously one of the best and the worst experiences in existence. Despite his urgent need, his head was too much

of a mess to string together an intelligible word, let alone a sentence or a spell – this was probably the most powerless he'd ever felt, completely at Harry's mercy...

Harry wasn't a merciful Lord, not at the moment. He was a cruel one who used and abused Tom's hole with a torturously high number of well-aimed thrusts, deaf to his pleas until the last moment.

... but what a moment it was.

Tom could feel the cock inside him twitching, unmistakably building up to a climax, and suddenly, without any warning or even an incantation, that blasted ring around Tom's own length was gone.

The sheer power of his orgasm took him by a storm. Everything went dark, there was only him and the explosion of pure bliss in his whole being, like nothing else mattered and never would.

When he came to, it was to find his head resting on Harry's warm shoulder, Harry's fingers playing absently with his curls – he must have been out of it for a while, because didn't remember Harry spelling them clean and manoeuvring him into this position. A heavy dark cloth, presumably Tom's robe, was thrown over them.

For a while, they just laid there in the moonlit Forbidden Forest clearing, basking in each other's body heat and presence. Tom didn't think himself the sort to appreciate stargazing and other romantic frivolities, but he supposed Harry might prove him wrong yet again. At one moment, he could feel Harry's abs flex as the other wizard chuckled.

"Sorry, I just thought I'll definitely have a different sort of dreams about this place after today," he explained. It made Tom smile, too – the idea of Harry having dirty dreams about him was always a nice one.

It was an exceptionally warm night for May, and with Harry by his side, the Forest didn't seem so menacing at all... Maybe he was still under the spell of that mind-blowing orgasm, but he felt like there was no place he'd rather be.

He sighed contently, running his fingers over Harry's chest, "Seriously, Harry, it can't be natural what you do to me. I feel like I could spend every day with you and never get tired of it... like you're turning me domestic or something."

Harry gave him that soft smile Tom loved, but then his eyes acquired an impish glint.

Oh, no.

"I guess that makes you my *tomcat*," he said and promptly burst into snickers.

Tom shot him his best death glare, which only seemed to make him laugh harder. "Call me that again and I swear I'll hex you," he warned.

"Ooh, kitty has claws!"

Harry yelped and jolted away from Tom, rubbing his left nipple protectively to sooth the pain of the mild Stinging Hex.

“Oi, I didn’t say ‘tomcat’ again!” he whined.

Tom sported a self-satisfied smirk. “You did now.”

Harry was mock-sulking, so Tom wrapped a hand around his waist and pulled him close. For a couple of minutes, they remained left to their thoughts. It was Harry who finally broke the silence.

“I’d love to, um, be domestic with you. I guess all I ever wanted was a family.”

That brought a frown to Tom’s face and a renewed pang of guilt to his chest. “Harry, we’re both men.”

But Harry kept smiling. “So? Two can be a family, too. Besides, family isn’t about blood.”

Tom hadn’t thought that far, but it was true that they’d been looking for a home together already. *A family with Harry* – it had a lovely ring to it, brought out that warm fuzzy feeling distinctly associated with his love for the wizard...

But the implied possibility of, what, adoption? Harry was the only person Tom had ever genuinely liked, could he honestly commit to raising a child? Well, he had been planning to raise an army, there was no way he’d be intimidated by some *kid*... was there?

He tried to imagine himself as a father. He reckoned he’d be the strict type; one you could ask to teach you a spell but not much fun to play with... If his feelings for Harry were anything to go by, he could be the protective type. That was all well and good, but properly raising a child presumably required kindness, affection... He wasn’t exactly the best at those.

Harry was, though. Harry was every inch the kind of person kids liked; funny, caring, accepting, high-principled,... He could get a little clueless at times, but he always found a way for things to work out.

Shit, now that he thought about it, imagining Harry as a *dad* seemed like the easiest thing in the world. Making silly faces at a toddler, teaching a child to fly a broom, seeing a teenager off to King’s Cross Station... The Harry in his mental image looked so *happy*. Knowing him, he wouldn’t even care that the child wasn’t biologically his, he’d just be glad to be helping an orphan... *helping*...

“Harry,” Tom breathed out, watching the other wizard with suddenly wide eyes. “This might be a completely loony suggestion, so excuse me if it is, but... how would you like the idea of opening an orphanage?”

xXx

Unbeknownst to the two merry wizards, their shenanigans in the Forbidden Forest hadn’t gone unnoticed.

Teodian the Centaur would never again choose this particular clearing for his stargazing... In fact, he was quite upset with the stars for not having had warned him off.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“An... orphanage?” Harry was sure he couldn’t have heard that right.

“Yes, a wizarding one. You want to help others and have a family, it just hit me that an orphanage could be right for you.”

It sounded right; scary, but right. Harry had been babysitting Teddy Lupin for a few days last summer – looking after a baby was demanding, but fun, well, as fun as looking after the son of your recently deceased friends could get. He aspired to come across like Sirius to children, just more responsible. His experience wasn’t vast, but he supposed he wasn’t completely hopeless with kids... But that didn’t mean he could handle, what, five? Ten? Fifteen of them?

“I... don’t know. The idea seems nice, but I guess it would be a lot of responsibility, also expenses,” he noted as he absent-mindedly played with Tom’s curls.

“It’s not like you have to decide on the spot,” Tom said, obviously amused by Harry’s here-and-now, “just an option to consider.”

“You wouldn’t mind the, you know, kids and stuff?”

Tom exhaled deeply, staring at the night sky thoughtfully. “I can’t say for sure. I’ve spent most of my time in the orphanage making sure everybody would leave me alone, so I obviously don’t have much experience with young children from an adult perspective, but I believe I could manage it.”

Harry was getting a bit sceptical. “But... would you *want* to? Not just because of me.”

“...Yes. The more I think about it, the more advantages I see.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“I told you I wanted to go into politics eventually – this would shed a very positive light on us and give us a good vantage point for criticising the way the Ministry currently operates. Also, we wouldn’t just prevent magical children from growing up in inadequate circumstances, we would also get to shape their opinions – they would pass them on their friends and so on.”

“You...” Harry couldn’t help but chuckle, “will make a brilliant politician. That almost has me convinced you’ve had this planned all along, and I’m just a convenient person who walked by.”

“That’s not-”

“I said almost,” he winked and silenced the other wizard with a light kiss. When they separated, Harry propped himself on his elbow by Tom’s side, grinning. “The real question is, though: to gain all these advantages, would you be willing to *change a nappy*?”

Tom tried to look impassive, but he unwittingly scrunched his nose a little – his failing effort was so adorable Harry thought his heart would explode. “We’re wizards, there must be a charm for that.”

There was, Harry even knew it since Andromeda taught it to him, but he marvelled at the fact that he knew a piece of magic Tom didn’t. “Oh, I don’t think there is.”

“Then I’ll invent one.”

And Harry burst into laughter, because the idea of *Tom Marvolo Riddle, inventor of the Nappy-Changing Charm and hero to all exhausted mums* was simply hilarious. It didn’t help that the “inventor” looked as close to pouting as his pride would allow him.

“We should go, or we’ll be knackered in class,” Tom huffed and promptly abandoned Harry’s side to gather his clothes.

Still chuckling, Harry followed suit and threw the Cloak of Invisibility over them for good measure as they set out on the way back to the castle.

xXx

Later that week, Harry beat the Hufflepuff Seeker to the Snitch after a tail-to-tail chase, granting Slytherin a chance at winning the Quidditch Cup depending on the result of the upcoming Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw match. To Harry’s delight, some of the Gryffindors he’d been trying to make friends with actually cheered for him – he hoped some Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws would have, too, if his win didn’t directly translate to their loss.

Even as the Quidditch season ended for him, his schedule remained tight – O.W.L.s were around the corner, and while most professors were considerate, assigning him less homework, he still had a lot on his plate.

...Which is probably why he hadn’t noticed that Tom took longer than usual on his trip for the real estate printed matter. That is, until the younger wizard stormed into to their dormitory so abruptly Harry jolted from where he’d sat at his desk.

“Found it,” Tom announced victoriously.

“Found what?”

“The perfect place.”

A sudden understanding dawned upon Harry. “Really?! Where?”

Tom presented him with a Muggle newspaper, pointing to one ad in particular.

£4000 Staffa Island of the Mull Isles, West Scotland. 33 acres, uninhabited since 1800, best known for its remarkable cave and rock formations. Home to fascinating wildlife, suitable for a fisherman's retreat. B. Forman, owner; 160 Hope Street, Glasgow.

"You want to buy a whole island?!" Harry gasped. He was no longer sure it was such a good idea to leave house-hunting entirely in Tom's hands.

"Of course. Remember how we talked about the necessity of a more secluded wizarding oasis?"

Seriously?!

"But..." Harry was lost for words, "Thirty-three acres, can we even afford it? And there are probably no buildings, will we have to build everything from scratch? How are we even going to get the material there?" More and more questions started flooding his mind.

"Hey," Tom said mildly as he came to stand behind him and lay his hands on Harry's shoulders. "We're wizards and we have the money, we'll manage. I've already talked to the owner and asked him to reserve it for a few days – all you need to do is take a look and say if you like it."

"Wait, *you* 've seen it? When did have the time to do that?"

"I had a two-destination portkey made, first to the island, then to Glasgow. The travel wasn't too time-consuming."

"And the owner was willing to hold it for a seventeen-year-old?"

"Not exactly. He was willing to hold it for Baron Potter who had been considering buying the island as a present for his son."

Harry sighed, "Polyjuice?"

Tom's face twisted in disgust. "The transformation process is horrendous."

Harry winced sympathetically at the memory, "Tell me about it."

"When are you free?"

He glanced over to his notes miserably. "Er, next June?"

Tom gave him an impatient look, "Come on, Harry, you already know you can pass it and you're not *that* studious anyway. You can spare two hours."

Merlin help him – was Tom actually *excited*?

Unable to say no to him and more than a little curious, Harry started gathering his study materials and putting them in the bag.

"Alright, you've convinced me."

Harry wanted to bring Voldemort with them, but Tom talked him out of it because of the multiple Apparition – he would love any place with an abundance of fish anyway. They side-along Apparated from the tunnel leading to Hogsmeade.

The sudden brightness blinded Harry for a moment, making him squint and blink furiously to adjust. When he finally did, he took a proper look around.

Air escaped his lungs all at once. “Bloody hell!”

They were standing on a rocky beach with columns upon columns of hexagonal rocks rising into a levelled cliff around them. Tom didn’t let go of Harry’s hand and led him up the path of pebbles until they reached a plateau. It was wide and covered in grass, easily large enough to accommodate a village and maybe a wood or a pasturage as well. The plateau was rising steadily at a low angle, the ground was mostly flat and looked like it was built on a platform.

Harry turned to Tom, sea breeze playing with his hair, eyes wide in wonder. The younger wizard was smiling; proudly, genuinely. When he noticed Harry was looking at him, he pulled him closer and Apparated them again without a word.

They emerged on a shore in front of a majestic cave composed entirely of tall hexagonal rocks, supporting a large chunk of ground which was presumably the plateau. Its insides were flooded by a metre or two of seawater, it seemed mysterious and magical all on its own, with no wizarding intervention.

“There are several caves like this around the island,” Tom explained. “I can think of various uses for them, most notably, they would be good for an underground settlement.”

Harry felt quite a bit overwhelmed.

“It’s... wow,” was all he could muster.

Tom Apparated them back to the plateau, more precisely, to the top of the tallest cliff that oversaw the island.

“So? What do you think?”

Harry spent a moment in silent awe before answering. “It’s brilliant.”

Tom adopted that smug look again, the unsaid “told you so” hanging in the air.

“Um, you sure you want to do this? Building a house here and... the orphanage thing?”

“Yes,” Tom replied without hesitation. “Are you?”

Harry hadn’t been, but standing here, seeing the place, breathing the salty air,...

“Yeah.”

So, they bought a sodding island. Tom played Harry's posh father (Who's calling whom "daddy" now?) while they signed the contract with Harry's name, immediately submitting the change of ownership to the Muggle land registry and owling a copy of the contract to the Ministry of Magic to list it as a wizarding residence.

Harry went back to his O.W.L. preparations while Tom took up the study of magical architecture – Harry would often catch him staring at various structures in Hogwarts thoughtfully.

The first week of exams actually flew by, definitely so in comparison with the first time around. Maybe it was because Harry felt more prepared, but, although he would never say it aloud, it could have been because Hermione wasn't there to obsess over it and drive her classmates (including Harry) mad.

It occurred to him while he was sitting in the Great Hall, with his Defence written exam finished ahead of time, that Myrtle Warren was taking the exam just a few seats to the right – she never got to do that in his original timeline. It reminded Harry of the importance of his quest here – he'd been forgetting he had been on one at all lately.

After he'd given it more thought on the nights when his brain refused to read another word about the Goblin Wars or the Invigoration Draught, the orphanage seemed like a great idea, as far as ending chains of misery went.

...Or maybe it shouldn't just be an orphanage: they could make it a shelter for any youth that the wizarding world couldn't or wouldn't take care of, magical folk and Squibs alike. A place someone like Sirius or Snape could have found refuge at – that should be his next mission, Harry owed that to those men, even if they wouldn't know it. How many sad stories like theirs were being written that Harry hadn't known about? He resolved to find out by setting them all straight.

Speaking of, there was one more fate he'd already set straight, but not completely: Rubeus Hagrid, currently a fourth-year and the proud owner of Aragog the Acromantula, whom he kept in an unused cupboard in the dungeons. Tom mentioned catching him in the dungeons at night repeatedly, and Harry interceded on Hagrid and Aragog's behalf, thinking that was all he could do.

Although, now that Harry wasn't a twelve-year-old, he started to see why raising a venomous flesh-eating arachnid in a school full of children wasn't the best idea – maybe Aragog hadn't caused the death of a student in Harry's original timeline, but he easily could in this one.

Also, Hagrid was an orphan since his dad had died in his second year, right? Where did he spend the past two summers? Harry didn't think he had any other family and doubted they could stick a ten-foot boy in a Muggle orphanage.

On Friday the 9th of June, between his first and second O.W.L. week, he finally decided to take action.

Hagrid opened a crack in the door, taking a cautious peek of the corridor to see whether it was safe to leave. Everything was silent, there was no one in sight. He slipped out of the door.

“Rubeus Hagrid, right?” said a voice behind him.

He jumped in surprise and turned to see a bespectacled Slytherin student standing in a spot he’d just checked. He was older, possibly a seventh-year, but he wasn’t wearing a prefect badge.

“Er, sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you, I just wanted to talk,” Harry said awkwardly, “I’m Harry Potter.” He offered Hagrid a hand.

Hagrid was still rather taken aback, but he reluctantly took it. “Ar, but everyone calls me Hagrid... Wha’ d’yeh want ter talk about?”

Harry had wondered about the best way of approach; knowing the half-giant, it would probably be the direct one.

“Alright, Hagrid, I’m going to be frank. I’m not going to report you or anything, but I really don’t think keeping an Acromantula at Hogwarts is a good idea.”

Hagrid looked shell-shocked. “Yeh know ‘bout Aragog?”

“Yeah... Hey, calm down, you’re not in trouble,” he tried to appease the half-giant, “Um, where do you stay over the summers?”

“...Bin helpin’ ol’ Mr. Picardy with groundskeepin’, s’ppose this year’ll be the same.”

“Oh.” So that’s where he’d been – maybe that was why Dumbledore was even able to give him the position in Harry’s timeline. Knowing Hagrid, that was probably better for him than what Harry and Tom could offer. “Could you perhaps move Aragog to the Forbidden Forest then? It would be safer since it’s forbidden to the students anyway... I can help, if you want?” Harry offered, although he felt and probably looked a bit squirmy about the last part.

Hagrid had a worried expression on his face. “But he’s jus’ a baby! Wha’ if somethin’ happens ter him out there?”

Harry gave him his best reassuring smile, powered by a surge of nostalgia, because worrying over a dog-sized carnivorous spider like this was just so like Hagrid, “I’m sure he’ll manage.”

Hagrid looked torn, probably wondering how the hell he was having this conversation with an unfamiliar Slytherin student – Harry certainly would have been.

“Why’d yeh not report me?”

Harry shrugged. "There's been enough bad stuff around here lately, I guess, for beasts and people both. If you could just move him, there would be no need to involve the professors."

"...Aight, I s'ppose he could take care of 'imself. I'll move 'im tomorrow morning."

"Great! Do you need any help with that?"

"Nah, I had a feelin' it would come ter this, got a nice clearin' picked fer 'im." He looked quite deflated.

"How about a moral support?" Harry suggested.

Hagrid perked up at that. "Yeh'd do that?"

Harry smiled warmly, "Sure. Let's meet here at, say, six a.m.?"

"Deal," Hagrid returned the smile. He was almost as tall and massive as he'd been as an adult, but still somehow endearing in his boyishness. "Thanks fer not tellin' anyone."

xXx

Once the exams were over, Tom and Harry finally had the luxury to enjoy a proper celebratory shag in the Room of Requirement. The Room always provided a rare sense of privacy, there wasn't a place quite like this to have a truly private conversation in Hogwarts.

"We should kill the basilisk soon," Tom opened.

"Why?"

"The funds would come in handy for the construction."

Harry considered it, but he shook his head, "No, selling the hide now wouldn't be a good idea."

"Because of the wizarding war?"

"Yeah, that's the one event in this timeline I really don't want to disrupt. Grindelwald in a basilisk hide armour... just the idea of it gives me the chills."

Tom nodded. "When is he going to lose?"

It should be fine to tell him now, right?

"Next June."

"I see. We'll just keep harvesting the venom throughout seventh year then."

Harry cringed. "Ugh, I wish she would shut up while we do that."

"If everyone else paid me as well as her to listen to their rants, we could buy the entire Scotland," Tom snorted.

Harry snorted right back. “True.”

Tom reached for his wand and cast a charm Harry didn’t recognise: thin lines of light flowed from the tip and gradually assembled into the three-dimensional model of a house. It had two floors and a habitable loft, divided into the central part and two wings. The style of it was mostly contemporary English with long rectangle windows and several dormers, making it elegant but not overly showy.

“Will this be okay?”

Harry snuggled up to him, studying the design with unconcealed admiration. “It’s great! How many people can fit in?”

Tom gave him an amused look. “Anywhere from two to two hundred. Magic, remember? It has narrow rooms for one that could be expanded to fit two or four.”

“Wicked.”

“Here’s the catch: we have enough money left to buy the materials and Portkey them to the island, but we would be pushing it if we hired too many workers, especially the magical ones. Beyond the foundations, we’ll have to do a lot of work ourselves if we want to have the basic construction finished by the end of summer.”

Harry blinked. “You think we can build it over one summer?”

“It will be hard work, Harry.”

“I can work hard! And I can handle the interior enchantments since I spent the best part of last summer restoring the Great Hall.”

“I like that attitude,” Tom smirked.

“I like you,” Harry retorted playfully and leant in for a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Like Tom, I’ve spend a long time searching for the perfect island for a wizarding settlement – please do look up Staffa, it’s stunning.

Chapter 18

“Knights of Walpurgis, I have summoned you to conclude another semester of our reign. I am very proud of you for staying loyal to the cause and following through with the resolutions of our last meeting. You shall all be rewarded by today’s great news, but first things first.

“Isaac, Maxmilion and Aaron, congratulations on your N.E.W.T.s, I am sure you’ve done well. It is unfortunate that you will not be joining our meetings next year, but I believe you shall remain true to us even after your graduation.

“It is fortunate, however, that many new faces have approached us and joined our ranks to compensate for the loss. Ignatius Prevett, fifth year Gryffindor, Alima Shafiq, fifth year Ravenclaw, Osian Driscoll, sixth year Gryffindor, Sean Cunningham, fifth year Slytherin, Clarence Pebblestone, sixth year Slytherin, Claire Jenkins, sixth year Hufflepuff, and Willow Miller, sixth year Hufflepuff, you are hereby initiated into our circle.

“As all of you know, our ultimate goal is the survival and prosperity of the wizardkind – we represent the new generation of wizards and witches that refuses to sit back and let our incompetent governments put our future in danger. When the war in Europe resolves itself, we will be ready.

“Aaron, present your findings.”

The bespectacled boy bowed his curl-covered head. “My research has confirmed your initial assertions: no correlation had been found between magical power and blood status, a slight negative correlation has been found between Muggle blood and squib birth rate. Over one thousand subjects have been included in my observations.

“Thank you, Aaron. As you can see, we have come a long way from our previous misguided ideals, and I believe one more change is due. From now on, you shall simply address me Leader during our meetings since we no longer wish to associate ourselves with the purist values. Understood?”

“Yes, Leader.”

“Good. Now for the big news: with help of Harry Potter here, we have raised funds over the year and secured the perfect place for a new, more isolated wizarding oasis, better and larger than Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade. We have also launched an ambitious project regarding the integration of the wizarding youth in need – over the summer, we will be building a shelter that shall prevent the young from turning to the Muggle world for help.

“This facility will be run by our organisation with Harry in charge. The materials and their transport have been arranged for, but I ask all of you to lend a hand, and a wand, in the construction. Those of you who have turned seventeen and have acquired their Apparition licence will be expected to participate as much as they can – we shall meet on the 3rd of July at 10 o’clock sharp on the platform of Hogsmeade station, it should be empty at the time.

“Harry and I will then Apparate you to the island and explain the task. You may choose the frequency of your participation, but I must once more stress the importance of this project – try to participate as much as you can, bring friends, if you know anyone who might want to help, although you must not reveal the details about the Knights or the role we aspire to play yet. To outsiders, we will all just be volunteers working on a charitable project.

“That is not the whole truth, however. While this project will indeed help many, it will also grant us a highly positive public profile, which we shall make use of in our later activities. It will allow us to influence generations of witches and wizards, passing our ideals on them and motivating them from breaching the Statute of Secrecy before it is inevitable. In short, it is a win-win situation. Any questions?”

The room was dead silent, everyone in speechless awe. If they hadn’t been aware of the gravity of the Knights of Walpurgis, they were now – this was no child’s play anymore, no silly high school club.

If anybody had been considering backing away, though, they weren’t letting it on. As Tom had predicted, they wouldn’t refuse to help, not after hearing that a large amount of money had been invested on their behalf... Most of them, especially the Gryffindors Harry had recommended, appeared excited about the whole deal.

The biggest surprise among the new members had been Clarence Pebblestone with his girlfriend who actively approached Harry and Tom one day at the library, asking to join their club and promising to help them with anything they needed. Gratitude was indeed a powerful recruiting mechanism.

Both Clarence and Claire turned out to be big fans of Ancient Runes, which would come in very handy in the construction of a wizarding home – well-written runestones could anchor magical properties to mundane objects or create temporary barrier to protect the site and the workers from the tough scottish climate. Tom could do it himself, of course, but the couple would save him a lot of time.

They had to push the meeting to before the curfew as they couldn’t smuggle so many people in and out of the Room unnoticed – there was also the added risk of information breach, which Tom had addressed by casting a Fidelius Charm on the sentence “*Knights of Walpurgis members are Tom Riddle, Harry Potter, Fulcran Lestrage, Dalamar Avery, Maxmilion Dolohov, Tristan Mulciber, Aaron Morgenstern, Isaac Rosier, Ignatius Prevelt, Alima Shafiq, Osian Driscoll, Sean Cunningham, Clarence Pebblestone, Claire Jenkins and Willow Miller, they meet in the Room of Requirement on the seventh floor,*” with Harry as the Secret Keeper. It effectively concealed both the list of member and the information about their meeting place, meaning Malfoy and Nott couldn’t remember where they used to meet and whom with anymore – that satisfying fact alone made that bitch of a charm worth learning (it must have been the most complicated one Tom had ever studied).

Isaac was the one to finally ask the question everyone had been thinking: “How have you raised enough money for all that?”

“We have come across a rare resource we were able to sell... *legally*,” he emphasised. “I cannot reveal more.”

“Building it is one thing, but how do you plan to handle the operation expenses?” asked Willow, the new Hufflepuff member, friend of Harry and Claire.

“We have a way to cover them for years to come, but I believe the public opinion will pressure the Ministry into funding us eventually. Same deal with any rich wizard in need of a reputation laundering.” Some people nodded thoughtfully.

When no one else spoke, Tom took the word again. “Can everyone make it to the meet-up?”

A chorus of “Yes,” or “Yes, Leader,” filled the air.

“Very well. Meeting dismissed.”

xXx

The involvement of the rest of the Knights had been a brilliant idea, Harry thought with a tired smile... *His* brilliant idea, for once. The total of twenty people showed up at the Hogsmeade platform on 3rd of July: twelve past or present Knights, five extra Ravenclaws, two extra Gryffindors and one extra Hufflepuff. Ravenclaws were apparently still quite passionate about the matter because of poor Sarah Jacobs. She ended up spending the summer with one of her friends who persuaded her parents to take the orphaned girl in.

They Portkeyed everyone to the island and moved directly to the explanation. Tom Conjured the architectonic design again, showing the wide-eyed crowd the desired result before handing them detailed plans of it on parchment in several copies. So far only the foundations had been laid, and piles of wood, stone bricks and other materials had been set aside under the Impervius Charm.

The volunteers were divided into teams and assigned specific tasks: one team was in charge of erecting buttresses, one team was in charge of tiling the floors, one team was in charge of laying the bricks, some members had individual assignments specific to their skills (like the Pebblestone couple and their protective runework).

Most of the tasks only required careful levitation of material from one place to another, so at the end of the day, they mostly just had sore wrists from all the swishing and flicking or headaches from the prolonged concentration, but they managed a good amount of work.

Tom and Harry treated the volunteers to Firewhisky and roast chicken at Bard’s Barn, at last listening to some of Robert the Bard’s odes and having actual fun with the Knights like the teens they were.

One by one, the others Flood home until only Harry and Tom were left. Harry had eventually talked his lover into staying with the Potters over the summer, so they reeled home and pissed Voldemort (now a five-foot long serpent) off by their drunken hissing... Oh okay, *Harry’s* drunken hissing.

Most of the volunteers kept showing up in the upcoming weeks, though obviously the graduates couldn’t come as often as the future seventh-years. With at least ten witches and wizards on site each day, the rough construction had been completed in a little under a month.

Then came the fun part: decorating. Predictably, everyone seemed to prefer painting the walls, assembling the furniture, even installing the bloody loos to the dull brick-laying of the previous weeks.

Harry used the skills he got from repairing the Great Hall enchantments to animate the magical countryside scenery that Tristan Mulciber had painted (who knew?) on the wall of the playroom – now there were Hogwarts Express trains running, Snidgets flying and Demiguises appearing and disappearing all across the room.

Following the success, anyone who wished to could decorate one or two of the twenty-five single bedrooms, making some more childish, some more mature, but all original and welcoming to all kinds and ages of kids, despite only having one bed, wardrobe, table and chair in them.

The children's bedrooms and the common bathrooms took up the whole first floor of the house. The loft rooms were left undecorated, should additional staff move in someday or should the orphanage need more space. The ground level consisted of a kitchen, a dining hall, a playroom, a common room and Harry(and Tom)'s living quarters, consisting of a bedroom, a bathroom and a study.

All that workload didn't keep Tom from throwing a birthday party for Harry – unlike his own, this one was full of people, lively, chattery, with all the volunteers and the Potters having a barbecue on the island. They set up a bonfire, sang songs, popped some bottles, told stories and overall had a great time. Harry thought it was his best birthday ever, although it still hurt that Hermione and Ron couldn't be there.

"... and then I dodge the Bone-crushing curse, spin and send a Freezing Spell flying... right at his crotch! Years later, our classmates still wouldn't stop calling him Blue Balls!" Fleamont's cheery voice cut through the night.

"Let's head home, dear, you're drunk," Euphemia sighed, her face exasperated but amused despite herself. The potioneer started to protest, but she grabbed his wrist uncompromisingly and Disapparated them with a loud pop. The boys in the circle laughed, and Maxmilion Dolohov started a duelling story of his own.

Harry had retired to sit with Tom on the other side, wanting nothing more than to snuggle up to him but having to settle for resting their knees together since the others were around. They stared into the fire, the dark silhouette of the house they'd been building in the background.

"It's brilliant," Harry said softly.

"The house or the party?"

"...The *home*," Harry smiled. "I've been wondering... I feel like it deserves a name."

Tom raised an eyebrow, also smiling. "I suppose it does. Any ideas?"

"*The Knight House* sounds cool, but I guess that one's taken."

“Is it?”

“...Will be taken, whatever. I forgot the Knight Bus probably isn’t a thing in the forties.”

Tom looked genuinely confused. “I started a *bus service* in your version of the future?”

Harry snorted and shook his head, “No, I don’t think you did... Oi, weren’t you the one who always came up with cool names for stuff?”

“I... might have a suggestion,” Tom said slowly.

“I’m all ears.”

“The day you left... You told me once that the memorial in the Entrance courtyard was called *Custodes de Hogwarts*. ‘*Custodio*’ means ‘to guard’, and ‘*angelus custos*’ means ‘guardian angel’. We could call the place *Custodarium*, since its purpose will be protection, and it has a personal meaning to both of us.”

“Wow, that’s...” Harry didn’t expect to get more emotional today, maybe it was the alcohol, but... “perfect. You just thought of that now?”

“Oh, it just came to me.”

He’d obviously been thinking about it for a while.

“Sure it did,” Harry grinned and levitated the bottle of Sugarplummet wine over to refill their glasses.

“Are you doubting my proficiency in Latin?”

Harry grinned, “I’m doubting your sobriety.”

He’d been expecting Tom to deny it, but the other wizard just chuckled, so ridiculously attractive in the warm firelight, and replied, “Me too.”

He met Harry’s eyes. “Because right now, I’m this close to kissing you in front of all these people.”

Then do it, Harry’s brain supplied, but he didn’t trust himself at this point either.

“I mean, we’ll have to... come out eventually, won’t we?” he said hopefully.

Tom tore his gaze from him and stared into the fire again. “I’d rather leave it for after we graduate.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense,” Harry nodded, somewhat disappointed.

“Don’t make that face, I’ll make it up to you once we’re alone.”

Harry loved being around the people he liked, yet he couldn’t help but wish they’d left already.

Chapter 19

With so much help, they'd been able to finish the interiors with nearly two weeks left until the start of the school year – according to Tom's original plans which didn't include the volunteers, they only would have had the rough construction done by then with significantly less money left. The least they could do was to throw one last party for everyone to celebrate the completion – they had a large brass plaque made and solemnly hung it by the front door that evening:

Custodarium

Home for the Wizarding Youth

1944

Bellow was a smaller, commemorative one listing the names of every volunteer in alphabetical order. It was a nice touch, giving credit where it was due, as well as a political statement.

The main task was over, the volunteers had been dismissed, but that didn't mean Harry and Tom weren't busy. Tom set out to dig a shallow pond about thirty metres from Custodarium and equip it with runestones that would keep it from drying up or dropping in temperature.

Harry meanwhile planted enough oaks to lay a foundation of a wood around the pond, then some more near the building and all across the island. Once he was done, he started laying a road from the mooring up to the plateau, following the outline they'd made of the potential wizarding village.

The 1st of September fell on Friday, so they made their shopping trip to Diagon Alley on Monday – it occurred to Harry that he could return the favour from seven years ago, so he owed Hagrid and offered to take him with them. It was fun, but not quite as fun as *going fishing* with Tom on Tuesday and Wednesday. (Tom thought) they could have simply bought a fry of fish to release in the pond, but (Harry argued) what was the fun in that?

Voldemort was certainly pleased with their efforts, although he was unsurprisingly a bit salty about being left on Staffa while his Masters finished their education at Hogwarts. Tom had appeased him by showing him a twelve-inch-wide tunnel complete with a Parseltongue-controlled flap door which connected the outside with Harry and Tom's bedroom, and solemnly appointing Voldemort as the Custodarium patron.

Harry realised he hadn't really gone sightseeing around the Muggle world of the 1940s, so they used the last day to wander around the mundane Edinburgh with a generous spending budget of six pounds. They would have gone to London, but it was just Harry's luck that the first time he'd had the opportunity to actually enjoy the city, it was at the height of the Nazi bombings.

Edinburgh was stunning, everyone's accent sounded like Minerva McGonagall when she was angry, they wore elegant suits and hats, occasionally even kilts. The two undercover wizards browsed through endearingly antique-looking shops with shoes, clothes and books. They ended up getting teach-yourself textbooks of German and French, since some of the war orphans might only speak those, and they both bought some clothes for casual wear.

It was the closest Harry had come to a fun date. It *was* a fun date, but it really hit him that *this* was Tom's world – so very different from the one he'd grown up in; simpler, but full of uncertainties. Electricity just barely became a thing, so did mass-produced plastics and cars. Was it too late to start feeling a little claustrophobic about being stuck here?

The answer was yes, so he tried to concentrate on the good stuff, because there sure was plenty: he'd finally become a seventh-year tomorrow, two years late (or technically, fifty-three years early). Tom made Head Boy and Harry's O.W.L. marks came out better than the original ones – he got additional Os in Charms and Potions. He had a home waiting for him, and his future was headed in the direction he'd chosen for once. There was a lovely berry brûlée on his plate and his lovely boyfriend in the seat opposite to him.

Life was good.

xXx

Tom arrived at the Platform 9 ¾ early as he had to meet with all the other prefects and give them a pep talk along with the Head Girl, a Hufflepuff called Lena Smilebrite. She was annoyingly talkative, so he planned to save his breath and dignity, tag along and mostly just look imposing.

He nodded to Harry when he saw him at the platform later, entering the Hogwarts Express with the rest of the Slytherin Knights. Tom had to sit with the other prefects and patrol the train.

He noticed some students had been giving him curious glances, more so than before. His suspicion was confirmed when he joined Harry for the Welcoming Feast, and the looks intensified.

Perfect.

Tom hadn't honestly believed they could keep the whole project a secret, he'd thought as much when Harry proposed letting the Knights and their friends participate. Twenty youngsters disappearing who-knows-where all summer, reportedly to do charitable work, an island getting registered with the Ministry under Harry's name,... Someone was bound to start asking questions, and some of the volunteers were bound to talk.

If they went public with a bang; an official announcement of some sort, it would reek of propaganda once they turned to politics. This way, they could play the good samaritan card immaculately: let the rumours spread, reluctantly confirm them and claim they didn't want to make a big deal out of it, maintaining the perfect image of guileless students just out to do the right thing.

They could go even further – offer the “extra” land on the island for free, as long as the beneficiary promised to actually build a house and live there, “to create a sense of community for the children.”

Someone might accept the offer, but most adults would hate to simply take land off students – they’ll want to pay at least the fair amount. However, Custodarium would only accept a symbolic amount, getting the “buyer” to commit to their decision to live on the island both because of the money they’d invested in it and because of feeling indebted due to the the money they’d saved. Tom would make sure to mention their kindness in public if he ever needed to curry favour with them.

The gossipmongers didn’t disappoint – within days, both Harry and he had been asked about the matter multiple times, and some Knights reported questions as well.

Someone had predictably been relaying the Hogwarts rumours to their parents, because two weeks into the semester, there was a big article in the Daily Prophet: “*Children to Children: Hogwarts students covertly build an orphanage with their own wands!*” The reporter (not Morgenstern’s mother, but presumably a colleague of hers) had apparently done his research and visited the Staffa island to look around and take a few photos. Harry’s name was mentioned since he was the owner, Tom’s name was mentioned because one of the volunteers let slip that he was the architect and coordinator.

The article was what really set things in motion. People kept whispering wherever the two wizards went, Slughorn gave an ode to “his most honourable students” so flowery he rivalled Beethoven’s, even Albus Dumbledore would do his twinkling-eyes thing when he looked at them, no Legilimency Tom could detect behind it. The man was the reason he’d studied the mind arts so early – in the years past, he could always sense suspicion off him and had been horrified to learn that he was a Legilimens. Tom also thought Dumbledore a hypocrite based on the contrast between the valour he preached and his stalling attitude towards Grindelwald. All in all, Tom wasn’t very fond him and reckoned the sentiment was mutual; the sudden change was unnerving.

In the days immediately following the article, they’d been bombarded with hordes of letters – mostly of support, some offers, some inquiries, a few sceptics. Unfortunately, it didn’t stop at letters – a very annoying fan club of younger girls emerged at school, “inconspicuously” following them around and “secretly” fawning over them.

Harry wasn’t happy about the attention at all; he apparently hadn’t been exaggerating when he said he hated it in his original timeline, but at least he seemed somewhat used to it.

There was a letter from the Ministry, too, promising their full support, but no specific amounts – not surprising, considering the tight position they’d been in; a government on the losing side of a war was desperate for all the public recognition they could get. Soon after, the Daily Prophet printed the Ministry’s official statement, its contents pretty much the same. Tom was fine with that. After giving it more thought, he realised they’d be directly obliged to the Ministry if they accepted their money, definitely not what he wanted to be at this point. All he needed from them now was the formal acknowledgement.

“Do we really have to?” Harry asked for the fifth time, even as he dawdled to the main entrance door to welcome their guest.

“No, but it will prove very advantageous for us in the future if we do it,” Tom answered patiently, feeling a tiny bit sorry for pushing Harry into something he so obviously disliked, even though it was objectively important and not that unpleasant.

Harry sighed and opened the door.

“Mr. Potter, Mr. Riddle, such a pleasure to make your acquaintance! My name is Norbert Dodderidge from the Daily Prophet, I’ll be the one interviewing you today.”

Dodderidge was a podgy man in his fifties, dressed in a grey suit that would allow him to blend with both wizards and Muggles of this era. He sported a professional smile and overall seemed like one of the more legit journalists Harry had the *pleasure* to meet.

“The pleasure is ours, Mr. Dodderidge, please come in,” Tom answered politely. They shook hands, and Tom led the way to the Custodarium common room. There were several sofas and armchairs in a neutral décor of cinnamon brown, conference tables and a fireplace.

xXx

You have done quite a bit of fine work here, gentlemen. To be honest, I was sceptical when I first heard of your project – that is, of course, until I have seen it with my own two eyes. How does it happen that a group of Hogwarts students decides to build an orphanage?

Harry: It was a series of coincidences – I transferred to Hogwarts last year, and Tom was the prefect assigned with showing me around. We became friends and found out we both wanted to do something meaningful for the wizarding world. Then one of our classmates tragically lost her parents, she had a hard time finding a place to go, and since both of us are orphans, too, the idea came to us naturally. We mentioned it to our classmates, many volunteered to help – we were only able to complete the construction this quickly thanks to them.

Pardon my curiosity, but how do two orphans and twenty other students raise enough money to buy an island and build a house this spacious?

Tom: Harry was so generous as to use most of his inheritance for this. The others also made donations.

Harry: (smiles wistfully, eyes glistening with the ghost of his past): I’m sure mum and dad would have been happy to see me do this.

Why have you chosen an island? Why Staffa in particular?

Tom: We wanted a place where the wizarding children could be themselves, not worried about their accidental magic or feeling alienated from their Muggle peers. Staffa happened to be on sale and fit our needs. Besides, you have to admit it already looks magical with its rock columns and caves. (chuckles)

Indeed, and it is quite a large island, too, at least thirty acres. Are you planning to make use of the extra space?

Harry: We 're not sure yet, but we're hoping to welcome other residents on Staffa at some point. It would be brilliant to have some sort of community for the youth staying at Custodarium.

You named the orphanage Custodarium. Does that mean anything?

Tom: It means "place of protection" in Latin.

Harry: We thought it sums up the purpose nicely. Other than an orphanage, we want to make it a shelter for any youth in need, like when someone needs to escape abuse or when families refuse a Squib child.

You'll be accepting Squibs?

Harry: Of course, we'll be accepting children from a young age – we wouldn't stop caring for them if they turned out to be Squibs, they'll just have different options in the wizarding world than the magical ones.

And you plan to run all this yourselves after you graduate?

Tom: For now, yes. Harry will be in charge of the operation.

Do you have experience with children?

Harry: Some. We knew it would be a challenge from the start, but I'm sure we'll make it work.

You mentioned an orphaned classmate – will she be joining you at Custodarium this summer?

Tom: That depends on her. If she wants to, she is welcome.

What about foreign children? War orphans from the continental Europe?

Harry: They're welcome, too!

Tom: We've been learning the basics of German and French to better accommodate their needs, although they'd still have to learn English eventually.

Est-ce vrai?

Harry & Tom: (laugh) Oui.

What is the capacity of this building?

Tom: Without any Expansion Charms, twenty-five residents plus the staff, but the rooms upstairs are ready to be Expanded should we need more room.

You have Runed them beforehand? How very prudent of you, and you made the entire design yourselves, correct? Why the secrecy? Why not involve adults?

Tom: Firstly, we are adults – all the volunteers have turned seventeen and have acquired their Apparition licences. Secondly, we have involved outsiders, we just didn't want to make a sensation out of it... although that part obviously didn't work out. All we wanted was to give some young people in need a better chance at life.

I see. I am sorry for publishing the previous article, then.

Tom: No, we should be thanking you – we realised it's better this way, we received lots of support and more people will know that there's a place they can turn to.

Oh, that's a relief, I would hate to interfere with your admirable efforts. Would you mind showing our readers around?

xXx

The interview printed in the Sunday 27th of October issue (they had to give it on a Hogsmeade Saturday when they could officially be away from Hogwarts for the day). It had been accompanied by the wizarding photographs and descriptions of the interiors (the playroom with its Animated wall painting, a couple of the bedrooms, the dining room) and one large photo of the two of them.

The effect was even more prominent than the first article: people started recognising them everywhere, not just Hogwarts, pointing, whispering, sometimes openly commending them. Tom basked in the attention, though on the downside, it made sneaking out of Hogwarts to do business unnoticed a touch more complicated (that touch was called Polyjuice).

Among the letters they'd been receiving appeared offers of financial help or volunteering, and two new types of letter which Tom had been waiting for: invitations to important parties, most notably the Ministry of Magic Christmas Gala, and inquiries about the possibility of construction on the island.

To Harry's dismay, they also became Witch Weekly's new favourite bachelors – the tabloid printed a special on the whole volunteer crew in the next issue, using photos obviously taken by a student from afar (or at least they hoped not by a *professor*, unless that twinkle in Dumbledore's eye was actually a flash!?).

Tom wasn't sure whether to try exploiting this kind of attention, but he wasn't bothered by it. As for the volunteers, most of them were happy about it, especially the actual bachelors.

xXx

“Sorry, um, Tom, right?” said a thin voice.

He looked up from his essay, keeping his expression neutral, although he inwardly suspected it was just a fangirl trying her luck again. Harry turned to the source, too.

It was Sarah Jacobs and her two best mates. She was a third year Ravenclaw now, on the shorter side, long dark blonde braids, brown eyes and a timid, slightly freckled face.

It was one of her friends speaking, though. “Were you serious? ... That Sarah could stay with you?”

“Of course! We’d be happy to have you if you want to come, Sarah,” said Harry quickly. Tom could hear the warm smile he must have had on his face.

“She wants to, she’s just too scared to ask.”

Sarah did look quite scared. “I... think I want to. I mean, can I try?”

Tom gave his most welcoming smile and said, “Sarah, why don’t you have a seat and let us tell you more? You can ask any questions you have afterwards and decide if you’d perhaps like to give Custodarium a test run over the Christmas.” Harry nodded enthusiastically and pushed his chair to the side, offering the girl a seat beside him.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Happy Christmas! It's a time of generosity, so how about we have one chapter a day for the duration of it? ;)

Harry had pretty much resigned himself to never being completely rid of the media – their ability of making his life difficult transcended space and time.

Fair enough, they'd called him a liar and the Undesirable No. 1, calling him the patron of orphans and Squibs wasn't the worst they could do. There was this one article insinuating he was unfit to be taking care of children – although Aaron's mum was a journalist for the Prophet, she wasn't the chief editor to censor the contents. The office atmosphere probably wasn't at its all-time high when the article undermining her son's project came out.

That hardly put a stain on the positive feedback they'd been getting, though. Their chat with Sarah in the library hadn't escaped the gossipers and the rag made a soul-stirring story out of it.

The war was gradually leaning to Grindelwald's side, and Harry realised most of the Wizarding Britain was desperate for any good news.

Just a bit longer, he thought, helplessly waiting for Dumbledore to interfere. He could see the toll each new attack took on him – the usually passionate professor had become broody, Harry believed he even caught a glimpse of him looking downright miserable once or twice.

He could understand Dumbledore's objectors, the voices asking why the strongest Light wizard, the Supreme Mugwump and the Chief Warlock wouldn't do anything, but he could understand Dumbledore's perspective, too..

If he imagined having to face Tom in a duel to death after what they've shared in this past year... Merlin, just the thought of it made his stomach churn. Every spell he'd send his way would have broken his heart all over again. Every incantation fallen from his foe's lips would remind him how they used to smile at him.

He wondered if his torturous wait had been similar to Dumbledore's after he'd found out Harry had a horcrux attached to himself, and their positions had been reversed completely... In any case, he felt the urge to give the older wizard a hug every time he'd seen him those days.

That aside, though, Harry was very excited about this year's Christmas holiday. Sarah would be coming with them to give Custodarium a try, so Harry had been planning big – cook nice meals, decorate the common areas and the tree together, play games, build snowmen, go on

trips, help her with homework... Everything he thought would make for a nice Christmas time. Tom would participate, of course, but he apparently had projects of his own.

“Can I borrow your Invisibility Cloak tomorrow?” Tom asked out of the blue one December night while they were on one of their progressively more rare rendezvous in the Room of Requirement – disappearing unnoticed for a prolonged period of time during the days became more difficult, and after having slept in their own bed at the end of the summer, nothing felt quite as right.

“Er, sure, what for?”

“Have you ever wondered how the Hogwarts professors know who to send the letter to?”

“...I just assumed it had something to do with accidental magic?”

“Yes, that was my initial thought as well, but we know the Ministry has no way to detect magic on a countrywide scale. If that were the case, wouldn’t you have been doomed the moment it had fallen? Flashes of magic in the middle of the woods would have surely caught their attention.”

“That’s... true.”

“Even if you use a wand to do magic before you attend Hogwarts, it won’t get reported, so the Trace isn’t something every magical child or wand inherently has. I believe it’s a charm or a set of charms, and that it’s cast on the first-years at some point after they board the Hogwarts Express in September and before they get off it in December.

“But that’s beside the point. Hogwarts has a way to know the names and addresses of all the magical children on the British Isles, I want to find out what it is and how to replicate it.”

Harry’s eyes widened, “...To get to children like us in time. That’s genius!”

“Not just that – we could use it to bring some order to the wizarding child protection in general and get the demographic data. You can refuse to attend Hogwarts, but how many children do that? For what reasons? Magic is rare and dangerous if not cultivated, to the individual *and* to the Statute of Secrecy – magical children should be checked up on regularly before they start Hogwarts and possibly given a choice to leave the Muggle world early if their circumstances are harmful.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.” Harry took a moment to process that. “Wait, why does that remind me of the ‘take Muggle-borns away, Obliviate the parents’ policy you talked about last year?”

Tom shrugged unapologetically and raised his hands in faux surrender. “You caught me. But you also just said it makes sense.”

“No! I mean, it does, but... Argh, that’s cheating! You bloody manipulator!”

“You mispronounced ‘logic’ and ‘Slytherin’,” Tom grinned and kissed the pout away. “I’ve done a lot of asking around and invested a lot of candied pineapple, but I finally managed to

find out what the artefact looks like and where it's kept. Now, if only I had a safe way to sneak in and analyse it..."

Harry huffed and rubbed his eyes in frustration. "Oh, okay, fine! But I'm going with you."

xXx

There was a catch: the artefact was locked up in a small windowless tower that was only accessible from the Deputy Headmaster's office – in other words, Dumbledore's office.

Getting the password for the main door was a matter of waiting under the Cloak after classes, it was getting into the small tower that posed a challenge. For one, the entrance was hidden – it could simply be hidden behind a bookshelf, but for all Tom knew, it could just as well appear in the middle of the wall or ceiling.

He could come here later and try to find the opening mechanism himself by chance, but he *was* a true Slytherin, so...

Bang! Thud! A sudden loud noise coming from above. Dumbledore jolted from his desk with a worried frown. The poor wizard was probably worried the war had finally caught up with Hogwarts, but Tom wasn't feeling too sorry about that; he still didn't like the man.

Harry had thankfully not realised this minor flaw in the plan when he agreed to it. They planned for Tom wait under the Cloak inside the office while Harry watched for Dumbledore from the outside. Once the professor entered, Harry would go to the broomshed, Disillusion himself and his broom – since he'd be outside and far enough from any possible witnesses, this usually imperfect camouflage would suffice. He'd fly to the small tower and Accio random things that are likely to be inside: a lamp, a bookshelf,... until he hears it crash against the wall and the pull of the spell snaps. Then he would swiftly retreat.

Tom could do it wordlessly from inside the office, but he'd risk accidentally Summoning the same type of item from this room instead and give himself away – he wasn't the type to risk anything unnecessarily when a safer alternative presented itself.

Dumbledore cautiously approached a wall. Tom followed him as closely as he dared under the Cloak, heart drumming in his ears from the adrenalin of it.

There were several beasts carved into the stone bricks around the office, the professor was now facing a dragon.

"Draco durmiens nunquam titilandus."

The dragon's eyes flashed with red light. Dumbledore reached up and... tickled the dragon, apparently not asleep anymore. It would have been quite comical in another setting, but the gravity of both Dumbledore's face and the situation gave no room for amusement.

Similar to the way the door to the Room of Requirement would appear, the outline gradually drew itself as a crack in the wall before some parts protruded and other caved in to form a

door. Dumbledore went inside, but Tom didn't follow – he had what he needed and used the opening to slip out of the office unnoticed.

xXx

“Aniseed Twists,” whispered a voice from no visible source. Fortunately, the only nearby portrait of The Athenian Philosopher was fast asleep and there was no one else to wonder at the peculiar occurrence.

Tom and Harry both crept into the office later that night, after Tom's prefect patrol. Walking around Hogwarts snuggled to each other to fit under the Cloak was nice, Harry decided, especially since they usually had to be careful not to act too intimate around each other.

“Draco durmiens nunquam titilandus.”

Tom tickled the stone dragon, and a door revealed itself. Behind it was a narrow spiral staircase. Upon ascending, they found a small round chamber. Apart from the bare necessities, like the wall candle sconce Harry had successfully Acioed earlier, there was nothing but an open ancient-looking tome and a quill resting in a holder above it, both resting solemnly on a stone pedestal.

Harry stepped closer and ran a hand across the yellowed page. There was something written on it, so he shifted the Lumos to be able to read it. A list of dates, names and addresses, written in neat cursive. The last entry was from 8 December 1944.

“Curious,” Tom said beside him in a low voice and began shuffling through the pages until he reached the 1926 entries. Sure enough, “*31 December 1926 – Tom Marvolo Riddle, Wool's Orphanage Room No. 7, 46 Jeffrey's Road, Clapham, London*” sat at the top of the page.

He browsed the list of their classmates a while longer, studying the addresses. Harry looked at him questioningly.

“It wasn't room no. 7 when this entry was made, and I know for a fact that Dalamar hadn't moved to London until 1935,” he explained, “Either the book self-updates, or this is the most accurate piece of Divination I've ever heard of.”

He cast a diagnostic charm on the quill while Harry stared at the book pensively. “Wouldn't it say Staffa if it self-updated? You don't live in the orphanage anymore...”

“It could only be active up to a point, like when you read the acceptance letter,” Tom frowned, “I know it's a stretch, but it's still more plausible than predicting the exact address years ahead. Actually, it would be quite controversial if you could just come up here and know the whereabouts of any adult wizard.”

He reached up to hold the grey quill carefully in his fingers, taking a closer look, “Even more curious. This is an Augurey feather – it's supposed to repel ink.”

True to those words, there was no inkpot to be seen on the pedestal. Harry thought hard to recall what he'd learnt in Care of Magical Creatures. “Augureys predict rain, right? Couldn't

they predict other stuff, too?”

“Indeed, one wouldn’t bother using an Augurey feather if they didn’t need it for its magical properties... But such precision, there’s no way...”

Tom cast a few diagnostic charms on the quill while Harry busied himself with going through the names and addresses. Were the people who declined the invitation to Hogwarts also there?

“It’s not Divination,” Tom said finally, eyes aflame with realisation. He turned to Harry.

“Harry, what do Augureys hunt?”

“Er, insects, I think, and they hunt for fairies in the rain...”

“Fairies!” Tom exclaimed triumphantly, “Why would they choose to hunt in the rain, when the visibility and the flight conditions are worse than usual?”

Harry knew this look, the one when Tom was trying to lead him to the answer through questions. It would be a great trait in a teacher, but a mildly annoying one in a boyfriend. This is what it must have been like for Ron to date Hermione – he could thoroughly sympathise. He tried to keep the exasperation out of his voice as he sighed, “Oh, just tell me.”

If that had rained on Tom’s parade, he didn’t show it. On the contrary, he eagerly acceded.

“Because a storm is the darkest a day could get! Fairies are only out during the day, but Augureys hate good weather while they hunt, because the sunlight drowns all the *other* lights they can see and hunt for... the magical auras.”

Now Harry’s eyes were wide, too. “Wow, that’s...”

“Quite a revelation, yes. The quill is heavily covered in amplifying and channeling enchantments which I can’t decipher on the spot, but I believe they’re meant to increase the radius of this particular magical property and focus it on the human magical auras... Although that doesn’t explain how an Augurey feather writes without ink or how it knows the current addresses...” he thought aloud.

Harry glanced at the book. “Well, we already know maps can be charmed to record names and positions of people on their own...”

Tom raised a uncomprehending eyebrow, “We do?”

“Oh right!” Harry hit his forehead, chuckling at the confused look he got. He pulled the Marauder’s Map out of the Cloak’s pocket. Smiling smugly, he touched it with the tip of his wand. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Ink blossomed across the parchment in all its black glory. Tom watched it with an amazed look on his face.

“What the... So this is how...” he breathed out, then he seemed to remember himself and huffed crossly, “For fuck’s sake, Harry. Any other invaluable magical artefacts you just casually carry around that you’d like to share with the class?”

“It’s just a spare piece of parchment,” Harry winked and watched with glee as Tom connected the dots. “Besides, it couldn’t be that rare – my dad and his friends made it in their fifth year.”

Tom gave him a *look* and waved his wand at the Map, casting a set of diagnostic charms, then repeated the process with the ancient tome.

“Yes, the enchantments have some common attributes, though of course the ones on the book are far more complex and only follow the auras transferred from the Augurey quill. The area is massive in comparison, but the function isn’t as demanding, and as expected, there’s a timed cap to each entry...” he muttered more to himself than to Harry and cast some more charms, shimmering lines of various various colours springing out of the book and filling the air.

Harry ran a hand down Tom’s back in a casual (yet rare) gesture of affection, smiling over his shoulder. “So, what do you think? Will you be able to replicate it?”

When Tom turned to face him again, there was a complacent smirk on his face. “I hope you’re up for a wild Augurey chase, because we’re going to ruffle some feathers over the Christmas.”

Bloody hell, Harry should have known that someone who came up with “*I am Lord Voldemort*” and “*Knights of Walpurgis*” would be a pathological punner.

Chapter 21

Tom had visited the Quill of Acceptance and the Book of Admittance a few more times during the two weeks leading to the Christmas holiday as he gradually unravelled the enchantments.

They were masterfully done. The Quill had multiple tiny runes carved into it to bind the Amplifying Charms, turning a single feather into an incredibly powerful magical radar, presumably covering the whole of Britain and Ireland. Over it was a layer of parametric charms – one that focused on the specific wavelength of human magical cores and another that limited the targeted strength from just over what a Squib would have to the maximum expected strength an eleven-year-old's core could have.

If the Quill detected a particular magical aura for the first time, it was Charmed to transfer it to the Book of Admittance, effectively creating a Homunculus. Tom got lucky enough once to see it in action – the Quill looked like it was writing, but it was the Book doing the visualisation, decoding the information from the magical aura like Harry's map would.

The sorting by birth date was an illusion – according to the properties of the Book and the Quill, most magical children would indeed register directly after birth, but the weakest would take years before they reached the minimum level, not to mention those who immigrated. As for tourists, the Book would logically only be able to follow the Homunculi of those who stayed in its monitoring radius.

That being said, Tom understood why the creator, most probably Rowena Ravenclaw herself, had bothered to Charm the Quill to look like it was writing and hide the artefacts away – who knew what oaths the Deputy Headmasters and Headmistresses had to take to protect the secret, had they ever discovered the principle. If someone went through the trouble of creating a number of smaller but more potent versions, they could monitor the movements of all the witches and wizards in vast areas in real time; that kind of ability fallen into the wrong hands would be disastrous.

Then again, Tom had an exceptionally delicate grip on magic, and the enchantments had seemed extremely challenging even to him – an ordinary or even above average wizard wouldn't stand a chance. Even if he managed to get ahold of a suitable Augurey feather, he was in for a challenging holiday.

Fortunately, it turned out some wizarding folk kept the Irish phoenixes as pets – although it was uncertain whether their feathers would be potent enough, the prospect of buying one was infinitely more appealing than trying to hunt one down on a broom. As Augurey feathers repelled ink, wizards thought them practically worthless anyway.

Speaking of, the value of Basilisk venom had predictably dropped since they started selling it. They were currently at 100 galleons per ounce, a fifth of the initial price, but it still allowed for a decent amount of savings, many times the cost of a generous Christmas.

The holiday began on Saturday the 16th, and Harry really outdid himself in that department – not that he would buy Sarah expensive gifts, it wouldn't have been well received and Harry wasn't an idiot, he just did his best to be festive and fun and simply *there* for her.

Sarah was a classic Ravenclaw, she had her passions and loved to live them out. What usually separated Slytherin and Ravenclaw was the drive – while Slytherins constantly set goals for themselves and everything else was just a means to achieve them, for Ravenclaws the path was also the goal.

In her case, those passions revolved around magical painting and fiction, unfortunately something neither Harry nor Tom knew much about, but it didn't seem to matter. She picked the room she'd found “the most inspiring”, and they helped her move the things she'd left at her friend's house, mostly books.

They left her alone when she looked like she wanted to be, but Harry made sure to always ask about her day at meals, what she'd done or read, and proposed activities they could do together... For instance, the three of them decorated the common areas together on 20 December, Sarah had painted wizarding motives on some Christmas balls, then either of the young wizards animated the pictures, which was surprisingly fun.

That was the first time he'd truly felt the weight of their decisions – this was no longer some anonymous pawn on the chess board of his plans, Sarah was a very real person who would depend on them entirely in the foreseeable future... His rationale assured him it was no big deal, they were prepared for it, but his not-quite-eighteen-year-old part thought it was rather daunting.

When he wasn't with the other two, he'd spent most of his time in their private study with Voldemort coiled around his neck, basking in the body heat while his master layered enchantments upon an empty book. It was arduous work and he had to start over twice, but he believed the result would be worth the effort.

He also organised a tour for the first few prospective Staffa residents and a couple of rubbernecks who wanted have look around the island. They'd gotten their Floo connected after securing the room both from the inside (so unwelcome guests couldn't just roam around the house) and the outside (so younger children couldn't use it unsupervised).

The tour took place on 20 December, two days before the Ministry Gala, and it was hosted by both Tom and Harry. At the end of it, they revealed the terms for new residents – as long as they build a house and lived in it, the land would be provided for free. Tom would be in charge of local planning; applicants were to owl a design to him and they'd meet individually to assign a suitable lot to it.

The news was in the Daily Prophet by the morning of 22 December – it would be a hot topic at the Ministry Gala, and that was exactly what Tom had been hoping for.

xXx

This was exactly what Harry wanted to avoid. How had Tom talked him into coming? And Sarah was such a traitor for saying she was okay staying in Custodarium alone for a few

hours – they’d played Exploding Snap and everything, he thought they were friends!

He stood at a bar height table in the corner, hiding awkwardly behind Fleamont and Euphemia. Everyone seemed to want a piece of him... the two of them, their island, whatever. He was happy to let Tom do all the talking.

“What *is* with everyone, it’s not like you’re *giving away land* or anything,” Fleamont teased after they’d exchanged pleasantries with another Wizengamot member.

“Oh, bugger off,” Harry grumbled in a low voice and sipped on his Whining Sparkle.

“But Harry!” Fleamont also lowered his voice and leant in conspiratorially, “It’s free real estate!”

“Yeah, that’s how I excited I am over this free champagne right n-”

“Mr. Riddle, Messrs. and Mrs. Potter, what a pleasure to see you here tonight,” said a familiar-looking wizard in his fifties. He wore a short beard, thin grey hair slicked into a wave and an air of effortless authority.

Harry couldn’t see Tom’s face, but he could see the polite little bow. “Minister Spencer-Moon. The pleasure is ours, sir, thank you for having us.”

“As the lad says,” Fleamont, also more formal than usual, smiled and nodded to the Minister – so did Euphemia, and Harry quickly followed suit.

Leonard Spencer-Moon had been remembered by the future History of Magic textbooks as a sound Minister who managed to keep the Wizarding Britain in order during the global wizarding war and worked closely with the Muggle government. He appeared competent in person as well, but Harry had too much of a bad experience with politicians to jump to conclusions.

“There’s nothing to be thankful for, Mr. Riddle, I should be apologising for not having had you sooner. I’ve wanted to meet you ever since I’ve heard of your honourable efforts, but as you can imagine, these are not the best of times for the Ministry. Nevertheless, please know our doors are always open to you.”

“That is very generous of you, sir. Our project has been going smoothly, although I must admit we have been hoping for the Ministry’s support in matters of custody and child protection once we launch the operation officially.”

“You shall have it, of course. Let us meet in more private circumstances and discuss the details – and please owl your ideas to me beforehand, I’ll see what can be done.”

“Thank you, sir, we shall be in contact then.”

“Excellent. Now, Mr. Potter, how’s your potion’s business? My wife has been most pleased with your latest product...”

Later hours of the evening found an accordingly exhausted Harry sitting at a dining table with Fleamont while Euphemia went to chat with her ex-classmates and Tom mingled with the wizarding elite, probably having the time of his life. Despite Harry's dislike for politicking, seeing his lover so excited was worth it.

"I see I had the right vow after all," he heard Fleamont say.

"Yeah," Harry agreed absently before the words fully registered. Once they did, he frowned and turned to Fleamont. "Wait, what do you mean?"

The potioneer was smiling impishly under his moustache. "I mean he's a keeper."

Harry felt his face turn red instantly and sputtered, "T-that's not, er, we're not-"

"Please, your eyes may be bad, but that certainly didn't come from *my* side of the family. You lovebirds bloody lived with us for a month! We're not that oblivious."

"Oh," Harry's shoulders slumped, and he stared at the table. How was one supposed to react in a situation like this? Fleamont, on the other hand, looked all too nonchalant.

"What's the big deal, Harry? ... Wait, don't tell me, I can guess," he winked and wiggled his eyebrows while Harry gave him a mortified look.

"Seriously though, why not tell anyone? Do your friends know? The ones who helped over the summer?"

Harry shook his head, "We thought it would be better to tell everyone after we graduate."

Fleamont sat back and twirled the end of his moustache in thought. "I suppose some bigoted kids could be right bastards about that sort of thing. But you didn't even tell the closest ones?"

"... The closest ones would be our roommates, so no."

Fleamont barked a laugh, "Ha! I forgot you two room together! I'd give anything to see the poor lads' faces when you tell them! But then, I bet they already have their suspicions."

Harry must have been tomato-red. "It's... that obvious?"

"Only if you look closely," Fleamont smiled, then added at Harry's dismayed expression, "Hey, it's fine, as long as you look at each other like that; if he breaks your heart, I swear I'll break his wand in James's place."

Harry snorted, then did a double-take, eyes like saucers. Fleamont had a big grin on his face. "Aha! So there *will* be a James."

"Fleamont! That's not a joking matter, you really shouldn't-"

"But why, Harry? You said it yourself that the future had been changed, there's no paradox to fear anymore." It was strange how quickly his grandfather could go from jovial to serious,

suddenly seeming years older than just seconds ago.

He had a point. Why was Harry still trying so anxiously not to change the future too much when he'd already changed it beyond repair?

The answer was simple, really.

"I guess there are things I don't want to risk changing."

The older wizard's eyes softened at that. "Of course," he sighed and rubbed his face, "I'm sorry for pushing."

"No, I get it. I'd be mad curious, too," Harry scratched the back of his neck. "Just... don't stop trying and trust me on the rest, eh?"

But Fleamont hadn't returned to his usual jolly self just yet. "What about later? Will you have to cut ties or Obliviate us to make sure the good stuff comes to pass?"

Harry paled. "Merlin, no! I mean, I hope not... I haven't thought that far, but--"

Fleamont laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed lightly. "It's okay, do what you think is best. I admit I'd hate to lose you or my memories, but I'd hate not to have such a brilliant descendant because of such a petty reason even more."

His smile was finally back, but it seemed somewhat heavier, more earnest and telling. If it made Harry a touch too emotional, he blamed it on the alcohol.

Neither of them spoke for a few moments, the chatter and music lost to Harry's overstimulated mind.

"But, regarding vows," Fleamont finally broke the silence, "something's been on my mind since that day – one vow to prevent a war? What was he in your time, a dark lord or something?"

Harry stared at him like a deer caught in the headlight.

"Er," he said eloquently.

"Merlin's pants!" Fleamont exclaimed, "And here I thought my time travel story was good..."

"*Your* time travel story?" Harry thought he remembered his grandparents sharing an insider joke about that once or twice.

"Oh, I can't believe I never told you!" Fleamont's eyes flashed, and his characteristic wide smile finally spread on his face again.

"I was just starting my business when I met this lovely hairdresser at one of my first contract salons – my beautiful wife, of course. I wanted to ask her out, but I already had a feeling that she would be the one and couldn't risk not being impressive enough.

“What could I impress this lady with? I was an ordinary wizard with a funny name to boot, I could only do three things well: brewing, duelling and pranking. I had to play my cards right,” he grinned, “so I did.”

“I experimented a bit and found out a skilful enough potioneer could mix Polyjuice and Ageing Potion safely, creating an Ageing Polyjuice, if you will.”

Oh, no. Harry didn’t know where this was going, but it couldn’t be anywhere good.

“I used the Cloak to get one of her hair unnoticed and went shopping for some Muggle clothes to look alien enough. I drank the Ageing Polyjuice and waited for her near the salon.”

“You didn’t!” Harry gasped, realisation dawning on him.

“I stopped her on her way to work and told her,” Fleamont made a theatrically horrified expression and raised his voice a pitch, “*If you don’t go on a date with Fleamont Potter, you’ll regret it forever!*” he said and started snickering at the memory. Harry wasn’t sure whether to feel impressed, amused or sorry for Euphemia.

“I Apparated away immediately after and asked her to dinner that very day. She accepted. I obviously didn’t want her to only go out with me because of a prank, though, so I told her the truth during the date.”

“Did she take it well?”

Fleamont held up his left hand, flashing the golden ring. “What do you think?” he grinned.

Harry grinned back and hid his face in his palms, shaking it. He should have expected as much from the man who’d raise James and (adoptively) Sirius.

xXx

When Tom eventually returned to their table, he was positively glowing – Harry wanted to kiss him so bad when he looked like that.

“Mission accomplished, I take it,” he said instead, giving the younger wizard a warm smile.

“More than. I got a dozen new resident candidates, a person willing to show me their Augurey and an interesting job offer,” Tom answered, emanating self-satisfaction.

“Whoa, wicked! What’s an ‘interesting job offer’?”

“Artificer for the Department of Mysteries. They were impressed by the runework and the enchantments we did on Staffa – one of the Wednesday visitors was apparently an Unspeakable.”

“Brilliant! I mean, if that’s what you want to do...”

“I like the sound of it so far. I could learn all their secrets without having to spend too much time away from Staffa, though I’d have to build a proper laboratory away from the kids.”

Harry snickered, “You could go full mad scientist mode and build it in one of the caves under the island.”

Tom raised an eyebrow, looking a little put out, “That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking – what’s mad about it?”

“Nothing, I guess, as long as you don’t raise an army of clones in there or something.” Harry almost immediately wished he hadn’t said that, because judging by Tom’s contemplative expression, he might have taken it as a suggestion.

“Er, can we go home now? So you can plot your mad scientist lair in peace while I sleep for two days straight? I’m knackered.”

“Oh, but then you’d miss the visit at Mr. Scamander’s – I thought you were quite fond of magical creatures yourself.”

Harry blinked, “As in Newton Scamander’s?”

Tom nodded, “Yes, the author of the Care of Magical Creatures textbook. I mentioned we wanted to see an Augurey for research purposes to Abbey Finch, a Ministry official I was talking to, and she was in Hufflepuff with him, so she sought him out in the crowd and introduced us.”

“Yeah, he was quite famous where I come from... Hermione was really inspired by his werewolf rights campaign.”

“Hmm, we should hurry and get you to bed then,” Tom smirked in a manner which suggested that *sleeping* wasn’t what he intended to do there at all. He then proceeded to exchange goodbyes with the Potters, casual as ever, leaving Harry to wonder where his tiredness had suddenly disappeared to.

Chapter 22

Newton Scamander was a timid but accommodating wizard in his late forties, and a distinguished Magizoologist. He didn't look very comfortable at the Ministry Gala, not unlike Harry, but he perked up as soon as Mrs. Finch explained Tom's interest in Augureys.

Tom had a cover story ready, of course – not to draw attention to what they'd really been up to, he played the “*Custodarium is a shelter to everything magical*” card to the fullest by claiming they'd been looking to introduce some magical creatures to Staffa, Augureys being the first choice since they weren't especially demanding and were practically native to the area.

Mr. Scamander was quite enthusiastic at the prospect and said they could drop by anytime as he had a pair of Augureys in his care. Tom eloquently returned whether “anytime” applied to the next day, because “there wasn't much left of their Christmas holiday and they wanted to get started on any adjustments necessary.”

That's how they found themselves in the fireplace of... a London apartment? Tom even recognised the street, it was a little over a mile away from Wool's Orphanage. Not exactly the location he'd imagine for a Magizoologist's base.

They had a few minutes to look around the small antique hall before they heard frantic footsteps. Then, a dishevelled Mr. Scamander burst into the room.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, I forgot to take off my wristwatch when I went to feed the Nifflers and lost the time,” he pointed to his empty wrist apologetically.

He ushered them to the basement which he'd emerged from, down a criss-cross staircase, passing various doors leading to obviously magically expanded spaces, sometimes whole landscapes – that explained a lot. They finally entered one of them and found themselves on a tiny island with a couple of trees and bushes.

“This is the aviary,” said Mr. Scamander, “Polly and Jack should be around.”

He made a low chirp, bizarre to have come from a middle-aged wizard, and sure enough, a pair of greenish black heads popped out of the brambles, chirping back. He held out an arm until one of the birds took the cue and flew up to land on it.

“As you gentlemen correctly guessed, an Augurey like Jack here would be quite happy on an island like yours. They prefer to nest in thorns and brambles, you'd only need to plant those and protect them from unwanted attention.

“Augureys are great hunters, they can take care of themselves, but beware, they have a taste for fairies whenever it rains, so if you have a fairy colony, you'll want to protect it, too. They let out a distinctive cry when it's about to rain... some people find it annoying,” he frowned and scratched the creature's neck gently. “...Do you have any particular questions?”

“How many would you recommend to introduce, and where best to get them, the wild or from private breeders?” Tom asked readily. He wasn’t really interested in the birds, but it wouldn’t hurt to keep up appearances and get a couple of them on Staffa.

“Either is fine, theoretically; the instincts stay strong in them, though the man-kept could be acquired with lower risk of harm. As for how many, I’d say two females would be enough to start a small colony.

“Actually, Polly’s started brooding a few days ago. She had her wings singed and can no longer fly well, that’s how she ended up here... But if you’d like, I could entrust you with some of her young once they’re weaned...”

“That would be brilliant!” Harry said, looking genuinely excited at the prospect.

Tom, on the other hand, knew an opportunity when he saw one. “So it’s true that Augurey feathers are highly waterproof but susceptible to heat? Is that where they got the name ‘Irish Phoenixes’ – they were thought to be the counterpart of actual Phoenixes?”

“Er, I suppose... yes, possibly.” This information was obviously new to Mr. Scamander, as it damn well should be, because Tom made it up.

“Interesting,” he feigned awe, “Would you... would *Jack* mind if I took a few feathers to study their properties?”

The Magizoologist raised his eyebrows at the bird and appeared to have a short silent conversation with it, then said, “I don’t think it would be a problem, um, let’s see...”

He reached up carefully, trying various feathers to see which were close to falling out, gently plucked three out and handed them to Tom. Harry watched the exchange with poorly disguised wonder. Fortunately, it seemed like Mr. Scamander rarely looked at people directly.

“Thank you, and sorry to have bothered you so close to Christmas Eve, Mr. Scamander” Tom nodded politely as he accepted the feathers.

“Ah, no, it was no bother at all... Actually, if you’re not busy, there are other species here that would benefit from a wizarding reserve like the Staffa island...”

xXx

Naturally, they couldn’t refuse such offer. Mr. Scamander led them from one door to another, eager to explain all about his beloved beasts and Harry was happy to listen – his only regret was that Hagrid wasn’t here with them, he would have been over the moon.

On the way from the Hippocampus’ habitat, Harry heard a series of low murmurs. In a classic Gryffindor fashion, his curiosity got the better of him, and he paused to locate the source. It was coming from an alcove to the left.

As he approached, the voices became clearer, though the words were just barely intelligible.

“Ai told yoo der ver strenjerz.”

“Hiz kamin dis vey!”

“Daz hi hev rowches four uz?”

He didn’t see anything other than a collection of pots, watering cans and boxes – it wasn’t until he stood directly in front of it that he noticed the small blue heads peeking out here and there.

“Hello? Um, sorry, I don’t have any roaches for you.”

A few beats of silence, then the creatures burst into chatter all at once, and the initially difficult comprehension became completely impossible.

Worried their host would be angry at him for upsetting the creatures, Harry turned to find Tom and Mr. Scamander come to a stop behind him, both watching him with a different kind of surprised expression.

“Er, sorry, I didn’t mean to slow you down, I was just... What are those?” he gestured to the general clutter.

“...Occamies,” said Mr. Scamander, looking thoughtful.

“Oh! We learned about Occamies in Care of Magical Creatures! I didn’t know they could talk, though.”

“They can’t... Unless...”

Meanwhile, Tom had been rubbing his eyes with his fingers, radiating exasperation. What was going on? Harry couldn’t think clearly with how loud the little bird-snakes were being... *snakes...*

Oh, bugger.

“Are you, by any chance, a Parselmouth?” The confusion on Mr. Scamander’s face was replaced by delight, he didn’t even need an answer – obviously, he must have just heard Harry hissing. “Wonderful, so Occamies do speak Parseltongue... I’ve been looking for someone to confirm that for years.”

Harry scratched the back of his neck, purposefully not looking at Tom. “Er, sort of. It’s like they have a heavy accent.”

“Oh, that makes sense, they’re not serpents entirely. Have you met any other serpentine beasts?” Mr. Scamander reached out for one of the watering cans and poured a blue-green creature onto his arm, suddenly bigger than should have fit into the space.

“...We have a Horned Serpent in the pond on Staffa.” At a still more exasperated look on Tom’s face, Harry quickly added, “Um, he’s really nice, he knows not to hurt anyone.” He supposed this was the best time to mention basilisks.

“A ‘really nice’ Horned Serpent, fascinating... I’m sorry, would you mind interpreting for me a bit?” Mr. Scamander asked hopefully.

“Sure,” Harry said just as the Occamy on the Magizoologist’s arm chirp-hissed and reclined its head. “Er, that was ‘Can mummy also speak with us now?’” he translated and shook his head at the creature. §No, but I can pass a message, if you want.§

The Occamy hissed back, and Harry chuckled, “She asked if you have more watering cans, because the others are always trying to steal hers.”

“Ah, that could be arranged for,” the older wizard stroked the scale-like feathers affectionately with his thumb. “...It would be greatly appreciated if we could stay in contact, Mr. Potter, magical serpents tend to get into trouble and end up here quite often.”

“Oh, I’d love to help!...And, er, one of my good friends adores magical beasts, even the dangerous ones – he raised an Acromantula in his fourth year and helps the groundskeeper at Hogwarts over the summer... He’s really inspired by your work, so, if you wouldn’t mind...”

“Not at all, feel free to bring him along, I don’t encounter kindred spirits very often.” Mr. Scamander smiled a bit sadly to himself and let the Occamy slip back into the container.

xXx

The success of Harry and Tom’s ventures to London put a cherry on top of the upcoming festivities. Them and Sarah hung their stocking on the dining room fireplace, Harry filled each with sweets and added new brushes and magical paints to Sarah’s. Him and Sarah spent the Christmas morning preparing the dinner while Tom got started on the quill enchantments.

The Christmas dinner itself was a peaceful affair, but since it was their first Christmas on Staffa – together in a home they built – it made Harry all warm and fuzzy.

He showed more potential residents around the island, took Sarah for a fun day in Diagon Alley, and before he knew it, it was the 31st of December. He had a big New Year’s Eve/Tom’s birthday party planned – the Knights, the volunteers, Sarah’s friends, Hagrid and the Potters were all invited.

After a chaotic morning of preparations, he went to meet Hagrid by the Three Broomsticks to Apparate him to the island as he wasn’t supposed to leave Hogwarts and him Flooing from the tavern (or doing pretty much anything else in Hogsmeade) would be easily noticeable.

Harry couldn’t wait to tell him all about their visit at Mr. Scamander’s and that he could come along for the next one. He wasn’t disappointed by Hagrid’s reaction – the half-giant gave him a full-giant hug, looking like he just got a lifetime of Christmas presents all at once.

“Yer an angel, Harry! Blimey, I can’ wait ter meet all the cuties! An’ Aragog’s caught his firs’ deer the other day, bless him, makin’ mummy so proud! ‘Twas a good idea ter move him,” Hagrid smiled fondly, eyes shining with tears.

“Yeah, uh, that’s great... I think Mr. Scamander mentioned a Nundu while we were there,” Harry couldn’t help the shiver that ran down his spine at the idea of being so close to the most dangerous beast alive.

“Brilliant, bet they’re nice kitties, jus’ need a bit o’ love, like everyone else,” Hagrid gushed.

Even though so many years separated this boy and the groundskeeper Harry had known, he felt like time hadn’t applied to Hagrid’s personality at all. His view might be a bit simplistic, but Merlin, wasn’t it true? Tom was the perfect example – one person, one act of forgiveness, one love were enough to turn a prospective terrorist into... Harry didn’t know what yet, but he was sure it would be amazing. He sort of felt like a spectator at this point, waiting for the new future to unravel before him.

He looked at Hagrid earnestly and laid a hand on his forearm. *Don’t ever change*, he wanted to say, but he settled for “You’ll make a *thumping good* Magizoologist, Hagrid.”

He Apparated them to Custodarium a second later and sat the half-giant in the common room with Sarah. More guests started arriving shortly after, Harry welcomed them, and before he knew it, the usually too-spacey house was pulsing with life.

“Tom’s not coming?” Fulcran asked at one point.

Indeed, the brunet was nowhere to be seen.

“He should be... I’ll go check,” Harry stood up and walked to their quarters.

Tom was there, standing by his desk with a wand in his hand.

“Hi, birthday boy, um, people are here and asking about you... What are you doing?” Harry said.

Tom turned to face him with the most self-satisfied grin Harry had seen on him. “Giving myself the first birthday gift.”

On the desk laid an open book with a quill furiously scribbling in it. Harry stepped closer so he could read the text in Tom’s neat cursive.

31 December 1944 – 20 eggs.....7 Knuts

31 December 1944 – 5 loafs of bread.....18 Knuts

31 December 1944 – 2 sets of bed linen.....10 Sickles

Before Harry could ask, Tom touched it with the tip of his wand. “*Show me what’s most precious.*”

The ink sunk into the parchment, then bled back, taking a new form.

12 June 1928 – Timothy Baldwin (53.3648686, -6.2597230)

26 June 1928 – *Alima Shafiq* (56.4389310, -6.3405668)

1 July 1928 – *Alphonsus Parkinson* (52.2202997, 0.1400257)

Some of the numbers in the brackets kept changing.

“Are those... coordinates?”

Tom nodded proudly. “A map would have been inconvenient, addresses too vague; this is my solution.”

“It’s genius,” Harry smiled and pulled Tom, whose face was glowing with an unsaid *I know*, for a kiss. The taller wizard hooked his fingers on the back of Harry’s neck, running them along his hairline and deepening the kiss. That smug tosser knew perfectly well how quickly it always made Harry melt. And hell, when Tom nipped on the skin under his ear like that...

“O-oi! I was supposed to bring you to the common room, not to deprive the guests of both of their hosts,” he protested a little breathlessly.

“They have Sarah,” Tom muttered dismissively, resting their foreheads together, his lips so close they brushed Harry’s when he spoke.

It took all of Harry’s resolve to counter, “Right, and they also have Fleamont. Wanna bet what he’ll joke about if we’re gone for too long?”

Tom sighed, but he pulled away in surrender, giving Harry a couple of seconds to catch his breath before they left to join the party.

Fleamont fortunately didn’t comment on their prolonged absence, he was just happy to have an audience for his anecdotes, and the Knights were happy to be the audience. Sarah and her friends were happy to be partying with the cool kids – everyone was happy, and Harry’s greatest New Year’s resolution was to always keep it that way.

Chapter 23

The morning mail arrived as usual on Wednesday the 31st of January 1945, leaving Tom with an impatiently anticipated letter in his hands. Naturally, he hadn't procrastinated on the correspondence with the Minister, sending him his elegantly phrased wishes of a happy New Year together with a proposition regarding the details of the Custodarium-Ministry cooperation.

He'd consulted the matter with Aaron Morgenstern (now a Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Law Division junior employee) at the party – the magical laws of child custody were rather simplistic: in short, custody could be passed between parents, godparents or immediate relatives freely, the authorities only interfered in the event of disputes. If a child's legal guardian died or proved unfit to raise it, their custody would fall upon the next eligible candidate. If no eligible candidate was available, the case was to be "handled individually". There were laws to protect an orphaned child's inheritance, not as much the child itself. Until they started Hogwarts, the Ministry had no way of checking up on the children.

In his letter to Minister Spencer-Moon, Tom proposed a system of child protection with the Custodarium staff as the executive power. They would check up on every "known" (source of that knowledge left unspecified) magical child's wellbeing at least once a year. If they detected unsuitable conditions, they would report to the Ministry of Magic and apply for a custody transfer. If the Ministry came upon an uncared-for magical or Squib child, it could temporarily or permanently leave it in Custodarium's care.

Additionally, any minor ought to have the right to seek refuge at Custodarium of their own volition, regardless of their family status. In such events, Tom requested for a new sort of protective custody to be established, so that the staff could legally handle the child until the situation resolved itself in their jurisdiction.

The demands were daring, but he'd phrased them carefully and explained the reasoning behind each of them to make them difficult to dispute. There was also one strong argument in their favour – the bill would shed positive light on the Ministry without it costing them a Knut.

Despite knowing that, Tom still felt a touch nervous as he opened the envelope – this was direct correspondence with the Minister of Magic, after all, and a crucial point to his plans.

Dear Mr. Riddle,

thank you for your letter, your initiative is most meritorious. I have considered your propositions and found no reason to demur. I shall present a bill to the Wizengamot as soon as possible in high hopes of it coming into force before your facility starts operation in June.

I am looking forward to our future cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

Leonard Spencer-Moon

Minister of Magic

That wasn't too bad, Tom thought in satisfaction.

"-serious?"

"No way!"

"-a shame... so handsome."

He glanced up from the letter to see a group of fifth year Ravenclaw girls look away in a hurry. Alarming, they weren't the only ones staring – there was an ominous hum of murmurs, mostly in female voices, throughout the Great Hall, heads turning in his direction.

Walburga Black, a pretentious classmate who used to have a very annoying crush on Tom in third year but washed her hands off him after the incident with Malfoy, gasped loudly and hastily passed a magazine to Christopher Nott and his friends on the farther, blood-purist side of the Slytherin table. They seemed awfully pleased about something, laughing and whispering to each other conspiratorially. Finally, they stood up and made for the door, pausing by the spot where Harry and Tom had been sitting. The Hall grew almost completely silent in anticipation.

"And here we were wondering how you'd convinced Potter to buy you an island," Nott spat, a haughty smirk on his face. "Never guessed you were *this* resourceful."

Tom turned to face him while Harry looked up from his scrambled eggs, confused.

"What's this about, Christopher?" Tom said, keeping his tone and expression neutral with the whole school watching.

Nott lowered his voice to make sure it didn't reach the head table, but the students in their vicinity heard it. "It's about you bending over for your rich blood traitor boyfriend, sugar boy." He savoured the gasps that comment had earned, then continued more loudly, "You're a disgrace to all of Slytherin."

Tom was quite stunned by the open attack, first horror, then anger washing over him, but he still had the presence of mind to catch Harry, who was about to go full Gryffindor and probably hex the motherfucker on the spot, by the arm.

As much as Tom would love nothing more, he realised this situation required careful handling – the sight of Harry forced him to cool his head; he needed to protect this person and he had to do it right.

Nott's group meanwhile made for the door, the rest of them uttering "Disgusting faggots," and "Poofers," as they walked by. Harry's face was pale and torn between shock, anger and mortification.

Tom closed his eyes for a second to gather his thoughts, then took a look around. One fifth year Slytherin girl nearby was sitting quite awkwardly with her hands beneath the table, it was as good a bet as any.

“Can someone please pass me the thing? Filomena?”

The girl started at being singled out, but she obediently handed him her copy of Witch Weekly.

Britain's young favourites favour each other!? Tom Riddle and Harry Potter's secret love revealed!

The article was mostly twisting what they'd said publicly before and speculation, the only new information being that they'd reportedly lived together in Custodarium. There was a photo of them sharing a smile and another of them walking to the greenhouses rather close to each other and laughing about something. All in all, there was no proof, but that only made Tom feel more gutted, because it didn't matter.

If they denied it now, they'd look like idiots once they actually decided to come out – the reputation of a private person or outright liar never did anyone's political career any good.

He forced a chuckle and turned to Harry, saying as casually as possible, “Took them long enough, eh?”

Everyone was staring at him with wide eyes, Harry included.

Then the Hall burst into excited chatter. Tom used the opportunity to murmur, “It will be best to play it cool, like we weren't trying too hard to keep it a secret, just not flaunting it.”

xXx

Harry barely had enough time to process the instruction and nod minutely before the assault of questions started.

“Since when?”

“You're gay?!”

“How did it happen?”

“Why haven't you told us, mate?” said Dalamar, the only source Harry could pinpoint since he was sitting directly to his left.

“Er, you never asked,” he offered uselessly. “Look, um, sorry, we didn't want to make you uncomfortable since we room together and all.”

“Oh! Ohhh, have you, you know, while we were sleeping...”

“No! I mean, er-” Bollocks, how was he supposed to answer that with a straight face? Especially since he could hear someone yelling “WHO'S THE TOP!?” and “PROOF OR IT

DIDN'T HAPPEN!" from another table, probably Gryffindor.

"Nothing of the sort, Dal, I promise," Tom came to the rescue with an effortless lie. Harry wished he had that kind of self-control.

"Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" group of students started chanting and Harry felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment.

Someone at the head table moved to interfere, but halted when Tom stood up, facing the Hall with his hand raised palm forward, obviously waiting for the students to quiet down. He had the other hand in his pocket – on his wand, Harry realised, and it had the familiar shake to it.

"Let's be civilised about this, friends. Yes, Harry and I have been romantically involved for about a year and making decisions as a couple. No, I assure you nothing inappropriate has been happening between us at Hogwarts. We are all witches and wizards here, I believe we are above Muggle prejudices, but if anyone has a relevant concern to voice, please do so now." The challenge in his words didn't transcend into his voice – his tone was even and conciliatory.

He waited for a few beats of silence to pass, then continued with a cordial smile. "Very well, let's consider this sorted and eat our breakfast in peace."

He sat down again and went back to eating his porridge like nothing of import happened. The Great Hall gradually returned to just slightly above its usual level of chatter, some professors were nodding in approval.

"Wow," Harry exhaled. "That was..." *Scary. Brilliant. Impressive. I love you.*

"Just an emergency measure, Harry, don't let your guard down," Tom finished instead.

"Oh." Of course it couldn't be that simple for Harry Potter, he should have been used to it by now.

The Slytherin part of the Knights had been exchanging looks awkwardly, the unsaid "*Did you know?*" hanging in the air. Some, like Dalamar and Clarence, wore a smug expression, others, like Fulcran, a confused one.

"So, congratulations," Clarence offered.

"Congratulations," more people joined in.

"I'd never guess you fancied blokes," Fulcran mused.

"That's because you're thick, Ful. I had my suspicions since summer," Dalamar retorted.

"Me too," said Clarence. "Does your uncle know, Harry?"

"Er, yeah, he sort of guessed," Harry admitted, scratching the back of his neck.

"See? It's the way they look at each other sometimes! I bet Sarah knows, too."

Harry turned to glance in her direction. The fourth-year Ravenclaw looked crestfallen.

“I’m so sorry!” she told them, teary-eyed, when she caught up with them while they were walking from breakfast. “My friends kept asking about you, so I told them you live at Custodarium together, um, I didn’t think it would spread and people would assume...”

“Er, it’s alright, we were planning to go official after Hogwarts anyway,” Harry said soothingly.

“But...”

“As Harry says. You don’t have a problem with it, do you?” asked Tom.

“No, no! I’m really happy for you!” the girl squeaked hurriedly.

“Then don’t worry about it, we had to deal with it sooner or later.”

‘Later’ would have been much preferred, though. This was a terrible timing – the article about the revelation of their relationship came out in the Daily Prophet two days later, in the same issue as the announcement of Minister Spencer-Moon’s law proposition.

Unsurprisingly, they were faced with a shitstorm from the pure-blood party. Harry and Tom had both received a few strongly worded letters, and a number of politicians expressed their concern over the moral development of children entrusted to individuals with such “questionable lifestyle choices”.

Fulcran got a letter, too – from his father. To protect the family honour, he was rather uncompromisingly instructed to stop associating with the “swarm of freaks”. Admittedly, that was rather hard to do when his room was full of them, so it wasn’t much of a concern for now. The real washout was that he was going to directly oppose the bill and would recommend his associates to do the same.

It seemed less likely that the bill would be passed than not, they could only thank Merlin that the Minister was a decent man and hadn’t withdrawn the proposition in the first place. There was nothing they could do to shift the odds, and it was bloody frustrating – Tom did his best to hold his head high through it all, but Harry knew the uncertainty had been eating away at him.

At least no one had been stupid enough to try and hex them. Harry could live with the occasional “faggot” or “sissy” by the bigoted minority, although he had to admit the slurs still stung just a bit, no matter who they came from. He didn’t really get a choice in the matter, did he?

What hurt him more were the cautious glances in the locker room after Quidditch practice and the ever-present whispers or giggles from the more tolerant part of the students, his friends. Literally nothing had changed, he hated how people started treating him differently overnight just because they’d learned whom he dated. Would Ron have been like this? Neville? Seamus? Damn, he missed them...

But as they say, there was something good in everything bad. A couple of other students gained the courage to come out, too, after the revelation, and Harry had caught more watching him and Tom with a wistful expression he'd imagine for someone coming to terms with who they are or building resolve.

He realised they'd become an inspiration to the other queer kids at Hogwarts. Ironically, the pure-bloods from the most traditional families and the Muggle-borns they hated shared the burden of a homophobic family background, Harry couldn't imagine how hard it must have been for them to be gay. The Dursleys had been homophobic as hell, of course, but he never liked them and was glad for every "fuck you" to their pretentious suburban lifestyle – these kids probably loved their parents and struggled with the idea of disappointing them.

He imagined being raised in a loving but strictly religious family, then finding out he was a wizard *and* gay. Shit, they really had to start checking up on the magical children as soon as possible, law or no law.

Chapter 24

It was Friday, the 11th of March – exactly eight days until the designated legislative assembly date, and things weren't looking good. Malfoy, Nott, Lestrange and some other families of considerable influence had been pulling votes against the Custodarium bill – the purists would have voted against anyway just because of Harry and Tom's open pro-Muggle-born stance, but the same-sex couple issue gave them leverage to sway other non-purist-but-bigoted representatives to their side.

It was time to face the eventualities: If the bill wasn't passed, Custodarium's remits would be very restricted – they could only get custody if the previous legal guardian willingly transferred it to them, or if a child was left at their doorstep. Otherwise it would be up to whoever handled the orphan's case whether they placed the child in Custodarium instead of another (Muggle) facility.

That, they could hopefully work their way around; what really sucked was that Custodarium wouldn't be authorised to protect minors from their abusive families – they wouldn't have the right to keep children from their legal guardians. Harry was trying to stay positive, but...

"...and if you just remember this one concept, you can't have a problem with animal-to-animal transfigurations in your N.E.W.T.s. That will be all for today, good work and see you next week," said Dumbledore, concluding his lesson. Students began putting away their textbooks to head to lunch. The professor walked over to Harry's desk by the window and asked in a lower voice, "Mr. Potter, may I have a word?"

Harry gestured to his classmates to indicate he'd catch up with them later and waited for the professor to continue. There had been another Grindelwald attack in Hungary a few days ago, and Dumbledore, trying and failing to hide his misery (at least from Harry) over the last couple of months, always withered away a little more at such news. He was in his sixties and bound to live to at least one hundred and twenty, but he seemed to be ageing at least one year a week lately – maybe he'd age in advance from the strain and wait for time to catch up later?

The older wizard didn't say anything else until the other students cleared off the classroom. Instead, he went to the teacher's desk and retrieved something from the top drawer.

It was candy, in a classic Dumbledore fashion. He unwrapped one for himself and presented another to Harry. "Toffee Éclair?" he offered.

"No, sir, thank you," Harry declined politely. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Ah, straight to the point – I wonder, not for the first time, how you ended up in Horace's house instead of mine. Quite the loss, I'd say, I've only been hearing commendable things about you."

Harry didn't feel comfortable getting complimented, but he was glad to see Dumbledore's eyes still had their characteristic twinkle.

“Most notably, your generosity... If you don’t mind an old man’s nosiness, I couldn’t quite put my finger on why you’d offer the extra space on your island for free – won’t you need money to run your orphanage?”

“Er, we have enough savings to run it for a while, we just thought it would be nice if many people moved in,” Harry explained gingerly.

Dumbledore nodded, “By all means, having a community is always nice... but I’m sure there were plots in Hogsmeade or other wizarding settlements available. Why choose a deserted island?”

Harry was beginning to understand what the professor had been up to, but since this was Dumbledore, the man who’d protected so many secrets over his long life, he thought it wouldn’t hurt to be open with him.

“We’ve been hoping to start a new wizarding settlement in a safer location,” he answered honestly.

Dumbledore’s eyebrows shot up. “A safer location?”

“Yeah, more secluded from Muggles, easier to keep hidden. Muggle technology’s been developing so fast, we’re just worried it will become harder to protect the Statute of Secrecy in places like Diagon Alley,” Harry explained, hoping the professor would take to it kindly.

Dumbledore kept his face thoughtful and neutral. “I see... You don’t think confronting Muggles would be a good idea?”

“No! I think it would be a disaster!” Harry felt a small pang of dejection at the implication that *Albus Dumbledore* would suspect him of supremacism.

The professor gave him a genuine smile and chased the feeling away. “Thank you for your honesty, Mr. Potter, I think I understand perfectly now. I’ll see what can be done for a certain bill you’ve no doubt been following closely – I believe I have a few favours to collect in the Wizengamot.”

“Wow, um, thank you, Professor!” Harry stammered quickly, taken by surprise at the open support and the surge of nostalgic affection for the man who’d been like a grandfather to him in his original timeline.

“Oh no, Mr. Potter... Harry, if I may. I should be thanking you for succeeding where I couldn’t.” His smile stayed, but his face suddenly appeared forlorn, his gaze distant. “Many years ago, I couldn’t save a friend,” he started, the small hesitation before the word “friend” making Harry wonder if they had more in common in terms of relationships with budding dark lords than he’d previously thought.

“A very bright wizard, but with too much darkness in his heart. I must admit, as I got to know Mr. Riddle more, I was afraid I’d be forced to watch the history repeat itself... I’m very glad to see I was wrong.”

Well, Harry was literally watching the past repeat itself, and bugger, he wanted to give Dumbledore a hug so badly. It would be weird, wouldn't it? He just couldn't help but remember the fragile old man from the Inferi cave, still haunted by the shadows of his past, and wish there was something, anything, he could do to prevent Dumbledore from becoming like that.

He would probably regret his words later, but he had to try.

"I'm sorry it was too late for your friend, Professor, I...I know what that's like. Sometimes we can't save a loved one no matter how hard we wish we could, and sometimes the best thing we can do for them is to stand up to them, isn't it? Beating yourself up wouldn't do any good," Harry said, phrasing his thoughts carefully not to rise suspicion but sincerely, praying it didn't come out wrong.

Dumbledore's smile slipped off his face completely, his expression grew serious and pensive. He turned away to look out of the window instead, absently gazing at something in the distance.

"Indeed..." he mumbled, then cleared his throat and continued in a louder voice. "I shall not waste any more of your time, Harry... In fact, I just remembered I have somewhere to be as well."

Harry had a feeling he wasn't referring to lunch and suddenly grew worried he'd disrupted one of the good bits of the timeline, but the damage was done.

"Oh. Sure." He made for the door, but he stopped with a hand on the handle. "Um, I know this will sound strange, but if you ever need anything, or just, you know, talk, I'll be happy to help."

Merlin, it sounded even weirded now that he'd said it – this was a student reaching out to a professor forty years his senior, whom he didn't even have a close relationship with, but Harry really needed to say it.

Dumbledore turned to look at him again, eyes shining and voice filled with unusual solemnity as he said, "Thank you."

Harry just nodded and slipped out of the door, heart leaping and aching at the same time.

Tom was waiting for him by the classroom door.

"What did he want?"

"He... asked some questions and offered his support of the bill. He just needed to be sure about our intentions, I guess," Harry smiled, at last remembering to be happy about the turn of events.

Tom frowned. "And you told him explicitly?"

"Yeah... I mean, it's Dumbledore, he's on our side."

Tom hummed noncommittally in response – not something Harry was used to from him.

“You don’t like him much, do you?” he asked as they started walking to the Charms classroom.

“No, I can’t say I do,” Tom admitted.

Why though? Since the Chamber of Secrets fiasco hadn’t come to pass and Dumbledore hadn’t refused Tom the position of Defence professor, Tom shouldn’t have had much of a problem with the professor yet. Except maybe...

“Because he knows... how you were before you came here?”

Tom pondered his answer for a moment. “That, too,” he said eventually, “I made it a point to make everyone like me, all the staff and the students, but Dumbledore always gave me the chills, like he never fell for it. I was also bitter with him, because I thought at first that he would take me to the wizarding world and never send me back to that Muggle place... but he didn’t say anything to help me, not even when the bombings began.

“Instead, he talked to me privately during the first few years, asking pointless questions and going on about love, friendship, light and dark...

“That’s my main problem with him: I hate hypocrisy.” Tom’s frown deepened uncharacteristically for his usually measured self – he must have felt exceptionally strongly about this matter, Harry thought. “He acts like he’s Godric Gryffindor himself, preaching righteousness, valour and all that nonsense, condemns the war in Europe, but when the whole world begs him to stand up to Grindelwald, he stalls like a fucking coward while dozens of others die.”

Harry gave him a sympathetic look. He could see where Tom was coming from – twisted as Lord Voldemort’s beliefs were, he had to give it to him that he’d pursued them relentlessly, unlike Dumbledore who rarely interfered directly.

“After what we’ve had... could you fight me, if I did something you hated? To death?” Harry asked softly.

Tom met his eyes, obviously confused. “What?”

“Just answer.”

“No,” he said, “Maybe... I don’t know, it’s hard to imagine.” Then he inhaled sharply. “Wait, are you suggesting that Dumbledore and...”

Harry quickly checked their surroundings for any accidental witnesses, then nodded. “I think they used to be... like us, or at least very close friends. They went their separate ways after a terrible accident, it has a lot to do with why Professor Dumbledore has been avoiding the re-encounter. I can only imagine how hard this must be on him, so,” Harry looked at Tom pleadingly, “don’t hate him too much, yeah?”

Tom processed the new information silently for a few moments.

“I love you,” he said so seriously and out of the blue it startled Harry – Tom normally wasn’t one for spontaneous declarations of affection, less still in public. “You’re the most noble goddamn person I’ve ever met, and I normally hate that in people, but not in you... you’re perfect like that.”

Harry felt a happy kind of blush creep up his neck and wondered if he could get away with a kiss, now that everyone knew anyway. Not wanting to risk more trouble for them, he snaked his fingers through Tom’s instead.

“You know, he actually thanked me for getting through to you. I think he cares, he just didn’t know how best to help.”

He squeezed Tom’s hand, then let go, feeling a bit too exposed and out of the place. This would take some getting used to, or perhaps he simply wasn’t the type for public displays of affection either.

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Dumbledore arrived at lunch late and with a broody expression. More worryingly, he hadn’t shown up for dinner or any of Saturday’s meals at all.

Harry was growing very anxious. What if he’d gone after Grindelwald and lost? The famous duel was meant to happen in June, he remembered that much from his History of Magic O.W.L. materials and Rita Skeeter’s blasted book, but he had no idea how much had Dumbledore been involved in the war prior to that.

“Hey,” Tom’s soothing voice snapped him out of his musing as he snatched Harry’s Charms textbook out of his hands and dropped it on the bedside table. They had the room to themselves, Harry realised – last he’d known, Dalamar was still sitting at his desk.

“You haven’t turned the page for at least half an hour,” Tom observed as he sat down beside Harry and pulled him against his side. His body heat and the light smell of his cologne were two Harry’s favourite things on Earth, he quickly found himself relaxing into him, though the knot in his stomach was still perceptible.

He rubbed his eyes with his fingers tiredly, noticing his head was starting to hurt, too.

“Merlin, I’m such an idiot,” he sighed. “I just wanted to comfort him a bit! What if he gets hurt because I couldn’t keep my mouth shut, or worse...”

And wouldn’t that make his little “sometimes we can’t save a loved one” speech morbidly true?

“He won’t,” Tom assured him.

Harry shook his head. “You don’t know that.”

“No, I don’t, I was trying to comfort *you* for a change.”

Harry snorted humourlessly, “Now we just need Dumbledore to comfort you and we’ll go a full circle.”

He was half expecting an indignant counter, but Tom merely buried his face in Harry's mess of a hair and laid a light kiss there. "See, he can't lose, he has a circle to close."

The warm intimacy of that gesture finally managed to make Harry feel a little calmer.

"Besides, we could beat Grindelwald ourselves, if it came to it. Just imagine: 'the most terrible Dark Lord in history, Marmot Dildo Lover, and his famous defeater, Harry Poofster, join forces'; Grindelwald wouldn't stand a chance."

Harry laughed almost involuntarily, "You're bloody impossible! There's so much wrong with that joke, I can't even begin to name it!"

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with it as long as it makes you laugh," Tom retorted smugly and leant sideways to kiss Harry on the lips – undeniably the most effective means of distraction.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Thank Merlin, Morgana and every god Harry knew – Dumbledore didn't lose! He won as spectacularly as the first time around, "*The Greatest Duel of All Time!*", the Sunday morning paper read as an excited buzz filled the Great Hall. There was a celebratory feast that evening with Headmaster Dippet's solemn opening speech and everything – Hogsmeade, too, flashed with fireworks once or twice.

Harry's shoulders slumped in relief the moment he saw the headline, practically feeling the large boulder of suspense rolling off them. He floated through the rest of the day in an elated daze.

The professor returned to Hogwarts for the next morning's breakfast to an enthusiastic applause from the student body. He looked tired, but lighter, finally rid of the burden of the last Merlin-knows-how-many years. When his eyes found Harry in the crowd, he gave the young wizard a grateful smile.

It didn't occur to Harry until much later that his unintentional, risky intervention probably saved the wizarding world three of the most turbulent months of the Global War – he didn't know the details, but there must have been a drastic event that had finally roused Dumbledore to action in the original timeline. This time, it seemed Harry's rashness had saved a number of lives.

...And a number of complications for Custodarium, as it turned out. They got the leave to go watch the legislative assembly on Saturday. Dumbledore opened the issue with a very supportive speech; no one wanted to get on his bad side now that he was almost universally worshipped by the public, so the bill was passed with an overwhelming majority.

News of the event were printed in the Daily Prophet, but they faded into the background of all the war repercussions, Acolyte hunts, re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Germany and Austria,...

It was high time for a bit of peace, too – with two months remaining until their N.E.W.T.s, Harry and Tom were glad they could finally concentrate on the preparations... Well, as glad as teenagers could be to study.

The exam drill had been interrupted only by a (victorious) Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, and before they knew it, the first weeks of exams was around the corner.

Harry hadn't found it odd to be so calm during his O.W.L.s last year, he'd already sat his them once, but he found himself similarly lacking in nervousness this year as well – perhaps because he didn't have to worry about not being accepted into the Aurors, although he still wanted to get good results since they were under the constant scrutiny of the public eye, judging whether they would be good role-models for the children entrusted to them.

It just all felt so... *unimportant*. Harry supposed war does that to a person, sorts your priorities – as long as you're alive and well, you can always figure something out.

Tom was actually a bit nervous, not that anyone but Harry could tell. Then again, he had far more appearances to keep; Harry had been a good student ever since he came to Hogwarts in September 1943, but he never strove for impeccability. Tom, on the other hand, had been all Outstandings, had everyone looking up to him and a prestigious job offer to boot – that was a lot of pressure even for a cool head like his.

They somehow made it through the Nastily Exhausting two weeks with their sanity intact. It was a strange feeling to finally graduate, two years later than Harry should have. He was sad to leave Hogwarts behind, but he felt ripe – at last he had a future he was looking forward to.

There still were some classes for seventh years while they waited for the results of their exams, but they mostly consisted of useful tips for their adult lives or introductions to more advanced, academic fields of expertise. As promised, Tom dealt with the basilisk that week, harvesting the hide and using the Cloak of Invisibility to smuggle it out of the castle in pieces.

The results arrived on the third June Wednesday; unsurprisingly, Tom got Os in all seven of his subjects: Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Defence, Ancient Runes, Herbology and Arithmancy. Harry got Os in Defence, Charms and Transfiguration, Es in Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures and Potions.

All that was left to do was to get on the boat – literally.

Forty-eight figures in black robes and hats boarded the boats they'd arrived in seven years ago (well, nine years ago for some) and, to the cheers of their younger classmates, set sail for the other side of the Black Lake. Hogwarts wasn't a dark silhouette like the first time around – it was shining in the warm afternoon sun like a proud mother waving them goodbye.

Harry clutched Tom's hand the whole ride.

xXx

Tom stepped out of the fireplace and proceeded to the entrance hall. As soon as he closed the door of the Floo room, he nearly had his breath knocked out of him by the force of Harry's body.

"So? How'd it go?" he asked excitedly, holding his lover in a tight embrace.

"Good," Tom beamed. "You're officially speaking with an Unspeakable."

Harry released his hold and beamed right back. "Wicked! What will you be researching?"

"Whatever they need me to at the moment; a bit of everything. Once I prove myself, I should be able to conduct my own research and have access to the more obscure areas of the Department of Mysteries."

"Oh, what do you want to research, then?"

Tom snaked a hand into Harry's black locks and played with them casually. "...Time; to find out what gave you to me. Minds; to understand how people function. Universe; because it sounds cool," he finished, causing Harry to snicker. "How was the interpreting?"

"Brilliant! I mean, Runespoors are creepy, but you should have seen Hagrid's face! He looked like he would pass out when Mr. Scamander said he could feed the Swooping Evil!"

"Don't they eat brains?"

Harry shivered in Tom's arms. "Ugh, don't remind me... Hey, wanna see the Augurey chicks? Mr. Scamander named them Rosie and Daisy, they're really cute!"

Since Tom would mostly be inventing and creating gadgets for a while, he wouldn't need to spend much time at the Ministry, but he would have to build himself the cave workshop – that wasn't a negative point, he'd been looking forward to it.

Staffa was blooming, both figuratively and literally. There were twelve houses in various stages of completion, four already inhabited, and a charming sea-viewing spot reserved for the Pebblestones until Clarence and Claire saved enough money to build a house there.

Tom had spent the last weeks researching Muggle-Repelling Charms and illusions – his next step towards the perfect wizarding oasis. How best to hide an island of thirty acres? He'd considered the Fidelius Charm, since he was already familiar with it – it would be the perfect protection against Muggles, but it would complicate the access for witches and wizards too much.

Illusion it was, then. He'd look into space alterations later to hide the island the same way Diagon Alley was hidden; the magic was too complex for him to cast haphazardly and Staffa needed protection now – an illusion of an unwelcoming piece of rock and a strong Muggle-Repelling Charm would have to do.

Custodarium currently housed Sarah and two other Hogwarts-aged minors who had decided to join her, a twelve-year-old orphan called Perseus Cattermole, and a fifteen-year-old Muggle-born witch called Mary Hazelton, who chose their care over her abusive father's.

Their first Ministry-assigned orphan arrived the second week of July: Nona McBean, a baby girl of only two years. As expected, the Minister made it into a media event, delivering the toddler to their doorstep himself with a Daily Prophet photographer in tow (not that Tom hated the positive press).

Harry looked nervous about the whole deal, maintaining a stiff smile all the while until the delegation left. Then he tentatively crouched by baby's carrier basket.

"Um, hi?" he said softly.

The two studied each other curiously for a few moments before the girl reached up and grabbed Harry's nose, letting out a triumphant squeal. Tom watched the scene with amusement; he found it strangely adorable.

“Oi, I’m gonna steal your nose if you steal mine!” Harry mock-pouted and made good on his threat by doing that silly “I’ve got your nose!” thing. Nona laughed out, then something behind Harry’s shoulder caught her attention and she reached out excitedly. Harry obediently picked her up and walked over to the object of her fascination.

“The cleaning broom’s that interesting, eh? Wait ‘till you see all the wicked toys that are waiting for you upstairs.” He watched patiently as her little fingers sifted through the bristles.

Tom stepped closer and ran his palm down Harry’s back and resting on his hip.

“You’re good at this,” he whispered.

Harry chuckled, “Holding a baby’s not rocket science... See for yourself.”

“Rocket wha-”

Before Tom could protest, he had his hands full of the tiny human... who didn’t seem to mind as long as she could continue exploring the broom.

It was bizarre. This little thing in his arms, barely more than a helpless animal, would turn into a real, full-grown person... under *his* care, no less.

“She’s... soft,” he observed. The toddler trained her big blue eyes on the source of the unfamiliar voice. Her brows furrowed and Tom felt something dangerously close to panic rise in his stomach. He shot Harry an alarmed look.

Harry was still smiling widely. “You’re doing fine, just talk to her.”

“...Hello, Beanie,” he said, feeling decidedly silly, but the girl tilted her head curiously, so he kept on, “Welcome to Custodarium, it’s this really cool place with lots of cool toys. That’s Harry, and I’m Tom, we’ll be your...” caretakers? “*dads* while you stay here.”

Harry let out a surprised laugh, and Tom felt his face heat up for the first time in years. “Beanie” continued to watch them with interest.

“Gosh, you’re so cute! Did you just call her- did you just call us-”

Red-faced, Tom did the only thing he knew was guaranteed to shut Harry up, and conveniently thrust the baby back to his arms as he kissed him.

Harry, still grinning, turned to her. “Well, come on, Beanie, let’s introduce you to the rest of the family.”

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The basilisk hide sold for so much they wouldn’t have to worry about operation expenses, or any expenses at all, for years. Tom insisted on getting a couple of House-elves, and Harry begrudgingly admitted that they were one more toddler away from not not being able to keep up with the chores and the older kids. (Sorry, Hermione.)

That's how Panpy (male), Mimmy and Kipsy (females) found themselves in Custodarium – to them, a whole different planet. Harry welcomed them warmly, showed the wide-eyed threesome around the house and to their room in the attic, complete with neat, elf-sized beds and “scraps” of fabric (actually just fabric for them to make clothes from, since he couldn't give them any the normal way). He asked them about their past duties and if they had any particular chores they liked to do, ordered them to rest whenever they needed to and instructed them to use as much magic as they liked to complete their tasks.

They reminded him of Dobby and Winky – damn, he'd have to find a way to trick the Malfoys out of their elf one of these days. Not right now, though, Dobby probably wasn't even born yet, and Harry had his hands full with more immediate matters.

In early August, the news of the horrors which took place in Hiroshima and Nagasaki reached the Daily Prophet, the atomic cloud in the magical photo captured clearer and more ominous than Harry had ever seen it on Muggle TV.

Why oh why had he not remembered the dates? Could he have done anything to prevent the atomic bombing? Would he even have been right to prevent it? He squeezed his eyes shut, took a sip of his strong tea and desperately tried to chase the thoughts away.

When he relayed his worries to Tom that evening, the younger wizard assured him none of those lost lives would be in vain. Effects on the Muggle world aside, Tom used the event to write a very pacifistic statement for the Daily Prophet – he wanted to get an International Portkey and visit the bombing sites himself to add credibility to his words, but Harry (possibly having the best understanding of how radioactivity worked and affected the human body of all the people in the current world) quickly talked him out of it.

The statement was printed two days later alongside other reactions of prominent witches and wizards:

We are deeply saddened by the recent tragedies in Japan, and the Muggle World War in general. Let this be a wake-up call to our whole community: Muggles are not to be taken lightly or ridiculed, both in their suffering and their power. We cannot, and should not, aspire to confront them at this point, nor should we hold them in contempt.

Instead, let us learn from their mistakes and successes, keep up with them, hoping the day will come when both of our worlds are ready to reunite in peace. Our hearts go to the victims, magical and non-magical alike, and while we admittedly cannot help the latter, our doors are always open to those in need.

– Tom M. Riddle and Harry Potter, Custodarium representatives

Chapter End Notes

The final chapter will be out tomorrow! Happy New Year everyone!

Chapter 26

Harry and Tom went to see the older kids off to the King's Cross Station. It was surprisingly emotional – the teenagers got them small gifts, thanked them for what they did for them over the summer and gave them a big ol' group hug. Harry actually let a tear fall at that.

It felt like what they did mattered. It felt like a family.

They still had a lot on their hands; Harry with Beanie and two other younger children who'd arrived in Custodarium in August, Tom with his work for the Department of Mysteries, his private projects around the island and also the kids, but they managed to find time to start their magical children check-ups.

The system had taken a while to smooth around the edges. One issue was the efficiency of travel: they couldn't Apparate knowing only the coordinates, so the most convenient means of transportation was by a Portkey, but they couldn't have one made beforehand as the position of the child often changed by miles in the meantime. They could make themselves one, but that was tricky – Portkey-making was restricted and the maker had to be sure it wouldn't land in the middle of a busy street or on someone's head.

Tom discussed the issue discreetly with the Minister and negotiated an acceptable solution. A special map of daytime Portkey-friendly spots would be commissioned for them with 99 % of the British population living within a two-mile radius of at least one of the spots. They'd be granted a permission to create Portkeys to these spots for themselves, Custodarium-related use only.

It also didn't seem right to dump the children already in their care on the house-elves on an almost daily basis, so they started exploring the option of hiring more wizarding staff. First to cross the mind were the Knights of Walpurgis, so Harry owed those who seemed eligible.

Willow Miller, a Hufflepuff Knight and a close friend of Claire Jenkins, joined them in late September. She was a warm and pragmatic lass, good with kids since she'd always taken care of her two younger siblings. She'd travelled around a bit after graduation and recently returned to Britain, about to start looking for a job, so their offer came at the best possible time.

Their next addition was Linda Abbot, a witch in her fifties and a great-aunt to Hannah Abbot from Harry's original Hogwarts year. Her husband died early from a heart disease, and she was an empty-nester, so she came to work for them on Fleamont's recommendation. She used to make living as a tutor and agreed to be in charge of elementary education for the children aged 6-11.

Once the practicalities had been sorted, they had to figure out how to go about the check-up itself. Psychology wasn't as systematic or widespread then as it would be in the 1990s, but Harry and Tom arguably had unprecedented methods at their disposition, so they could get a bit more creative than any Muggle psychologists anyway.

They stocked up on Polyjuice potion, and Tom approached each magical child in the body of their peer when he found (or Harry created) an opportunity to have a private talk, chatting them up about how things were at home, watching for any red flags, sometimes through Legilimency. If he picked up on anything, they would return and investigate further.

By December, they'd found four young children living in unsuitable conditions – one in a Muggle orphanage, one in the streets of the post-war London, one from a family with an abusive father, and one from an orthodoxly religious Liverpool family who treated him as if he'd been possessed by the devil.

The first two mentioned, Natalie and Jack, had been taken to Custodarium right away, there was no reason to delay. It was the other two who proved to be a real challenge for their abilities and their relationship as a couple.

Tom was for the brutally pragmatical approach of simply Obliviating everyone and taking the child in. Harry thought that was too harsh, and that if there was any chance for a child to live with its family, it should be explored.

They ended up compromising: plans A would be according to Harry, plans B according to Tom.

Jane Cobbs, the neglected six-year-old girl with an alcoholic father, just wished for the man to leave her and her mummy alone. They were a poor rural family from a village near Southampton. One day, not long before Christmas, Harry and Tom (dressed in formal Muggle clothes for effect) knocked on the door when Jane's father wasn't home.

First, they basically did what a Hogwarts professor would once Jane turned eleven – showed Mrs. Cobbs some magic, told her that her daughter was a witch and there was a community waiting for her.

What a Hogwarts professor wouldn't have told her, though, was that they'd been keeping an eye on her child and had seen her struggle. They offered to take both Jane and her mother to Staffa, help her make a living within the wizarding community and Jane to grow up happily among her kind, leaving her abusive husband behind.

Plan B had been reporting the abuse to the Ministry and having the father sent to Azkaban for violence against a magical child, fortunately once Mrs. Cobbs believed their offer was genuine, she decided to take it.

Matthew Johnson's case didn't go as smoothly. Tom had visited him repeatedly and befriended him, then one day brought his "big brother" Harry to show him some "really cool stuff". Harry told him about magic, showed him some spells and Apparated them to Diagon Alley.

Matthew was obviously confused and overwhelmed by the contrast his family's stance and this whole new world where magic was okay. His parents had been even less receptive – too set in their beliefs. Even though Harry had shown them the most benign magic he knew, the Patronus charm, they freaked out, threw religious symbols at them and screamed for "the

devil to begone”, acting like them, and more importantly, *their own son*, had been some sort of test of their faith.

In the end, they’d been forced to Obliviate the Johnsons, place a Fidelius upon the information that they ever had a son, and take the shaken eight-year-old to Custodarium. He was better off there, but the memory of his family throwing him away would probably leave a mark on him – they didn’t dare to erase it lest they confused the boy completely.

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The first field of study Tom picked up once he had the liberty to was the human brain – he had an immediate need for it given Custodarium’s activities, and conveniently had considerable skills in the mind arts; Obliviation, Legilimency and Occlumency. In fact, he was convinced the Fidelius charm was a wide-range mind spell, the proof of which was his first significant breakthrough to earn him recognition among his fellow Unspeakables.

He’d built himself a rather impressive workshop in one of the caves, with a secret tunnel leading to it from their quarters and a smaller one from the pond, so Voldemort could spend some time with him while he worked – the Horned Serpent was good company, and getting a bit lonely since both Harry and Tom had been busy as of late, barely even having time for each other.

As a part of his project, he’d built himself a Pensieve – several, in fact, because he’d been researching possible optimisations of the creation process: using cheaper and less rare alternative materials, adjusting the enchantments,... Some worked better, some worse, some not at all, but that was part of the job.

Surrounded by Pensieves, he felt progressively pettier for never finding the courage to watch any of Harry’s memories. Of course he’d been curious, but...

Tom categorically refused to be a petty person, so he finally asked Harry for a memory collection for his twenty-third birthday. “Only the crucial moments,” he said, so he wasn’t quite expecting the *two hundred and twenty* vials, marked and chronologically organised in a multiple-compartment layered box.

He watched them in the afternoons after work, a few at a time. Most had been hard to watch; not just the ones that involved his alternative self, not just the sad ones – sometimes even the happy ones, because they reminded him of what Harry, his sweet, loving Harry, had to give up to come to him.

Now Tom just had to find out how.

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Over the years, many children and young adults benefited from the services of Custodarium, many tragic fates had been overturned; not without hardships, but for every time one of their children made Harry sad, there was a hundred times they’d made him happy and proud.

Staffa gradually blossomed into a large wizarding oasis – some of the Custodarium children decided to build their own homes there, the Muggle-borns who'd been moved there with one or both of their parents (like Jane Cobbs had) also continued living in their provided houses, and a number of outsiders moved in because of the community and the businesses opportunities that had been popping up.

Harry used what little he remembered about the future to invest in new “perspective” businesses: Nimbus, Ogden's Liquors, Bertie Bott's Confectionary, Nintendo, Microsoft, Ford or Toyota, securing funds for Custodarium even after their basilisk hide pile ran out. Since both him and Tom never got to travel because of their circumstances, he made sure to take the kids on at least one abroad trip a year.

Tom continued his career with the Unspeakables, making time and consequently also space the focal points of his studies. At just 36 years old, he rose to the Head of the Department of Mysteries position and started pursuing his political career more intensely ever since.

He had successfully bent the space around Staffa to essentially make it exist in a “fold” of the three-dimensional space – a Muggle ship could pass right through its location without noticing a thing. Since Diagon Alley, Hogwarts, and most of the other wizarding settlements around the world had only been protected by the mind arts, he'd been pushing for his Space-Folding Charm to be cast on those, too, arguing the rapidly developing Muggle computers that processed visual data might not be fooled by the standard illusions.

Rubeus Hagrid successfully graduated Hogwarts in 1947, got his Care of Magical Creatures mastery apprenticing under Newt Scamander and went on to teach the subject at Hogwarts. Clarence married Claire that same year and together they started a private rune-commissioning company with the office in the ground level of their home on Staffa. Sarah became a novelist and an occasional Daily Prophet contributor.

Malfoy and Nott were, well, still Malfoy and Nott, but the Lestrangle name went an entirely different direction than the one Harry had remembered. Fulcran eventually freed himself from the influence of his blood-supremacist father and came to work as a potioneer for Fleamont at Sneekeazy's. The rest of the Knights aimed for various positions at the Ministry from Aurors (Dalamar Avery) to dull office jobs (Aaron Morgenstern).

James was born in 1960, to Harry's relief – despite all the timeline disruption, he still had a chance of being born. He hadn't cut ties with the Potters, though – he felt like at this point, it couldn't hurt if they had tea together once in a while.

With James's generation came one of the greatest dilemmas of Harry's career as a caretaker/social worker: Severus Snape. He knew the boy had been unhappy, but he couldn't tell if he'd been unhappy enough to require Custodarium's services. The Snape family was far from ideal, but they weren't dirt-poor or truly abusive like the families of most children Harry and Tom would take in...

In the end, he decided against intervention, but he made sure Severus would be offered a summer job at Sneekeazy's and a mastery under Fleamont or Fulcran – Dumbledore was happy to pass that message.

As far as Harry knew, most events related to the Marauders' school years came to pass unchanged – Sirius even stayed with the Potters again, not at Custodarium, once Walburga disowned him.

When Fleamont and Euphemia died of Dragon Pox just days apart in 1979, it was the single greatest heartbreak for Harry since the Battle of Hogwarts, now a faded memory in comparison to the faces of his grandparents he'd spent most of his new life with.

On 31 July 1980, James and Lily had a son. Like the first time around, they named him Harry, except this time it was after "Uncle Harry" – James held him in high regard, plus the boy "had his wild hair" (and nose, and mouth, and eyes,... the only thing he didn't have were the scars).

Harry's little sister was born two years later; little Sophie Potter. Harry was moved to tears when he first held her, because he never got to have a baby sister all those years ago.

Not burdened by guilt or overall death-eaterness, Severus eventually got over Lily and married Apolina LeStrange, Fulcran's youngest daughter whom he met through his job at Sleekeazy's laboratory.

Harry had tried to resist, but the frequency of his visits with Dumbledore and Hagrid rose dramatically in 1991. At last, he'd seen them one May afternoon – a huddle of first-years with Madam Hooch in the lead, each carrying a broomstick.

He immediately recognised the shock of curly hair, like the *fourty-eight years* since he'd last saw it had been barely a day. The brown mane almost blocked the ginger head behind it from view.

Hermione and Ron. His chest tightened, his eyes burned – bugger, it had been so long, too bloody long! And Neville was there, too. Seamus, Dean, Parvati, or was it Padma? Harry couldn't tell anymore. He was even happy to see Draco there – he once instructed his younger self to prank the hell out of any Malfoy he'd meet.

Young Harry noticed him and waved enthusiastically. Old Harry waved back and prayed the group wouldn't come his way, because he wasn't sure he could hold himself together. Fortunately, they'd been headed to the Training Grounds.

When he Flood back home, he sought Tom for comfort, as he'd always done. His lover's hair had greyed, but his eyes were still as brown and young and determined as the day they graduated, his smile still as charming, at least to Harry.

He found him in the study, writing something down using a Muggle ball pen.

"Hi," he said, trying to sound normal.

Tom took one look at Harry and stopped writing. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, earning a raised doubtful eyebrow from Tom, "Nothing, really... um, I saw Ron and Hermione today."

Tom sighed softly, stood up from the desk and manouvered Harry to the sofa, pulling him close so his head rested on Tom's shoulder.

"How was it?" he asked calmly.

"Nice, nostalgic," Harry began neutrally, then let go of the pretense and winced, "Weird, because everyone was there, and I was there, but also wasn't."

Tom stroked his hair comfortingly. "I told you it would be hard on you."

Harry laughed miserably. "Yeah, you were right... as always."

He expected more of the familiar playful smugness, but Tom's voice remained placid and serious.

"Harry, I have to tell you something, and it won't be easy either."

Harry pulled back a few inches and looked up at Tom with sudden apprehension, waiting for him to continue.

"How much do you know about the grandfather paradox?"

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"Enter."

Harry stepped into the office cautiously. It was spacious, airy, elegant; just like he would expect from the most sought after spot at the Ministry.

"Good morning, Minister. You've asked to see me?" I was odd to call him "Minister", it had always been "Uncle", but he didn't want any preferential treatment. His other uncle was sitting at the armchair by the Minister's side, his usual good-natured smile missing from his face. They nodded to each other in greetings.

"Yes, please have a seat."

Harry did as he was told.

"Look at you, you're almost an Auror now – you've been training for a month now, correct?" the Minister asked.

"Yes." *What's this about?*

"You're willing to risk your life for the citizens of the Wizarding Britain?"

"Yes," Harry answered more firmly.

The Minister nodded somberly. "What if I told you there was a task only you could do that would save thousands of lives; possibly the whole world?"

Harry's eyes were wide like saucers.

“I’d do it, of course,” he said resolutely.

“Even if it meant you couldn’t see your family again?”

His rapidly beating heart suddenly stopped – or was it the time that stretched impossibly at that moment?

“Is it... a suicide mission?” he asked with a tight voice.

“No,” *thank Merlin*, “but it is one where you have to give up everything.”

“I- I don’t understand-”

The Minister handed him an old photo... of himself?

“This is Harry here, when he was eighteen.”

What does that have to do with anything?

“Wow, we really do look alike.”

Uncle Harry looked uncomfortable – Harry could easily tell, he liked to scratch the back of his neck when he was nervous, too.

Then Uncle Harry said, “That’s because I am, er... you.”

Wait. What?!

“To be precise, Harry here is an older version you. When he was eighteen, he travelled through time from a terrible future where many of your friends and family had died, suffered horribly or hadn’t been born at all. He managed to change it, but my research indicates that to maintain the spacetime stability, you must-”

“Go back in time,” Harry breathed out, understanding dawning on him. The idea was equal parts terrifying and exciting.

“Yes,” Minister Riddle – Uncle Tom – confirmed. “But there is one more catch.”

Okay, way more terrifying than exciting.

“You must go carrying Harry’s original memories.”

“What... do you mean?”

“Quite frankly, we’ll have to overwrite all the memories you currently possess. We will make a back-up and you will be able to regain them eventually, but not until this Friday,” Uncle Tom’s somber eyes studied Uncle Harry’s face for a moment before adding, “To you, fifty-five years from now.”

Harry’s stomach churned when he understood the implication. He would forget everything, everyone, his whole life! Wasn’t that practically dying? But then, if he didn’t do it...

“...I must go to save... everyone?”

Uncle Harry closed his eyes, looking his age for the first time since Harry had known him. “I... never had a sister – mom and dad died before they could have her. Remus and Sirius died, too, Fred Weasley, Dumbledore-”

“I’ll do it! Whatever it takes,” Harry cut in, not needing to hear any more. He was a Gryffindor, he wouldn’t cower away from something this important.

The two older wizards exchanged a grave look, having a wordless discussion or perhaps just waiting to see if he’d change his mind.

He didn’t, so Minister Riddle eventually said, “Very well. You have two days to say goodbye to your friends and family, we’ll make it look like you’d been sent on an international undercover mission, highly classified. It will be easier on them than if you simply disappeared. Uncle Harry and I will take care of the preparations – come to Custodarium on Thursday at 9 a.m., I’ll make the copy of your memories there before we head to Hogwarts for the rest of the plan.”

Harry’s heart was attempting to jump out of his chest, but he managed to nod his acknowledgement.

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“Here we are,” Harry said, leading them into a cozy room with an armchair and a cup of hot tea sitting on the table. Tom set two large glass jars on it, one full of swirling silver substance.

“Good. Now, please, Professor, hold out your wand.”

Dumbledore did. His eyes had twinkled like never before when Harry and Tom came to explain the situation to him.

“Harry, please disarm him with an Expelliarmus.”

The teenager looked rather taken aback, but he obeyed.

“Now give the wand back to him. That’s all, sir, thank you.”

“Anything for an old friend,” Dumbledore nodded to Harry, “Or a young friend,” he gave the younger Harry a reassuring smile and left the room.

“Hold this,” Harry passed his younger self the Cloak of Invisibility and the Resurrection Stone.

“I forfeit the ownership of the Cloak,” he said, holding his wand.

“I forfeit the ownership of the Stone,” Tom repeated, then flicked his wand to the left, charming the window open. “Now throw the Stone out.”

Bewildered, younger Harry did.

Tom nodded to himself, mentally checking the steps off the list. “I believe we’re all set. Whenever you’re ready, please sit down and drink this. It’s a Dreamless Sleep potion.”

Younger Harry took the vial in one trembling hand. He flicked a nervous look to the jar on the table. “Okay,” he exhaled deeply, obviously bracing himself.

“Um, bye, Uncle Tom... Uncle Harry,” he said shakily.

Older Harry smiled reassuringly, like he did so many times for one of his children. “Bye. And don’t worry, it will be alright – I should know.”

The teenager nodded, took another deep breath and downed the potion. Within moments, he was sleeping soundly.

Unfaltering as usual, Tom trained his wand at the unconscious form.

“Obliviate.”

It was almost anticlimatic how such a fateful spell showed no visible effect, but Harry still somehow felt it happening.

Tom then proceeded to unlid the large jar – its entire contents were actually just one impossibly long thread of Harry’s childhood memories, up until the day he time-travelled, including the delicately isolated essence of his latent knowledge of Parseltongue. Tom started to etch the fine thread of memory upon the clean slate with a charm he’d created back in his Unspeakable days.

Meanwhile, older Harry lifted younger Harry’s right hand. He was feeling sick to his stomach, but he knew Tom couldn’t do this part for him. He gripped his wand tightly to steady his hand and cast the Scalpel Curse, a modified version of the Scalpel Charm specifically designed to make the tissue scar once it was healed.

Letter by letter, he started carving the familiar sentence onto the pristine skin. An eternity later, a bright red “*I must not tell lies.*” glistened with blood. Harry quickly healed it with an Episkey and washed the blood away, letting out a heavy breath he’d been holding.

“I’m almost done up here as well,” Tom informed him. “Only one thing left.”

He pointed his wand to the sleeping teenager’s forehead and cast the Scalpel Curse himself, drawing the shape of a lightning bolt he’d religiously kissed countless times in the past. He healed the skin just as fast as he’d broken it.

Harry just stood there, watching himself sleep. It was bizarre.

“You were so cute as a teen,” Tom admired as he stepped back, the smile audible in his voice.

“It’s... weird. Like we’re taking his life from him,” Harry exhaled shakily, “Doesn’t feel right, you know?”

Tom didn’t waver a bit, “But he has a good life ahead of him, doesn’t he?”

Harry's gaze turned to his lifelong partner, all the marvellous memories they'd made together over the years emerging and flooding his mind at once. His eyes burned, but his lips stretched into a fond smile.

"The best."

~The End~

Afterword

Dear readers,

thank you for reading all the way through, for putting up with my terrible puns and maybe even laughing at them (for I, too, am a pathological punner). I hope it was as fun a ride for you as it was for me, despite the inevitable grammar hiccups due to my not being a native speaker, let alone British.

I found it symbolic to release the final chapters on New Year's, as it stands for the end as well as the beginning of a cycle. I hope you were able to make sense of it. If you really think about it, it's a bittersweet ending – for everyone from the original timeline to live, the "new" Harry still had to die in all but the body... But he got to secure the time continuity (old Harry and Tom knew he would do it, because he already has) and have a happy childhood, in fact, enjoy it twice; once as he lived it and once as an old man watching himself live it. Both Harries believed this was a sacrifice worth making... Plus, dying but not really is a classic Harry thing.

Death seems like something that transcends space and time, but was becoming the Master of Death necessary to travel through time? Maybe, maybe not, Tom sure wasn't willing to leave anything to chance.

When I first started writing Custodarium, I only had the endgame of Harry and Tom opening an orphanage and how I wanted to go about avoiding a time paradox – most of everything else was where the characters of J. K. Rowling's magical world in general took me. For example, that whole guardian angel thing was a spontaneous solution to the confrontation I've written myself into, I laughed out loud at Harry ingenuity when the idea hit me.

For the characters to take the wheel of a story, though, there need to be solid characters. While the interpretation of Harry also varies throughout the fandom, I feel like young Tom Riddle has rarely been done justice. People just see him as dark and evil, but is that how he would see himself? Could an ominous, penniless orphan sway the scions of the most powerful wizarding families to his side at a young age by intimidation?

I've tried to gather every bit of information canon gives us about Tom's youth – it's blissfully vague, and while you can choose to see him as a psychopath from the get-go, there is no clear indication of it being so. Here are my conclusions:

- ***It's never explicitly said that Tom had tortured or killed any person or animal before Myrtle.***

He said he could "make animals do what he wants without training them," which probably just refers to him being a Parselmouth. He might or might not have killed Billy Stubbs's rabbit, but we don't know the circumstances – if you're going for a non-psychopathic Tom like me, you would obviously prefer to assume it was a frame-up; we know he was really unpopular in the orphanage, and would it really be smart to kill the rabbit just one day after you've been seen arguing with its owner? But then, even if he did it, most of us village kids have killed a rabbit at some point, there's not much shame in that. Also note that Tom was able to gain support of almost every intelligent magical species besides humans later on.

As for the cave incident, any number of magical occurrences could have happened there to make Tom remember it fondly while scaring the hell out of the two children; from seeing Tom speak to snakes (perhaps this was where he'd discovered the ability?) to him "making things move without touching them." Tom was probably on the better of terms with Amy and Dennis before the incident, since they went exploring together.

- ***Tom grew up with zero exposure to the wizarding world.***

Imagine an exceptionally intelligent young boy, growing up in the harsh circumstances of a post-WWI orphanage in London, who one day discovers he's different – special; magical. It would be so easy to believe, logical even, that you've been given those powers to do great things. The fact that you alone have been chosen also suggests that you are somehow better suited to have them than anyone else, superior, a hero from the fairy tales you've no doubt been exposed to. You also become quite lonely in your superiority, because you have a giant secret, and there's no one you can relate to – maybe you try to show your peers, but they react horribly?

Then one day, a strange man comes and tells you there's a large community of people like you that you've been missing out on. You're excited about all the new stuff and the new sense of a belonging somewhere, but it also means you're not so superior or special. You have a self-image to maintain, though, so your subconscious searches for ways to work around it. Maybe you include the rest of the wizardkind under your "superior" label; maybe you work extra hard to be one step ahead of the more privileged kids; maybe you step into the role of a saviour, the only one aware of an underestimated threat.

- ***Tom started Hogwarts as a destitute orphan, then was repeatedly described as charming and well-liked by everyone.***

What a person starting from the very bottom needs in order to accomplish great things in politics is a solid agenda and the drive, delicacy and assertiveness to enforce it.

Unlike Harry, Tom had nine months to prepare for his premiere in the wizarding society – he was a Londoner, therefore able to venture to Diagon Alley during that time, observe the culture and come up with a persona that would most benefit him in this new and threatening world.

If you're smart, you don't go all-out dark lord just because you're more talented than your classmates. If you're really smart, you don't go all-out dark lord until you're invincible, like when you have an anchor to keep you alive even if someone kills you.

You play nice. You play hard-working and friendly. Tom had probably learnt very quickly that some wizards looked down on Muggles and Muggle-born, and the majority knew next to nothing about the Muggle culture. He would have tried to keep his background as mysterious as possible without making it look like he's hiding something, and he'd sure as hell work hard not to stand out in a negative way from the beginning; he'd learn everything he could find about the wizarding world. He would spend a lot of time in Diagon Alley collecting data and maybe even practicing spells, if he found a private spot near enough to adult wizards not to trigger the Trace.

- ***Tom was forced to return to the orphanage every summer, even in the 1940s and after pleading with the headmaster.***

It was the 1940s London, for heaven's sake, even the wizards couldn't be so oblivious as to not notice the Blitz?! Surely it couldn't have been that much of a problem to give a couple of children a safe place to stay, especially if it was empty anyway?

To be precise, we know Tom was denied the stay after the Chamber of Secrets fiasco, but there is no indication of it being otherwise in the previous years. This may be an additional reason for him to hate Hagrid, if the half-giant was indeed allowed to stay at Hogwarts over the summer after his father had died.

- ***Tom petrified three Muggle-born students before he was caught by surprise by Myrtle in the bathroom.***

This, to me, is one of the most intriguing facts about his younger years. Improbable coincidences from the second HP book aside, I like to think this was an intentional and carefully planned development – after all, it would be significantly more complicated to plan the attacks so that the victim got petrified rather than killed, Tom had to worry about a potential witness once they got revived,...

The most logical explanation for this extra effort is that he had it in him to care about innocent lives; at least before the Myrtle incident. He was aiming to intimidate, I can think of multiple ends he could have been going for with that, but there was a line he wasn't willing to cross.

- ***Myrtle's death was an accident.***

This one involves a bit of guesswork, but if we assume Tom used to be as smart as the canon tells us, there's no way he would have killed someone right by the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets if he thought he had a choice. Tom was normally calculating, but he wasn't completely immune to panic and rash decisions, which I hope I've managed to capture in my story as well.

- ***Tom had known how to create a Horcrux when he killed Myrtle.***

And isn't that an interesting point if we assume he wasn't planning to kill her? He had his sought-after immortality at his fingertips, that's one thing you really don't want to delay obtaining. If he truly was a cold-blooded murderer from the start, he could have picked a random Muggle-born, lured them to the Chamber of Secrets, Obliviated them of their last hour (in case they left a ghost) and killed them there with no one ever the wiser.

All in all, I believe young Tom saw himself as a well-meaning revolutionary and did care about lives, or at least struggled with the idea of murder for selfish reasons. People never see themselves as evil – I bet Hussein, Hitler or Stalin didn't.

I like to think taking an innocent life leaves a mark on a person, makes them give up on themselves morally or twist their morals to accommodate what they've done. Also, there's no telling what ripping one's soul in pieces would do, but I assumed it wouldn't exactly strengthen their character either – if anything, I imagine them becoming weaker, more fickle and petty, until we eventually get Lord Voldemort as we know him from the 90s.

Why am I ranting like this, you ask? Well, I obviously feel pretty strongly about Harry Potter, and when someone asks about my favourite character, they look shocked when I say it's Tom Riddle. He was ambitious, passionate and proactive, not shying away from what he believed had to be done, willing to risk a lot to accomplish it – I admire and identify with those qualities, and I hope that after suffering through this last couple of columns, some readers might see him in a new light, too... Some readers might even use it to write their own Tomarry stories.

If you enjoyed this story, don't forget to leave your Kudos so others can find and enjoy it too... or even a comment, if you want to make my day!

Love, Tina

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