

Iron & Decaying Dreams

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Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	F/F , M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Harry Potter/Tom Riddle Voldemort , Hermione Granger/Lucretia Black , Harry Potter/Tom Riddle , Other Relationships To Not Be Spoiled
Characters:	Harry Potter , Tom Riddle Voldemort , Avery Sr. Tom Riddle's Schoolmate , Lestrage Sr. Tom Riddle's Schoolmate , Mulciber Sr. Tom Riddle's Schoolmate , Abraxas Malfoy , Orion Black , Armando Dippet , Hermione Granger , Lucretia Black Prewett , Walburga Black , Rosier Sr. First War Death Eater , Luna Lovegood , Ginny Weasley , Ron Weasley , Molly Weasley , Albus Dumbledore , Horace Slughorn , Galatea Merrythought , Moaning Myrtle
Additional Tags:	Sane Tom Riddle , Possessive Tom Riddle , Manipulative Tom Riddle , Harry Potter & Tom Riddle Attend Hogwarts Together , Harry Potter Epilogue What Epilogue EWE , Slytherin Harry Potter , Harry Potter Loves Tom Riddle , Tom Riddle Loves Harry Potter , Ravenclaw Hermione Granger , Hermione Granger & Harry Potter Friendship , Alternate Universe - Soulmates , Soulmate-Identifying Marks , Morally Grey Harry Potter , Morally Grey Hermione Granger , Harry Potter is a Little Shit , Rivalry , Alternate Universe , No character bashing , Slow Burn , Fluff and Angst , deep thoughts about morality and all that jazz , dubious consent due to age difference , No Underage Sex , Harry Potter Being an Idiot , Characters Contradicting Themselves , no fatphobia , Demisexual Hermione Granger , Bisexual Harry Potter , Seer Luna Lovegood , Black Hermione Granger , Asian Harry Potter , different takes on familiar characters , Slow Build , No Graphic Depictions of Transphobia , like 200k words or more kind of slow , Ensemble Cast , The Knights are supporting characters with their own storylines , Original Mythology , POV Multiple , Morally Grey Ron Weasley , Morally Grey Albus Dumbledore , Pureblood Culture (Harry Potter) , Pureblood Politics (Harry Potter) , Introspection , Demisexual Tom Riddle , Smitten Tom Riddle , Tom Riddle Has Feelings , we're in this for the long haul kids , no posting schedule bc chapters range from 4k to 16k , & they take time to write & plan
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of The Will of the Living Saga
Collections:	Ongoing fic , Works In Progress , Love these stuff UwU , Those Tomarry fics , thiccboimork's harry_potter reading list , thiccboimork's reading list
Stats:	Published: 2023-04-04 Updated: 2023-11-23 Words: 177,289 Chapters: 17/35

Iron & Decaying Dreams

by [Pitzer](#)

Summary

Harry Potter is, above all, lost, as he finds himself imprisoned within the walls of Grimmauld Place entirely of his own volition, questioning his place in the world now that he is more legend than human being.

Upon entasking himself with learning more about the wizarding world, he stumbles upon a book that changes everything, and he learns of the ultimate secret he had never been privy to: soulmates are real, and his is Tom Marvolo Riddle. But not the version he has fought and bled for, the man he has killed – rather, a Tom Riddle from another universe entirely.

Unable to let go of the yearning for answers that is raging on inside him and having learned of the real purpose of the Veil, Harry crosses dimensions, only to find a reality very close to his yet so undoubtedly different. Tom Riddle is charismatic but detached, powerful yet misguided, and Harry quickly realizes that the only way forward is to break Tom's network of allies one by one, whatever it takes.

He just isn't counting on the arrival of a very hurt and furious Hermione Granger, who is searching for him as well as her own mystery's answers, and together they are both confronted by a web of complexity neither could have ever imagined possible.

INTRODUCTION & NOTE ON CRITICISM

Chapter Summary

This is not a chapter, but it is important that you guys read it.

WHAT THIS IS ABOUT

If you're devoting so much of your time to read my work, I think it's only fair that you get a general idea of what you're about to read, so this is for my fellow readers that need to know what a story contains before fully committing to it, especially if they're as big as mine. I know tags can only do so much, so in addition to them, here are some things you can expect from this, in no particular order (these are technically pretty spoiler-free and whatever I wanted to keep as a secret and that doesn't require a trigger warning isn't here or on the tags, so knock yourself out):

- Attempts at power plays and sabotage
- Physical, emotional, psychological, and verbal abuse's effects on people, but no explicit scenes showing it
- Semi-canonical takes on characters and families due to the multiverse theory the story is based on
- Characters doing smart things and the same characters also doing very, very questionable and thoughtless things – but it always makes sense with their characterizations and traumas
- Multiple protagonists in the form of Harry (who is introduced first), Tom (who is introduced second), and Hermione (who is introduced last), and very prominent roles for Orion Black, Abraxas Malfoy, Tymeo LeStrange, Bram Avery, Sébastien Rosier, Lilith Mulciber, Walburga Black, and Lucretia Black, including occasional POVs for each and every one of them whenever they're needed
- Slow burn (for the relationships) and slow build (for the plot)
- Original lore/mythology and different takes on things like soulmates, magic systems, and what it means to be a dark or light wizard, all which will come back again in more details on planned sequels
- No character bashing in the sense that I, as an author, am not going to write a character as a one-dimensional villain. Some characters do some awful things and the other characters react to that in whatever way they see fit, but if I'm writing a POV for that supposed villain, I'll do my best to write it in a nuanced way and make them feel human. It doesn't mean I'll justify their actions, but simply that I'll make sure that they'll make sense with their characterization

- Details that might be set up early to come back later on, either in this story or on a planned sequel
- No explicit sex scenes, especially between minors
- Most of the 11 characters are queer, plus Dumbledore himself, except for literally one single character
- While I am doing loads of research to make sure stuff is either canon or my version of it works around canon well enough, I am just one person and it's been a long while since I've read the books or watched the movies, so a few things may have been forgotten or not mentioned and some might not fit perfectly with the canon interpretation of them. If you notice such a thing, feel free to point it out, and I'll explain why it might have been left out or how it fits into the story, or if I simply forgot and you should just exercise some suspension of disbelief instead. Either way, if some detail is bugging you and getting in the way of your enjoyment, don't be afraid of seeking clarification in the comments, and I'll do my best to explain it to you
- I am aiming for diversity here, not out of tokenism but simply because the world is diverse and I want this story to be reflective of that. Harry is Japanese, Hermione is Black, and Lilith is Indian. I also don't really like taking the whole "this character is attractive in canon so let's make them perfect in every way" route with my writing either, especially because I find that that just perpetuates a very narrow idea of what beautiful and "perfect" can be. So don't be surprised if characters don't look like they normally would – I've gone through great lengths to make these characters' appearances both believable and memorable. Iconic characteristics – like Harry's eyes, his glasses, his hair, Hermione's hair, etc – are maintained, but the rest is up for grabs
- There are lots of themes surrounding each character's personal journeys, loyalty being a big one, as well as tradition and prejudice. With Bram – and in an upcoming story, Draco too – I wanted to explore changing your mind and deprogramming it from prejudiced ideals, and that is also a theme we see in almost every Knight's stories. With Sébastien, I also wanted to explore toxic masculinity on top of that, and Orion and Lucretia also have parental abuse mixed in there. And with Tom, I wanted to see the other side of powerlessness, and how the search for autonomy can lead to, unwillingly, supporting ideals you don't believe in and siding with your oppressor as "one of the good ones" – and how you can delude yourself into thinking you have the power when really, those people don't really admire you, they just tolerate you and let you hang around in order to appear less radical than they truly are.

Things like immortality, morality, the power of personal choice, and self-discovery are main themes, as well as emotional empathy vs. psychological empathy, intention vs. impact, and familial expectations and privilege vs. the burden of tradition. I see *Iron & Decaying Dreams* as a TV show more than a book, to be honest. And as with every long TV show, there is a lot of ground to cover and lots of characters to explore, and all of the plotlines and journeys, unrelated to the main plot or not, should serve to complement, assist, and prove the main themes and ideas behind the text. I guess you could sort of summarize all of this into "this story is about personal autonomy vs. responsibility toward other people, and the choices that can come from that"

- One of the things you can expect from Harry and Tom's relationship after Tom already knows Harry's identity is them trying to understand each other and make their lives, morals, and principles work together.

I want Tom's redemption to feel genuine, not a product of Tom wanting to keep Harry by his side by doing good things for him without actually believing in them. I see this version of Tom as actually believing he is doing the right thing at times, but at the end of the day, still falling into the trap of good intentions/bad execution. Plus I want to make sure Tom's anchor isn't simply Harry, because it just isn't sustainable nor would it feel like Tom has earned his character development if I did that. I just don't want to have to restrain myself from making anything happen to Harry just to keep Tom happy and not murderous.

Despite, you know, the everything surrounding Tom Riddle in canon, I want him and Harry to have somewhat of a healthy relationship, and healthy relationships include communication, the ability to be apart from each other, and only a healthy amount of jealousy. There isn't anything healthy about a partner that Crucios everyone around them or kills people whenever their moral-compass-partner isn't there to rein them in, and I don't want Harry's whole existence to be about that either. I've always intended for his decision to leave it all behind and find his soulmate to be about him and about finally breaking free from other people's expectations, and thrusting him into that role once again, only this time with Tom, seems counterproductive as hell. I just can't see Harry (at least not this version of the character) shutting up and accepting Tom's messed up behaviors and the possibility of him just snapping whenever Harry didn't do whatever he wanted without a fight or talking back. Harry doesn't just take shit, and Tom being his soulmate isn't an excuse to do that now, it doesn't matter how fun it can be to read a dysfunctional relationship. Because that's the thing: I have nothing against these sorts of stories. In fact, some of my favorite fanfics of all time are about how fucked up Tomarry/Harrymort is on a fundamental level. But one of the things that enticed me about writing a time travel fic (even though this technically isn't a time travel fic) was how things could change, how different circumstances could change a character's outcomes and choices. I want Tom to choose change for himself, even if the catalyst for him to do so is Harry – I don't want the story to end and the characters and the reader to still have in the back of their minds the doubt that Tom might snap back to who he used to be at any second. Which is why I wrote so many characters into the story.

Yes, the Knights have various unrelated plotlines that further their development, but I tried to be very careful about the way I wrote them and how much space they took in the story. But, most of all, I wanted to make sure every storyline – or at least the majority of them –, while personal, still ended up moving the plot along. If I presented an issue, I wanted its resolution to happen in a way that didn't solve it in isolation from everything else, and also tied back to one (or more) of the main characters – in this case, Tom, Harry, and Hermione. I wanted to 1. have these characters also influence Tom's changes so the burden wouldn't be solely on Harry to be his moral compass and so he would have other things to hold on to outside of him, and 2. have these characters' storylines converge at the end of it all in a way that didn't make anything feel wasted or pointless and also tied into the story's main themes.

I could have just written the classic time travel fic where Tom and Harry are at the center and the Knights are just background characters that sometimes work as plot devices to move the story forward. I could've written in it that Harry gets through to Tom and he drops his

followers and then they're no longer relevant. There's nothing wrong with these kinds of stories – in fact, at times, having a clear focus can be immensely beneficial to storytelling. But I sat down to write a redemption story for Tom Riddle, and isolating him from everybody else and making Harry the center of his world just didn't work for me.

Don't get me wrong, this is a really big story and at times the Knights do take up some space in it, but I'm trying my best to balance it out with enough of the main characters to not feel like they've become the main focus.

I wanted to tell a story where a character's romantic life didn't take over their entire being. Maybe it's just me being in the aromantic spectrum, but I can clearly see the road down the line of someone getting into a relationship and forgetting their goals for the other person, only to resent them later on for how narrow their life has become. Sure, these are characters and I can do whatever I want with them, but I use stories as a way to explore real life, in a way, and I wanted to be able to imagine Tom and Harry years and years later and still feeling like they have their own individuality and tastes and goals and careers and freedom on top of their relationship. I wanted them to be partners first and foremost.

Plus, this version of Tom Riddle wouldn't just let his goals fade for Harry. This version, in my head, was always misguided instead of evil. To me, Tom has always wanted to do good and change the world for the better, but due to his lack of decent role models and the harsh realities he was confronted with in life he often chose the wrong methods. There was no space for Tom to become idealistic – he used to be, once upon a time, but his ambitions had to turn into something else in order for him to survive the hierarchy of Hogwarts and Slytherin and the wizarding world.

So, yeah, I can see him questioning his decisions for Harry, but I also see him going “okay, I see how this is bad now. So what should we do instead?” I see him wanting alternatives instead of inertia. And I also see Harry not backing down from his morals regardless of how much he loves Tom. He knows what he believes in; he had the time to question the world as it was presented to him, and he won't fall for another trap of yielding to whatever charismatic figure crosses his way, not after Dumbledore, so he and Tom have to come to compromises.

NOTE ON CRITICISM

I've received some incredible feedback on this story so far. So many of you seem to understand fully what I'm trying to achieve with this, and it fills my heart with so much love to read your comments and see your kudos and bookmarks and hits. For years I've been scared of writing fanfiction and of posting it, not only because of the high chance I would never finish it but mostly because of the reactions I would possibly gather – I was both scared of no one reading my stories and of too many people reading them.

I'm autistic and have ADHD, which is, unsurprisingly, a very complicated and annoying combination.

Autism makes me crave routine – ADHD makes me hate it. Autism makes me overthink every detail of a story – ADHD makes me get too excited, post too soon when I should be reviewing what I just wrote, and forget major plot points as a result of my impulsivity. Autism makes me turn these stories into special interests – ADHD makes me have intense

periods of hyperfocus on them only to make me incredibly disinterested in them for weeks on end. Both of them, however, make me sensitive to criticism, especially ADHD.

A big feature/trait/facet of ADHD to me is RSD (or Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria). It essentially means I am extremely sensitive to rejection, perceived or real. It means that if I think someone is upset with me in any way – whether there is proof of that or not –, I will have an extreme reaction to it. My reactions are mostly internal – I don't tend to lash out at anyone –, but they can be particularly brutal to go through. When it comes to my writing (especially since it is a long-term special interest and is essentially one of the most important things in the entire world to me), more often than not it means I will quit a project almost immediately if someone doesn't react positively to it, or criticizes it in any way, constructively or not.

Maybe it's a feature of growing up autistic, but I've been misunderstood my whole life. People always assumed malice where there was none, thought I was lying when I was being truthful, made jokes at my expense because they knew I wouldn't understand them/that I was being mocked and not just friendly teased, took advantage of my gullibility and tendency to give people the benefit of the doubt, etc. This means that to counteract this I was forced to overanalyze everything, be always on edge, and be hypervigilant all the time. If I had trouble reading tone, then I had to learn how to overanalyze every context, every part of a sentence where the double meaning or subtext or sarcasm could be hiding. I became obsessed with psychology as a way of defending myself. And RSD is nothing more than this hypervigilance coupled with trauma. It makes me overthink every interaction, and the trauma and CPTSD I've dealt with give me the extreme, impulsive, out-of-proportion reactions.

That has been my entire life, but I have been making progress these last few years. I have learned to separate my own personal value as a human being from my work, my tastes, and my special interests, and realize criticism is not the end of the world. There are two ways I deal with it. First, I have to feel my feelings.

I have learned that the only way to convince my body there is no imminent danger is to recognize – and let go – of the feelings criticism brings upon my body. Before I overthink everything, let myself feel the urge to change everything about the story I'm writing, or, even worse, delete it entirely and pretend I have never posted it in the first place, I allow myself to feel every shitty feeling I have before reacting. The key is no reacting. If a comment hurts my feelings, I simply do not acknowledge it until I'm emotionally distant enough from it to react well to it.

Secondly, I have a method of measuring the criticism.

First, I ask myself:

—How many people have expressed this opinion?

Obviously, if I take the criticism seriously or not depends on the number of people reading my story. If there are hundreds of readers and only one has expressed that opinion, it probably isn't something worth considering. If there are ten people reading the story and one person sends constructive criticism, I'll take it more seriously. That is not to say that someone's opinions aren't valid and valuable – of course they are. It is very possible for someone to notice a mistake or plot hole that no one else did. Most of the time, though, I'll

ask myself the next question before deciding between responding/accepting the criticism or not.

—Does this make sense to me?

Since I am the author of the story and the only one who actually knows where it is going, I need to put it against my own judgment. Sometimes someone will voice a valid criticism, like, let's say, a portion of the story doesn't make any sense, or there's no context for a character's actions. Sometimes, that person will be right – in that case, if by re-reading the story I realize they are right, I'll do my best to fix it in the next chapters and make it fit in with what I've posted so far. Other times, it's possible that the odd segment is actually a mystery or set-up planted there that will be solved/addressed later on. Obviously, the reader has no way of knowing that, so I'll usually just respond to the comment letting them know I am aware of what they are describing and that said thing has not been forgotten and will be addressed later on.

And lastly:

—Has this comment been made in good faith?

I am not here to tone police anybody. Obviously, I won't take mean/hateful comments well, but those are not being considered under this umbrella of constructive criticism anyway, so this isn't about them. I know I can't expect everyone who comments here to know the exact right way to criticize something without offending me, nor do I expect them to. It is my responsibility to manage my feelings and actions, especially in this online space I've knowingly put myself into as an adult. That doesn't mean I can't curate it to suit my needs – since I do believe that, if someone states they do not want constructive criticism, they are more than entitled to moderate or exclude comments that do not respect their boundary –, but I am writing this whole thing precisely to let you know that I accept constructive criticism, which is why I use this entire method before even responding to someone's comment.

So, yes, this part takes a little bit of intuition on my part, which I famously struggle with. I usually always assume good intentions from anyone posting, and this probably won't change, so it will take some time and brain power from me to determine whether the person commenting has meant well by it or not, but if the comment has passed the other two questions, I assume the answer is probably yes.

Here is the thing: I believe criticism is valuable, and I welcome it. Constructive criticism, of course – I don't necessarily believe someone has to give the solution to the problem they present to me on a silver platter, but I do think that if you present someone with criticism, then you have to have a better reason to do so than "I don't like it". If you know you don't like something, then don't read it – it's that simple. It's when there is something there that the reader enjoys, when there is potential they want to see explored, that's when constructive criticism is valuable. And, of course, that is, most importantly, when it is wanted.

Fanfic writers are not paid for their labor. Most do it because they enjoy it, because they want to better their writing and practice it, or because they want to see an idea out into the world. Any and all reasons to write fanfic are valid. Not everyone wants to become a great writer, or even just better than they currently are, and there is an audience for everything, it might

simply not be you, and that's okay. So, if someone expresses that they don't want criticism, then I believe it should be respected.

The point is: please give me criticism if you feel so inclined.

If you see a grammatical error, if the formatting makes something confusing or hard to read, if a plot point doesn't seem to make much sense, or if a character is acting in a way that is incongruent with the previously established behavior in the fic, please tell me. If something is done that way on purpose, I'll inform you of it. I'm writing this for fun and because I want to, but it doesn't mean I don't want to become a better writer.

As a non-native English speaker, there are loads of things I struggle with when writing in English. My vocabulary is big but not as vast as the one of a native speaker that has been reading books in their language their entire life, and I am aware of it. I am always trying to make it better, but please be patient with me as I do it. I also don't have a beta, which means grammatical errors might be showing in the finished product, and there might be some insensitive sentences or characterizations in the story (though I try my best to avoid it, and also, fuck J. K. Rowling's transphobia), or I might write too much about things that should have been cut, etc. It's completely okay to point these out – I'll change what I can.

As I've mentioned before, if someone's justification to complain about something is because they simply don't like a plot point, someone's characterization, or where the story is going, I will not be changing these things for their sake. By the time I start writing something, it means I already have a big portion of the story in mind, and that I want to tell it. I am not here to do fan service – I might heed a reader's suggestion, but I do so because I like it or believe it is sound, not because I want to please them. Please respect that.

Comments on the story, your reactions to it, thoughts on the characters and their journey, all of this is welcome and appreciated. I absolutely love reading your thoughts, and they make up my day.

Anyway, this is my huge, probably unnecessary take on constructive criticism, but I feel like I need to put this out there, for my own sanity and to make sure I continue to write this story and follow my own advice.

Also, for anyone reading this that might feel the same way I do – do not read the bookmarks on your story. Trust me. Some readers are not aware that writers can read their bookmarks and while they will not comment what they think directly to you in the story, they might put it on their bookmarks, and they usually do it in a way that is more of a personal footnote of their current opinions rather than a serious critique, and it can be a serious punch to the gut of an author that is excited about the numbers their fic is getting. I'm not saying this to criticize anyone who writes stuff like "boring" or "annoying" on their bookmarks – as I've stated above, anyone is entitled to their opinion –, rather, just as something I wish someone had told me before writing this story. You can have a hundred positive reviews and only two negative ones, but it's incredibly easy to focus on the negatives.

Anyway, thank you to those who had the patience to read this monstrosity – your support is highly appreciated and matters more than you know.

CHAPTER 1. YOU CAN SAY ANYTHING, YOU CAN DO ANYTHING, BUT YOU CAN'T FAKE A THOUGHT.

Chapter Summary

This first chapter is indicative of what the rest of the story is like – very character-focused and driven, introspective with a high level of exploration of their motivations, thoughts, and feelings. There's a plot, but it's merely a vessel for the message. That being said, don't expect canon Harry and Hermione and Tom from this – they can be somewhat OOC, depending on your point of view. Harry in this is Japanese, Hermione is Black, there is a trans character, and everyone has physical flaws. My intention from the very start was to get the most polarizing traits from them and explore them to their full potential. This means Harry is impulsive and self-sacrificing, Hermione can be quite ruthless and a bit judgmental at times, and Tom is... Well, Tom. That being said, every character goes through a journey of understanding their shortcomings and growing beyond them – they are not stock characters, they're people. If this is not your thing, that's okay. I'd appreciate it if you gave it a chance, but it's fine if you don't enjoy it. If you like reading about characters' trauma, inner world, and growth, this might be perfect for you. Thank you for giving my story a chance ♥

Chapter Notes

This is the new version of Iron & Decaying Dreams, updated on the 28th of May, 2023. If you are reading this and you've read the story prior to this date and are not in the first chapter, please go back and give it a read. While the bulk of the story is still the same, the order of certain parts has been changed and new sentences/paragraphs have been added. In a few chapters, new scenes have been added as well. By re-reading it, you assure the absorption of the content the way it is meant to be read. Thank you <3
Chapter title is from I'M THINKING OF ENDING THINGS by Iain Reid.
MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON SEPTEMBER 26TH, 2023.

“People talk about the ability to endure. To endure anything and everything, to keep going, to be strong. But you can do that only if you're not alone. That's always the infrastructure life's built on. A closeness with others. Alone it all becomes a struggle of mere endurance.”

- I'm Thinking of Ending Things, 2016, Iain Reid

CHAPTER 1 – YOU CAN SAY ANYTHING, YOU CAN DO ANYTHING, BUT YOU CAN'T FAKE A THOUGHT.

OR, *THE OTHER HALF*

Harry James Potter's exit from the wizarding world had not surprised many. In fact, it had been quite anti-climactic.

Hermione had seen it coming miles away. Ron was only shocked for about three seconds, which was the time it took for him to realize Harry wasn't him and a love for Quidditch, magic, and a past crush on his sister were not good enough reasons to stay somewhere he had no future in. Still, he had protested Harry's decision as much as he could, to no avail.

Molly had taken it the hardest. Harry appreciated how much she saw him as family, he truly did, but he also resented her unrelenting smothering after Fred's death.

He had never fit in with the Weasleys, and he was constantly reminded of that every time he spent longer than a couple of days at the Burrow. Whenever he showed wonder at something magical he had never seen before, the look of pity in her eyes showered him with the sense of being an outsider. He knew she always had in the back of her mind a "poor Harry" outlook when a simple everyday spell was the catalyst for them to remember Harry was not part of their unit, did not share the same traditions, and would never catch up to being raised in their world. The Prophet had finally gotten his abused child backstory and shoved it out there for the world to see, and Molly's guilt at not seeing it sooner combined with her still lingering loyalty toward the late Albus Dumbledore meant she could not truly apologize to him for being another adult that failed him, not when that meant wishing she could've taken him from the Dursleys. That, in turn, would've meant acknowledging it had been Dumbledore who had put him there to begin with, and that he knew all about his treatment. If there was something that the Weasleys could not do, it was disparage the leader of the Light. Even if, technically, that was Harry now.

Another title he had never asked for.

Harry, then, left. He promised himself he would be better out there, that at least he had the advantage of having knowledge about the muggle world, which many of his friends did not.

Of course, Harry had been wrong yet again. He had knowledge, sure, but *past* knowledge. Harry had essentially left when he was eleven. He had completely forgotten that the muggle world moved much faster than the wizarding one ever had. The changes were overwhelming, and Harry had never gone to middle school, or high school, or college, and had never worked a muggle job. He barely had any documentation at all. He had no family, no friends there, no connections, and though he relished in not being famous there, that certainly meant strangers were more hostile than they were when talking to the Savior; no one seemed like they had the time or patience to humor a clueless adult on how to be a person.

So Harry came back, hands tied and ashamed to camp out in Grimmauld Place... and he didn't tell his friends at all.

He just had no idea what to *do*, no idea of who to *be*, and while he had more leeway than most, he knew he didn't want to live off the glory of being young and manipulated to kill a Dark lord forever. That wasn't an achievement or something he had ever felt proud of. He just felt empty, knowing he had taken a life.

To put it another way, the last few years of Harry's life had been a colorless, dull existence.

It took him quite a while to shake off the adrenaline of war. He had been in fight or flight for as long as he could remember – if not evading a homicidal maniac, then surviving another year in Hogwarts, or, which was just as bad, living through another summer with the Dursleys. Being on high alert was the only way he knew of living.

His life had never been easy. It had never been calm. So to be presented with both of these things felt nothing short of foreign.

Suddenly, Harry could get anything he wanted – he was offered jobs, properties, opportunities, all things he had never actually earned. He was thanked daily for things he could barely take credit for, and was never listened to if he tried to explain so.

And his days... well, they were uneventful. Not because they had to be; Merlin knew he was always being hounded on the streets and being asked to do interviews, to write a biography, to talk and talk and talk about what he had done, as if he wanted to relive the worst moments of his life...

But he didn't want those things, and he never accepted any of the offers. He isolated himself, only using the Floo to visit his friends and help them grieve. It was something he felt he owed them, whether he truly did or not.

Ron turned into a ball of worry, even more than usual. Before, his best mate had been one of the most courageous people Harry had ever met – he could be terrified, but he would stay by his side regardless. If Harry was in danger, then Ron would share the danger with him.

Losing his brother, however, seemed to remind him to be cautious, living forever on the edge of a panic attack. Ron could not fathom the thought of losing anyone else, so he didn't hesitate for a second before asking Hermione to marry him. She had accepted it, not wanting to wait to do what she deemed to be the right thing. If Ron had shrunk into himself, then Hermione had done the opposite, embracing recklessness and impatience – at least as much as she could, anyway.

But then again, Hermione made it work. She went back to Hogwarts, Ron back at her side, refusing to leave her alone, and made her dreams come true.

She joined the Ministry, one of the youngest people in the field, and refused to listen to anyone that scoffed at her ideals. Hermione was fearless after the war.

She would never take no for an answer, and when questioned, her answer was always that she had lived through far harder and scarier moments and wouldn't let small-minded people act as if they knew what the wizarding world needed, not when she had seen it crumble in front of her eyes.

Harry was proud of her. He was proud, but he couldn't join in. Because if Ron was overly cautious and Hermione overly determined, then Harry was just lost. Paralyzed. He had too much future in front of him, and no idea what to do with it.

They worried about him, he knew. Of course, they did.

Ron was especially insistent that he showed up at the Burrow more, but it was always awkward and painful to be there more than he had to. Things with Ginny had gone so cold they were practically freezing, and their chemistry was long gone, their dynamic odd and stilted. Ginny was fiery, witty, and a fighter, but Harry had been forced into those roles. If he had learned anything from his self-imposed grief asylum was that Harry was far less of a thrill seeker than he had ever realized. He was often reckless and impulsive, but those were features which determined the way he acted, not the goals he was aiming towards.

And back then, there were none. He strove for one particular thing, and that was peace of mind. He didn't want a boring life, a life that dragged itself along, but he wanted to be okay with who he was, what he wanted, and what he was looking for. Harry was tired of second-guessing himself. It had only ever led to suffering.

Things were often out of his control, and he wanted to be okay with that. He would change what he could, but he didn't want to take responsibility for the entire world as he had before. He wanted to know he had done what he could, and accept that people's choices were not his own to bear.

Seeing his best friends marry carried a mixture of happiness and nostalgia with it, as if he could see the end in sight. Even as their best man, the one at their side, he had a feeling that he wasn't meant to be there.

He couldn't help but entertain the thought that he hadn't done enough to earn it.

If Harry'd had his way, he would've rehabilitated all the Death Eaters, not murdered or jailed them. If Harry had truly succeeded, the wizarding world wouldn't feel so goddamn empty as everyone grieving someone they lost felt the need to celebrate just because that was what one did when the war was over. Because the truth was, it really wasn't. It just wasn't as blatant, or as bloody.

There were still Death Eaters wreaking havoc, only this time they were isolated and being seen as pitiful instead of terror-inducing. And as long as there were people out there believing in blood purity and wanting to rid the wizarding world of the *filth*, Harry would never believe that the Light side had won.

Most of the time, he didn't even know what "the Light side" even *meant*.

He was still in the dark about so many wizarding traditions, spells, charms, types of magic, rituals, and customs. He wanted to learn everything, he wanted to feel connected to the ancestors of whom he didn't even know the names. Knowing he had his mother's eyes and looked like his dad had never been good enough, and it meant even less now. If he was to be compared to people he'd never met, he might as well at least know to what he was being compared. Then, if he had to emulate someone, he could at least claim it was purposeful.

So he researched. He spent all his time holed up in Grimmauld Place, with Kreacher and Walburga's portrait as his only company, surrounded by Dark books that Harry supposed should feel worse to hold than they did but just felt like magic. Not at all that different from the types of magical objects with which he was allowed to work within Hogwarts or Auror training (which, of course, had lasted all of one week before Harry realized he had no idea why he had ever thought that was what he wanted to do with his life.)

Maybe killing his prophesied enemy had given him thicker skin, but all Harry did whenever Kreacher or Walburga screeched and mumbled about mudbloods and blood traitors was roll his eyes, mildly annoyed but otherwise indifferent. He didn't believe what they said, but after learning so much about the magical world, he could see they were just parroting what other people had said before, not an ounce of originality between the two. What did Kreacher even care about blood purity? He was a house elf, for Merlin's sake.

When the boredom of isolation became too much and not even the most cursed objects from the Black library could hold his attention hostage, Harry would find other, more unorthodox ways of entertaining himself.

First, he explored, not just forcing himself to stick to books anymore. That had been something he had been doing out of respect for Sirius's absolute hatred for the place and out of self-preservation against Kreacher's undignified rants – those he would go on every time he decided Harry was *desecrating* the ancient home of the Black family by moving stuff from their mummified places and trying to make it look less like someone had died in some of the chairs and more like a lived-in environment. Harry would walk through every room, listening for any holes in the wooden floors, any secret passages or hidden trinkets he could use to pass the time.

In Sirius's room, he had found a box full of letters, to everyone from Remus, James, Peter, and Lily, to Hagrid, even Severus. It was the one to Severus that pierced his long-still heart and made it resemble a beating one.

Apparently, Sirius had tried apologizing to Snape about the werewolf "prank" once before. According to the date, it had been shortly after he had escaped Azkaban, and the tone of the letter was so heartfelt Harry had a hard time believing Sirius had been the one behind it.

But it *was* his handwriting. And considering where Harry had found it, it had never been sent.

Years in prison could do that, Harry thought to himself. Padfoot'd had more than enough time to ponder on and regret his mistakes, but he'd never had the maturity and growth necessary to actually apologize for them and deal with the consequences of said acts. Harry couldn't see Severus ever being friends with Sirius, but he wished he could have seen his reaction to the letter.

But there was no point now, anyway. Not when there would be no recipient for it nor one to receive a reply.

A sigh left Harry's lips, and a frown settled right after as he re-read the still-open letter on his lap.

Something Sirius had written made Harry raise an eyebrow. *I wish I would have reacted better to your first words*, the letter stated. Nothing about it was unusual, per se – his godfather had been simply regretful of having never given a chance to Severus – but the way he had said it, *reacted better to your first words*, sounded odd.

Why had he worded it like that? Why couldn't he have said he wished he reacted better to his introduction or *acted better when we first met*? Hell, even *been less of an asshole to you when you said you wanted to go to Slytherin* sounded less weird.

It didn't really matter, Harry reassured himself, tapping the paper with his fingers. Padfoot was dead. He would remain dead. Wallowing on dead people's words was the type of shit that led to existences like Snape's. And it didn't matter that Harry had let go quite a bit of his resentment and that what he felt toward his former professor was more of an amorphous, ambiguous sort of feeling than anything else; he did not want to live a life as the man had, not if he could help it.

He did not stop his search, however, he just changed gears. He was too close to Sirius, and he wasn't doing this to reopen old wounds – rather, to fulfill his curiosity. Harry knew there was more to discover in Grimmauld Place than the ghost of his past possibilities.

The only other place he lingered that had some tie to his own past had been Regulus's room. He had never known the man, but he was Sirius's brother, and he had been a Death Eater that had tried to bring Voldemort down. He was, ironically, kind of the light side of Peter Pettigrew's story, as well as a less dark version of Snape's. He had chosen to do good besides being as scared as Peter, but he had donated a lot less time, effort, and pain than Snape had ever had to. If Harry had cared at all about war symbols, he would have made sure Regulus was as remembered and cherished as a hero as Severus had been post-war. Alas, one thing he had learned after the war had ended was that symbols were nothing without action to back them up. The only reason Dumbledore had been such a great one for the Light side had been because he'd been still alive, still *there*, still visible to be worshipped, to be hated and envied. Before he died, he had ruled over the wizarding world for decades – if Voldemort hadn't been there to try to take his crown, he would've been a symbol and a ruler forever. If one wasn't available to tell their own story – either backed up by support or by brute force – it was hilariously easy for someone, *anyone* to twist it up for their own needs and leave them as forgotten as the ones who just watched and didn't intervene.

So, no, he did nothing to honor Regulus. His sacrifice had real weight to their world, and his impact mattered a lot more than his status at the end of the day.

Harry knew; that had to be enough. And if it wasn't...

The dead didn't get to tell stories anyway, and Harry couldn't tell his for him.

Regulus's room was surprisingly bare. Maybe it wasn't that surprising, Harry corrected himself as he pondered more about it – Slytherins, especially the ones from pureblood families, were expected to keep a mask on at all times. The more one had to hide, the less they had to show for it on the outside. He wouldn't keep his secrets wherever his blood purist, Death Eater sympathizer family could easily find.

Even Sirius had done it, keeping his vulnerabilities inside, even if his mask had been different than most – being loud and boisterous could be just as much of an effective cover as being quiet and cunning. It still hurt, realizing how little he truly knew of his godfather. He knew of the Blacks, and he knew of Sirius, but Padfoot always made sure Harry had a hard time connecting both in his mind. He shouldn't be surprised that had been the case since Harry was quite adept at doing the same. At least until all of his secrets became first-page and spread material on The Prophet, of course.

The search came to a standstill after that. Harry's thoughts started to take him into a what-if direction he wasn't very happy about, but what was there to do? He wasn't ready for the million questions coming his way if he revealed himself, and he was tired of the pity and the looks and the misguided worship.

People thought of Harry as their savior, but what they didn't realize was that if all the cards had been laid down for him, everything explained and exposed and he had been given a choice halfway through it all, he would have said no. That was why, even upon realizing Dumbledore's blatant manipulation, Harry hadn't been able to stay all that angry at the old man. He had created the perfect conditions for Harry to do what had to be done. And it might have been wrong, but that was the reason the war was over. And Harry was angry, oh so angry still, but he couldn't deny it was a good thing.

~~So many were dead.~~ It was a good thing. So many more *could* be dead, but wouldn't be. And it had been Harry's hands, but it had always been Dumbledore's mind.

For better or for worse.

After the books had become repetitive and the search fruitless, Harry turned to Kreacher. The more he realized he knew nothing of the wizarding world, the more curious he became. There was so much he didn't know, so much wizards took for granted that Harry would love to figure out. But the elf was skittish and angry, working for Harry more out of obligation than anything else, and being kind didn't work because Kreacher didn't see *his* kindness as worth it.

So maybe another approach might.

"Kreacher," Harry summoned him, immediately greeted with a *pop*.

The elf always had a look of satisfaction and disgust etched on his face whenever he answered Harry, as if glad to be of service but angry at who that service was to be given.

"What can you tell me about the Black family? About their traditions, their personalities?"

He could tell the question caught the elf off-guard, but Harry made sure to keep his face neutral, to not give any impression that he might want to use that information for anything bad.

It had to have somewhat worked, because Kreacher, warily, started to talk about the very first Black family member he had worked for, only to have his beady eyes light up with something other than displeasure and go on a rant that lasted longer than Harry could've predicted.

He was glad, though. And he wasn't bored. Kreacher told stories with an air of someone who knew those people deeply – because he did – and alternated between personal anecdotes and stuff Harry could find in history books. He ended up knowing more about Sirius than he would have ever thought possible, considering just how much his godfather had despised Kreacher. It was oddly sweet, too, how the elf spoke of young Sirius with an affectionate tone while switching to a steel-cold one when he mentioned the man he had become. Kreacher might hate him now, but he had helped raise him, and he could differentiate a child from the adult he turned out to be.

If he ignored all the pureblood nonsense, Harry could see Kreacher's true personality coming out whenever he talked about his masters. He just wished the elf had something else, anything to cling to in his life that didn't revolve around the Blacks, especially now that they were all dead. While Kreacher made his isolation a much easier affair, Harry wished he could free him for good.

Kreacher, at least, did warm up to him after that. He didn't truly see Harry as his master, but Harry didn't either, so they worked out their differences well enough once the elf realized Harry had no intention of exorcising the spirits of his family from their resting abode. It was their history, not his.

And that house would never truly belong to him, he knew that, and he didn't want it to. He was its keeper, making sure it stood the test of time. Nothing more, nothing less.

A few months in, he stood before Walburga Black's portrait, face completely devoid of any feeling as she bellowed her heart out, clearly vexed that Harry insisted on remaining in her *sacred* family home.

"Why are you so angry? You're dead. You've got no control. This isn't your house anymore." He had been annoyed at her constant screaming, so he answered her, even though he knew that even her portrait had way more claim over Grimmauld Place than he would ever have.

Walburga seemed absolutely pissed off, ready to go off on another tangent, but Harry interrupted her yet again. "Tell me, who were your favorite family members?"

Maybe it was *the way* he had asked, with only curiosity covering his words, but Walburga actually answered, seeming deep in thought instead of focused on just who exactly was inquiring. Harry was pleasantly reminded that she was once a person, too, not an enchanted object made to spew bigoted nonsense.

And the more he got to know about Grimmauld Place, the more he got fascinated by it, by the sheer *history* within those walls.

There were journals, pictures, old clothes, jewelry, and letters of past lovers and enemies everywhere he looked; even the chosen colors of wallpapers told stories of their owners, painting a picture much more interesting and mosaiclike than ancient family tomes and official records ever could. Once he understood the personality of each person who had lived in the house, it was easier to find pieces of them hidden, transforming the cacophony of symbols into a symphony of memories.

Harry hadn't carved out a place for himself inside those walls, though. He didn't think he could. If he had been involved with the Potters, then maybe, but there was no one left who he knew of with which to commiserate. Even if there were any, he would encounter the same problem – too muggle to be a proper wizard, too wizard to fit in as a muggle.

Either way, he still wanted to learn more. So he did.

Of everything he had found, the letters and the journals were the most enlightening. He didn't just learn about the Blacks – he learned about the Malfoys, the Rosiers, the Crabbes, the Goyles, Weasleys, Potters, Lestranges, Notts... Surnames that once only belonged to Death Eaters or Light wizards in Harry's mind actually revealed so much more than the surface level he had learned at Hogwarts or guessed based on someone else's words.

Harry once again wished he had grown up with his parents to teach him all about their history. It was distasteful to think about the kind of person his father had been in school, the kind of person *Sirius* had been, even Remus; but to know his father was gone meant that he would never get the stories from the source. He only had one side to consider and his own bias of which to go off.

By the end of his first year inside Grimmauld Place with only a few times going outside – so glamoured that no one would ever be able to identify him – Harry was almost done with the Black Library. Between all the times he had been almost cursed to oblivion, he had learned everything he could, from Dark magic to Light (though it was clear which the Black family preferred), from curses to healing magic, from rituals to wizarding customs to family trees. There was a lot of blood purity propaganda, but Harry was able to filter that out using his own discernment.

When he finally stumbled upon the book, he had been half-asleep, searching for something that would help keep the nightmares at bay. His reading habits hadn't helped, often enough making his already horrific dreams even more creatively disturbing, but he found that if he filled his head with inoffensive enough information before bed, he might just have a decent night's sleep.

The book had been different than most. The magic it spoke of wasn't Dark, but it didn't seem to be Light either; it reminded him more of neutral rituals that every wizard had to follow, the ones he was never taught about, as people usually forgot he wasn't raised as a wizard and did need to be taught the very basics.

It was about Soul magic, but not the type that Voldemort had meddled with. It spoke of soulmates, and how, apparently, every wizard had one, with the exception of squibs.

Harry had never heard of such a thing. Not even in the people-have-never-explained-this-concept-to-me kind of way, but rather in the this-has-never-been-mentioned-in-the-ten-years-I've-spent-in-the-wizarding-world-not-even-in-passing way.

Maybe it was all bollocks. Maybe it didn't mean anything.

But Harry couldn't stop reading.

The more he read, the more certain he felt that this actually made sense. Apparently, soulmates felt a pull toward each other, even if they couldn't explain it. Every wizard – muggle-born, half-blood, pureblood, it didn't matter – held their soulmate's first and last words toward them in their wrists, invisible until they turned seventeen and performed a specific spell to make them visible. Only the first words would appear, and if their soulmate died first, the same spell could be performed to have their last words visible. People usually hid their soulmarks with glamours, especially if their soulmate's first words were particularly embarrassing or odd, which was why Harry had never noticed. But was it taboo to mention such things out loud? The book didn't say. In fact, it spoke of it very naturally, as if it was common knowledge.

Harry's headache worsened the more he thought about it.

Why would that have been obscured from him? He didn't understand.

It seemed he had still been kept in the dark like the good little lamb people thought he was, never mind the fact that he had sacrificed everyone he loved and everything he had ever wanted for *the cause* and been called a lion for showing the courage he had only ever felt because he didn't know the actual stakes.

What he had learned shook him to his core.

No one, not a single person in the wizarding world had bothered to let him know. Not Sirius, not Remus, not Dumbledore or Severus, none of his professors...

The worst of all, though, was the fact that none of his friends had.

Hermione, he could understand. Maybe she didn't know either. She was muggle-born, so it wasn't common knowledge to her. Maybe she was also kept in the dark like him. But Ron? Any of the Weasleys? There was no way none of them didn't know Harry wasn't aware; if he had figured out who his soulmate was, his best mate would've been the first to know. It sounded too strange that none of the Weasleys had ever even mentioned it to him, not even as a casual remark.

He glanced at the spell at the bottom of the page, the one to reveal the words. Did he even want to know? What if he didn't have a soulmate? Maybe people knew, maybe that had been why no one had told him...

Harry tried controlling his breathing as Sirius had taught him, annoyed that he seemed to be failing.

Why did that even make him so angry? Did it even matter if he had a soulmate? Whoever it was, Harry doubted they could fix the hole into which he had dug himself. He had no prospects, he hated his life and the person everyone thought he should be, and he had spent all his days lying to his friends and surrogate family and trying to understand more about a wizarding line that thought people like him and his best friend were the scum of the earth.

What was he even doing?

His curiosity still spoke louder, though, and it wasn't like Harry was known for his patience. He was reckless by nature, which was why he was such a good match for Gryffindor. Thus he read the incantation, words sounding foreign and just plain wrong on his tongue as he spoke them, "*Revelio animae dimidium meae.*"

It didn't feel right, he didn't feel *deserving*. Even if his soulmate wanted something to do with him, how could he even know they weren't just interested because he was *the* Harry Potter?

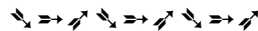
The words started glowing on his wrist, a yellowy orange light that seemed to burn into his skin, though rather painlessly. They settled, and Harry gawked at them as they became legible enough to make out their meaning.

Avada Kedavra.

He remembered almost every single time that curse had been thrown at him before. He also remembered who had been the first one to have the pleasure to do so.

His soulmate was Tom fucking Riddle.

And he was dead, by Harry's own hand.



Of fucking course. Of course. Wasn't his luck just astonishing?

Harry didn't allow himself to overthink it, or think about it at all before doing the spell again, this time with the intention of finding Voldemort's last words to him.

The faded – *fated* – words, *Avada Kedavra*, joined their twins for a few seconds, only to disappear after.

Harry frowned. He tried the spell again.

Nothing.

Could it be wrong? Was this even possible?

Voldemort was dead. Harry was sure of it.

Why didn't the killing curse join his pulse as the omen and the ironic sign of universal symmetry that it was?

Harry searched everything, everywhere in the Black Library for an answer. He couldn't trust anyone outside of the house, not anymore, and he needed unbiased sources.

He eventually came across something. In a time and dimensional travel book, of all places.

“If the wizard is meant to meet up with a live version of their soulmate in the future, be it due to time travel or dimensional travel, the dying words will not settle on the skin, regardless of the current living status of their soulmate.”

Harry knew a thing or two about self-fulfilling prophecies. He could just ignore what the book said, and eventually the mark would find its place on his wrist. Wasn't that what everyone would advise him to do?

That was if anyone had ever cared to let him know about this, which they hadn't.

Had Dumbledore suspected it somehow? The book talked about soulmates as equals – the same wording as the prophecy. Harry had assumed like everybody else that being marked as an equal meant his scar, the Horcrux inside of him, but could he really be sure? It wasn't like he could just ask Trelawney, not only because he didn't trust the consistency of her abilities as a seer, but because he knew she didn't remember her prophecies after she uttered them. Bloody useless gift. What was the point of speaking prophecies if they were incredibly vague, self-fulfilling at worse, didn't actually mean one *saw* the future, and even if they did, they didn't recall them afterwards?

Divination, real or not, was more of a hassle than helpful. Harry would know – his whole life had been ruined over a fucking prophecy, one that didn't even need to come true if Voldemort had simply ignored him.

It was hard to believe Dumbledore could've convinced everyone to keep quiet about it, but, then again, the old man had had way too much sway over the magical world. A little eye twinkling from his part and everyone would've kept it quiet. If Dumbledore believed the war might have gone on for longer than Harry's seventeenth birthday, then he might have thought it would be better if he didn't know anything until after he had killed his soulmate. He wouldn't have wanted to risk Harry changing sides.

Would he have changed sides? Doubtful. But he sure as hell would not have personally murdered his soulmate, even if he had to die for it to be able to happen.

But Dumbledore was dead. The war was over.

And no one had said a word.

Sure, Harry had isolated himself quite a bit after. He barely saw his friends before trying out the muggle world, he had broken up with Ginny, and he had done only the bare minimum when it came to post-war efforts of reconstructing Hogwarts or helping out with new legislation. He went to funerals, kept his mouth shut, and never, not even once, gave an interview or a speech.

That had never been him, but the end of the war had only exacerbated those tendencies.

He had never wanted the attention, never wanted the spotlight, sure as hell never wanted the martyrdom, and the last thing he wanted now was to become a political symbol. Voldemort

was gone – that was a good thing. ~~Was it?~~ He never wanted him dead, but he wanted his goals to never materialize. He had hope for more substantial change in the wizarding world, but he was in no shape to lead it. Most days, he just wanted to sleep forever – no nightmares, no trauma, no people he had known and loved dead, causing a hollowness in his chest that nothing would ever be able to fill.

No, he couldn't trust anyone. As far as he was concerned, he had no more friends in the wizarding world. It might have sounded harsh to think like that, in the past tense, but what had been an inkling of anger at being kept in the dark when he was a kid had turned into quite a raging fire. He had never had a childhood, but somehow the same people making sure he was an adult before his time were also the ones acting as if they were trying to preserve it. They expected him to take charge of an entire war while also never giving him enough understanding of it to make his own decisions. Harry had never before been so aware of what being a pawn consisted.

He had no intention of being manipulated again. No one needed to know what he knew. If he had any doubts about Voldemort being his soulmate (*Avada Kedavra* were quite characteristic words in Harry's reality, but he *had* fought quite a few Death Eaters), the fact that his soulmate's last words were the same erased them entirely. No one else had died while uttering those words at Harry.

The real question was: did Voldemort know? He would've gotten Harry's first words at seventeen. He couldn't even remember what those were – what even counted as first words? Had he babbled something at Voldemort when he was a baby? Did his first words to Quirrell count, or only in the graveyard? Were they even distinctive enough for Voldemort to recognize them as Harry's?

Did Harry's last words before he died in the Forest etch themselves into Voldemort's pale skin and make a home there?

There was no point in imagining. Voldemort probably hadn't known, but if he had, Harry doubted it would have changed a thing. His worst fear was dying, and Harry had been the personification of that, Voldemort's own personal Boggart. He had gone to great lengths to assure his immortality, and Harry had made sure he could never come back.

Still...

The words that had all but flickered out of existence instead of being visible to Harry told a different story. The book had said time or dimensional travel were the reasons such a thing could happen. Necromancy, though not mentioned, might've been another, but Harry had no intention of ever figuring *that* out.

Why did it sound as if he even wanted to?

The idea of a soulmate was too good to be true, and knowing his was Voldemort was proof of that. He regretted picking up that damn book, most of all because he knew he wouldn't be able to leave this alone.

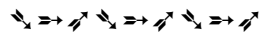
The fact that nothing in the book sounded like it was theoretical information made Harry even more suspicious. For all he knew, time turners were the only way of traveling through time, and they could only go back a few hours and not to the future at all, but he knew his information couldn't be trusted. And dimensional travel? Was that even a thing?

If there was one place that had all that knowledge available, it was the Department of Mysteries.

As if he needed to be back *there*.

Yet, he knew he was going if only to confirm this whole thing to be false. Maybe then he could stop doubting everything he had ever known.

Something inside Harry, however, insisted that he would only get more challenged as time went on.



Harry would have given anything to have Hermione's counsel just now. Truly, anything at all. He would listen to her talk about SPEW for hours (never mind the fact that he agreed with her – Hermione was relentless when inspired), he would babysit Ron whenever she needed time alone, maybe even go to a mind healer as she had insisted multiple times when they were eighteen until Harry had completely shot her down. He would do anything to have his best friend by his side, helping him solve the absolutely desperate, ridiculous, and borderline impossible conundrum he had found himself wrapped up in.

Everything, except see the look of pity on her face if he told her just who his soulmate was.

Hermione was a married woman, a career woman, and someone who very much belonged in the wizarding world. She had adapted, assimilated, but most of all, worked relentlessly to establish changes and to make their world a better place. Harry couldn't claim anything like that, and he didn't want to derail her life with the insane idea he had just cooked up in his fucked up brain.

And, yes, maybe he was a little scared of what she might say. Hermione was really fucking scary when she wanted to be. Sue him.

It wasn't like entering the Department of Mysteries would be difficult; he had received a job offer to train to join the Unspeakables before, after all. He had turned it down faster than he did Auror training, however, not only because he would have to confront the place his godfather had died in, but because he had a suspicious inkling that they didn't want him to be one of them as much as they wanted him to be a subject of their study on death and immortality. Since, apparently, dying and coming back like that wasn't commonplace even in the wizarding world. Who knew.

Harry sighed. He was too bitter and too tired for this shit. He was only twenty years old, but half of the time he felt somewhere between seventy and five years old, forever wanting it all to be over and to go back to when his awareness of everything was so little he wouldn't know anything of value.

The point was: he had no doubt he could get there. It was understanding exactly what it was that he needed that was the difficult part.

He couldn't just waltz in there and be like, *hey, I just read in a probably illegal book that dimensional travel is a thing, can you show me the portal to that?*

Like the good old Gryffindor that Harry was, however, he decided he didn't care. Maybe he *could* just ask – hypothetically, of course. Professional curiosity, nothing else.

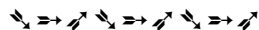
Wasn't it what that was, truly? It was not like Harry intended on traveling to a different dimension to hang out with another version of the guy who killed his parents. He wasn't a fan of categorizing people as evil, preferring to see their acts as such instead and the people themselves as capable of changing their own behavior, but Voldemort was a bad guy, that was indisputable. Whatever motivations he had to do what he did, the impact was more important. He had changed the fabric of their universe, and Harry couldn't just overlook that.

This universe was forever stained by Voldemort's legacy, Harry concluded. He couldn't, however, ignore the feeling building up inside of him that said, *another one, though, might not be.*

Ugh. Fuck. This is such a mess.

I'm going to go there, aren't I?

I wish Hermione was here.



Being allowed into the Department of Mysteries had been ridiculously easy. He had gone to the Ministry glamoured, only dropping it to be allowed in, and he felt like a circus attraction. The news of him leaving had traveled fast, it seemed, as most people at the Ministry gawked at him as if they'd seen a ghost. Which was a fair point, he thought, considering he probably resembled one after an entire year isolated in a cold, dark house like Grimmauld Place.

The Unspeakables present had been delighted that he showed an interest in their profession. Harry hadn't even finished his Hogwarts education, so he was well aware this was a privilege only granted to someone like him, but he didn't mind. He wasn't actually taking a job at the damn Ministry.

He would rather be choked by Tom Riddle's dead soul piece in his scar.

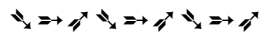
He asked the necessary things, trying to maintain a healthy dose of emotional distance, one he had been struggling to master after years of being asked questions about defeating Voldemort. No one seemed to notice his doubts didn't seem to be about the job itself, more than happy at obliging their Savior.

It was an advantage, but one he sincerely resented.

The Unspeakables answered his questions about soulmates without a care in the world, confirming Harry's hypothesis that soulmates were indeed a normal thing in the wizarding world. One more secret being kept from him. No big deal. He was getting better and better at masking his emotions, especially now that his youthful magic spurts were a thing of the past. Harry buried his anger like an adult now, thank you very much.

When he steered the conversation toward dimensional travel, the tone shifted slightly. The two Unspeakables that were indulging him – a woman and a man, two he had never seen before – carried a look of trepidation, as if in fear of his reaction.

He could tell exactly where they were going to take him.



The Veil looked exactly as he remembered, a cloud of white smoke more mystical than anything he'd seen before and since.

He hated it. It had taken his godfather away from him.

Somehow he wasn't surprised when they told him they had started to hypothesize on the fact that it might not be a Veil of Death, but something else entirely. A pathway to alternate worlds, realities varying from completely different to almost identical to their own. It was so convenient that it felt like fate was masterminding this whole thing.

Was Sirius alive right now, enjoying the sun in a Voldemortless world?

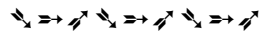
Merlin, Harry hoped so. But if what the Unspeakables were saying was true at all, he wouldn't be joining him.

"There is very little control about where one would end up if walking through the Veil," the Unspeakable woman replied. "It seems to be rather sentient. You end up where you need to be, nowhere else."

Well, if fate was anything to go by, Harry was meant to be with another version of Tom Riddle, a very alive one. The thought didn't scare him nearly as much as it should.

As they talked, Harry steered the path toward the Veil, trying to not look too interested. There was a pit in his stomach and an urge he couldn't explain, then; he just needed to do it.

As the woman expanded on the theories they had on the multiverse, Harry all but jumped.



Great fucking idea. Just fucking great. You were inspired when you came up with this one.

He was back at Hogwarts' grounds – to be exact, on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It made sense. For all intents and purposes, that was when his life had started.

That wasn't the thing that caught Harry's eye, though, not really – that was the throng of students near the Black Lake. They were decently far away, but Harry could make out their house colors, enough to see they were all Slytherins.

And, at the center, was the reason he was there and the reason he didn't want to be.

Tom Riddle.

Annoying, ridiculously attractive Tom Riddle. He looked a bit older than the version from the diary, but just looking at him made Harry's blood boil. Tom was everything he had wanted to be right then, and Harry knew he would only grow into it more as the years went by. He needed to be taken down a notch. It wasn't even that fucking difficult to be a Dark Lord; it seemed all it took was being an entitled dick with self-aggrandizing notions, shitty beliefs, and Crucio-happy hands. Big deal.

Harry snickered at the thought, but he knew he couldn't suppress the urge to want to stop Tom's reign of terror.

He knew he was an idiot, but he was here now. He didn't know anyone, anything, or a way of going back, so who cared if he rocked the boat a bit? He supposed he should be freaking out over being stuck in another fucking universe, but he couldn't feel anything at the moment but a competitive streak whenever he was staring at the guy who had ruined his life, smiling all polite and charming as if he truly had anyone's best interests at heart. It would be a fun experiment – if he died, it wouldn't be like he would be missed all that much. Harry had just walked through the Veil; anyone who had been or would be notified would already think he was dead anyway (and didn't that thought make him feel guilty as hell...) There was no way the Unspeakables would reveal their theory to someone who didn't work for them.

Harry was the exception, of course. And he had fucked them over.

He was so jaded by that point that he didn't even care.

Call him selfish, but he had given enough to the wizarding world. It wasn't as if he had gotten anything back. He made friends, sure, but they would survive without him. They always did. He was the one who was a wreck without outside guidance. *He* was the one who could never make his damn mind up but still somehow ended up in messes like these.

It turned out being impulsive did not equal being decisive. Maybe he should've let the hat put him in Slytherin. Maybe then he would've been called a fucking idiot instead of being indulged as with his peers.

And his headmaster. *Fuck*. He would have to deal with Dumbledore, again.

Did Harry even look like he could attend Hogwarts? He couldn't *not*, if he wanted to get close to the royal prick over there. He was small, and he looked younger than he was, courtesy of child abuse at the hands of the Dursleys. He could barely grow a faceful of facial hair. He could probably pass for a seventeen-year-old if he truly set his mind to it.

He didn't *want* to, but he had to. Might even learn a thing or two, considering he was essentially a high school dropout.

He had made such monumental mistakes in such a short amount of time, and if one asked Harry why, he would probably stutter and not be able to answer. But he knew.

He was tired of being alone. And learning he had a soulmate, someone who, by definition, would understand him in a way no one else could, and learning who he was, learning that Harry had a chance of actually being with him...

He would give up anything he had for that, and he didn't have a lot to begin with. He had lost so much. And maybe the Veil knew what he needed – it didn't give him a Voldemort at the height of his power. No, it had given him a young Tom Riddle, one that had already split his soul but hadn't reached the deep end quite yet. He was meant to be there. Harry never liked the idea of fate, especially after learning of the prophecy, but what he had read about soulmates made them seem like a gift.

Harry had no idea just how much he could possibly have in common with Tom Riddle that the universe had tried to set them up, but he was curious enough to try to find out, even if the feelings he had for the man were mixed at best.

This action might have seemed suicidal, but he had quite literally survived worse than a pre-Dark Lord.

Harry got up and dusted off his jeans, increasingly aware that he had just spent god knows how long sitting on the floor staring at Tom Riddle, a student he was not supposed to know. He didn't have any idea where he had ended up, what differences were expecting him, or even if there was another version of himself hanging out in Hogwarts at that very moment, and his shaking hands betrayed that.

Okay, I really didn't think this through. Harry took a deep breath, and exhaled whatever he could of his anxiety.

Because, then again, had he ever?

Harry didn't have anything to lose. Unless he was thrown in Azkaban, he really didn't care if he messed everything up. He deserved a chance at being reckless just because he wanted to for once, instead of for everyone else's benefit but his own.

There was no one to disappoint here. This universe's Dumbledore wasn't his own, and he was no longer Tom Riddle's Horcrux.

He was just a guy that seemingly came out of nowhere.

No one seemed to be looking in Harry's direction, or even seen him appear out of thin air, so he walked toward the castle with a confidence he didn't feel and surely didn't earn, unbothered by the stares he soon received as someone who very much didn't fit in with his muggle clothes and dead-inside look.

Whatever. It's not worth having a panic attack over.

The Slytherin group started to disperse, some shooting curious glances at him, others downright hostile ones. Right. He looked like a muggle-born with his clothes.

Harry focused only on Tom Riddle, who stared at him with a disquieting intensity. Was he jealous that all the attention was on Harry? He could use that.

Harry winked at Tom, whose face devolved into unabashed surprise before transforming back into a mask of indifference. He was good, Harry thought – controlled, powerful.

He had nothing on Harry's war-torn attitude, though.

Because whoever Harry was as an adult, it wasn't the person Ron and Hermione had befriended.

They were best friends with Harry, the little boy who was clueless about how the world – and anything, really – worked and had his occasional bouts of anger, but always, always meant well. The one that was good through and through, selfless, reckless but as a synonym of courage and that never questioned the people on the “right” side. There were heroes and there were villains in Harry's world then, and his friends firmly believed he was the one supposed to bear the burdens of being the prophesied hero.

That wasn't him anymore. Now, he could see the shades of grey in between the Light he was supposed to worship, and, Merlin, it was so much better to be able to dull its brightness so he could see the stars.

So he hadn't told his friends he was back at Grimmauld Place, nor that he was leaving through the Veil. He wondered if it would've been smart to at least let Hermione know of his questions, to let her know he was alive, but there was something in him that reveled in the anonymity of it all. It was his first truly independent choice, even if made by impulse, and he didn't want to have to justify it or act as if he was asking for permission.

They couldn't follow him there anyway, and he didn't want them to. He was still angry they had kept the knowledge of his soulmate from him.

If nothing inherently mattered, then he could choose what did. It was oddly nihilistic of him, but Harry had never seen himself as a nihilist at heart.

If he had been one, he would have preferred to see the world turned to ash and rubble. Maybe he would have leaned more toward revenge, a last act of reckoning against the manipulation so he could move away from the chaos with no remnants of guilt.

But he still cared. He still saw every life as valuable. The problem had always been that he didn't think *his* was.

He hoped that was changing. He still wanted to do good – he just didn't want to feel like it was anyone else's choice but his own.

And, most importantly, he wanted to be able to define by himself what “goodness” meant.

With his self-righteousness aside, he could see his own actions in a different light, as well as the ones from the people around him. He remembered Draco Malfoy, the desperation and fear so clear in his eyes when Harry had seen him in that bathroom. It sickened him that he had only ever seen an enemy. Harry should've known better; he should've known it was improbable that Draco's *crucio* would even work. He should have put his wand down and offered the kid a way out.

He couldn't change the past, however. Though the desire was there, it was not so much about changing some particular moments in his past as it was about wanting a second chance at making different choices, wanting to relive everything in another way – because while he might have helped save the wizarding world, he had done things he despised just to get there.

He knew he would never make himself do something like *that* again. It had been drilled into his brain that he had to, that Harry was the only one that even could, but that was not his reality anymore.

So while he was incredibly conflicted over being match-made by magic itself with Riddle, it wasn't due to thinking he had to kill him.

Killing Voldemort in his original timeline had been a desperate act, a last Hail Mary attempt at stopping the destruction of the wizarding world. Losing almost everyone he cared about had been the catalyst for his surrender. He remembered uttering a “*we will meet again*” to Voldemort just before he died at his enemy's hands, a plea more than a threat.

And the fighting itself... He had never cast the killing curse. He never would. It had been a stroke of luck that the Elder Wand had turned on Voldemort more than a calculated assassination attempt.

But he *had* killed him nonetheless. He had taken a human life, it didn't matter how perverse or broken it had been. He would take responsibility for that.

But he didn't intend on ever doing it again. There was another way, and he would take it.

So he came up with the brittle skeletons of a plan. He knew Riddle well enough to know the boy was very unlikely to just quit his lifelong goals, regardless of any sort of motivation Harry might throw his way, and that was because Riddle was terrified of death, and because he craved power.

Ambition and fear walked together, one strengthening the other, making him so very ruthless. He wanted everything, and his fear of what would happen if he didn't get it would make sure he had enough motivation to go after it.

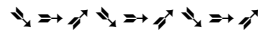
He hated Dumbledore, definitely due to the way he was treated by the late headmaster, but also because he was a genuine threat to his plans. Riddle hated competition, hated feeling like he wasn't at least twenty steps ahead of everyone else.

Well, Harry could be somewhat competitive if he had to. He could be unpredictable enough to mess with his head. If that was the thing that caught Riddle's eye for more than just a lazily curious second, that distracted him enough to turn him away from his more nefarious objectives, then that was what he would do.

He wasn't responsible for Riddle's choices, but this was, in a way, more about Harry than him. He wanted to see the person his soulmate was – and could be – beyond the mask he wore at all times.

Harry would force Tom to dial down on his methods in order to match – and surpass – him.

If he wanted to be a Dark Lord, he would have to do it Harry's way.



Dumbledore wasn't the headmaster yet. Harry had forgotten it, too wrapped up in the fact that he was in an entirely different dimension and the ramifications of that.

It was 1944, and Headmaster Armando Dippet was the one at the helm. Harry didn't know anything about the man, the only contact he had ever had with him being with his portrait in Hogwarts. Except for now, of course, as Dippet stared down at Harry, more cautious than curious.

"So you are telling me, young man, that you are from another dimension?"

Right, he had told him. In his defense, things would get a lot harder if he had to pretend to know what the fuck was going on instead of just being honest.

"You're the headmaster of a magical school and *this* is what trips you up?"

Harry expected the man to turn to him with a glare, but Dippet laughed, seemingly wildly entertained by Harry's lack of manners. "You do have a point."

The headmaster waited for Harry to continue, then, and Harry sighed.

"I walked through the Veil at the Department of Mysteries," he admitted, head held high, refusing to feel embarrassed over his reckless decisions. Didn't he want to be able to claim his own actions? That was a start.

“Now, young man, why would you do such a thing?” Dippet spoke with reprehension, a deep crease on his worried forehead. His reaction didn’t fill Harry with confidence, per se, but he pressed on. *Young man* was annoying, after all, but at least it wasn’t Dumbledore’s *my boy*.

“Look, headmaster, you look like the type of person that appreciates honesty above politeness. If I had to assume, you strike me as a Ravenclaw or a Gryffindor. As a former Gryffindor myself, I think it’s safe to assume you are probably familiar with reckless decisions, is it not?”

“You accidentally walked into the Department of Mysteries and through the Veil?” His tone sounded somewhere between incredulous and impressed.

“Now, I didn’t say accidentally,” Harry backtracked, sure that he was ruining this. “More like planned recklessness.”

Way to manipulate this situation.

Dippet eyed him curiously. “You sound like a Slytherin.”

“Yeah, well, the hat was really torn up about my decision,” he retorted. It probably would be yet again.

“Is there a reason why you did that?” Dippet didn’t seem very eager to drop it – that shimmer of curiosity in his expression only seemed to grow as they conversed. Harry decided honesty was the best course of action; it wasn’t like he would tell the man everything, anyway. There was no point in discussing the budding dark lord in the other room any more than necessary.

When he answered, it was covered with something he didn’t want to look too closely at. “My soulmate... In my dimension, he is dead. But not here. Here he is alive, in Hogwarts *right now*.” Harry didn’t even need to fake the shades of longing in his voice. He had no delusions about changing Tom Riddle, not without a lot of effort, but it wasn’t as if he couldn’t even *try*. “I just want a chance to meet him. There isn’t really all that much waiting for me back home... and I never got to finish my last year in Hogwarts, so. Here I am.”

He had no idea where to go or what to do if he was rejected, especially since he had no money at this time. He doubted he would even be able to access his family’s vault at Gringotts since it was quite possible their magic wouldn’t read him as a Potter.

Either way, something softened in Dippet’s eyes. He was a fan of honesty, it turned out. Or maybe just vulnerability.

Harry was glad when he didn’t push to know who his soulmate was. He probably assumed he would know soon enough.

The thought made his stomach twist with something akin to nervousness – perhaps even anticipation.

“I’ll see what I can do,” the headmaster’s tone was final. “In the meantime, you need to be sorted.” A smirk sprouted from his lips, leaving a bad taste in Harry’s mouth. “Something

tells me you won't be a Gryffindor this time."



CHAPTER 2. IF I DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING, PEOPLE ALWAYS ASSUMED THE WORST.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON SEPTEMBER 26TH, 2023.

Chapter Notes

This is the new version of Iron & Decaying Dreams, updated on the 28th of May, 2023. If you are reading this and you've read the story prior to this date and are not in the first chapter, please go back and give it a read. While the bulk of the story is still the same, the order of certain parts has been changed and new sentences/paragraphs have been added. In a few chapters, new scenes have been added as well. By re-reading it, you assure the absorption of the content the way it is meant to be read. Thank you. Chapter title is from FIGHT CLUB, book by Chuck Palahniuk and movie by David Fincher.

"Only after disaster can we be resurrected. It's only after you've lost everything that you're free to do anything. Nothing is static, everything is evolving, everything is falling apart."

- Fight Club, 1996, Chuck Palahniuk

CHAPTER 2 – IF I DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING, PEOPLE ALWAYS ASSUMED THE WORST.

OR, FORSAKEN, SEEN

Dippet had provided Harry with everything he needed.

The school funds weren't huge, but the wizarding – and muggle – war raging on outside Hogwarts' walls meant students seeking refuge during the school year were always welcome.

The school staff didn't like housing students during the summer if they had somewhere to go (which was stupid, in Harry's eyes, considering there was a fucking war going on and

nowhere was safe), but he didn't have a place to stay, he had no money, *and* he had no guardians, so Dippet had let him take up residence in Hogwarts for the time being.

It was his last year anyway. After that, he could figure out what to do by himself.

Harry had grown past the incessant house loyalty, but he was still proud of being a Gryffindor, and he could definitely see himself in its traits. He was used to the red. Harry belonged in Gryffindor, and he knew it.

It turned out the hat didn't agree all that much. Not like it ever had, really.

"You have been sorted before, by me." The Sorting Hat snickered on Harry's head as if it thought the notion was a rather amusing one.

"Yep. Definitely have," Harry responded, nerves finally catching up to him. The moment he left Dippet's office, his new life would begin. It could be either heaven or hell.

"Then you definitely know what I am about to say."

Ugh. "Real friends, greatness, the like. I could argue with you, but I won't. My entire plan rests on Slytherin, after all." Harry sighed, almost regretting the decision that brought him there.

Almost.

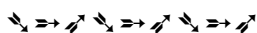
"Is there truly anything more Slytherin than staying somewhere you don't think you belong for the benefit of a plan?" the hat inquired, voice deep as if channeling ancient knowledge, its question a rhetorical one.

Nope, there is not, Harry thought, not intending it as a response to the hat. *Maybe it does know me, after all.*

"Slytherin!" it bellowed out. Harry watched Headmaster Dippet give him a knowing smile as he took off the hat, a stubborn scowl on his face.

The headmaster gave him new robes, which Harry quickly spelled on without any ceremony. He could admit the green settled nicely as it replaced the black.

Heaven or hell, he reiterated in his head.



It was purgatory, instead.

Harry felt the true feeling of being out of time when he first stepped into the Great Hall in 1944.

It looked just like his Hogwarts had – the floating candles, the long, wide tables filled with students, excited chatter bringing the room to life – but Harry couldn't help but feel like something was inherently different.

His eyes first strayed to the Gryffindor table by instinct, but he found they were just as eager to watch the Slytherins. All the people he had read about in books in the Black Library touted their glorious existences like it was an everyday occurrence, and Harry felt like he was watching a live painting, though it carried the fluidity of Renaissance art more than it did the rigid vivacity of a wizarding portrait.

Laughing and complaining could be heard everywhere between those walls, and the wave of magic that hit Harry as he walked in was overwhelming. Grimmauld Place had been powerful, but the Dark magic surrounding it could be depleting as if feeding on him to keep its power. In Hogwarts, it felt fresh. Throughout all of Harry's readings, he had become well aware that the difference in auras wasn't due to the types of magic a place contained at all, as some might think. It was simply because Grimmauld Place needed lots of magic to sustain itself and it had no one from who to pull it, while Hogwarts had hundreds of students within its halls performing it daily, which more than satisfied the near-sentient wards and protections which surrounded it.

It made Harry almost upset, the thought of Grimmauld Place, now free of wizards entirely. It was never meant to be an abandoned manor – it was built to be a family home, to house generations of magical prowess that could keep its mystical properties alive. Of course it felt so draining when it had nothing to draw from. It wouldn't surprise Harry if the reason Kreacher was always in such a bad mood was partially due to his elf magic feeling weak.

He made himself shut down the thought as he started his stride to his new house's table. There was no point in thinking about all the things he had left behind. His anger was new and burned bright, and he wanted it to help him bury the guilt he could feel already pooling in his veins.

The Slytherin uniform felt odd on his skin, and he felt like he was betraying the person he was supposed to be by going in the opposite direction he was used to.

In a way, it felt like the lack of control of being a child all over again.

Harry felt observed as he walked, and it brought forth a sense of déjà vu. It was nothing new, the feeling of being stalked as prey, but he felt the urge to find its source anyway, and that was how he ended up locking eyes with Riddle.

Was it part of the bond, this almost irresistible pull to be closer to each other? Was that the reason Voldemort always chased him, when he had never felt to Harry like the type to put so much stock into divination?

Riddle had dark eyes, almost as dark as Snape's had been, and brown hair the color of rich earth, with dark red undertones visible as sunlight streamed through one of the large windows, as gargantuan as walls of glass. He was beautiful, thought Harry, just as beautiful as he had been when he left the diary, though much more alive and tangible this time around.

Harry wanted to touch him, make sure he was real.

He snapped himself out of his reverie, trying to focus instead on the present moment. This wasn't his universe and this wasn't his Tom, not really, and that was what he was counting on. But if he wanted to truly make a living here, he needed to know if there were any real changes to the timeline he needed to be aware of, and that could only be done by *being* there.

Harry wasn't a Ravenclaw, and it wasn't as if he could find any information about that in books anyway. It would have to be a practical exploration, learning of all the ways the paths had forked down the road, leading to another destination.

At least he knew there were no other Harrys lurking around from what Dippet had informed him. Only him. So far it looked like everything was on track to be the same, the only deterrent being himself. He would change things by just being there; and, hopefully, he would change Tom's actions, too.

But it wasn't as if he could just catch the boy's attention easily.

Sure, Tom would be interested at first – no, not interested, *territorial* – but he was a master manipulator. He collected people like jewelry, always a keen eye on the ones that were worth the most. Harry was ordinary at best, all the things that made him something more either usual consequences of aging and learning as a wizard or being caused by Tom himself. And there, of course, none of these things had happened. And he couldn't just tell Tom he was his soulmate from another dimension. He had no idea what he would do with that information.

And by his counts, Tom wasn't even seventeen yet. His mark would not be visible, ritual or not, until then. There was no way he would believe Harry if he were to tell him.

Harry felt the urge to check his own mark once more, his anxiety itching to make itself known, and he spiraled again.

What if this Tom *wasn't* his soulmate, regardless of what the book said? Was he taking another Harry's soulmate by being there, a Harry that wasn't even born yet, one that had no chance to claim what was rightfully his?

"Avada Kedavra!" A voice cut through Harry's thoughts, making him realize he had already reached the Slytherin table and had been busy overthinking everything and standing with a vacant look in his eyes. He froze, all too familiar with the voice uttering those words. He focused his gaze.

Tom freaking Riddle was *smiling* at him.

"You seemed freaked out by us. Were you scared we were going to kill you or something?" His tone was mildly mocking, more amused than anything else.

Right. He had been joking. No one was trying to kill Harry.

A cold, paralyzing feeling took over Harry's veins as he looked at Tom instead.

His first words to me.

Would those words be his first in every single universe?

Does this mean this was always the way those words were meant to be uttered?

Not as a curse, but as a lighthearted jab?

The conclusion made Harry's head spin.

"Not exactly scared of Slytherins," Harry finally answered. He had to live in the present, not in his head. "Maybe you all just aren't that interesting."

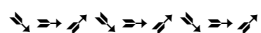
Now, *that* sparked something familiar in Riddle's eyes, something akin to feeling challenged, a hungry look that told Harry that, regardless of their bizarre introduction, this was very much still Tom Riddle.

"Maybe you just haven't spent enough time with us." The smirk on Tom's face shifted, morphing into a quiet look of confidence of someone who knew exactly how to put everyone in their place. "Tom Riddle, prefect, at your service."

Something about the way he said that led Harry's instincts right back to the graveyard.

Bow to death, Harry Potter.

"We'll see." The smile that slipped onto his face felt deadly. "Harry," he introduced himself.



Upon joining their table for what appeared to be dinner, everyone already sat there gave Harry a once-over, clearly not impressed by what they saw. With robes of dubious quality, scrawny-looking, and with bad posture – at least when compared to the purebloods – there wasn't much about Harry to hold their attention besides the fact that no one was expecting a new student to join Hogwarts in their seventh year.

The books Harry had read about the purebloods of that time didn't have much in terms of illustrations; he could tell which families some of them belonged to, but it was nothing more than conjecture. It was all based on stereotypes: light blonde hair and light eyes – possibly a Malfoy. Grey eyes, dark hair? A Black, probably. Lestranges were the most varied family appearance-wise – they would be hard to tell at first glance alone. Rosiers, Mulcibers, Carrows, Crouches, Greengrasses, Rowles, Averys... None were very unique in their physical form. Prewetts were, with their red hair, but Harry didn't think there were any at the moment in Slytherin, at least not in seventh year.

He had no way of tying names to faces, not *really*. The Blacks, however, were the only ones he felt he could tell with almost certainty at that moment. The tendency toward inbreeding certainly didn't hurt.

At first glance, there were at least two people at the table he could make sense of. One was a boy, taller than half of his peers, his height visible even as he sat down, with storm-grey eyes, midnight-black hair with perfectly styled curls reaching his shoulders, and a tendency toward not blinking. He looked quite impartial to Harry's arrival. The boy sat with his back straightened in a way that would appear rigid on anyone else, but looked effortless on him. Harry had no doubt he was Orion Black, simply because looking at him brought a pain to his chest immediately.

He held a striking resemblance to a younger Sirius.

Another one was a girl, jet black hair reaching her waist, straight as a razor, with the same grey eyes as Orion – though those were appraising him with far less subtlety and creepiness. She was standing up, having been interrupted halfway in her conversation by Harry's arrival. It was clearly Walburga Black – she hadn't changed much in the way of physical appearance from her portrait.

She had a curvy and stout physique, but it held a softness to her. She had a similar type of body to the ones Harry associated with Greek female statues, only larger, more imposing; she looked like she could snap a man in half. If it wasn't for the severity of her facial features, Harry would have considered Walburga one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen.

Apparently, she knew this, too, because she caught him staring, her inquiring look leaving to make way for a smirk to form.

"Who's the new kid, Riddle?"

Harry had somehow forgotten Tom had sat next to him. The shock of Riddle's first words and unexpected introduction combined with the strange yet familiar-looking faces around him had Harry locked away in his own head.

And looking way too long at Walburga Black, apparently.

Riddle plonked back in the seat next to him, an oddly undignified gesture for someone so proper. "A new arrival. This is Harry..." Riddle paused, looking questioningly at him.

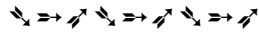
"Evans. Harry Evans."

His last name's muggle origin did not pass unnoticed. Half of the Slytherin table who had been listening in rolled their eyes and went back to their previous interactions, leaving only Riddle, Walburga, Orion, and a few others tuned in.

"Well, welcome to Slytherin, Harry Evans. Hopefully, you'll fit right in here." Walburga smiled, though it didn't seem to carry much warmth. "At least as much as you can," she concluded, an amused-yet-distant feel to her voice. *Which is not much in your eyes*, Harry guessed from her words.

"I will," he answered, not sure in the slightest of his assertion.

This is going to be much harder than I anticipated.



He would room with Tom, Orion Black, and Abraxas Malfoy, the original unholy trinity.

Their dynamic hadn't been hard to grasp as he situated himself. His roommates were not quiet, per se, but definitely secretive. Orion and Abraxas seemed particularly close, despite their opposing personalities, and Tom simultaneously fit in perfectly as the trio's silent commanding leader while also feeling awkwardly tacked on whenever teasing and joking took place.

It was surprisingly funny to Harry, seeing Riddle like that. He was charming, helpful, and the perfect picture of politeness, but he became rigid the minute things took a turn he wasn't expecting. It reminded Harry of being the third wheel when Hermione and Ron had started dating, oddly enough. It made him painfully aware that Riddle might have been mature, but he was still a teenager, stumbling through social interactions like everybody else.

Still, Harry couldn't help but imagine Voldemort in his place, wondering if he resorted so much to *crucio* because he couldn't bear not knowing how to react, and if he felt so out of place and disrespected by someone else's displaced amusement that torturing them was the only way out he could find.

The thought turned up the corners of his lips, a hysterical, incredulous laugh bubbling up in his throat.

"Something you want to share with the class, Evans?" Riddle's deep voice took him out of his musings, the boy looking at him with a curious glint hiding in his eye.

He was standing in the middle of the room, next to his bed. Harry's bed was in the left corner, while Orion's was at his right, then Riddle's, then Abraxas's.

The jab wasn't mean but casually composed, like everything else about the boy. It made Harry wonder why their first meeting had gone the way it did, why Riddle seemed so relaxed that first moment in contrast to the mask he so effortlessly slipped on now.

"Doesn't this façade get tiring?" The words slipped out of Harry, supposed to be a simple thought but ending up as anything but.

Harry suppressed a groan.

Riddle blinked slowly, like a predator before his clueless prey. His tiny smile, however, leaned into an image of innocence that did not fit at all. It could fool other people – it probably *did* fool other people – but not Harry. Not after everything he had gone through with that man, both wrapped up in a bow by the cruel strings of fate, one that grew tighter the harder they tried to untie it.

Harry knew Orion and Abraxas were still in the room, but he had no eyes for either of them. It was just him and Tom, a duel closer to chess than to a battle.

“It is surprising you’ve survived Grindelwald when you speak every thought you have out loud,” Tom commented with the casualness of someone remarking on the weather.

Harry’s backstory was as simple as it could get: his parents had died running from Grindelwald’s forces, but he managed to escape and got asylum at Hogwarts. He chose to go by his mother’s maiden name, as Potter was quite a well-known pureblood name and he really didn’t want to have to reckon with the existence of any ancestors that might be attending Hogwarts at the same time. He could’ve had decided to stick to being a half-blood, as that would certainly give him a bigger amount of privilege in Slytherin, but he knew his housemates would be interested in knowing just whose family belonged the wizard who’d had a kid with a muggle or muggle-born wizard, and he didn’t want to risk that. People had already jokingly remarked on his physical similarities to the Potter family, and it was only his insistence on being muggle-born that made them drop it. He knew it would make things harder, but being seen as a muggle-born meant his story was essentially untraceable, and he was counting on the fact that the pureblood obsession with blood status wouldn’t be such an issue, as they couldn’t care less who his parents were; after all, a mudblood is a mudblood, regardless of where they came from.

“I’m surprised you care enough about a muggle-born student to remember what they’ve told you about themselves.” Harry’s tone openly contradicted his words. There was nothing surprising about Tom Riddle, manipulator extraordinaire, knowing every detail about a new student of the House of Snakes.

At the end of the day, he wasn’t irreplaceable. If Riddle, a supposed muggle-born, had surpassed the restraints of his blood status and risen above it, who’s to say there wouldn’t be a next one to take his place?

“I’m afraid I’m not quite sure what you mean.” Oh, but he did. Harry could see the flame burning through his gaze. *Finally. Maybe he is alive. Maybe there’s hope there. Anger is a predecessor to love, at the end of the day.* “I care about all students alike.”

“I’m sure that’s true.” Harry wanted to break down his exterior, one piece at a time, get under his skin in such a way Riddle wouldn’t be able to shut down and keep his façade up. Harry wanted to make him scream at him, call him names, and *react*. “If you say so.”

Harry hadn’t been there for more than a few hours, but his experience with the Tom Riddle from the diary and the more unhinged version of him as Voldemort made him more attuned to the boy in front of him. He knew he could read Harry almost as well as Harry could read him. He didn’t want them to dance around each other until Riddle got bored of him. He wanted to haunt Tom’s every dream and be the only person he felt intrigued and challenged by.

It was quite an intense feeling. Harry hadn’t felt that alert since the climax of the war, as he walked to his certain death and closed that chapter by killing his soulmate.

Still, he had to take it slow. Riddle’s next Horcrux was made in his twenties. Harry didn’t have an unlimited amount of time to sort everything, seeing it was his and Riddle’s last year

at Hogwarts, but he had *some* time, and antagonizing Tom without counterbalancing it with enough to also rouse his curiosity was a bad idea. He didn't want to appear as an obstacle the other boy had to get rid of, not quite.

Harry lay down on the bed, clothes on and curtains undrawn, and stared at the dark ceiling and its glowing star patterns. He breathed deeply, uncaring if any of his roommates were looking at him.

Nobody here knew him. It was terrifying, having to survive on flimsy lies and hiding his past.

But it was also freeing. He could be whoever he wanted now, whoever he had become that he was still trying to untangle and comprehend. If what he needed to succeed was the type of adrenaline this Tom released in him, one that for once was less about danger and more about feeling *alive*, then he was more than willing to stay and try something new.

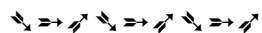
He didn't have a concrete plan, but he knew what he wanted to accomplish.

He wanted to help Tom fear death less, and keep him from making any more Horcruxes. And, of course, if he could, stop his plans of becoming a Dark Lord. Or at least steer them toward something a bit more legal, like joining the Ministry.

Truly, as long as he didn't kill a bunch of people and spread his ideology against muggles, Harry didn't care what he did with his time. He saw so much potential in Riddle, and he had an inkling that the pureblood crap he spewed was more about appeasing the masses than anything he actually truly believed in. Riddle was a smart guy – he knew the consequences of getting rid of muggle-borns and half-bloods, and he sure as hell knew they were not inferior. Riddle was a half-blood, and he was one of the strongest wizards the world had ever seen.

It was the methods that tripped Harry up. How could he help Tom let go of his plans? Riddle had spent years building what he had with these people. They must be ready to follow him straight out of Hogwarts.

He would figure it out, though. And maybe, just maybe, for once, Harry and Tom could stand as equals rather than enemies.



If Harry had ever felt more powerless than at that moment, he couldn't tell.

His first day in this alternate dimension had ended with Harry taking another look at his mark.

It was midnight by the time Harry lifted the glamour, his curtains now drawn and a silently cast *muffliato* in place.

The mark was no longer illuminated by that odd hue of orange; it was as black as coal, just like a tattoo. The delicate handwriting – the same as the diary, but more adult somehow – looked settled as if it had always been there.

The first book he had read on soulmates did mention the phenomenon: when someone finally met their soulmate, their mark turned dark. Harry didn't have any doubts, not really, but this solidified what he already knew.

When he had first done the spell, his mark had been that yellow-orange, even though he had already met Voldemort. His soulmate wasn't meant to be him.

It was always this version of Tom.

It upset Harry, just how much of his life had been taken by Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Harry had been his the moment he first graced the Earth, no buts, no whys, no hows. Tom was the rhythm to his poem, the reason he was. A prophecy merely confirmed what had been destined: they were one.

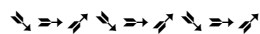
Tom, however, had had decades before his existence had been overtaken by Harry's. Harry never had the chance to be something other than a self-sacrificing savior.

Yet, he found himself lost without his soulmate, searching for him in every room, a small piece of him destroyed every time he realized he was alone. Harry could never admit it to himself, then, but there was more to his sense of impatience than restlessness. Even after Voldemort had died, he still expected him to show up.

The worst part was that he didn't always feel scared at the prospect.

Fate was but a cruel joke. It intertwined life and death in the most terrible ouroboros and laughed as mere mortals suffered as if loss meant the end.

Because Harry understood it now. Voldemort was gone, but Tom was still here. It was always how it was meant to be, and he had played his past perfectly.



On that first night, he dreamed.

The dusk's dimness of daylight gave the vision an otherworldly feel. The sky was a dark orange sunset, an aura of sentience surrounding the area like the crepuscular heavens above were a dome, trapping Harry within it.

Everything wore that malicious shade, from trees to the ground to the puddles of rainwater in it. He knew he was in the Forbidden Forest, but it somehow felt too alien to truly resemble it; the true location could be dangerous, but it also carried a sense of purity, the type of

amorality only nature could possess faultlessly. This place, however, felt to Harry like an imitation; a good one, but inauthentic nonetheless. The only exceptions to the all-encompassing threatening emanation were Harry himself and the shadow lurking somewhere around his peripheral vision, not as clear as everything else but still noticeable regardless.

It was so dark it was impossible to miss. It felt like the absence of color, so dense it absorbed everything near it, a tarry black hole. It spoke to the boy in a silent pull, a magnetic field so irresistible Harry couldn't help but let himself be guided forward by it.

As he approached the shadowy figure, never seeing it head-on as it slipped aside with the swiftness of Harry's invisibility cloak, he felt the anxiety present ever since he fell into sleep grow in his chest, every heartbeat more frantic than the last. *I am going to die here*, his head whispered, echoing his past venture into the Forest.

Yet, Harry didn't feel the calming sense of acceptance he had previously felt – no, this time, he wanted to fight.

I'm going to die here, his brain spoke again.

I won't let it happen, he answered.

He forced his feet to stop moving, breaking up the only sound of his dreamscape.

The mysterious humanoid creature trying to nobble his life force finally turned around, eye-to-eye contact established.

It was human.

Or rather, a being with the uncanniness of something transformed out of humanity and into the unknown.

Voldemort stood in front of Harry Potter in all his Tom Riddle glory. He looked the way Harry imagined he would have if he had grown older the usual way, lined skin in his complexion still carrying a sense of regality, as wizards aged more slowly than muggles. There was no supernatural feeling to him anymore, no enhancement made against the laws of magic. They felt like equals in all but destiny now, with Harry alive, and Voldemort, dead.

A raspy wheezing sound made its way out of the man's mouth, a long unused voice so low it would have been missed if it wasn't for the dead silence of everything else.

"Why did you abandon me?" it whispered, Voldemort's ruby-red eyes filled with the sadness of someone who had been alone for millennia. It made Harry's body break out in shivers, his breathing shallow and useless as he tried to wake himself up. "It is so cold, where I am. You should have been here with me, yet you got a second chance."

He didn't want to answer; he didn't want to think about it. Harry just wanted to wake up, wake up, *wake up*.

Yet, he couldn't stop himself from doing so.

“I wish I had been there before you lost all hope. I wish I had given you a way out.”

I wish I hadn't needed to be the one to seal your destiny.

I wish someone else could have taken the burden.

But Voldemort didn't seem to listen.

His eyes wandered, unseeing, as if his body was there but his spirit resided somewhere else.

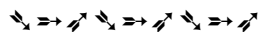
Harry could hear whispers coming from the man's direction, even as his lips remained shut.

Eloi eloi lama sabachthani?

My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?

As Harry's head provided the translation unprompted, he closed his eyes, the feeling of anxiety and dread slowly morphing into guilt as he stayed like that.

He was back in his the dorm when he finally opened them.



The dream stayed with him through the entirety of the next day.

Harry wished he had a harder time deciphering its meaning, but he could see it, clear as day.

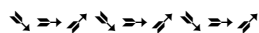
He had a chance of helping Tom now.

He couldn't waste it.

The easiest way to catch a Dark Lord's eye was to be unforgettable. To be competition.

And, of course, to be an equal.

Harry was luckier the most – he didn't have to dance around Riddle, bow to him, or swear loyalty and servitude to him for all eternity. Their connection would bridge the gap. He could instead do what he did best: provoke him into noticing him.



His first days in the dungeons were odd, to say the least. Dippet had left him some money, books, uniforms, class schedules, and everything he needed to be a normal student, and the

day after he arrived, he was expected to take his OWLs, which were just as hellish as they had been the first time. If it hadn't been for the preparation he had done for Auror training and all his reading, he wouldn't have stood a chance. As it were, however, he got decent grades in almost everything, and Acceptables on the subjects he had hated in school, including Potions. It was just another year in Hogwarts. He could handle another year.

His roommates mostly ignored him, as if waiting for Riddle to give them permission to speak to him, and Harry had never felt so awkward in his life. Riddle was perfectly polite, perfectly helpful, and perfectly hospitable. It made Harry want to shake him, to break him. It was only when Orion and Abraxas showed up, urgency in their eyes, that Riddle showed anything other than his manufactured perfection. Alas, those were the moments they left the room, privacy charms keeping their conversation as secluded as possible, and Harry didn't get to see the version of Tom he actually wanted to.

Harry was unremarkable in class. He had never been the best student in the past, but he also didn't want to raise questions he couldn't answer this time around. Defense was the only subject he allowed himself to shine in since being on the run from Grindelwald was enough of an excuse for his great reflexes.

His spell repertoire had also increased since he wasn't scared of Dark magic, not anymore, but he kept it legal and plausible for classes.

He wouldn't hold back if threatened, though, not if he wanted to catch Riddle's eye.

And catch his eye he did – at least for the time being. Harry could see Tom watching him, his intense brown eyes almost red in the distance. On Harry's fourth day in Hogwarts, he got caught up in a conversation that both helped him and doomed him in his mission.

Harry was spending time in the Slytherin common room before his next class – free periods were the only time he was able to fully come to terms with his situation – when he heard Avery speak.

"So, Evans," he began, "how was it like, running from Grindelwald?"

If there was anyone brave enough to ask, that was Bram Avery. Harry was almost impressed, especially as he could feel Riddle shooting daggers at him with his eyes.

"Annoying. You would think the worst Dark Lord ever would have something better to do than go around killing people's families, wouldn't you?" The more reckless he seemed, the less likely it was that someone would sense his ulterior motives. At least, that was what Harry told himself. Truth was, he just liked getting to be childish for once, after having to carry such a burden from a young age.

If he had to play a teenager again, then he would milk it for all it was worth and have fun with it.

His words seemed to shock the Slytherins around him. The game of politics they played was a tiring one, both trying to seem against Grindelwald and gauging who agreed with his beliefs. Harry had no intention of playing. If he confused them, then he was on the right path.

Harry went back to staring out into the Black Lake through one of the windows when the last voice he expected to join the conversation did just that.

“What was so interesting about your family?” Riddle asked, tone low and captivating, effectively silencing all murmuring around them. Tom had shown little to no interest in his backstory before.

“Interesting? When you are a maniac, your opponent doesn’t need to be interesting. Anyone and anything is a threat to someone like Grindelwald, especially muggles and muggle-born wizards.” A non-answer. Harry was getting eerily good at those.

“Would you consider yourself a threat?”

“What do you think?” Harry genuinely wanted to know. He wanted to change Tom’s ideals, and to do that he needed to become somewhat of an antagonistic figure; he didn’t want to have to be one, though. He wanted Riddle to want something other than to destroy the only place he had ever called home.

Because, at the end of the day, that was another thing they had in common: Hogwarts and the wizarding world were their homes. Harry had been lost after the war, true, but he still felt more like himself at Hogwarts than he ever did in Privet Drive or even Grimmauld Place. Harry just couldn’t understand why Tom felt so inclined to sabotage the only place that had given him any semblance of power.

“I think you think you’re utterly forgettable and cannot fathom why a Dark Lord would have come after you and your family, so you are loud and obnoxious to try to make up for your mediocrity.”

Well, that was uncalled for. Just because something was true didn’t mean one had to point it out.

Especially if they were the Dark Lord that actually fit that description.

“Well, Riddle, the real question here is why would you bother asking something you seem to think you already have the answer to?” Harry wasn’t about to go down quietly. He tried to inject as much contempt and mockery as he could into his voice as he asked, “Was it so you could use the retort you probably practiced for hours in the mirror so you could feel superior to the mudblood orphan?”

There was a real rage in Tom’s eyes this time.

Probably hit too close to home, Harry thought. He was an orphan too and probably had been called a mudblood loads of times when he didn’t yet rule over Slytherin.

It was clear that no one challenged their master, especially not as openly as he was. *Riddle had never been badgered like this before*, Harry guessed. Never questioned, and that was changing with Harry there. He couldn’t allow the mudblood kid to do it and come out unscathed.

“Careful with the path you’re treading, Evans,” Riddle answered after a long pause. He seemed to be carefully measuring his words, his thin lips pursed in a straight line. “You wouldn’t want to make enemies so early on in the game.”

You are already my enemy, Harry’s brain uttered.

But it didn’t really feel like the reality, not with all he knew and now that the adrenaline of war had faded.

Well... You are supposed to be.

Tom Riddle was dangerous, but he also couldn’t be blamed for the actions of his counterpart, not really. It wasn’t like Harry was even sure whether he had done the exact same things here as he had in Harry’s original universe. It would do him some good to keep that in mind.

“Maybe you could teach me how to avoid that.” That sounded like flirting. *Fuck*. It was hard to concentrate when Tom looked that good in his school uniform, all brooding and commanding.

It was in the weirdest moments that his attraction decided to show, Harry realized, cringing on the inside. It was quite annoying.

Riddle’s eyes glittered for just a second, but enough for Harry to notice Tom seemed entertained. The storm had passed almost as fast as it had arrived, clouds parting to make way for the blue skies.

“I could,” Riddle replied. A cold look of indifference replaced the warmth. “But I have better things to do with my time. You can figure it out on your own.”

Ouch. Maybe he wasn’t enjoying the banter as much as Harry was; either way, it was a hard balance to strike, it seemed, between keeping Tom’s attention and boring him to death.

To Harry, after all, this was a do-over, but a chance at a lighthearted one. To Tom, though, it was life or death, an opportunity to take control of the narrative once again. Harry kept forgetting the stakes were quite different to the both of them, and that impacted their interactions.

Tom probably didn’t yet feel like Harry was worthy of a show of power. He didn’t see Harry as anything but a kid trying to mask his insecurities, still wound up from running from a Dark lord. Harry had to show him this wasn’t a passing trend, and that he actually meant to challenge him.

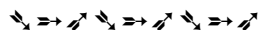
Harry would have to play peacemaker, to attend to the purebloods’ delicate sensibilities, while also making it obvious that he was strong enough to take on Tom, so he would be taken seriously and not destroyed by him.

He would have to do this until he could join forces with Riddle.

Because *that* was the only way forward. Harry didn’t want to be a Dark lord, and it was hard to imagine Tom giving up on it – for the time being, anyway. At least if they worked together,

Harry would be able to let Tom take charge while he was his moral compass.

He wasn't a strategist, but he would need to think of something soon.



Soulmate talk was all the rage in Slytherin. At first, it had been quite the whiplash to Harry, who had been kept in the dark about it for so long.

While the Slytherins were cautious and only talked to their pureblood peers about their excitement over turning seventeen, it was not particularly hard for Harry to overhear. He had never before appreciated the current non-existence of *muffliato* – a spell that was Snape's creation – and the current obscurity of silencing charms as much as he did now.

From what he could gather from browsing the library, it was quite possible that in his original universe as well as this one, soulmates were pureblood-only knowledge, something very common between them yet secretive. There were quite a few things Harry had come to find out through his year of reading that were like that; wizards, especially pureblood ones, tended to shield their culture the best they could from muggle-borns, possibly afraid of them "corrupting" it. Soulmates were quite a touchy subject and a delicate knowledge – most people were taught to only reveal their soulmates when they were ready to start their relationship. To reject your soulmate was seen as a terrible act, especially if done publicly.

As a muggle-raised wizard more worried about surviving than anything else, it didn't surprise Harry that he didn't hear much about soulmates in school. What pissed him off was none of the adults telling him, the adults that knew he wouldn't know about it. He knew it had been Dumbledore's influence – it was implied that he made sure that no one let Harry into the subject. And while he knew it had been done with the specific goal in mind to ensure the end of the war, Harry wished someone had broken the rules and just told him.

He just didn't like feeling on the outside. He had already experienced it all his life.

And that had been in school and in the war, of course. What about after? Sure, he hadn't spent much, if any, time with people afterward save for his best friends and the Weasleys. But they would have let him know.

Ginny would have told him... Unless, of course, he hadn't been her soulmate, which was the case. She had wanted to be with him after the war when she had turned seventeen and had probably already been aware of her soulmate mark, so it was possible that she hadn't told him as not to risk Harry not wanting to be with her due to their magical incompatibility. It angered him, but it made sense, in a twisted sort of way.

Why hadn't Ron, though? Had he truly done the same thing to him simply for Ginny? Would he have lied to Harry because of that? Ron had been a huge advocate for Harry and Ginny to be together, but he had eventually accepted their breakup. It didn't make much sense to him

that his best friend would have kept something so major from him, especially if there was a possibility that Harry's soulmate could've kept him from leaving the wizarding world, which his friend had been vehemently opposed to.

Fuck, a sudden thought hit Harry, Sirius's letter from Grimmauld Place flashing in his head.

Snape and Sirius were soulmates.

What. The. Fuck.

Magic must be sentience, he thought, shaking his head in disbelief. *I mean, the sheer irony...*

Harry got careless when walking to Potions, lost in thought as he was. His classmates and roommates had been quiet enough, and he had naively assumed that meant Riddle had nothing in store for him. He should have known.

Harry might be a new student, but Riddle had never been known for his patience. He had never been one to stand disrespect and let someone else walk all over him. Harry might not have any *real* intentions of overthrowing him, but Tom didn't know that.

Harry got ambushed exactly halfway through the Slytherin common room and the Potions classroom. It was a particularly dark corridor, shadows playing on the stone walls as the last of the students made their way toward Slughorn's class.

There were four of them – Rosier, Lestrangle, and Avery were staring at him, and in a corner, suspiciously bored-looking, Mulciber leaned onto a wall.

Riddle's posse, Harry remarked, entertained.

Is this their idea of being intimidating?

"Evans," Tymeo Lestrangle greeted him, a surprisingly mild tone to his voice. "I don't think you have fully fathomed what it means to be a Slytherin," he spoke again, like an actor on a play.

He even had the stance.

"And you are here to teach me, I presume," Harry sounded bored. *I just want to go to Potions*, his brain whined, surprising him with something he had literally never thought before in his life.

Desperate times.

"It makes sense, of course," Lestrangle continued, as if Harry hadn't reacted at all, "raised as a muggle and running from Grindelwald... You never had the opportunity to learn *manners*."

If Harry had been a pure-blood, that would have been quite the insult. He could imagine Riddle's reaction, the pure contempt and anger on his face as he heard the words.

Harry, however, thought it was hilarious that they ever thought he cared about their *manners* in the first place.

“Is your idea of manners cornering someone in a corridor and making them late to class?” Merlin, he was there for barely four days and was already bored of the games the Slytherins played. Couldn’t any of them ever be *direct*?

Maybe it was the war hero in Harry, but he could not handle anticipation at all. He had never been good at patience, but lately, his skin crawled any time he had to *wait*, especially if he could do anything about it.

Lestrangle’s face darkened, his eerie light blue eyes glinting with anger, but it was Avery who responded to Harry’s retort.

“What is your *problem*?” he spit, and gritted his teeth. *A human reaction, at last.*

“The same as everyone else’s, I suppose.” Harry paused. He almost sneered as he continued, “I can’t *stand* entitled people.”

A soft snicker cut through the last of Harry’s words, making all of them stare at its source. Lilith Mulciber, who had been quiet until then, tried to go back to the unaffected look from before, failing miserably.

Harry smiled to himself. Maybe he had a possible ally there, after all.

Rosier glared at her and turned back to Harry, the rest of them following suit.

“There are rules in Slytherin, rules you have to follow if you want to remain here without any issues. The first, and most important of all,” Rosier chimed in, the same stony expression he had since the beginning of their confrontation, “is *no one* disrespects Riddle. No one.”

“Why isn’t your master here himself to educate me on that?”

“He doesn’t bother with lesser beings.” It was the first time Mulciber had spoken. Her voice was melodic and low, but it still carried itself through the dungeons. “You’ll know if he sees anything worthwhile in you.”

That’s the plan.

“In the meantime...” Lestrangle jumped in, “There are ways of putting people back in their place.”

Avery, Lestrangle, and Rosier approached Harry, the levity and pursuit in their steps reminding Harry of McGonagall’s cat stride. It was oddly rehearsed, leading Harry to believe they had some sort of organized attack prepared for any new Slytherins who misbehaved, almost as a violent rite of initiation.

Not for the first time since arriving, Harry missed the simplicity of Gryffindor.

He braced himself, hand reaching for the wand in his pocket, eyes on his pursuers. Avery smiled, all teeth yet no sign of glee behind his eyes. *Creepy fucker*, Harry couldn't help but remark in his head.

Harry chastised himself, however, when he realized that was the entire point – to get him focused on the obvious threats and forget there was another member he had overlooked.

Mulciber already had her wand out, and Harry could barely do anything as she shouted, “*Confringo!*”

It took all of Harry's prematurely built reflexes to jump away at the last second.

They were smart, though; they weren't familiar with Harry's dueling abilities, so they chose the best strategy: to overwhelm him with no time left for him to defend himself.

Avery's wand was already directed at Harry before he could even truly raise his, a battle properly established as he uttered:

“*Stupefy!*”

They wanted him down. It wasn't a fair fight or an attempt at gauging his abilities – they wanted to scare him, to shut him up.

For the time being, it worked. He was struggling to stay conscious, Avery's spell clearly masterfully practiced, but he still scrambled to get his wand, which had left his arm and jumped near Lestrage, who stared at him with a look that was a mix of pity and contempt.

He was a cockroach to them – a particularly stubborn one, but a pest nonetheless.

It wasn't the best impression to make on a bunch of Slytherins if he couldn't even hold his own in battle.

But Harry was nothing if not annoyingly persistent. He managed to get his wand, and he aimed at the nearest opponent.

His *expulso* sent Lestrage flying, his back almost hitting the wall, stopped only by a well-timed *impedimenta* cast by Mulciber. The girl set the boy down gently before turning back to Harry.

Before Harry could cast his trusted *expelliarmus*, however, he was hit by a stray *incarcerous*, his wand falling just out of reach yet again.

Always focus first on defense, the voice of his Auror instructor echoed in his head.

Well, that was one of the reasons why he had hated Auror training so much: he sucked at following orders in the heat of the moment.

The four of them approached Harry, all with indifferent looks on their faces, except for Avery, who still held anger in his eyes.

“Maybe next time you’ll think a little more before speaking,” Rosier’s voice was as cold as frozen glass.

They left, Harry still tied up, the feelings of defeat and anger simmering in his veins.

Great. Just fucking marvelous.

There was no one in the corridor – all students were in their classrooms, common rooms, or around the castle. Harry couldn’t reach his wand, not in the position he was in, but he was safe from trying when a very familiar figure approached, the humming of an odd melody stopping dead in its tracks as he spotted Harry.

Dumbledore was there just then, murmuring the counter incantation to the *incarcerous*. His long white hair was shorter and in an auburn color, and he looked much younger than he had been when he died. The odd glinting in his eyes, however, was just the same as fifty years into the future.

Harry had been too cocky. He had underestimated Riddle, *again*. Of course, he wouldn’t surround himself with idiots – at least, not useless ones.

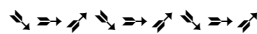
Another lesson learned: *don’t deem yourself better than anyone else*.

He convinced his professor that he was fine, unsettled by his sudden appearance, and adamantly refused to give up the names of his tormentors. The last thing he needed was more scrutiny for being a snitch.

He inhaled sharply as he was finally left alone.

Well, he had done it. Step one completed.

He had definitely been noticed.



TOM

Harry Evans had been a thorn in Tom’s side since he had shown up. The boy was as unpredictable as he was bratty, unable to keep his mouth shut before supposed injustice.

It had been years since Tom had been properly challenged, if only by words, and it had caught him unprepared, as hard as it was for him to admit it to himself.

Tom knew he was the Heir of Slytherin – he had opened the Chamber of Secrets and spoken to Salazar’s beast himself – but he still didn’t have all the answers about his origins. He had

been forced to pause his search for his family history to keep an eye on the new addition to his House, and it annoyed him to no end.

Heavy was the head that wore the crown and all that.

His Knights had noticed his shift in mood, most of them following well-established protocol instead of going to Tom to solve every single issue that arose, if only to not wake up the temper they all knew was hiding underneath. The only ones Tom allowed to come to him at all times were Orion and Abraxas – Orion because he always had useful information and was too... *challenging* to keep in check constantly, and Abraxas because Tom trusted him with his life.

The only one he ever did, in fact.

If it hadn't been for the soft-hearted boy, Tom would have had a much harder time establishing his presence in Slytherin. He had gone from a mudblood people spat at to someone people admired, respected, *worshipped*. It was his conquest to claim, of course... But Abraxas Malfoy had been the one to give him the opportunity to prove himself.

He believed in Tom, and, in return, Tom believed in Abraxas. His... *friend* could see things other people didn't, and while everyone else scoffed at what they considered to be weakness in him, Tom could see Abraxas for what he was: an asset.

~~And his best friend.~~

Abraxas had come to him soon after Tom's Knights had attacked Evans to report on the boy's reaction.

"He kept his mouth shut. He could've sold them out to the professors—"

"Out of fear, perhaps, but certainly not loyalty," Tom pondered. Abraxas nodded.

He hardly disagreed with Tom. Unlike the others, who did the same out of respect or fear, Abraxas did so because he was a peacemaker and trusted Tom's judgment.

Mostly, though, because Tom was rarely wrong.

"Still. It shows he is not stupid, at least. He knows what's at stake if he wants to survive."

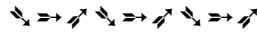
"Maybe," Tom's tone of voice made it clear there was no actual ambiguity about it in his mind. "I have a feeling he doesn't care about self-preservation or winning our approval as much as something else entirely."

"And what would that be?"

He smirked humorlessly. "That's what I need to find out, and you to confirm."

And find out he would, as fast as possible. He wouldn't let a no-name mudblood derail his plans any further if he could help it.

And Tom always accomplished what he set his mind to.



HARRY

“Did it amuse you, sending your minions after me?”

It was a few hours after the incident. Harry had managed to run into Riddle in the library of all places, as if the other man had been waiting just for him.

Riddle smiled, with only a faint sign of entertainment underneath it.

“Immensely.”

Harry rolled his eyes, not wanting to give Riddle the satisfaction of showing any hints of anger.

It had been his fault, for acting as Gryffindorish as he had. It hadn’t really been a strategy, sure, but it was clearly not a good one. At least he knew he should do something else.

“Truce?” He didn’t really expect much, but it was worth a try.

“No.” Dry, direct, unyielding.

“You’re making this harder than it needs to be—”

Riddle’s mask slipped slightly to show a hint of vexation. “Am I? Tell me, Harry Evans, what do I really know about you? There aren’t a lot of muggle-borns in Slytherin, especially during the war; I’m sure you’ve noticed. Most non-pureblood wizards beg the hat to be put anywhere else, yet, here you are. An anomaly.”

“I like to think of myself as an exception.”

“And *there* it is. Your... bravery. A rat in the snake’s pit, yet you’re not afraid.”

“Should I be?”

Riddle approached him, with the confidence of a politician and the stride of a predator. He stopped mere inches from Harry, his face close enough to make the other repress a shiver.

“Yes,” he tilted his head, his lips close to Harry’s ear, “you should.”

Harry felt on the verge of melting right then and there, knees weak and mind blank, but he rolled it in, putting on a façade of strength that he didn’t have, courtesy of years of being put

in danger by adults who didn't care. He hadn't known beforehand that Tom could have such an effect on him, and it frustrated and intrigued him in equal measures.

He decided, then, to be proactive, and turned his face to meet Riddle's, stopping only half a breath away from the other man's lips.

A little more, Harry thought. A little more and I'll know how he tastes.

Not yet, another part of him contested, trying to keep his eyes from looking down, trying to keep him somewhat in control of the situation.

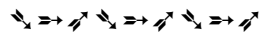
"I've dealt with bigger threats than teenagers with delusions of grandeur, Riddle. I'm done with it," he whispered, not wanting to disturb the delicate balance.

Riddle smiled then, a full smile, grin wide and real, and took a step back. Harry couldn't help but gape, awestruck by the sheer beauty in front of him. This close to him, Harry could see all his imperfections, from his slightly crooked nose to the gap between his front teeth, often hidden away by his smirks and neutral expressions. It didn't surprise Harry one bit that they just made Tom even more beautiful.

"And yet," Riddle responded, smile fading, taking with it what seemed to be every light in the room, "you keep searching for trouble as if you couldn't get enough of it." He took a step back, turning his face away.

Harry breathed deeply as Riddle left the room, as quietly as a slithering snake.

Arrogant little creep, Harry exhaled, trying to stabilize himself once more.



CHAPTER 3. OUR GREAT WAR'S A SPIRITUAL WAR. OUR GREAT DEPRESSION IS OUR LIVES.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON SEPTEMBER 26TH, 2023.

Chapter Notes

This is the new version of Iron & Decaying Dreams, updated on the 28th of May, 2023. If you are reading this and you've read the story prior to this date and are not in the first chapter, please go back and give it a read. While the bulk of the story is still the same, the order of certain parts has been changed and new sentences/paragraphs have been added. In a few chapters, new scenes have been added as well. By re-reading it, you assure the absorption of the content the way it is meant to be read. Thank you. Chapter title is from FIGHT CLUB, book by Chuck Palahniuk and movie by David Fincher.

"When the fight was over, nothing was solved, but nothing mattered. We all felt saved."

- Fight Club, 1996, Chuck Palahniuk

CHAPTER 3 – OUR GREAT WAR'S A SPIRITUAL WAR. OUR GREAT DEPRESSION IS OUR LIVES.

OR, IN THE SNAKE PIT, NOT ALL THAT SLITHERS HISSES

Riddle had been the one to show Harry around Hogwarts on his first week.

Harry had played the part of clueless, awestruck student, pretending to get lost a few times until it was believable to stop, and Riddle had been pleasant, then, as polite as ever, and almost cheerful.

As Harry had been more outspoken and disinterested in commiserating with the purebloods, however, he had turned more combative, not hostile per se but not as kind. Then, of course,

Tom had sent his minions after him, solidifying Harry's impressions. It was as if he knew he had seen through his mask.

At the end of the day, being perceived as a muggle-born in his new Hogwarts house was a somber affair.

There was a sense of pageantry to being a Slytherin. Members touted their blood status and family power like muggles would flash their possessions and money, with the same type of misplaced pride of a rich heir turned CEO, except there was no myth of meritocracy to cling to in Slytherin – you were either born into a pureblood family or you weren't, and while magical prowess was just as much a result of practice as it was of inherent ability, shows of power by the purebloods were rewarded, while by muggle-borns and half-bloods, seen as disrespect and punished.

Or, Harry should say, by any muggle-born or half-blood that wasn't Tom Riddle.

There were more purebloods in it than in any other Hogwarts house, it seemed, and Harry was the only seventh year muggleborn there, excluding Riddle, who was essentially an honorary pureblood.

As such, he was exposed to their prejudice and vitriol daily, jinxes and hexes thrown his way from multiple directions, always in the dungeons or more secluded places, more often than not when he had his back turned – which he only managed to evade and block due to his more mature magical core and experience. For every time he managed to pass unnoticed, there was another he didn't.

He tried to be the bigger person with his classmates, not choosing to retaliate against the ones who had jumped him, but it was hard, keeping his temper in check. They were younger, getting indoctrinated by their families, and had no real world experience. He could hardly judge them too harshly for their actions.

Whatever they chose to do after Hogwarts was the real character test.

Still, Harry was not nearly as good at impulsive control as he wished; most of the time he felt seconds away from snapping. He envied Hermione's ironclad grip on things, her ability to guide her train of thought instead of being led astray by it. He knew he would have to put them in their place soon enough, but he wanted to think it through first, do it the right way, not out of revenge or pettiness.

The easiest part of being back at Hogwarts was the classes. While he had put a low amount of effort into most of them in the beginning, choosing to keep up with his learning more privately, he still enjoyed them. The teachers all treated him fairly, even Dumbledore; though he more often than not seemed more distant toward the Slytherins, not as eager to guide them, simply teaching his classes and letting them fend for themselves. While Harry's classmates were quite independent learners, the lack of care for their possible difficulties made Harry feel uneasy, too aware of the man's biases, a reprise of his mixed feelings toward Dumbledore that he didn't want to confront quite yet in this universe. Or ever, if he could avoid it.

Harry and Riddle were often paired up in classes, the professors deciding Harry could use some help to keep up in class from a notoriously smart prefect, and he accepted it without complaining. Working with Riddle had been nothing like Harry had expected – the other boy was patient, his instructions clear and precise, and he often complimented Harry when he did something right, especially in Potions, which he had noticed was his least favorite subject. Things like these reminded him of how different Tom was from Voldemort, a world and an ocean of difference between the two. Harry couldn't read Tom's mind to judge his intentions, but he found he didn't want to; he wanted to trust the boy beside him, give him the benefit of the doubt.

Best case scenario, he was quite different from Voldemort. Worst case scenario, he wasn't, but at the very least wasn't going around on a murder spree at the moment or making Horcruxes, and that was good enough for now.

One thing Harry had checked as soon as he could was the status of Tom's Horcruxes. According to what he remembered of the memories Dumbledore had shown him, the ring Horcrux should have already been made as well as the diary by this point, but Harry had checked and the Gaunts were alive and well here, as well as Tom Riddle Sr. and his family. To his chagrin, however, Myrtle Warren was still dead, her death a carbon copy of the one in Harry's universe, and Hagrid had still been expelled for supposedly petrifying students with his pet Acromantula.

There was no way for Harry to know if her death had been used for the Horcrux ritual or not, however. Riddle had every reason to long for immortality since he was still stuck at Wool's during the war, but there was no real proof Myrtle's death hadn't simply been an unplanned – or planned – casualty of opening the Chamber and releasing the Basilisk.

Harry couldn't predict whether or not Tom was still interested in looking for his family. So far, he hadn't had the possibility to leave Hogwarts even if he had figured out who they were, but Harry hadn't seen the boy spend that much time in the library except when meeting Harry there or simply studying. And from whispers around the house, he had concluded no one knew of Riddle's ancestry, since he wouldn't have released the knowledge, not after opening the Chamber and writing those messages about it. He might not have been blamed for Myrtle's death, but Dumbledore suspected him; and, of course, people *had* heard about the Chamber, the legends that only the Heir of Slytherin and a Parselmouth could open it, and those two things could possibly end up jeopardizing his revelation and curbing whatever advantage he might gain from it, so he seemed to have kept the secret.

Still, his impact on Slytherin was obvious.

If Harry had to guess, something must have happened that made it so Tom was still respected regardless of his status as the Heir of Slytherin, as he was very clearly their king and heading to an ascension too soon for Harry's liking.

The Knights of Walpurgis were both a secret organization and not one. They were on a need-to-know basis outside of Slytherin, but inside they seemed to be everyone's heroes. Even Harry, who had both been shunned and decided to isolate himself from most of the House's politics, was well aware of the power the Knights held. Their meetings were secret, but their

beliefs weren't, as Riddle seemed to always be open to recruiting new members, especially as he prepared to leave Hogwarts at the end of his seventh year and start his legacy.

Were the Knights still a danger? All signs in Harry's path pointed to yes – their goals seemed to still be the same as their Death Eaters counterparts. Even if the same level of violence never came to be, they could still bring a lot of damage to the wizarding world as well as the muggle one, and Harry knew his plan was still necessary, not only to try to be with his soulmate as someone worthwhile, but also to keep him from going down even further into his dark future.

Not that Harry had needed to do a lot after their talk, because Riddle started showing up just about everywhere he went.

He didn't say anything, lurking more than accompanying, but Harry could feel him, an unsettling presence crowding his space even when he wasn't close, his eyes focused on Harry's every move.

He couldn't help but wonder what had changed, from sending his goons to do his dirty work to *this*. What had Harry done to now be worthy of Tom's time and attention?

It became harder and harder to ignore him, especially when all Harry wanted was to push him against a wall and make him scream his name.

Nope, wrong fantasy to be thinking about in a library, shut up.

As if he could feel Harry's embarrassment – and if his face had betrayed him by blushing, he could definitely *see* it – Riddle walked toward Harry, sitting down at the table he sat, next to the Restricted Section.

“Parallel Dimensions and Interdimensional Interactions?” Didn't remember that being a NEWT subject.”

Was that an attempt at a conversation starter?

“Not everyone lives for their NEWTs,” Harry mumbled, still embarrassed over his previous thoughts. “Some of us just like to read.”

“Oh, I know,” Riddle purred. Purred, for fuck's sake. *How did anyone get anything done with that guy around?* “If you are interested in the practical applications of this subject, I recommend ‘The Department of Mysteries and Time Travel.’ There is quite an interesting section about parallel dimensions and the possible discoveries made by the Department of Mysteries.”

Harry blinked.

No fucking way that was public knowledge. There was a reason Unspeakables called themselves that: they didn't just reveal their information to anybody. That book's author must have been a very lucky bloke to theorize on the stuff they were hiding in the Department of Mysteries... or he was an ex-Unspeakable.

Probably the former, though. Harry didn't think that book would have gotten published if the information in it was actually accurate.

"Thanks. It's just a passing curiosity, though. Not worth pursuing."

To that, Riddle frowned, seeming confused and serious all of a sudden.

"Any knowledge is worth pursuing. There is something useful in everything."

Harry huffed softly. "Didn't know you were such a Ravenclaw."

"One does not need to limit themselves to arbitrary systems of classification."

Cute statement from the Heir of Slytherin himself.

"Says the textbook Slytherin that sent his cult followers after me for not being enough of a snake."

"Well," Riddle smirked, eyes glued to Harry's face, "Slytherins are more attuned to real-life politics than the other houses. They can see who will succeed in life and who will not and treat people accordingly."

That's one way of describing arrogance and entitlement. "Don't they ever get it wrong?"

"Rarely. Though it wouldn't surprise me if they've miscalculated this time."

Harry blinked again.

"You mean, *you* miscalculated? I doubt they do anything without your say-so."

"Hmm, perhaps there is potential in you after all. You just need to..." Riddle hissed in a low tone, and ran his fingers through Harry's hair, putting a lock of it behind his ear, "learn to obey more."

Harry's breath got caught in his throat. He wanted, no, *needed* to have a ready retort, but nothing made its way out of his tongue.

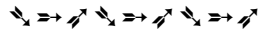
Fuck. Riddle was way too fucking smart. He knew what he was doing to Harry, and that was why he only chose to flirt whenever he tried to get Harry in line.

I am getting conditioned, like a fucking dog.

"Yeah, no, thanks," Harry sputtered, and scooted over in his chair, opening up some space between the two of them. "I'm fine as I am."

"Suit yourself," Riddle's tone shifted to indifferent so suddenly it gave Harry whiplash. He got up from his chair. "You'll change your mind soon enough."

Riddle didn't dignify him with another look, and walked away before Harry could even think of a reply.



Riddle was Jekyll and he was Hyde.

He would follow Harry around and then give him the cold shoulder. He would seem amused by Harry's behavior and then seem annoyed by it. Riddle would flirt with him and then act as if he was repulsed by his very existence. It was the type of hot and cold behavior befitting of someone conniving, scheming, and maybe, just a touch indecisive.

Harry couldn't really figure out his end goal. Was Riddle trying to confuse him into seeking him out himself for the answers? Was he trying to force Harry into humiliation?

With his followers, he was an entirely different person – when they spent time together in their common room or classes, Harry could get glimpses of the charismatic leader he was always meant to be, the one that could make people sign away their lives as if they were nothing, override their survival instincts for the benefit of someone else. Slytherins chose themselves first, so for someone else to inspire such loyalty was quite a feat. Harry wanted to hack into why and how Riddle was succeeding.

Which led to step two: know thy enemy.

There were the ones Harry had already gotten acquainted with, of course: Rosier, Avery, Lestrangle. Mulciber was a mystery Harry was quite eager to solve. Malfoy and Black, his roommates, were surprisingly hard to read. Walburga and Lucretia Black didn't seem to be inner circle, but Walburga was either around or with Lucretia, and they could be valuable assets nonetheless.

The thought made Harry smirk humorlessly. He was already thinking like a Slytherin, as if people were made to service him and nothing else.

Well, that was the way to get into those people's heads, it seemed, after all. Harry wasn't a fan of the whole thing precisely, but he had to admit his entire plan was Slytherin to its core. Maybe it was about time he embraced his house. That didn't mean he had to forgo his values – just that he would have to be more thoughtful from then on, and a lot less impulsive. He was trying to leave his old life behind, not repeat it.

Either way, when it came down to it, Riddle's classmates and sidekicks were all different shades of fascinating.

Not that each of them was interesting in their own right, mind you. But their families' history was, and Harry had never felt more grateful for Hermione for trying to instill a love for books in him as he did then, sliding well enough into their dynamic to not feel constantly threatened. The Black Library had sustained him with enough information that he didn't make a fool of himself constantly in Slytherin unless he specifically chose to.

Firstly, there was Lilith Mulciber. The Mulciber family, unlike the ones from which the entirety of the Knights of Walpurgis (how in the hell had their name gone from *that* to Death Eaters?) belonged, were not one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. The Pure-blood Directory contained the list of the supposedly twenty-eight most pure-blooded families in Britain and had been penned by Cantankerus Nott, though that particular fact had never been proven. To the pureblood families, especially of that time, being part of that list was everything – there was a reason why Riddle had surrounded himself with people from them, even though there was clearly lots of bias contained in it. It was clear in the way the Potters, the Princes, the Crabbes, and the Goyles were all absent even though they were widely known to be almost entirely composed of purebloods, and in how the Ollivanders were included, despite Garrick Ollivander's mother being a muggle-born. Still, they were held in high regard and prestige in the wizarding world, and Riddle knew it.

Mulciber was the exception to that rule.

The Slytherins, however, as best as Harry could tell, didn't seem to care all that much about it. The Mulcibers had a high standing in pureblood society regardless, and that seemed to be enough for Riddle. Perhaps with just how exclusive the Sacred Twenty-Eight was, it benefited him to have a representative of the ones outside of it included. After all, Riddle could not gather enough followers if he didn't branch out as much as possible without compromising his image.

Lilith was quiet and observant, often in the corner of a room as Riddle drew everyone's eyes, but that didn't make her unremarkable. In the three weeks he had spent there, Harry had seen almost every person in Slytherin's seventh year ask for her advice about something at least once, eyes wide as they took everything she said as law.

He could see how Tom would want someone like that in his group. Mulciber's opinion was respected, and if she let someone else take charge, like Riddle, then other people would follow her lead.

She didn't seem to care much for Harry, but that wasn't surprising. None of them did. It was only Riddle's obvious curiosity that kept him immune to their scrutiny, but even that had an expiration date around the corner.

It was in Harry's third week that he got to learn a secret he didn't at all expect.

Mulciber wasn't always known as a woman. When had she first joined Hogwarts, apparently, she went by a different name. It surprised Harry that everyone respected her identity. The impression he got was that it hadn't always been the case, but that Riddle had made it so.

Maybe it shouldn't surprise him Tom reinforced the use of her name. He had chosen a different name in life for himself, after all, and hated being referred by his birth name in the future. He probably could relate to her on some small level. It was just weird to Harry to think that someone so openly prejudiced could also be so oddly accepting.

Then again, power was everything to Riddle. It wasn't about liking or accepting her, but more about what she could offer *him*.

Harry could see it, clear as day, the *quid pro quo* between the two: Riddle had transformed Mulciber from a pariah into someone people not only respected but admired, and she had brought new followers and a different level of legitimacy to the Knights of Walpurgis.

The moralistic sense of loyalty inside Harry despised the idea of caring for someone only as long as they had something to offer him, but the Slytherin roots in him couldn't help but be fascinated by the complexity of their dynamic that bordered on war strategy.

Sébastien Rosier was essentially Riddle's bodyguard. Not that he needed one, and everyone knew it, but there was something intimidating about having someone shadow one's every movement – no one would dare to even believe themselves capable of handling Tom, not when he was so rarely alone.

At least, he wasn't alone at any moment people were aware of him. He had opened the Chamber of Secrets, after all.

Harry knew the Rosiers were known to be quite ruthless, and Sébastien was not an exception to that. He always carried an alert look in his eyes, as if ready to jump into action at a moment's notice. Rosier didn't seem to view Harry as a threat, however. He appeared confident enough in his abilities of intimidation that he assumed Harry wouldn't dare to breach Riddle's space.

He was wrong, of course, but Harry had enough brains to do his whole thing in a way that didn't activate the guy's defenses again, at least for now.

Bram Avery was the loud one – there was no better descriptor. He was the muggle hater, the sneering one with his nose up in the air. Abraxas was the one that looked like Draco Malfoy the most, but Avery was the one who resembled him in personality.

If Mulciber disliked Harry and Rosier was indifferent to him, then Avery hated him. Apparently holding Riddle's attention without even trying was an enviable trait.

Tymeo Lestrangle could only be described as the loyal one. It was in his blood – the Lestranges's motto was "*corvus oculum corvi non eruit*," or, "a crow will not pull out the eye of another crow." Riddle needed brainless followers to build up his masses, and Tymeo was quite perfect for that role. He didn't need to want something or work hard for it; he could just believe what everyone else did.

Abraxas Malfoy was Riddle's right hand man. He was the only one Riddle bothered to listen to, and if Abraxas considered someone to be a threat, then Riddle would make sure to abide by that. He was the closest thing to an equal that Tom had, but Harry was too familiar with his nemesis to ever believe he wouldn't put Abraxas in his place if the circumstances called for it.

Orion Black was the whisperer. Every secret came from him. He, alongside Abraxas, was the one Harry had to watch out for the most. Unlike Sirius, who was very obvious about his loyalties, Orion was everything Slytherins were thought to be – he was cunning, able to switch alliances with the drop of a hat, and served no one's goals but his own. It just so happened that his were pretty damn aligned to Tom's.

It always required an extra amount of effort on Harry's part to share spaces with Orion without letting his grief for his godfather show on his face when he looked at him.

There was Walburga and Lucretia, but besides Walburga hanging around – not *with* – Tom's posse and Lucretia hanging out with *her*, they weren't a part of the Knights of Walpurgis. Walburga was Orion's cousin and didn't seem to like him all that much. The only thing that kept them spending any amount of time together was the marriage contract between the two of them, meant to be fulfilled as soon as they finished Hogwarts. Neither seemed particularly happy about the outcome.

Walburga held some characteristics from her portrait, but not a whole lot. The years seemed to have hardened her.

Harry hadn't forgotten the conversation he'd had with her portrait months back; his knowledge of the Black family would prove to be dead useful if he wanted to succeed in his plans.

According to her older version, Walburga's favorite family members were Lucretia, who was her best friend, and her mother. Kreacher had been a better source of knowledge, however, with his rants on the Black family.

Walburga despised her father, whom she considered weak, and had a love-hate relationship with Orion, whom she seemed to envy and look down on simultaneously.

Walburga wasn't a very good liar – she often wished she could have an advantage over everyone like Orion did. But she also had unshaken principles, which was great when she chose the path of honesty, and terrible when she couldn't be convinced of the ineffectiveness of blood purity. She was rigid and outspoken, hardly swayed by other people's opinions; she would be one of the hardest to conquer, but Harry wouldn't quit, not now that he knew what she valued most: authenticity.

It was upsetting to Harry to see how much of her had changed with time and her marriage to Orion. Walburga was prejudiced, yes, but she would have at the very least respected the hell out of Sirius for standing up to what he believed in if she had remained the person she was then. But future Walburga was not past/alternate Walburga, and Harry was well aware of that the more he had contact with her.

Unfortunately, Harry hadn't spent that much time alone in a room with Walburga in the three weeks he had been there, not really. She and Lucretia went everywhere together, hardly making space for him to get to know his classmates at all. And when Riddle was there, he was the center of attention.

Always.

And then, of course, there was Lucretia Black.

Lucretia was a Ravenclaw, a rarity in the Black family.

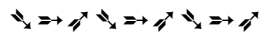
She actually reminded Harry of Hermione – she was studious, a bit neurotic, and fiercely loyal. She was Walburga’s best friend and confidante, and the two of them could be seen strutting around the castle hand in hand far too often for people from opposing houses.

She was also Orion’s older sister – she was in her seventh year while Orion was in his sixth – but their relationship seemed quite strained from what Harry had observed. Whether Walburga’s feelings toward Orion were also a reflection of whatever had happened between Lucretia and her brother, Harry didn’t know.

He knew a lot about the Slytherins, a mix of Kreacher’s tales, his Grimmauld Place readings, and the small amount of spying he had done, but it wasn’t enough. It didn’t matter that he knew things about them – he needed to interact with them, build connections, and open their eyes to Riddle’s flaws and the cracks in his plans. He needed to break the connection between the king and his subjects, for a leader was nothing without his followers.

Harry was building the foundation, at least. It was a start.

It was just a matter of time before the games began.



It was when things got quiet that Harry felt like he could finally breathe.

He would spend most of his time outside of class either in the library, the dorms, or the common room – anywhere he would be left mostly undisturbed. He wasn’t particularly looking forward to another violent run-in with Riddle’s crew. At least he shared his dorm with the least dangerous snakes.

Physically, that was.

Besides Harry’s attempts at staying low-key, Riddle seemed to find him anywhere he went. His stalker-ish tendencies made Harry almost feel ashamed of what he had put Malfoy through in sixth year.

Almost. He had been right, after all. He would still allow himself this petty victory.

Either way, it felt nice to be somewhat anonymous. Here, he wasn’t Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived. Here, he was Harry Evans, a muggle-born student who was trying his best to pass unnoticed, to let the dust settle after being so *rudely* introduced to the Slytherin rules.

After that first confrontation with Riddle’s Knights and his discussions with him, he had made an effort to lay low and try to gather as much information as he could. He would still make his impact – it just appeared he would have to do so in a more Slytherin way than he had initially planned.

Snakes didn’t roar, after all. They preferred to hide until they were ready to strike.

Harry was looking through the library after having completed his homework for anything that caught his eye. His research on soulmates had been limited, riddled with conjectures and observations, but there weren't all that many books about it in Hogwarts – at least not anywhere that wasn't the Restricted Section, and he hadn't been able to get access to it yet.

It didn't surprise Harry when he saw in his peripheral vision that Riddle was approaching him. The library was quickly becoming *their* spot – whenever Harry was there and there weren't many students around, the boy seemed to materialize out of thin air.

“Evans,” Riddle kept his greeting short. Harry nodded in his general reaction.

Harry's lackluster behavior didn't seem to appease the other boy all that much. Tom tried again. “Anything interesting enough to capture your ten-second attention span?”

If there was one thing that had surprised Harry when he first arrived in 1944, it was how much Riddle seemed to relish in teasing him. Riddle couldn't handle it all that well when the same was done to him, but something about destabilizing Harry seemed to bring him great pleasure.

“Nothing that would make sense to your posh little brain, I'm afraid,” he joked.

Harry's new favorite hobby was acting as if he knew nothing of Riddle's life outside of Hogwarts. There was nothing posh about the boy looking at him analytically; he was poor like Harry was, and just as uncultured. But he faked well enough, and Harry wasn't supposed to have any knowledge of Riddle, so pretending just made sense.

Their banter was an inferior intellectual sparring of sorts – and Riddle almost always won. Not because he was superior, or even more stubborn, but because Harry always gave in.

“I just don't get it, you know.” The frown on Riddle's face convinced Harry that he meant it, as if it had been building through the weeks. “How is it possible for you to have ended up in Slytherin?”

Harry smiled, entertained about the direction in which the conversation was going.

“It's about the ambitions, sweet Tom, not the execution,” he retorted, and refused to be embarrassed over the term of endearment that came out of his mouth unprompted.

Riddle's right eye twitched slightly, but his expression didn't change. “And what would those even be?”

It was Harry's turn to frown.

“Certainly not taking over the world by being a blood supremacist.” There was no harm in saying it – it wasn't like he was willing to compromise his morals and pretend to be a racist just to win over his soulmate, and while the Knights didn't let just anyone in on their goals, they weren't as discrete about their beliefs.

Either way, his answer clearly didn't appease Riddle.

“You’re an incurious philistine masquerading as someone confident who doesn’t care about anything. You know nothing of the greatness we will achieve beyond these walls.” The scowl on his face did not make him any less attractive. Harry hated it.

“Are you always this pretentious? I could have sworn there was a hint of humanity somewhere in there.” Pushing Riddle was just too much fun. Harry could be cunning and secretive around anyone else if he had to, but with Tom, it was like pulling teeth to hold his tongue.

“You’re a bloody menace, Evans. I know you are hiding something. Don’t think I’ll stop keeping an eye on you.” The intensity in Riddle’s eyes showed him he meant every word.

“I’m looking forward to keep proving to myself how much space I take up in your mind.”

Harry could’ve sworn he saw the hint of a blush on Tom’s face, and he hid how victorious that made him feel. The lovely color seemed to fade fast, but it made Harry determined to see it again.

Finally, I’m not the only one being mortally embarrassed.

Riddle sighed, almost like a defeated gesture. “Have you finished your History of Magic essay?”

The change in subject caught Harry off-guard. He blinked, and then smirked. “Sure. You need some help?”

Riddle all but snorted.

“I think I can hold my own on the easiest subject in Hogwarts, thank you very much.”

Harry smiled.

He hadn’t realized it in the beginning, not really, but his mood had become marginally better after he had traveled to this new dimension.

His days were no longer spent sulking about all the ways he didn’t fit into the wizarding world; he no longer felt purposeless, directionless. For once, he could see the world around him as it was, even if it was very rarely as pleasant as it should be.

Their conversation drifted to lighter topics, the banter still going at times, but no animosity was taking place between them anymore. Once they started talking about books and school, Harry got a glimpse of a different side of his fated enemy.

It was actually surprising how passionate about knowledge Riddle was.

Harry knew he was powerful, of course – one didn’t achieve the title of greatest Dark Lord for nothing. But somewhere in the back of Harry’s mind, he truly thought it was raw power, or privilege, maybe, from hanging out with purebloods and being worshipped by them.

But, no, that wasn't it. Riddle actually worked for it. He did the research, he practiced, and he learned how to harness his potential and make it so his magic obeyed him instead of the other way around.

Harry couldn't help but admire the guy. He never had the opportunity to just relish in the fact that he was magical like that; he was always waiting for the next threat to materialize. His greatest gift was also his greatest curse, and often enough he did the one thing he swore he would never do: he took it for granted.

But not Riddle. He had one hell of a mask, that was true, but in the split seconds it went away, there was always awe in his eyes like he couldn't quite believe that was his life.

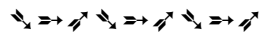
Harry could relate. The first years he had spent in the wizarding world felt like a dream he could never wake up from before all the ugly reality settled in.

He wished he was still as easily baffled by the beauty surrounding him. He was still curious, but it never felt like enough. When he mastered a spell, he needed another. He could never just live with the feeling of achievement.

But he could see a path opening in front of him, though, for the first time in a long time. He no longer had to cling to his old patterns; he could try something new.

Maybe he was finally getting the hang of this whole thing.

Harry only hoped this wasn't the calm before the storm.



The day after their newest conversation in the library, Harry decided to take a walk near the Forbidden Forest.

It was Saturday, late afternoon. Gossamer covered most plants, all of them a shade of emerald green, surprisingly alien for that time in September. There was an aura in the air, almost as thick as fog, that seemed to cover the castle, making Harry feel wary in a way he hadn't yet experienced in that dimension, even as he was faced with unknown circumstances.

There was nothing abnormal that he could see at the edge of the forest, yet Harry couldn't shake the feeling that he needed to enter its dense vegetation to check. As an adult, he would usually ignore this sort of instinct, well-versed in its near-confirmed potential for trouble, but nothing so far seemed to be dragging him into things he wasn't *himself* looking for.

He roamed around with his eyes, looking for the unknown thing calling his magic forward.

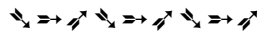
It was so sudden and subtle that if Harry hadn't been aware, he wouldn't have noticed it. The effect happened right in the same place he had appeared when he went through the Veil, pulling the air around it with the unnaturalness of a silent exclamation.

Where there had been nothing but flecks of light-dappled dust and foliage, now stood Hermione, a wild and feral look in her eyes, untameable and mane-like hair like a crown framing her face.

As she took in everything around her, her eyes finally settled on Harry, who was frozen in place, stationary with his brain full of static as it refused to take in the sight of his best friend.

Fuck, he thought, it being the only word marching forward against the stillness of his disbelief.

Fuck.



HERMIONE

Hermione had a bit of a beast inside of her.

If anyone had asked before the end of the war, she would have told them she was just naturally cautious. Guarded. A rule-follower. A law-abiding citizen. She knew the dangers and she avoided them. It was the smart choice, of course.

Except it hardly felt like the one she wanted to make.

Before Hermione's first year at Hogwarts, the Sorting Hat'd had quite a battle with the girl. It had wondered about sorting her into either Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, or Slytherin, but it was most adamant that she belonged in Ravenclaw. And she was studious and curious, she was, but Gryffindor was the house that everyone worthwhile went to, all the heroes, the ones worthy of being remembered.

So she had put up a fight, and she'd won. It felt good, for a while.

And all of her friends were there, too, by her side.

Then why did she feel like she was betraying a part of herself when the ruthlessness of her search for knowledge came forth?

It scared her. She felt like she could do about anything to just *know*. Anyone she had to cross, hex, curse, or break without a second thought – she knew she had the potential to do it. Sometimes empathy would take a backseat and her borderline interrogation tactics would take hold, and, more often than not, she would let them.

She had a reputation to maintain: book-smart, respecting of authorities, Dark magic hater, annoyingly stuck up. She was always the one to nag someone about homework, to get pissed

if they wanted to copy her work instead of doing their own. She did believe in fairness. She *did* love books, she *did* care for her friends, and she *did* fear Dark magic and the ways it had been used, but there was more to her.

Not even her best friends seemed to see through her mask. Masks always worked best if they held a partial truth underneath, after all.

And the thing was that that mask rarely slipped, even around the people who knew her best. They didn't, *couldn't* see how scared she was of how she could throw everyone off a cliff if it meant reaching the top first. If it meant getting the absolute truth of the universe, she could let the ends justify the means, if only for the greater good.

Sometimes she couldn't help but think the needs of the majority should always be put first. And she was well aware of how changing the world through knowledge always took time and a few sacrifices. What were a few unfortunate casualties for a good, greater cause?

She couldn't utter those words out loud, though, even if in a completely theoretical manner.

Not when her best friend Harry was so clearly the scapegoat assigned to that very role of a sacrificial lamb.

She didn't want him to die. She loved him, and that was why she wrestled against her worst instincts.

Knowledge for knowledge's sake – that was Ravenclaw's motto. Hermione didn't want to rule the world or use the knowledge she sought for any self-serving motive, but she was a bit too cunning for her own good.

She was getting too close to a master in manipulation for her own liking, and Ron didn't understand. He'd never had. He had betrayed her so deeply just so he could hold on to a version she didn't even want to keep anymore.

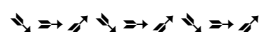
So when Harry disappeared, she had grilled the Unspeakables until they told her. Harry had jumped to another dimension, and she knew she had to follow him.

For his own sake, of course. Terrible things happened to wizards who meddled with that sort of thing.

Her curiosity might kill the cat, but satisfaction would bring it back. As long as she kept noble goals at the forefront, she would be fine.

Never mind she had her own agenda.

Learning all she could about dimensional travel and soulmates was just a bonus.



CHAPTER 4. I AM JACK'S INFLAMED SENSE OF REJECTION.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN DONE ON SEPTEMBER 27TH AND 28TH, 2023.

Chapter Notes

This is the new version of Iron & Decaying Dreams, updated on the 28th of May, 2023. If you are reading this and you've read the story prior to this date and are not in the first chapter, please go back and give it a read. While the bulk of the story is still the same, the order of certain parts has been changed and new sentences/paragraphs have been added. In a few chapters, new scenes have been added as well. By re-reading it, you assure the absorption of the content the way it is meant to be read. Thank you. Chapter title is from FIGHT CLUB, book by Chuck Palahniuk and movie by David Fincher.

"If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?"

- Fight Club, 1996, Chuck Palahniuk

CHAPTER 4 – I AM JACK'S INFLAMED SENSE OF REJECTION.

OR, *HEART OF STONE*

HERMIONE

17 years old

There were too many funerals to count.

Hermione was present in every single one, Ron clinging to one arm, Harry to the other. They attended to their obligations with lifeless reverence, honoring the deceased's lives and their legacies while wishing they didn't have to.

Hermione felt like a spectator. She wasn't family, not to any of them. She had let her own go for their protection. She hadn't been forced to stand there for the arrangements, entertaining the attendants as if she wanted to do anything but crumble, not like them. She had been friends – or friendly – with almost all the ones lost, but she couldn't claim the level of pain the others were experiencing.

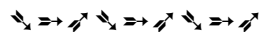
The worst, by far, had been Fred's.

The loss hung in the air like a thick fog. The voices of the bereaved were solemn and sorrowful, an uncoordinated symphony of condolences and words of sympathy. The atmosphere was one of widespread grieving, the sort that was always present when the taken were too young, too inexperienced to truly leave their mark; the grief of knowing one day they would run out of memories to cling to.

The Weasleys, however, were quiet as a tomb. There was no melancholy – theirs was not a low-grade sadness, a steady humming of *missing*. The look in the family's eyes was a mix of desperation and brokenheartedness, the kind that lingered past its expiration date.

George was not there. He *could not* be there. No one dared to ask about the twin that was left behind.

It wasn't the first time Hermione wished she could change the past, and it wouldn't be the last.



Hermione Jean Granger's last year at Hogwarts, just like all the funerals, had been a grief fest.

Everyone that had come back was a little scarred, a little broken. Hermione was in no good shape either, but she told herself she needed to be there. She needed to be in the castle she had come to call home, to stand in between those walls and feel its magic, even as depleted as it was. She needed to feel like she could help bring new life into a place so filled with death.

The empty spaces remained empty. No one dared to sit where the fallen had in the Great Hall, in the classrooms, in dormitories. There were enough missing students that the refusal never became an actual problem.

In Gryffindor, Lavender's loss was felt like a missing limb. Every house seemed to grieve its own. Corridors, where their voices could once have been heard loud and proud, were now unusually muted, a harrowing, dead rhythm taking their place.

The reconstruction efforts had been slow but steady that first year. Spells and charms upon spells and charms being cast, broken objects and materials repaired as if no damage had ever been done. But the people, well... they all felt like withering. The scars, to them, were permanent.

And Hermione didn't like the remaining picture when she looked in the mirror.

Going back to Hogwarts to finish her last year had been a sort of non-decision, a no-brainer. She refused to let the war derail her plans, regardless of how nebulous they now seemed. As a war hero, she had received dozens of job offers, but it didn't feel right for her to accept any of them before she finished her education.

It did feel quite inconsequential, sitting down to study basic spells when she had spent months on the run, learning what she did out of necessity, feeling hungry, tired, and weak for a cause. Hermione knew there was much she didn't know, yet she couldn't help but feel like she had outgrown whatever Hogwarts could teach her.

It didn't matter, though, not really. She needed her NEWTs if she wanted to truly succeed at the Ministry.

So she studied, even as her mind wandered toward her self-sabotaging best friend and pertinacious boyfriend, and she forced herself to compartmentalize the best she could.

One thing that Hermione could do very well was choosing her priorities.

And choose she did, as she jumped from class to class, from the Great Hall to the library.

But at night, everything came back. She wished, all throughout her last school year, that Harry was there with them instead of isolating himself. After their Horcrux hunt, even sleeping apart was hard for them, nightmares plaguing Hermione's mind even after she had awoken.

She lost weight that year, barely eating and split between her studies and her worries as she was. Ron never left her sight, and while she was grateful to always know of his whereabouts and security, she felt stifled by his presence and overbearing affection.

She would never tell him that, though. Hermione knew Ron needed to assure himself that she was there, that she was real, *alive*. He constantly made her promise she wouldn't leave him, and promise she did, even when it felt as meaningless as the symbolic gestures of healing they were supposed to be partaking on.

It was always quiet in her dorm.

There were never lots of girls in her year in Gryffindor before – she had only ever shared her room with Parvati and Lavender – but now, multiple rooms had ended up completely empty, so they were taken up by students from other years. Though Hermione was part of the previously unheard-of Eighth Year, she hadn't had to move to new accommodations at all, instead remaining in her old room, alone, since Parvati had decided not to come back after everything.

Snores, giggles, complaints, and the ruffling of sheets were all gone. Hermione hated it. She had never realized how much it added to her life, the sounds of civilization surrounding her for the entirety of six years, but now she was painfully aware of their absence.

Hermione's home life had always been lonesome. Her parents worked a lot; their shared dental clinic took all their time. She had learned how to be self-sufficient, to enjoy her own company. Maybe that was why she loved books so much – she had friends, knowledge, different universes, and lives all in one small package. If no one wanted to talk to her, she could just open a book and pretend to be above it all. She could replace human connection with imagination.

That was what she did, that last year, as her loneliness ate away at her until she could no longer pretend.

Because it got under Hermione's skin, how little Hogwarts had changed. Lives had been lost, and the world has tilted so much in its axis that it was upside down, yet everything looked exactly the same.

She knew that, for some people, it brought them comfort, the permanence of their second – and to some, first – magical home making it easier for them to detach the horrible happenings of the war from the place itself. But it didn't need to carry battle scars to feel tainted.

And despite Hermione's best wishes, Hogwarts didn't feel like home anymore.

She wanted to tear the curtain of falseness she knew was hiding within it. She wanted to see change, *real change* being enacted instead of everyone acting as if because Voldemort was gone, there was nothing else wrong with their society.

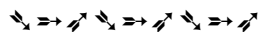
Because that was the problem with the wizarding world: it relished in stagnancy. It refused to see Voldemort and Grindelwald were symptoms, not the root cause.

They rose as well as they did because the systems allowed their methods to flourish instead of nipping them in the bud. They reformed an inherently, deeply flawed system and called it fixed and unbroken.

It just wasn't enough for her to sit down and watch and let someone else stay at the helm, smiling as stony as the statues at the Ministry, frozen in time as if they still lived in the Dark Ages.

Hermione was already used to speaking to the walls and being underestimated up to the point they couldn't deny her power anymore.

If she had to change things herself, so be it.



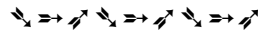
18 years old

She was so very lonely at times.

She was surrounded by people, of course; she was often at the Burrow, or visiting Harry in Grimmauld Place, or at the Ministry as she trained to start at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, where she intended on putting forth a bill for House Elf rights. Hogwarts alumni insisted on going out to bars and “celebrating,” though what, exactly, she was never fully sure. She hated those nights, the commiseration of misery leaving her feeling more hollow after than she had felt before, but she still went, choosing the illusion of normality as armor.

She knew it was a good thing the war was over; of course it was. She knew it was cause for celebration and parties and new beginnings, but most of the time it seemed like everyone felt just as aimless as she did, and were trudging along simply for the aesthetic of it, hoping to fake it till they made it.

At least she had her goals to push her through.



Hermione was getting married.

Ron had asked her just out of Hogwarts.

She said yes. It was the only logical choice, and she didn't want to wait and delay things anymore. Life was too short.

Ron had been her companion, her light, and her protector for the entirety of seven years. She loved him, cared for him, and *liked* him, which was just as important as the rest. There was no question over who would be their best man, of course – Harry was *the* only option. And Molly, upon hearing the news, had jumped in excitedly to plan the wedding ceremony, just as Hermione had predicted.

For all intents and purposes, she only needed to relax and enjoy being engaged. She and Ron had moved into the Burrow for the time being, and they intended on finding their own place before getting married. Everything was working perfectly.

Hermione, still, had the odd feeling like something was out of place.

She ignored it to the best of her ability and focused on her job.

The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures – or the DRCMC – was a mess of epic proportions.

Half of her job consisted of “keeping creatures in place” (an idea she hated), while the other of banging her head against the table every time she realized how much of a shitshow the department was.

Their classification system made no sense most of the time – they didn’t seem to know how to properly differentiate between creatures that were most similar to animals and the ones that were essentially humans. The divide between beings and beasts was nebulous at best, and downright insulting and dangerous at worst.

House elves were considered beings, but they were still enslaved and treated as subhuman. The same thing happened to giants. Goblins were only “respected” due to their control over wizarding money – they had been ignored and looked down on for millennia, having to rebel again and again only to have what little rights they had conquered revoked every time. And when they finally managed to have *some* advantage over the ones killing and mistreating them, they were seen as greedy, mean, and *still* didn’t get to have wands, just like house elves didn’t either.

Fairies were beasts, apparently due to their supposed inability of having “sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community and to bear part of the responsibility in shaping those laws.” Then how was it that wizards seemed to consider them *vain*? In Hermione’s eyes, that wasn’t a trait one could have when they were hardly any more capable of rational thinking than decoration items or insects.

Not to speak of werewolves, of course, who were just as human as everyone else, who were capable of magic if they were also wizards, but were still denied free – or at least affordable – Wolfsbane potions that were essentially healthcare... Never mind most of them never wanted to be werewolves in the first place and didn’t want to hurt anyone. They were shunned for something they didn’t choose and because they were dangerous, yet the same people scared of their potential for harm didn’t see fit to do something to lessen it.

Thinking up solutions to every problem took up almost all of Hermione’s time.

That, and trying to win over the Weasleys.

For the most part, it was no problem. Charlie, for the limited contact they had, seemed to like her well enough, though he was often so detached from his family and their lives that Hermione wondered whether he didn’t have strong feelings toward her simply because he didn’t think all that much about her existence in his brother’s life.

Bill was more present than Charlie, but barely. He and Fleur were always away in Shell Cottage with Victoire, or Fleur was alone with her daughter as Bill traveled the world doing his job as a Cursebreaker. He was nice, kind, even, but he still treated her as a guest whenever he and his wife spent some time at the Burrow.

Percy... To be fair, he tried. He *had* been trying, with all of them, to build back a bond with his family. Ron and he had a somewhat stable relationship, though it could feel like it was seconds away from imploding at times. Percy didn’t seem to hate Hermione, but he didn’t like her either, in some instances acting as if he didn’t understand why she was even there.

Hermione got insecure, sometimes, thinking none of the older siblings believed she was truly a part of the family or even meant to stay for long.

George, of course, had always been a sweetheart and saw her as an honorary Weasley. After Fred's loss, however, he shut down more and more, so emotionally distant Hermione wondered if he hadn't gone with his twin and only left his shell behind.

And Ginny...

Well, Ginny was a nightmare.

Hermione had tried everything to win her over. In school, they had been friends, and Ginny had always been pleasant and fun. After Harry had broken up with her, however, she had somehow decided it was Hermione's fault for not convincing her best friend that they were meant to be together.

Whenever they spent time together in the Burrow, it was awkward and borderline painful for Hermione to try to connect with Ron's sister.

The only times they got along somewhat was in their group outings, where they didn't need to talk or even look at each other.

It didn't seem to matter what she did – Ginny just didn't want the friendship Hermione so desperately craved.

Hermione had always been a boy's girl. Her best friends were both boys, and she felt safer among them, less like she was about to be eaten whole. Her priorities were always different from the Gryffindor girls, who somehow managed to do well in school and still date, care about fashion and makeup, *and* have a social life outside of Hogwarts.

She had been jealous, then, of their bond. Girls could be manipulative, absolutely, but they could also be emotionally honest, kind while expecting nothing in return, and affectionate.

Hermione craved sisterhood. She craved someone who shared the same ideas and principles while also being *like her*. She loved her boys, but she always felt scared that whenever she broke the mold that allowed her to slip right into their dynamic by being too *girly* they would mock her or just simply not understand her. That they would see her as a try-hard instead of a girl trying out new things and learning who she was.

It pained her that she didn't get that with Ginny. While Luna was also part of their little hang-out group, she didn't get to see her as often as she did Ginny; at least as long as she lived at the Burrow, that was. Ginny was forced to spend time with her, and that seemed to fuel her resentment even more.

Hermione couldn't win – if she lived elsewhere, she couldn't make as much of an effort with Ginny; but with her living at the Burrow, it felt like she was imposing her presence onto her sister-in-law against her will.

It made Hermione dread getting married into the Weasley family. It made her even more painfully aware of what she had lost when she had let go of her parents, as now she was entirely detached from the muggle world.

She had reached out to them as soon as the war had ended. Jean and Thomas Granger had been confused and scared as she explained everything – she had Obliviated them, implanted false memories, and shipped them off to Australia, all to make sure they were safe.

It had been a callous, borderline cruel decision, but one she had stood by as she saw the destruction Voldemort had caused upon the world, wizarding or otherwise. She'd had her reasons, and as she undid her parents' false memories, she hoped they would understand them.

There had been gaps then, in all the places she was supposed to be in their heads. With no fake memories to occlude the places she was supposed to occupy, to them Hermione felt like a phantom sensation, a lost limb they could never regain. She had been unable to fully erase herself from their existence, as having a child meant she was part of every one of their memories even if she wasn't physically there, instead just erasing the parts that explicitly contained her. What was left was a jumbled mess, where her parents couldn't tell the circumstances that led them to move in the first place nor her role in their remaining memories but could tell a part of their life was missing, as nothing but the existence of a daughter could explain what was left.

Having the knowledge of who she was didn't seem to make up for what she had done – she might have erased herself from their memories in order to protect them, but she had taken from them a huge part of their lives and identities, removed them from their friends and other family members, and essentially uprooted their entire existence for what they saw as her convenience.

According to them, that was never a choice that was hers to make, and the damage was irreversible enough that they couldn't deal with her in their lives, not right now, maybe never again.

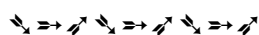
She couldn't allow herself to regret it – they were still alive.

Oh, but it still hurt. How it hurt.

It felt like being a child again, left behind to fend for herself as her parents decided she wasn't a priority. She had felt like a checklist item then, just as she felt like a product abandoned in the middle of a supermarket aisle now.

It was the fact that she couldn't blame them that completely destroyed her.

And now, she was about to get married, and she had no one to walk her down the aisle but the ghosts of her own mistakes.



It had been Luna of all people that had sparked the realization of Hermione's sexuality in her.

Ron, Hermione, Luna, Seamus, Dean, Neville, and Ginny were hanging out that day, hopping from bar to bar like they usually did. It was a game of theirs – who could get drunk faster, slurring their words and pretending everything was just fine. Ron was their leading champion, though they all equally tried, drowning their sorrows in booze or at least attempting to do so.

It was quite sad of all of them, in Hermione's eyes. The only one missing was Harry, who always denied their invitation, claiming he "would bring the mood down," as if it had ever been *up* to begin with.

That day, they decided to go around the table talking about the last person they have felt attracted to.

"Hmm, Seamus... probably," Dean answered, face red and eyes wandering everywhere, except Seamus's eyes.

His best friend also seemed incredibly embarrassed, but if the smallest smile sprouting from his lips was any indication, he was also rather pleased by Dean's admission.

"Ginny," Luna said, an airy tone to her voice as melodically natural as the wind and as unashamed as she could, contrasting beautifully with Dean's and Seamus's reactions.

Ginny didn't respond, but nobody seemed to care much. Hermione noticed, however, that there was a hardness in her eyes, as if trying to hide her anger at Luna's statement.

Hermione was confused; she was sure Ginny wasn't homophobic (that wasn't really a thing between wizards who weren't raised in muggle society), and she had never shown signs of disliking Luna before – in fact, they had always been close friends.

She didn't really care, Hermione decided. She had been trying to build a friendship with Ginny for ages, only to be rebuffed every time. If she didn't want to share her feelings with Hermione, she wouldn't pry.

The rest of the group continued sharing their experiences – Neville said Pansy Parkinson (and wasn't *that* a revelation), Ginny said Harry (because of course), Seamus said Dean (which surprised nobody), Ron answered Hermione (which had the entire group *awwing* at them), and then, it was Hermione's turn.

Hermione had never spared much thought to attraction before. She had felt it, at least a couple of times – her first crush had been Viktor Krum; then, of course, Ron – but those revelations had never been too obvious or instantaneous... until they suddenly were. Hermione had a tendency to only feel attracted to people she already knew or had some sort of connection to. With Krum, while she could tell he was good-looking, she hadn't felt any pull toward him until after they started hanging out. His admiration for her brain also helped. Hermione's weakness, more often than not, was vanity – she wasn't superficial or cared

much for appearance, not at all, but she liked to be admired for things she put effort into and for the things she valued in herself, like her intelligence. And, sometimes, that meant she could get blinded easily to other people's manipulations if they used flattery.

With Ron, they had been friends for a really long time, but she only started seeing him in a different light in their fourth year. It had been sudden and weird then, to go from feeling nothing to feeling everything. She couldn't tell what was the trigger, what was the common denominator tying Krum and Ron together, not really. Maybe it was courage? Defiance? They had nothing in common physically, and it wasn't like she was attracted to anyone who shared the same characteristics Ron and Viktor had. Harry was courageous and defiant, yet she was never attracted to him – he was her best friend, nothing else.

But listening to her friends talking about it, with no issues or hang-ups, made her feel odd, left out. It felt like another way she didn't fit in.

Because that was the thing: she loved Ron. But even when she felt attracted to him, it was never the overwhelming, overtaking passion her friends often talked about. He was comfortable, beautiful yet unassuming, and he knew her, accepted her, and loved her back. And that had been enough. ~~At least for a while.~~

Sometimes, in the quiet of the night, Hermione wondered if she really felt attracted and in love with him, or if she felt attracted to the fact that he was in love with her.

She was taking too long to answer; she could tell by the looks given by everyone, especially Ron, who seemed upset she didn't immediately say his name when they got to her. She felt guilty, but she was tired of lying, especially as the drink in her veins made fuzzy all the reasons why she felt like she needed to in the first place.

"I don't know." Her answer had everyone at the table in an uncomfortable silence. She wanted to shut up, but for some reason, she felt unable to. "There's Ron, of course..." *This is your chance. He is smiling now. Don't fuck this up.* "But I think I'm not entirely sure I feel the same way all of you do. Girls, boys... They all just feel the same. That is, not that attractive. Most of the time, I don't even think I know what attraction really means."

Ron, who was sitting at her right, seemed to be unable to look at her, even as Hermione tried to catch his eyes. *I really fucked this up, didn't I? We will have so much to talk about in the morning...*

She sighed and looked ahead. She noticed Luna was smiling softly at her, the opposite reaction of everyone else. Hermione frowned, but still made an effort to return the smile.

As the night winded down, mostly ruined by their impromptu game, the group dispersed, leaving only Luna, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione behind.

Hermione said she wanted some fresh air and stepped outside, sitting down on the concrete sidewalk and waiting to see if Ron would follow her.

He didn't, but someone else did.

“You know, that was very brave of you,” Luna began, settling next to her on the sidewalk and looking up at the stars, as calmly as she did everything else.

Sometimes Hermione wondered if the stars ever answered Luna’s silent prayers.

“I would hardly call a drunken slip brave, Moon,” Hermione answered, instinctively using her favorite nickname for Luna.

Luna had been a surprise when it came to making friends. Hermione had been unfairly hostile to the girl in school, looking down at her seemingly anti-intellectual way of living with a frown and rolling of eyes, but as she grew up, matured, and learned how to handle the grief for the people they lost and the lives they had to leave behind, Hermione started to see the logic in Luna, the beauty in her unpretentious way of leading life, and the soothing nature of her patient and kind approach to every creature in her path.

It made Hermione want to *want* a little less – to allow the current to take her instead of fighting the waves every time.

Alas, she had never been one to let her ambitions slide away unresolved.

“Was it a slip or something buried deep finally coming out?” Smart, brilliant Luna. She always saw through Hermione’s façade – at least, more than most.

Hermione sighed, shivering, but not because of the cold.

“I’m scared I’ve made a mistake settling down.”

It was the first time those words had left her mouth. She felt like she couldn’t stop whatever else was coming.

“I love Ron, I do, and this isn’t about him. But... I want more. I want something more from life than being stuck in an office, the most I travel being from work to the Burrow, trying to make friends with Ginny when she clearly doesn’t care and dodging Molly’s unsubtle jabs about when Ron and I are having kids, especially because I don’t think I would ever want to.” The words were spilling out, and tears gathered on her lower eyelids, prepared to do the same. “I just don’t know that I’ve found the thing everyone else seems to have. The passion, the inherent mutual understanding. They say opposites attract, yet when I look at Ron, all I see is someone who smiles at my antics and thinks they’re cute but doesn’t actually *see me*. He doesn’t seem to truly believe in my goals – he sees it all as a utopian dream. He is supportive and loving, but sometimes, I just think I want someone who thinks I can do anything I set my mind to. Someone who is just as eager to build it all from the ground up, someone who challenges and betters me, not gets scared when I get genuinely incensed and fired up.” Her frustration finally leaked, and she blinked, wiping furiously at the tears that insisted on going down her face. She turned to look at Luna, who was observing her, something in her eyes that seemed to Hermione to be pride. “Is it too much to ask?”

“Nothing that makes you this passionate is too much to ask for, ‘Mione.”

“I... I just... Ugh.” A monster made of upset seemed to eat at Hermione’s words, making it harder for her to communicate properly. “I know we can’t all get what we want. We went through war, for Merlin’s sake. We both lost so much... I can’t expect Ron to want to leave security for something unpredictable when the last time we both did so, he lost his brother. It’s just silly to replace practicality with daydreaming.”

Luna lifted her eyebrows as if saying “Is it?” She knew Luna believed nothing could ever be done without someone dreaming up the impossible first, and Hermione knew where she was coming from. And she loved Luna, she really did, but she would never be like her. She could never allow herself to be the one forsaking achievable goals for the illusory pleasure of idealism.

Ron might think her ideas were impossible, but she had been making changes, slowly but surely. If it weren’t for the wizarding world’s stubborn resistance to progress, she would be doing so much more already. Luna’s philosophy, however, was much more mystical than Hermione could ever see fit to pursue.

“Anyway, thanks for listening, Moon. I know this isn’t what we came here for.”

She knew Luna had heard the unspoken apology hidden within her words.

“It’s nice to have a change of pace, you know. It’s been way too long since I’ve heard anyone say anything real.” Luna smiled, that sort of smile of hers that assured anyone and everyone that they could never disappoint her. It filled Hermione with warmth, the kind she hadn’t felt in a really long time. “I think we’ve all been too scared of being honest, as if fearing complaining about anything could allow the universe to take back the good we’ve accomplished. Well, let me tell you this, Hermione Granger: you only need to feel gratitude for the good things you’ve got, not the hypothetical pains you’ve avoided. You’re allowed to want more. Please remember that.”

Hermione blinked at the use of her old last name. It felt meaningful, somehow.

She, despite the sullen desperation at what would happen when she got home, grinned, glad she decided to go out that night, if only because of Luna.

“I will. Thank you, Luna.”

Luna blinked and stretched her arms up in the air, the laziness of a cat waking up from a nap under the sunlight.

“By the way, you should listen to your instincts more. If they seem to lead you to Mysteries and alternative ends, then that’s probably where you should be.”

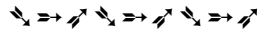
Hermione didn’t understand her words, but that was Luna, after all: a well of wisdom with just a little bit of crazy thrown into the mix.

It was just what they all needed.

As Luna went back into the bar to grab her bag, she shot a last look at Hermione, a lopsided grin set on her face with a kind of mischief Hermione hadn't yet seen in her friend's face.

It made something stir in Hermione's stomach.

It felt oddly close to attraction.



Hermione scratched her neck absentmindedly, her nails scraping the marks left by Bellatrix.

Harry was leaving.

She scoffed at it.

Of course. Of course, he was.

Harry had always felt like an intruder, an impostor amongst the worthy. It didn't matter to him that he had proven himself again and again. It didn't matter he was much better than those screaming they were of superior blood. Hermione's best friend didn't believe in himself, and he would never learn if he had overbearing figures in his corner coddling his self-destructive tendencies.

Was it harsh to see it like that? Perhaps. But he needed a wake-up call.

Maybe this was it.

Still, it felt like being abandoned yet again. She needed support, and he was leaving.

As she stared at her reflection in the mirror, she wished she had any physical reminders of how emotionally tired she really was.

Her hair, forever wild and with a mind of its own, hung down, dark brown and curly and shiny, as if she had had the time to actually care for it.

She hadn't, obviously. Between her marriage, Molly and Ron's insistence that her job was taking up too much of her time and just *unnecessary, we can provide for you just fine*, and her attempts at making sure the Ministry actually listened to what she had to say, she was surprised she still managed to look somewhat presentable.

Her eyes were dark and dull, but there were no bags underneath them. Dreamless Sleep was often Hermione's companion, her only way of remaining productive when the nighttime threatened to bring up everything she would rather forget.

Her skin, following the theme of monochrome, was still brown and healthy, kept that way by the overbearing nature of her mother-in-law.

Her lips... Well, they remained shut outside of her office. No one really wanted to hear what she had to say, especially not Ron, who was still angry over what she had said at their last group outing.

She really avoided thinking about that day. She wasn't ready to deal with the feelings and realizations brought on by alcohol and loneliness, and her husband seemed to prefer it that way. Instead, she focused on her job, frustrating as it was, and tried to convince Kingsley that he could do better without causing yet another uprising in the wizarding world.

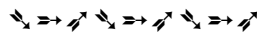
Progress was slow – that was something she had learned since starting her job. What no one had told her was just *how* slow, how much you had to fight for, and how often determination, hard work, and *fire* still weren't enough. No one had warned her about how things almost always depended on the most powerful people's whims.

Well, she knew that now. And she convinced herself that she just needed to climb up the ladder and *become* that.

She could do it.

She had to.

And even as it hurt to see her best friend turn his back on the world she was fighting so desperately to make better, Hermione promised herself she would always, always do whatever it took to do that, even if it made it harder to look at herself in the mirror.



20 years old

That day had been a rare one when Hermione got to come home early instead of working overtime as she always did. It made it silly, calling it overtime, when it was essentially her normal working hours already.

Being the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic was hard fucking work.

Her promotion had been a shock but not a surprise. In just two years, she had gone from a trainee to the best professional the Ministry had ever seen. She didn't see it as vanity to acknowledge it, not when she had put in the hours and destroyed any friendships and obligations she had in the process, becoming less of an individual and more of a social change machine.

She was the youngest person ever to reach that role in the Ministry.

She had fucking earned it.

There was a lot Hermione regretted and felt ashamed of – her growth in her career was not one of those things. She had done everything she needed to get there, never taken advantage of the doors opened for her when she felt she didn't earn them, and had gone back to school and essentially re-traumatized herself in the process in order to know everything she needed to do a good job.

And Hermione did. She always did. And she was bending herself backwards to make sure that even with that as a fact in her life, she still didn't neglect her marriage to Ron.

That was why it was so odd to feel him keeping secrets from her, especially as she had gotten to a point she felt like she had none, her sense of self and privacy turned into a spectacle owned by the public.

It was the price one had to pay when they became a war hero, essentially the Minister in all but name, and had done so without isolating themselves as Harry had.

She was famous, beloved by a lot of people, and hated by twice as many, and somehow, she still felt lonely when she saw Ron retreat into the darkest corners of his mind.

She knew he was just as hurt by Harry's absence as she was. She wouldn't begrudge him for that – they had been best friends for the entirety of Hogwarts and after, and the "Golden Trio"'s friendship could not be as easily severed as adulthood tended to do to most.

At least it seemed like it couldn't until Harry decided it was time to cut the umbilical cord.

Hermione still hadn't heard from him. She knew he was fine – his name had been added to Molly's clock, and it remained on *safe* the entire time he had been gone – but it wasn't just that she was worried about him.

She *missed* him.

Harry had been just as much of a familiar and kind face to her as Ron, but she had always been able to see an *edge* hiding inside him where Ron had none, one that sang to her own so very much. When there was no pretense between the two of them, when Ron was gone from their Horcrux hunt and it was just Harry and Hermione, she could see it, a hunger for survival, a wish inside him that whispered that he had too much to see, that his story wasn't over. Ron had been brave, noble, and strong, always her lighthouse and her compass, but the war had warped him into something else. She still loved him – because how could she not when he made her smile like that? – but the tightness of his embrace meant that, sometimes, when she woke up in the middle of the night, the arms around her that once meant safety now felt like the hold of a snake, squeezing her more and more until she couldn't breathe.

It had been fine, though. Even after losing their other part, they had managed.

She'd managed.

That was, unfortunately, until she heard the dulled words coming out of their room in the Burrow.

Their plans of moving after their wedding had been short-lived. Her reminders had fallen on deaf ears, as Ron kept telling her his mother needed him, that it was selfish to abandon her when she had already lost a child.

It made Hermione want to scream, but she wasn't one for dramatics.

Now, though, as she approached the door, having disillusioned herself and muffled her footsteps, she wished she had made more of a fuss back then.

The voices belonged to three of the other four family members that still lived at the Burrow. Ron, Ginny, and Molly seemed to be having some kind of argument, one Hermione was scared of but couldn't stop her curiosity from listening into.

Molly never argued with her kids, not after Fred's death. She had become their servant, the perfect subservient mother, pretty much doing everything they wanted, while Arthur just watched and repeated whatever she deemed the right way of doing things.

Ron had loved it, of course, as starved of attention as he was, even when the entire world knew his name. At the end of the day, the attention he wanted and *needed* would always come from his own home, where the hunger for it had been first planted.

Hermione did a spell to amplify the voices to herself, and she waited to catch the context of their angrily magically-dulled discussion.

"She doesn't deserve this, Ron..." Molly's voice pleaded, in a way Hermione didn't quite remember hearing before.

"Mum, you know why we're doing this. I can't risk losing Hermione, not like this." Ron's words cut through Hermione like sharp glass.

Losing me?

What the hell did he do?

"I... I know. I don't want to lose another kid either, and you know she is like a daughter to me."

Ginny interrupted her, "Exactly, that's why..."

"Stop it, Ginevra. Don't act as if you haven't been giving that girl the silent treatment since the moment she moved in." The authoritarian tone in her mother's voice shut Ginny up quickly, Molly sounding more like her old self than she had in a long time with those brief words. "Ron, she deserves to know she isn't your soulmate. Merlin, she deserves to know what a soulmate even *is*."

Soulmates? The way her mother-in-law spoke about it made it sound less like a romantic metaphor and more like an actual thing that existed.

The idea made Hermione want to barge in and demand they told her everything, but she reeled the impulse in, thinking she might know more if she let them speak without knowing

she was there.

“You know how Hermione is.” *How is it that I am?* Hermione thought, anger filling up her body as Ron’s words sounded less sad and desperate than before and more like manipulation. “She will obsess over it and won’t be able to see the big picture. She’ll think something magical *must* be perfect, and she won’t see how a few words scribbled on her wrist can’t mean more than her relationship of years and her adoptive family.” Ron paused, sighing, before continuing with, “I can’t lose her, Mum, not like we lost Fred,” he repeated, Fred functioning as the perfect final card, as he always did.

He would have hated having his name be used like this, Hermione thought, feeling bitter.

“I know I haven’t been a good friend to her, and I promise to do better, but Hermione is happy, Mum. She doesn’t need another crusade to go on when she has everything she needs right here.”

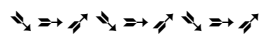
Ginny’s words seemed to be the last nail in the coffin, because Molly didn’t insist any longer, silence filling up the room as Hermione couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Am I happy?” she asked, canceling her spells as she walked into the room she and Ron shared. “Or am I just being kept in the dark?”

All eyes were on Hermione, but she couldn’t look at anyone but Ron. Her husband looked shell-shocked, as if he’d never expected her to find out and couldn’t quite believe she just had.

He probably didn’t, she reasoned with herself. *I’ve been so busy trying to make this world a better place I forgot to question the people I surrounded myself with.*

Before she could say anything else, Molly and Ginny left, closing the door behind them, leaving only the betrayer and the betrayed to reckon with the words said and overheard.



“What did you mean, when you spoke of soulmates?”

Hermione could grill Ron, force him to talk about all the ways he had been keeping things from her, how he had managed to rope his entire family into it, but she didn’t want to hear the excuses. Hermione had been carved out of pressure – she knew what her priorities were at any given time, and, right now, knowing the cause was more important than the effect.

“Hermione, I... I don’t know how much you heard, but I’m sor—”

“Spare me, Ronald,” she cut him off, straight to the point. “Answer my question. We can talk about your secrets after.”

If there was one thing marriage had brought Hermione, it was the ability to cut through the bullshit and bring Ron to the same page. Gone were the days of bickering in Gryffindor, where both were too stubborn to back down. Now, Hermione was in control of the situation, and Ron knew it.

He lowered his head, lips tight in a straight line.

“Every wizard has a soulmate,” he began, “and when we turn seventeen, we perform a spell to reveal our soulmate’s first words to us. When two soulmates meet, the mark turns black.”

Ron raised his left hand, his wand on his right, and didn’t once look at Hermione as he whispered an incantation.

Black words appeared on his wrist, and he turned it the right side up so Hermione could read them.

The words read, *“Think my name’s funny, do you? Well, no need to ask yours. Red hair, and a hand-me-down-robe? You must be a Weasley.”*

Some bully, probably a pureblood...

Either way, not Hermione.

“So you had a bad meeting with your soulmate, and you were already dating me when you revealed your mark. How is any of this an excuse for not telling me, for making your family lie to me?”

“Look, ‘Mione, I know you’re angry, and I don’t blame you—”

“Generous, are we?” Her tone was biting as she interrupted him.

“But I just couldn’t... My soulmate... If there’s any proof soulmates aren’t a perfect thing, this is it. You and I were meant to be together, even if some words on my wrist say something else. I couldn’t risk you leaving me because a *stupid* piece of magic told you so.”

Hermione breathed deeply, not wanting to let her anger get in the way of her judgment. She felt betrayed, and broken, like she had been cheated out of any chance of carving a different path. It hadn’t been her choice to stay, not really, not when her *husband* had kept a huge part of her identity hidden from her.

“You married me knowing I wasn’t your soulmate.” The statement felt heavy on her tongue.

“See, you’re already taking this soulmate thing too far...”

“Fuck you, Ron,” Hermione’s voice was as cold as ice. “You never believed I could think for myself. You still see me as that little girl believing every word coming out of an authority figure’s mouth...”

“I don’t, ‘Mione, you know I don’t.”

“Stop. Just, stop. Just answer me this: how did you get your family to keep this from me? How did you get *everyone* to lie to me? Does Harry know?”

Those were the real questions, the ones that hurt the most to think about, but that needed to be answered.

“Harry doesn’t know. We never told him about soulmates either. Ginny wanted to be with him, and when she discovered they weren’t soulmates she was completely brokenhearted. She kept it a secret from both of you because she knew if she told you about soulmates, you’d tell Harry.”

“She and Harry broke up. Why didn’t she tell me after?”

“She still held hope. Plus, she rejected her soulmate. And she was doing it for me.”

Hermione’s head was pounding with a headache that showed no signs of ending any time soon.

“But why would Ginny reject her soulmate? I mean, I get it, she loves Harry, but it’s not like they ended up together anyway...”

“Ginny– Fuck, I’m not even sure I’m supposed to say anything, but...” *So Ginny gets to have her secrets respected by you, while I get to know nothing at all.* “Ginny... She has a few things about herself she is not ready to accept. Her soulmate isn’t like mine...” Ron’s face twisted up in disgust at that, “but she is not there yet. Maybe she’ll be in the future, I hope so anyway. But I can’t judge her – she gets how it feels.”

Hermione ignored the last part, Ron’s pathetic attempt at sounding like he was the victim of the situation.

Merlin, how did I miss so much about him?

“So Ginny lied to Harry and you lied to me.” This wasn’t a one-person betrayal; it was multiple. Ginny had probably kept her at arm’s length because she couldn’t deal with lying to her.

Hermione wished she would have simply told her and Harry the truth in the first place instead of making it worse.

“Charlie, Bill, Percy, and George don’t know. Mum and Dad... They just couldn’t bear losing another kid. When we begged them to keep it quiet, they couldn’t deny us that. You and Harry are family to them, Hermione. And the thought of me and Ginny getting angry at them for telling you would have ruined them.”

No.

“This... This is not family behavior.”

“Hermione...”

She had bent and broken and bent again, pretending she was in the same shape she had always been in, all for him. And yet...

“I don’t think I can forgive you.”

The words felt final coming out of her mouth.

“After everything we’ve gone through together, you’re going to leave me because I love you too much?”

“Don’t you dare twist this, Ronald. This wasn’t an act of love, it was an act of possession. You didn’t trust that I would choose you so you hid a part of myself from me. You chose me because you didn’t like the option that was presented to you. You were too scared of being alone, so you lied to me for years, *married* me, made your family lie to me... These aren’t things I can forgive just like that, Ron. Every single person I thought I could trust betrayed me – you isolated me and called it love. And I honestly can’t tell if it makes it better or worse that I wasn’t the only one.”

She saw the moment his hope slipped away, his blue-eyed gaze transforming entirely.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, please don’t leave me. I... I can’t lose you, not like I lost Fred, please...” His pleading made Hermione sick to her stomach, his words carrying a level of desperation she had only ever heard from him when he’d cried over his brother’s body.

Her voice was cracking, but she remained determined in her decision. “Don’t... Don’t use Fred for this. You won’t lose me like you lost him. I’m still alive, Ron. I’m just not with you.”

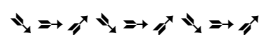
Hermione readied herself to leave. Maybe one day she could forgive him, but she needed space, she needed air, and she couldn’t stay at his house as she dealt with the knowledge she had just gathered.

As she turned around to open the door, however, she saw a glimpse of Ron’s wand as he pointed it at her.

“*Oblivia—*”

Ron was fast, but Hermione was faster. Fighting in the war had made her bulletproof.

She got out of the way of his spell and only managed to shoot him a betrayed look as she walked through the door, and Hermione left her first home after losing her family behind.



As Hermione settled into Luna’s place, she couldn’t stop thinking about the end of her and Ron’s confrontation.

He had sent her way the same exact spell that had ruined her relationship with her parents.

It felt ironic and prophetic at the same time, almost as if the universe was punishing and warning her both.

Luna had been exactly what Hermione needed, taking her in, no questions asked. She had offered to go to the Burrow to get some of Hermione's stuff, which she accepted, grateful for her friend. Hermione felt guilty, reminiscing on how she had essentially cut Luna off since The Incident. She had felt embarrassed and ashamed then by her own feelings and words, and Ron's anger and disappointment had led her to do something similar to what Harry had before leaving, isolating herself from outside connections and only spending time at work or at home. The fact that her friend didn't seem to blame her for the two-year break felt like a miracle at a time like this, when she had no one else.

Harry's absence felt like a punch to the face, as fresh as when he had first left.

When Luna returned, bags filled with her clothes and books, oddly somehow all of her favorites, Hermione was sitting down on the sofa, mind miles away.

"You know, Ginny is my soulmate," Luna broke the silence, drawing Hermione's attention to her.

Did Ron say something about it to her?

It made sense, though, she thought, as her memories flashed back to that night in the bar, when Ginny had seemed incredibly upset at Luna's acknowledgment of her attraction to her.

Ron's words came back to Hermione, too. Why was it so hard for Ginny to accept Luna as her soulmate?

"I'm sorry."

Luna didn't smile this time, breaking her usual pattern. Instead, she sat down next to Hermione and looked at her own hands.

"Thanks." She paused. "You know, Ron's is Draco Malfoy."

That made Hermione laugh incredulously, the first time she did in what felt like forever.

"Seriously?"

Luna did smile then, a sad look still in her eyes.

"Yep."

"Did Ron tell you that?" *He hasn't even told his wife*, she wanted to add.

"No. He didn't need to." Luna looked ashamed, a shy look on her face as she turned to stare at Hermione. "I'm a seer."

The worst of it was that it made perfect sense.

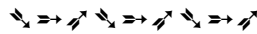
Hermione couldn't help but sound suspicious as she asked, "Did you know I didn't know anything about soulmates?"

"The thing about my gift is that it's incredibly unspecific. Sometimes, it is words that I feel a strong push to just utter. Sometimes, I see images, flashes of a possible future. Most of the time, however, I'm not entirely sure what they mean. So, no, I didn't know, 'Mione. All I know is that there is someone out there for you, someone who will challenge you and break everything you thought you knew about yourself... if only you allow yourself to do something you never thought you could."

"And what is that?"

Luna played with her blonde hair shyly as she spoke.

"Let go."



Hermione spent that night researching everything she could about soulmates.

After all, research had always been a good distraction for her feelings.

Luna helped by providing her with books and her own knowledge, but she eventually left Hermione on her own, as she knew she wanted to see her own mark.

And see it she did.

She stared at the light orange light coming from the mark, pulsating with a hue seemingly mixed with yellow and red, a mock fire slowly becoming more visible.

Hermione could make out the words "*are you Harry's friend?*" and she tensed up in anticipation, as she waited for the mark to settle.

It eventually did, with no more movement to be noticed. It remained that odd orange color, though, meaning Hermione had never met her soulmate.

Okay. Fine. They probably didn't go to Hogwarts. I'm sure that's it.

She braced herself, however, as she cast the spell again, this time, hoping that nothing would appear.

She wasn't so lucky.

They sprung from out of nowhere underneath the other mark. They almost seemed to whisper as she read the words:

“Don’t forget me, love. We have made history.”

Hermione didn’t have any time to process the haunting words; the transformation only lasted for a few seconds before flickering out of existence.

What?

No, this makes no sense...

She tried the spell again, but the result was the same. She felt the urge to try once more but stopped herself.

Is this the definition of insanity?

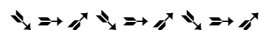
She looked at a few more books, reaching the apparent conclusion that it meant she would meet her soulmate through time travel.

Yeah, I’ve had enough experiences with time turners, thanks.

Hermione put her head between her hands, and did her best to suppress her looming tears. After much deliberation, she decided to go to bed and try to sleep, knowing she would have work early the next morning.

No rest for the cursed, I guess.

Her tiredness overtook her, just as Hermione was thinking how the next day after the tragedy was always the worst.



Hermione dressed mechanically, ate mechanically, and pretended nothing had changed the next morning, trying to delay the comedown for as long as she could.

That was, of course, until her own trainee came barging into her office, nervously telling her about Harry’s sighting in the Ministry.

He was back. *Had been* back, Merlin knew for how long.

The rage Hermione had been suppressing since the day before came rushing in, turning everything around her red. How dare he leave her behind only to return with no warning? Did he think Hermione could forgive and overlook everything?

She wanted to give him a piece of her mind, to yell at him about everything she had gone through without his support and presence. Her assistant had only told her he had been spotted at the Ministry, making his way toward the Department of Mysteries. Hermione had no idea what he could possibly be doing there, but she was about to find out.

She made her way out of her office, taking the lift and feeling nauseous as it made its way down. Hermione was familiar with pretty much everyone in the Ministry of Magic, but she had only a few friends there. The Unspeakables were not among them, as isolated and private as they were. She was nervous, but she knew she could handle it.

She had dealt with a lot worse.

She left the lift as it stopped with a *ding*, and greeted every person she saw on that floor, doing the social dance she always did almost in an automatic response.

Hermione could see it now, the falseness of it all – she wanted to change things, to cause a stir, but she was choosing to assimilate more often than not.

There were two Unspeakables standing close to the Veil who seemed awfully jittery with Hermione's appearance, as if they had something to hide.

There they are, thought Hermione, sure that those were the ones she was looking for.

Her patience was running thin, and she had no time for games.

“What do you two know about Harry Potter's return to wizarding society?”

The man and the woman – Unspeakables Selwyn and Travers, respectively, if Hermione wasn't mistaken – shared looks with each other in a surprisingly unobtrusive manner, considering their jobs.

It made Hermione want to roll her eyes, but she held back the urge.

“You know, I can make your jobs a whole lot harder if you don't share this information. As the Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic, I have clearance to know everything that goes on down here,” she didn't, but it was beside the point and they probably wouldn't know that, “so it's a better option to simply come clean. If you do so, I promise, no one will be punished for whatever happened here.”

As something must have, Hermione reasoned with herself. If Harry had just visited, or even just asked some questions, there would be no reason for their sketchy behavior.

Unspeakable Travers was the first one to open her mouth, seemingly deciding whatever it was, it wasn't worth losing her job or going to Azkaban over.

She caved quickly. It wouldn't surprise Hermione if she'd had to deal with Umbridge back when the woman had held Hermione's job, if that was her reaction.

“Mr. Potter came to us under the pretense of learning what a job in our department would entail,” Travers responded, with her jaw tight and words coming out through her teeth.

“And what answer did you give him?” Hermione was trying to remain patient, but it was becoming increasingly harder. She ran a hand through her hair, unbothered by the mess she was undoubtedly making.

“Well, Mr. Potter asked some questions about soulmates, which we answered, and then he started inquiring about the Veil.”

Oh, no. What were you thinking of doing, Harry?

“We explained some theories we had on it, that we believe it is not a Veil of Death, but rather an interdimensional portal. And as we expanded on that, he took the opportunity to jump in.”

He...

Harry was...

God, he was so fucking stupid.

“Theories?”

Please, don't let it be just fucking unproven theories.

This time, Unspeakable Selwyn stepped up and answered.

“We've managed a few tests already,” his tone held a cadence of pride, one he did a bad job of disguising. “We are almost a hundred percent sure no one that has gone through the Veil is dead.”

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, one that tore through her rib cage as it left her lungs.

“Why would he do such a thing, though? What exactly did you say to him?”

“We mentioned how our understanding of the Veil makes it clear to us that it is somewhat sentient, and that we believe magic controls the destination one might end up in. Essentially, it only sends someone exactly where they are meant to go, and nowhere else. What that means is still a bit inconclusive to us – it could mean something like the concept of a predestined fate, or soulmates; however, we do know it is highly unlikely one could walk through it and end up at the same spot someone else previously did.” The last portion seemed targeted at Hermione specifically.

She had a reputation when it came to her curiosity. Selwyn wasn't wrong in trying to warn her.

Everything about the Veil seemed fascinating.

And irresistible, too.

But that wasn't what she was there for.

“So, Harry knowingly traveled to an alternate universe?”

“We believe so, yes,” Travers chimed in, apparently appeased by the direction in which the confrontation was going.

Of course. Who wouldn’t feel better over knowing they wouldn’t be sent to jail for someone else’s *informed* reckless decision?

Hermione was even angrier, now, but she wasn’t going to aim that at the Unspeakables. Sure, they had been negligent, probably blinded by Harry’s status as the wizarding world’s Savior, but she knew her best friend well enough to know he would have found a way around any rule if he set his mind to it, regardless of any possible interference.

No, she wasn’t worried about punishing them at all – not when she could only think about the possibilities.

It made sense why their department had been keeping that knowledge a secret if it wasn’t a hundred percent confirmed. Disguising the Veil as a death trap was particularly clever – no one would be tempted to try their luck to call their bluff.

Harry did, but then again, he wasn’t known for his forethought or self-preservation.

And he knew enough to risk it, apparently.

Hermione couldn’t imagine what could possibly have led him to do this, to go somewhere no one could ever follow, to leave his friends and family behind. What could possibly have happened in the time he spent away from them?

And the soulmates thing... She believed Ron when he said Harry didn’t know anything. When had he figured it out? Why hadn’t he come to her when he did?

Maybe he thought she hadn’t told him either.

Merlin, she was so angry at Ron and the Weasleys.

Hermione bid goodbye to the Unspeakables, who cleared a path for her to leave, almost as if scared she would take them with her, and she would have laughed at it if she wasn’t trying so hard to keep her rage and pain locked inside. She was scared that if she let anything out, everything else would follow.

And that was a recipe for disaster.

She needed fresh air, something no stuffy building could provide her. She left the lift, feeling herself on the verge of a panic attack, and stepped outside of the Ministry, where she saw *him*.

Hermione hadn’t seen Draco Malfoy since his and his family’s trials. Lucius Malfoy had been sent to Azkaban, but Draco and his mother Narcissa had been cleared of all charges thanks to Harry’s intervention. Draco had looked pale and bony then, more than usual, his eyes lacking the look of superiority they once perpetually held.

Now, as Hermione watched him, she could see he somehow looked even worse than that last time. He wasn't as pale or as thin, not at all; there was nothing physically wrong with him.

But the look in his eyes...

Her eyes met Malfoy's, and the nakedness of his pain mirrored hers.

For what felt like the first time, she could *see* him. See the boy who had lost everything because of his beliefs, the boy who chose arrogance as his weapon because he was too scared to take action. He didn't get to be reckless, and he didn't get to be brave, not like she and her friends did – to be Draco Malfoy meant to hold his head high, be who he had always been, and cling to what was left of his pride till the very end.

Even if it meant he never got to be happy.

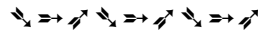
How had she never seen it before, how alike they were? The masks were cut from different cloths, but they both still wore them.

Hermione was still faking her way through life as if she was anywhere near satisfied, as if concrete gains were a good replacement for love.

She was tired of pretending she didn't want more from the people around her.

She tore her eyes away from the boy a few feet away from her, and went back inside, not stopping once until she was inside her office.

Hermione had a choice to make.



She thought through all that she knew so far.

She had a soulmate, one she had never met, and apparently, one that she could only meet through time travel.

And possibly, dimensional travel, too.

Harry was gone from this universe, the reason for it completely unknown.

And Ron had kept the knowledge of soulmates from Hermione, betraying her and turning his whole family against her in the process.

She didn't have anyone else. Sure, she had Luna, some of her colleagues from school, but that wasn't the same. They had fought side by side with her, but they hadn't spent months on the run, sharing the burden of cursed objects between them, and the horrible knowledge that there was a very real chance none of them would survive.

She wanted Harry, needed Harry right now.

And there was only one way she could risk seeing him again.

Her whole life, all she had ever wanted was a connection, love, friendship, *kinship*. She wanted a kindred spirit to hold on to. Harry was the closest thing she had to that.

And her soulmate... there was a possibility they would be, too.

Hermione looked at her office for the last time, allowing just a smidge of nostalgia to pass through her trauma-induced emotional armor.

That space had been hers for some time now, but it still looked as impersonal as ever. Hermione couldn't see it ever changing. She wasn't sure she wanted it to.

She sat down at her desk and took out ink and parchment, letters on the tip of her fingers, ready to be written.

One for Luna, one for Neville, one for Seamus and Dean, and one for Ron and the Weasleys.

He was still her husband, even after everything.

And if she was about to leave forever, he had to know why.

She let them all know what she was about to do, and that Harry had left, too, but that he was okay, and she would be as well. This was the only chance she had at changing her destiny, at fixing her own future instead of just reforming what had never once worked.

And if magic was right – and magic always was – then she wouldn't regret this, impulsive as it was.

Her owl took every letter away, and Hermione made the invisible leap, heading back to the Department of Mysteries with a determination she usually only reserved for her most ambitious goals.

What she could find out was a thousand times more interesting than anything she could see stuck at her desk job in the Ministry.

Before all of this, Hermione would have probably chosen the safer option, the moral one of staying, to keep working on making the world a better place for everyone. But that was when she thought everyone she knew was kindhearted, had good intentions, and meant well.

She had done everything she could for the greater good, yet it had never been enough.

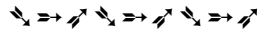
Maybe she would regret it in the future, but for now, that was a different Hermione's problem. She wanted to take the selfish route for once, to give herself the chance she never got to explore the real thirst for knowledge she had been suppressing all her life.

Luna's words, both from The Incident and before Hermione left for her job that day, rang in her head, clear as when they had been uttered.

Mysteries and alternative ends.

Let go.

So she waved mockingly as she walked back into the Veil before anyone could stop her.



She landed in the Forbidden Forest, Hogwarts in the distance.

The light momentarily blinded Hermione's eyes, and as her vision came back, she looked around, taken by the view of the place she hadn't set foot in since she was seventeen years old.

And then she saw who she was looking for.

She locked eyes with Harry, disbelief written all over her brain as she steadied herself.

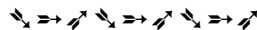
She did it.

She traveled through space and time and landed in the same place as her best friend, despite the absolute impossibility of it.

Fate must be laughing in joy, sitting with its legs up, the wood of its lit fireplace crackling as Hermione took in her new reality with anticipation filling up her veins.

This is where I'm meant to be.

And it's just the beginning.



CHAPTER 5. “IF YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT,” THE DOORMAN SAID, “YOU END UP WITH A LOT YOU DON’T.”

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON SEPTEMBER 26TH, 2023.

Chapter Notes

This is the new version of Iron & Decaying Dreams, updated on the 28th of May, 2023. If you are reading this and you’ve read the story prior to this date and are not in the first chapter, please go back and give it a read. While the bulk of the story is still the same, the order of certain parts has been changed and new sentences/paragraphs have been added. In a few chapters, new scenes have been added as well. By re-reading it, you assure the absorption of the content the way it is meant to be read. Thank you. Chapter title is from FIGHT CLUB, book by Chuck Palahniuk and movie by David Fincher.

“When people think you’re dying, they really, really listen to you, instead of just-”

‘Instead of just waiting for their turn to speak?’”

- Fight Club, 1996, Chuck Palahniuk

CHAPTER 5 – “IF YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT,” THE DOORMAN SAID, “YOU END UP WITH A LOT YOU DON’T.”

OR, FOR THEIR HEROES

It felt like all the air in the world had vanished without her noticing, a squeezing feeling threatening the usage of her lungs.

“Harry?”

Hermione trotted toward her best friend, almost as if being pulled forward by an invisible string. He didn't look that much older than the last time she had seen him – in fact, he looked younger, healthier, almost as if a weight he'd carried his entire life had left his shoulders.

It made her incredibly furious, to have visual confirmation of how much he had not missed her.

“Harry!” she repeated, voice still strained, trying to get him out of the trance he seemed stuck in, with his bright eyes covered by glasses wide in surprise and rooted in place.

Something about the way he reacted made Hermione hesitate.

What if that wasn't *her* Harry? What if that was that universe's Harry, and she hadn't gotten her friend back after all?

If she hadn't stopped so close to him, she might have missed his call. “...Hermione?”

He recognized her. He *recognized* her. He recognized *her*.

Hermione sprinted now, jumping into her best friend's arms, relief flooding her system unlike any other.

“What are you doing here, Hermione? *How* are you here?” His questions were frantic against her body, his face buried in her hair, muffling his words but not enough to disguise his reaction.

“I followed you, you asshole.” As Hermione pulled away from Harry, her anger started building up again, and she was unable to stop herself. “How could you leave me without saying anything? If I hadn't forced the Unspeakables to tell me where you were and immediately came here, if it wasn't *you* of all people to do it... Did you not care that I could have thought you were dead?”

Harry's neck was flushed as he looked away, bringing up his right hand to set his skewed glasses back in place.

“Mione, I...” He interrupted himself, blinking. His tone shifted into one of confusion. “Wait, what do you mean, you forced the Unspeakables and went here immediately after?”

“When I found out you were seen at the Ministry, I went there and made them tell me everything. There— There were some... *extenuating* circumstances involved,” Hermione didn't know if she meant the threats to the Unspeakables or Ron's betrayal as she resumed speaking, “but I couldn't just leave you in another dimension without seeing for myself that you were okay.”

Harry frowned, guilt seemingly now mixed in with everything else. “That... Doesn't make any sense.” Hermione scowled at him, and Harry stuttered, “Not the part about you coming here. The part about how you came immediately after the Unspeakables told you. How long has it been for you since I left?”

“What do you mean? You just did.” The wheels in Hermione’s brain were turning at his question.

“No, ‘Mione, I didn’t. Fuck... Apparently, the timeline here is different or something. I can’t believe I haven’t noticed before. Of course, Hogwarts wouldn’t have even started yet if the timing was the same,” Harry sputtered, but recovered, his tone taking up a darker color. “I’ve been here for three weeks, Hermione. I left in the middle of August, but I arrived here on September 1st. It’s now the middle of the month.”

What?

“I left in the middle of August, too. Why... Why didn’t I arrive here September 1st, too, then, if the date here isn’t the same as in our world?”

“I don’t know,” he breathed out, weaving a hand through his dark, messy hair. “This is just odd. Do you think everyone who goes through the Veil arrives at the other side at a different time?”

“Maybe,” the part of Hermione’s brain that was obsessed with the idea of jumping through universes felt fired up, “it’s possible. Or maybe the magic of the Veil chooses the appropriate time for each person. After all, I ended up here, with you, even though there is almost no chance of that happening. According to the Unspeakables, the Veil only leads you—”

“Where you’re meant to go, I know.” Harry’s forehead furrowed even deeper. “Do you know anything about soulmates, Hermione?”

Hermione gritted her teeth. She *knew*, since both Ron and the Unspeakables had essentially confirmed it, that Harry had not known anything about soulmates. She knew, *logically*, that it was not Harry’s fault she had been kept in the dark. Still, he had figured it out and left before telling her anything.

Breathe, she told herself, as the urge to sink her nails into her palms surfaced, *you know he probably thought you had kept it from him as well. Maybe he felt betrayed, too.*

Her empathy wasn’t the strongest at the moment, but she was quite versed in the art of patience.

She tried to relax her jaw and started talking. “I didn’t. I just figured it out. Ron kept it a secret from me.”

Hermione told him everything – what she had overheard, the betrayal of the Weasleys, Luna’s words. She saw the same fire in Harry’s eyes as she knew was in hers, and the sense of kinship she had been lacking since the end of the war and Harry’s absence came rushing back, easing some of her anger.

“Fuck,” there was a defeated cadence to Harry’s voice, “that feels so hard to believe. I trust you, ‘Mione, obviously, but to think Ron did this to both of us... To *you*... and Ginny, too...”

“I know.” Hermione patted Harry on the shoulder, trying to comfort him and make sure he knew she understood what he meant without words. “I can’t believe it either.”

Harry stood there, very still, but his eyes roamed around, unseeing as if combing through his memories for signs.

Hermione felt the urge to do that, too, but she suppressed it.

She had more questions.

She willed her curiosity to replace the resentment as she spoke, “When did you figure it out?”

His eyes met hers, the green jumping out from his hooded eyes as his usually narrowed glare widened yet again. His scar moved with the expression.

“Please don’t get angry at me,” he began, hesitancy written all over his face.

Really? Do you not know this is the single worst way of starting a sentence?

She sighed and gestured with her head, tilting it as if to say *go ahead*. Harry swallowed and cleared his throat as he explained himself.

“After I left, I only spent a month in muggle London. I...” Harry stopped himself, but continued, as he looked up at Hermione’s carefully composed neutrality. “I couldn’t stay there. I didn’t fit in, things were so different from what I remembered, and I felt embarrassed. I just couldn’t face you and Ron and Molly or anyone else, not after I had made such a big deal about leaving.”

Hermione didn’t answer.

She couldn’t answer; she was too afraid of exploding, and she didn’t want this to be their reintroduction after more than a year apart.

Harry seemed to take her silence as an encouragement.

“So I came back, and stayed at Grimmauld Place, up until I came here.

“Now, what I need you to understand was that I never meant to leave you behind, or hurt you in any way. When I stayed in Grimmauld, I had every intention of eventually writing and seeing you guys. I just felt ashamed. I felt like I didn’t belong with you, like your life was perfect and you didn’t need me.”

Harry scoffed at his own words before Hermione could, but no humor bled through.

“I see it now that I was being stupid. I should have been a better friend, I should have noticed things weren’t that great for you either – obviously, it was hard for everyone after the war. It’s just that, by isolating myself, I was refusing to see it. I preferred living in denial because it was...” The way he scrunched up his face reminded Hermione of the time she had seen her father sucking on a lemon as a kid, expression sour and regretful. “*Easier*, only having my

pain to reckon with, after feeling for so long that the entire world's fate rested on my shoulders."

Hermione could understand that. She really could.

Perhaps that was why she only took a deep breath and kept quiet.

"It was only a day before going through the Veil that I learned about soulmates. I have been reading a lot lately, and I went through a ton of books in the Black Library. There is so much to learn, Hermione, you would have loved some of the stuff there..." He smiled fondly, before wiping it off and focusing on his next words. "Anyway. One of the books talked about soulmates, and I did the spell. And..." Harry's voice faltered. He inhaled deeply before resuming his speech.

"My soulmate is Tom Riddle."

At that, Hermione's self-control slipped.

"...What? Oh, *Harry*..."

"Don't," his voice was cutting, stopping any sympathy that Hermione could muster to send his way. "Don't feel sorry for me. This isn't about how bad it is to have your soulmate be the person who killed your parents, because he isn't that person."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, sure, he is, in a way, but not yet. When I did the spell, his first words remained orange. They didn't turn to black like they do when you've already met your soulmate. But when I came here and met *this* Tom, they *did*."

There was something manic in Harry's disposition, something that had Hermione feeling on edge.

"Is he..."

"Voldemort? No." Harry smirked, a tiny sliver of something like amusement showing. "Hermione, welcome to 1944. Tom Riddle is a sixteen-year-old prefect and a very annoying one at that."

Hermione could feel her eyes gleaming the way she'd been told they did when a new piece of exciting information made itself known.

"No fucking way."

"Way," Harry replied.

As Hermione looked at him, *really* looked at him, she noticed how much he had changed in the last year – and, apparently, a month and three more weeks – since she had last seen him. He looked healthier as she had noted before, yes, but he also held himself differently, his posture more mature, less slouched, as if he felt proud of his stance. His skin, usually a light

brown that at times looked dull due to the lack of sun – especially when he went back to Hogwarts after being with the Dursleys for the summer, or when he had isolated himself for long periods of time – was an even darker shade, but a bright one, as if he had suntanned. He reminded Hermione of how James Potter had looked in Harry's pictures of him.

Despite what everyone said, Hermione had never before thought Harry looked all that similar to his father. The Potters were Japanese, having changed their last name and settling in England a few decades prior. By marrying people of other races, they looked quite different from their ancestors. While Harry certainly looked Japanese, he did so much less than his father and his father's father, the influence of his white mother quite apparent. He had even gotten his mother's eyes, that beautiful Veridian green, despite how uncommon it was for Asian people to have light eyes. They shined now, much brighter than they had in the years past, and Hermione's anger couldn't help but abate a little as she saw the impact this experience had had on him.

Harry continued talking, abashedly, and Hermione focused her attention on his words instead. "So the mark didn't turn black, and Voldemort's last words didn't stick. They flashed for a bit and then disappeared, which confused the hell out of me, so I researched more. I figured out that traveling through time or another universe were the reasons that could happen, as I was supposedly meant to meet Riddle somewhere else. And you know how I am; I just couldn't ignore that. And I was really angry – I thought everyone had kept that knowledge from me, and I felt manipulated, and you know how I react when I feel like someone is hiding something from me. You know I hate being left in the dark." Hermione nodded. "I didn't intend on coming here, not really. I met with the Unspeakables to learn more about soulmates and if dimensional travel was even possible, but when I saw the Veil I just knew. I felt a push toward it, almost like I had been drawn there... and I jumped.

"I'm really, really sorry I left you behind, or at least didn't tell you before. I know it's terrible, but I thought I couldn't trust anybody and it was a genuinely impulsive decision to leave. I wish I had told you, Hermione. I'm so glad you're here. I've missed you." His face and voice were completely genuine.

She could forgive him, just not yet. But she was here, right now, and her best friend was alive and well. Hermione was tired of clinging to the past. Almost everyone she loved had betrayed her and broken her trust in the worst way possible, not even thinking of telling her, ever, if she hadn't figured it out, or, like her parents, decided she wasn't worth it.

And one of the few who hadn't was here, right now. She didn't need to be alone, *lonely*, anymore.

And there was a mystery waiting for her.

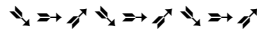
Two mysteries, in fact – dimensional traveling... and her soulmate.

And she intended on solving both.

"It's okay, Harry. I mean, it's not okay, but we'll get there."

The relief in her best friend's eyes was enough for her to store away her resentment for now.

“Now, how about we leave this forest and figure out a way for me to join you in Hogwarts?”



HARRY

“Mione, are you sure you want to go through your last year again? You’re essentially the Minister – it will probably be unbelievably boring for you to redo it.”

They were walking the halls of Hogwarts together. Harry noticed Hermione didn’t seem to be wearing any official Ministry robes, rather just a simple white shirt, a sensible pair of trousers, and black dress shoes, with a nice dark robe on top of it all; she had never been one for flashy outfits, seemingly preferring to save the fancier ones for unavoidable occasions, and Harry thanked Merlin for his best friend’s discretion. It would be very, very hard to explain away why he was friends with someone dressed as the Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic.

“I’m sure,” she replied, face still as hard as it had been while they talked on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry didn’t blame her. “It would be too inconvenient keeping in contact with you in Hogwarts and me somewhere else. Plus, to build a life here, I need my NEWTs.”

She was taking the whole thing very seriously, as practical as ever. Hermione had always been much better at making sound decisions in the heat of the moment than Harry ever was.

“Makes sense,” he mumbled. Of course it did – it was Hermione, after all. “Do you need me to go with you to talk to Dippet? He is aware of this whole situation with me, so it won’t be too complicated, but who knows.”

“No, it’s okay. If he already knows, then I doubt he will be all that surprised.”

Okay, then. No emotional support is needed. Harry weirdly felt like he had been ditched, but he knew he was being silly. This wasn’t the Golden Trio facing Dumbledore after getting into trouble, after all.

As Hermione continued on to Dippet’s office, Harry cast a *tempus*. It was still somewhat early – twilight had finally passed after their conversation on the edge of the Forest – but he had no idea how long Hermione would take with the Headmaster (though he knew she would be able to convince him, even if she had to fight him for it). He wanted to know if he would still have time before he had to retire to his dorm since their schedule was more flexible on the weekends. Deciding he probably would have, he just walked around while waiting for Hermione.

As he approached a dark corner, Harry overheard whispered voices, one of them particularly frantic-sounding. He hid the best he could, casting a silent disillusionment spell on himself.

“I have no soulmate, Wally. I am a disgrace to my bloodline and the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black.” The words carried a mixture of desperation and bitterness as they came out of the girl’s mouth, the mocking way she had said her family house’s name very apparent.

It was Lucretia Black. Harry hadn’t had much contact with her aside from greeting each other, but she had been decidedly less antagonistic toward him than the Slytherins had.

“Didn’t you say a few words flickered before disappearing?” Walburga Black asked with suspicion.

“Yes, something like ‘Are you two friends as well?’” Lucretia all but discarded the notion. “But I don’t see how it could mean something if they don’t stay.”

There was a pause before Walburga spoke.

“Weren’t there cases like this before?” Walburga’s reservation bled into her words. Her tendency of focusing on whatever was of interest to her sometimes seemed to irritate Lucretia. Walburga’s voice assumed a cloudy tone as she carried on, “I swear I have heard of something like this before...”

“Focus, Wally. It doesn’t matter if this isn’t rare, or an exception. That isn’t the point. The point is that it’s an abnormality, and you know how those are treated in our family.”

Harry could imagine it – from Sirius’s stories, the Black family certainly didn’t seem like a walk in the park.

“You don’t need to tell them,” Walburga’s signature petulant tone shined through, “let your parents think what they want to think.”

The other girl scoffed. “How naive are you? This is the Blacks we’re talking about. They whip their children because they think the muggle way is more barbarian, therefore a better lesson. Do you seriously think my parents will follow the custom and not force me into revealing my soulmark to them? Just because your parents are more worried about spoiling you than beating you into submission doesn’t mean mine are as lenient, Wally. You know what happened when I got sorted into Ravenclaw.”

Harry couldn’t see them, but he could imagine the expression on Walburga’s face as she responded, scrunched up in regret and pain. Lucretia was the only one who could make Walburga show any kind of true vulnerability.

“Low blow, Luce. You know how shitty it is with my parents.”

Lucretia’s voice softened, and she sighed. “I know. I’m just desperate.”

“Well, don’t be,” Walburga replied determinedly, “we will figure it out. I’ll help you like I’ve always done.”

“Thank you, Wally.”

The conversation seemed to come to a stop, silence filling up the space, and Harry almost jumped as familiar footsteps approached him.

Harry undid the spell and turned to face Hermione.

“How’d it go?” he asked, trying to detach his thoughts from the conversation he’d heard and focus on his friend.

She twirled, an easy smile appearing for the first time since she had arrived. “You’re looking at the newest Ravenclaw in seventh year.”

The smile he shot her way was a real one.

“Congrats, ‘Mione.”

“Thanks.” Her own smile slipped suddenly and frustration leaked out, her nose scrunching up slightly as it always did when Hermione got upset or confused. “I guess we won’t be spending that much time together,” she regarded, frowning as she inspected his green tie.

Once, soon after the war had ended, they’d ended up talking about their years at Hogwarts, and Harry had mentioned he was supposed to have ended up in Slytherin. Hermione’s reaction had been subdued as if knowing all along, and she had shared with him how the hat had struggled between placing her in Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, or Slytherin, but that she had fought with it to be in Gryffindor.

It reminded Harry, once again, of how similar the two of them could be.

Now that she was here, Harry was aware of the hole in his heart that he had been ignoring as it had finally started to close, making way for relief and love to build up inside his chest as he had the person he loved and admired the most back at his side. He missed Ron too, the way their friendship used to be easy and uncomplicated, but Harry could see now how things had been warped between them after the war – there was always an undercurrent of tension in their interactions then. While Ron hadn’t blamed Harry for his involvement in the war, knowing he had been the one to choose it, Harry still felt like his friend had regretted it a bit. And as Harry had changed and moved beyond his blind loyalties and feeling like he owed something to everyone, his interests changing and evolving, they had become more distant. The first sign of trouble had been when Harry had quit Auror training and Ron had stayed in it, as their shared goal had been one of the few things they still had in common at the time. Now, knowing what he had kept from him and Hermione, Harry couldn’t help but feel like he had made the right choice to let their connection fizzle out.

Hermione, on the other hand, had been aware that Harry needed space to figure out what it was that he wanted to do with his life, while also not being scared of choosing tough love sometimes. It was one of the reasons why he felt so shitty about the way he had let his anger blind him to his responsibility toward his friend when he made his decision to leave his universe behind.

“Nothing could keep me away from you, ‘Mione. Not dimensional travel, and certainly not something as silly as a Hogwarts house.”

Hermione grinned widely, and so did Harry. They walked in silence, side by side, and ignored the looks of curious students.

“You seemed to show up out of nowhere when I came back. What were you doing?” she asked, head tilted, curiosity unveiled as her gently prying eyes watched him.

Of course she had noticed it. Nothing escaped Hermione Granger’s observant gaze.

As he thought through the conversation he had been witness to, he realized Lucretia had mentioned the same phenomenon Hermione had, the same Harry had gone through as well. As Harry remembered the words his friend had mentioned in her mark, he realized Lucretia’s were essentially a response to Hermione’s.

Should he tell her? Could that possibly change the way soulmates’ meetings went, if they already knew what they were supposed to say to each other?

Could knowledge thwart magic’s hold on someone’s fate?

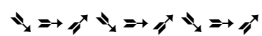
He couldn’t lie to Hermione, not after everything she had gone through. But that didn’t mean he had to tell her what Lucretia’s mark said.

“I overheard something. A conversation between Lucretia and Walburga Black.”

Hermione’s eyebrows raised, certainly recognizing the names, but she didn’t say anything as she waited for him to proceed.

“I think Lucretia is your soulmate.”

The mask of calculated neutrality his friend had cultivated ever since stepping through the Veil crumbled before Harry’s eyes, if only for a second, leaving not a single trace of it behind.



HERMIONE

It was completely bizarre to Hermione that the wizarding world had been frozen in place for so long that living in 1944 didn’t feel too different from the future.

Hogwarts looked and felt exactly like it used to, with no obvious changes to be spotted. The students weren’t the same old knowable faces, but their uniforms were identical, the expressions on their faces and the rhythm of their steps carrying the kind of echo that made up the same cacophony present in Hermione’s school years. This time, though, nothing about

it reminded her of the war – it was almost as if the aura the place sported was lighter, having been scrubbed clean.

Walking alongside Harry should have felt familiar, then, but the shock of his revelation obscured whatever excitement nostalgia could bring her way.

Her soulmate was there, it turned out.

She had suspected it, it had been part of the reason why she had taken that leap of faith, but a piece of herself had rationalized her reunion with Harry as magic's will to throw the two of them together.

Maybe it was her unprocessed grief toward Ron rearing its ugly head, but she had been more worried about whether or not Harry had kept that secret from her than the possibility of having the resolution of it for herself right there, at her fingertips.

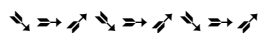
Part of her was terrified of confronting the knowledge that there was someone out there that had been picked out just for her. It meant, in a way, that Ron had been the wrong choice, that her feelings weren't real, or at least, *right*. Hermione had always had unwavering confidence in her own decisions, partly because she researched everything before making them, partly because she trusted her judgment, but the thought that she should have questioned everything more, especially after finally allowing herself the freedom to just act, was overwhelming.

She just didn't like thinking even her own mistakes were a path to lead her to something she couldn't change, even if that something was meant to be, picked out by magic itself.

However, the rush she had felt upon crossing the Veil still hadn't diminished. It was a power struggle within her, thinking on whether to relent to her self-doubt and anger or to her ambition and curiosity for knowledge, and she wasn't quite ready to give in to either side.

She needed time to think things through before she allowed herself to break down more.

So she put her mask on again, straightened her new uniform, and made her way into the Great Hall for dinner.



They would have each to go their separate ways. It was one of the disadvantages of having been sorted into different houses, after all.

Still, Harry refused to let her go before introducing her to people in his house, even though Hermione was quite sure he wasn't exactly friends with anybody there, at least not yet.

He had whispered to her the whole way there about his classmates, the things he had uncovered about them, who they used to be in their version of history. It surprised Hermione, how well-read Harry seemed to be. In the past, he had been too impatient, too hyperactive to

slow down. It had never been that he was uninterested in learning – Ron had been, content with the ways things were and with getting better at the skills he already had, but not Harry. It seemed to Hermione that her friend had simply forced himself to be okay with things being kept from him, with the fact that his questions would never be answered and that his knowledge would always be incomplete.

She saw how he had opened himself up to the power that *knowing* could give him. It was a rush unlike any other, an advantage no one could take away from him, and she was glad he had gotten to experience it.

It was awkward, standing next to the Slytherin table, however. It was something new to Hermione, and she felt transported back to her school years, though she was much better at faking it this time around, her thoughts no longer showing on her face as much.

The first one to speak up was the one Harry had said was called Bram Avery, a look of scorn in his eyes already telling Hermione everything she needed to know about how she was perceived there. He finished speaking to the person on his right – Tymeo LeStrange – and turned to Hermione.

“And you are?” he asked, addressing her as if he was speaking to his maid who had just broken a glass of water in the middle of an important meeting.

Merlin, if this is the type of pressure people go through in Slytherin...

She decided for a bit before answering.

“Hermione. Hermione Granger.”

She couldn’t introduce herself as part of such a well-known pureblood family. Plus, she was no longer a Weasley. In a way, she never had been.

Harry’s eyes were wide, a surprised smile on his face, and he looked at her, giving her a supportive nod.

She had missed this so much.

“*Harry’s* friend, I suppose,” Avery conjectured, every bit clear in his voice just what he thought of that fact. Coupled with her surname, there was no doubt in Hermione’s mind that they had already clocked her as a *mudblood*.

“Yes,” her jaw was tight as she answered, “we grew up together.”

She wasn’t intending on becoming friends with the lot of them, but she still forced herself to remain calm and civil, if only for Harry’s and her sanity’s sake.

“I assume you are also running from Grindelwald?” Avery somehow managed to sound both bored and skeptical at the same time. It wasn’t the best cover in the world, but it would have to do.

“Something like that.”

Avery seemed to want to speak more, but as Hermione surveilled the wide table, her eyes fell onto the one that had kick-started that whole thing.

Riddle.

His dark eyes were fixed on Avery, no emotion readable outside of their obvious intent.

One glare from Tom Riddle was enough to shut him up. It was no surprise Harry gotten so reckless around the boy – Harry often did when he was scared.

~~Or had a crush.~~

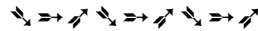
“Well, I have to go back to my table, but it was really nice to meet all of you.”

It really wasn't.

Harry turned to Hermione, a tight smile on his lips.

“That went well, don't you think?” He whispered, his face making it clear he didn't believe his words.

“Any time I'm not called a mudblood is a win in my book,” she replied, making her way to the Ravenclaw table. She waved goodbye to her best friend, tried to keep her hands from shaking, and prepared herself for what would be one of the hardest things she had ever had to do, war included: meeting her soulmate.



Hermione sat down, picking at a stray thread she had undone in her robes, and looked up to greet her new housemates.

McKinnon, Bones, Boot, there were a lot of last names she recognized, but she couldn't really focus on any of them, not when Lucretia Black was *right there*.

She was beautiful – her dark brown hair reached her shoulders, curls wider than Hermione's and much tidier. Hermione couldn't see her eyes, though, as she was solely focused on the food on her plate.

The girl had not cared much about her arrival, a surprise considering how it had turned quite a lot of heads, but Hermione didn't blame her. There were a million possible reasons why she hadn't introduced herself to the new addition to Ravenclaw yet.

Should I...?

Before she could finish the thought, Lucretia finally looked up at Hermione, a questioning look in her eyes.

“Are you Harry’s friend?” Lucretia’s voice was husky, a beautiful blend between delicate and deep.

She said it. The words from my mark.

Hermione tried to catch her breath, and not let the girl notice.

She nodded, and tried to focus on what to respond – she didn’t think Harry was close to Lucretia, but she saw fit to ask anyway.

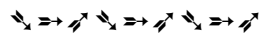
“Are you two friends as well?”

Her words seemed to make Lucretia freeze up. As Hermione looked at her, hope in her eyes, she had a front-row seat to the way Lucretia’s hardened, not a hint of warmth to be seen.

“No,” she responded, disdain clear in her features as she focused back on her food, “I don’t make friends with mudbloods.”

Hermione’s hope deflated as quickly as it had surged, and she bit her tongue as she turned to her dinner.

She should have known things were never that easy.



She suppressed the quite unexpected urge to scream.

As Hermione lay her head on the bed that first night, regret and shock washed over her like being caught up in a tidal wave.

Oh my God. Oh my God oh my God oh my God what have I done

She had left everyone behind, permanently.

Ron, Molly, Arthur, the rest of the Weasleys, Neville, Dean, Seamus, Luna, her parents...

They had lost both her and Harry at the same time.

That was the cruelest thing she had ever done.

How could you be so selfish?

What Hermione had started to realize, the thing she wished she hadn’t realized at all, was that what hurt the most wasn’t losing someone she had loved, or even the trust of a decade-old friend...

What hurt the most was feeling like she was losing herself; it was feeling like she had been a hypocrite, vindictive, thoughtless... It was wondering what people thought of her, if they hated her, whether the impact of her latest actions was enough to undo the good she had broken her back to achieve.

There was nothing more fragile than disconnect, she thought as silent tears trekked down her face.

Hermione felt herself slipping, less and less tied to the things that used to matter so much, now only a need to feel like she was the same as she once was keeping her upright.

It was once a cable stronger than titanium that held her back by the waist. She floated in zero gravity then, still, but it was all a dream, a small taste rather than reality. At times, she ventured too far, and it snapped back, bruising her ribs and cutting off her air supply, reminding her that she had reached her limit – she had always learned her lessons the hard way. Now...

Her sanity, her brains, her intelligence, they were her prized possessions, and she felt petrified over the thought that they might be lost forever to her if she gave herself into the wild. It was a dark rabbit hole, choosing change and letting go, and the last thing she wanted was to be the one screaming *“off with her head!”*

She had chosen Gryffindor for her heroes; the Ministry, for her goals; the war, for her morals.

She had chosen the Veil for herself.

Hermione didn't want to do things by the book anymore, but she also didn't want to take things too far. She wanted a moral compass, and she was scared she didn't naturally have one.

That everyone that could have reeled her in had been left behind.

No, the voice in the back of the head, the one that always made sure she was left standing instead of breaking down, whispered determinedly at her.

She wasn't close with Charlie, Bill, Percy, or George. Molly, Arthur, and Ginny had lied to her, kept secrets from her, helped Ron mess with her autonomy. They had chosen their son and daughter over her – and while she understood Ron and Ginny were the priority, regardless of whether they saw her as family or not, she just couldn't accept how Molly and Arthur had decided to coddle their kids and be accomplices in their abominable behavior. Hermione couldn't imagine ever doing the same with her own kids, if she wanted them. She couldn't possibly fathom not wanting to push her children to be better people, instead just sitting back while they manipulated others for their own gain.

She liked Neville, Seamus, and Dean, but they had never been too close. She always felt like she was putting on a mask when interacting with them, pretending to be the same person she was at Hogwarts. Plus, since that time at the bar, she hadn't been maintaining contact with them at all, she and Ron deciding to step back from the dysfunctional dynamic of their nights out.

Luna was the one Hermione regretted leaving behind the most – she had been the one who had stood by her when she needed it, even when she had cut her off; the one who was there for her after she had discovered what Ron had done.

But Luna had also been the one to warn Hermione of her future. She had been the one to tell her to listen to her own instincts.

If there was someone who would understand she was following the path she had chosen for herself, that would be Luna.

And every single one of them was aware of what she had done; she hadn't done this like Harry had. Even her impulsive decisions were done with thought behind them.

Hermione's parents had essentially disowned her. They didn't want anything else to do with her, and she had eventually learned how to be okay with that, even if that hole could never be filled.

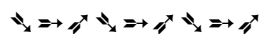
She had always been alone. She could do it again if she had to.

And Ron...

She would always question herself, wonder whether she could have spotted it sooner, this fundamental *lack* in him, this need to hoard everything and everyone in order to feel like he owned anything instead of being spun blindly in this blue rock in space. Maybe it was the way he had been raised, knowing he was a stepping stone toward the kid their parents actually wanted – a girl – knowing he had so many people to live up to... And then having everything he had ever accomplished being tied to the Chosen One, Ron being a squire but never the knight.

But Hermione wasn't his mind healer. She wasn't the person that could fix him. And while she had empathy toward his pain – they had been married, for Merlin's sake; she knew that man, even if not completely, and when one knows someone so deeply, it is almost impossible to not feel for them – Hermione wanted to finally be able to put herself first. Staying would have meant pretending everything was okay when it wasn't, and she had already done it for too long. If she had stayed, one day she would wake up to notice she didn't recognize herself.

And Hermione refused to suppress who she really was anymore.



Hermione was glad she got to share dorms again.

She was incredibly unaccustomed to sleeping alone – between all her school years, her Horcrux hunt with Harry and Ron, and her marriage, she hadn't had time to get used to that feeling again, the one she had as a kid and had to endure when finishing Hogwarts, of being the only body heat and source of comfort through the long hours of the night.

Ravenclaw wasn't as loud as Gryffindor had been, but she didn't mind it. She could still feel everyone around her, and she didn't need to yield to the sensation of loneliness she had worked so hard to obliterate.

The only hitch in that whole thing was having to share a dorm with Lucretia Black.

It was so utterly bizarre, having the knowledge a person she had just met and barely interacted with was her soulmate. It went counter to everything Hermione had experienced before. She believed magic didn't just randomize something like this, that there was something in Hermione and Lucretia that made sense together, but she had never believed in love at first sight. To know she was supposed to fall in love with someone when she had no feelings yet toward them made Hermione feel awkward. As if she knew she was in a game when nobody else seemed to realize it wasn't reality.

As if, if she chose to be with her soulmate, it wouldn't truly be a choice made out of free will.

Her first days in Ravenclaw had been surprisingly calm regardless of Hermione's inner conflicts. She had finished her OWLs fairly quickly, getting high marks as expected. She and Harry took advantage of any free time they had to hang out; they had a few classes together, but not a whole lot. Lucretia mostly just ignored her as Hermione settled into her new house, spending all of her time with Walburga Black instead. It didn't seem to Hermione like she had any friends in Ravenclaw at all.

Despite being incredibly frustrated over their failed introduction, she couldn't help but feel empathy for Lucretia's obvious loneliness. If there was one thing Hermione was acutely familiar with, it was that.

When she had time to reflect on her new-found freedom, she felt more often than not overwhelmed. She was technically single now, something she hadn't been for ages. In this universe, she didn't have a husband, or even a past.

Those thoughts always left Hermione feeling a little queasy. She had, after all, worked hard all those years to build something that lasted, whether it had been her marriage or her career. At least her marriage's crumbling state hadn't been her fault. Her career, on the other hand...

She hoped that, at the very least, Kingsley would follow through with the changes she had tried to implement. Even if she had left that world behind, it still deserved to thrive.

It was upsetting, though, to see this universe had essentially reset itself. All progress they had made back home was now nonexistent.

She was a muggle-born witch in 1944. While Ravenclaw wasn't nearly as prejudiced as Slytherin, there were still some people that held beliefs like Lucretia did. She could ignore them most of the time, but when one of the people sneering at her in the corridors was her soulmate, it grew exponentially harder.

How was it that she was expected to fall in love with someone who believed she was less than human?

It reminded her of the Malfoys' trials, which she and Harry had both attended. Ron had refused to speak up for Draco and Lucius, and neither of them had blamed him – now, though, with the new knowledge she possessed, she couldn't help but wonder whether he just wasn't ready to face his soulmate. But Harry had wanted to be there, to acknowledge what Narcissa had done for him and to keep Draco, a teenager, from going to Azkaban. Hermione had wanted to be there, too, but she wasn't too sure of the reason why.

Maybe it had been this little morbid curiosity she'd felt gnawing at her ankles, demanding her attention.

Either way, she had seen all three members of the Malfoy unit stand trial, all their heads high and proud, even as they convinced no one of their superiority. Draco had been skin and bones, tiredness seemingly seeping through every pore, and Narcissa had seemed so fragile it looked like a strong wind could break her.

Lucius had been unkempt, his previously clean face unshaven and long hair messy, but upstanding regardless, just like his family.

It was like someone had plucked off all of a peacock's feathers.

Harry had spoken, the power of his words obvious before he even opened his mouth, and only Lucius had been convicted.

As mother and son watched the father get dragged away and his wand snapped against the family's wishes, Draco's and Narcissa's eyes fixed themselves on Harry and Hermione. Harry had turned his face away, probably scared they blamed him for not getting Lucius released as well, but Hermione kept watching.

It was crystal clear there was nothing left to the Malfoy family.

They still had money – or whatever was left after all their dark objects had been detained – but that was about it. In the wizarding world, money without a name attached to it barely meant anything.

And the Malfoys had no more name to carry the burdens of their privilege.

Hermione could see the road they would have to partake on, a long, hard, treacherous path of isolation, deradicalization, and redemption, the only road they could travel by if they wanted to pick themselves up. It was borderline impossible to see Draco Malfoy learning the error of his ways immediately after the war, but as reality crept in, Hermione could get a glimpse of it in her mind's eye.

Her experience seeing him before leaving, so many years after the war and still broken, had shown her she had been right in her assessment of their situation. She just didn't want to think that something as drastic as that was needed to work through a pureblood's blood supremacy programming.

Not if she wanted to get to know Lucretia better.

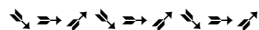
Hermione had gotten to know some of the intricacies of the pureblood ways while in office. She was familiarized with the practice of arranged marriages, so it hadn't been surprising to hear from the other Ravenclaw girls that Lucretia had a marriage contract all drafted up for her to marry Tymeo Lestrangle right after Hogwarts.

It was yet another obstacle – but it did seem, at the very least, that Lucretia didn't care much for Lestrangle.

Not that that was enough to break a centuries old tradition, especially with how abusive the Black family was known to be.

She hated the thought of a time constraint.

Hermione just hoped she could count on Harry to help her out.



HARRY

Explaining everything he had been doing to Hermione didn't go as Harry wanted, but it definitely went as he should have expected.

“So you’ve been essentially goading the guy who can’t stand being challenged into a fight in order to get in his good graces?”

It had been one of their rare shared free periods, one they chose to spend at the library. Harry had essentially turned into Hermione, spending all his time outside of classes surrounded by books. The surprising thing was he didn't really mind.

Except on moments like these, of course.

“Well, when you say it like that, it sounds stupid.”

She didn't miss a beat with her response, “Maybe because it is.”

“Mate!”

“You’re a walking contradiction, you know that?” Hermione sighed, a hand going through her wild hair, failing at her attempts at taming it. “Riddle is dangerous, Harry. He is calculating. If he wants everything going his way, you need to sabotage him in a way he will be in awe of you, not pissed off.”

She was right, of course, but it wasn't like Harry wanted to make Riddle his enemy again.

It was just that spending his entire life in the defense had left Harry wanting to be prepared to attack.

His issue had always been his lack of moderation: if he relented even once, it felt like surrendering. He had a hard time differentiating tactical retreat from cowardice. It had been why he felt so antagonistic toward Malfoy, and it was one of the reasons he couldn't help but attack Riddle head-on when he was supposed to subtly oppose him.

"You know I tend to be impulsive. It's stupid, I know, and I wish I was better at this growing-up thing... but I just feel like it's giving up, to let Riddle go around unchallenged. Like I'm agreeing with him by omission or something."

"I see," Hermione responded, a flat tone to her voice, "I am friends with an idiot."

"Hey!" Harry protested, well aware he was losing the discussion.

"Harry, Riddle is making his own decisions. He knows everything that is wrong with them, and he is doing it anyway. It's not your responsibility to put him back on track."

"Just as you aren't responsible for everything the Ministry is doing wrong?"

He knew it was mean, throwing their shared savior complex right back at her, but he did it anyway.

Hermione guffawed, surprising Harry. "Yes, like that." Her face went back to seriousness, the look on it one Harry was well-acquainted with. "But this is not about me, though. It's just... Tom Riddle, really? You know I'm not judging you, and he is your soulmate, but he is bad, Harry. The things he's done by now, his liberal use of Dark magic..."

"Good and evil describe acts, not people, and certainly not magic. Tom did terrible things, but so did I. It doesn't make him a bad person, not *yet*, just a misguided one."

He was trying to convince himself just as much as he was Hermione.

"Harry, I know you're too kind, but that's not even remotely comparable—"

"Isn't it, Hermione?" he interrupted her, his temper mercurial and unstable. "Do any of us really have a leg to stand on?"

"Look... I know you don't have the healthiest self-esteem..."

He huffed. "Understatement of the century—"

"But! But you've always tried doing the best you could. Always, Harry. Even when you did things without thinking, your heart was in the right place. That's not the same thing with Riddle, at all. He's always been self-serving."

"Can you really blame someone who has never had anything if they seize the opportunity to have everything?" Was he really defending Tom Riddle of all people?

Huh. I guess I am.

“Have *you* done it?”

Have I?

“You know what? Yeah, I have. Didn’t I leave home without telling anyone I was even fucking alive when I knew there was probably no way of going back?”

To that, Hermione swallowed, resentment still clear in her eyes, even though she tried to hide it.

See? Face it, I’m a monster. I’m just as bad as him.

“Yes. Yes, you did that,” Hermione answered, eyes red as tears started to form. “Yes, you left without saying goodbye, even after everything we went through together, after months when even being apart was torture. You left the wizarding world then came back without telling anyone for a year only to leave again to a place I only managed to follow by sheer luck or divine intervention, even though I spent my last year in Hogwarts barely eating because I was terrified of how you were doing all alone in that stupid decrepit house.” Harry could see the anger building up in her. It had been turning into a staple of Hermione lately, and it bloody terrified him. “Yes, you left us. You left me. And that still doesn’t make you as bad as a fucking mass murderer, and the fact that you’re trying to get me to hate you while he is out there right now, commanding his followers to probably do something awful without an ounce of remorse tells me all I need to know about you, Harry. And that is that you are not a fucking monster, it doesn’t matter what your head is telling you right now.”

Harry had forgotten how well she knew him. People didn’t go through years of blood and trauma together, the smell of salt and iron filling their lungs, having every dream they ever had die a slow death as they could barely get out of bed without knowing every inch of each other’s demons.

And Hermione certainly knew his.

Harry had never seen himself as a deeply introspective person, but that had changed since the end of the war.

His thoughts and actions waxed and waned, hardly following the pattern he desired them to. He could spend days thinking of something to do only to have that planning become null the second his impulsivity reacted. Hermione was right, he had been strategizing too little, even though he overthought all the time. He had been choosing the self-destructive path yet again, except this time he couldn’t hide under the excuse of sacrificing himself for the greater good.

This time, he was chasing the taste of blood because he liked it; because it was all he had ever known.

And wasn’t that fucked up? Wasn’t it fucked up that he didn’t believe for a second that Tom could change, that he could love Harry, so he didn’t even bother with trying?

“You’re right. You’re right, Tom has already done so many bad things, things he can’t come back from, and he has done them not out of manipulation or impulsivity or self-hate, but out of self-preservation.” And while in and out of itself that wasn’t a terrible goal, not in Harry’s eyes, it was hardly conducive to growth, especially when motivated by fear. “I want to help him, Hermione. I want him to not be scared of dying. I want to help him build something worth preserving.”

Hermione glanced at him, searching for something in his face he didn’t know she could find.

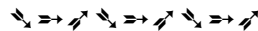
“Your heart is too big, Harry. You might get hurt, but I want you to know what you’re doing. And I can see that you do. You might need a little push to change the way you go about your efforts, but...” She shrugged, a coy smile playing in the corner of her lips.

The gratefulness in Harry’s chest squeezed his heart with the reminder of how lucky he was.

“I love you, ’Mione. I don’t know how I’ve ever gotten anything done without you.”

The glint of *life* that had been so sparsely present in Hermione’s eyes since she arrived sparked back into existence.

“Well, you *have*, just not as well.”



HERMIONE

Harry wouldn’t turn down Hermione if she asked for help, and she knew it.

He was too self-sacrificing; a trait left over from his childhood, she guessed. When the Prophet had run that story, it had shaken her to her core, to realize she had essentially turned a blind eye to what were obvious signs of abuse in retrospect.

The bars on his window that Ron had spoken about, how thin he had looked every year, especially soon after returning to Hogwarts, the way he sometimes flinched when someone was being too loud or too touchy with him...

She had tried to convince him to go to a mind healer, but he had been so very adamant against it.

After that, she had tried her best to become a more empathetic person. While Hermione cared a lot about people, she often went about it in a practical way – she was the one to offer sound advice upon hearing of someone’s woes instead of just offering a sympathetic ear or comfort, the one to waive away someone’s overwhelming emotions in order to focus on the problem at hand, the one to offer tough love instead. She wasn’t cruel, but she was the type to solve

issues by intellectualizing them, processing them in a more analytical way, the type to discuss things with a straight-to-the-point approach.

As a kid, she had a tendency to put too much trust on the authority figures around her; they were her heroes, the people she looked up to. She was always read as a mini-adult, and she wanted to embody that. So if Dumbledore said something was okay, she listened. If no one seemed to question the obvious abuses of the systems around them, she didn't either. It was a childlike way of seeing things, but it made sense to her then.

With time and experience, of course, that had changed, since Hermione was also someone that took in new information all the time and changed her approach accordingly. As she grew up, she realized adults were just as flawed as young people, and just as prone to mistakes and biases. It was just that the immediate threat to Harry's life had been Voldemort, so that had been the thing she had focused on, the thing her roaring protective instincts jumped in to defend him from.

She wished she could've seen it back then, just how insidious that type of abuse was, seen how it could be just as destructive as the things Voldemort had done.

Because that was the thing: Voldemort went after Harry, but he had never disguised his intentions. Harry knew Voldemort hated him and wanted him dead, and in an odd way, it was never personal. He didn't hate Harry, the boy – he hated what Harry represented, which was his downfall.

The Dursleys, though, were much worse in that aspect, because Harry had never done a single thing to “earn” their abuse. They hated him not only for him, for the things he couldn't control about himself, but also for what he reminded them of, the people he had never met but had always been compared to.

And because they had raised him, Harry had never had the chance to avoid these messages from being internalized into his very core... and his already low self-esteem had been spotted and lowered even more by people who realized he was vulnerable and prone to being manipulated.

As someone who had been used more than once as a child eager to please her superiors, that was the thing that made her blood boil the most.

Usually, Hermione would try to move on, tell herself it was in the past and there was no point in dwelling on it, but she didn't want to pretend this wasn't a thing that was still weighing on Harry to this very day, from the way he thought to the way he acted.

A prime example had been his approach to Tom Riddle.

His original plan had been clever – it showed the potential in Harry's inner Slytherin. But he was still struggling to get there because of how self-destructive he was.

To Harry, the freedom to do whatever didn't mean happiness and being carefree, it meant a dangerous reckless abandon. With no one to show him his own worth, he would fall off a

deep end, doing all the same things he would before, but now with no one to protect him or guide him.

Hermione knew that he relished not being controlled or kept in the dark anymore, in finally having the opportunity to make his own decisions, however flawed they may be. And he wasn't wrong in doing so, not really.

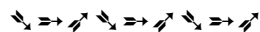
But the way he had been raised meant that he couldn't see the half-way point between being someone's punching bag and a free-wheeling train-wreck. He was so scared of losing his autonomy that even the thought of a cautious approach to things seemed to him like a red flag.

Hermione was glad she was there whenever her own self-judgment relented, if only to help her best friend see himself the way she saw him: as an incredible, loving person that deserved so much more than the lot he had gotten in life.

It was why she was side-eyeing Riddle so much, too. It was so like Harry to jump into an opportunity of saving his greatest enemy. And while it was a noble goal, even if it had the undercurrent of a self-interest in there, it was one that had the potential to destroy any progress Harry had been making toward seeing his own self-worth.

Hermione couldn't make up for neglecting to see Harry's suffering in the past, but she could make sure he didn't give too much of himself to someone who didn't deserve it in the present.

Even if, by Hermione's perspective, Riddle seemed to be just as caught up in Harry as he was in him.



HARRY

Harry was an idiot.

He had been a hypocrite. Being thrown into what was essentially the past had warped his mind, and made him feel like the child he was when he frequented Hogwarts the first time around. Harry had grown and matured. He liked to think he was better than before. He held on to the idea of rehabilitation, not empty punishment. Yet here he was, mistreating the Slytherins and Tom Riddle as if they were monsters from a storybook.

Hermione was right – he was being childish. He had let his hormones take over, being as overwhelmed by Tom as he was. The truth was that he'd had a crush on the boy when he was twelve; the version from the diary had been smooth, kind, and charming, ensorcelling Harry in a way he could have never escaped as a naive child. Tom wasn't like that, not his real self,

and Harry was well aware. It didn't mean he had to act as if he had already signed away his fate to evil.

And it sure was not a good strategy to antagonize him and his peers, even if it irked Harry to no end how much they looked down on half-bloods and muggle-borns.

Words were pointless to people like them. Slytherins worked on effectiveness, not reassurances. He had been so focused on being non-threatening and *himself* that he had forgotten to prove himself worthy of being listened to.

He needed to change that.

First, he needed to show he had power; after all, that was what they respected more than anything else.

Then, he could work on proving their beliefs wrong. Harry wanted to be the antithesis to everything Tom currently was in principle, but he wouldn't sway them easily. He was already chained to his identity as a muggle-born, so while his plan to prove himself in their eyes would be hard, if he managed to do so, then the purebloods would see muggle-borns were just as powerful as them, and that wasn't easy to refute.

Harry didn't want to be a hero anymore. He wasn't doing this for some greater good; he was doing this so he could make sure Tom chose a better path, and he was doing *that* because he wanted his soulmate to have a better chance. He wanted his soulmate to choose him over power.

But his plan was full of holes because he was letting his insecurities and feelings guide it. He was brash because he was reckless. He tended to react, not analyze.

In his head, the only way to get close to Tom was by doing what had always worked: acting as his enemy. Harry had never known anything else. He was terrified that who he was, *what* he was *to* Tom would never be enough to sway him, so he chose the most complicated approach possible. He goaded people instead of deescalating because he could see all their masks, and after years of being manipulated and kept secrets from, the only way he could feel alive and *okay* was by trying to destroy everyone else's falseness. He hated the spotlight, he wanted quietness, and he was so used to hiding his talents, as he had always been forced to by the Dursleys, that he ended up choosing mediocrity yet again, even though that wouldn't work on proving his worth. He used the excuse of not wanting the Slytherins to question his backstory as a muggle-born if he excelled in everything, but the truth was, he was just too scared of the attention that could bring. He was too scared of getting closer to the myth of Harry Potter he wanted so desperately to shed. The worst of all was how he allowed himself the arrogance he so hated in his father and Sirius and the Gryffindors, at times, by believing he was morally superior. He had a tendency to put too little thought into people's contexts, only doing so in retrospect, and that made him too close to the type of person he despised; the type of person that felt entitled to praise simply because they believed they were better than everyone else. Harry believed every person was equal, and that everyone could change, so why wasn't he giving anyone the chance to do so? Yes, the impact would always be superior to intent, and Tom was on his way to making one hell of a bad impact, but there was still time.

Harry was still stuck in his patterns, it didn't matter how much he tried to break them.

He wanted to allow himself to be who he needed to be – even if that wasn't the person he thought he would turn into. Old Harry hated Dark magic; now, he knew it was simply another branch of magic that needed respect as any other. He was ambitious, even when he still felt lost and misguided.

He had loads in common with Tom and the Slytherins; he was just too scared to embrace it.

What Harry was terrified of admitting was that he thought embracing those traits meant turning into another Dumbledore, someone who was willing to walk all over anyone and anything to reach their goals. Even if Harry trusted his goals were noble, he didn't want to lose sight of his path – after all, that was the thing he wanted to change the most. Not the past, but his methods. He didn't want to grieve the lost anymore.

It was his impulsivity that got in the way of his plans the most. He wasn't very cunning because he always focused on the big goals, the big picture, instead of on the details. His whole life, he had been forced into action, fighting on the battlefield where there was no time to think of the consequences, where speed was of the essence. He felt so lost because he had never had to make decisions – he was always the soldier, never the tactician. He never expected to survive so he made sure to never have anything to plan or hope for. There was no future – just the present. His loneliness definitely didn't help with critical thought either.

The thought that now Harry had to allow himself to *want* something was inconceivable. He just got triggered, again and again, every time he felt out of control. It just reminded him of the past, of war. What he longed for the most was certainty. Not boredom, but knowing there was something out there. And there was absolutely nothing certain about Tom Riddle.

The war had changed everything Harry thought he knew about the world. Now he could only see the shades of grey that were hiding before – he couldn't choose to ignore the complexities anymore. He craved the recklessness because now he could no longer wing it, he could no longer choose self-destruction. He had to embrace Slytherin's self-preservation, even if he didn't see his own value.

He hated the thought of prophecies because he wanted to choose his own destiny, and most importantly, he wanted that destiny to feel safe and secure, and prophecies had never been that for him. But he had difficulty believing soulmates were the answer to the stability he craved, simply because their existence didn't mean an unchangeable future. Sirius and Snape had been soulmates, yet they hadn't ended up together. Though he had the confirmation that he *was* his soulmate, what guarantee did Harry have that he and Tom would? He was curious enough to try to find out, but too scared to properly commit to it, which meant he was stuck in this limbo, self-sabotaging his goals because he still needed someone else to be the one steering him toward the right answer as it had always been the case before.

He didn't feel like he fit into the wizarding world because he still saw himself as the boy living in the cupboard under the stairs, the unwanted freak. And by being a Slytherin disguised as a Gryffindor, he was just that. Hogwarts had felt like home because it was the only place he had ever felt loved. He didn't want to taint that.

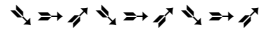
He was being the thing he hated the most: false. It was time he stopped pretending he was still the same Harry from before. It was time he stopped holding on to fake outrage for the sake of not disappointing people that were no longer around.

They had lied to him, manipulated him, and kept secrets from him. He didn't owe them anything. The only one he needed to be true to was himself.

He didn't want to die. He didn't want to lose himself. So he needed to try.

If he was getting too close to becoming someone else, Hermione would tell him. That was what friends were for, after all. He would do anything for her, and she would do anything for him.

Harry just needed to stop confusing the edge with the deep end.



CHAPTER 6. I AM JACK'S COLD SWEAT.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON SEPTEMBER 26TH, 2023.

Chapter Notes

This is the new version of Iron & Decaying Dreams, updated on the 28th of May, 2023. If you are reading this and you've read the story prior to this date and are not in the first chapter, please go back and give it a read. While the bulk of the story is still the same, the order of certain parts has been changed and new sentences/paragraphs have been added. In a few chapters, new scenes have been added as well. By re-reading it, you assure the absorption of the content the way it is meant to be read. Thank you. Chapter title is from FIGHT CLUB, book by Chuck Palahniuk and movie by David Fincher.

"You are not special. You're not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You're the same decaying organic matter as everything else. We're all part of the same compost heap. We're the all singing, all dancing crap of the world."

- Fight Club, 1996, Chuck Palahniuk

CHAPTER 6 – I AM JACK'S COLD SWEAT.

OR, *FOR THE GREATER GOOD*

A WEEK AND A HALF AFTER HERMIONE'S ARRIVAL

HARRY

Since Hermione had arrived, Harry had spent almost all his time outside of classes with her, making up for lost time, but he was prepared to make connections with his peers. None of

them had inquired much about her, mostly shooting her dirty looks and gossiping amongst themselves, but Harry had no doubt Orion's – and consequently, Tom's – head was spinning with speculation.

He knew they would pry that information out of him eventually. He just wanted to be ahead of the curve to try to avoid the severity of it.

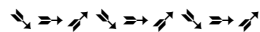
He had started to stick to himself more, engage with the house rules more often. There were no loud discussions of pureblood supremacy outside of their common room, no talks of the current war in public, limited engagement with other houses (before Hermione, it had been mostly with other pureblood families), and, of course, presenting a united front outside of their common room and dorms. No badmouthing Riddle was an obvious one, and Harry made sure to stick to their discussions only when they spent time together at the library, away from prying eyes. It wasn't like he wanted to share their banter with anyone else anyway.

He wasn't happy, not really, not yet, but he was oddly content, and having his best friend back only heightened the feeling.

So Harry used this odd peace to his advantage and reoriented himself, reassessed his goals. He had too many people to win over, and not enough time to do so if he hesitated any further.

He hated being rushed, as it reminded him of worse times of blood and chaos, but, alas, he didn't have a choice.

It was time to let his inner snake out.



When professor Merrythought suggested dueling, Harry's heart sank to his stomach.

It was exactly the opportunity he was looking for, but he would have to approach it much differently than he would have had before.

Arrogance was a trait only purebloods were allowed to have in his house, and at best, he would be seen as capable and talented, but not full of himself – a good recruit for the Knights, but non-threatening enough to convince them he wasn't going after Tom's crown.

A hostile takeover was not the cunning way to go about it – it would have been the Gryffindor way, and Harry was trying to leave it behind.

He had already begun to improve in his classes, trying to make up for his previous mediocrity, but he still needed a boon.

Their Defense Against the Dark Arts professor didn't really have a sound method when it came to partnering up students – she seemed to do it based on her mood or what disaster she was interested in witnessing that day. Harry's professors were, overall, pretty okay, arguably

better than the ones he'd had at his time, but the few exceptions, however, severely stood out. One of them was Binns, of course, who was still just as mortifyingly dull as he had been in Harry's time. And her.

Galatea Merrythought was nothing like Harry had expected upon starting her classes.

It wasn't like Harry'd had the best track record when it came to Defense teachers. Most of them had tried to kill him, after all. But she was something else entirely.

Merrythought was a great teacher... when she wanted to be. She didn't display favoritism; in fact, she seemed to be equally bored by everyone that entered her classroom, regardless of the clear ass-kissing attempts from Riddle. She followed her own desires most of the time, and wasn't afraid to laugh at a student's face when they made a stupid mistake. Everything was amusing to her, but in the kind of way an ignorant person was amusing: one would roll their eyes and laugh at their absurd behavior while not taking them seriously one bit.

In a way, she reminded Harry of Dumbledore – except instead of treating kids with kindness when they were foolish, she dismissed them outright.

At least someone like Snape had cared about Harry's education, even if in a severely misguided way, and he made it obvious that everything Harry did or said affected the professor one way or another.

It made Harry want to scream, when he was clearly a great student and trying so hard to learn what he could while having to bend to his professor's whims. He loved being back at Hogwarts; what he didn't love was being treated like a child again.

Alas, it seemed that was the price he had to pay for his decisions.

That day, Harry's partner in dueling was Sébastien Rosier.

Harry had never partnered with Riddle before in Defense, besides that being the standard in every other class he had. It was a blessing in disguise, of course, as he couldn't win in either scenario, since winning against Riddle would be seen as a threat and losing against him would make him as unremarkable as everyone else. But it made Harry scratch his head. He was great at Defense, but his professor didn't seem to care. If he had been bad or mediocre at it, any other teacher would have partnered him with Tom to help him out. And being as good as he was, in any other class, they would probably have done the same, if only for the sake of seeing two great students challenge each other and show the rest of the class how it was done, as well as to not stilt his progress. If there had been method to his teacher's madness, Harry would have guessed she thought that separating them meant both he and Riddle could help other students out so they could get to their level. But that was Merrythought, and she had never expressed that intent. He knew there was no method.

Sébastien was the second greatest duelist amongst the students in Hogwarts. The first, of course, was Tom. There was a reason why he was always flanking Riddle; it was the thing he was the best at, fighting.

While Tom was all flourish and spectacle, going out of his way to show off his knowledge and perfect stance, Sébastien favored precision and speed. There was no time for theatrics with him – he seemed to fight to hurt and incapacitate, not to dazzle.

His style was the closest to Harry's in the whole class. Harry, however, fought for survival. What he had lacked in his repertoire in the past, he had made up for in creativity. He wasn't always prepared but he got up to speed quickly and made it out alive, even if he had to get a little embarrassed in the process.

What scared Harry about going against Rosier was just how much the other boy was eager to skirt the lines. Harry often acted on instinct, shouting spells before he even had the chance to think them over, and he was nervous about the possibility of saying something he shouldn't in class, especially now that he knew a lot more about Dark magic than he had during the war. He hadn't been very concerned about legality when consuming the contents of the Black Library.

While Merrythought wouldn't tolerate Dark magic, she didn't particularly care if students used curses on each other, as long as they weren't too strong or hurt them badly enough that simple healing spells didn't work. They were seventh years, after all.

She was honestly terrifying as a teacher.

Shaking his head to get rid of his thoughts, Harry took his stance across from Rosier, purposely ignoring the other boy's eyes. While he appreciated dueling as an art form and was decent at it, he still had a hard time following through with the traditions of it, especially the bowing part.

He always had flashbacks to the graveyard then.

"On the count of three, you can start," Merrythought's voice had the same droning cadence Binns' was famously known for as she spoke the words. "One, two, *three*."

Harry and Rosier bowed to each other, each with their wands in hand, Rosier's lax around his, as if not expecting a single challenging moment to arise from their duel.

Not surprising, considering the first time we went against each other. Though four against one is a very different affair.

Harry's eyes were focused on his opponent, his feet prepared to dodge if necessary. He had been surprised when he had been cornered by the Knights, not expecting them to truly attack him out in the open, but he knew what to expect now. He had seen Rosier fight before – he was used to being the superior one, his track record essentially flawless, so he often decided to forgo defensive spells entirely, his ego getting the best of him. And he always, *always* went for attack first.

Harry cast a non-verbal *protego* just as Rosier sent an *expulso* his way. His shield held in place, only a small amount of pressure making Harry grit his teeth, and he prepared for his first attack.

“*Vortigo aequilibrium!*” he shouted, and his spell hit Rosier right in the chest.

It had been a Black Library special, one of the legal ones – it made the target feel like they have been spinning for several minutes, leaving them incredibly dizzy. It didn’t last long, but it was enough.

Harry utilized his advantage to cast a non-verbal *stupefy*, but Rosier managed to duck out of it, having recovered surprisingly quickly, and shouted, “*Petrificus totalus!*”

Harry’s head was completely blank as he cast another *protego*, narrowly escaping, and he blinked.

“*Manus instabilis!*”

Rosier moved out the way to avoid Harry’s spell, but it hadn’t been fast enough.

He probably isn’t familiar with it, Harry thought, as the boy hadn’t realized Harry wasn’t aiming for any obvious part of his body.

Rosier’s right hand immediately started to shake, almost making him drop his wand, but he ignored it, despite the mixed look of confusion and anger in his eyes, and pointed it toward Harry again.

“*Everte statum!*”

Not a very usual spell. *I guess he is learning.*

It hit Harry fair and square, but he managed to slow his fall backwards with an *impedimenta*.

“*Genus ruina!*” Harry cast, still in the air. As he descended, he didn’t even focus on the results of his spell, instead sending yet another one, “*Obscuro!*”

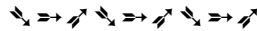
As the already confused Rosier now had to deal with being blindfolded, Harry sent his way his final spell, his trusted *expelliarmus*.

As he made his way toward Rosier and cast a *finite incantatem*, Harry could feel the entire class’ eyes on him, Riddle’s included. He didn’t look at him, though, more unsettled by Merrythought’s glare, none of the boredom or hollow amusement now present. Instead, as he turned to gaze at her, still with Rosier’s wand in his hand, he could see the failed attempts of disguising a look of curiosity etched into her face.

He returned Rosier’s wand to him, momentarily taken in by the rock-hard way his jaw was set in place, looking everywhere but Harry’s eyes.

Well, I guess I can deal with Merrythought later.

There was something much more pressing awaiting him as the end of the class approached.



“Where did you learn that spell?”

Merrythought’s foot stood between Harry and the door, symbolically locking him in.

Harry had intended on avoiding dealing with his professor after the duel, all but trying to run out of the classroom, but he wasn’t so lucky.

“Which one?” *Playing dumb, as if that has ever worked for you before*, Harry chastised himself. Still, he didn’t want to have to come up with an excuse.

“The one before the *obsкуро*.”

Genus ruina.

A spell of his own creation, inspired by a Dark one he had come across in his readings. The original’s intent was essentially warping a person’s entire sense of self, making them as confused as a *confundo*, as forgetful as an *obliviate*, but much, much more destructive. The person subjected to that spell turned into a mix of a child and an amnesiac, permanently scarred, having the physical reactions of trauma of an adult but no memories of it, and unable to grow up mentally to the point they had once been.

Harry had been fascinated by it, both horrified and intrigued, and had challenged himself to create a modified version of it, one whose effects were temporary and functioned by turning someone’s thought processes into ones of a child as if they had regressed into childhood, making them incredibly disoriented and unable to remember what they were doing previously.

He hadn’t intended on using that spell, not really, especially since it had never been tested, but he couldn’t change the past.

At least it would have made an impression, as Rosier would definitely tell the other Knights about it. He hoped that by ending the spell himself and returning Rosier’s wand he hadn’t came off as an asshole, but he would have to wait and see.

“It was just an obscure spell I found in a book. It didn’t seem to be illegal or too damaging, so...” Merrythought wasn’t a stickler for the rules, so hopefully she wouldn’t care all that much.

“Which book?” She wasn’t eager to drop it – Merrythought’s dark blue eyes were narrowed, her voice curt and sharp, and her posture slanted to a degree that, even though she wasn’t standing too close to Harry, it felt to him as if she was breathing down his neck.

“I don’t remember.” Harry found that it was better to keep his answers short when being interrogated – the more he tried to embellish his lies, the easier it was for him to trip up.

Just drop it.

The professor changed gears upon his response, possibly seeing he wasn't going to let up.

"Rosier could barely tell me what the spell did. All he said was that it made him feel like he didn't know who he was."

Worse than Riddle's stares through the rest of the class had been when Merrythought had called Rosier to her desk, their conversation too low for Harry to listen to.

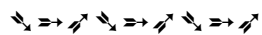
"Well, he is fine now."

To that, Merrythought smiled, a grin with too much teeth, resembling a shark. "Indeed."

"Professor, if I maybe excused, I have other classes after this..."

"Of course, go ahead," she said, still not retreating her foot from the doorway.

Harry didn't even look in her direction as she finally let him go.



TOM

"He won against Rosier?" Orion looked shocked, having skipped class that day to spy on his usual targets, and Tom wanted to close his gaping mouth with a punch. "Didn't you lose to him your first time?"

Yes, he thought, still bitter over his loss in fourth year. How come a student that had been supposedly on the run and spent Merlin knows how long self-studying, with muggle parents on top of that, managed to win so easily against Rosier?

Not only that, but with a spell none of them even recognized?

"It appears our mediocre mudblood isn't so mediocre after all," he all but hissed, ignoring Orion's second question. "Have you gotten any information on him yet?"

Tom tried to not let his impatience show, but it was getting harder to mask it.

"Not yet." Tom's dark mood must have shown, because Orion rapidly blinked, an embarrassed blush creeping up his cheeks.

Good. He still knows his place.

"I will, though. I promise."

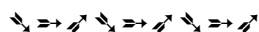
Tom knew that to be true – Orion hadn't let him down yet. But it was still amusing to see him dance around trying to please him.

"I don't need promises, Black. I need results."

Orion's voice turned from its usual mischievous cadence to a serious one.

"And you will get them."

Of course I will. Even if I have to force them out.



HERMIONE

"You have changed, you know? You are much quieter. You were never too loud, but you used to be much more certain of your words before."

It was a Tuesday. Hermione and Harry had been spending time together as they often had since their reunion. They were sitting on the grass, watching the water on the Black Lake lazily drift, and just talking.

Harry didn't turn to look at her as he answered, "I guess. Does it bother you, that I've changed?"

He was constantly doing this, constantly looking for her approval, as if he believed she would shun him.

If Hermione hadn't done it after he had left her, she certainly wouldn't now just because he was no longer who he used to be.

"No. What bothers me is how badly you seem to be fighting it."

It was true. Harry was caught up in the same dilemma she was, this push and pull of morality.

"Do you think Ron would have accepted me if I acted more Slytherin?"

Hermione had to think before giving her answer, knowing Harry would appreciate honesty much more than comfort. "I don't know. Maybe, maybe not, but probably not right now. I don't think he knows what his principles are. I think he is scared of questioning, of rocking the boat too much, of all that could bring up for him. Because if he realizes not everything is black and white, that might open up a can of worms he is not ready to confront. I think he is most afraid of feeling sympathy for the people he blames for everything that happened. He needs there to be a clear hero and villain, something to hold on to. It's one of the reasons why

I felt like I couldn't breathe in our marriage. If I had remained the Hermione I was before, none of this would have ever happened. But the war changed me, and it changed *him*, and it shot us in opposite directions. He heard me get tortured when he couldn't do anything to help; he lost his brother. Those things just don't go away, and they leave scars. But the more he held on, the less I wanted to stay.

"In an odd way, I'm grateful. I'm angry, I'm fucking pissed off at what he hid from me, but it would have taken me too long to break the mold and choose a different path if I hadn't had that awakening.

"And I don't think Ron knows who he is yet, and he is not willing to search for it. Stability seems to be the only thing he craves. While it makes me feel conflicted, you know, having left him behind, I think it is possible that that could be a trigger for him, a new beginning. Even if he wouldn't have accepted you, Harry, he would have still loved you, because that's Ron: courage in the face of danger, and to him, that means the courage to stand by people even when they aren't right for him anymore. It is unwavering loyalty, and it's as good of a thing as it is bad. But one thing I know for sure: he could've never hated you."

"Thank you, Hermione. I'm not sure if I believe it, but I want to. Even if I never see him again... The thought of my best friend being disappointed in who I've become..." He trailed off, green eyes distant.

She gave into the urge to comfort him.

"You know, you haven't changed all that much. You've mostly just allowed yourself to see the parts you've been too scared to confront."

"I guess." Harry paused, thinking for a second before resuming his speech. "What about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you believe you have changed?" A glint of *something* was behind his eyes.

Did she believe she had changed? Or were her seemingly illogical actions just a taste of who she was always meant to be, a Freudian slip of sorts?

"I think we might be at the same crossroads right now, actually."

"How so?" His gaze was too focused on her, and she felt oddly sheepish.

"I think I might be too scared of embracing who I am, too." Harry was the only person Hermione felt like she could be honest with without judgment, but it was still hard for the words to take form and leave her mouth. "I'm scared the real me might be a bit too dark for people to handle."

At that, out of nowhere, Harry laughed boisterously, making Hermione jump on the grass. "You've always been the most ruthless one out of us, Hermione. I mean, you kept Rita

Skeeter in a jar for a whole week. You disfigured Marietta Edgecombe for snitching on the DA. Everyone has been scared of you for ages.”

Hermione cringed at the memories.

“Is that too fucked up?”

“More fucked up than killing my Defense teacher when I was eleven?”

“That was self-defense, Harry.”

“Yeah, against someone I wouldn’t have had to confront at all if I had simply warned a teacher we thought the Philosopher’s Stone was in danger and *actually* let them handle it.”

Hermione sighed. “Well, we were never that clever to begin with.”

“You were,” Harry refuted, shaking his head.

“And look where that got me.”

They sat in silence once again after this, each other’s company enough to fill the cold space left by their words with warmth.

“For what it’s worth,” Harry interrupted the stillness, “I quite like ruthless Hermione.”

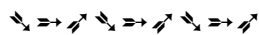
“Warts and all?” She joked, closing her eyes as it fell flat.

When she opened them again, Harry’s gaze was fixed on hers once more.

“We will keep each other alive and sane, Hermione.”

His seriousness slipped, and Harry grinned at her before speaking again.

“Warts and all.”



THREE WEEKS AFTER HERMIONE’S ARRIVAL

Hermione and Harry had been scouring the library on every information about soulmates they could find.

Harry had already looked over what he could find outside of the Restricted Section, but he hadn’t been able to get access to it. The librarian, Mrs. Blackwood, was a rigid woman, and unless you had a pass from a teacher – which required them to have a specific subject in class

they had to look up, and there was nothing so far that would require research outside of the usual parts of the library – she wouldn't allow anyone to peruse the section, especially unsupervised. And since soulmates was not a subject of study in Hogwarts, it was highly unlikely they would be able to get in.

Due to how unplanned Harry's trip there had been, he hadn't brought with him anything but his wand and the clothes on his body, so his invisibility cloak was unfortunately gone from their reach. Hermione hadn't brought anything with her either, a short-sighted decision she was still beating herself over, since she'd had ample opportunity when compared to Harry (*why didn't I go back to Luna's at the very least before leaving?*), but even if she had, she hadn't been the owner of anything that would have allowed them to enter undetected either.

There was only one option, then.

Sigh.

Hermione would have to do her thing.

The *thing* was how she called the annoyingly effective method she used to get people to see her side of things and to persuade them. She hadn't "developed" it until after she had started working at the Ministry, but it did come in handy more often than she would have liked.

It involved a lot of smiling and nodding, twisting hers and other people's words, and most of all, that voice she hated, the one that said "*I am harmless, merely curious, and maybe just a little naive and stupid.*"

It was the opposite of Hermione's usual disposition, but sometimes one had to resort to less than pleasant methods with strangers.

Anabella Blackwood was as stern and somber as a funeral, but Hermione had noticed in all her time in the library with Harry that there was something that lifted her mood: the newest muggle fashion.

She often noticed the woman reading muggle magazines hidden inside of wizarding books with a dreamy look on her face. It made Hermione smile – it was sweet.

It was also useful.

She called up Harry and talked him through her plan. As she approached Blackwood, Hermione thanked her past self for reading books about literally anything, including the muggle fashion of the 1940s.

"It's just absolutely dreadful, Harry! I can't believe we have to wear these old, unfashionable robes everywhere. Why can't we have at least a bit of innovation like the muggles do? Have you seen their shirtwaist dresses, the colors and patterns? They are so much more elegant than these flat, drab, colorless outfits!" she whined, voice higher than usual, holding up her hands to her mouth as if scandalized, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

She could tell Harry was trying his best not to snicker, too.

“Honestly, I don’t get you girls’ obsession with clothes, it’s just so silly. If it’s functional and it covers your body, it’s fine by me.” While Harry’s acting was usually pretty bad, he had nailed the part. Probably because he actually believed what he was saying, if Hermione had to guess.

“What?” She was overplaying it a bit, but it was working, as she could see Mrs. Blackwood was paying attention to what they were saying, eyes glinting with recognition. “Fashion is not silly, Harry. It is the backbone of culture, an art form, a celebrated form of self-expression.” True, by the way. Hermione just wasn’t as passionate about it as she made herself sound. “How dare you!”

“She is right, young mister,” the librarian’s voice cut through their conversation, her eyes narrowed in Harry’s direction in a clear sign of scolding. “There is much more to fashion than vanity.”

Bingo.

She turned to Hermione, a rare smile blossoming from her full lips.

“It’s rather rare to find a young witch such as yourself interested in muggle fashion. What is your name again, young lady?”

Hermione had already introduced herself before, but she supposed she hadn’t made that much of an impression previously.

“It’s Hermione Granger, Mrs.” She smiled wide, and let it turn into a coy lopsided grin, a shy look on her face. “I wonder if you could help me find some books on fashion? I haven’t found any that truly covers the subject outside of the Restricted Section. It seems people don’t get the cultural impact fashion can have.”

Mrs. Blackwood smiled back, no sign of suspicion in her eyes.

“Oh, I’m sure you will be able to find something on the Restricted Section. Do you have a pass for it?”

“No, Mrs. Blackwood. I guess Hogwarts’ professors don’t find it interesting or educational,” Hermione said, looking upset.

The librarian’s face morphed into one of a deep-set annoyance, as if that was a qualm she’d had with the staff for a long time.

“No, they do not. Well, worry not. I will give you a pass for the Restricted Section to look up whatever interests you on the topic. I’m sure you will find something there.” She handed Hermione a piece of enchanted parchment. “This one will last you two weeks. I hope it will be enough time for you to research.”

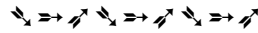
The smile Hermione had in her lips now was genuine.

“Thank you, Mrs. Blackwood. I appreciate it.”

She waved away Hermione's words. "Of course. Anything for a fellow fashion enthusiast."

Hermione walked away from the librarian's desk, looking up at Harry, who had left for their table, and flashed the paper his way.

He blinked and tried to disguise his grin, failing miserably.



After Hermione got access to the Restricted Section, everything went by smoothly.

The Section was protected by enchantments that sounded a silent alarm whenever a non-authorized student managed to pass through its wards, so Mrs. Blackwood didn't need to be at the library at all times of the day to manage it. Her role was mostly assisting students, so having a pass meant Hermione could simply choose to research whenever the librarian wasn't there as to not call attention upon the types of books she checked out.

She and Harry looked through the immense selection of texts, finding several that seemed to fit the bill, and went to work.

There was a lot more information in those books than the ones they had previously read – some mentioned how pureblood families introduced their children to other pureblood kids as soon as they turned seventeen in order to make sure they met their soulmate, or in case their kid's soulmate wasn't a pureblood or was someone of the same gender, so they could make connections to ensure later marriage contracts, all to keep their bloodline pure and force the existence of heirs.

Hermione found it all rather nauseating to think about.

Some books talked up the idea of soulmates being a gift from magic. They talked about how magic was aware of the past, the future, and all possibilities, how it never made mistakes, how everything had a purpose. A big thing that was bolstered on the texts was how free will was still something magic considered, and it only interfered at times upon a wizard's choice to reject their soulmate if they were doing so because of outside circumstances and not of their own volition.

Soulmarks were kept glamour'd at all times, the only exception being when one's reciprocated soulmate died – then the surviving wizard would show off their mark as a way of honoring their deceased loved one.

Soulmates were the same in every dimension, every time, every universe. They didn't need to be romantic, but they often were. Soulmates were almost always born in the same period, with small age gaps or none at all. The only exceptions were cases like Harry's and Hermione's.

While cases like theirs meant they were supposed to either time travel or travel through parallel universes, that wasn't always the case – the ones who were supposed to wait for their soulmates to arrive, like Lucretia or Tom, also experienced the same odd phenomenon with their marks as Harry and Hermione had.

And, of course, there was no other Harry or Hermione in this universe, nor there would ever be – for there to be other versions of them would mean to have two of the same person destined for a single soulmate, and that could never happen.

As they read on, Hermione pondered on the phenomenon of the soulmates left behind.

Her soulmate, and Harry's, were from another universe.

Did that mean that the versions of their soulmates from their original dimension were always meant to be alone?

Lucretia Black was long dead by the time Hermione had been born, according to Harry's reading in the Black Library. Voldemort hadn't been, but the age gap between Harry and him had been huge, and the amount of Horcruxes he had made plus the resurrection ritual meant he was too far gone to reciprocate whatever affection Harry might have had for him. And Severus's circumstances had been a true deterrent to whatever relationship could possibly flourish between him and Sirius.

Sirius, Hermione, and Harry all got another chance with their soulmates, but Voldemort, Lucretia, and Severus apparently didn't – they died before they could. How was any of that fair? How could magic justify it?

Had they spent their entire lives waiting for someone that would never come?

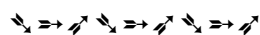
If Hermione went by the books' logic, then maybe the reason why they were meant to find different versions of their soulmates was because of the choices the original Lucretia and Tom Riddle had made.

If Riddle hadn't made more Horcruxes and turned into Voldemort, would that have changed things?

What about Lucretia?

What had happened to her, which circumstances had trapped her?

Could things even be changed at all, or were their destinies written in the stars, their choices already predetermined?



Dumbledore might have been possessed of his usual affable disposition, but his younger looks and red hair were enough to make Hermione's head spin.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, Ms. Granger. Tell me, how are you finding us so far?"

That had been the first time Dumbledore had seemed interested in either of them since Harry had arrived.

Hermione couldn't help but wonder why. She guessed it must have been that, to him, one odd appearance in Hogwarts was a coincidence; two were leading into a pattern.

She had been there for three weeks up to that point. Dippet had all but laughed when she had spoken to him, explaining the circumstances of her arrival. He had been kind, curious – clearly a smart man, but one that liked to see the chips fall where they may instead of interfering.

It was clear that wasn't the case with Dumbledore.

"Hogwarts is truly a great institution, professor. I am glad I get to finish my education here."

The man was clearly impatient – his eyes had drifted while he waited for Hermione to finish speaking, his hand playing with his beard in what looked like an anxious mannerism.

"Ms. Granger, Mr. Evans—" Dumbledore gazed at the two of them. He had stopped them when they were making their way toward their next class, Herbology, which they shared. "If you would be so kind as to accompany me to my office for a chat."

Harry and Hermione shared a look, one filled of exasperation and nostalgia.

"We would love to, professor, but we both have class at the moment..."

"That is not an issue, my girl. It won't take long – you can tell your professor I was the one detaining you."

No escape.

The three of them walked in an uneven step, with Dumbledore taking large strides, Hermione trying to keep up with him, and Harry lagging by dragging his feet behind them. It was clear he was unhappy with the outcome.

It wasn't at all surprising to Hermione; he had seemed more than satisfied with ignoring his former headmaster as well. She knew they'd had a complex relationship, one soiled by a power imbalance and unfair expectations. She herself had never forgiven him for what he had asked of Harry during the war, and she knew Harry hadn't either.

Dumbledore spoke his password, and they walked into what seemed to be a version of McGonagall's old office, except with all the questionable Dumbledore-esque decor – a colorful, dissonant clash of patterns and styles, cramping up a fairly small space with personality and hoards of seemingly useless objects. The portion of the office that rang the

most familiar to Hermione was the right corner of his desk, where a perch for Fawkes could be spotted alongside the mess.

“What can we do for you, Sir?” Harry was the first to actually speak once they had sat down.

“Well, my boy, you see—” Hermione noticed how Harry flinched at the nickname. “Headmaster Dippet and I had a little talk regarding the situation with the two of you.”

He said it so casually, so innocently. Neither Hermione nor Harry had tried to get Dippet to swear to secrecy, but something about the man made Hermione believe he wouldn’t have shared their secret with anyone else. Apparently, she had been wrong.

“No need to worry,” he continued, an appeasing undertone to his words, “your secret is safe with me. Armando only told me about it because he was concerned about the possible ramifications of your existence in this reality, but I have assured him I believe it is very unlikely your presence will cause any issues whatsoever.”

Harry’s jaw was tight in place. Hermione didn’t feel appeased – she felt betrayed.

She tried to let it go, though, for now, and focus on the present moment.

“I do have a few questions, however.”

Of course. Who wouldn’t take advantage of the presence of two dimensional hoppers?

“I don’t believe we have the answers you’re seeking—”

Harry interrupted Hermione. “Why doesn’t it surprise me that you of all people are using us as a chance to manipulate this situation to your advantage?”

The room went quiet faster than lightning strike. Dumbledore looked fixedly at Harry, light-blue eyes more ancient than they had the right to be, as if trying to see into his past.

“Tell me, my boy, have we met before in your previous universe?”

You didn’t just meet him – you raised him for slaughter.

Harry didn’t say anything in return, but that was an answer in and out of itself.

“We can’t give you many answers. We won’t. Us being here might not affect your future when it comes to some sort of paradox, but things seem to be similar enough that we might mess things up just by virtue of sharing.”

If she had to take the helm in the conversation, so be it. That was the type of thing Hermione was used to doing.

“I understand what you are saying, Ms. Granger, but there are certain matters that are of an absolute and pressing nature. Lives might be at stake, you see.”

“Trust me, I’m well aware. I’m doing this for the well being of these very people you are concerned for.” She wouldn’t let him guilt-trip her into giving in.

He continued on as if he hadn’t heard her. “You see, Ms. Granger and Mr. Evans, there is a student in your year that rather concerns me. He is an incredibly talented young man, but I am afraid he seems doomed to stray and lead others astray if he is not stopped and reasoned with in time. I’m afraid he can cause a lot of damage if left unchecked.”

Harry’s breathing picked up, and Hermione had to fight to keep her own temper in check.

Was he seriously trying to convince them into giving up information on Tom Riddle’s future instead of trying to help him himself?

Harry got up from his chair abruptly, his body weight tilting it and almost making it fall down, the scraping sound it made causing Hermione to feel goosebumps all over.

“I’m done.”

He aggressively opened the door, and barged through, not even looking back once.

Hermione sighed.

She understood his reaction, she truly did. But it was too much to deal with, sometimes.

She prepared to leave, but stopped instead to look at her former headmaster.

“To Harry... you used to be his hero, you know. His role model. But it turns out you were simply using him. For the greater good, yes, but he was nothing but a scapegoat, and you didn’t bother to let him know until he had no other choice but to self-sacrifice.”

Albus Dumbledore listened carefully to Hermione’s words before answering, his head seemingly in a different place and time.

“I am not the man he used to know.”

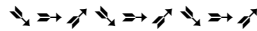
“You are not him, but you’re acting like you are,” she explained, keeping her tone gentle, as if speaking to a trauma victim. “He needs time. Harry needs no expectations to be put on him by other people. But, mostly, he needs to grieve who the other version of you convinced him he needed to be.”

He nodded, and remained silent for a few seconds, before turning his gaze to Hermione.

“What about you? What do you *need*, Ms. Granger?”

At that, she smiled, teeth and all.

“I need to get back to class.”



HARRY

Hermione had just left when Riddle made his way to Harry's table.

"Soulmates, really?" Tom asked, eyeing Harry's reading material.

Harry was still fuming over Dumbledore's *request*, but he wasn't about to take it out on Tom, regardless of how annoying he decided to be.

"Well, it's not like the wizarding world is particularly forthcoming with this information." Harry sighed, still angry and disappointed over that fact.

"Maybe someone like you isn't worth this knowledge," Riddle retorted scornfully.

Harry wanted to hit back with an "Are *you*? Aren't you a Half-blood?" but he stopped himself. He didn't want Tom to know he knew things about him, not yet, regardless of his bad mood. Not until he was sure it was okay to share his origins with him.

"Do you seriously think it's okay to keep this from muggle-borns, even though we have a soulmate just like every other wizard?" He didn't say it with the intention of goading Tom – he was genuinely upset over the idea.

Maybe it was the hurt tone in his voice, but Tom seemed to be caught off-guard by his vulnerability.

"I... don't." He hesitated, as if unsure if he wanted to keep talking. He searched Harry's face for something, and he must have found it, since he continued. "Soulmates are a gift from magic. If muggle-borns are worthy of it, then they should be allowed to know."

"If you believe that, then why do you perpetuate this rubbish in Slytherin?"

Tom rushed his hand through his hair, giving him a disheveled look that was unlike his usual persona. Harry quite liked it. "It's complicated. The politics of our house are one of a kind—"

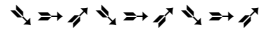
I know. "That sounds like an excuse, Tom. We both know they all listen to you, you're their leader. You can be more than persuasive enough to convince them muggle-borns aren't tainting magic with our blood." While his words were harsh with practicality, he spoke matter-of-factly; he was simply being honest.

"Would *you* listen to me?" Riddle asked, a softness to his voice that destabilized Harry's impulsive defenses.

Harry's breathing ceased for a second, but he still refused to be dishonest, choosing instead to show Tom he actually meant his words.

“I would listen to anything you’d say, Tom, if you used your power for good.”

As his words hung heavy in the air, Harry got up and left, leaving a pensive Tom Riddle behind.



CHAPTER 7. HOW MUCH CAN YOU KNOW ABOUT YOURSELF, IF YOU'VE NEVER BEEN IN A FIGHT? I DON'T WANNA DIE WITHOUT ANY SCARS.

Chapter Summary

EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON SEPTEMBER 26TH, 2023.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Fight Club, as usual.

“Dr Ventress: Then, as a psychologist, I think you’re confusing suicide with self-destruction. Almost none of us commit suicide, and almost all of us self-destruct. In some way, in some part of our lives. We drink, or we smoke, we destabilize the good job... and a happy marriage. But these aren’t decisions, they’re... they’re impulses. In fact, you’re probably better equipped to explain this than I am.

Lena: What does that mean?

Dr Ventress: You’re a biologist. Isn’t the self-destruction coded into us? Programmed into each cell?”

- Annihilation, 2018, dir. Alex Garland

CHAPTER 7 – HOW MUCH CAN YOU KNOW ABOUT YOURSELF, IF YOU'VE NEVER BEEN IN A FIGHT? I DON'T WANNA DIE WITHOUT ANY SCARS.

OR, *THE VALUE OF A SECRET*

TOM

With Evans, Tom had been his polite persona, in the beginning. He had poked and prodded gently, tried to be as helpful as possible, and wasn't outwardly bigoted, but that had only

seemed to anger the boy and make him even more outspoken.

Then, he had tried to violently reinforce the house rules with the Knights. While Evans had stopped being as obnoxious as before, he hadn't ceased with the display of insubordination, nor did he show any interest in fitting in with the other Slytherins – more often than not, he seemed to avoid them.

Tom had tried to flirt with him to goad him into submission. That strategy had been one he hardly, if ever, employed when confronting difficult new Slytherins, and he hated it. It made him feel cheap; but most of all, uncomfortable.

He didn't want to admit it, but it had felt less disgusting than it usually did, doing it with Evans. And, if he had read the boy correctly, it had worked, somewhat – Evans got flustered around him, and his guard went down. That was, for a while. It didn't mean Tom didn't feel like he had lowered himself by doing it, and it had never lasted, anyway, since Evans never seemed to stand down from his ideals regardless.

He had tried to pique the boy's interest in him by being unpredictable and hard to read, but it had always been Tom seeking the boy out still, never the other way around.

And, of course, Tom had tried to find information on him, but either Orion seemed to be particularly incompetent in this one case only, or there was nothing to be found on Evans that didn't include forcing him or his mudblood friend to speak.

And Tom didn't yet have the means to do so, but he would soon. While he couldn't brew *veritaserum*, as that would take too long to accomplish and he didn't have access to the ingredients, he was dying to try out *legilimency* on someone. He was so close in his learning to be able to do so he could almost taste it.

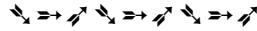
But, at the end of the day, none of Tom's strategies had been working as intended, and he was starting to lose his patience.

Tom Riddle wasn't someone impulsive. He hated waiting, so at times he did resort to less than friendly methods, but he would be patient if the situation asked for it, even if he had to swallow down his rage. But none of his previous targets had required such an extensive workload on his part, and that just made him all the more curious about the boy, the one who seemed to know so much yet so little.

Abraxas had been the one to warn him about Evans only a few weeks into their seventh year, as he usually did about the new Slytherins. But there was nothing usual about the way he had characterized the new addition – at first glance, Evans had been as unremarkable as it came to everyone else, but not to Tom, and not to Abraxas. There was something there, something that got into Tom's skin in a way he wasn't used to, and that scared him.

Tom Riddle had done his best to shed fear from his emotions years prior.

He couldn't let it resurface.



HERMIONE

“How are you doing this?”

Hermione had been trying to get Lucretia’s attention for weeks – from trying to help her in class, approach her in the library when she was alone, talk to her at meals, to even trying to reach Walburga instead, she’d tried almost everything she could think of; but what actually made Lucretia react was not anything Hermione could have anticipated.

It turned out Lucretia Black was extremely competitive when it came to her grades.

In a way, all Ravenclaws were – but Lucretia was obsessive to an unhealthy degree. In the beginning, she seemed to regard Hermione’s academic achievements as dumb luck, but as they piled up, she no longer was able to, and Hermione upstaging her every time in class had finally reached a boiling point.

“What do you mean?” Hermione responded. Perhaps she was acting especially obtuse, but she needed to keep the girl talking.

From up close, Hermione could see the nuances of Lucretia’s hazel eyes, more green than brown, their upturned shape giving her already intense stare an even stronger edge.

“You know what I mean. You’re clearly cheating, and I want to know how.”

And there is why she wasn’t sorted into Slytherin, Hermione thought, mildly amused.

It had been a particularly hard Herbology lesson... or, Hermione corrected herself, hard for the *actual* seventeen-years-old taking it. She had answered every question no one else seemed capable of without much enthusiasm, but it wasn’t as if she hadn’t expected at least a little bit of boredom when she’d decided to come back to Hogwarts.

Lucretia, however, had been fuming – she had immediately cornered Hermione just out of the classroom, not even seeming to care or notice the crowd of students who were still dispersing as they spoke.

Thankfully, no one seemed to care all that much about them. Hermione had been right in her assessment: Lucretia wasn’t particularly popular in their house.

There was something about Lucretia’s behavior that didn’t sit right with Hermione; she could swear she saw the girl staring at her at times, not with a jealous or angry look, but with something akin to curiosity, maybe even longing, if Hermione let herself wish.

But she had a hard time believing a girl who had rejected her so promptly over being muggle-born, who seemed so clearly determined to dismiss her because of her blood status, could

have any curiosity about her, soulmate or not. While soulmates did feel a push toward one another, it could be resisted if the wizard so wished. It didn't mess with someone's feelings; it was more like a magical pulse that spoke to the other person, that showed the wizards they were connected in some way.

Magic didn't make Lucretia interested in Hermione, she did.

And Hermione would figure out what was holding her back.

She smiled what she hoped was a pleasant, not-at-all-threatening smile. "I'm not cheating, Black. I just study a lot."

"Sure you do," Lucretia retorted, sarcasm pouring out of her every word. When she was that openly hostile, her naturally husky and delicate voice became closer to a growl.

"Look, you don't know me, and besides my best efforts, you don't really seem to want to," Hermione said, attempting some sort of diplomatic tone to what she was about to say. "I don't know why you're so scared of getting to know your soulmate," at that, Lucretia looked around and then at Hermione, shooting daggers at her with her eyes, "but I'm not one for games. I prefer honesty," she continued, as much seriousness as she could project in her voice, trying to hammer her point home.

Lucretia seemed to consider her words briefly, but whatever was eating up at her and keeping her from interacting with Hermione won out in the end.

"We're not friends, and no one will know we're soulmates." Hermione rolled her eyes at the half-assed threat. "And I'm going to figure out what you've been doing. No one knows this much about everything, *especially* muggle-borns. I'll prove you're a fraud to our entire house, and you'll be a social pariah for the rest of seventh year."

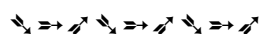
What Lucretia didn't know, *couldn't* know, was that Hermione's goals were much bigger than Hogwarts. She knew the damage pureblood propaganda did, but she could easily survive teenagers throwing slurs her way. She had done it once, she could do it again.

No, Hermione wanted more. She wanted to get to know her soulmate, maybe one day even allow herself to feel something again for someone, but she wouldn't put all her worth and objectives onto the whims of someone else, especially someone like Lucretia Black.

There were three reasons she had gone there: to be with Harry, to meet her soulmate, and to learn more about dimensional travel.

She had the first one already, and she wouldn't wait around for the second one forever. She wasn't going to give up easily on understanding the enigma that was Lucretia Black, but if she truly didn't want anything to do with her, then Hermione would have to move on.

After all, she still had her last goal to achieve.



HARRY

Orion looked so much like Sirius it was unbelievable. Not just at a first glance, but in his facial expressions, his mischievousness. It gave Harry an existential crisis, the question a sort of egg-chicken scenario specific to him: did Sirius resemble Orion or did Orion resemble Sirius?

“What are you looking at, Evans?”

Orion had been Harry’s target for the past week – he was the one who had the most sway over Tom aside from Abraxas, and ostensibly the easiest to manipulate between the two. Rosier, Lestrage, and Avery were just lackeys, Walburga and Lucretia weren’t Knights, just supporters, and Mulciber wasn’t inner circle. Abraxas was harder to read than Orion, surprisingly, but considering how close he seemed to Tom, Harry wouldn’t be surprised if he was also too loyal to intrigue right away. That meant Harry had to get a feel for Orion’s intentions, his weaknesses.

He hadn’t been exactly subtle, however. It was in moments like these that he wished he still had his cloak – or at least, that he hadn’t relied on it so much in his time at Hogwarts and had learned to be stealthy on his own.

Or, you know, maybe Orion was just very good at noticing shit.

“Nothing,” he replied, going back to reading his book. He couldn’t spend his whole time at the library, lest he attract suspicion he didn’t need, so he hung around his dorm on free periods as well, which meant easy access from his roommates.

His answer wasn’t enough to dissuade a Black, of course.

Orion left his own bed, where he had been using a small knife to carve something onto his bedpost, and plopped down on Harry’s like they were friends in a slumber party.

The absolute mad lad, Harry thought, chuckling to himself.

He constantly had to remind himself the boy sat next to him was not his godfather.

“Do you do anything other than hanging out with mudbloods and reading?”

His tone was innocent enough, but Harry tried to keep himself from wincing at the use of the slur. He used to think he was mostly indifferent and desensitized to it, but he couldn’t be more wrong. Kreacher and Older Walburga’s use of the word was an entirely different beast (it was so clearly pejorative that Harry could simply wave it away) since Walburga’s screams were so over the top that they were almost comedic and Kreacher’s so ridiculous and inconsequential that they simply made Harry roll his eyes. After all, they were from another time, when ignorance was a more normalized thing.

With Harry's classmates, however, he knew he was the odd one out – he saw they all genuinely meant it, and they said it so casually, like they could never be reprimanded, because they knew everyone thought the same way. In a way, they didn't need to *choose* to be bigots. Because they were raised like that, they believed from birth that muggle-borns were inferior, as simple as that. It was a fact to them, not an opinion. They didn't need to attack a muggle-born for it like they did, but from their point of view, there was simply no need to think of themselves as bad people for it.

With Tom, it hurt Harry a lot more – he had chosen to adopt those beliefs, as a muggle-raised wizard. It didn't mean it wasn't uncomfortable to hear, still, but he didn't want to start conflicts he didn't need to have to handle at the moment.

“Reading is great, what is wrong with that?”

Orion tsked at him, the head movement that accompanied it making his black curls bounce. It was weirdly endearing. “You must have another hobby.”

Harry knew what he was doing; Orion was getting impatient trying to fish for information from him. There was a reason Harry had chosen to be seen as a muggle-born, after all – it made his origins much harder to track, and Orion had nothing to go on.

He had to build some sort of rapport with the boy, though.

“Not really,” he said. “I have always been interested in Quidditch, though.”

It had truth to it, but not entirely. He couldn't say he liked Quidditch outright – if he did, Orion would wonder how he got to play it as a muggle-born who had never been to Hogwarts before, and it wasn't as popular of a sport outside of Europe, so he couldn't claim he played it in Ilvermorny when he had supposedly spent time there.

Orion's eyes gleamed with barely concealed enthusiasm. “You've never played it before?”

“Always wanted to, but never had the opportunity.”

Harry wasn't the greatest liar, but his life experiences combined with trying to convince everyone he was fine sure had made him halfway decent at it; when he tried, that was. Most of the time he hadn't really had a reason to.

Now, though, it was starting to become natural to him. Harry questioned whether that was Slytherin house's influence on him or simply his own nature emerging.

He wasn't sure, and he wasn't sure he cared that much either, not anymore.

“We should play a game some time.”

As if. Knowing what he knew about the boy, he would throw Harry out of his broom to his death and pretend it was an accident.

“Sure. I doubt I'll be any good at it, though.”

He had enough on his plate already. He loved and missed Quidditch, but the game had kind of been soured to him since Ginny had become a professional player. The thought of her constricted his chest, and while he didn't feel anything for her anymore, her betrayal still stung.

He tried to swallow his anger most of the time, however – there was no point in harboring resentment for someone he would never see again.

And the thing he had loved most about Quidditch had always been flying, and he didn't need to play to do that.

Before Orion could answer, Abraxas opened the door, dragging himself in an exhausted gait toward his bed.

Harry observed as Orion seemed immediately concerned, his face transforming from his usual playful smirk into a deep frown. He left the bed a little more forcefully than necessary, and Harry's abandoned book almost fell from it.

The boy reached Malfoy and put a hand on his shoulder, a gesture so tender Harry couldn't help but gape at it.

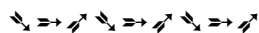
He had often been oblivious to romantic relationships in his lifetime, mostly because fearing for his life didn't leave much time to become experienced. But while he was still socially immature due to his extended isolation period, Harry was sure he had never seen someone's feelings for someone else look this obvious before.

He just couldn't tell if Abraxas reciprocated them.

After a few seconds of awkward quietness, Harry realized the two boys weren't going to break up their silent communication with words, and Abraxas didn't really bother to acknowledge his presence either; he knew there wasn't going to be anything for him to overhear, so he started to prepare his bed to go to sleep.

"Good night," Harry said, and when no one seemed to even listen to him, he started to close his curtains. It wasn't curfew yet, but he refused to think about Tom. He was a prefect, he had duties. As much as Harry wanted to spy on him, he didn't exactly have the most inconspicuous way of doing so.

He would have to cultivate the art of waiting, as much as the thought of it pained him.



TOM

Tom had never particularly cared much about soulmates.

His early years at Hogwarts had been plagued by bullying and purebloods looking down on him. In the beginning, he had chosen patience, knowing he wasn't yet strong or knowledgeable enough to stand up to them. He certainly wouldn't risk failing in front of them and confirming their skewed beliefs of him. Just because they saw his blood as dirty didn't mean he would let that define him.

Tom's biggest flaw was pride – he couldn't let anyone believe any less of him, not if he could help it. But caring about how he appeared to other people didn't necessarily mean Tom cared about *them*.

He had always been a lonesome person. Having spent his entire life in Wool's, where his value was shared between and diluted by all the miserable and essentially nameless kids, Tom had never allowed himself to depend on other people. His main goal was survival, so he would if he had to, but emotions were weakness, and he would never get emotionally attached to anyone.

That included a soulmate.

He was a naturally curious person, and every knowledge was valuable to him, but he had always had a great sense of priority. Soulmates were not a priority to him. He had learned of them by reading about it – and later on from Abraxas – and while he intended on looking for his mark when he turned seventeen, he had more important things to worry about at the moment.

Abraxas, however, was not like Tom. He had always been incredibly invested on finding his soulmate, the person he was meant to be with.

That had been why Tom had felt so confused when Abraxas had reached out to him, moments away from crying, soon after discovering the knowledge he'd always dreamed of.

“What happened?” Tom asked, uncomfortable with the possibility of having to comfort his friend over something he considered highly inconsequential.

Abraxas was too kind, too trusting. It didn't surprise Tom that something like this to him would only carry disappointment. Trusting people always did.

Abraxas swallowed, clearly trying to stop his emotions from leaking out, as his soft, grey eyes looked everywhere but Tom's. “I found out who my soulmate is.” Whoever it was, it clearly wasn't a nice surprise. “It's, uh...” He breathed deeply, and his exhale let out a low sound that came out shuddering. “It's Orion.”

Fuck. Tom resisted the urge to sigh.

That's going to fuck everything up.

Abraxas and Orion couldn't fight over something like this – it would threaten their whole hierarchy.

Tom had briefly considered trying to keep any and all relationships between the Knights merely transactional, but it just wasn't feasible. Orion, by being so close to Abraxas, would follow him everywhere, even if that meant following Tom. It was why their dynamic usually worked so well – they were all so devoted to each other that they ended up devoted to Tom by default.

And Tom, of course, took advantage of that, making sure they all looked up to him and never had any reason to challenge him.

Because he knew, even as prideful as he was, that if one or more of his Knights walked out, it would be only a matter of time before they all did.

It was why he was always careful to make it so they all felt like they owed him or at least felt scared of him. Sébastien and Tymeo would have no standing with their families without him, and those two needed a leader; they couldn't function without one. Bram would just be another obnoxious muggle hater – he would still have social clout, of course, but not nearly as much, and he knew it. And Lilith... Lilith would be nothing without him. Worse than nothing, as nothing would imply indifference, that she would go by unseen. Without him, Lilith simply wouldn't still be alive.

When it came to Abraxas, however, he *chose* to stand by Tom, he wasn't forced into it, and their relationship was different from the other ones. Abraxas had accepted a young, ambitious-but-misguided Tom Riddle and mentored him, nurturing his hunger to prove himself until he could do it by himself. He had made sure Tom – back when he was new to the wizarding world and to magic and was bullied daily – knew how to protect himself, and from there, Tom had learned on his own how to seek revenge. Abraxas had been his first Knight, and while Tom wished he could pretend he had made it all alone, that simply wasn't the case.

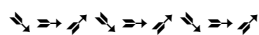
He hadn't needed Abraxas more practical help in ages, though, and he exercised his emotional detachment from him everyday.

He had gotten what he needed from him, and the moment he was no longer useful, Tom wouldn't keep him around anymore.

At least, that was what he told himself, while the boy in front of him put both of his hands to his face.

“He is going to get married to Walburga. I can't... This can't happen.”

No, it can't, Tom agreed internally as he tried to think of the ways he could keep this from fucking up the balance he had fought and bled for.



SECOND WEEK OF NOVEMBER TO START OF DECEMBER

PROLOGUE

The Hogwarts Castle, home of a school for witchcraft and wizardry, was a container of ancient sorcery. Its stone walls stood the test of time, its dents all the more pronounced for how rare they were, and its magic was more mysterious than one could wish to uncover in a lifetime.

The castle housed seven floors, all with their clear functions and not-so-clear secrets. Their purposes had changed through the years and changes to the school's headmasters, but one thing still rang true: only the four founders and their helping architect knew of every secret passage, old structures, and ghosts that haunted the castle's foundation.

It was possible, though, that the antediluvian nature of its existence meant that the acquired changes to the castle's fate through the centuries meant that the founders would not had been able to predict its destiny, not any more than anyone else would.

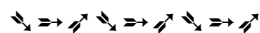
In a way, Hogwarts was an echo of what it used to be due to all the ways it had been warped and perverted by the deranged and disquieted minds of its inhabitants. In some other way, however, perhaps in an even realer sense, it had been turned into something powerful through time and molding, much more than it had once been dreamed into.

In the gaps of silence bred when students went home for the summer, when the weather wavered with the predictability of the changing of seasons, if one listened closely, they would find it possible to hear the roaring movements of the stone walls, settling into a slightly different shape. The castle's ghosts, its semi-sentient portraits, and its hidden beasts all spoke to each other, a steady hum of synergy and wordless connection one could not hope to understand.

Magic traveled the empty hallways more frequently then; so did the darkness within.

And when the students came back and spoke their woes to what they thought was the nothingness...

The castle listened.



PART 1 – ORION

Salazar Slytherin had been seventeen when he had first conceived of the idea of a magical school. Back then, he had not had the methods to make it true, but he had never forgotten about it.

When he, Godric, Helga, and Rowena had started working on Hogwarts' design, he had known he wanted the dungeons to be his empire. The newly named Slytherins were the children of the serpents, and as such, they needed to rule from the shadows. By being below, they would be seen as weak, non-threatening, the forsaken children of Hogwarts – but it would all be an illusion, a farce of the greatest caliber.

From the ashes, they would rise.

There were numerous classrooms located on the dungeons. Potions was one of the few subjects that had always been taught there, just as Astronomy had always been on the seventh floor; though when it came to Potions, there was seemingly no rhyme or reason for it. It had started as simple status quo, and so it had remained.

Despite that fact, most Hogwarts professors throughout history seemed to dislike the cold nature of the dungeons and their somewhat cramped, claustrophobic feel. Some would claim magic ran more rampant on its corridors than in other locations of the castle, and despite most people rolling their eyes at said tales, all that entered their underground location couldn't help but feel the push of its atmosphere, and more often than not, they tended to avoid it. Due to that, there were multiple classrooms deemed out of commission, dust seeping into their every surface as if belonging there.

All that made these empty spaces perfect hiding spots for students wanting to disappear for a moment.

Orion Black was such a student.

Son of Aquila and Adora Black – nee Greengrass – and brother to Lucretia Black, Orion had been born as the youngest child of their branch of the family. To the Noble and Ancient House of Black, tradition was everything, and the sons were named after stars, while the daughters, after Roman tales.

Orion had grown under the watchful eye of his progenitors and the caring embrace of his older sister... Until the day everything had changed.

Lucy would tell her brother everything. They were a year and a few months apart in age, but their bond superseded such conventions. While their parents would try to encourage distance between the siblings, being a Black was lonely by nature, and the two flocked to each other like a sheep to its herd. At first, it hadn't mattered that they had cousins similar in age and other kids to play with – why would it, when they had each other?

When Orion had turned ten years old, Lucy had left for Hogwarts. He'd heard stories of the place, of its magnificence and brilliance, but Orion didn't feel awe – he felt envy. Most of all, he felt rage at being left behind. What if his sister decided she didn't need him anymore? What if the other wizards there were far more interesting than Orion could ever be? But

Lucretia had promised no one could ever take his place, that they would remain best friends forever, and he chose to hold her to that.

He didn't want to be left behind with his parents, with the cruelty of Adora and the coldness of Aquila. He wanted to cast wandless magic with Lucy once again, to laugh together as harmless sparks showered them both.

Lucy had returned home the summer after filled with adoration, liveliness, and those same sparks in her eyes, untouchable in all her experience outside of the darkness of Grimmauld Place. She still shared things with him, but it was all about Hogwarts, all about the friendships she had made, the things she had learned, and the beauty she had seen.

Orion had been right – there was no place for him. And soon enough, he would be pushed out of the picture, and he'd be alone forever, surrounded by the ghosts of his ancestors on the family tree.

In all of Lucy's tales, it didn't matter how wild or varied they were, there was *her*. Her new best friend, a muggle-born girl that was the source of light and enthusiasm in Lucy's new life.

He couldn't stand it. Who else would he put his trust in when Lucy was all he had in the dungeons of hopelessness that was his home life? He wouldn't have abandoned her when he went to Hogwarts, but she had broken her promise to him, and it had taken less than a year.

Still, he kept her secrets. Their parents were strict, and in their eyes, they could only interact with whoever they approved of explicitly, and Lucy hadn't asked for their permission.

But he couldn't do so forever. When Aquila had cornered him and threatened him with a whip, a ten-year-old Orion had no choice but to tell them of Lucy's new best friend.

He didn't know of what had happened next, but he wasn't naive. He didn't hear it, but he could imagine it, and Orion had always been cursed with perfect precision of his mind's eye.

Lucy's uneven gait and the dark shadows underneath her eyes had haunted Orion every day since, and it hadn't gone away even as she had broken his heart just as he had broken hers.

He should have known better, he knew that, but it was *Lucy*. His older sister. How could Orion have ever thought she was waiting for the best time to seek retribution?

He was eleven, starry-eyed and in love for the first time. Abraxas Malfoy was kinder than he had the right to be, and Orion wanted to bask in his sunlight. His mistake hadn't been to love him – loving Abraxas could *never* be a mistake – but rather, it had been on telling her about him.

That night, Orion had learned the value of secrets. He couldn't trust anybody, and everyone, no exceptions, held well-kept mysteries under their skin. If the only way he could get ahead was by knowing every single one of them, so be it.

He would be the secret keeper and the secret destroyer, and everyone would bow before him. Everyone would fear him if they couldn't love him unconditionally.

Because if even his own sister couldn't do so, then who could ever love someone like him?

So as Orion Black sat on the empty floor of an abandoned classroom, he pondered on such a question.

Abraxas had been acting odd as of late. He wasn't the only one, of course – Tom was enraptured by the new mudblood student in a way he hadn't been in the past, and said student had been doing shady things Orion couldn't figure out for the life of him; but he knew he would. He always did. Abraxas, though, had been the one truly occupying his brain, eating away at all his other thoughts, making a residence inside his mind palace.

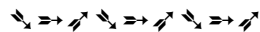
Orion hated how much power Abraxas had over him, but he had long accepted there was nothing to be done about it. The more he tried to undo it, the tighter the hold on him became.

He told himself it could be worse. At the very least, Abraxas was deserving of everything he could give him.

Maybe that did make it so – keeping blackmail material on the love of his life was his greatest shame, and the fact that he couldn't make himself let go of it was even worse.

If he couldn't figure out what Abraxas was keeping from him (though he had some idea – he had just turned seventeen, after all), then he would try to go after the next best thing.

Harry Evans.



HARRY

The last few weeks had been oddly fun for Harry.

Orion was clearly still curious about him, and Harry had been using it to his advantage. The more interested Orion was on Harry, the more likely it was that he would give him something to work with toward gaining the trust of the other Knights.

If he couldn't change Tom's mind directly, then he would try other ways first. He had been acting suspicious on purpose, and he could tell it was working.

There had been the time he had gone to the Forbidden Forest, alone, of course, and just walked around, examining seemingly random branches and trees as if searching for something. Harry had felt Orion following him, waiting for something to happen, only to get frustrated.

Then there was the time he had stayed behind in Astronomy class to look at the professor's notes with questionable interest.

Harry could only imagine how it had annoyed Orion to no end to see that the paper he had been looking at so attentively was actually blank.

And, of course, there were his late night walks on corridors he was absolutely not supposed to know about as a new student, which resulted in nothing odd happening at all.

Harry had known it was only a matter of time before Orion confronted him, and he had been right.

Just as their Charms class ended, Orion cornered Harry before he could leave.

"I know just about everything about every wizard in this school, yet you're still a mystery." Orion seemed miffed, grey eyes closer to steel than rain-clouds.

That was Harry's chance.

"What do you want to know?"

"How are you here?" What Harry heard was: *How are you so good in your classes all of a sudden if you've never been to Hogwarts before?*

"I was raised in England, mostly. My parents sent me to the States to study in Ilvermorny for a few years. They were planning on joining me there, but... well... I didn't really fit in." He hoped he was blushing. Let Orion come up with whatever conclusion he wanted to from this. "I came back to England and self-studied for a while. We ended up getting caught up in the war, and a few of Grindelwald's followers went after me, but my parents refused to let them take me. They gave me enough time to run, but they didn't make it.

"I didn't have anywhere to go, not really. I guess I could've gone to the muggle world – it probably would have been safer. But I don't think I would ever fit in there either. And Hogwarts is supposedly one of the safest places in England... So here I am." Harry tried to make his story sound less rehearsed than it truly was. Most of this stuff was already public knowledge – he had only added in the bit about his parents sacrificing themselves for him. It made him feel shitty, using his own parents' story like that, but it helped that it rang true. "I think I am settling in quite well. I'm even doing better in class," he added, smirking softly.

After a long pause filled with contemplation, Orion replied, "I don't believe you."

Orion was used to secrets – of course he could tell truth from lies.

Ignoring the nausea forming in his stomach, Harry answered, "I don't have a better answer for you."

Orion didn't like that, as his face scrunched up in clear distaste. "I will figure you out, Harry Evans. And you'll feel sorry you lied to me when you had the chance of making an ally."

He didn't want to push Orion away – that went counter to everything he was trying to do. But he couldn't just tell him the truth like that, could he?

“Wait,” he blurted out, just as Orion started to leave.

“What?” The glint of mischief and madness was back at the boy's eyes as he turned to Harry.

“I will trade you a secret.”

A smirk now made itself visible. “For what?”

“Information on the Knights.”

That was a gamble – a risky one. Orion Black was one of Riddle's biggest allies. His loyalty was decidedly wavering, but unless he had a better master, he would stick to the one benefiting him the most. It was why Harry didn't ask for information on Riddle – mostly because he knew he would never get it, but also because he probably knew more personal stuff about him than Orion did anyway. The Knights, however, were fair game, and knowing information on them would allow Harry to better understand and turn them to his side, even if covertly. It would just be a question of how curious Orion was about him.

“It doesn't need to be anything top secret. For every two facts about me I share, you'll trade me one of one of the Knights. You are allowed to ask me something in particular, but I won't be required to answer, only if I find it pertinent. The same rule applies to the information regarding the Knights.” He could see Orion checking the math in his mind, trying to see if it added up. “Come on, you know you're the one winning here. I know you have no reason to believe me, but I'm not trying to use this against anyone. I just want to have some knowledge on the people in this house as a way to know how to earn their respect and avoid making mistakes.”

In a way, it was *kind of* true.

“You're getting there,” Orion replied, that same smirk still on the corner of his lips, a look so familiar to Harry it made it even more painfully obvious how he and Sirius were related. “It's a deal.”

Shit. It actually worked.

Orion was still looking at him, eyebrows raised, clearly expecting him to take the first step.

Okay. You can do this.

What can I tell him? Should I be honest?

Fuck. I have to be honest.

“My parents were twenty when they died.” That begged the question of logistics, Harry knew, but he could simply refuse to answer. The information he didn't want to share was much more important than this for the time being. “And I had to leave my other best friend behind when I came here.”

The look on Orion's face screamed *really?* but Harry refused to give him more.

He hadn't asked anything in particular, after all.

"How many people are members of the Knights of Walpurgis?" He had one chance; he wouldn't waste it.

Orion shook his head. "Enough."

"That's not an answer."

"Then ask a valid question."

Harry bit back a groan. "When do the Knights meet?"

The other boy seemed to think before responding.

"Thursdays, seven pm."

Harry wondered why *that* wasn't restricted information. Was it because Harry couldn't join them?

Was it because they *wanted* him to?

"How did you get here? Real answer, this time."

Harry smirked. "Pass."

"Really? Just how much of your little backstory is real?"

"Is this a question or a smug remark?"

Orion laughed, startling Harry.

"Question."

"My parents died sacrificing themselves for me."

Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

A smile remained on Orion's face as he spoke, "Were they actually muggles?"

Orion was asking the perfect questions. If Harry confirmed something, he was saying too much. If he refused to answer, he was confirming at least a part of it by default.

If he refused to answer this, it would be clear his parents weren't muggles, or at the very least, that one of them wasn't.

What was more important to him, keeping everything about himself a mystery, or hiding the fact that Tom was his soulmate and he was from another dimension?

The answer was clear.

“My mother was a muggle-born.”

Orion hummed at that, seemingly satisfied that Harry hadn’t just stuck to a yes or no answer.

He was the only one.

“Why are you loyal to Riddle?”

He responded with lightning speed. “Pass.”

“Do you really believe muggle-borns are inferior?”

“What do you care, aren’t you a half-blood? Pass, by the way.”

Pass? That was interesting. If the answer was yes, he would have just said it.

“You can’t just not answer anything I ask.”

“Hmm.” Orion paused. An odd look crossed his dark grey eyes. “Ask something else, and I’ll answer it.”

Was he really giving Harry free rein?

“What would it take for you to leave the Knights and not follow Riddle?” It was a rewrite of his previous question, but Orion had promised to answer it.

He didn’t seem to *want* to stay true to his word, but he did so anyway.

“Abraxas. If he walks, I walk.”

Of course.

He didn’t waste time before asking his own question. “What do *you* want with Riddle?”

Fuck no. “Pass.”

Orion came closer to him, forcing Harry to keep eye contact with him.

“Who is your soulmate?”

“Pass. What type of question is this?” *Aren’t purebloods supposed to keep this shit a secret?*

“Okay, then, an easier one. Why are you trying to break the Knights apart?”

Harry breathed deeply, and held it until he opened his mouth to speak, several seconds later.

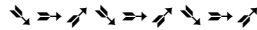
“To free Riddle from his own constraints.”

Had he said too much? Probably, but not enough to make Orion reach the wildest conclusions about him.

Regardless, Orion seemed plenty satisfied with the little he had gotten...

For now.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Evans. Hopefully you’ll be open to this exchange again sometime soon.” Orion broke eye contact and walked away, whistling gleefully on his way out of the empty classroom.



TOM

“So this is where you’ve run off to. Having fun breaking the new toy?” Tom’s voice carried an undercurrent of danger that hissed *he is mine*, a streak of possessiveness as in everything else Tom coveted.

It would have had everyone else shivering.

Not Orion.

It was part of the reason why Tom kept him around – if you can’t beat them, join them.

Or, in this case, make them bow. Even if they do so with one foot out the door.

“Information is key.” There was nothing subtle about the way he made sure Tom remembered exactly what the other reason was.

Orion was an expert at secrets.

“And what did you get from him?”

“Everything. Not enough.” He was frustrated, seemingly one step away from ripping a piece of his hair out.

Orion could be so incredibly patient when it came to hounding his victims, yet so undeniably bored when they were easy prey.

Harry Evans had been a mystery from the get-go – no information Orion could find from the Ministry, his backstory made it essentially impossible to track down his origins, and he was notoriously hard to get close to with his evasive nature, almost as if he could tell what their intentions were from the beginning.

He had one vulnerability, though. The girl, Granger.

Tom had seen it the moment she had shown up seemingly out of nowhere, another little knot he had to untie.

Except Orion couldn't find anything on her either.

It drove the boy crazy, Tom could tell, not being able to crack the code. He liked the chase, but he liked it even more when results were on the horizon.

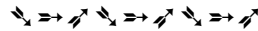
What did it say about Evans that as far as Orion could tell, there *were* no results?

“Elaborate.”

As he listened on, his rage grew from a kindling flame to a wildfire.

Why did he destabilize Tom so much?

And *why* was Evans so interested on *his* Knights?



HARRY

“What do you think you’re doing?” Tom sneered, his voice bordering on hissing as he cornered Harry between the isolated shelves of the library.

For the first time since Harry had arrived, he could see the shadow of Voldemort lurking beneath the surface.

It was obvious what he wanted to know; he must have had a conversation with Orion.

“Why, making friends, of course.” Harry smiled innocently, trying to not appear as unsettled as he was by their proximity and the look in Tom’s eyes.

It just seemed to anger Tom even more.

“None of them will ever follow a mudblood.”

Harry’s voice was carefully manipulated into casually neutral as he responded, “Then you have nothing to worry about.”

It was barely a second between his words and Tom’s actions, and it all caught Harry completely off-guard as Tom’s hand flew to his throat, cutting his air supply immediately.

He could tell his face betrayed how shocked he felt – Tom was dangerous, of course, but he was often too careful to do something this impulsive-driven, especially the muggle way.

Tom wasn't letting go, however, even as Harry could hear his own wheezes, and he felt the urge to claw at Tom's eyes to make him stop.

After a few seconds, his grip grew slack, but never fully left. If Harry didn't know better, he could have sworn it was approaching a caress.

Despite the pain still lingering, he somehow knew, deep in his bones, that Tom wouldn't kill him.

And with his hand around his throat, Harry felt... angry, yes, but *saved*, as if something had shifted between them.

"You know, the first thing Abraxas told me about you was that he didn't think you were a threat to me. You see, he's a great judge of character – it's the reason why he is my right-hand man. He can see through everyone and everything.

"The most interesting part, though, was that he didn't just tell me you weren't a threat. He told me you weren't a threat *to me* – but that you *could* be.

"You have the potential to destroy me, and you seem to hate everything I stand for, and yet... you don't."

He finally let go of Harry's abused throat, and his anger seemed to have dwindled as he looked at his own hands for a second, a subtle frown etched in his forehead, leaving space for something Harry could only call genuine upset.

It didn't last long; when Tom looked at him, his dark eyes were as inscrutable as a murky lake at night. "What are you so scared of, *Harry*?"

Of losing you before I even had the chance to have you.

Of falling back on hating you because the bad parts are the only ones you allow me to see.

Being vulnerable felt like the only choice he had left, standing there with Tom so close they were essentially sharing breaths.

Harry raised his own hand, and he saw tracing the shape of Tom's jawline, watching as the other boy followed his action with his eyes, on edge as if trying to decide whether he should curse Harry or let him carry on.

"I'm scared of many things," he whispered, not wanting to disturb what felt like a sacred moment. "Most of all, I'm scared of who you won't allow yourself to be."

His gaze fell upon Tom's throat, catching the subtle way he swallowed at Harry's words.

"Tom, I'm scared of how you're shackling yourself to an ideal that will only bring you misery.

“I know there’s so much more to you than what you perceive as perfect. I’m scared you’re killing all the good parts of yourself in order to live forever, and that you can’t even see it.”

Tom’s brown eyes widened and soon darkened, the threatening aura back in them. He shoved Harry’s hand to the side, and almost hissed when he spoke:

“*What do you know?*”

It all but confirmed Tom had at least one Horcrux – the diary, it seemed. He wasn’t completely gone, not yet, and Harry wanted to keep him that way, a time capsule of his potential before it went too far.

Even if it put him in danger.

“Just listen. Stop letting your armor interpret this as a threat and *listen*. You deserve so much more than balancing on a tightrope for people who see you as less than human for being muggle-born.”

“I’m not muggle-born,” Tom corrected him, almost automatically, like a knee-jerk reaction of denial.

Harry knew that. It didn’t change anything. “Does it even matter, if this is how you’re perceived?”

“Of course it does.” He was angry then, grasping at straws as Harry could see he was breaking through his façade.

“You know blood doesn’t matter. You know you wouldn’t have ended up in that orphanage if both of your parents were purebloods, yet it’s very clear you’re more powerful than half of this school *combined*. What does that even say about blood purity, Tom? Do you want a future where squibs are more common because every wizarding family has resorted to inbreeding to keep their blood pure? If having kids with muggles truly dirtied a family line and impoverished magic, then wouldn’t it have destroyed many magical families ages ago? And what about muggle-borns with no magical parents that are still born with magic and are just as capable as anyone else?

“Look, I get it if you’re scared of wizarding culture getting diluted by muggle rituals, of losing parts of us to adapt to them instead of them adapting to us... I know what you’re going through with the Blitz, and I know what muggles are capable of. I believe you when you say they have the potential to be dangerous, Tom. But I also know they outnumber us by a lot, and that Grindelwald is doing just as much destruction out there, and do you seriously want to repeat the same rhetoric as the man who is spilling magical blood left and right simply because people oppose him? Because by killing and subjugating muggle-borns, you’ll be doing the same, not only to them, but to every wizard that chooses to fight for their right to exist. And you might think it doesn’t matter that your followers believe in those things, that maybe you can use their prejudice to your advantage by recruiting the most powerful students to your side and that you can just mellow down their beliefs later, but can you, really? You’re persuasive, absolutely, but you are not a miracle worker, Tom. You can’t promise muggle extinction to rile them up and then not deliver. And you might think a few casualties are okay

in your path to do what you consider to be the right thing, but I can see where you're going, and it's not pretty.

"I know you felt like you had no choice, like no one would listen to you because you have no money, no status, and you aren't a pureblood, but this isn't the only way. You can still do what you want, accomplish all the incredible things I *know* you think about doing. You're good, Tom. You are wholly and utterly good, and you can stay that way if you choose the harder path."

Tom had looked almost hypnotized throughout the entirety of Harry's speech, but the latter part of it seemed to pull him out of his trance. He blinked a few times, and backed a few steps away from Harry, his eyebrows furrowing even deeper. When he spoke, it was with a deep, raspy voice that carried nothing but self-hatred within it.

"I'm not good. You don't know what I've done. I don't know what you think you know about me, but whatever it is, it's not true."

"*Tom...*"

Tom's tone was biting when he responded, words spilling out of his mouth like poison. "It was a really well-thought out speech, truly. Is this all in benefit of you and your little mudblood friend? Scared you won't be able to win any Slytherins to your side? I'm guessing you can see where the war is currently going. You've come to Hogwarts for asylum, yet you've ended up face-to-face with someone you believe holds the same principles Grindelwald does, with the potential to continue on his legacy. So, what? You think you can win me over to keep me from turning you in to him?"

No, no, no...

Harry was doing so much progress, he had been *so close*, it was why Tom had pulled back so fast, he could *feel* it.

"Please, don't shut down now, Tom, please," he pleaded, trying to make Tom hold on to the flicker of belief he had seen in his eyes.

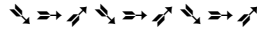
It didn't work – he had already retreated into his mask.

"Leave me alone, Evans. And it's Riddle to you."

Harry was devastated, his eyes leaking with tears he hadn't even felt forming. He felt humiliated, like he had been vulnerable for nothing. He wanted to shrink into a bubble and disappear.

"By the way," Tom – no, *Riddle* – continued, no emotions visible on his face, "the next time you try to pull a stunt like this, you won't like what'll happen to you and your friend."

He left, then, his steps echoing down the hallway, leaving Harry feeling like his heart had been shattered into pieces.



PART 2 – ABRAXAS

Harry couldn't allow himself to feel all the emotions swirling around his body at the moment, so he did the thing Hermione was an expert at.

He distracted himself.

He hadn't had the chance to check in on the Chamber of Secrets since he had landed in this version of 1944. There had been no more petrifications after Hagrid had been expelled, but Riddle still had access to the Chamber, and Harry wanted to see if he had been keeping any secrets on its enclosure.

He wasn't too worried about the Basilisk – for all he knew, she was probably asleep and would remain so until his original second year, which, of course, would never happen.

Harry reached the girls' bathroom on the second floor and hissed at the hidden snake. Parseltongue was an interesting mystery to him – even after the death of Voldemort's soul piece in him, he still managed to maintain the ability. Hermione had theorized that, while his inherited magical ability of speaking Parseltongue was gone, it had been etched into him for so long that his brain had been rewired, making it so he still had the memory of the sounds he needed to make to mean certain words and what they meant, almost as if someone had implanted all the fluent knowledge of a language into his brain. If someone Obliviated that fluency away from him or he got amnesia some other way, it was quite possible that he wouldn't speak Parseltongue anymore.

Harry didn't want to think about how devastating it would be to lose the only true gift he had gotten from Voldemort's Horcrux.

Either way, he spoke it now, and the passageway opened up in front of him. He slid down, preparing himself for the small chance the Basilisk could be down there, but outside of his footsteps and their echo and a faint sound of water dripping from afar, the Chamber was silent.

He had never had the opportunity to explore it before, too busy running for his life the last time around, but he did it now. The Chamber was both smaller and bigger than it had seemed when he was twelve – smaller because he was older now, but bigger because, with his tunnel vision of adrenaline gone, he could see how its passages snaked into others, a complicated network of labyrinthine connections leading to places Harry could only imagine.

As he walked, he bypassed a giant, rotting shed snakeskin, and his nose scrunched up in distaste.

Salazar Slytherin had clearly put a lot of thought into his Chamber of Horrors, from the way its large size was cleverly concealed by its underground location up to the potential the place held. Harry had no doubt there was more to the Chamber than simply being a hiding place for the Basilisk – as it hibernated, there was no need for such a large structure if there weren't other functions for it.

It made Harry shiver, trying to imagine what uses for such a place a known blood supremacist could have.

He made sure to remember certain landmarks in order not to get lost as he wandered around the Chamber. He could remember which parts he had ran from the Basilisk in, and where exactly he had confronted Tom. Thinking about him hurt, so Harry focused on the steps he had to take ahead of him, and after a few minutes of perambulating, he found a smooth, black door he had never seen before. He approached it carefully, for once caution steering up his expedition.

Its massive wooden handle was encased by the head of a metal snake, its fangs in full display. There was something malicious in its pearly-white eyes, giving the faux animal a sense of aliveness that made Harry hesitate before it. The door was a huge thing, bigger than three Harrys in height, but it was rather narrow in comparison. It somehow made the already towering ceiling seem even more imposing.

Harry scoffed in an attempt to brush away his anxiety as he thought, *Salazar Slytherin was definitely compensating for something when he designed it.*

He kept staring at the door. Had Tom been aware of everything the Chamber had to offer? Harry had no idea. Either way, it was about time he stopped stalling.

“Open,” he hissed, self-conscious of the way Parseltongue now felt to him – less like a native tongue, more like a second language. He hoped the snake didn't notice.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Harry waited with bated breath, and he had already come to terms with his inability to open the door when he heard, quiet as a slithering reptile, the mechanisms that kept the lock in place slowly loosening their grip.

The door slid ajar not with a click but with the creak of an old, unemployed structure. Wand in hand, Harry stalked on, touching the door attentively.

Nothing jumped out to him as out of the ordinary, so he made his way in, making sure not to close it behind him.

Harry found himself in an area just as vast as the one he had been previously in. It was a private chamber of some sort, a pied-à-terre – possibly even meant to function as a kind of office.

There were no signs of immediate use, however. If anything, it looked both abandoned and untouched, as if the place had never been employed after its initial conception.

The room was designed in an octagon shape. The walls were covered in a rusted gold wallpaper with quatrefoil motifs all over it, except for the one facing Harry – that wallpaper, though the same color as the others, had only one shape in its center, an ouroboros.

There were small bookshelves on four corners of the space, settling nicely in each side parts of the octagon, leaving the front and Harry's left and right sides barren except for small stools sitting inconspicuously on the black, matte granite floor. There were no books on the shelves, however – in fact, the entire place, while filled with furniture, didn't seem to house any personal belongings at all, aside from the box settled precisely in Harry's immediate eyesight on a long table, which occupied the vast majority of the room.

At the chamber's center stood a massive, solid wooden table. Its edges were jagged and seemingly unfinished. Its legs were made of what looked like solid gold, and their four sides met in the middle, forming what was essentially four snakes facing each other in a circle.

Merlin, this guy really didn't cool it with the snake imagery, huh.

The box on the table was the opposite of the lodging's excessively ornamental layout. It was a simple plain black rectangle, no decorations Harry could spot on its surface. Like the rest of the room, it was not covered in dust, but Harry felt like it had been there for centuries, as if waiting for the right person to open it.

There was no magical signature that could be felt anywhere in the room. If it weren't for the pristine conditions the place had been kept in, he would have thought it hadn't been conceived using any magic at all.

Harry properly entered the space, sure that the door would lock him inside of it as he did so, but nothing occurred. He approached the box and ran diagnostics on it before touching it.

It was truly an ordinary box by the looks of it – or it would have been, if it weren't for the fact that there was no way of getting it open.

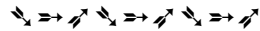
There were no visible locks or separation delineating where an opening should be, and a simple *alohomora* didn't do anything. Harry considered abandoning the box there and leaving the Chamber entirely – it had been a long day and his confrontation with Tom had left him emotionally exhausted – but something in him refused to do so. There was something there, and he needed to figure out what it was.

He took the box in his left hand, and his magic responded in a burst of white, semi-translucent fog, enrapturing the object with it. Harry yelped, but didn't drop it, and watched as his magic faded.

It had never reacted like that before – his magic had always been invisible to the eye, felt more than seen, or only perceptible through the use of his wand. He tried casting a spell as soon as things settled to check if his core was okay, and everything seemed to be normal.

He didn't feel like there was anything malicious in the way the box had interacted with his magical core – while unusual, he felt no alarm bells going off in his head, so he kept it. He

disillusioned the box and made his way out of the room, then out of the Chamber, and was about to walk to the Slytherin dorms when he ended up face-to-face with Abraxas Malfoy.



The dormitories had been the one place Salazar Slytherin had put the least thought into.

The man had let such things up to his colleagues; he was much more interested in the ways exploring the castle could be an exhilarating experience to the students than in the logistics of their shared rooms.

Still, he had made it clear the color green was non-negotiable, and the place had been conceived in his vision. The dungeons were the most challenging part of the castle's construction, as they were located under the Black Lake. It had been another one of Slytherin's demands, that the students placed in his house could interact in some form with the magical creatures under the majestic body of water present on Hogwarts' property.

Much to the other founders' exasperation, his wish was their command.

The Slytherin accommodations were of a nice, spacious variety. Everything was emerald and silver, and no more than four students shared a single room. Their beds were made of good quality wood, the kind to last for years, sturdy and stubborn in its design. Magic, of course, could fix almost anything, but all involved in the room's architecture were adamant that something was much easier to fix and maintain if the foundation was made to be long-lasting to begin with.

The ceilings were high, enough so that one could often forget they were standing at the lowest level of the castle, and silver-white stars were peppered all over them and the walls, twinkling softly if one so focused their eyesight on them.

The floors were hard wood, once mahogany-colored but now faded in specific patterns, feet-worn and full of history. High bookshelves were assigned to each student, and just what they decided to fill them with told the castle much about the wizards' personalities.

Those rooms were home to generations of magical recipients, and the castle's own magic respected and revered them for it.

Abraxas Malfoy was one of the lucky ones to live there.

He had loved Hogwarts from the very first time he had laid eyes on it. The Great Hall's magnificent stature, the Forbidden Forest with all its mysterious allure, the Black Lake and all the creatures that lived there, the classrooms, dorms, corridors, the Astronomy Tower, the Quidditch pitch – everything spoke to Abraxas with a soft, inviting tone. He loved Malfoy Manor, and it would always be *home*, but there was something special about Hogwarts, something he couldn't quite put his finger on but adored regardless.

Home was Malfoy Manor, home was Hogwarts, but home, most of all, was Orion.

He loved Hogwarts, he had come to realize, because it felt new and energetic even in its ancient existence; when it came to Malfoy Manor, however, he felt connected to it in all the ways history lived within it.

The main entrance was loudly and blatantly overadorned, but not in an ostentatious manner; rather, it was overcrowded by personal memorabilia, by legacy. The wall in the west corner was mosaicked with portraits, but unlike Grimmauld Place, those were non-magical ones.

It hadn't always been like this. Before Nikon and Iris had made Malfoy Manor their own, the only value the objects of embellishment had was a monetary and magical one. Things were passed down, yes, but as a burden of wealth, not as a remembrance of a life well lived.

At times, growing up, Abraxas wished the pictures were magical, that they could answer his millions of questions. He loved Malfoy Manor, but as an only child, sometimes it got too big, too lonely, with too much space for someone like him. It somehow managed to feel claustrophobic even in its expansion.

His parents, in all their overprotective affection, didn't seem to understand why he was so eager to experience the magic school for the first time. Nikon and Iris Malfoy were gentle and perceptive, and they loved Abraxas with the strength of a stormy ocean and the patience of the ever-growing nature. Every time he made a mistake, they were there to help him understand where he had gone wrong; and every time he failed, they were there to remind him there was always tomorrow to try again.

His parents made his house feel special, but he loved Hogwarts, and part of the reason why had been *him*.

It had been Orion that had made him see Malfoy Manor with a different outlook the first time he had come around, excited to explore and play games around the huge echoey corridors. He had helped change the ways Abraxas saw his tiny world, and right then and there, he had decided there was no place he couldn't come to love if Orion was there with him.

Abraxas knew he was lucky – that was what everyone had always told him, and he believed them.

But he couldn't help but wish people didn't see him as weak for always choosing to trust them, give them the benefit of the doubt.

Orion always told him he was a walking contradiction. Abraxas had an intuition like no other – he could read everyone's intentions by just observing them, by biding his time. But by usually focusing on the good parts (which, more often than not, were also the hidden parts) of people, he could blind himself to his own gift.

At least that was what Orion, and to some extent, his parents, believed. Abraxas had never once been wrong about someone. Every person he had taken under his wing had been worth it – from his childhood friends to Orion and Tom, he had never once regretted it.

But, sometimes, he had doubts.

Tom Riddle had been a ferocious specimen when he had first arrived at Hogwarts. There had been something about him then, a will to survive and to thrive that caught Abraxas's eye – it was a light that shone way too bright, and it was bound to fade just as fast.

He was the perfect first friend to make in Hogwarts.

Tom had been prickly, however, all armor and no tenderness. It was clear he was used to being hurt, and had had to fight for scraps at the table.

Never mind – Abraxas could help him scrape off the spikes into a smooth, impenetrable surface if he so wished.

Being a pureblood came with advantages, whether he wanted to acknowledge his privilege or not. By spending time with Tom, he had realized just how much he took for granted, how magic had seeped into his every day life in a way he had much more to teach than he had ever imagined.

And teach he did. Tom was an excellent student, eager to learn but creative enough to search for more than he knew Abraxas could pass along and put his own spin to things. Soon, he had surpassed everyone in their class, everyone in their year, everyone in Hogwarts.

Abraxas felt like a proud parent, even though they were both the same age.

But there was a vindictive streak in Tom – one that Abraxas couldn't squash, no matter how hard he attempted to. Tom was ambitious and visionary, but that instinct could go either way, and that scared Abraxas.

And as Tom built the Knights of Walpurgis from the ground up and recruited more and more people into it, that instinct had been steadily growing darker.

Even worse than that was seeing Orion also get swept up by it.

Abraxas knew Orion, initially, had been there because of him – he loved Tom and wanted to support him, so Orion did the same. But Abraxas had always struggled with the line between loyalty and enabling, between seeing the good in someone and seeing what you want to see.

Was he idealizing Tom so much he was supporting his potential instead of him?

Was he bringing the man he loved into it as well, corrupting him because he was unable to cut ties?

Abraxas had been unsure of the answers for a while, and with Evans' arrival, it was becoming clearer and clearer things weren't as innocent as he once had wanted to believe.

Tom had always had a temper – he was good at controlling it, but Abraxas was always close enough to see when it spilled over. With Harry Evans in Slytherin, however, that temper had grown into something else, something much more destructive. Tom didn't know how to internally handle his emotions well, he didn't know how to understand them, so he often

ascribed anger as the root of everything, as it was the only emotion he allowed himself to feel aside from curiosity and pride.

And Harry Evans evoked *something* in Tom, something he didn't understand and was scared of. Abraxas could see it every time he caught him looking at the green-eyed boy.

And it would have been fine, acceptable, even, if it wasn't for the fact that it was opening his eyes to all the ways Tom was choosing the wrong alternatives.

His plans toward the muggle-borns had been despicable, but Abraxas had let it slide, because he knew that was Tom's main selling point. It was a tactic to recruit, not something he actually believed in.

But did it make a difference, at the end of the day, if he seemed to be eager to follow through with them anyway?

To which point did Tom's initial intentions even matter?

Abraxas didn't know. He wished he could talk to Orion about it, lie with him on the sofa near the roaring fire in the common room and be soothed by the steady sound of his heartbeat and the oh-so-certain way Orion spoke reassurances in his ear... But he couldn't do it anymore, because Orion was his soulmate, and he was going to get married to Walburga as soon as he left Hogwarts.

And while he knew, deep in his heart, that Orion felt the same way about him as he did, he also refused to betray his principles and be with him if he was promised to someone else.

Hiding his face in his pillow, Abraxas decided he had spent too much time wallowing. Orion had been quite confused over his change of behavior toward him, and Abraxas felt guilty, but he didn't feel ready to confront their inevitable break quite yet. Orion was still sixteen, would be sixteen for quite some time, and Abraxas wanted to live in the plausible deniability for as long as he possibly could.

So, for the time being, he needed some air.

He left his dorm and took a walk around the castle. Classes were over, but it was still early. Abraxas walked past Lucretia and Walburga, who seemed to be deep in conversation, and kept going... until he was face-to-face with Evans.

The boy clearly didn't want to be seen – it was written all over his face. He held his left arm closely to his robes, as if cradling something, but whatever it was, Abraxas couldn't properly distinguish.

Whatever; he had been wanting to speak to him, anyway. It was like the answer to his most – second most? – pressing problem had appeared out of thin air, a gift from magic directly for him.

It wasn't like Abraxas to waste it.

“Hey, Evans,” he began, focusing on the boy’s reaction. Harry Evans was odd – sometimes, he looked much younger than he was, but, at other times, Abraxas could swear he was older than anyone else there. It was one of these latter moments now. “Can we talk?”

Suspicion was as clear as glass on Evans’s expression, but he tried to cloak it. It was a valiant effort, in Abraxas’s opinion. “Sure. Want to go somewhere else?”

He nodded. “Lead the way.”

The two of them walked together, and Evans led him all the way to the Black Lake.

It was a cold day, and Abraxas cast a wordless heating charm on himself and Evans, which caused the other to shoot him a grateful-yet-reserved look.

Most of his classmates, save for Orion and Tom and maybe Lilith, wouldn’t even have noticed, let alone appreciated his effort.

It was becoming increasingly clear Evans wasn’t like the majority of them.

Abraxas sat down by the shore of the Lake. As Evans copied him, he collected a tiny pebble from the sand absentmindedly.

How should he start this?

He was safe from pondering for much longer as Evans started speaking.

“Why are we here? Are you also trying to steal secrets from me?”

Also? Had someone already done that?

It might have been Orion, or maybe Tom. None of them had said anything to him, though.

“No. I’m more curious as to why you would think I would.”

“Isn’t that what all of you Knights do? Try to break everyone else’s spirits until they become subordinate to you?”

Evans’s tone, so jaded and indifferent, made Abraxas subconsciously smile. He was so right, yet so wrong.

“You’re thinking of Tom, not me.”

“Is there a difference?”

Of course there is, he wanted to argue, but his mind made him pause.

Was there a difference, if he didn’t try to stop or speak out against Tom’s more insidious behavior?

“I want there to be. He’s one of my best friends, truly, and I think he has much potential for greatness, but I can’t help but feel like he is wasting it by appealing to the ignorance of his

followers.”

There was something he could see in Evans, something that told him it was okay to tell him all this. Tom would have never allowed it, but Abraxas wasn't Tom's pet. He could do what he felt was right, and he didn't need his permission.

Evans frowned, as if trying to read his intentions.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because,” he explained, looking out into the dark water and the cloudy sky that merged with it in the horizon, “I don't want it to be too late for him,” he then injected as much certainty he could into his voice, “and I think you want the same thing as I do.”

It had been one of those hunches, then, that had made him say it. He had never had much contact with Evans in the last few months, but he had watched him. He saw how he clearly didn't believe in the same things the Knights did, and how he didn't want to be the center of attention – yet, he butted heads with Tom constantly. Not out of arrogance (Abraxas didn't think so), but out of genuine interest in Tom, in who he was as a *person*, not the leader.

Abraxas could relate.

It was nice having a possible ally again, after having been distant from Orion and so different from the other Knights.

It took Evans longer than a minute to answer, but he eventually did. “I do want it. I...” There was conflict there, in Evans's mind. Abraxas gave him time to resolve it. “Tom is my soulmate.”

Suddenly all the pieces clicked together, no longer a mosaic of broken glass and incompatible colors, but a completed, coherent puzzle.

“Does he know?” Abraxas asked, even though he could already hear the answer.

“No, not yet. His birthday is soon, anyway–” How he knew that, Abraxas didn't know. “He'll figure it out, and I'll deal with it.” Evans blinked, gaze distant. “It doesn't really matter; there's no way that fact will be enough to dissuade Tom from his plans. That's why–” Evans cut himself off, mouth snapping shut.

“Why...?”

He didn't want the other boy to shut down.

He didn't want to do this alone.

Whatever was written on Abraxas's face, it apparently was enough to convince Evans he didn't mean any harm.

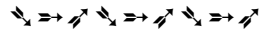
“That's why I have been trying to break up the Knights; starting to, actually. Or, at least, to convince them to change their beliefs.”

Abraxas's initial assessment had been right: there was raw potential there. When Evans made a decision, he stuck by it, even if it turned out to be a disaster.

"I can help you."

Well, the same could be said for Abraxas.

And he had been on the fence for too long.



CHAPTER 8. PART ONE. WE ARE A BY-PRODUCT OF A LIFESTYLE OBSESSION.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN DONE ON SEPTEMBER 27TH, 2023.

Chapter Notes

I haven't really done trigger warnings before but I feel like it is warranted for this one. So, trigger warning for suicidal thoughts, an interrupted suicide attempt, transphobia, and severe bullying. The bullying and transphobia are not explicitly described on text, but their content is heavily alluded to, and it might still be kind of hard for some readers to get through. This entire thing starts at Part 3 – Lilith, and ends at the end of the chapter.

Chapter title is from Fight Club.

“I’m thinking of ending things. Once this thought arrives, it stays. It sticks. It lingers. It dominates. There’s not much I can do about it. Trust me. It doesn’t go away. It’s there whether I like it or not. It’s there when I eat. When I go to bed. It’s there when I sleep. It’s there when I wake up. It’s always there. Always.”

- I’m Thinking of Ending Things, 2016, Iain Reid

CHAPTER 8 – PART ONE – WE ARE A BY-PRODUCT OF A LIFESTYLE OBSESSION.

OR, *THE IDENTITY OF THE MONSTER*

HARRY

Abraxas Malfoy was the farthest thing from his descendant as one could get.

He had similar features to Draco – he was thin like him, his white-blond hair the same shade, and he shared his almond-shaped grey eyes, lighter than the Blacks’ and much softer.

But that was where the similarities ended, in Harry’s eyes.

Abraxas had sharp features like most Malfoys, but his face shape was more triangular than the long, pointy one Draco sported, his jaw more defined, his nose less sculpted. His hair was cut short, styled well but loosely, not at all like Lucius Malfoy’s signature ponytail or Draco’s slicked back hairstyle. Even his voice was different – where his son’s had been regal-sounding and posh and his grandson’s arrogant and hostile, Abraxas’s was sweet and angelic, the boy exceptionally soft-spoken.

The real distinction truly lay in his personality, however.

There was no arrogance behind his observant gaze, no fear masquerading as anger. He chose his words carefully and thoughtfully, and his confidence was more of the quiet type. He didn’t need to rely on aggression to get his point across.

The thought caught Harry off-guard, but he couldn’t say he was surprised: it turned out he quite liked Abraxas Malfoy.

It was hard seeing how someone like him could have ended up so indebted to Riddle. They were polar opposites, even more so than Orion and Abraxas, and Riddle was rigid in all the ways Abraxas was flexible.

Regardless of that, it was obvious to anyone with eyes that Abraxas cared for Tom. He wasn’t a follower as much as he was a helper, a sort of – dare he say it – emotional support.

So having the boy on his side felt like the biggest victory he’d had so far, especially when contrasted with the absolute disaster of Harry’s last confrontation with Riddle.

“What do you plan on doing about Orion?” Abraxas asked, still mild-mannered.

What he planned to do, indeed.

“I’m not sure.” He hesitated as he got up from the grass. “He, uh... He made it pretty clear he would only stop supporting Riddle if you did, so.”

Abraxas also got up, a thoughtful expression on his pale face. “I’ll talk to him. Maybe we can do it together, even, though he might want to test me to see if I’m not under the influence of a potion or spell.” Neither of them moved, both aware that they could not be seen consorting inside the castle, unsure of where to go next. “Your biggest challenge will be the others, especially Tymeo and Bram.”

Harry felt the weight of the box inside of his jacket, and pondered on Abraxas’s words.

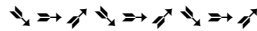
“You should talk to him first. There is a place we can use to meet up after, but it’s best if I show you where it is later on.”

Abraxas nodded, and started to move, turning to the side of the Hogwarts castle.

“Thank you,” he said, and Harry couldn’t help but frown at the sincerity in his voice.

“For what?”

“Challenging Tom. Not choosing to enable his behavior because he is your soulmate.” He paused, considering his words. “Giving me a chance to do the right thing.” Abraxas smiled, a soft grin that was contagious enough to make Harry smile in return. “Take your pick.”



HERMIONE

It was toward the very end of November when Hermione got to follow Walburga and Lucretia around the castle.

Harry had been increasingly caught up in his schemes, and Hermione hated to admit it, but she was getting a bit lonely again. Her interactions with Lucretia were more barbed wire than an embrace, more thorns than roses, and she was getting tired of toning herself down to appease to Lucretia’s fragile ego. Hermione wanted it all, wanted to be herself and for that to be enough. She was exhausted of the secrets she could feel everyone around her keeping, and she was acutely aware of the differences between her and her soulmate.

Hermione had already lost everything; she had already experienced pain and loss enough to feel bored of the dramas of youth her classmates were entangled in. So when she had woken up absolutely sick of it all, and having had to see yet again Lucretia shooting her glares while trying to be inconspicuous with her best friend through empty hallways, Hermione didn’t even feel guilty as she decided to see for herself what they were doing.

She wanted to take a trip to the Department of Mysteries with Harry as soon as the Christmas holiday rolled around, but in the meantime, the mystery of Lucretia’s push and pull of ignoring her and then openly antagonizing her was driving Hermione insane. She needed to solve this, even if it took a more Gryffindorish, direct approach at some point.

Lucretia wasn’t known for her subtlety either, after all. She was secretive, yes, but she was as Ravenclaw as one could get, and that manifested in her attacking every angle head-on, unstoppable in her search for answers. She was like Hermione in that way, except Hermione had learned how to tone down the aggressiveness and lean more toward cunning as an adult.

There were things that intrigued Hermione about her, more than just her contradictory behavior, isolationist tendencies, and hostile disposition. Her drive toward being number one in class was one of those things; it had somehow managed to bypass her determination to avoid Hermione, after all. Another one rested on the way Lucretia had changed gears after their confrontation. She had been doing even better in class, even though Hermione hadn’t

seen her spend any more time in the library than she used to. She didn't know Lucretia enough to suggest she would consider cheating – *or* that she wouldn't – but there were no other explanations available. She was doing *something*, that was for sure, and Hermione wanted to figure out what it was.

It had been in Charms that it had become the most obvious. That class was one they shared with the Gryffindors, so Lucretia didn't get to just pair up with Walburga as she usually did. Their professor, Ms. Talia Fortinbras, seemed to favor Hermione's spellwork, but that wasn't exactly surprising. She didn't brag outwardly or anything, and Hermione was well aware of her weakness for compliments, but it made sense that the teachers would favor her as an example in class – she had much more experience and her spells and charms were more refined because of it. Lucretia didn't seem to take it well, however, as seen before, but, lately, she showed it differently.

Before, she would scowl or roll her eyes whenever Hermione did as little as answer a question no one else would, or when a professor complimented her written works. It irritated her, but Lucretia was harmless at the end of the day, and she could spare some sympathy for the clearly weighty expectations the girl was under.

Then, she had, of course, accused Hermione of cheating. Whether it was because she was a muggle-born, her soulmate, or simply an obstacle to Lucretia's goals, Hermione didn't know, but something about her deeply bothered Lucretia Black. She had too much to think about and ponder on in between her research, dealing with her own feelings, and Harry's dangerous endeavors, and yielding to Lucretia's childish behavior seemed immature, even if she wanted to understand her soulmate better.

That day, however, things had changed. Lucretia had gone through the class flawlessly, answering everything before Hermione could even raise her hand. If she was surprised, professor Fortinbras didn't show it – Hermione assumed it was because before she herself had arrived, that had been the standard in classes anyway. But there was something suspicious about the way Lucretia had looked at Hermione with a cocky smirk on her face, shamelessly rubbing it in, as if Hermione had been doing as well as she did in class simply to spite the other girl and now she was getting her comeuppance. It was infuriatingly annoying, and she couldn't take it anymore.

So when Lucretia had reconvened with Walburga post-lunch, she hid herself the best she could under a spell and followed them.

Everyone knew of the bond between the two Black cousins, and neither of them tried to hide it, so chasing them around was easy. What made that day differ from many others was their sketchy behavior, and how on edge Walburga in particular looked as they hid on a recently empty classroom down in the Slytherin dungeons.

A quick spell made sure Hermione could listen in on their tense exchange.

"So?" Lucretia gripped both of Walburga's shoulders with her hands, making sure the other girl was facing her. "Who is it?"

Walburga looked less put together than usual. Dark circles underneath her grey eyes were quite prominent, and her thick, long, straight black hair was unbrushed, knots visible in it to Hermione even as she remained distant from the pair. “It’s, um...” She hesitated.

“I told you who mine is. It can’t possibly be worse than that.”

By that point, Hermione was already pretty sure this was about Walburga’s soulmate, and hearing Lucretia speak of their situation like *that* had her cringing in emotional discomfort.

Walburga sighed, looking away and avoiding Lucretia’s eyes.

“It’s Lilith.”

“Holy *fuck*.” Had Hermione ever heard Lucretia swear before, or even seen her have that wide-eyed look? “Does she know?”

Walburga shook her head. “I don’t think so, though her birthday *was* in January. I don’t exactly remember what I said to her when we met, but I doubt it was unique enough for her to know it’s me.”

The pair was quiet for a moment, until Lucretia chuckled. “I can’t believe we’re both this messed up.”

Walburga barely managed a smile. “I certainly can.”

“I, um... I don’t know what to do about her,” Lucretia replied, voice low. Hermione perked up to the mention of her.

“Why don’t you give her a chance?”

Is Walburga Black seriously encouraging Lucretia to give a muggle-born a chance?

When Lucretia responded, her tone was a defeated one. “I can’t.”

“Why not? Don’t get me wrong, I know about your family, but you’re self-sabotaging and I don’t know why, Lucy. She’s *right there*, and from what you’ve told me, she’s smart like you and willing to give you a chance even after you’ve called her a mudblood to her face. It’s not like you’re not willing to go against them – there’s not a single bone in aunt Adora’s and uncle Aquila’s bodies that would ever approve of you wanting to become Minister of Magic, right? Still, I have no doubt in my mind that you’ll do it. I’ll help you make sure your parents don’t figure it out, if that’s what you’re afraid of.” Walburga spoke with such tenderness that Hermione felt her heart clench.

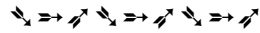
“I *can’t*, Wally. Let it go,” Lucretia exclaimed, a tortured cadence to her voice, her curly hair falling into her face like a curtain as she tried to hide herself.

There was no doubt now that there was more to Lucretia’s stubbornness than just blood supremacy ideals. Walburga Black was *the* most bigoted person Hermione had ever had the displeasure of interacting with when she went by Grimmauld Place to visit Harry, and yet,

there she was, clearly not upset over her best friend having a muggle-born for a soulmate. If Lucretia's family wasn't the issue, what was?

I can't, Lucretia had said, and those two words haunted Hermione's thoughts.

I need to figure out why.



SIX DAYS LATER

TOM

The hallways were always deadly quiet in Tom's patrol nights.

Being a prefect had been a choice of convenience, in the beginning. But besides the opportunity to learn the insides of the castle, spy on his colleagues, and of maintaining his image as a perfect student, Tom simply relished in being able to blow off some steam, let his constantly chatting and scheming thoughts fade away as he focused on the task at hand and the subtle sounds of his shoes as they hit the floor.

His rounds were predictable and uninteresting, but that had never bothered Tom. He liked knowing exactly what to expect of his nights.

Plus, it had become extremely hard for him to go back to his dorm, where he would have to face Orion and Abraxas and the tension their interactions had been carrying since Abraxas had discovered Orion was his soulmate.

Worst of all, he absolutely did *not* want to face Evans.

He kept accidentally referring to the boy as Harry in his mind whenever he looked into his oddly bright green eyes, feeling unable (~~unwilling~~?) to put him back into the same category of distance as he tried to do for nearly everyone else. In just about three months, ~~Harry~~ Evans had gone from a stranger to a nuisance to... something else, and Tom hated the loss of control that came with it.

He blamed his willingness to trust Abraxas's intuition for this whole mess, he thought, as the steady rhythm of his walk had started to wane to accommodate his distracted state. Had Abraxas told him anything else rather than let Tom get curious about Evans, he could have handled this in a much more efficient manner, nipped it in the bud.

Now, though, he had to deal with the tremor in his right hand, the one he had been ignoring ever since their *moment* in the library.

He didn't want to confront the foreignness of his feelings, the way he had shivered at the boy's touch, and he most definitely didn't want to confront what Evans's words have made resurface in his head. Tom had done his damn hardest to shut those moral thoughts up; he knew it was the price he had to pay to hold the spot he did in Slytherin. One didn't do what he did and came out unscathed and morally superior.

He resumed the former pace of his stride, and went up a particularly rare set of stairs that remained almost entirely static. Tom rather liked the puzzle that was the moving staircases and memorizing their patterns, but he prioritized practicality in his rounds.

The seventh floor had always been Tom's favorite. He knew most prefects skipped it entirely, but ever since he had first stepped foot in there, he never had. He couldn't properly point out why; perhaps it was something about the way it *felt* darker than the rest, its magic mostly dormant but still visible, and not entirely Light in nature. Its contents were the usual ones – classrooms overall, and most notably, the room in which they had their Astronomy lessons – so, nothing out of the ordinary. Yet, Tom saw himself drawn to it.

He was almost done with his patrols, and curfew was nearing. It would take him some time to reach the dungeons, so he started his way down.

There hadn't been any students out that night, at least that he had managed to catch out. It was unusual, but not unheard of. Tom preferred it anyway – he could go on his way uninterrupted, no need to pretend and put on a mask. The nighttime was the only time he felt like he could be himself, or at least, a version of himself that didn't require him to have to choose between his role within his Knights and his eagerness to learn and ask questions that didn't necessarily help him with his ambitions. Tom felt like he could only be one thing, lest he be taken less seriously by those whose respect and recognition he had fought to gain.

He was approaching the second floor when he heard muffled footsteps, the telltale sign of someone trying to disguise themselves. It would have worked, if whoever it was hadn't been wandering around in the quietest possible hour inside the castle.

It didn't take long to find the offending party, as a Slytherin Sixth Year accompanied by a Fifth Year were trying to sneak back. Tom recognized them: the first was Jane Abbott, the second one, Robert Crouch. Tom often made Lilith scout possible new recruits for the Knights, especially now that they were nearing the end of their school years and it would be Orion's job to keep the newcomers in the loop as the only Knight still left after. Abbott and Crouch were being considered, but at the moment, Tom had no need to chase them, not when people usually flocked to him regardless, and he liked it that way.

Abbott and Crouch were clearly *together*, by the looks of it. Tom's nose scrunched in distaste at the sight.

“Abbott, Crouch.”

Abbott's face was red – certainly not solely out of embarrassment, though – and she was avoiding Tom's eyes. Crouch did face Tom, but he did so with clear trepidation, weaving his fingers through his dirty-blond hair.

“Riddle, hmm...”

Eloquent, Tom mocked him in his head. “Back to your dorms. Next time, you'll receive more than just a warning.”

Crouch and Abbott seemed scared at his words, and Tom resisted the urge to laugh. He had obviously meant taking points or detention, but it was good to know his reputation preceded him.

Still, they both lingered.

“Is there a reason why you're still here?”

Abbott was clearly the bravest of the two, as she stepped closer to him and answered, “We actually wanted to talk to you.” She lowered her voice. “You know, about joining the Knights.”

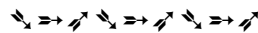
While Tom appreciated them doing the work of a pitch for him, they had chosen the worst possible time to do so.

“Well, you can do so with Mulciber tomorrow. Lilith is the one to speak to. First you go through her, and if she deems you worthy, then you'll be referred back to be evaluated by me.” It didn't hurt that the whole bureaucratic process made him seem even more unapproachable. Being a Knight demanded more than just wanting to join a popular social club, and this was a good way to fish out the weak-willed.

Harry would make a good Knight.

The intrusive thought made Tom bite the inside of his cheek with more force than necessary, and he felt blood pouring on his tongue.

He didn't even notice the pain as he went through the same path Crouch and Abbott had just done.



He couldn't ignore it further. It was still in his mind even as he prepared for the next Knights meeting.

Things had felt... *different*, since the last time he had spoken to Harry.

The reality was that touch, to Tom Riddle, was both a poison and its cure.

Growing up in Wool's, the only physical contact he had ever experienced had been laced with punishment and perversion.

There were the times he had been slapped on the face for daring to speak up against the other kids when they stole the last of his food; there were also the carelessly malicious hits from Billy and his crew, as Mrs. Cole was not the only one who thought Tom was a freak and a demon disguising as a child.

And, of course, there were the touches that kept him wide awake at night, fear enveloping his nervous system, breathing ragged as he tried to be as quiet as he could be. Those touches, *those* were evil incarnate, more than he could ever be. They always came accompanied by such hungry looks that Tom couldn't help but throw up afterwards, getting rid of the little food he'd managed to keep for himself.

He told himself he didn't mind it; they could be much worse than just *fondling*, after all.

Still, Tom hated touch, yet he craved it like a starving man craved nourishment, whether it be from a plate or the dirt.

When he had first stepped into Hogwarts, the urge had been overwhelmed immediately in a completely unexpected way. Tom could *see magic*, its shades and hues and power, and as it caressed his skin, it almost satisfied what he had been missing.

Most wizards held their magic in with an iron fist, their magical cores too controlled to emanate even a sliver. They were entirely dependent on their wands for everything, as they couldn't feel and work in symbiosis with their power.

But the few times their aura shined, *oh*, those were the times Tom felt the most alive. As a prefect, helping the first years was his favorite task – their magic was careless and wild, not yet taught to behave, and he basked in it as it seemed to chase him around. It was as if it could tell Tom could see it. Those same kids usually had a better grip on it by the end of the school year, and Tom had to wait for the next group to roll in, bored and helpless in the meantime.

And when he went back to Wool's, it was so much worse than culture shock. There wasn't even a bit of magic in that place, and the only thing that could comfort Tom was knowing he would be back home soon.

He just needed to endure.

As he had confronted Harry Evans in the library, he had *seen it, felt* Harry's magic, just as intense and overwhelming as the boy's touch. None of the other Slytherins had auras as transparently obvious as Harry's, and Tom, against his instincts, had felt magnetized by it. His own anger had been replaced by something else, something he desperately wanted to ignore, but couldn't.

Want.

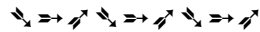
If it were only Harry's magic, however, it would have been a thousand times easier. But, no – Harry's words were just as hypnotizing, just as entrancing. He had appealed to Tom's rational side, and he had listened. That, coupled with his touch, had made sure Tom had stood no chance at all.

But he wasn't that powerful for no reason, after all. He was Tom Riddle, and Tom Riddle *never* got overpowered by anyone.

Harry, *Evans*, had thought himself stronger than Tom, and had tried to manipulate him. That just wouldn't do.

He'd been neglecting his duties for too long. It had been a nice distraction, but that was all it was.

He couldn't help the smirk that settled on his face as he thought through his next move.



The next time he was in the Astronomy Tower, the place was anything but silent.

Knights' meetings were the place Tom felt like he had the most control over. He could enter a noisy room and quiet it by simply clearing his throat and shooting everyone a look. Sometimes, just walking in was enough.

This time, it was clear they had all felt the energy Tom exerted, as every single voice ceased the second he came in, stride anything but subtle. Someone had already cast a silencing charm upon the classroom, and Tom could see the wavering, transparent aura that encapsulated the entirety of it. It was especially strong, meaning the caster had either been Abraxas or Sébastien; as Tom concentrated on the hue left behind on the room, a slightly orange-y color confirmed it had been Sébastien.

It had taken Tom longer than usual to prepare this particular meeting. Evans had been in his mind, their last conversation on replay as he tried to ignore him and focus on what actually mattered. It was hard, though, when even the mere sight of him made Tom's magical core react.

He breathed deeply, and focused on the task at hand. He had a new command for them, and he wanted to see it done.

A large part of his work as the Knights' leader involved finding ways of influencing things from the outside. As a Hogwarts student, he didn't have any real sway over politics, but he *had* sway over the next generation's ideals, and he took advantage of it to the max.

Bram's father was the Minister for Magic, and Sébastien's held seven Wizengamot seats. They were powerful by mere birthright, and losing them would be a major blow to the Knights, regardless of how much he *despised* Avery.

However, they were not the only powerful ones at Hogwarts. Avery's dad certainly held that title, but Bram was not usually politically inclined, and his tough-as-nails father was not easily manipulated, certainly not by his own son.

No, there was someone else that could claim so – a *spineless* Fourth Year Gryffindor, a Potter, of all people, whose parents, combined, held the majority of Wizengamot seats. Not only that, but they were staunch muggle-born supporters. Even with Louis Rosier's biased caucus of allies, there was only so much he could do against such political influence.

Maybe it was time for a more drastic approach to things.

Tom walked toward the group, most already settled into their chairs, and he took his time analyzing his followers.

In front of the entrance to the Astronomy Tower's main classroom, Abraxas was standing up, lips pursed and light grey eyes alert. His posture spoke of his discomfort, and the way he had his arms crossed and body slightly angled to his left made it very clear in Tom's eyes that he was avoiding Orion, who was sat down at a transfigured armchair to his right. Orion himself donned a faux-distant look in his eyes, but Tom could see through it enough to know he was just as aware of Abraxas as he was of him.

That wasn't what actually caught his eye, though, not really. It was the tension in the room, so much thicker than usual. It was like every single person in it was holding their breath; Tom could feel the pressure rising and rising, and he couldn't ignore the half-suppressed eagerness he felt at the prospect of its implosion.

Maybe it was the way he held himself this time, with more impatience than usual. The end of seventh year was on the horizon, and he had wasted too much time on inconsequential details.

He didn't sit down – he never did. Instead, Tom walked over to the small podium where the professor's desk stood, and took claim over the highest spot in the room.

He could see all of them perfectly from where he was; and there was nothing better than reminding them of who was above, pureblood or not.

Tom gestured to the Knight that was closest to him. Sébastien, as everyone else, was well aware of what it meant – they only spoke in meetings when he allowed them to. Tom listened as he shared the newest information his father had in regards to the Ministry with a neutral look.

For years, purebloods had been too scared to speak up, supremely admonished for their beliefs which were considered increasingly dated. It had been Grindelwald's rise that had sparked up the long-dying flame back to life, and Tom had every intention of using it to burn everything to the ground.

“There has been some speculation on the possibility of voting for the abolition of Samhain rituals. Apparently, they've been deemed too antiquated and encouraging of Dark magic.”

Sébastien's words seemed to echo around the room, and everyone's faces mirrored the one look Tom imagined he would have on, if he wasn't so skilled at disguising his expressions.

One more reason to go through with it, he concluded.

"Well," Tom began, his tone of voice chipper as he prepared for his next words, "everyone knows Henry Potter would do anything for his youngest son. Let's see how true that is."

Tom had center stage to the reactions of those around him, and he could see how Abraxas's face immediately fell, the least subtle response he'd had so far.

It wasn't often that Tom was interrupted by his Knights – they usually let him finish his words, as he would later open the floor to questions. Lilith, however, seemed especially courageous – or *reckless* – that day.

"What should we do?"

He looked at her then, really looked. Lilith Mulciber had been the closest thing to an impulsive addition to the Knights Tom had ever gotten. There was a kinship between them, an understanding of what it entailed to be an outsider. But he had never once regretted it, as she had proven herself more valuable than he had anticipated. That day, however, she looked worn down, as if every shred of energy had left her body, and Tom decided to spare her the punishment for speaking out of turn.

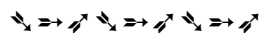
At least he thought he did, in a way.

"Sébastien, Tymeo, Lilith," he enumerated them, and smirked as the next words left his mouth. "We should give Charlus Potter the Bulstrode treatment."

Orion changed his position on the armchair, it being the only sound aside from Tom's words to be heard in the Tower as the rest of the Knights remained unusually quiet. Tom could feel the thread of tension seconds away from snapping entirely, and he chose to ignore Lilith's increasing paleness.

A few years ago, that would have barely been a request worthy of such obvious reexamination within his followers if it yielded real results.

Were the golden days of the Knights of Walpurgis already behind them?



ABRAXAS

After that disaster meeting, Orion was nowhere to be found.

It made Abraxas sick to his stomach, the thought that they would have to bully some innocent 14-year-old just because of who his family was. All of them knew what “the Bulstrode treatment” meant – it had been the catalyst for Lilith to join them, after all. Tom had saved her then, but now he was willing to go as far as doing the same thing to someone else.

Abraxas knew he had made the right decision the moment he heard those words coming out of his mouth.

Orion hadn’t reacted well either, and Abraxas had noticed. He was good at hiding his thoughts and feelings – they all were, to some extent – but Abraxas knew him, had done so since Orion’s first year in Hogwarts. He was as disgusted as Abraxas was.

They all had done things they shouldn’t have. They all had hurt people in the past in the name of doing the right thing for their cause.

But doing something that serious, something that had once actually harmed, almost *killed* one of their own?

That was taking it too far.

Orion had separated himself from the rest of the Knights as soon as the meeting had ended, and Abraxas hadn’t been able to find him in their dorm. He needed to speak to him, to tell him about his deal with Evans, but he could feel how their distance had been taking a toll on Orion, just as it had been taking a toll on him. They had never been apart, not since they had become friends – his mark, spoken by Orion with a smile soon after Abraxas had answered one of Tom’s questions, “*we’re friends now, no take backs,*” made it very clear. They were inseparable, and to have that become less fact and more fiction when magic had literally deemed them a perfect match was inconceivable in Abraxas’s mind.

He knew it was his fault, though. He had chosen this, chosen his morality over what his friendship could turn into – Orion was simply responding to the atmosphere the only way he knew how. Still, he couldn’t help the way his stomach twisted at the sight of Orion, at the way his playful energy shifted when he looked at Abraxas, a shy smile harbored in his lips as he looked down. Abraxas didn’t get to see this side of him, not anymore, and he could feel the grief of it steady in his chest, the possibility that he wouldn’t have Orion in his future messing with his head.

He searched all the spots he knew Orion liked to go to when he wanted to be alone, to no avail. It was when he was ready to quit for the day, the time nearer to curfew, that he heard a soft sigh coming from one of the corridors in the dungeons.

“Orion?” he asked, looking into every classroom on the way.

No one answered, but he kept at it, until he saw a familiar mess of curly black hair.

Orion was sat on top of a student’s desk, eyes focused on the pitch blackness of the lake outside of a window. That classroom in particular was never actually used, and Abraxas wondered whether that was where Orion usually was when he couldn’t be found.

“Hey. Are you okay?” Without meaning to, Abraxas’s voice lowered into a whisper, something about the atmosphere in the room seemingly demanding it.

Orion turned to look at him, an inscrutable expression on. “I’m fine, Abraxas. Curfew is close, you should be in our room.”

A sad smile crept onto Abraxas’s face. “So should you.”

Orion shrugged his concern off quite literally, and continued to watch the stars, as if expecting him to just go back without him.

He was sorely mistaken if he thought Abraxas would ever leave him.

“Talk to me.” *Forgive me.* “I know I have been distant lately—”

Orion cut him off. “I don’t know what happened with your soulmate, but... Why are you icing me out? Did I do something?” The vulnerability and hurt in his voice had Abraxas swallowing his words, trying to keep himself from crying. Just as fast, however, Orion’s tone shifted to one of anger. “Or what, just because you have a soulmate now you think you have to let go of your best friend?”

There was nothing Abraxas hated more than seeing Orion fall back into his mask of rage. “That’s not what it is.”

“What is it, then? What could possibly have changed so fast between us? I thought you—” He was paler than usual, like he had said too much.

What?

Orion shook his head.

Abraxas couldn’t help but plea, “Please, tell me.”

The silence between Orion’s words and Abraxas’s response was so charged one could almost hear someone else’s blinking.

“I thought you loved me too.”

It was as if Abraxas’s lungs had stopped working, the weight of the words pressing against his chest. *He loves me.*

He had a suspicion his feelings were reciprocated, but to have him state it outright...

He was stuck in a state of euphoria and despair, and he cursed his throat for not letting the right words through fast enough.

“I do. Of course I do.”

Orion’s hardened eyes, in all of their stormy glory, turned soft, a hopeful smile blooming on his face in such a beautiful way that Abraxas felt his heart clenching in his chest.

“Then... Then why?”

He loves me too. Fuck, he loves me. Should I tell him?

I have to tell him.

But would it change things?

The Blacks were notorious for their cruelly inescapable agreements. While Orion’s marriage contract wasn’t yet finalized – he needed to be seventeen to be able to sign it – it wasn’t simply a matter of a magically binding piece of paper or a vow. His parents knew exactly how to keep their kids in order, if the burn marks Orion refused to talk about were enough proof.

Abraxas knew Orion didn’t care whether or not he got disowned by the family – his reasons were related most of all to his sister, Lucretia. Abraxas knew what had happened between Orion and Lucy, and while they didn’t speak to each other anymore, it was clear he still loved her, and was scared of what would happen to her if he left her behind.

Marrying Walburga wasn’t something he wanted, but it was something he felt like he had to do.

Abraxas understood, but it still hurt.

“Orion...” If he didn’t do it now, he might never do it at all. “*You* are my soulmate.”

Abraxas kept his eyes down, scared of Orion’s reaction, so he could only feel the impact of his best friend’s body onto his as his back hit the wall.

Those dark grey eyes were so intensely focused on his that Abraxas found himself unable to look away. Orion’s curls were touching his face, softly caressing his cheeks, and he could feel himself blushing at how close they were. They would often touch each other, be it hugs or cuddling, but it had never felt like this before, like lightning was filling up his veins.

Orion didn’t say anything when he leaned in, and there was absolutely nothing Abraxas could have done to convince his body to stop what was coming.

The moment their lips touched, Abraxas could have sworn the world had shifted in its axis. There was something like a steady, silent hum inside him, like his magical core was singing.

Orion’s lips were impossibly soft, and hunger filled Abraxas as he moved with them, unable to think clearly at all. It was all he had ever wanted coming true, and he had never realized something had been missing until then.

At his reciprocation, Orion smiled into the kiss, and it picked up the pace, suddenly feeling much more urgent. Abraxas felt hot all over, the pleasure of it making his body shiver and yearn for more, and he didn’t have any thoughts in his head as pulled Orion by his shirt, aggressively making their bodies collide.

Orion made a sound that hit Abraxas like a tidal wave, a mix between a moan and a gasp, and Abraxas couldn't help but open his eyes and watch his reaction as he bit Orion's lower lip.

He was glad he did so. Orion's eyes were more black than grey, and his right hand gripped Abraxas's jaw, his thumb almost marking his face as he brought it to his mouth.

Fuck, Abraxas thought, as Orion traced his lips with it.

His hand left Orion's shirt and buried itself on his hair, and he couldn't repress a moan at the face Orion made when he tugged it back, leaving his throat exposed.

"You're so..." he whispered, almost frustrated, unable to finish his thought as he kissed the pale skin, more tongue than lips.

The groan that escaped Orion's mouth had Abraxas losing any control he had left. He licked and bit the skin, making sure to not leave any trace of his throat untouched. Orion's hands dug into Abraxas's hips, gently pulling up his shirt in a way that had his fingers touching his skin, and Abraxas's breathing became even shallower.

"Ah... *Orion*—" This wasn't why he was there, he tried to remind himself. As perfect as it was – and *Merlin*, he never wanted it *to end* – he couldn't get caught up in this any longer.

"You're so *perfect*," Orion whispered in his ear, the sound closer to an exhale, and brought Abraxas's jaw closer again, his lips hitting his once more. His tongue was inside Abraxas's mouth now, and he growled at the feeling, pulling him even closer.

If I don't stop now, I don't think I'll be able to.

Abraxas pulled back for air, and tried focusing on anything other than how Orion's hair was messy from the way he had pulled on it, the way his lips glistened and his eyes didn't even try to disguise his desire.

"Orion," he interjected, still trying to stabilize his breathing and the sensations in his body to something more easy to control. "This... This isn't why I told you."

At the sound of Abraxas's words, coming out of his mouth so hoarse he felt himself blush, Orion stepped back, letting his arms fall down.

"You don't want this?"

Abraxas huffed softly. "How could you ever come to that idea after *this*?"

He could feel the sweat dripping down his body, and he refused to look at Orion, afraid that if he did, he would feel tempted to devour him whole.

Abraxas felt Orion looking at him, examining his body from top to bottom, and he tried to will his face to become more neutral. The boy approached him, less eagerly this time but still desiring, and stood before Abraxas with his eyes set on his lips.

Abraxas knew he had to give him a valid answer. "You will still marry Walburga."

It wasn't a question, and it wasn't a plea for a different answer. He knew it was true, and the way Orion's face fell in shame confirmed it outright.

"I have to. You know why."

Even knowing exactly what the answer would be, he still felt his whole body collapse on itself.

"I know."

The heat of the moment had dwindled to a candle-flame. The tension was still there, the weight of what they had done still perceptible without saying it out loud, but now, there was enough clarity for Abraxas to put his thoughts into words.

"I love you, and I would give anything to be with you, but I won't do it if you are engaged to someone else, Orion. I know why you feel like you have to go through with it, but I can't wait for you forever, I can't be the one you have to hide, the one you introduce to people as a family friend. Not when I want you this much. Not when you are the only one for me."

Saying those words felt like the worst of self-sabotage, but Abraxas knew he was right. There was no place for him on the outskirts of Orion's life, and he didn't want to have to force him into doing something he would regret, like leaving his sister to the vultures for his own benefit. He knew Orion would do anything for him if he asked emphatically enough, and he refused to be someone who would make the love of his life into a slave of his own feelings.

"I love you," Orion whispered, soft and heartbreaking as a promise of eternal love when both knew death was inevitable.

Abraxas breathed deeply, and he looked into Orion's eyes.

"There is something else. It's not anything like this, but it's serious."

Abraxas watched as Orion's hands opened and closed, a self-soothing gesture Orion only ever partook in whenever he was particularly stressed.

"What is it?"

"I talked to Harry Evans." The mention of that name made Orion look at him with a surprised gaze, a frown in place. "He told me something about him, something that explains why he has been acting the way he has. Most of all, he told me of his plan."

He didn't miss the way Orion's eyes shifted with suspicion.

"He wants to end the Knights. And I promised him I'd help."

Orion took a few steps back and rested his back on the same table he had been sitting at before, face going from one emotion to another so fast Abraxas couldn't pick up on what they meant.

"Why?"

He didn't want to just share Evans's secrets without him there, but he had told him he would talk to Orion first, and he knew he had to give him something.

"Tom is his soulmate. He wants to stop him from doing something drastic."

At that, Orion's face settled into a thoughtful expression.

"And you're just okay with betraying Tom's plans? It makes sense, I guess, but he is not telling the whole truth, though, I can tell."

"I trust him," Abraxas reassured him, hoping that would be enough to convince Orion. It usually was.

"You trust everyone," Orion huffed good-naturedly, and Abraxas was unable to suppress the smile in his face at seeing his friend back to a semblance of who he was.

Abraxas continued, "And I love Tom, I do. That is why I'm doing this. You've seen how far he is willing to go. If we indulge him in this, he'll only want more."

The darkness of his tone brought Orion back to the seriousness of the situation. He seemed ready to argue, seemingly more out of habit than anything else, but as Abraxas shot him a look, he relented. "Fine. But I'll need more information to feed Riddle."

"We'll meet up with him soon. He says he has a place where we can talk without drawing attention."

Orion sighed, looking at his hands.

"I hope he is ready to the possibility that no one else will be as stupid as us."

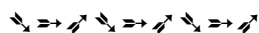
Abraxas grinned at the love of his life, genuinely entertained for the first time since the day started. "Trust me, you are overestimating the Slytherins' sense of self-preservation. Most of us just follow the odds. If they're shifted in our favor, they'll have no reason not to."

"And you think we'll be able to do it?" Orion seemed skeptical but hopeful nonetheless. Something in his eyes told Abraxas Orion would trust whatever he said, prepared to follow him to the ends of the earth.

Still, he wasn't lying when he said, "Yes. Love might not conquer everything, but determination does, and I'm determined. Are you?"

There was a pause, then, but there was no hesitation within it as Orion replied.

"Yes."



A WEEK AND TWO DAYS LATER

PART 3 – LILITH

The Astronomy Tower was located on the seventh floor of Hogwarts, and enchantments covered the area more heavily than in other places in the castle.

Its main circular room had a ceiling, but it was nothing a little spell couldn't fix; the students could see the night sky whenever classes demanded it, and they mapped out their discoveries of constellations and planets with ink and parchment under the moon and candlelight.

It was hardly the largest room the school had to offer, but it needn't be – no more than a small amount of students from two houses occupied it at once, after all.

The tower was Rowena Ravenclaw's favorite structure in Hogwarts. The witch had been highly involved in its development from start to finish, and it had her touch all over it. From the navy blue walls to the bronze finishing on the windows' stiles, casings, and stools, her favorite colors decorated it in its entirety.

She had always been drawn to stars, and the secrets they whispered when they thought no one was listening. Rowena could imagine it being a refuge to lost students, how the celestial bodies would encase them in the same sense of numinosity and yugen she felt when she looked up.

One thing she had never seen coming, however, was it being a stage for one's pain and existence coming to an end.

Lilith Mulciber had spent one too many nights there, looking down instead. Of all the corridors spiraling around the castle, the Astronomy Tower was the one place left fairly unchecked – possibly due to its exhausting access. No prefect wanted to go that far in their patrol, lest it took them too long to come back to their dorms to retire for the night, especially the Slytherins, the group that was geographically located the farthest from it.

So Lilith took advantage. Her roommates didn't particularly love having her around, so it was a win-win – if you considered her lack of sleep as such, of course.

It was with a critical eye that she examined everything around her – muggle-borns the most. Lilith saw the wonder in their eyes as they first stepped into Hogwarts, eagerness in their wand hands, and that strange feeling always overtook her stomach as she observed.

She was born with the practicality of magic within grasp, and it was as inconsequential as the ground she walked on. Her first word, delayed by several months, hadn't been *dad* or *mum* or any of the expected alternatives. It had been *lumos*, as her mother often sat with her in the dark and only lit her wand to read Lilith *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* when she was a baby.

She knew magic like she knew the back of her own hand, in a way muggle-borns would never be able to. It didn't matter, though; it had never been enough to make her life any easier.

The feeling of being different had been part of Lilith's being for as long as she could remember. As a kid, comfortable in herself as children often are, she had only ever seen something wrong with the way people perceived her, not who she was, but that had changed as she grew.

The life of a pureblood was someone else's as much as it was theirs. Tradition came first; individuality came second. Every pureblood wizard in England knew each other in some capacity – sometimes because they were related, often because they were introduced by their parents with the intent of facilitating soulmate meetings and marriage contracts. Maintaining the sacred nature of magic, the *purity of blood*, was of utmost importance. Appearances were everything in the game of relevancy.

Lilith had simply misunderstood what *appearances* meant.

She hadn't been able to transition before going to Hogwarts. She often wished she had been lucky enough to go stealth and avoid all the ~~miser~~ misfortune that had followed her since. She was a woman, had been one her entire life, but that wasn't enough to be treated as one, it seemed.

Being sorted into Slytherin had been pretty much the only pride she had ever brought her family. She had loved feeling like she had finally done something right for once, but it hadn't lasted.

People often underestimated the cruelty of children. Perhaps cruelty was the wrong word – it denoted a level of understanding and maliciousness that wasn't present in their actions. *Amorality* was a better one. As a child, one's main drive is to have their needs satiated, whatever it takes, and as the indifference of the universe has not caught up to them yet, it's impossible to see morality as a necessity. Kids are governed by impulses, often chaotic and animalistic ones, and they couldn't be blamed for it, as one wouldn't judge an animal for hunting for food. The responsibility rested on the shoulders of those in charge of them.

What happened when the ones responsible delegated their duties to outside sources?

What happened was what Lilith had been privy to since her first year: blood, mockery, and humiliation. It wasn't just about not being seen; it was about being purposefully misgendered. Children lashed out with what was obvious to them, and they did so because they had no other way of getting approval outside of making sure they were the apex predator.

In Slytherin, of course, it was worse, seeing as it was the house where competition flowed in its most pernicious form.

She wasn't muggle-born, but it hardly seemed to matter when you were a *freak*. At least a muggle-born was seen as something other, not a part of them, but an intruder trying to find a way in. As a pureblood, she was worse.

She hadn't infiltrated their circles; she was simply the ugly exception, the aberration, the genetic error.

Lilith was an embarrassment to Slytherin and the Mulciber name, a stain upon what once had been spotless.

Her first years had passed by in a blur of bullying and violence that seemed to simultaneously last forever and blend together, indistinguishable from each other. One thing Slytherins weren't was creative, fortunately, so Lilith always knew what to expect.

In those first years, the real punch in the gut lay at home, when she had no other choice but to face her parents.

There wasn't much of a distinction between the way she was seen at home and anywhere else. If they could have hidden her, kept her apart from their world, they would have. They had always known she was different, but insisting upon transitioning in her second year had solidified her otherness in their mind.

They had wanted to deny her, and Lilith knew it. But being spineless was a quasi-genetic Mulciber trait, and her determination had struck them in its insistence.

One thing that the bullying hadn't done was dissuading Lilith from living as herself. It might have bruised her ego and self-esteem, but it had not broken her spirits. The disconnect between her body and mind was much more damaging than anything they could do to her, and while her colleagues occasionally had to leave her alone, her own body never would. She couldn't detach herself from her own existence.

Magic had been useful for something, at least. It had done a decent enough job that her parents didn't feel the need to keep her from Hogwarts.

But her outside matching her inside didn't mean people forgot what she had started as.

Her old name was still being thrown at her left and right, even if her teachers treated her right, and no one, in Slytherin or otherwise, wanted to be seen with her. It was social suicide to hang out with the freak, after all.

And the lack of creativity on the Slytherins' part? It didn't last long.

That day had started like any other. Nothing had stood out in any way, no whispers in the hallways or funny looks, and that was what had stayed with Lilith for years after fourth year – the absolute mundanity of it all, how it made her completely unprepared for what was to come.

Fiona Avery, Peter Fawley, and Kyle Bulstrode – the first a Ravenclaw, the other two Slytherins – had taken upon themselves to make Lilith into even more of a laughing stock. What they did, however, was no laughing matter.

Lilith had no fear of heights, or spiders, or even magical creatures, but after that day, even the sound of running water could make her have a panic attack.

As she struggled to keep herself afloat in the deepest part of the Black Lake after being abandoned by Bulstrode, who knew she didn't know how to swim – and who had held her head underwater for long enough that she had felt seconds away from slipping into the darkness – a pale hand waved above her eyesight. It was just out of reach, but as it approached her, not even her fear that her attackers had come back to finish the job was able to keep her from taking it.

The strong, almost painful grip held on to her, even as her hand kept threatening to slip away. The stubborn resistance of her rescuer gave Lilith enough stability to focus on her breathing, wheezing and coughing up water as a wand appeared and suddenly saw her body floating safely to shore.

Liquid out of her lungs, she saw him swimming expertly all the way back in record time.

Tom Riddle reached her, and the look on his face was inscrutable in every way, even as his always-coiffed hair and impeccable clothes dripped water into a path in the sand. He sat next to her where the sand met the grass, and neither spoke for what felt like several minutes.

“Thank you,” Lilith finally broke the unnatural silence with a tone so close to a whisper that it barely seemed to be heard at all.

Riddle had never joined in the bullying, but he had never stopped it either. Lilith wanted to hold some semblance of resentment toward him for it, but it felt like too much work as she twisted the water out of her hair in a state of spirit that she supposed was what other people referred to as shock.

It didn't feel all that different from the dissociation she had become painfully familiar with throughout the years.

Riddle kept quiet as Lilith's thoughts wandered. She was unsure whether she should just get up and get back into the castle, but uncomfortable as it was being there, at the shore of the lake she had almost died in, the idea of having to confront at least one of her attackers in the Slytherin common room stopped her from proceeding.

It was then that he chose to speak for the first time. When he did, it was with graveness and loathing barely disguised in his deep, baritone voice.

“What were their names?”

She had nothing to gain from keeping it a secret. Everyone knew how she was treated, and within Slytherin, it was no mystery who hated her and who took it a step further into action.

Lilith guessed that, to Riddle, there were simply too many names to keep track of.

“Fiona Avery, Fawley, and Bulstrode.” There was no need for further specificity – she just didn't want Riddle to think it had been Fiona's cousin, Bram Avery, who had been there, laughing as she struggled against Bulstrode's and Fawley's tight grip. Bram was no saint, but Riddle wasn't known for a lack of action. He was a man of few words. If he wanted to know who had done it, it was because he had something planned for them.

And as Lilith still felt detached from her surroundings as if she had been observing everything from inside of her head instead of her body, she had no energy to care about any punishment they might undergo by his hand.

What actually worried Lilith, as much as anything could, anyway, was the *why*.

Why was *Tom Riddle* interfering?

And why *now*?

“What do you want?” What did he want *for* it?

Tom Riddle did nothing for free. It was making a pact with the devil, whether you paid for it now or later.

The boy next to her frowned, as if seriously confused.

He is probably thinking of a price, Lilith reasoned with herself.

When Riddle finally answered, the frown hadn’t yet dispersed from his brow. He sighed, a deep exhaustion present in the gesture. “Just keep yourself alive.”

He stood up, brushing his trousers as if it could make any difference when he was already so thoroughly drenched. Riddle cast a drying charm upon himself – which only helped with his clothes; his hair was hanging down as if still wet – and examined Lilith, who hadn’t moved from her spot on the grass. “Do you have your wand?”

Did she? She had been caught off-guard by them. While Lilith was usually careful when it came to her wand and her possessions in general, always on edge, she had been focused on her Potions essay, and her wand had been in...

Her pocket? She reached into it, feeling for the familiar shape and texture of the piece of wood.

Nothing.

She hadn’t seen or felt them steal it, but it didn’t surprise her. Lilith shook her head, and Riddle’s frown deepened.

“You’ll have it back by tomorrow morning.”

“Won’t they have snapped it?” The thought greatly worried Lilith, somehow piercing through the fog of distance she felt herself trapped in.

Riddle’s brown eyes narrowed slightly, a dark look settling into them as if it had always belonged there. Lilith could see, then, how a muggle-born Tom Riddle had managed so flawlessly and swiftly through the years to not only assimilate, but hack into the hierarchy of Slytherin entirely.

“Not if they want to remain unscarred.”

Her question stayed unanswered, and she refused to let it rest as such.

“Why?”

Lilith knew she didn’t need to expand on it, not to him.

Riddle smirked – an imitation of a smile, the only type he seemed to be able to offer. “The Knights meet in the Astronomy Tower on Thursdays at seven. Be there, and you’ll know.”

Was it a price or a reward to invite her?

Did it even matter, if she could get any sort of immunity, a way to stay alive?

Back then, Lilith had wanted to live. She had wanted to survive.

It should have surprised her, then, how things had taken a turn, but it hadn’t.

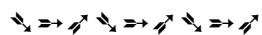
She had chosen to make a deal with the devil, after all, and those always came with a price that was way, way too high.

Now, after their latest meeting, she had gotten all the confirmation she needed to go ahead with it. She had clung to the littlest sliver of hope when Evans had shown up, stirring things up in a way the stale nature of Slytherin tradition had never seen before. But it was futile, hope, and Lilith Mulciber knew it. It had never brought her anything but ~~misfortune~~ misery.

As she reached the last of the steps and made her way toward the front window, Lilith stood there, eyes to the magnetic darkness of the outside.

The last words of *The Tale of the Three Brothers* flashed into her head unprompted, and Lilith couldn’t help the tiny smile that settled on her face.

Maybe her invisibility in life meant Death, too, would embrace her as an old friend, and they would depart as equals.



HARRY

Harry couldn’t help but feel optimistic after his conversation with Abraxas.

He wasn’t sure what, not really, but there was something about the boy, something that made him trust his words. He knew the Slytherins were anything but transparent most of the time, but Harry’s instincts told him Abraxas’s strength wasn’t in his deception, rather in his ability to see through everyone and help them be the best they could.

And maybe that made him naive, but he genuinely believed Abraxas cared for Tom; in a way, maybe even more than Harry himself. Harry cared for Tom in a different way – he cared for the person he knew his counterpart had been, and he cared for Tom’s potential. He knew there was more to him, and he wanted to pursue that. It wasn’t a completely pure feeling he held, but he hoped it would evolve from that eventually. Abraxas, however, never knew any other Tom. Everything he knew of Harry’s soulmate came from *being there*, by this Tom’s side, and experiencing him as he was, the good and the bad, not who he could be, and Harry envied that. There was nothing about Abraxas that made Harry think he stood by Tom because of fear or a belief in pureblood supremacy. Which meant there was only one reason for it, and that was that he loved him, just as he was right now.

He had been loyal to Tom for years, but he wasn’t the manipulative type. All signs pointed to him actually trusting Harry and wanting to help, and that made Harry feel like things were finally working out for once.

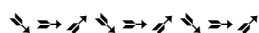
Once Abraxas got through to Orion, there would be two Knights by Harry’s side now. Two down, four to go.

There was no doubt in Harry’s mind who would be the next.

Lilith Mulciber had always struck Harry as the odd one out. She didn’t seem all that invested in the Knights’ ideals, but she also wasn’t one to deny them outright, instead walking on a thin tightrope, trying to seem indifferent to it all while also very clearly contributing to a side of the conflict.

The real question in Harry’s mind was which one of these sides she was actually invested in, if any at all.

He had been lucky, for now, like fate was on his side. Harry wondered how long that luck would hold up for.



The answer was: long enough.

Harry couldn’t sleep – even with all his current good fortune, Riddle was still in his mind, muddling his thoughts and feelings. Sometimes, in his dreams, he would hold the boy closer, get to feel his body heat, comfort him and expel all the bad that clung to him like a second layer of skin.

Harry always felt hollow when he woke up and realized there was only the soft breathing of his roommates filling up the space, and that he couldn’t reach out to the one that was so close, yet so far away at the same time.

That night, he took a stroll around the castle, half expecting Tom to find him, but he had no such luck. He did find someone else, though, when he sat foot onto the Astronomy Tower.

Harry felt like he was interrupting something when he locked eyes with Lilith Mulciber. He had no idea what she was doing there, but he chose to ignore it, focusing instead on his next words.

“I have a proposition for you.”

She didn’t even blink or hesitate as she spoke a clear, “No.”

Harry suppressed an ill-timed snicker. “You don’t even know what it is.”

“Are you sure about that? Either way, it doesn’t matter.” Her words were spoken oddly quietly, and Harry felt a shiver going down his spine. *Something is wrong here.*

He wanted to ask why, to interrogate her further, but he was interrupted by Lilith climbing on the ledge, looking nowhere else but straight ahead.

She looked down, then, a vacant quality to her gaze.

She is going to jump, Harry thought, and his feet started to move without his permission as if stuck in a trance.

“Don’t!” he shouted, and stopped before he could reach her. He was afraid of getting closer, afraid she might feel threatened by him. He took out his wand and kept it lowered near his body, ready to do something, anything. “You don’t need to do this,” he said, this time in a normal volume.

She barely seemed to acknowledge Harry’s presence. Lilith’s forest green eyes were unseeing, a dull and dead haze behind them. It hit Harry then, just how much he had overlooked in his assessment of the people Tom surrounded himself with.

“Lilith,” he whispered. That seemed to have an effect on the girl. Her feet turned on the windowsill to face him, and Harry flinched as he saw how close she had gotten from falling just from the act. “Careful.”

“Why should I be?” A beam of moonlight illuminated her dark skin as she stood approximately two feet above him, an ancient goddess so detached from humanity she showed nothing but indifference toward him on her face. “I’m right where I want to be.” She chuckled, humorlessly, and amended her words. “Or I will be soon, anyway.”

“Why?” She had everything just in her reach. What more could she possibly need?

Lilith didn’t answer; instead, she turned her back to him, and Harry could only cast a spell to stop her fall before it was too late.

“What are you *doing*? *Why can’t you just leave me alone?*” Lilith growled, rage mixed with grief all over her face.

“I’m doing what I wished someone had done for me.” *What I wish someone had done as I gave myself up to Voldemort, as I saw my own end.*

Lilith shook her head. “You don’t get it. I’ve shackled myself to something I don’t believe in, something dangerous and destructive, and I can’t break free, because my own safety... my own *sanity* is at risk. I can handle the end, I can’t handle any more of this.”

“I *don’t* understand. I can’t imagine it was easy before joining the Knights, but you have a scope of influence now. Everyone looks up to you.”

She scoffed at his words. “Your perception is not reality, Evans. You think people see me as influential, but all they seek from me is a gateway to Riddle. Riddle uses me because everyone already looks down on me, so I’m approachable. I can recruit for him, so I’m useful. If I stand up to him, then I’m everyone’s punching bag again. You weren’t here for it, you can’t possibly imagine how bad it was to be who I am. The only reason my own parents tolerate me is because they think that being like this has somehow helped with building connections in Slytherin. That’s all that matters to them, to any pureblood family – Grindelwald awakened something in them, a sense of dissatisfaction they had been ignoring.

“I can’t go against him, and I can’t join you – the retaliation would be too much, and not one person alone could shield me from it. I don’t have any other choice.”

No, no, no, not this.

“What if I got Riddle to quit his plans and the Knights?”

“You can’t. But even if he did, it’s not like that would solve all my issues. I’d just be left protection-less, again, against people in school and out there, in the real world.”

“But it’s a start, right? What... *What if I can* protect you? What if you can join me, and Abraxas and Orion, all covertly?”

She didn’t believe he could do it, and he could see it on her face, crystal clear. But there was something else there, too, something akin to hope that she couldn’t conceal.

Had anyone ever offered Lilith even a semblance of a way out?

“Fine,” she said, but it didn’t feel like a victory to Harry. “I will humor you. If you get Riddle to let go of the Knights of Walpurgis before seventh year ends, I’ll give up on trying to harm myself.”

She climbed down the ledge, and walked toward him. It had been a crazy leap, but he felt like it had somewhat worked. Lilith was clearly clinging to something, anything at all, grasping at straws because she didn’t actually want to die. She wanted to live – she just needed the pain to stop.

Harry couldn’t relieve her from it, but he could give her the next best thing.

A distraction.

“You know why I chose Lilith as my name?”

Harry shook his head softly, still shaken up from the whole affair.

“I thought it was symbolic. Lilith was the first woman, the one thought to have corrupted man and Earth way before Eve had come along, all because she didn’t bow down and ask for permission. By calling myself Lilith, I was asserting myself as a woman, while also embracing the identity of the monster people saw me as. I was saying fuck you to the man – I was saying ‘you don’t own me.’”

She chuckled humorlessly once more.

“Now, though, it just feels ironic.”

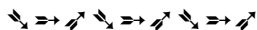
Harry wanted to walk up to her and hug her, make sure Lilith didn’t feel so alone. He knew how it felt like to have the entire world turn against you, to feel like your only value was in what you could do for other people.

He knew it wouldn’t be a welcomed gesture, though.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this, Evans, but at this point, I don’t have much more to lose. I don’t think there’s a chance in hell you’ll succeed, but... just... prove me wrong. Can you do that?” She asked the last question with a slightly higher pitch, her voice breaking.

She was so jaded, and Harry felt like he could almost see every crack in her armor, the metal no longer able to stop any hits, just too heavy to carry. This wasn’t how he wanted to get her to his side, but he was glad he had been able to save her life, even if just for now.

He promised himself he would make sure Lilith never had another reason to see her existence as expendable ever again.



CHAPTER 8. PART TWO. WITH A GUN BARREL PRESSED BETWEEN YOUR TEETH, YOU SPEAK ONLY IN VOWELS.

Chapter Summary

Chapter title is from FIGHT CLUB.

Chapter Notes

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON SEPTEMBER 27TH, 2023.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“We can’t and don’t know what others are thinking. We can’t and don’t know what motivations people have for doing the things they do. Ever. Not entirely. This was my terrifying youthful epiphany. We just never really know anyone. I don’t. Neither do you.

It’s amazing that relationships can form and last under the constraints of never fully knowing. Never knowing for sure what the other person is thinking, never knowing for sure who the other person is. We can’t do whatever we want. There are ways we have to act. There are things we have to say.

But we can think whatever we want.

Anyone can think anything. Thoughts are the only reality. It’s true, I’m sure of it now. Thoughts are never faked or bluffed. This simple realization has stayed with me. It has bothered me for years and years. It still does.”

- I’m Thinking of Ending Things, 2016, Iain Reid

CHAPTER 8 – PART TWO – WITH A GUN BARREL PRESSED BETWEEN YOUR TEETH, YOU SPEAK ONLY IN VOWELS.

OR, *THE MEANING OF LOYAL*

HARRY

Harry used to think he was succeeding in keeping a low profile in 1944, but it was clear his conduct as of late had been raising some eyebrows.

Defense Against the Dark Arts classes were... *peculiar*, after Harry had been victorious in his duel with Sébastien. For once, Merrythought had started scrutinizing him a lot more – at least when compared to how she used to. She watched him like a hawk the entire time, as if he could do something remarkable the second her gaze shifted and she didn't want to miss it. He was flattered, but it was quite annoying when all he wanted was to be left alone to syllogize through the situations he had found himself wrapped up in.

In Transfiguration, Dumbledore had been eyeing Harry suspiciously as well, though for a very different reason. He knew it wasn't simply about the fact that he knew of Harry's unusual circumstances regarding his arrival, because he had known for a while and his behavior had remained more or less the same since. Maybe it was his association with Tom that was to blame for his sudden change, but Harry didn't care – he felt inclined to spend more time around the boy simply to piss off the old man. He was still angry about his trite attempt at an ambush, most of all because of the topic of his professor's curiosity. He understood the urge to know about a possible future, but there were a thousand unfamiliar branching paths he could wish to be clued up on – including the end of the war against Grindelwald – and *that* was what he had chosen to focus on: a student that had some questionable behaviors, yes, but hadn't done anything truly dangerous in nature. Tom was planning harrowing things, but Dumbledore didn't yet *know* anything. He chose to try to manipulate Harry for information out of a hunch, one that he himself could have done something about if he actually cared about getting his hands dirty instead of forcing a kid to do so. It just summoned up Harry's memories of his days spent believing every single word out of the man's mouth, no questions asked, and it made him feel more frustrated than anything. He was there to stop Tom, but he was doing so because he chose to, not because of someone else's orders. The fact that Dumbledore didn't even consider it a possibility for him to try to do the same was appalling.

Harry was still doing his best in his classes, but the truth was, he had too much on his mind to give up time worrying about his professors' misgivings about him. If they wanted to talk to him about whatever was on their minds, they would have to be direct and just do it instead of skirting around the subject. He was tired of being gawked at as if he were a rare species; he'd had his fill of it in his own timeline, and it was the possibility of a new beginning that had enticed Harry so much about being in 1944. He could just be a normal human being for once; that was the appeal of it all, and he hated being a circus attraction yet again, even if as Harry Evans instead of Potter this time.

Time had elapsed so incredibly fast Harry couldn't help but feel a sense of consternation when he contemplated it all. He had arrived at September 1st jaded and fed up with the world – the secrets, lies, and conditions he had to follow in order to be seen as human had been making him feel like he was wanted for everything but who he really was. Now, three months and two weeks into what was a seemingly daunting task of assimilating into a new world, Harry felt the best he had since the war had ended, and he knew it was because, for the first time in his life, he finally felt like he had power. He was no longer disenfranchised, wide-eyed, and scared; he had the upper hand, the knowledge, and now that Hermione was here and he had Orion, Abraxas, and Lilith by his side, support.

The holidays were approaching, and while that meant respite from homework and studying for their NEWTs for the majority of students, it meant something quite different to Harry. He would be staying at Hogwarts with Hermione, of course, but so would Tom. In a few days, the castle would empty and there would be no more classes, and Harry would be confronted with much more than just alone time with his soulmate; on December 31st, what Harry had been keeping secret would come to light as Tom turned seventeen years old.

Telling him they were soulmates was easy, when compared to sharing his origins.

It was a fine line, between not keeping secrets from Tom, trusting he wasn't like Voldemort, and letting him choose his path... and being wary of it, being scared of the possibility that him knowing what his counterpart did and the ways he didn't succeed would give him an edge if he chose to carry on with his plans.

If things went wrong, would Harry be the one to blame for another universe being left at the mercy of Lord Voldemort?

Would the destruction – the bending, the twisting, the inevitably unrecognizable shape of its ruins – be Harry's fault?

Could he really live with himself, could he reckon with it, if he knew that this time, it had been his choice to take on the responsibility? Could he live with himself if this proved, once and for all, that Harry couldn't be trusted to make good decisions by himself, when he wasn't being puppeteered by someone else?

Would he be the real villain this time, if he steered Tom toward a destiny that he seemed fated to follow but could just as easily break from if given the chance?

He had promised he wouldn't take upon himself the responsibility of someone else's judgment calls, but it was easier said than done. It was one thing to wash his hands of it when the decisions were small and he wasn't involved, but this was anything but. If he kept this secret from Tom until he felt the boy was out of the woods and mellow enough, then Tom might hate him forever from taking the choice away from him, for not trusting he might make the right choice by himself. But if he told him as soon as he could to appease his moral selfishness, his own desires of closeness, he might be putting the entire world at risk.

What was Harry willing to prioritize this time around? Was his past even relevant this time? It wasn't like he had done enough for this world – this wasn't his universe. This time, if he fucked things up, he would have no good deeds to point to in order to even out the damage. In this world's history, he would be Harry Evans, the one who ensured that Lord Voldemort's crusade truly triumphed, with no way out possible this time.

Tom was more than clever enough to not repeat his actions if he knew they were doomed to become fatal mistakes. Sure, if Tom followed Voldemort's path, there would be no Harry Potter, no prophesied enemy to stop him, but anyone could hunt down his Horcruxes and kill him if they were determined enough, and Harry wouldn't feel able to fix his mistakes himself – he would never be able to kill his soulmate.

If Tom changed his trajectory entirely...

Well, there was an even lower possibility of avoiding bloodshed, then.

Could Harry ever be truly sure that Tom was really changing and not playing him? Could he even risk it?

Harry sighed. He had made the choice the second he had walked through the Veil. There was no way he would ever be able to stand aside and not do something, not feel responsible for Tom. Their dynamic was flipped now – Voldemort had brought Harry into the mix, had been the one to be responsible for Harry's actions and misfortunes, and that had been the case because he had been the one with the power, the knowledge, the choice.

But that was Harry now. He was the one who had the advantage in this situation. In the beginning, it had made him feel empowered, to finally know everything and hold all the cards, to finally feel like he was on equal footing with Tom.

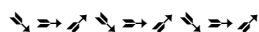
Now, though, he kept flip-flopping on how he felt about his decisions; on one hand, having knowledge made him feel more in control, on the other, nothing involving Tom felt predictable or controllable. But fate was delicate. He didn't choose for other people, but even a single differing decision on his part could cause all the dominoes to fall. Harry was finally privy to the nature of Slytherins and why they acted the way they did, now. Being a Slytherin meant being cursed with foresight, and what separated one Slytherin from the other were the choices each made, between ignoring the impact they had on the world or choosing to make it a good one, even if it took everything away from them.

Even withdrawing from the situation entirely was a choice. Inaction was, for better or for worse, just as much of a selection.

He wasn't ready for it, not really – but he wanted to be the one to talk to him before he figured it out on his own. It would be better if Tom felt like he wasn't trying to hide the inevitable or manipulate him into creating a connection with him. Yes, in a way, it was a kind of manipulation Harry was doing, but he wasn't aiming for Tom's feelings, but his morality, his actions. He knew he couldn't convince him with words alone and hope for the best. The soulmate knowledge, however, was too delicate for Harry to risk by trying to be cunning about it, and he wanted to do it right. At least, when it came to this part, it was clear what he had to do.

He just wished he had a better idea of *how* to proceed.

Well, at least he had someone sensible to ask.



HERMIONE

With History of Magic being just as dull there as in her time, Hermione had to find other ways to understand pureblood society and its different ramifications in this universe.

She hadn't had the best track record when it came to understanding the Black family – or any traditional magical family – in the past.

She was proud of being muggle-born – she got the best of both worlds, in a way, by being a witch and learning magic, and, of course, knowing the muggle world, with all its innovations, technology, and wonders. Even as she had chosen the wizarding world as her home, Hermione had never stopped learning about the way the world out there was evolving. She didn't think of technology as a muggle substitute for magic, but rather a wonderful tool that could bring much needed modernity to the wizarding world, and she thought of magic as a brilliant way of connecting to nature and one's own personal well of power. She wanted to know everything she could, and she didn't discriminate; if it sounded interesting, then it probably was – or, at the very least, useful – and she wouldn't waste the opportunity to know all she could about it. One of the disadvantages of being in 1944 was being flung back into a world of backwards ideals, but she knew enough about it to feel like she could hold her own, at least. Being well-read didn't necessarily make her smart, but choosing not to decry anything she didn't understand as inferior did, and that was how she knew the wizarding world's obsession with bloodlines and its connection to “pure” magic was nothing more than an ignorance-led attempt at a power play.

Nothing she had read seemed to imply a dilution of magic when wizards consorted with muggles. While it was true magic didn't come from nowhere and there was some sort of genetic component to it, it was less something like a dominant gene being passed down by generations without the possibility of repression, and more like an evolutionary trait of sorts – as long as you had a metaphorical drop of magical blood in your family somewhere, that magic could resurface anytime it was needed. Hermione liked to think of it as a sort of sentient approach to magical distribution, or an example of nature's inherent understanding of supply and demand: the wizarding community was small and always in need of new blood to keep itself from going extinct, and muggle-borns provided it whenever needed. In a sense, squibs were a metamorphic necessity, and their supposed uselessness in the wizarding world and their unfortunate shunning contributed to the expansion of magic as an inheritable trait, possibly even a mutation – even as the gene remained dormant in them, it was still getting passed down. Hermione wished wizards could see the value of intermingling with muggles without the need for such an ignorant approach, but she was glad it at least meant wizards kept existing. If it weren't for the variability, who knew if wizards wouldn't have seized to exist long ago as a blip in history? It made Hermione wonder: were wizards a different kind of humans, or maybe a newer (or older?) evolutionary branch stemming from muggles? One thing was for sure: wizards had possibly evolved from muggles, but never the other way around, because with how inheritable magic was and how often wizards and muggles had children together without extinguishing magic as a trait, it became clear how pervasive and stubborn of an ability it really was. The existence of muggle-borns was proof that wizards didn't need to only couple with wizards, as magic would always, *always* survive, even if it had to stay dormant for various generations before reawakening.

With all of that in mind, Hermione was still highly intrigued about the journey of mental gymnastics and thought processes that had led to the construction of such ideology. As a

Black woman and a muggle-born, she was well-acquainted with the general concept and practical application of how the innate fear of the unknown could lead to hostility and laziness of questioning, but the specifics were still beyond fascinating to her. How the wizarding society had risen and fallen from grace, how the insular nature of its community often lead to uniformity of thought, and, especially, most of all, all the ways in which wizards would often pick and choose which aspects from muggle culture they wanted to absorb and claim as their own and which they would choose to undervalue and scorn, precisely because the argument of muggle jealousy over magic was so hilariously flawed – after all, wizards knew muggles existed, but muggles were in the dark about wizards’ existence. If there was anyone borrowing from someone else, it was not the muggles doing so.

The question of power was also an interesting one to Hermione. Muggles won when it came to numbers and weapons, but wizards had the ability to erase minds, modify memories, conjure objects from somewhere else in the country, change the molecular structure of an object, transport themselves through long distances in seconds, not to speak of magical creatures and their abilities, of course. Fatal diseases in muggle societies were akin to a common cold for wizards, and the possibility of a cure for such illnesses if the Statute of Secrecy was not in place was too enticing for Hermione to turn a blind eye to. She understood wizards’ fear as it pertained to exposure to muggles, from the witch hunts to the undoubtedly plausible chance of mass extinction and experimentation, but there were ways around it. There *were* mainly muggle societies outside of Europe that had venerated magic users in the past and worked alongside them in peace – it wasn’t an impossibility. It would take work, education, and common sense regarding how the knowledge would be spread and to whom, of course, but it was doable, as long as collaboration sat on the root of it all. There was so much to study regarding the differences between muggle and wizard physiology! In Hermione’s eyes, the wizarding society was taking the coward’s way out, and by doing so, they were dooming themselves to inbreeding and stagnancy, forever stuck in the 1800s technologically, ideologically, and even fashion-wise.

It was like wizarding society had ended up stuck with some of the worst characteristics of old muggle ones. The ancient wizarding families, for instance, were more analogous to royalty than to mere basic genealogy, and with just as much incest. There were cultural pseudo-rankings among them based on things like money, connections, and how much they “kept it in the family,” so to speak. The Black family was one of the largest, most well-known dynasties, in a way, and they behaved as such.

Their decline had been steadfast for years, however, from what Hermione could gather from her observations back in her own universe. Between Walburga, Sirius, and Bellatrix, the Black name had been soured by bad reputation, and no lineage was safe when they were a known breeding ground for Death Eaters. The most talked-about names went from famous to infamous, and the genuinely well-meaning individuals like Andromeda were forgotten by virtue of being struck from the family tree and choosing to associate themselves with anyone but their old roots. Hermione couldn’t blame them, of course, but by doing so, it just ensured no heroes could ever come to be known from it.

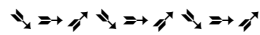
She had never been one to care about name and status, but by being so close to members of said families when they still held a semblance of importance, it was impossible for Hermione to ignore the effect being raised to fulfill an ideal and perpetuate an image could have on

them. It was no longer a question of “Black madness” as an inescapable family curse, but of the ways in which it had been used as an excuse for abuse and complacency.

Lucretia Black was the oldest daughter of her branch of the family. Hermione didn’t know much more than that, but she wanted to, to understand what it meant to shoulder the mantle of an heir, and what chains and privileges came with it. What did it mean for her to not be a blood supremacist but act like one? What had carved her out of marble into a statue of alternating rage and stoicism, indifference and ambition?

It was very clear she was aiming higher this time than she had in another life, and Hermione wanted to know all the steps that had led her there.

There was only one person she could count on to know more details about her than she did.



HARRY

“No longer skipping supper?”

Harry had been in a bit of a daze since the Lilith incident; he wanted to get together with Abraxas – and possibly Orion – again, but classes had been time-consuming and quite homework-producing lately, and any free time Harry had he spent keeping an eye on Lilith, making sure she was okay, if only physically.

So, yes, he was aware he had been neglecting Hermione a bit. His mind was always racing, a thousand thoughts per minute, and he had a hard time prioritizing, organizing his time and attention. When something was gripping to Harry, it was borderline impossible for him to let it go.

Hermione didn’t seem angry, though, as she approached him in the Great Hall after dinner. Most nights he didn’t even bother going there, either not eating at all or doing so in the kitchens. The political talks of the Slytherin table were asinine at best, and way too focused on appearances; Harry had no doubts the serious stuff was left for the Knights and the Knights only to discuss in secret.

“Uh, no. Sorry, things have been kind of hectic lately,” he mumbled halfheartedly. His mood was confusing – his mind was in a tug of war between anxiety, guilt, and an odd slew of misplaced excitement.

“It’s fine. I get it, we’re here for more than just socializing. I’m honestly surprised you didn’t ditch me sooner, knowing your tendencies to self-isolate.” Hermione chuckled, shaking her head.

Harry shoved his guilt back down and answered, "I'll never ditch you, 'Mione. That goes against everything our friendship is built on. I know I was an asshole for leaving, but never again, I promise."

Hermione wrung her hands, but her tone didn't change. "I know, Harry. It took me some time to work through it, but I'm not angry anymore."

Harry's lips curled into a relieved smile.

"Thank Merlin for that."

Hermione played with a strand of hair between her fingers, seemingly in thought, and looked at him, a hint of mirth in her medium brown eyes. "What's been going on with you?"

A lot, he sighed. "Well, we'll need a place to sit down before going *there*."

Harry and Hermione left the Great Hall together, ambling through the corridors and moving stairs, and when they reached the seventh floor, Harry strutted back and forth three times, pleased when a door appeared out of thin air.

One thing he could always count on was the existence of the Room of Requirement whenever he needed it.

He hadn't asked for anything in particular besides *a room to talk*, and he was greeted with what was essentially the last view he expected as he entered the area: emerald green was the primary color in what was essentially a ripoff of the Slytherin common room.

What does that say about me?

"Pretty," Hermione hummed in appraisal, traipsing through the space.

"Yeah... Looks like the Slytherin common room," he mused, following her in a much more hesitant manner.

She turned to Harry but didn't say anything in return until after settling into an armchair. Hermione had a professional stance on, then, weirdly reminiscent of a job interviewer's.

"So, what's up?"

He started telling her about his latest run-ins with the Knights, starting with Orion and his confrontation with Tom. Hermione listened attentively through it all, showing a hint of curiosity in her eyes when he talked about his finding on the Chamber of Secrets, but she didn't interrupt him. When he got to his talk with Abraxas, however, she did, her nose wrinkled in an emotion Harry couldn't read all that well.

"So you told him about Tom being your soulmate? You trust Abraxas not to tell anyone?"

Harry didn't need to think through his answer. "Aside from Orion, yeah. I do."

She wasn't at all familiarized with Abraxas aside from the little Harry had told her, so he didn't blame her for questioning his decision.

He told her about Lilith, at last, and watched as her reaction shifted entirely. Hermione's previous posture – not too casual but still leaning back in order to get more comfortable in the armchair – was dropped entirely, now with her elbows on her knees and her gaze intensely focused on him.

"What are you going to do now?" Her big, nut-brown eyes were filled with concern and compassion.

"Get them all together in one place, probably here, and figure out our next move, I guess." Harry pondered on his words for a few seconds, and added, "And you too, 'Mione. I think it's time I properly introduce everyone."

She nodded, a hint of anxious anticipation in the gesture, and Harry breathed deeply.

"I should probably tell you some stuff, too," she said, and Harry blinked.

"Sure."

She told him about her confrontations with Lucretia, as in that she had essentially accused Hermione of cheating in class, and how she had overheard Lucretia and Walburga talking about Walburga's soulmate. That last bit of information in particular stopped Harry dead in his tracks, his nervous pacing coming to a halt.

Walburga and Lilith? It was kind of unthinkable. *But...*

A relationship couldn't fix anyone, but for someone like Lilith, someone that was so close to the edge, anything to help her hold on until the arrival of better days was paramount. If Walburga told her they were soulmates...

His brain ceased his thought halfway. Walburga was a Black, an heir at that, and she was expected to bear children and marry someone within the family to keep up their legacy – that was why she was promised to Orion, after all. There was no way she would ultimately choose Lilith, and giving her hope by telling her was just cruel.

It was up to Walburga to choose what she would do, not him.

"What?" Hermione asked, seeing his reaction.

Harry shrugged, and gestured for her to continue.

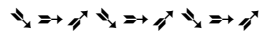
Hermione shot him a slightly annoyed look, but kept speaking. "I think she is hiding something, something that keeps her from fully giving me the time of day. Not only that, though – she is definitely doing something to keep up with me in class, but I don't know what. Which brings me to a question I wanted to ask you: what do you know about her from what Kreacher and Walburga told you?"

There was shockingly little on Lucretia Black that Harry had found snooping around the Black Library, and even with Kreacher's and Walburga's information, he found himself lacking.

"A few things, but most of them contradict who she is here. In our timeline she was a Slytherin, not a Ravenclaw, for once. She married Ignatius Prewett later in life, not Tymeo Lestrangle, and she never had any children. She wasn't seen as very remarkable in Black history. The only things I remember them saying about her that felt distinctive were that Walburga knew Ignatius wasn't her soulmate, though they never really talked about it, and something else that Walburga sort of alluded to. She never went into any details, and that woman was barking mad, but she did mention something about a curse."

"A curse?" Hermione's brows furrowed. "What kind of curse?"

"Honestly, I don't know. It's hard to tell if anything she told me was the truth or not. Even if it was, it's possible Lucretia contracted it later on in life. And, you know, despite Walburga claiming she was her best friend, I have to wonder how close they actually were, because she didn't know either."



"Where is this place you spoke of?" Abraxas asked as he, Harry, and Orion stood in front of the entrance to their common room.

There weren't many opportunities for Harry to meet up with the Knights inconspicuously, but they got the chance to that night, once Tom was in patrol, since Orion and Abraxas were aware enough of Tom's patterns to evade him. It was incredibly lucky his roommates happened to be precisely the people he had managed to get on his side of things; it made Harry honestly wonder if someone had snuck *Felix Felicis* into his drink somehow. He had wanted Hermione to join him, but she had a big Herbology project she was obsessively working on, and he couldn't waste the occasion. If everything went well, he would *make* time for her.

"Right, so. It's possible you have heard of it before; it's a secret room in the Astronomy Wing. You need to walk back and forth three times in front of the Barnabas the Barmy tapestry thinking of a place you need, and a door will appear," Harry pronounced, looking around to make sure no one was aware of their impromptu rendezvous. "It's called the Room of Requirement. There's some other rooms that can show up, in particular the Room of Hidden Things, but for our purposes, the original works just fine."

"The what?" Orion's brows were raised in confusion as he interrogated Harry.

"I thought you guys used it for the Knights' meetings."

It had made sense in his head. It was surprising to Harry that Tom hadn't found it yet.

Maybe he has, he reasoned with himself, *but wanted to keep it all his*.

They started making their way toward the stairs, voices hushed.

Orion responded, “I don’t know where that is, but we meet up at the Astronomy Tower.”

That’s where they had their meetings? “Huh. I wonder if Tom knows about it.” He hummed as he pondered on it.

Harry caught an exchange of quasi-fond glances between Abraxas and Orion at his words.

“What?”

Orion had a lopsided grin fixed on his mouth.

“I can definitely see how he uprooted his whole life for Tom.”

Harry rolled his eyes at the statement, trying to ignore how it made him feel. “This is slander, you know.”

“Is it, though, if it’s true?”

Harry shrugged, amused at Orion’s tone. “Touché. In my defense, though...” He paused, unsure of how to continue.

“In your defense?” Abraxas asked, and they cast several spells to make sure they would pass unnoticed as Harry thought through his answer.

“Hmm. I might not have a defense worthy of Slytherin, after all.”

“A wise man recognizes defeat,” Abraxas remarked, a levity to it that made Harry feel relaxed.

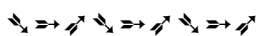
“An even wiser man doesn’t get defeated at all,” Orion answered, a sarcastic tone in his voice.

His sense of humor kind of reminded Harry of Snape’s – when he wasn’t being an asshole, that was.

Abraxas looked over at Orion, affection written all over his semblance. “Shush, Orion. He is trying.”

Harry huffed, and tried to avoid the smile that was threatening to come out. “I am also right *here*, and we should think things through before it’s too late.”

Orion didn’t bother hiding his when he said, “Lead the way, captain.”



As they continued joking and teasing each other all the way to the seventh floor, Abraxas smiled. It was a playful grin, one so unlike his usual calm but serious demeanor. “You’re a silly little man, aren’t you?”

“Hey!” Harry protested, feeling the hint of a smirk spreading across his lips. “Don’t call me little, mate.”

Abraxas gestured toward him with a casual flair, and when he spoke, it was with an amused delivery. “I mean, you *are* standing next to Orion right now. There is no other apt descriptor for you.”

There was something familiar in the banter shared by Harry, Abraxas, and Orion, almost as if the other two had turned into temporary replacements for Draco and Sirius – except that wasn’t really it. There was no bite or sting to Abraxas’s quips, no fondness to Orion’s. They were new additions with familiar faces, and the more Harry looked, the less they reminded him of his former universe. Abraxas didn’t resent him, and Orion didn’t look at him as if expecting to see his father – or some version of him – looking back. They were their own people doing their own thing, and for once, instead of that making him feel guilty or some version of bittersweet, it made Harry breathe a sigh of relief.

He was home, and it was no less welcoming than the last.

Harry managed to get the door to appear, and they entered the Room of Requirement, which still resembled their common room.

“You guys are less... stilted, when he isn’t here,” he remarked, making sure his words carried no connotations of skepticism or mistrust. It was simply an observation, after all, but Harry was still acutely aware he didn’t know them well enough to say anything without expecting repercussions and misunderstandings to trail just behind his words.

In a rare sign of discomfort, Abraxas ran his fingers through his short hair. “It’s hard being yourself when you are expected to have the weight of the world’s fate on your shoulders,” he said tacitly.

He felt closer to the two of them the more they interacted, the universality of their feelings blatant in their display. *I get it more than you could possibly know.*

Well, maybe they *could* know.

Maybe he should tell them.

Before he could contemplate the decision any further, Abraxas sat down at the conjured armchair and sighed, a sound of resignation. He started explaining to Harry what had occurred on their latest Knights meeting – the last they would have before January – and Tom’s plan to intimidate a student with a powerful father.

“You haven’t truly interacted much with the other houses, but it’s possible you’re aware of him; Charlus Potter, a Gryffindor Fourth Year?” Abraxas indagated, more like a throwaway question than anything else.

Still, it struck him lightning-fast, and it was like ice was occupying his veins, keeping Harry rooted in place.

No...

He tried not to gape at Abraxas or make his state of speechlessness any more obvious, but he knew his efforts were not paying off – he had no doubt he had blanched, his body language too stiff for such an observant person to not notice.

Fuck.

Charlus Potter was his grandfather’s – Fleamont’s – younger brother. He was *family*, and Tom was targeting him simply for his status.

Merlin, he wanted to *scream*. It was like every time he managed to take a step forward, Tom shoved him three steps back without even knowing Harry had managed to accomplish anything at all.

He swallowed his anger against his constricted throat, however, and Abraxas lowered his head in Harry’s direction in an obvious look of distrust, Orion following suit. “Do you know him?”

Harry’s jaw was tight as he answered with a clipped, “No.”

Abraxas had both of his eyebrows raised, and Orion rolled his eyes, making Harry have to resist the urge to glare at him.

“That was super convincing, congratulations,” the latter retorted Harry’s terse reply with a sardonic timbre to his voice. Harry much preferred his dismissal of his attempts at subtlety to his suspicion, so he did end up feeling a little more at ease with the sarcasm.

Abraxas, however, didn’t seem to think so, as he put a hand on Orion’s shoulder, an intense stare forming a glower of reprehension at his friend. He turned to Harry as he spoke, his intonation careful and conservative in its inflection. “You know, I get that it might be hard talking about your life before, but we’re putting a lot of trust in you. Tom has been my friend since I’ve first set foot in Hogwarts. If I’m actively choosing to foil something so important to him, I would like to know what I’m putting my friendship in risk for besides the fact that he is your soulmate.”

Harry knew wizards tended to be extremely trusting of their soulmates, and that other people more often than not assumed good intentions between them, but Harry had no such preconceptions, as he hadn’t been raised with that ideal in mind. Soulmates hurt each other all the time, and there was no instinct to not do so – look at him and Voldemort. He knew Abraxas was right in being wary of him when Harry was this secretive.

What would Hermione do?

Hermione wouldn't have gotten herself into this situation in the first place, he replied to his own thought.

Right... But if she *had*?

She would tell me that if I want to earn someone's trust, then I need to give something back, too. And she would be right.

"I'll tell you guys everything, but I need you to promise you won't tell Tom just yet. I will do it soon, but I need to do it on my own terms."

Abraxas and Orion shared a look, and Harry watched as they had an entirely silent conversation with their eyes before turning to face him.

It was Abraxas who answered with, "Okay. But first, though... we called Lilith. She'll be here soon; she had to do something else first. I think it's best that you tell all of us together."

Harry blinked, taken aback. "You guys *called* her?"

"She went after us. We knew you had gotten through to her, so we told her."

"Right." Of course they still trusted each other more than they trusted him. He hoped what he was about to share would put them all in a more equal footing. "How did you do it, though? I mean, you didn't yet know where we were going to meet before we went here, so there was no time to tell her."

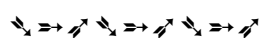
"Tom devised this method of communication that we can use to reach out to each other. It's a mark we have on our left arms – we keep it glamoured, though. We just need to touch it with a wand and think of who we want to reach, and we can send a small message to the other party undetected. It comes in handy more often than you'd think, though Bram loves to use it to complain about class."

"The Dark Mark," Harry whispered to himself. He was certain that Voldemort hadn't been able to come up with it so early on, and he definitely wasn't able to glamour it away – if it had been that easy, no Death Eaters would have been caught.

It was another way things were different there.

"The Dark Mark?" Orion responded tentatively, as if tasting the words, and had a questioning look in his eyes. "Do you know something about it?"

Harry sighed. He was so tired of keeping secrets, so tired of feeling like he was turning into something he hated. "In a way. Let's wait for Lilith. I'll tell you everything then."



It wasn't long before Abraxas touched his own forearm with a focused look in his eye, and they left the room, finding Lilith looking inconspicuous on the other side of the door.

"Come on in."

Lilith was seemingly back to the mask she had been wearing before the incident in the Astronomy Tower, not a single detail about her appearance betraying her mental state. Her wavy, dyed light brown hair tinged with cinnamon-like highlights was pulled back into a high ponytail. Her wide set, dark green eyes were alert and perpetually watching, and her warm brown skin glowed with a healthy look. Despite being Indian and good-looking just like the Patil twins, Harry thought Lilith was much more elegant in her presentation, always spotless and imponent. Her uniform looked impeccable as it usually did, and the expression on her face meant business.

"What is this place?" she asked, the tiny scar underneath her right eye moving as they narrowed in suspicion.

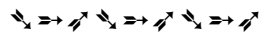
"The Room of Requirement."

"How did you know of it? Isn't this year the first time you've been in Hogwarts?"

Harry sighed. "Not really, no. Just... take a seat. It's time you get to know more about me and how I got here."

Lilith did as he told her to, stopping only to shoot a look at Abraxas and Orion.

It was time.



Harry had started at the very beginning – he explained the circumstances of his birth, went through all the happenings of his life, and talked about Voldemort, not at all skipping his second year and the reveal of just who Tom Marvolo Riddle was. The look on their faces had been priceless, and he had battled with his urge to laugh as he went through it all, not giving any opportunity for them to interrupt him.

He had done his best to keep it efficient – they didn't have all day, after all. As he finally finished his tale – so frankly unbelievable he himself would have had a hard time believing it if he hadn't lived through it – Abraxas got up from the couch that faced the fireplace.

"*What?*"

Harry had expected that reaction, but if he was being honest with himself, it had been Orion in his mind that uttered the dreaded word.

He shrugged, however, not sure how to make it more clear. “It’s true.”

Lilith chuckled and scoffed in disbelief, turning her head Abraxas’s way. “*That’s* who you decided was trustworthy?”

Abraxas shook his head, a conflicted expression on his face. “Look, he’s telling the truth, even though this is completely insane. This either actually happened or at the very least he believes it. I don’t know what to tell you.” He uttered the words with absolute incredulity in his voice, but they still soothed Harry’s worries.

“I *am* being honest. I know this makes no sense, and I wish I could give you a better answer. Dippet and Dumbledore know the truth, at least, and Hermione is from the same place I am.”

Lilith stayed sitting down, deeply in thought, and Abraxas kept pacing through the room, consternation written all over his face.

Orion, however, had been scarily quiet the entire time, and Harry was getting more and more worried by the second.

“Say something, please,” Harry pleaded, eyes on the boy with a too-perfect neutral expression on.

Orion obeyed him, voice no louder than a whisper. “That’s why I couldn’t find anything on you.”

Harry nodded as a response, and Orion did the same, letting his thick dark curls hide his face from Harry. “You believe me?” Harry asked.

“Abraxas does.”

It wasn’t a yes, but it was as good as one when it came to Orion.

“I know this is a lot to take in, but now you know why I am so adamant about keeping Tom from doing the things he wants to do with the Knights. Trust me, he has the potential to be a lot more dangerous than he is, and I want to stop that from happening. Even if you aren’t sure of my origins, then at least we can have this goal in common.”

The three other occupants in the room all had differing reactions to his speech: Abraxas nodded in agreement, Lilith kept quiet, and Orion, surprisingly, laughed.

“I *knew* you looked like a Potter!” he shouted, a hysterical edge to his cackling that made Harry shiver in its similarity to Bellatrix’s.

“Well,” he began, and waited for Orion to stop to continue, “then you get why I need to stop Tom from hurting Charlus.”

Harry had never gotten to know his family in his original timeline. Now, he was almost certain that there would be no Harry Potter to speak of in this one – so for all intents and purposes, this Potter was not related to him – but Harry still felt connected to Charlus. If he

couldn't get to know the man, then at least he could keep him from getting hurt by his soulmate.

It was the right thing to do, and he owed it to himself to know he had made a good impact in his pseudo family's legacy, even if they never knew it had been him.

"Yeah, yeah," Orion responded, a smile fading as he was out of breath, "you're right. Even if I still have a hard time swallowing all of this."

Harry sighed in relief. "Thank you for giving me the benefit of the doubt."

"Don't thank us yet. You still have the hardest job ahead of you."

Don't I know it. "Which is?"

In Orion's face then lay his signature mischievous smile.

"Convincing Tom he is worth saving. It's all fine and dandy to have the Knights' support, but from what you've told us, he is the actual threat."

Tom was the bomb he needed to defuse. Right now, he was managing to evacuate the building, sure, but an explosion was still imminent.

"Trust me, I have every intention of succeeding."

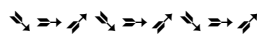
A smile bloomed on Orion's face, and Harry's stomach internalized his anxiety at the sight.

"So... who do I marry? Is it Walburga or someone else?"

Ha. "No, no way. We're *not* going there. You don't want to mess with this whole thing more than I already have. Knowing is *not* a blessing. If things go right, anyway, I doubt your future will be at all recognizable."

Orion rolled his eyes.

"Spoilsport."



After everyone had had the time to settle into their new situation, Lilith, surprisingly practical in behavior, started strategizing.

She turned to Harry, intense in her focus. "The Charlus plan won't get into motion until after the holidays. Tom will already have his mark, so it'll be up to you to convince him you care about him. Hopefully by then we will have enough people by our side that Tom will have to

think twice about everyone's loyalty before going through with it. Which brings us to Tymeo."

Abraxas had stopped pacing and was sat on the couch by the fire again, and Orion started taking the lead in the conversation.

"What about him?"

Lilith didn't think twice before answering.

"He's the obvious next recruit, of course."

Orion didn't seem to care much for her statement. "Really? Shouldn't we go for Sébastien instead? Tymeo is too..."

"Too *what*?" Lilith asked tersely, her gaze going from centered to annoyed.

Orion scrunched up his nose in distaste. "*Loyal*," he uttered like a dirty word.

Lilith huffed, rolling her green eyes. "Says Abraxas's lapdog."

Orion stared at her with something akin to loathing in his expression, and Harry knew he had to step in.

"Hey," Harry intervened with a gentle lilt to his voice, wary of a possible fight taking place. "Let's not do this right now."

"Orion," Abraxas called for him, and Orion immediately looked at him, a softness replacing the anger in his eyes. "It's okay."

Harry didn't know why Lilith seemed so protective of Tymeo or why she believed he was the best next option, but the last thing he wanted was to have this tentative peace turn into anything else.

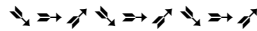
"I get why you would want Tymeo to be the next, Lilith, but you know he's a liability," Abraxas said, clearly attempting the role of a mediator. Harry hoped it worked. "He has never questioned Tom, not even once, even when alone with just us. He just takes everything in stride, he always has. I do think we should try him next, but with a different approach."

Lilith seemed to have calmed down a bit, her gaze entirely focused on Abraxas, now purposefully ignoring Orion.

"What kind of approach?"

"We test him. We feed him false information, and wait. If he doesn't go to Tom, then he's on our side. If he does, it's no harm no foul."

Her lips were locked into a thin line, but she eventually nodded. "Okay."



PART 4 – TYMEO

Godric Gryffindor had been called reckless his entire life, and he could see why – he did have quite the thrill-seeking streak. Maybe that had been why it'd been his idea to build Hogwarts so close to the Forbidden Forest; though, if you asked him, he would answer that he had decided to do so because he had always believed a little possibility of danger was quite the incentive for students to learn. After all, nothing motivated one more to find an antidote than being poisoned themselves.

Salazar had been the one fascinated by the mermaids and other aquatic species in the Black Lake, but Godric had always been drawn to the centaurs. Not that he had been lucky in commiserating with them – Helga'd had the pleasure, lovely witch and arbiter she was. Salazar, of course, had been much more interested in how they could be one of the first wizards – if not the first ones entirely – to strike a peace treaty with a group of magical creatures, and Rowena had focused on the learning potential of having a school so close to the abode of many differing species. Which left Helga, then, to succeed in striking an accord with the centaurs, the reigning creatures of the Forest; Godric had watched the exchange with stars in his eyes, flabbergasted by the whole affair.

Since then he had taken many trips to the grounds, circling the perimeter and trying to squash his temptation of going in. They wouldn't attack him – it was a condition of their agreement – but he knew it was an unnecessary risk to put himself into. Still, he spent many days and nights on the edge of the forest, bewitched by its strange atmosphere, the aura of its magic unlike any he had ever felt. The enchantment surrounding it was wild, uncontrollable – not that different from a child's accidental magic, before charms and incantations became the norm for spellcasting. Godric still remembered a time when wands were nothing but the possibility of an invention in some wizard's head, when magic answered a wizard's request like a genie grants a wish, or, rather, how someone might owe a non-magical life debt: tied to nothing but their own desire to give back. And that was how the sorcery of the forest felt, like a prayer being answered.

Godric, at times, would dream at night about a young wizard following his legacy, being more courageous than he had ever been, a wizard that became one with the forest – not an outsider trying to assimilate, but a vessel for magic finally, finally coming home.

Tymeo Lestrangle didn't know of Godric Gryffindor's wishes, but he was uniquely attuned to his desires.

Tymeo had grown up seeing his family put their faith in charismatic yet malicious leaders. His father, Laurent Lestrangle, was obsessed with divination. He had wasted thousands of galleons on self-proclaimed seers in search of the next supposedly trustworthy figure to follow. It was like he was unable to think for himself, to come to his own conclusions without someone to steer him there. His mother, Eve Lestrangle – nee Greengrass – was not a believer,

but she was bound by her sense of duty to her husband and his ideals, and Tymeo had no choice but to watch from the sidelines as they slowly lost everything they had to a man's fabricated fantasy.

That had not been the first time they have been burned by believing blindly in someone's promises, but the lesson remained unlearned. To the Lestranges, honoring their traditions always meant more than evolving. The collective forever trumped the individual, and Tymeo, whose name quite literally meant honor, was expected to be just another cog in the well-oiled machine. He was meant to marry Lucretia Black – who was the daughter of his mother's sister, Adora – he was meant to only associate with purebloods, he was meant to be the perfect image of the Lestrangle name...

He was always *meant to*.

Tymeo's entire life was written out for him – quite literally, as every Lestrangle had a written record of their lives available for the next generation to draw wisdom from – and all he wanted was to rebel against it.

He didn't know how, however; up until that point, he had done everything that was expected of him, from not saying a word about his emerging engagement to his cousin to begging the hat to be placed in Slytherin instead of Gryffindor. Tymeo's connection to the Black family (one of the richest in the wizarding world), to his family, was their chance to recuperate what they had lost, and their desperation seeped into everything he did.

Tom Riddle had been a godsend, then, when he had risen from the pits of mundanity to become the muggle-born king of Slytherin. Following him would be the opposite of everything his family preached – if Tymeo couldn't become a leader on his own right, then being an acolyte to a *mudblood* was the second best thing.

He could have never expected Tom's identity to become such a secondary concern, however, nor that he was more than willing to stick to the status quo by being a blood supremacist himself.

Tymeo wasn't a muggle-born supporter or anything, but he wasn't an active hater. He just didn't see what was the big deal behind people just wanting to exist as wizards.

But apparently even that was too much of a radical view, so he kept quiet and followed every unspoken rule. One thing that Tymeo was well aware of was how thoughts didn't always translate into actions, and he knew he was too much of a coward to stand up to what he believed in, so he never told his parents of Tom's muggle-born origins, and he let himself be praised for conforming.

His only respite from how boring and formulaic his future was shaping up to be was spending time in the Forbidden Forest.

He had started going there in his first year, and he hadn't stopped since. Tymeo had plenty of knowledge on all sorts of plant species inside the ecosystem of the forest, of how they interacted with the magical creatures, and he knew many of those same creatures by name. The castle had never been anything more than another cage, but there, in between the

darkness and the light filtered through the tree leaves, he felt like he almost had a purpose outside of his predetermined fate.

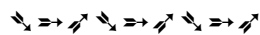
The centaurs didn't avoid him, the thestrals liked his company, and the fairies played with his hair, making him laugh in a way he never did near anyone else. He had no hidden agenda when he spent time there, and the creatures could feel it. The only person who knew of where he spent his time was Lilith, and she had discovered it completely by accident.

Back when Lilith wasn't yet Lilith, in their first year, Tymeo had bumped into her just as he left the forest. He'd been scared of her telling on him, but he'd realized she had been crying, then, a hint of spilled red on her hands that had remained in Tymeo's nightmares even weeks after, and he'd stopped caring about that.

She had watched him with unmalicious curiosity in her big, tearful eyes, yet not a single question had left her lips. Since then, their friendship had been a quiet one – she didn't expect him to step in or claim their connection out loud, but he was always there to patch her up after.

And when she had joined the Knights, he had silently cheered; finally, he didn't have to pretend they didn't know each other. Finally, he could spend time with her without keeping it a constant secret.

So when Lilith had called for him on the edge of the forest, a concerning look on her face, Tymeo tried his best to listen.



LILITH

Lilith always knew where to find him.

She didn't dare to use their mark to reach him, though. While they could do so without alerting the others, at the end of the day – at least when it came to Lilith and Tymeo – using it to communicate was something they only ever did when something serious was happening, and doing so now would tip him off to the suspicious nature of their upcoming conversation.

She didn't truly have any friends, and she knew that, but there was something about Tymeo Lestranger that made her feel like she could, like she had something worthwhile to share. Like Tom, he had never interfered when she was being bullied, but it was hard for Lilith to resent him for that.

With Tom, it had been a strategy more than anything else, but Tymeo was soft in a way she wasn't, and he seemed to activate some long forgotten protective instinct in her.

He wasn't her friend, she couldn't claim so, but he was the closest thing she had to one.

The sky outside was beclouded, all gray, flat, and dark, despite it being pretty late in the morning. There were no students near the Black Lake studying, no classes being held outside. For anyone else, the ugly climate would usually be enough of a deterrent, but not for Tymeo.

To him, it was an invitation.

He had once told Lilith the centaurs were most likely to roam the Forest in weather like this. When the sky was clear, they often remained in their territory to stargaze and practice divination, and anyone with a brain knew it was imperative to avoid breaching the centaurs' enclave.

The Forest wasn't a fortress – rather, it was a well-divided realm of homes, realms that most wizards were not aware of and frequently intruded upon. Tymeo hadn't let his curiosity become entitlement, and in return, the creatures had let him in.

He was probably there now, roaming around with the eye of an expert. He was sneaky, too, and most professors had no idea of his extracurricular activities. The ones who knew were well aware of the special bond he had with the Forest's magical communities, so they let him go with a pat on the back.

Lilith felt like she was betraying Tymeo by doing this. She knew it was for his own good and that it was necessary, but Slytherin as she inevitably was, she had never loved the feeling of manipulating someone else. She would skew things in her favor by focusing on technicalities, yes, but not outright lie or fabricate facts to sway someone else. It felt too disingenuous, and to do it to someone she cared about...

Lilith shook her head, a somatizing display of her inner conflict as she tried to shake these thoughts away. Lilith knew: there was no winning side for her at all.

She vividly remembered the one and only time she had dared to stand up to Riddle, how her hands had been cold as ice, sweat pooling in her palms, how she had dug her nails deep and her legs had almost given out.

It was his response, however, that had stuck like a magnet to her mind, always pulling her closer to conformity than she wanted to.

His eyes had looked as black as coal. "I could make your life a living hell. Have you forgotten already, Lilith, how it was before I saved you? When troves of students would follow you around shouting slurs instead of your name? Did you forget every curse, every spell, every *time* you got detention for being late to class because a pureblood decided it would be funny if they vanished your robes halfway through the hallways? Is it *that hard* for you to recall the fact that the only reason you haven't been disowned yet is because you belong to me? Could you have possibly let slip your mind when Kyle Bulstrode thought it would be *hilarious* if you stopped breathing, *permanently*? Because I haven't. It was because of me that you became anything other than a parody of a pureblood, and the minute I drop you, it will all come back with a vengeance. Are you truly willing to risk it?"

He had been so needlessly cruel then, a show of power so ferocious Lilith felt like it circled back to being born out of insecurity, maybe even fear. Tom could fool everyone, but Lilith knew fear when she saw it, had swum in it with the expertise of someone who had been doing so in the womb. She was acquainted with its halls and basements, with the monsters banging on the scuttle hole leading to the attic. And Tom *reeked* of fear, like he bathed in it.

Except, instead of doing it like Lilith and letting it force him into submission, he had molded it into a sharp weapon and disemboweled others with it.

By choosing Tom, she would be betraying herself.

And she was done doing so.

But by choosing Harry and Abraxas and Orion, she would be doing things like *this*. She would be disowning everything that made her safe, and for what? The small possibility of a happy ending?

Then again, Lilith found herself thinking, she had been willing to give up on that possibility entirely. At least now she would get to see the consequences of it, for better or for worse.

Lilith wouldn't let herself hope for the best, but she could at least find entertainment in the what-if.

"Tymeo?" she called for him as she approached the outskirts of the Forest, unable to suppress a shiver as a very limited amount of light illuminated its entrails.

Sometimes, if she let herself feel it, she could swear the Forbidden Forest was alive, as if composed of a beating heart, blood vessels, and most of all a stomach, ready to devour her whole.

He wasn't far away; she could hear the approaching footsteps through the crunching of leaves and twigs, and Tymeo's body took shape in the intersection between the shadows and the light, making Lilith wish he had taken just a little longer to arrive. She just wasn't ready.

The way he looked was the same as always: his hair, ear-length and of a light bronze-ish shade, was tucked behind his ears, and his pale blue eyes framed by his lighter-than-usual eyelashes shined behind a narrow gaze with a serene spark as they got re-accustomed to the brightness of the outside.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" he asked casually, no hidden meaning behind his words. Lilith's guilt multiplied tenfold.

He trusts me.

What am I doing?

You are doing what it's best for you, Lilith reasoned with herself. Tymeo will be fine if you tell the truth and he decides to go to Tom; you won't.

This is the only way.

She could tell the exact moment Tymeo realized something was wrong by the way his posture changed, from relaxed to tense in a second's time.

She swallowed. "I just needed to talk. It's not like we had much time to, lately."

It was true. The Knights hadn't necessarily been more active than usual, but it had been like every one of them had too much on their minds to focus on each other, their issues and problems keeping them apart instead of bringing them together as they once had. It was in moments like these that Lilith realized just how different they were to one another, how incongruous their lives truly were. Even as purebloods, they had nary anything in common.

"You know I've gotten my mark back in January. I've just been anxious about it. I know the possibility of finding my soulmate soon is low, let alone in Hogwarts, but that's just been on my mind."

Her mark had been so utterly... mediocre. The words "*which house do you think you'll be sorted into?*" had cropped up in orange and then inky black without much fanfare. That wasn't uncommon, not at all, but it just felt like another way the universe was against her, to know she had already met her soulmate but being unable to figure out when, where, or who it was, and she wasn't lying when she said that had been on her mind.

It just wasn't all of it.

Tymeo nodded, but there was something more than just agreement there, his clear blue eyes doing that thing when he made her feel like he could truly see her.

When he spoke, he did so with uncertainty.

"Lilith... What is *really* going on? I know most of you think I don't notice things, but I've seen it. You've been even more distant than usual, especially after the last meeting. And Abraxas and Orion too... They've apparently been avoiding each other, but sometimes when one is missing the other is, too, and I have a feeling you know what is going on."

Perceptive, as usual. "I don't."

Tymeo was too nice to scoff at her, but Lilith could tell he wanted to.

"Yeah, I don't believe you. You're a decent liar, but I've known you for ages. You've got to try harder than that."

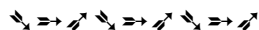
I'm not strong enough... I'm not strong enough to choose me over him.

Lilith had spent her entire life making concessions, compromising on who she was. Sure, she had come out, but there was nothing unapologetic about it, it didn't matter how much she wanted there to be. She wasn't there yet, and it felt more and more impossible to ignore the voice that whispered in her head to give it all up, to choose ending herself.

Deep in her heart and in the darkest depths of her mind, Lilith didn't think her life was worth anything at all, let alone more than Tymeo's. She wanted to recruit him not to have an ally in her corner, but to save him from himself.

And to do so, she was willing to put herself at risk.

So she took a deep breath, and she told him.



“I can’t believe you did this,” he said, a subtle hint of disappointment in his voice that had Lilith feeling just as she did when her parents looked at her, all expectations and no affection. Every time they so much as glanced at her, she felt like she had already failed whatever test they had for her before she had even started, and Tymeo unintentionally mirrored that look exactly.

She had kept the more egregious details out of the picture; Tymeo didn’t know Tom was Harry’s soulmate, and he didn’t know of his origin story.

Still, he knew enough, and Lilith knew she had made a choice she could never come back from.

“Remember third year?” he asked when Lilith kept quiet, the maelstrom of her thoughts and emotions too great to respond.

Like my parents always said, you look better when you’re silent. Be seen, not heard, and when possible, neither.

There was a sardonic edge to her voice when she spoke, “How could I possibly forget.”

Tymeo opted to ignore her bitterness. “For a second there, things were almost okay. Eventually, of course, everything came crashing down, and we promised each other that we would take any way out we had. Remember that? And then Tom asked me to join the Knights, and then you, too, and things changed, *for the better*. They’re not perfect, and they definitely don’t look like I hoped they would, but we’re safe, *you’re* safe, and we’re together.”

“Is *safe* the most we should expect out of life?” She was thinking out loud, but as she did, she realized she truly meant her words.

“Lilith, we’re purebloods. Most of the time, safety is guaranteed. I mean, being a pureblood is privilege mixed with compliance. The others, hell, even me, can only move within this circle of bullshit, but we can still move. You? Fuck, it’s incredibly unfair, but you have even less than that. And I wish that wasn’t the case, but it is. And I’m not willing to lose my best friend to an illusion of freedom. You’re smarter than that.”

Lilith knew he was trying to be kind, but all his words felt like were condescension.

“Tymeo, we’re *seventeen*. We’re fucking *teenagers*. There’s a whole life ahead of us, and you want us to do this social dance for the rest of it? We said *take any way out we have*, right?

How is this any different?”

She was desperate to convince him to join her. She wanted, needed nothing more than her friend to realize he deserved more than this.

Tymeo’s hair fell on his face as he lowered his chin, framing it in such a way that it amplified the desperate, intense look in his eye.

“Lilith, this isn’t about me. I am worried about *you*.”

It’s not me you should care about.

Merlin. The frustration felt like it was seeping into her bloodstream and clouding all her judgment.

“Are you sure that’s it? Are you sure you just aren’t too much of a coward to stand up for yourself?”

She knew she had crossed a line when Tymeo answered, “Don’t,” a closed off expression on his face.

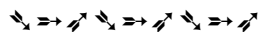
It was with a desperate conviction that she chose her next words. “*Then prove me wrong.*”

Tymeo had his jaw locked tight, his blue eyes now avoiding hers, but she knew some amount of anger still lingered.

“Fine. But don’t expect me to join in.”

Had she made a mistake trusting him?

She didn’t want to believe she had, but it was done now. Only time would tell.



TYMEO

Tymeo had never allowed himself to feel his anger. By the time he gave it any breathing room, it had already turned into resentment, and resentment was much less urgent, much less intense, and much, much more ignorable.

Now, however, it built and built, raising the stakes and lowering his tolerance considerably. His mouth was dry, Tymeo only saw red, and he didn’t even try to stop his hands from clenching into fists. He couldn’t handle any more performance at the moment.

Why did he even care about anything at all, if his only true friend had decided his concern wasn't worth it, if she was more than willing to risk herself?

Why should he care when she was willing to leave him behind, when even after everything, she still thought of him as a *coward*?

He wasn't thinking, and he didn't want to. It didn't even cross his mind to use his mark – Tymeo let his feet lead him wherever, and he wasn't even a bit surprised when *wherever* happened to be right into the lion's den.

Tymeo knew Tom's schedule like the palm of his hand. He knew he liked to spend time at the library after lunch, and he apparently didn't even need to think about it before finding him.

Something must have sold him out as he walked in, because Tom's brow was furrowed when he acknowledged him by looking in his direction.

"Follow me."

Tymeo did, steps choppy and heavy, and jumped slightly at the sound of a door closing. Tom cast a privacy spell, and Tymeo belatedly realized they had walked all the way back to the dorms – more specifically, Tom's (previously empty for the moment) room.

"What happened?"

How could he even find a place to start? Fuck, should he even say anything? Would he be putting Lilith at risk?

What should he prioritize?

Tymeo was panicking all of the sudden, his breath shortening further from anger all the way to anxiety now, but Tom didn't allow him the space to lose it.

"Focus, Tymeo. Look at me." *Breathe*, he told himself, to no avail. "I've been meaning to try this for a while anyway," Tom muttered, but Tymeo didn't register its meaning.

Tom's voice sounded simultaneously too distant and too close, and Tymeo wasn't even sure he had processed at all what Tom had just said.

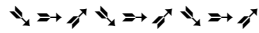
It wasn't like he'd even had to do anything, however, as Tom moved Tymeo's face toward his and their eyes met, Tom's dark brown ones narrowed in concentration.

"*Legilimens.*"

There was no time for Tymeo to even try Occluding – Tom barged in like he didn't even need to be invited, and the images of his conflict with Lilith came flooding back.

Tymeo's stomach hit him with a wave of nausea as he was forced to relive everything, and he realized, a tad too late, that he had fucked up big time.

Lilith is going to hate me.



TOM

His Knights had been keeping something from him – he had felt it, deep in his bones, all throughout these last few weeks.

Orion and Abraxas were still not speaking, at least not in front of him, but something had shifted in their interactions. They were good at hiding it, but Tom could see through it.

He could always see through it.

Maybe that was his curse, in a way – he just never had the privilege of ignoring anything that was going on around him, and he always had to insert himself, feel like he was the dominant one lest they decide he was weak enough to be preyed on.

And then Tymeo had proved him right.

It was good that at least *someone* was still loyal to him, but...

It didn't mean much, not when the ones he had put the most trust and responsibility in had decided to desert him; for the new kid, too, of all people.

The giddiness he felt as his first attempt at *legilimency* succeeded faded fast as he got hit with the reality of the situation.

Harry *had* to have told them something about himself, and it had to have been something big to have swayed Lilith, Orion, *Abraxas*.

Orion had never been all in, and Tom knew it. Lilith had been brought in by Tom himself, and he had done so knowing she had nothing else, that she owed everything to him. It wasn't loyalty as much as it was servitude, and while it had worked for a long time, Tom had always been wary of how that could eventually go awry.

But Abraxas, though?

That one hurt.

As much as Tom wanted to deny it, they were friends. Abraxas was Tom's best friend, his *only* friend, and he couldn't fathom what had driven him to do something like this.

Tom refused to even entertain the possibility Harry Evans had compelled him with magic – one of his Knights was possible, but all of them? Three against one?

No, they had *chosen* this. Orion would have never gone with it if he as much as suspected Abraxas of not doing this out of his own volition, and Lilith was too clever to not question the whole setup the first chance she got.

Harry had sprung something on them to make this impossible to refuse, and what made Tom furiously frustrated was having no idea what that could possibly be.

The Knights had already gone home for the holidays, then, so his confrontation with Tymeo had been the last time he'd had the opportunity to learn more details. Unfortunately, though, Tymeo hadn't known anything outside of Lilith's new loyalties, and Tom was left with nothing to go off on.

That had been, of course, until he realized Harry Evans and his mudblood Ravenclaw friend had stayed behind with him.

He had much to plan to neutralize the damage, much to analyze, but for once, he couldn't focus on anything – not when he had been stupid enough to get himself attached to someone who hadn't hesitated to trade him for the first one brave enough to offer an alternative.

Tom was being forced to realize he didn't have *friends*, or *allies*, or even *followers*.

No, he had hostages.

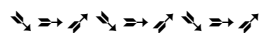
Clearly he hadn't been doing enough to instill fear in them, then, if rebellion had even crossed their minds as a possibility.

The thought ate at him as the next two weeks passed by. Tom did his best to avoid Harry for now. He wanted to be in tip-top shape for when he confronted him, but the waiting was every shade of excruciating.

The boy, however, seemed to be trying to do the very opposite, in a way – if Tom didn't know any better, he would think Harry wanted to approach him but felt conflicted about it.

As the two of them engaged in this surgically sterile dance, an opportunity Tom couldn't refuse presented itself to him near the end of December.

By some twist – or trick – of fate, Tom found himself alone in a corridor with Hermione Granger.



Harry's friend was possibly more of a mystery than he was.

While Harry had tried his best at establishing himself as a presence in Slytherin, Hermione Granger had been much quieter. She didn't seem to mingle much in Ravenclaw, and she was mostly seen by Tom and his Knights spending time with Harry.

Their dynamic was one that intrigued Tom. It was beyond clear the two of them were close – they were comfortable with each other like childhood friends were, like they had never been apart. But living on the run didn't seem to be very connection-friendly, and Tom often wondered what was the story there, what had brought them together, especially when Harry struck Tom as usually either aloof or hostile in manner.

Tom stared at the girl, analyzing her as she finally noticed him.

Hermione Granger was of average height, average weight, average everything, really, at a first glance, with her brown eyes, brown skin, brown hair... But there was *something* there, something Tom couldn't truly discern. A spark, perhaps – a whisper of power, of potential, something that said *you haven't seen anything yet*.

She had a rather noticeable and unique scar on her neck, however, one he had never seen before. Did she keep it glamoured? It was ugly, clearly delivered in a rush by someone who, while enthusiastic and knowledgeable enough to make it deep, didn't have a particularly steady or surgical hold.

The story of that was definitely interesting, Tom thought. He couldn't help but wonder if it tied somehow all the way back to Harry.

“How are you finding the castle, Granger?”

Her crisp but soft voice answered, a hint of suspicion within it she couldn't hide, “Louder than I expected.”

What an interesting choice of words. *Louder*. Not bigger, not better, not even fuller – *louder* than she'd expected.

“Not used to crowds?”

She scoffed lightly. “The other way around.”

That only compounded the mystery of Hermione Granger in Tom's head. She had been on the run, but surrounded by people. Close enough to Harry to know him deeply, yet taking three weeks to follow him to safety. There hadn't been a single sign from Harry that he was expecting his friend to arrive, no sign at all that he was worried about her, yet here she was, as if she had always belonged.

Granger didn't have the same fire Harry had when they interacted; she was more Slytherin in her approach, cautious and chary. But Tom could undoubtedly feel she had curiosity bursting out of her in every step she took, though she bit her tongue enough to try to hide it.

He circled the girl, head tilted, and watched the way she oppositely mirrored his movements exactly. Tom was amused by the chase, but that did not distract him from the blatant suspicion on Granger's face. He was the predator and she was the prey, but her defense consisted of way more than just fleeing the scene or playing dead.

Something told him the only reason he had the upper hand was because he had caught her off-guard, and he was thrilled at the challenge.

As they stared at each other, not truly getting closer nor leaving, Tom was sure the girl in front of him was aware of his reputation of striking the minute things hinted at going awry.

Or, of course, when one's back was turned.

The longer she stayed, the easier it became for him to feel tempted. He had the golden ticket to that pretty little head, and he was wont to take it.

Especially now that he knew it would work.

"Tell me, Granger, what's your story?" Tom found that it was easier to access the memories he wanted to reach through *legilimency* if he forced them into the forefront of someone's mind first, and having the girl there was a perfect opportunity to get information on Harry. If Evans was playing dirty to sabotage him, then it was more than justified that he do the same.

Plus, it wasn't like he actually cared if he hurt people in the process of getting what he wanted. Tom was used to collateral.

Granger's eyes narrowed, but she actually had the gall *to tsk at him*.

"You know, people talk, Riddle. You aren't as inconspicuous as you think you are. Everyone can see you're obsessed with Harry, and you don't hide it very well."

What was it about these people that let them feel like they could just waltz in and take what they wanted, say what they pleased, no fear of consequences for any of their actions?

It made him want to show her her place, make it clear who was actually the one in command here.

But Tom didn't take his place in Slytherin – and Hogwarts – for granted; he knew how delicate the whole structure was, the pure balancing act of a house of cards, and it was only his pure skill and menace that kept it standing. He might be prideful, but he knew how to use flattery or surrender as a way to manipulate someone if he had to, unpleasant as it was to give up control. At the end of the day, manufactured powerlessness was only a temporary approach in his journey to complete dominance.

"Harry is a formidable rival in lots of ways," he began. She clearly didn't trust him, but that didn't mean Tom couldn't do his best to sell a more approachable version of himself to Granger. It had always worked in the past whenever someone felt intimidated by him upfront. "You couldn't possibly fault me for being fascinated by his potential."

Tom watched as Granger twirled her wand around her fingers, as if considering her next move. There were brownish sparks coming out of it, the kind that signaled the shade of her magic. It was a soothing but regal color that was somewhere between bronze and copper – strong, reliable, supportive.

It was interesting; one of the things Tom had come to realize with time when it came to magic was how it served as a pointer for someone's real personality, the masks they put on aside. It almost served as an aura, except it was only visible to him when they released it, whether on purpose or due to a strong, uncontrollable emotional reaction.

He had seen all sorts of shades through his stay in Hogwarts, and he could sometimes tell apart the differences on a person's mood, which helped with reading their intentions. He wasn't an expert on color theory, but it was fascinating to analyze it.

While no one knew he could spot magic like that, some Knights suspected something of the sort because of his uncanny intuition, and they had started to work extra hard on keeping their emotions hidden. Tom still knew what the color of their magical core was, but not the nuances of their feelings anymore. It had forced him to truly labor for the answers, *and* to get creative with the methods.

The first time he had realized wizards' magic carried different hues had been upon meeting Dumbledore. His was a dark, deep red, screaming of both menace and energy, willpower and leadership. He hated it immediately, even more so upon realizing it was the same color of the Gryffindor house, where the rowdy students with no ambitions lived, the students that didn't put any effort in yet were constantly being rewarded. Gryffindors loved to pretend they were accepting, but the vast majority of the house was still pureblood and just as snobby as any Slytherin; plus, their tendency to confuse bravery with recklessness and thoughtlessness often infuriated Tom. He had to push everything down, always appear polite and kind even when all he wanted was to hex someone, while Gryffindors got to bully people and still come off as the good guys. It didn't surprise him one bit to know professor Dumbledore was the head of house for Gryffindor. Still, despite that first impression from Dumbledore, Tom had always been fascinated by magic's shades.

Magic spoke to Tom, it always had, and Hermione Granger's told him just enough to know what direction he needed to take this... *discussion* in.

"I guess I can't," she replied, still with a guarded stance. She paused, and Tom could tell she had something at the tip of her tongue, just waiting to come out. "Harry... He always wants the best for everyone. He is strong, and he is ambitious, yes, but he has a good heart. I know this isn't something you particularly care about..." She made a point of scowling at him, and Tom felt a smile of amusement threatening to find its way out. "But I think he's just as interested in you. He just has a tendency to be reckless, that's all. Don't take it personally if he says something offensive." *Don't hurt him*, was what Tom heard in her tone. She was loyal, that one, but he didn't really see what she was saying as reality, not with what he now knew.

Lies, Tom's brain whispered as he considered her words. Still, he couldn't stop the barrage of memories that flooded his brain, all the moments where Harry had expressed to him a will to do more than just seek power.

"I would listen to anything you'd say, Tom, if you used your power for good."

Tom fought the urge to shake his head. No, Harry clearly wouldn't, and no, he was not inoffensive. He tried to portray himself that way, but if what he had been plotting with Tom's

Knights against him was any indication, there was way more to him than just supposedly being a good guy. He didn't know what Granger was trying to accomplish here, what she was trying to convince him of, but it wouldn't work.

Tom hadn't conquered everything he had by sitting around and letting people take things from him; if he wanted something, he took it, and if someone fought back, he made sure they never saw what they used to have as theirs ever again.

The Knights were Tom's, and they would remain that way.

"You see, Granger, I believe you." Tom took a step forward, and took off his wand, lazily playing with it while the girl in front of him tensed up. "Or rather, I believe you believe that."

Granger had her own wand raised now, a look of determination and anxiety looking right at home on her features.

Tom ignored it, his stride purposefully slow and ambiguous, and he stopped right in front of her. "It's just that I can't let someone like him, or you, go around usurping what's mine, for good reasons or not."

As she remained quiet, Hermione Granger's weakness became clear in Tom's eyes: she was too reluctant to attack first; she was too *nice* to presume intention, always preferring to defend, to try and convince herself she hadn't meant to react the way she did, that she wasn't actually searching for blood.

Well...

She was waiting on an attack, but it was obvious she didn't know which *kind*, by the way her eyes had never wavered from his. Tom was fast enough to guarantee that by the time she figured it out, it would be too late.

"*Legilimens!*"

It was like an invasion of the senses, *legilimency*, with all the colors, sensations, and the sheer volume of memories and space one possessed inside one's mind. With Tymeo, Tom had gotten the first taste of what he had been working towards, the exhilaration of holding a person's entire identity on one's hands.

Now, however, there was the whole experience of overwhelm and dizziness but none of the rewards of flashing remembrances. There was *something* there, yes, and he pushed through the odd feeling of a blank mind, spurred on by his frustration and anger, and *pulled* at the first memory he managed to come across.

Colors were the first things he became aware of as it took shape, followed by the loud, harrowing sounds of a crowded Great Hall.

"*Are you Harry's friend?*" It was Lucy Black, of all people, that spoke first, as Tom watched the scene take place.

Granger was at the Ravenclaw table, and a look of astonishment took over her face. A thought that wasn't Tom's popped up.

She said it. The words from my mark.

Tom blinked, suddenly struck by the meaning of those words. Hermione Granger and Lucretia Black were soulmates.

Interesting.

Tom's attention was multiplied tenfold as he watched the conversation unfold.

"*Are you two friends as well?*" Granger asked, and Tom noticed how Lucretia looked immediately paralyzed, both girls hit with the realization at the same time.

Lucy, however, didn't seem nearly as positive about it as Granger had.

"No. I don't make friends with mudbloods."

The memory cut off rather abruptly, but Tom braced himself to find other threads to pull at.

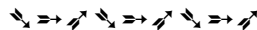
However, before he could reach the true enticing answers he was searching for, he was pushed out by an insisting pressure, his own awareness landing aggressively back to the present.

A natural Occlumens.

No one their age would be able to expel him from their minds this easily, even with Tom still new to *legilimency*. Natural *occlumens* were rare; if the girl truly was one, she was untrained, yes, but the potential was there.

The covetous urge behind everything Tom did started raising like a slow burning fire, and that was almost enough to dull the rage inside him at his frustrated attempt.

Almost.



HERMIONE

Hermione had decided to take the holidays as an opportunity to unwind and meet up with Harry again, try to gauge his progress and plan more around hers. What she had not counted on – but perhaps absolutely should have – was bumping into Tom Riddle.

Even worse had been having her mind ripped into like it was the easiest thing in the world.

Hermione knew Riddle could not be trusted, and she wasn't about to be silly enough to not be on guard the moment she was left alone with him. It had been a matter of time, after all, before he got bored of doing things the hard way and tried to fight dirty.

She just had been naive enough to not believe that would happen *right now*.

Hermione had never been a good *legilimens*, but she could handle *occlumency* decently enough. Her job had never asked of her to breach someone's privacy like that, but it sure did call for protection of her brain – after all, it was the most important resource she had. However, like with most intuitive things, Hermione struggled. She could follow instructions to a T, read books and follow their practical application, but the Mind Arts were different. They required an innate understanding of the mind as a palace, a well of information, and, most of all, it required the ability to slow down one's thoughts and empty one's mind, and that was something Hermione had always had a hard time with. She understood the world through critical thought and observation, and she always checked in with herself before reaching any conclusion.

It was also especially true that both *legilimency* and *occlumency* thrived on willpower, and that, at times, that willpower was easier to access through emotions as its conduit. It required both powerful feelings and a supreme control over them, and Hermione, while she did have both, usually saw herself separating those two things – if she felt her feelings, she could be especially irrational, so she never allowed them out at all when she had to think her way through things. It was almost impossible for her to do both at the same time, and when she succeeded, it was usually a tad too late.

Pushing Riddle out had been one of those rare occurrences where her feelings of rage at being breached like that had reacted in her favor. She hated that he had still seen something, but at least it had been fairly innocuous.

Not that Tom Riddle couldn't find a way to weaponize that eventually; Hermione was already dreading the day that might happen.

Hermione watched as Riddle's brown eyes fixed on hers, but she refused to meet his gaze again, now that she knew he had already started to mess with *legilimency*. She already had a curse on her tongue, ready to strike, but she wanted to see what Riddle would do next.

Maybe it was reckless on her part to wait, but she had to admit she was curious about how a true duel between her and Riddle would look like; and there wasn't a better way to understand your enemy than to see what their first move consists of.

She could see Riddle preparing to cast seconds before he even did, and she was ready to get a shield up, prepared for whatever curse he might throw her way.

But it wasn't a curse on his tongue, however. No – it was a lot worse.

Riddle bellowed out an *obliviate*, voice angry but his face ominously blank, and at the sound of that word, that dreadful, hateful word, a word that brought every bad memory back to the

surface, her entire body, suddenly coated in magic, rebelled against it, protecting her from the spell.

The rational part of her brain, however, in the middle of the action, whispered to her.

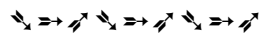
Pretend.

She let herself act as if the curse had hit her, as if the disorientation was real, as if she didn't remember anything.

She peered at Tom with a confused look, and as he didn't react with anything but a false sense of indifference, she started walking away, heart beating so loudly she was praying he couldn't hear it.

When she had put enough distance between herself and the boy who had been searching for every secret she had been dying to keep, Hermione allowed herself to break down for what felt like forever, hiccups, sobs, and tears as her body trembled making their way out as if desperate to leave before being forced to return to the inside.

And Hermione, unable to think, to analyze, to *be*, let them.



TOM

As the clock struck midnight, now marking the first hour of December 31st, Tom Marvolo Riddle ignored everything that had been going wrong these last few months and chose to focus on one thing only.

His soulmark.

There was something eerie about the way the incantation sounded, like a march of death. It was like invoking something to the front that had always meant to remain hidden. Tom felt like he was searching for forbidden knowledge by doing so, and the pit in his stomach felt foreign. He had always promised himself he wouldn't take the whole soulmate thing too seriously, that nothing could change his plans, not even someone destined for him, but there, in the silence of the night, when not even someone else in the room could make a sound strong enough to disturb the atmosphere, it felt too hard to pretend to be any more indifferent to it than he actually was.

Which wasn't a lot, if he was being fair to himself.

Tom had always been lonely, had always been alone, and he wanted and feared his soulmate in equal measures. He wanted *him*, but the thought of giving anyone power over himself was

terrifying.

He kept his eyes closed as he whispered the words, and when they cracked open, he waited a few seconds – which felt more like hours – to finally cast a *lumos* and see what his skin had declared his.

When he finally did, a gasp nearly loud in the dark, he couldn't help the way his breath got caught in his throat at the sight right after, because he immediately *knew*.

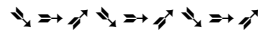
He remembered, clear as if it had been yesterday, Harry Evans speaking those words, a look on his face that Tom couldn't properly, fully understand.

Everything suddenly made sense, as if the sky had parted like the Red Sea and God had spoken to him, like in those Bible stories Mrs. Cole had told them every Sunday.

He hadn't been betrayed, the realization hit him. They had thought they were saving him. They had heard the confirmation out of *his soulmate's* mouth, and they had been willing, *eager*, to obey.

There was still one question Tom felt like he couldn't answer, however, and it haunted his mind.

What did Harry Evans think he needed saving from?



Chapter End Notes

Tymeo in this chapter 😊: <https://youtu.be/yE07FbWmew8>

I have a Tumblr now! I wanted to have one so people could send in questions if they wanted – if you're interested on any aspect of this fic, any ideas I might have about any project going forward or simply about me as a person, you can find me on

[@naianepitzer](#)

I also have a playlist for this fic that I'm always updating: [Iron & Decaying Dreams](#)

I have also made a Pinterest board for the characters of this fic. Pinterest is a cesspool of art theft, honestly, and I really don't want to contribute to that, so I have credited every single fan art in the fic folder. Unfortunately it is not feasible to do it all the time, but since the other folders are just for personal use and this one is the only one I'm sharing for the readers of this fic, I think it's more ethical to do my best to not contribute to the sharing of art without properly crediting it. Ironically enough, the one piece of art that was the main inspiration for my Harry's appearance is the one I could not find the artist of, even by searching the image. If anyone has any idea who the artist of the Harry

fanart in my Iron & Decaying Dreams folder on [@pitzers](#) is, please tell me so I can properly credit them. Thank you!

CHAPTER 9. PART ONE. I WANTED TO DESTROY EVERYTHING BEAUTIFUL I'D NEVER HAVE.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON SEPTEMBER 28TH, 2023.

Chapter Notes

THIS FIC IS NOW OVER 100K WORDS! I think this is the largest amount I have ever written of anything, let alone fiction writing, and this would not have happened if you guys hadn't been encouraging me every time, so THANK YOU.

Quote from first chapter title is from Fight Club, and the alternative title is a quote (unsure of its origin) about the Roman god Janus.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"It calls for a contradictory thing – a mind that is constantly open to new facts that dictate change but at the same time is resolutely committed to what seems best at any given point of time."

- From the Commencement Address Edith Sampson gave at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois.

CHAPTER 9 – PART ONE – I WANTED TO DESTROY EVERYTHING BEAUTIFUL I'D NEVER HAVE.

OR, *"ALL BEGINNINGS AND TRANSITIONS, WHETHER ABSTRACT OR CONCRETE, SACRED OR PROFANE."*

TOM

When Tom Riddle was a small child, he used to be hopeful.

In his first years of life, he had been a curious little thing. He would cling to anyone that showed him the least bit of attention, anyone that humored his endeavors. Tom had always been eager to prove himself, to show off his plans, his thoughts, his ideas, and he needed everyone to know how special he was. He believed everyone was either right or simply ignorant, and that he could enlighten them if that was the case; he couldn't see how some people *chose* ignorance instead of having it bestowed upon them, and how power didn't always come to the brightest of them all.

Back then, he simply hadn't known how to discriminate between the worthy and the unworthy. In his youthful mind, there was no such thing as status or inherent superiority – one proved their worth by how well they used their talents. He hadn't really noticed how being honest and straightforward wasn't always the way to make someone understand the truth. *Privilege* had been a concept Tom had become acquainted with the hard way, and it had been because of how eager he was to impress, no fear of strangers or reservations over who would listen, that Tom had lost his innocence, the light behind his eyes.

He had felt unwanted by his parents, so he tried his best to prove he was worthy of being loved – if not because of who he was, then because of what he could do. But life wasn't kind; it wasn't fair, and it wasn't pretty, and the more Tom pushed, the more he was pulled back. It turned out people didn't like kids like him – kids who were magical, kids who were too smart for their age, kids who didn't shut up and obey without questioning. Tom had burned too bright to settle down, and the adults around him had noticed. Mrs. Cole hated him, reviled him, and punished him, while others...

Others took notice of his eagerness and search for approval... and they took advantage.

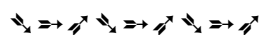
The very first time Tom had been caught conversing with a snake, a priest had been called to the orphanage. He had arrived, Bible in hand, but the second they had been left alone, no words from the holy book had ever been spoken.

He had been a facsimile of a kind person, and had listened to Tom as he explained everything. The glint in his eyes had never faded, and back then, Tom hadn't realized what it meant, young as he was. But the meaning didn't evade him for long; when a gaze turned into action and *hunger* could no longer masquerade as innocent interest, Tom had, at last, learned not everyone that claimed to care actually did.

Tom was used to not being listened to by then, so he didn't speak up. The priest came back for weeks after that, and he only stopped when Tom's accidental magic retaliated.

He learned that people always wanted something from him, that things were not as they seemed, and that he had to fight back. Tom despised being a victim, so he learned to strike first at any sign of threats.

And when that wasn't possible, he told himself that if he had to yield to them, then at the very least he could control how he went about it.



Tom never dreamed.

Ever since he was a wide-eyed toddler, all the nighttime had ever brought him was terror. From the bombs to the visitors to the crying children always hungry and never satisfied – wartime forever making everything scarce – there was very little a small Tom Riddle liked about nightfall. But if there was something that had always given him a taste of freedom, it was the way the closing of eyes lulled him into the comfort of complete, unadulterated darkness. Even as he feared losing control, feared never waking up again, it was an escape from reality, and most nights, he gladly took it.

His body was like clockwork: he fell asleep and woke up at similar times each day, barred a few exceptions he always planned ahead for, and he could count on his mind, without fail, to keep him focused on what mattered.

But the night he saw those fairly innocuous-looking five words – *not exactly scared of Slytherins*, Harry had said, like the punchline of a bad joke – did not bring with it the release and relief of silent slumber. Midnight had turned into one, two, three AM, and once dreamless sleep had been invaded by an inharmonious loudness of images and feelings. Tom had never truly doubted himself before and his lack of dreams reflected that, but, in that moment, it was like everything he had pushed down had been steadily climbing up over the years, only to now resurface, all at once.

He had never been more grateful for the fact that he usually slept like the dead – no movement, no noises, nothing to alert anyone else to his inner conflicts – because it was dream after dream, that night.

When he first opened his eyes, he was enwreathed by a congregation of cotton candy blue, amber yellow, and lightning purple mist, a colorful hurricane against the black backdrop of his dreamscape.

The magic was a siren, but the inescapable nature of its calling swerved closer to a lullaby than that sort of alluring wailing of forbidden loneliness that came from a creature that yearned for connection yet could not deny its predatory nature. He breathed deeply, but no thicker-than-smoke fog made its way into his lungs. As it encircled his skin, it burned with the itching of poison, as if rejecting his acceptance of its never-ending, all-consuming power; it said, in no uncertain terms: *I am here to collaborate with you, not be dominated. You don't own me.*

It wasn't *his* magic; it didn't feel like he had released it out into the world. Rather, it felt like *it* had expelled *him*. Like it didn't want him to be magical at all.

Tom's stomach was in knots, and he felt himself scowling, more due to confused frustration than genuine anger.

Was magic...

Was magic *rejecting him*?

Suddenly his thoughts were swept away, and like a whirlwind, Tom felt himself get sucked into a completely different scenario, his breath getting snatched away in the process.

He was standing on the opposite corner to the entrance of the Astronomy Tower, facing its lofty window. The sky outside was of a purplish hue, with thick clouds making the twilight a shade darker than it was supposed to be.

Tom's hands shook in anticipation, and he noticed it as he looked down, the dream version of him clearly awaiting something, maybe someone, to come meet him.

His intuition was rewarded by footsteps approaching, and he turned around, coming face-to-face with Harry Evans.

He tried to move his eyes away from the other boy, but he wasn't in control of his reactions; of nothing but his thoughts, it appeared, as if his body had been hijacked by some unknown force. The corner of his lips turned up, a mockery of a smile, and he could *feel* the meekness behind the gesture, like a cowardly, pathetic surrender.

"Harry," he – *the thing* – greeted the newcomer, and his voice was so unrecognizably sugary it made Tom want to scream at Harry. Instead, he only achieved the mental equivalent.

That's not me. You're my soulmate; can't you see that could never be me?

But Harry didn't react with anything but a smirk, striding confidently toward Tom, mere inches of distance left between them as he stopped.

"You know what I came here to say, Tom. You know what I want from you." Harry's voice was just like real life – animated, overly resonant, confident. His bony, tan hand came to rest at Tom's cheek, warm like the early summer sun, and Tom's not-body reacted by leaning into it more. "You have to let them go. You don't need anything else at all." His eyes were too green, too alien as they stared into Tom's, unblinking. "Just me."

Tom wanted to stop this, to leave, but relying on his will power was useless; the disconnect between Tom's mind and body were too strong as he felt his mouth form the words, his voice pronounce them out loud like there was nothing wrong with them at all. "Of course, Harry. Anything for you."

The image faded as he jumped up in bed, his body feeling foreign as his usual graceful stance gave way to clumsiness. As he sat up, finally back in control and with his breath catching in his throat, Tom looked around the room at the only other current occupant, confirming he was still sound asleep.

The subject of his dream was only a few feet away from him, green eyes closed and body shrunk into itself as if used to small spaces, the covers halfway out of the bed. Tom refused to watch him, refused to search for a mark on a wrist he knew was glamourised up. Instead, he got up, and started searching his trunk for the diary.

It wasn't yet morning, but the midnight darkness had seized, leaving enough light for Tom to move without having to worry about making too much noise. His trunk was also organized to

the tiniest details, so he knew exactly where to find the book with the black, hard leather cover just by feel.

He hadn't touched his diary in ages; the last time had been when confirming the Horcrux ritual had succeeded. Years of words had vanished instantly, leaving it with blank pages and a black aura surrounding it, and Tom had kept the piece of his soul well-warded by dark spells and ones of his own creation, hiding it away from prying eyes. No one would dare to touch his belongings, but if they did, they'd be in for a rather unpleasant surprise.

Nothing had changed about its state since. Tom opened it, barely sparing a glance to his initials on the inside of the cover, instead choosing to write on it with a pen.

Even after six years of schooling in Hogwarts, Tom still didn't like writing with ink and quill. If there was one thing he could admit to himself that muggles were superior in, it was the handwriting tools – though he wouldn't dare to say so out loud, nor let anyone see him using them.

He wasn't careful with his calligraphy then, not like he usually was. Tom was too shaken up by his dreams and the last few weeks, and it wasn't like anyone would be reading what he wrote anyway. The words were rushed and heavy, barely short of a scrawl, as he detailed all that had happened since seventh year had started. Tom had always better processed things when written down, and he could feel a tiny amount of the burden lift off his shoulders as he put pen to paper.

He didn't know how long had passed, but the first rays of sunlight were rising shyly by the time he finished. Tom looked at that last page for a few seconds, and at first he thought his eyes were tricking him as the sloping, sloppy handwriting started fading. It was subtle at first, as if the words had simply aged a few years, but it didn't take long for the process to accelerate, and he was left with a page as blank as it had started as. Tom couldn't stop the silly thought that formed in his mind, then, as shock settled in.

All this work for nothing.

Was it some sort of Horcrux magic that did this, trying to ensure the integrity of the object hosting a part of Tom's soul?

He didn't need to try to answer the question, though, because the emptiness made way for very similar shapes on the page, and an answering question – *was I even seeking some sort of counsel?* he thought – bloomed.

What will you do about this Evans?

Tom's right hand tightened around the diary, and he was biting his lips a little too hard as he considered the implications.

It was *his* handwriting. It was a part of him writing *back*.

Tom quickly closed the diary. He flinched at the sound of it, and glanced at the other side of the room, making sure Harry was still asleep.

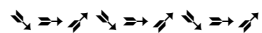
The boy remained in the same position as before, only now with his lips slightly open. He looked innocent like that, so unlike the version of him from Tom's dream.

Stop thinking about it.

It wasn't real.

Tom could deal with the diary later, he told himself, when he was alone, well-rested, and not feeling like he wanted to wake Harry Evans and force him to answer the million questions swarming around in his head.

For now, there was nothing more pressing to him than figuring out what to do as the day before the dawn of the new year became nascent in the horizon.



There were many realities to living as he had, as an orphan and an outcast.

Growing up in Wool's, there was only communal living. He had always shared everything with others: toys, rooms, bathrooms, meals, classes... Hogwarts had felt familiar to him when he had first set foot in it, the lack of privacy a given. He knew he could protect himself or at least flip the narrative whenever he couldn't, so he didn't need isolation in order to impose himself.

It had never even crossed Tom's mind he could conquer things on his own.

That didn't mean he counted his achievements as anyone else's – he had to supervise everything, direct everything, and Tom never once saw other people as being on the same level as him. He still had to fight for a place at the table, after all.

But Tom also couldn't see a meaningful life that didn't involve someone else's eyes on him, a legacy, something to leave behind.

And that had been why, the second he had established himself as more than just a dirty, lowly mudblood in Hogwarts, he had founded the Knights.

The Knights of Walpurgis had been nothing but a utopia when the project first started sprouting inside Tom Riddle's mind.

He knew he coveted power, however form it might take; as long as it belonged to him in some capacity, it didn't matter if it came from inside him or someone else. It needed to be controllable, malleable, moldable. Tom Riddle craved the control of a god, and he needed his subjects to be all made in his image. He needed to be remembered, his impact to live on, but the circumstances of his birth forced him into taking drastic measures to ensure there was enough time to achieve what he needed to.

Now, Tom had forever, but he was still human. And as a human, he was very, very impatient.

He didn't want to have to wait much longer, to carry the brunt of being *small* for Merlin knows how long. He had worked so hard for six years; he had recruited, persuaded, flattered, sucked up to, threatened, *owned* some of the biggest names of wizarding society, and he had made himself so enviable others would give up everything for an opportunity to join – and be seen by – him. After years of forced self-degradation, he could finally distance himself and trust his Knights would follow through with his goals, and they had.

But all it had taken was the magical concept of soulmates to bring it all down.

His equal didn't want to rule beside him; he wanted to push him to the ground, to sabotage the one thing he had exhausted himself for all those years. He had convinced half of his Knights that he was doing it for Tom, and they had believed him. He had given them an alternative, and they had taken it.

And that was what Tom just couldn't comprehend: how easy it was for them to switch sides. Tom wasn't naive, he didn't have any illusions that the Knights followed him out of sheer devotion. He knew they had their own reasons and goals, and that he was simply a charismatic enough figure to make them trust he could follow through with his promises. They might not all be the smartest or most competent at strategy, but they could see an advantage and take it. But hadn't he done enough to trap them there?

It made Tom wonder: when exactly had he crossed the threshold, the point of no return? When had the cons outweighed the pros?

And what were probably the most important questions of all: shouldn't he use this opportunity to gauge who he should truly keep in his inner circle, to recruit the most ruthless of them all, to show just what happened to those who double-crossed him?

The Blood Ball had taken place a few days into the holidays, and every eligible pureblood had been in attendance. The Blacks were the hosts, as always, which meant Tom wasn't exactly invited, and there was no way he would go back to Wool's if he absolutely didn't have to, so he had stayed behind. In a way, he was grateful for the delay – Tom wasn't used to such big emotional reactions, and the last thing he wanted was to make a mistake because he rushed into a decision-making process on what to do about his Knights. He might have forever to achieve what he needed to, but his subjects did not, and he knew he didn't have the luxury of appearing weak.

Now, though, they would be back soon, and he still felt conflicted about how to proceed, because he had been caught off-guard.

It was all Harry Evans's fault.

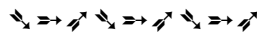
Because that was the thing: Tom couldn't shake the feeling that Harry had known, maybe even before they met, back when they had first locked eyes and the green-eyed boy had winked at him.

And Harry had convinced his followers with some unknown information that Tom was somehow fragile enough to need saving; like he had let all the horrible things that had happened to him break him beyond repair.

Tom should have waited, perhaps, until he had a solid plan, but he had to prove to Evans that he wasn't ruled by something as primitive as emotions; he needed to prove to him that if he had done something, it was because he meant it. If he waited, Harry would think Tom had yielded and he had won. There was time for strategy and time for action, and when it came to Harry Evans, it seemed it was always time for action. He needed to reassert himself as the leader, whatever it took, or he would be allowing anarchy to take hold.

If there was no more structure and order, no more hierarchy in place, then what was stopping everyone from deciding Tom should be pushed right back into the role of filthy mudblood?

So, on December 31st, his seventeenth birthday, Tom, ready to not pull any punches, found Harry Evans sat on the grass looking out into the Black Lake and faced him, fire brimming in his veins like the scalding center of the earth.



HARRY

All this time, he had been waiting.

Waiting for a sign, waiting for the universe to give him the go-ahead. He had been waiting for what had always been given to him – an order, an irrefusable action.

But he never would have had any, not anymore, because this wasn't a life-or-death situation to anyone else but Harry and Tom. He had hesitated because there had been no concrete, black or white answer to his moral dilemmas, and now, it was too little too late.

Harry's courage was a curious thing – it became pronounced in times of crisis, but turned shy whenever it was required for anything sentimental. Leave it to Harry to confront his feelings with anyone but himself and shrivel up in despair.

Upon waking on the day of Tom's seventeenth birthday, Harry kept his eyes closed, listening in for any activity on his dorm. He hated how his body exhaled in relief at the absence of sounds, how his first thought upon realizing he was alone was *thank Merlin he's not here*.

Because Harry wanted to talk about it, he really did, but he didn't want to be the one to broach the subject.

So he put on his glasses, got dressed, skipped breakfast – there was no way in hell Harry wanted to talk about it in the Slytherin table, empty or not, and have their professors a few

feet away observing whatever heated discussion they might engage in – and retired near the Black Lake, where he hoped the fresh air would help him feel less like throwing up.

It didn't take long for Tom to find him, and Harry swore he could feel Tom's sour mood before he had even approached him.

“Evans.”

Harry turned around, confirming Tom's anger with a single look, and got up, facing the boy in front of him with what he hoped was a calm demeanor.

“Tom.”

He could tell Tom was annoyed at how familiar he was being by refusing to utilize his last name, but Harry didn't care – if they would do this, if Tom was to acknowledge their connection, then Harry no longer wanted to pretend they were strangers, that they were supposed to be antagonistic toward each other and nothing more.

Tom took a deep breath, and Harry didn't say anything, his mind dangerously blank as he watched Tom bite his lower lip and look into the distance as if fighting to measure his next words.

“When did you plan on telling me we were soulmates? And don't lie to me – I know you know.”

The whole time.

Never?

Somewhere in between.

“I... I wanted to, but no time seemed like the right time.” Tom looked like he wanted to punch him – Harry needed to find a better way of explaining himself, *fast*. “To be honest, I didn't think you would care. Not when you are so... *open* about your views on people like me.”

Like us, he wanted to add.

It wouldn't be his greatest idea, though, he could tell.

Tom's expression remained the same: thin lips pursed, jaw clenched, dark eyes so intense they trapped Harry's like quicksand.

“Is that why you decided to try to sabotage my Knights? So I wouldn't be so *indifferent* to you?”

What...

Who had sold him out to Riddle?

Lilith had been in charge of recruiting Tymeo, but she hadn't given a status report to anyone before going home for the holidays. Harry had assumed she either hadn't confronted him yet or things had gone well; however, it was clear he had assumed wrong.

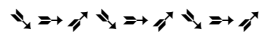
He didn't think she had been the one to betray them, but it was likely she hadn't followed Abraxas's plan either.

Harry wiped the cold sweat pooling in his hands on his trousers and focused his attention on Tom, thinking through his answer.

There was no point in coming up with excuses or trying to deceive him; even if he was bluffing somehow, Tom was clearly also angry he hadn't told him about the soulmate thing, and Harry knew there was no way someone so utterly distrustful by nature would give him the time of day if he denied it and he eventually figured out Harry had lied to him.

Like Orion had said, it was Harry's responsibility to convince Tom he was worth saving.

"No. I did it so you wouldn't eventually do something you can't come back from."



TOM

Do something you can't come back from? As if Tom had no ability to think for himself, to decide what was best for him and his Knights?

"What makes you think that isn't precisely the path I want to go down on? What makes you think you have the right to decide for me what I will or will not regret? What gives you the right to question the decisions *they* made, to act as if they didn't have any agency in joining me?"

He wasn't just angry; no, Tom was *furious*.

Harry, however, seemed to be just the same. "Why are you so angry these people aren't willing to die for you anymore? Are you really so narcissistic you can't stand actually building goals that rely upon collaboration and loyalty instead of unwavering servitude? Can't you seriously not let it go?"

Let it go?

Harry's question reminded Tom of the dreams – of the way the magic in the first one refused to yield to him, of the other Harry's words – and he took another deep breath.

"Fuck you, Evans."

Harry sneered, seeming ready to leave, but he stopped himself, a stubborn edge to his jaw as he refused to. “You know what? No. You can’t keep avoiding the real issue. The fact that *I’m* your soulmate, out of all the ones who would give themselves up for you in a heartbeat. You just can’t stand that I’m not willing to be your puppet. You just can’t stand that I’m a *mudblood*.”

Tom couldn’t help but explode. “*I couldn’t care less* that you’re a muggle-born!”

Tom cringed slightly at his words, but his anger didn’t defuse. He didn’t miss the way Harry’s eyes widened, but he was far too pissed off to think much of it. He was sick of being challenged, *sick* of being questioned and poked and prodded. No one actually knew what he was doing, but somehow *Harry* thought he did, and Tom was sick of yielding to a man that had come out of nowhere and randomly decided it was time for him to give over his throne to him. He was sick of letting thoughts and *feelings* worm their way into his mind, take the space left for his plans and goals for themselves.

Most of all, he was sick of Evans, and sick of the way he kept letting him get away with things he would have cursed someone else over.

And he was willing to show it.

Tom drew his wand from his pocket, a spell prepared on his tongue, and aimed it at Evans. “*Flipendo!*”

The boy was good, Tom remarked grudgingly in his head, as Harry, his wand drawn just as fast as Tom’s, deflected his spell with a *protego*.

Well, not as good as me.

They kept shouting spells at each other left and right, both ducking and shielding, and Tom’s breath was getting more and more ragged, but his rage didn’t diminish one bit.

He had been trying to avoid the darkest curses regardless of his desire to unleash them upon his opponent, all for the sake of discretion, seeing as they were still in Hogwarts, but he couldn’t help himself as Evans deflected yet another spell aimed toward him, an arrogant smirk on his face essentially telling Tom he found his anger amusing.

He didn’t even say the words out loud as he cast a *separe aeris*. The warmth of his satisfaction as it hit its target was swift and overwhelming, but as he watched Evans struggle to breathe against the bubble that had formed around him cutting his air supply, it vanished just as soon as it had arrived.

Still, Tom refused to back down, and he did nothing but observe the effects, not even bothering to disarm Evans, who was clearly too preoccupied to attempt to attack him back.

As the boy fell to his knees, Tom’s blank thoughts started to swirl with something else – something foreign and wrong, something that tainted his brain and threatened to ruin everything.

Regret.

He moved to cast a *finite incantatem*, but something happened before he could.

Evans's breathing started to stabilize, and the bubble that surrounded him in an ugly chartreuse tinged with black edges burst, almost as if it had never been there.

Suddenly, as Evans stood up, his magic left his core in a slow but deadly fashion, embracing the boy in a clear protective stance.

Tom's conflicted feelings all gathered and melted into a single one.

Adoration.

Harry's magic was intoxicating.

He was powerful – Tom could feel it. It was more than just his victory against Sébastien and his lack of fear regarding Tom; it was the way his magic spoke, what it all meant. He had been learning how to differentiate intent with each spell cast, and Harry's magic was always more lively than the rest – not necessarily stronger, but more mature somehow, as if it had evolved past the simple spells Hogwarts could teach and had instead chosen to protect and serve its master, bending to whatever the situation required of it. It had almost a will of its own, with the way it floated around him. Tom would usually assume it was simply less controlled, but with Harry, it was all about the subtle things – the way his magic moved with him, the way it worked as a silent and sightless shield even when Harry wasn't himself aware of the potential danger.

It was beautiful. It was mighty and fierce and *so light*, and Tom envied it, all too aware of how different his own was.

His magic was prickly like a flower thorn, all jagged edges and attack-ready, black as midnight. It made Tom question how much of it was innate and just how much of it had turned out that way because of his upbringing, of all the ways he'd had to learn of defending himself because no one else would do it for him.

But Harry's... His was white like smoke, like transparent fog, like moonlight and blinding sun. Tom couldn't breathe, and it was impossible to tell if it was due to the effect of Harry's magic or to how breathtaking it was.

He could almost taste it – and, by extension, taste him.

And Merlin, he found that he actually wanted to.

“Harry...” His name came out of Tom's mouth in a strangled sound and completely unprompted, like a promise he didn't want to make but couldn't stop from leaving his lips. He wanted, craved, *yearned* for him then, like water to a parched man, and he couldn't care less if Harry knew it as he approached him.

Because he could it see in Harry's eyes, too. The color, usually a blend of fern and forest green, was now sharp and present, alive with a charge of electricity that made Tom, always so

poised and prepared, feel like he was blushing from the intensity of it.

He was one step away from doing something he couldn't take back, and the worst of all was that he couldn't think of any of the reasons why he shouldn't.

I want you.

And as Tom watched the boy in front of him fight his own instincts, he knew.

He wants me too.

The realization was all that took for him to lose every sign of composure he had been clinging to so desperately.

“God, *your magic...*” he moaned, coming closer to Harry, ignoring every instinct that roared at him to stay back, avoid the danger.

Harry's anger was interrupted midway, a delicious shade of red painting his cheeks as his magic started to dissipate. Tom was saddened to see it go. “You can see it?”

“Can't you?”

Harry shook his head, seemingly in disarray over the whole thing. Ever since he had gotten there, even in the moments his mouth got the better of him, Harry had never lost his temper like that. He was incredibly protective of his magic, domineering over it in a way that didn't allow for any of it to slip through cracks of emotionalism. Maybe that was the reason why it looked so stunning to Tom, to see control break like that, all because of him.

“Don't hide it. Let it stay.”

For whatever reason, Harry listened to him. The fog enveloped the two of them, and Tom got closer to it and to Harry, like a moth drawn to a flame.

Tom released his own magic to match his. Ever since he had seen it for the first time, he knew it was a special gift – no one seemed to be able to, even after he joined Hogwarts, and now, that feeling was being once more confirmed.

Black smoke interspersed with white, the two dancing in a slow spinning motion as Tom only had eyes for Harry. Their magic blended together, the offensive nature of his with the protective one of Harry's, turning into a beautiful shade of silvery wisps surrounding the both of them.

Like they were meant to be together, Tom remarked in awe, eyes never wavering from the target of his fascination. *Like we are meant to be.*

Something about this thought pierced through him, however, his own words cutting through the haze of his desire with a sharp edge, and he stepped back.

No. No, I'm not going to be manipulated like that.

He can't make me lose myself like that.

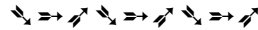
Tom called his magic and retreated, seeing as Harry responded immediately, also taking a hasty step back.

“Tom?”

Tom's jaw was clenched, his heart rate increased to such a degree that he couldn't tell whether it was from anger or something else.

He didn't mean to issue a challenge when he said his next words, but he couldn't help the way they sounded.

“If you want to win me over, you'll have to make a bigger effort than this.”



HARRY

“Tom...”

“*What*, Evans? What could you possibly say that would make this better? You took so much from me, and now you're asking for what? Forgiveness? A pat on the back and a thank you?”

Was that the way he thought of it? That those were his accomplishments, his possessions, his life?

The sneer on Tom's face was made up of more than just anger; there was grief in there, too.

Obviously, Harry thought, feeling the urge to hit his own head with his fist. Tom grew up with nothing – everything he had was shared among other children – so to him, possessions weren't objects, things that could end up stolen, but his sense of self, his pride. And those, unfortunately, were intrinsically connected to his less-than-moral ambitions. To strip him of those things was to strip him of his own dignity.

“Fuck, Tom, just... Can't you just give me a chance to show you there's more to life than just fighting for the approval of people you don't even admire?”

Tom snorted, his nose wrinkling in an infuriatingly cute way.

“Only if you show I can admire *you*. Show me there's something in there worthy of being listened to, and I'll think about it.”

Was he bluffing? Harry couldn't tell, and all the thousands of questions he had been entertaining over whether or not he could trust Tom with the truth swirled around in his brain. He felt like he was short-circuiting, coming up short of answers. "I..."

Tom had a determined look on that seemed to only strengthen with Harry's hesitation.

"I don't take advice from strangers. So, tell me, Harry Evans, what is it that you want? What has led you to the conclusions you so kindly impose on me? What gives you the right to act as if you know me at all?" Despite his deeply sarcastic tone, underneath Tom's defensiveness was a kind of shadow lurking, a shadow of wariness and curiosity that felt synonymous with Tom, for better or worse. "Who are you, really?"

Who am I?

Am I the Boy-Who-Lived?

Am I the leader of the Light?

Am I a Lost Boy, too stuck on the past of my Neverland to ever grow up?

Harry had thought about everything before, but always from the point of view of his own morality, of the world's safety, never from Tom's as a seventeen-year-old *teenager*. That whole thing had been built on lies from the beginning. He had kept secrets from Tom when that was the very thing that had forever destroyed relationships in his past life. He had kept the soulmate bond from him, kept the reality of who he was and who Tom was to him a mystery the whole time. He knew Tom needed to control everything, needed everything laid out on the table, yet he chose manipulation just as Dumbledore had manipulated him.

Harry felt disgusting. He wanted something of Tom that he could never give, not as long as he felt like fate held the strings and they were just puppets.

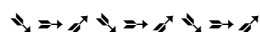
He couldn't *want* Harry, he couldn't change for him if he felt his soulmate's feelings weren't genuine.

Harry had to be completely honest with him, and had to try to convince him his feelings were his alone. And there was no better way for him to do so than to make it clear how Harry was choosing Tom even besides the sheer depth of malignant history between the two of them.

Here goes everything.

God, let me not regret this.

"I'm Harry James Potter. Son of James Fleamont Potter and Lily Jane Evans, born on July 31st, 1981. I'm 20 years old, and I came here from another dimension to meet you."



TOM

When those words hit Tom's ears, he thought he had misheard them.

But as he didn't say anything, Harry continued speaking.

He spoke of fantastical tales of a boy growing up in a cupboard, always alone, neglected, and hungry, and of finding out the truth about the world he belonged to. His eyes glinted in wonder as he described his first year in Hogwarts, meeting Rubeus Hagrid (a numb part of Tom's brain murmured, *does he know I am the one who doomed Hagrid to this fate?*), meeting non-existent Weasleys and a muggle-born girl with bushy hair when Tom hadn't yet Obliviated her (an image of the girl's unsuccessful shielding flashed in Tom's head), fighting a wizard with a dark lord on the back of his head, one with a name Tom had only given a passing consideration to when trying out anagrams of his own. Tom didn't breathe as Harry's first year turned into his second, and a very familiar diary made an appearance in the narrative, much more sentient than Tom had dared to consider the night before.

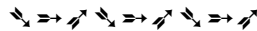
Is this what that version of me wants?

Is all my rage at being seen as lesser trapped there, waiting to come out to do some sort of magical ethnic cleansing?

He still didn't speak, however, as Harry narrated the events that led him to destroying Tom, destroying the diary and the Basilisk and abandoning the Chamber, saved only by a sword and Phoenix tears.

Tom knew he wanted to continue, but Harry was also visibly tormented by Tom's lack of response, and he swallowed dryly before whispering the command.

He needed to know the actual truth, after all, and *legilimency* was far too unstable for that.



HARRY

“Imperio.”

The Unforgivable, soft as a suggestion, enveloped Harry with a sense of warmth and pliability that should have felt nice – it had always felt nice, in the past, even as he didn't want it – but that, this time, only made him sick to his stomach.

He despised that damn spell.

“Nice try,” he grumbled, shaking it off like a fallen leaf that had settled on his hair. “Is this your reaction to what I’ve told you so far?”

“How?” The incredulity in Tom’s voice brought a bit of smugness to Harry. A spark of realization shimmered in Tom’s dark eyes, and Harry didn’t like how the name he spoke next seemed to almost hold a sense of reverence. “Voldemort.”

Harry scoffed. “Your counterpart also liked to try to control me. Guess you both enjoy a challenge.”

Harry expected Tom to react with anger, violently, or even with something like amusement, but his expression held none of these. Instead, his lips were in a downturned line, a frown in his forehead, and his eyes turned distant, as if he was internally reckoning with the meaning of what Harry had so flippantly spouted.

He tried to shove the bitterness aside to focus on the task. “Which brings me directly to my fourth year.”

He kept on talking, aware of Tom’s disbelief, but he could also feel he was getting through to him. The *imperius* hadn’t felt like it was Tom trying to control him – Harry could tell he wanted to pry the truth from him instead, in some kind of messed up alternative to *veritaserum*.

He only gave the Cliffs Notes version of third year, instead focusing more on his fourth next, and didn’t skip any details moving forward, trying to answer any question Tom might have before he even asked.

Through the entire endeavor, Harry observed Tom, seeing as his expression changed from shock to awe to fear and everything in between, and how the closer he got to the ending in the Forest, the more serious and dark Tom’s look became.

Harry swallowed his urge to stop, to question him relentlessly over whether he believed him or not, and finished his tale, on the very day he had arrived.

As the silence settled between the two of them, Harry exhaled a sigh of relief when Tom finally spoke. “At least it explains why you’ve been less than... charitable, when it comes to me.”

That might be an understatement.

“I just couldn’t risk you following in his footsteps.”

Tom huffed at him, like he was offended at his words, but his own actually surprised Harry with the direction they went in.

“I’m not a child, Harry. You’re not responsible for me. My counterpart ruined your life; he chose, one way or another, to bring you into everything, and you were always an unwilling participant. You did not choose to involve yourself with him, and you don’t need to involve yourself with me either. Being soulmates doesn’t erase our individuality.”

Was that... a *kind* statement coming from Tom Riddle?

Harry felt himself genuinely flabbergasted over the whole thing. "I... I know. That's part of the reason I'm here, but it's not all of it."

Tom nodded, the black curl that always fell near his eyes moving with it, and when he spoke, it was with a serious tone.

"I will not be with you as long as you're my soulmate, though."

He was stubborn, even more than Harry at times. Tom could not reckon with his future being dictated by magic. As much as he appreciated and respected magic, he was a control freak at heart – he wanted to control it, not the other way around. The thought of having fate tell him who he was meant to be, not knowing if whatever he was feeling was a result of a compulsion or not seemed to mess with his head.

Harry could relate. Still, he wouldn't let him go, not again, at least not as long as Tom could want him close.

"That doesn't sound like a rejection, Riddle." Harry grinned. "If anything, I'm hearing a challenge."

Tom groaned, but it wasn't in a heavy, angry sort of way. Harry felt relief taking over his anxiety, and he was more than delighted that he had managed to flip their dynamics for once. Maybe he could use this reveal to his advantage, after all. "Of course that would be your takeaway, Evans. I don't even know why I still get surprised by you."

Harry smiled in amusement, but that same smile dropped as he thought through Tom's words and their meaning. "What do you even mean by *as long as I'm your soulmate*? I'll always be your soulmate, and you'll always be mine. It's how this works."

Tom assumed his perfect prefect stance, which immediately put Harry on edge. "A regrettable outcome. Maybe I can find a way to break that bond."

No.

Harry didn't think that would even be possible, but he knew how tenacious and determined Tom could be.

He wouldn't dare.

"You can't."

"Don't underestimate me."

I don't. That's the whole point.

Harry found himself begging, and he didn't even have enough pride to feel ashamed of it. "Please, don't try anything."

“Why is it so important to you that we remain soulmates?”

“I...” He found himself stumped; he had no idea how to respond to that question.

Because I can't ignore the way you make me feel. Because I can't see my life without the rush I feel when you're next to me. And, none of this makes sense, but... because I want everything you're willing to give me.

Too soon too soon too soon

Harry bit his tongue to not let those words spill out, and answered something else instead. “I don't know. But I want to figure it out. I'm not going to pretend I know how you feel about soulmates, but I'd like to think you care enough about magic to believe there is some potential here. Just give me a chance to do so before you make a permanent choice.”

It only took a second for Tom to answer his plea, but to Harry, it felt like ages.

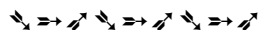
“Okay.”

Okay? Really? Fuck.

He had been expecting more of a fight, but he could work with this.

“You won't regret it, I promise.”

Tom sighed, a defeatist approach to his stance taking shape. “I already have.”



“So let me get this straight. Me from another universe destroyed your life because of a prophecy, forced your hand into killing him, yet when you figured out another version of him was your soulmate, you jumped through dimensions, which you *knew* was most likely a permanent decision, all in order to meet me? Even though you believed I was just like him and you didn't even know I was going to still be in Hogwarts and not an irredeemable homicidal maniac?”

It wasn't the first time Harry had been confronted with the sheer absurdity of his actions, but it still hit him just the same.

“...Pretty much, yes.”

Tom didn't call him stupid or naive, however. When he spoke, it was with curiosity lacing that single word.

“Why?”

“I guess... I guess I was so used to the adrenaline he brought me that everything felt empty without him.”

Tom chuckled, and Harry had to stop himself from scowling at him. “That’s really fucked up. You truly have no survival instinct.” Well, it was partially true, at least, so he wasn’t *too* angry at his remark. “So then you decided the best possible option was to sabotage all my plans in order to make me powerless? How was that supposed to make me like you?”

To that, Harry had an answer ready.

“I wasn’t trying to change your feelings toward me. I don’t think I have the power to do something like that, and I wouldn’t want to force it either. I wasn’t lying when I told I wanted to make sure you weren’t going too far. It’s more important to me that you don’t become a bad person than anything else.”

It was the truth, after all, regardless of what his heart wanted.

“So this is your savior complex talking.”

Had Tom and Hermione been consorting or something?

“Merlin, I hate that term. ‘Savior complex.’ Is wanting the world to become a better place having a savior complex? If so, shouldn’t all of us strive to have savior complexes?”

“It’s not about wanting good things for the world, Evans. It’s the lengths you’re willing to go to make it so when it isn’t your sole responsibility. It’s the fact that you’re self-sacrificing again, even though you don’t need to.”

Harry didn’t want to hear it; he didn’t want to reckon with it, even if he was well aware it was the reality, so he got defensive.

“I don’t know any other way to be. I don’t know how to see my life as worth more than other people’s, and I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing.”

Tom smirked at him, but Harry could swear there was something akin to sadness in his eyes.

“I would love to see what goes on inside that brain of yours. How you can see muggle-borns as just as great as anyone else, but not yourself, a half-blood who already died once to save the entire world?”

Harry shook his head in disagreement. “It’s not the same thing. I was born to handle it. I was *raised* to handle it. Before I was even a concept in someone’s mind, I was meant to serve this purpose. It wasn’t a choice, it wasn’t me being selfless, it was just me fulfilling a predetermined duty.”

It was clear by the way that Tom scoffed that he wasn’t convinced. “Was it really? Did magic force you to go on the run for months, to walk into the Forbidden Forest and give yourself up to Voldemort?”

Harry paused. “No, but if I hadn’t... If I *hadn’t*, everyone would have hated me. I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself. I was the only one who could stop him. There was no one else.”

“But it’s over now. There is no prophecy here. You aren’t meant to stop me.”

That was such a simplistic view of the whole thing, Harry thought. He wouldn’t think like that if he had had to live through it on Harry’s side of the equation.

“Aren’t I? I think our marks make it very clear this was more than just some impulsive decision on my part. I was meant to be here.”

Tom hummed in appraisal.

“To be here, yes, maybe. But there’s nothing else written in the stars. You can choose now.”

Harry sighed, suddenly feeling very drained by the whole thing. “I can’t even see the options in front of me. They all depend on you.”

His whole life had been dictated by Tom. This was just an extension of it.

Tom threw his hands up in the air, a surprisingly dramatic gesture of frustration, and surprised Harry yet again with his choice of words. “*Fine*. Fine, then. I will give you *carte blanche*. You’ve already fucked up half of what I planned for this year anyway. For whatever time we have left here in Hogwarts, you can choose. You can put all your efforts on me or on converting my Knights, whatever is most pressing to you.”

No way.

“You would seriously give up on your plans that easily? Just let me further mess with what you’ve been building for almost a decade?”

To that, Tom smirked maliciously, making Harry painfully aware of how attractive he was, even when being questionable. “Who says anything about giving up? Tell me, Harry, what do you really know about my plans? You know I recruited the Knights because of their scope of influence, but what do you think I’m even working towards?”

In that moment, Harry actually stopped and thought about it. What *was* Tom actually planning?

Even with Voldemort, all Harry had truly been aware of was the chaos, the methods, the ideals behind his actions, but never the actual goals. When he had taken over the Ministry, it had become clearer, but way before Harry had been born, Voldemort had been alive for a long time; he had been much more influential, at his peak, even, back then, yet no one seemed to talk about what his goals had actually been, almost as if they hadn’t mattered at all in the grand scheme of things.

Harry decided to be honest, then.

“I don’t know.”

The boy in front of him nodded slowly, almost condescendingly, as if expecting this answer. “The thing is, Evans, that I was never mad that you were *corrupting* my Knights, or turning them into good people or something. That was never the actual problem. If anything, that works in my favor.” He started pacing around the lake, and Harry hurried along to keep up with him. “The whole pureblood supremacy act was just that, an act. It was the method to keep their attention, never the actual goal. I didn’t know if I could trust you, or what you wanted. I didn’t know if you were powerful enough to join me, and you were too chaotic to keep in line – *that’s* why we fought so much, and you kept pushing back without even listening. It’s because you are trying to *take them over* that I am so angry. If we could work together, if we *can* both keep the Knights on our side without alienating them too much from each other and their pureblood families, then we can actually make a difference in the wizarding society. When I told you to behave, to *obey*, I didn’t mean for you to become a slave.” He stopped abruptly then, almost making Harry fall on top of him, and turned around to look into his eyes. “I wanted you to not be scared to do what it takes. To not be scared to lead.”

Harry had no words left – *this* had been the last thing he’d expected Tom to say when he had gotten up that morning.

The intensity behind Tom’s eyes was like a force field, and Harry couldn’t look away even if he wanted to.

And he really, really didn’t want to.

“Sometimes you need to establish yourself by the rules in order to break them, it doesn’t matter how unfair they seem.”

That was Tom Riddle at his best, his most confident. Harry wasn’t sure if he believed him, but he wanted to, and if the passion with which Tom spoke was any indication, there was some truth to his words. Harry just wasn’t aware of the degree of it.

After all, this wasn’t the first time Tom had tried to manipulate him. He just didn’t know whether it was half his fault for not being honest from the very beginning if Tom felt the need to.

He decided to resort to hypotheticals, then.

“*If* I were to join you... What would that entail? Because I want to make something very clear here: I will not hurt other people or spread pureblood supremacy ideals for you. I need to know everything you want to accomplish. I’ll try my best to be open to the nuances of this whole thing, but I won’t submit to you.”

“I’m not expecting you to.”

Harry felt more confident in himself as he answered, “Good. Because if I’m going to be there, I want to be a sort of moral compass, *not* a follower. You get too caught up in manipulating people to your side to realize that if you are acting as if you were a blood purist, saying all the talking points of blood supremacy, using it as your selling point, and punishing people for not complying, then there is no difference between you and a real blood

supremacist. Not really.” That was what he wanted Tom to understand – that he was doing himself no favors by acting like this. “And, you know, I have talked to the Knights. I don’t think any of them truly know what your real intentions are. They’re all terrified of you, Tom. The ways you choose to keep them in line...”

Tom waved him away in a rather blasé manner. “It’s the only way.”

Harry *hated* being dismissed.

“I refuse to believe that. Loyalty and servitude are two different things, you know.”

Tom scoffed again, and restarted his pacing. “Are they? Which one do you think lasts longer?”

Harry frowned. “Does the only value of a friend lie in how they can’t choose to leave your side?”

Tom had his hands on his back, and his jaw was locked tight as he spoke.

“They aren’t my friends. They’re allies. And everyone, *everyone* in Slytherin is self-serving. There *is* no real loyalty, just the illusion of it. I can’t rely on it alone.”

“I think the fact that most of them were desperate to leave you because of your ways speaks a different kind of truth.”

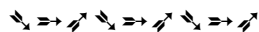
Tom sighed. It was clear it was taxing for him to keep up the beliefs he’s had for years when he was seeing them fail him in real time, but Harry felt no pity, only relief.

The truth hurt, but in his experience, it always set them free.

“That is why I want you here. I need another perspective.”

When Harry smiled, it was the most genuine one he’d had so far.

“That I can do.”



Tom was holding back, and Harry could tell he had many more questions about the things he had told him, but, for some reason, he wasn’t asking them.

Was he expecting Harry to take charge of the conversation?

Harry sat down again, this time closer to the water, and gestured for Tom to join him, which he did.

“Which Horcruxes do you have?”

Harry knew he most definitely had the diary – the circumstances in this universe were too identical to the other one for that to not be the case. But who knew if Tom hadn’t somehow made others that didn’t involve his family?

He still wasn’t convinced Tom wasn’t planning some sort of revenge against him for his plans, so Harry was on edge as he waited for Tom’s reaction to his question.

Tom, however, was still acting just as mild-mannered as before as he spoke again.

“Just the diary.”

He didn’t say anything else, just staring at the distance, but Harry needed to understand. He needed to know the nuances of *this* Tom beyond select memories in a Pensieve.

“I get why you wanted to become immortal, I guess, but murder? I just... I know you can have a hard time with seeing right from wrong outside of power, but–”

Tom was already shaking his head before Harry had even finished speaking.

“Myrtle was an accident. She was just *there*. Dumbledore... He hates me. I was seen as evil in Wool’s, and nothing changed when I came to Hogwarts. I had to protect myself for my reckless behavior, because there would be no understanding, no second chances for someone like me. I acted rash because I wanted to fulfill what I saw as my birthright as the Heir of Slytherin, but I knew no one else would see it that way, especially not him.”

Harry nodded. It made sense, but...

“But it *was* her, right? That–”

“I used her death for a Horcrux, yes, but I don’t relish in mindless torture. It all has a point. Always.”

“What if the point behind it is still wrong?”

Justified murder was still murder, after all.

“Then I’ll need proof of it. It isn’t easy for me to just know what is right or wrong, like you said. It doesn’t mean I’m a sadist, but I don’t have this instinct, this gut feeling pointing me to it. But if you can show me,” Tom said, looking directly at Harry this time, “then I’ll listen.”

There was anxiety swimming in a crescendo inside of Harry now. He had taken the responsibility for himself, he knew that, but it still scared him, the thought that he would now have to serve as this man’s sole moral compass.

“How did it feel like?” Tom’s voice was lower than usual, wistful. It did things to Harry, the way it reverberated around his rib cage from how close they were standing to each other.

He responded in kind. “What?”

“To be my Horcrux.”

He had been waiting for this question. For a much longer period than he had expected to, as well.

“I thought you would never ask.”

Tom’s sigh sounded more like a huffing laugh. “I wanted to give you some space before bombarding you with questions about it. I know I’m not the best at empathy, but even I can see that wasn’t the point of your story.”

Harry thought about lying. He thought about the ways he could quash any fascination Tom might have over the things Voldemort had done.

But he did not want to, because Tom was clearly trying in a way he wasn’t used to needing to.

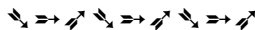
“Safe.” At Tom’s disbelieving look, he amended his statement. “Don’t get me wrong – when he was angry, it hurt like hell, like being awash by the tides of his hatred. And I knew it was almost always toward me. But after knowing it was because I housed a piece of his soul... I can’t explain it, but... eventually, in an odd way, it felt like being loved by him. He knew we were connected and he was much stronger than me, I mean, he even exploited the connection to send me specific visions. He clearly knew what he was doing much more than I did, and yet, he let me in. He let me feel what he was feeling, and there wasn’t anything anywhere as intimate as that.”

It was one of the reasons why he had been feeling numb, *hollow*, for such a long time after Voldemort had died. Why he had felt so happy knowing he’d at least gotten to keep one thing that connected the two of them with his ability to speak Parseltongue, as broken and unnatural as it felt now.

Tom’s deep voice was tinged with insecurity as he asked, “Do you still feel the same way, with me here? Does it still feel like we have a connection?”

There was no doubt in Harry’s mind as he answered.

“Yes. The Horcrux is gone, but the feeling never left. It just transferred to you.”



Their conversation got into a standstill after that, and Harry expected Tom to leave right after, considering how willing to bypass the soulmate affair he was by acting much more interested on Harry’s story.

Instead, he lingered, now standing and silently watching the way the water on the Black Lake danced and reflected the morning sun, and Harry felt a little braver.

“You know everything about me now, but I don’t know much about you outside of him.”

Tom blinked, and looked at him. There was a light blush on his cheeks when he said, “You shouldn’t expect me to fall in love with you *just like that*, Evans.”

What?

He...

He thought Harry was trying to expand on the fact they were soulmates. Tom thought he was *flirting with him*.

“Harry. You can just call me Harry from now on.” He loved the way Tom said his name, though he wouldn’t admit to that. “And... not love, no, not that fast. But...” That was an insane leap to take, but the hardest part was already over. “Maybe we could start somewhere? Like with attraction?”

The blush that still hadn’t faded on Tom’s cheeks turned crimson, and Harry rejoiced at the view, ignoring how his probably looked the exact same way.

“Attraction does not equal intent, *Harry*,” he said, exasperated.

Harry knew that, but he was much more focused on the other part of that sentence. “So you *are* attracted to me.” His grin grew wider, and he knew he was coming off a bit arrogant, but he didn’t care.

Still, Tom did not deny it. “Against my better judgment.”

Observing him brought Harry a new sense of curiosity. He had never thought of Tom Riddle as a shy person, but it seemed the boy contained multitudes. When it came to power, he was in control of everything and everyone – he knew how to manipulate people’s desires, secrets, and aspirations, and he knew magic and its inner workings. He knew how to intimidate and how to flatter, but that didn’t mean Tom knew his way around feelings. Emotions were the ultimate unpredictable factor, and when it came to them, Tom was a mess.

It was good, then, that Harry was a lot more skilled at handling the ups and downs of it.

Harry approached Tom, slow and gentle yet unmistakably determined in his stride. Tom didn’t move, just watched him with his eyes low to compensate for their height difference, but Harry knew he was nervous. Tom was exceptional at hiding the emotions threatening to spill onto his face, but he couldn’t conceal them entirely, not with the way that his body language betrayed him. Everything about the way he stood unnaturally still to the way he was swallowing dryly at the sight of him – everything let Harry know he wasn’t wrong in assuming Tom wanted him.

Tom Riddle was like a cat, in a way – if he didn’t want something, he left; if he felt threatened, he attacked. Harry couldn’t make him do anything he didn’t want to, and his stance only encouraged Harry forward, giving him a confidence he didn’t usually feel.

When he stopped, he did so much closer to the other boy than he had in previous times. It was unfairly attractive, the way he had to pull his head back to look up at Tom's towering frame, and how Tom's already dark eyes were bordering on black, something indescribable behind their gaze.

He didn't want to scare Tom away, and it felt like a fight between his will and his desires, his mind and his muscles to move slow, to not kiss him right then and there.

Harry couldn't stop his hand, however, from exploring the expanse of Tom's body – he touched his surprisingly muscled arm, feeling his body heat even over his cloak, and moved his fingers all the way through his neck to his face, his heart beating faster as he felt the texture of Tom's skin.

He didn't miss how Tom's breathing became more and more shallow as he went from his cheek to his eyes and all the way to his mouth. Harry watched all of Tom's reactions with fascination and curiosity, and he didn't think at all as he put a finger to his slightly agape mouth, getting closer and closer to sliding it in as Tom jerked away.

“Stop.”

Harry froze immediately, shame building up in his stomach.

I...

Fuck.

Did I go too far?

Harry tried to keep his mind at the present moment, however, not wanting to lose himself in his guilt and not be there for Tom.

He saw, however, how Tom didn't seem angry or upset, nor did he put much distance between the two of them at all.

“I didn't think you'd listen to me,” he said, voice hoarse and quiet, eyes cast down.

His words hit Harry like a punch to the gut.

Why wouldn't Harry listen to him when he told him to stop?

He couldn't help but have a really, really bad feeling over the hidden meaning behind Tom's words.

How many times did people not listen when he said no?

Harry refused to be another one of them; he would never make Tom feel like his consent didn't matter.

“I only want what you want, Tom. If you're not willing, then I'm not either,” he proclaimed, meaning every word. Harry took a step back, prepared to leave, but his breath got caught in

his throat by the way Tom's hand gripped his shirt and pulled him forward.

Tom's lips crashed into his, and Harry saw stars.

There was no time for thoughts to even form in his head, however, as the kiss ended as abruptly as it started.

"I... I don't—" Tom stuttered as he pulled away, and ran a hand through his hair as he separated himself from Harry, a look of shock and confusion on his face.

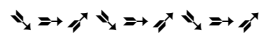
It was like he hadn't intended at all on doing what he did. Harry's stomach did somersaults as he tried to gauge what it all meant, his feelings going on overdrive.

This wasn't about him, however – Tom was the one who needed comfort.

"Tom, it's okay," he reassured him, a sense of nervousness – and oddly enough – possessiveness building inside him as he saw the shade of pink that spread around Tom's cheeks and lips, looking more like shame than mere embarrassment. "I want this too."

"No, that's not... I need time, just..." He kept stuttering, and Harry's brain, rather unhelpfully, remarked on the unusual-ness of it. Tom took a deep breath, however, and a look of grim determination set onto his face. "Meet me here at midnight. We'll talk then, and I'll know what to do about... all of this."

Midnight, Harry thought, as he nodded and looked down. *Hopefully the carriage won't turn back into a pumpkin by then.*



It was pitch black outside of the castle, the kind of black that almost had a liquid quality to it, more tar than a dark screen. The only two sources of light came from the tips of their wands, and Harry's was dimmer than the other's.

The other wand was Tom's, of course, and it illuminated his face as he sat down by the Black Lake. Harry's steps seemed to startle him as he turned around in the grass rather forcefully to face him.

Harry tried to not feel nervous as he saw his reaction. *He was waiting for me, right? He knew I would show up.*

Harry shook his head, focusing on his steps. He joined him in the grass, careful not to get too close, and remained quiet. *Your move*, his brain whispered, and as if he had read his mind, Tom cleared his throat.

"I want to try something. Can I?"

His voice was so thin and strained that Harry felt his own disappear, so he only nodded in response, trying to ignore the eagerness that clawed at his throat and yelled at him to react.

Tom scooted closer to him, his breathing soft and warm against Harry's face. He remained like that, and Harry had to find every shred of self-control he had to not bridge the gap between them.

Tom got even closer, his nose traveling through Harry's skin, leaving Harry a blushing mess in its path.

"I don't think I have ever—" Tom didn't finish his sentence; instead, he looked at Harry's lips, causing Harry to bite them in a self-aware motion.

The action seemed to have an effect on Tom, as the boy gulped air into his lungs rather roughly. "I don't understand this, this urge..."

Merlin, Harry thought, and once again he found himself having to hold back from everything he wanted to do, the way he wanted to reach out to the boy in front of him.

Make him mine, Harry's brain continued on, making him blush at what the thought was hinting towards. It made him realize how he had been wanting this for much longer than he had initially thought.

Tom didn't seem to notice Harry's inner struggle as he kept speaking. "It's like every part of your skin is calling mine."

Please.

Tom's eyes widened, and Harry realized he had said that out loud. *Fuck.*

"I want to try something else now."

All Harry could do at that moment was nod eagerly, incapable of finding the words inside his scrambled brain, and Tom took it as all the encouragement he needed.

Harry shuddered at the contact of Tom's lips against his, and nearly whimpered as the boy moved away again, only stopping when he saw the look on his face.

"Are you okay? Is this okay?" Tom asked, a look of concern so genuine it brought a smile to Harry's face.

What came out of his mouth was nothing more than a whisper. "It's more than okay."

Tom gave him a questioning look, and Harry confirmed it silently, their lips connecting once more. This time, there was no sign of stopping from either of them.

It started sweet and uncertain from Tom's part, but Harry could feel him getting more and more confident as Harry reciprocated avidly. It was clear Tom was inexperienced, but in a way, so was Harry – and there wasn't a single thing about the kiss that made him regard it as anything less than perfect.

Harry couldn't help another smile taking over his face as Tom brought a hand to his face, keeping him close in a gesture that was a little too purposeful to not feel possessive.

Fuck, I really like this.

It definitely shouldn't have surprised Harry as much as it did.

Harry could feel Tom was also smiling, and he opened his eyes, not wanting to miss it for the world.

Tom's innate confidence was clearly back, the grin both cocky and blissful, and Harry gave into the urge and kissed him harder, deeper, his head tilted as his tongue searched for Tom's.

The sound Tom made bordered on animalistic, and Harry moved closer, settling in between Tom's open legs, Harry's on both sides of the boy's body.

For a second, he wondered if Tom would have the same reaction from before at his hasty approach, but he was surprised by the way his arms touched Harry's back, pulling his closer to him until almost every part of them was touching.

"Fuck," Harry muttered, and Tom laughed softly. He kissed Harry again, gentle and short kisses that hit Harry even harder than the ones before. They were so *affectionate*, like Tom was choosing to show him he was cared for instead of just superficially desired, and Harry wanted to make Tom feel like he was feeling, like his heart was about to fly out of his chest.

"Hey," he whispered, kissing Tom's cheek, then his forehead, then his eyelids. Tom exhaled, a shuddering little thing, and the only thing that came onto Harry's mind at the sight was the word *cute*. "You're beautiful," however, was what came out of his mouth, as apparently he was unable to stop his thoughts from turning into spoken words.

Why would he want to, though – he reasoned with himself – when every time he did Tom had a reaction like *that*?

Tom retracted a bit, but only enough to look at Harry.

"I promised myself this would just be an experiment," he said, low and deep and vulnerable, eyes drooping in uncertainty. "I promised myself I wouldn't want this."

There was a small sharp and stabbing sensation on Harry's heart as he heard Tom's words, and he tried to tell himself he didn't mind it, that he didn't care that Tom wanted to fight this as much as he did.

He needed to know the answer, though, even if it left him in pieces.

"And did you break that promise?"

There was a pause filled with silence before he answered, and the anticipation almost swallowed Harry whole.

Tom had a tiny, almost impossible to spot smile when he spoke. “I do it every time I look at you... Every time I think of you.”

How is he like this? How does he always know what to say?

“Do— Do you regret it?” Harry tried to instill confidence into his words, but he didn’t really think he would be able to, not when they were still so close to each other, not as Tom said things like these.

“Not right now, no.”

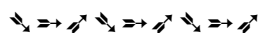
Would he do so the minute they left?

Would things go back to the way they were before, when the magic of that time was gone and the shadows no longer played on their skin, obscuring the reality of it all under their enveloping embrace?

Harry was scared of leaving, scared of it ending. But, most of all, he was scared of how he had let himself get so caught up in it.

Because he knew that the minute things went back to normal, it would like hurt like nothing he had ever felt before... but that he wouldn’t trade this, still, for anything else in the world.

Harry sighed, and whispered softly into Tom’s ear. “Happy birthday, Tom.”



Chapter End Notes

This chapter’s opening quote is from a really beautiful speech that I got to experience being read by one of my favorite actors, Andrew Scott, and honestly, I think everyone deserves to hear it, so here it is, if you’re interested:

https://youtu.be/wM_-O8GREGA

CHAPTER 9. PART TWO. I MYSELF AM A QUESTION WHICH IS ADDRESSED TO THE WORLD.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON OCTOBER 5TH, 2023.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote by Carl Jung.

“Is intelligence always good? I wonder. What if intelligence is wasted? What if intelligence leads to more loneliness rather than to fulfillment? What if instead of productivity and clarity, it generates pain, isolation, and regret?”

- I’m Thinking of Ending Things, 2016, Iain Reid

CHAPTER 9 – PART TWO – I MYSELF AM A QUESTION WHICH IS ADDRESSED TO THE WORLD.

OR, *SAFE VS. FREE*

DECEMBER 31st

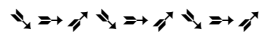
HERMIONE

When Hermione woke up on December 31st, the primary sense to hit her was smell.

It was too early for potions brewing, yet something sickly sweet permeated the air around her, the fragrance identical to that of the night-blooming jasmine flower.

The castle had been mostly vacant since the other students had left for the holidays, but one of her roommates had stayed behind with her – Charlotte Prewett, a self-assured yet unassuming girl. She was a Potions prodigy, Hermione had noticed, always brewing and trying new concoctions for class to discuss with Slughorn. There *was* no new assignment this time, however, but the smell lingered nonetheless, so potent Hermione could feel it coating her tongue, almost being able to taste it.

It was making her nauseous, and not even holding her pillow to her face seemed to drown it out. Sighing, she got up from her bed, and started to prepare for the day ahead as she tried to ignore the aftereffects of her panic attack from the day before still clinging to her like cigarette smoke.



The mysterious potion was being bottled in their bathroom, of all places.

The fumes were particularly strong as Hermione looked inside, and she resisted the urge to cough. Charlotte had her red hair up in a ponytail and a focused look on her eye, too entranced by her task to notice Hermione watching her from the door frame.

Once she had concluded that particular bottling process, Hermione cleared her throat.

Charlotte all but jumped, and when she turned to look at her, it was with her face scrunched up in mild annoyance.

“Do you usually brew potions in the bathroom or is this some sort of new year’s ritual?” Hermione asked good-naturedly, trying to get the girl’s bad mood to subside.

Charlotte huffed, exasperated, and straightened her back. “Hi, Hermione. This isn’t exactly a school-related batch. Thank Merlin for magically transportable boilers.”

Hermione smiled at her, and quietly wondered whether it would be too invasive to ask what it was for.

Charlotte, however, saved her from the possibly embarrassing question by answering it herself. “It’s for Lucy. She has these horrible headaches almost every day. She pays me to brew these from time to time, keep her stash stocked up. This is some strong stuff, too. I don’t envy her in the slightest.”

“Oh.” Hermione had no idea. “That sucks.”

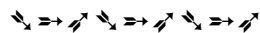
“Yeah. I can usually do these in the classroom, but professor Slughorn has some sort of project that he’s preparing for, so I’m banished. According to him, I ‘spend too much time there anyway,’” Charlotte replied, doing a poor imitation of Slughorn’s voice that had Hermione amused, and rolled her eyes, a fond smile on her face.

There was an awkward pause, then, and Hermione wanted nothing more than to find the perfect excuse to leave. “I, um... I’m going to the Great Hall. Are you coming with?”

It was more of a filler question than anything else; it was clear from Charlotte’s cauldron that she had quite a bit of bottling to do still.

“I got to finish this.” Charlotte shrugged. “See you later.”

Hermione waved to her, feeling her own headache seeming to form, and went back into the dorm, her thoughts on Lucretia and all the secrets she kept locked inside her mind.



Hermione really didn’t want to bump into Riddle that day. It didn’t matter that he didn’t know the spell hadn’t worked; she had gotten triggered at the encounter, and the last thing she wanted was to have to relive that and all the memories it evoked.

Plus, she knew exactly what this day was – December 31st was Tom Riddle’s seventeenth birthday, and the possibilities of him looking for Harry to discuss his soulmark were high, meaning that, to avoid Riddle, she would probably have to avoid her best friend too. It wasn’t like he wouldn’t want the privacy as well; it made sense to take the day off. Harry could take care of himself if things went awry, she told herself, even if it went against everything her brain yelled at her. After all, he *was* a talented wizard, though he denied it frequently.

Hermione sunk her fingernails into her palms, and tried to let the pain ground her and keep her from intervening. She was often too overprotective and incapable of staying away, and she knew she had to give him the space, so she decided to spend the day reading instead. She had no intention of keeping what Tom had done from Harry, but it could wait one more day.

Just one more day.

She walked around the castle surreptitiously, taking any and all shortcuts on her way to the library. Mrs. Blackwood had given her another, longer-lasting pass for the Restricted Section, and she decided to spend the day researching whatever she could find about the Veil.

Hermione remembered when Harry had shared with her what he had seen on the Forest, holding on to the Resurrection Stone – he distinctively recalled seeing Sirius alongside his parents and Remus, but all signs pointed to Sirius surviving the Veil. Unless the last few weeks had been a death-related hallucination (which she severely doubted, especially when confronted with what the Unspeakables had told her), the Veil was a portal to another universe, not a portal to death. He was still alive.

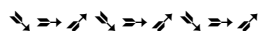
But it wasn’t as if the Resurrection Stone actually brought people back to life either way. It was possible the visions one experienced when in possession of it were nothing more than that – visions.

It certainly fit the description of it on *The Tale of the Three Brothers*.

Questions like that were the reason why Hermione desperately wanted to go to the Department of Mysteries. She wanted to sit down with the Unspeakables from this universe, get to see this world's version of the Veil up close, because there *must* be one; she and Harry had been transported directly into Hogwarts, not the Ministry, but something inside her insisted that there must be a similar one in this universe. Her time in the Ministry had barely scratched the surface of her knowledge about the wonders of the DoM. They had been annoyingly secretive about it, and she wanted to correct that if she could.

But Hermione wouldn't go alone. She was a competent witch and could hold her own if push came to shove, but it was the Department of Mysteries, after all, and she didn't want to exclude Harry from it. She wanted to understand more about their experience, and they were both intertwined in that whole mess. The Unspeakables would benefit from both of their presences.

Hermione kept up her research, and promised herself she would talk it over with Harry the next day.

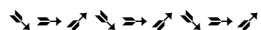


HARRY

As Harry lay his head down on his pillow that night, he realized he might have been a bit too hasty in the way he opened himself up to Tom.

He didn't regret it, *not at all*, and he was glad Tom had so promptly believed him, but it wasn't as easy as just being honest when it came to the two of them. Honesty was paramount and the very foundation on which anything could be built at all, but it was not the end all be all, not when they were fundamentally very different people.

Harry and Tom had walked into their dorm together, hours after, smiles on both of their faces, and the warmth inside of Harry's chest had shown no signs of fading. Now, as he looked across the room at his soulmate, serene in his sleep and with no frown troubling his face, Harry decided he should take the opportunity presented the next day as the last before the Knights returned and finish clearing the air between them the best he could.



JANUARY 1st

Tom's soft greeting was the first thing Harry heard as he woke up on January 1st, and he briefly wondered if he had died in his sleep and been sent to heaven.

"Hey," he responded the same way, feeling himself beam at his soulmate before he even opened his eyes to the morning light.

As he did, however, Harry yelped, and Tom let out a full-hearted laugh at Harry's surprise. Tom wasn't in his own bed, but standing right next to his.

Harry put a hand to his chest, feeling how his heart was beating fast, and scowled at Tom. "Merlin, Tom, that was so unnecessary."

Tom had a soft smile plastered on his face, his dark eyes shining. "Happy new year."

Harry's faux upset look melted at the sight, and he stuck out a hand from under his blankets. Before Tom could even react, Harry wrapped it around his collar and pulled him into the bed, kissing him.

Tom fell on top of him, face bright red, and he rushed to sit down properly, with Harry watching, amused.

"What was that?" Tom asked, his tone a little hoarse. He combed through his hair with his right hand, but didn't look at Harry once.

"I—" Harry began, but upon truly looking at Tom, he changed his trajectory. "Sorry."

Tom blinked, finally looking in his direction.

"It's okay. I, um... Just didn't expect it, that's all," he replied, a shy undertone to his voice.

Harry rushed to correct himself, feeling flustered. "That was stupid of me. This is really new, I don't want to mess it up."

Tom didn't answer him right away; instead, he got up, looking out the window into the light-dappled depths of the Black Lake. When he did speak, it was with an oddly distant cadence.

"I didn't hate it."

The words made Harry wince as he sat up in bed.

That was Tom's frame of reference?

"I'll make sure next time you'll do more than tolerate it, then."

Tom looked like he wanted to fight Harry's assertion, but he only nodded instead. He sat down on Orion's bed as Harry got up and put his glasses on.

Harry paused. Without Orion and Abraxas there, the dorm felt a little too empty, and he couldn't help but feel self-conscious.

"I, um— I have to shower," he said, feeling incredibly awkward in place.

Something in Tom's gaze softened at him, though, and Harry couldn't help but smile a bit. Tom always seemed to bring out emotions he didn't expect, for better or for worse.

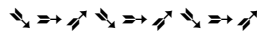
How am I already this fucking whipped? He doesn't even need to smile for me to feel like I want to drag him back to bed with me.

"Okay," was Tom's only response.

Right. "Will you wait for me, then? There's some stuff we still need to talk about. Plus... I want to spend the day with you, if that's okay."

He felt vulnerable saying it, like he was on the cusp of rejection, but he needn't be, as Tom gave him a closed-lip smile, that, while subdued, felt genuine.

"I'll be here."



TOM

As he waited for Harry to come out of the bathroom, Tom couldn't help the thoughts swirling around in his head.

There was, of course, the anxiety surrounding what Harry wanted to talk about. Tom was well aware there was an ocean of unspoken words between them. The fact that his anger had dissipated that fast hadn't escaped him, and that brought back into his mind the next thing that was worrying him.

What he was feeling.

Tom had never cared about romance in the past. He had wondered about it, of course, but curiosity was hardly the same as desire, and he often felt on the outskirts of that particular teenage experience. He didn't know if he should blame his childhood *incidents* on it or not, but he didn't think that was the case. Not feeling attracted to anyone had always felt natural to Tom – there had never been any obvious connection he could feel between those two things.

But he knew that, if he were to feel anything, it would be toward boys, not girls. As a child, he had felt drawn to the other boys in Wool's – it was, perhaps, one of the reasons why some

of them picked on him, as if they could *feel* Tom's unnaturalness. After he had joined the wizarding world, he had soon realized liking boys wasn't the abomination the priests and Mrs. Cole made it out to be, but sometimes he was struck by those feelings, by the intrusive thoughts that told him everyone could see who he was, that they were disgusted by it.

But even when he had a version of these feelings, they were never the full thing. It often took Tom longer to feel anything other than indifference toward another boy, and even as he grew older, those feelings were never sexual in nature. He had never had a real crush either, before, and the sheer intensity of what he was feeling now scared him.

Was it soulmate magic that was to blame?

The worst thing to Tom was thinking, deep down, that he didn't even care if it meant he could feel like this forever.

Every time he tried to focus on anything else, he saw green eyes and black hair in his mind's eye. It was Harry's laugh, Harry's smile, Harry's words, *Harry's everything*, and that scared him. It had been so long since Tom had last felt scared and threatened by anything, but his own feelings did both. If it were only Harry the perpetrator, then he could deal with that, but he knew he was just as guilty.

They were both feeding whatever this was.

And when Harry touched him, well...

It was like everything was on fire, in a good *and* bad way. He wanted it so bad it hurt, but whenever he wasn't the one initiating it, he couldn't stop his brain and his body from recoiling, literally and figuratively. Tom wasn't used to touch, he wasn't used to *being wanted*, and he didn't know how to say no. He didn't want to, but the fact that he felt himself freeze and the words get stuck on his throat the second Harry touched him made the whole thing a lot more jarring.

He needed to have more control, but he was scared of pushing him away by taking it or asking to go a bit slower.

The only reason why he hadn't immediately fled the situation was because he could tell Harry respected him. It hadn't always been that way, especially in Slytherin, but Harry was willing to do whatever he asked when it came to this, and that helped Tom breathe through it instead of reacting. That first moment when Harry had stepped away the second he had told him to, when he had said he only wanted what Tom wanted... Tom had never felt anything like it. For the first time, he hadn't been able to help himself, and he had kissed him. It only lasted a second, but it had been enough for him to realize he was in a lot of trouble.

Because Tom Riddle had never done anything in halves, and whatever he wanted, he didn't stop until he had it.

And as Harry came out of the shower, shirtless and with his hair dripping water on the floor, Tom knew he desperately wanted him.

“What?” Harry asked him, a curious look on his gorgeous face.

Ugh. Shut up, brain.

“Nothing.”

Harry didn’t answer; instead, he just watched him, and Tom saw as a smirk started to bloom on his lips.

“Merlin, what?” Tom asked, a bit too aggressive, but Harry just kept smirking at him. He licked his lips, still looking at Tom, and cocked his head.

“Come here.”

Tom was well aware of the fact that Harry was half-naked, and the way he had said those two words, with no shame at all...

It did *something* to him. It also brought a knot to his stomach.

Don’t look anywhere but his face.

Tom forced himself to move, stopping close enough to Harry for their faces to almost touch, but not enough for their bodies to do the same. Something about him, however, must have warned Harry of his conflicting feelings, because he frowned.

“I’m doing something wrong, aren’t I?”

“No!” Tom was quick to intervene. “No.”

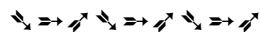
Harry’s face softened at his vehemency, but not completely, and his green eyes remained narrowed in his direction. “But *something* is wrong.”

Tom sighed. “Not you. Never you.”

Harry looked down, but Tom saw on his lips a hint of a smile. “Will you tell me?”

How could he even find a place to start? “You should put on a shirt first. It’s distracting.”

Harry chuckled, mischief back in his eyes. “Will do.”



“So?”

Tom had no idea how to answer him.

He didn't want to think if he had made the best decision of his life or the worst, not yet, not as he was still feeling high from their encounter at midnight and the awakening of feelings he didn't know he could even feel. But it was obvious he couldn't avoid it forever – not his emotions, and not his behaviors.

Harry's eyes were on him. He looked concerned.

Tom wanted to scream into a pillow.

“Can we maybe do this later?”

Harry opened his mouth to argue, presumably, but Tom interrupted him by caressing his cheek. Harry leaned into it, eyes closed, and he took the opportunity to keep talking. “Didn't you want to talk about something?”

Eyes now open, Harry appraised him, as if assessing his intentions.

He began speaking, and while his cadence was hesitant, the look on his face was determined. “What we've talked about yesterday... I want to do it. I want us to work together, but there are too many unspoken things between us, and those need to be addressed first.”

Tom tried to hide the way he winced.

Like how I Obliviated your best friend?

Well, no one had ever said Tom Riddle was flawless in the execution of things.

The Knights would be back tomorrow and things would take a turn yet again, so if there was a best time to sort this out, it was now.

He nodded. “Okay.”

“I guess I should start by asking you how you really feel about muggle-borns. I'm half-blood, but my mother was a muggle-born and so is my best friend, and it's important to me that you don't see blood status as something relevant to determine whether someone is capable or not.” Harry still had that serious face on, and Tom couldn't deny it was incredibly endearing.

Still, he felt a tad defensive regarding Harry's question. He was guarded about his true beliefs for a reason, after all, and that was because nothing good had ever come from being overt about them.

Tom just didn't have the privilege of going against the status quo as a muggle-born in Slytherin.

“I think you know how I feel about muggle-borns.”

Harry didn't back down. “I would prefer to hear you say it.”

Tom sighed in exhaustion. “Muggle-borns are fine, Harry. You were right that first time in the library when you said muggle-borns are necessary. You were also right when you guessed I

was just clinging to the prejudice as a talking point to recruit purebloods to the cause. Is this good enough for you?”

There was a hint of a smile in Harry’s lips. “For now.”

Tom rolled his eyes at him. “You are a rather annoying force of nature.”

He had no idea why he liked the other boy so much.

Harry full-on smiled then. “So are you. But I need to ask you something.”

Here we go.

“Go ahead.”

“Do you want me to join you because I’m a nuisance and that would destroy your only competition or because you actually want to try and have something with me?”

Tom both suppressed a smirk and what he felt at having Harry ask if he *wanted something* with him. “Both.”

He watched as Harry pulled at his hair, making it even more messy than usual, and his heart did a weird thing at the sight. “Smartass. Okay. So you need to know there are a few lines I won’t cross.”

“Like what?” *Noble as always.*

“The thing with Charlus Potter. It can’t come to fruition.”

And *there* it was. The catch. Reality crashing down.

“Look, I see why you wouldn’t want this to happen, but it’s important for our cause; Charlus Potter has a direct link to the Wizengamot.”

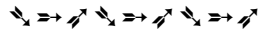
Harry scoffed at his words, and Tom felt a pang of annoyance. His head – ~~his heart~~ – might have been especially tolerating of Harry’s insubordination for some reason, but at the end of the day, he still hated being openly questioned.

“I’m sure there are ways you can work around it without traumatizing a kid.”

“He’ll be fine. We both know what kids can endure. Besides, it’ll be a good show of power with the Knights. You know, since they betrayed me and all.” And wasn’t *that* the crux of it all.

Harry could see through his forced indifference, however, and Tom knew it; the way his eyes narrowed and he bit his lower lip said it all.

“I get that you’re angry at the Knights, but you can’t punish them for it. Not without punishing me too.”



HARRY

There was a pause as Tom processed his words, and then he actually laughed at that; but the gesture was so cold, as if he were an entirely different person from the one standing in front of Harry before.

Harry's day so far had been so confusing he felt like he was on the verge of vertigo, but he tried to give his all to the discussion at hand. Harry knew Tom had always had a vindictive streak, and that was the last thing any of them needed right now.

"You will need to let it slide."

Tom's remaining smile, predator-like, turned just as easily into a sneer. "No way in hell that's happening."

"Tom, stop."

"The Knights are mine," he hissed, and Harry shivered slightly. "Mine to claim, and mine to punish."

Harry gritted his teeth.

Fine. New approach, then.

"Just— Look. You could do that, but what would that achieve?"

Tom's words came out in a flat tone. "They would fear me again."

"Did that even work for you?"

Tom didn't even take a break before answering.

"It worked for years. It can work again."

Fuck no. We're not going back to this.

"Years, yes, but it took just a fraction of that to break," Harry responded, tone argumentative.

Tom lifted Harry's chin up with his thumb, a confident tilt to his jaw, and Harry tried to ignore how the gesture made his heart beat faster.

Why was it that both arrogant Tom and shy, nervous Tom caused Harry to have the exact same reaction?

“When *you* came along. But you aren’t really against me now, are you?”

Harry’s brain was screaming *danger* on every possible front.

“Don’t give me that look. You know I won’t stand for that.” Tom’s eyes darkened, but he remained quiet. “Plus, can you really trust the foundation of it ever again if it’s once more built on fear? I wasn’t some miracle worker, Tom. They wanted to leave. They just hadn’t had persistent enough ways out of it before.”

“So you gave it to them.”

Tom’s response made Harry sigh. “I tried. But honestly, I’m failing them just by talking to you.” He didn’t want to imagine the repercussions the day before would have on everything.

Harry only had one shot at convincing Tom about not retaliating, so he silently apologized to Lilith in his head before continuing.

“Tom... I don’t want to betray Lilith’s trust, but I need you to understand this. You know where I first found her? What she was about to do?”

Tom shook his head grudgingly.

“She was moments away from jumping out of the Astronomy Tower. Hell, if I hadn’t performed magic to stop her fall she wouldn’t be here. She would have died if I weren’t there, and the only reason why she decided to not go through with it the second I left was because of a rickety, long shot promise I made her. I wanted the Knights on my side of the equation, yes, but when I stumbled upon her trying to end her life, it wasn’t about allies at that moment. I promised myself I would do anything I could to make sure she knew there was something out there for her that didn’t end up in disaster, and I intend on keeping that promise.”

He could see his words had shook Tom, if only by the way his usually magnetic energy stilled and he stood in a statue-like form.

“Why? You barely know her. You barely know any of them. They’re Slytherins; they’ll stab in the back if it’s convenient. Are you sure this isn’t just you taking on a responsibility that isn’t yours?”

Here we go again. He hated that argument. “Maybe. Maybe that’s the case, but you sure seem to love using the excuse of ‘not your responsibility’ to not step in against injustice. And you may not have been the one to bully her, but do you know what the main reason she gave me for her actions were? She told me she thought there was no way out of this web *you* created. And the promise I made her that made her step back, it was making sure you would stop.”

Tom was taller than him, but Harry made sure his height didn’t matter as he was staring him down, invoking every determined bone in his body.

“So, Tom... Asking you to step down from the Charlus thing? This isn’t me trying to micromanage you, simply trying to stop you from hurting my ancestor, or trying to mold you

into my image. I get that sometimes sacrifices need to be made. I am the living proof of that. This is for everyone else's sake as much as it is for yours and mine."

Tom made a move to speak, but Harry put a finger to his lips.

"Ask them. Ask them what they think of this. Ask them and see how they'll cower into themselves and say whatever you want to hear out of fear." *Please listen to me.* "I know you can see people's weaknesses, how to hit exactly where it hurts. You don't need empathy to see the truth, Tom. My point is, just— Stop giving them reasons to hate you. Just give them a reason to stay that they can't refuse. You know they aren't the kind of purebloods you thought they were. You claim you don't like causing pain to other people. You claim to want something different than what you've been putting out there. Prove it. Take advantage of that."

He took a step back, hand dropping next to his body, and let the quiet settle in between the two of them.

"I'll see what I can do," Tom whispered weakly.

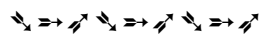
Harry rolled his eyes, but Tom wasn't looking at him.

"Now let's get out of here," his soulmate said, taking off his robes and leaving only his button-down in display.

Harry frowned. "Where are we going?"

There was a slight pause before Tom responded.

"To eat in the kitchens. And then, outside."



HERMIONE

The first thing Hermione did after breakfast on January 1st was to try and find Harry.

He hadn't been on the Great Hall, *again*, and she hadn't bumped into him on the library or around the castle. It had been sheer luck that had her looking out of the window and seeing him, Riddle by his side, in what seemed to be a casual conversation.

The sight made her frown, but she made her way toward the Black Lake nonetheless.

Hermione kept flicking her wand in and out of her pocket in a nervous gesture, her thoughts swirling in her mind with no clear target to stick to as she scurried around. She knew she had

to tell Harry of her confrontation with Tom, but lately, she felt like she was an afterthought to him.

And the feeling was only aggravated by the sight she walked into.

Harry was smiling at Riddle.

She didn't know what had happened between them in such little time to change their dynamic entirely, but she knew that smile. Even from far away, she could see the way his eyes glittered with feeling, the way the corners of his lips lifted, hesitant as if in a timid display.

It was genuine.

She felt her protective streak – the one that so often lead her chastise people around her and try to take control of everything – taking charge of her body, and she struggled to reel herself in. Harry was as brave as he was naive, as capable of holding a grudge as he was of forgiving. And right there, he was overwhelmingly skewed toward naive and forgiving.

The logical part of her brain knew she didn't have all the facts yet, knew that Harry didn't know of Riddle's actions toward her, but the emotional one? That part wanted to scream at him, because she had thought they were on the same side, like they always had been. She thought there would be no more side quests that didn't involve one another. She thought this was, in a way, like the Horcrux hunt, where, while Harry bore the brunt of it, the burden was still shared. She had been patient, but now, it felt like he had taken matters into his own hands without even consulting her, and he barely seemed interested in her issues.

Hermione was used to being the support, the one you went to for information and advice, and while she at times resented the role, she had learned to accept it.

It was unfair, and it was petty, but she felt betrayed by the way he seemed so swayed by Riddle.

If she wasn't good enough to help anymore, if Harry had other people to turn to and she was no longer his best friend, what was left?

She didn't want her life to be all about being Harry Potter's friend, but in a way, that had been her primary function for a long time. She had transferred it to being Ron's wife, the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic, and the responsible adult who had their shit together in the group, but there was no job at the Ministry now. She was no one's wife anymore.

And there was no group. It was just her and Harry. Or at least, it should've been.

She couldn't help but feel a bit lost at the role reversal. What was she without it?

Who was she now that all of the things that used to define her were no longer there?

Riddle leaned in slightly and reached in to touch Harry's fingers right before turning around to leave. If Hermione hadn't been watching them she would have missed it, as subtle as the gesture was.

It didn't feel right to her; Riddle was manipulative, he *used* people, and for all she knew, that was how he was manipulating Harry: through his necessity to be loved, through his need to feel like he had saved someone from their darkest impulses.

It wouldn't surprise her one bit if he had figured out they were soulmates and had been using Harry's feelings toward him as a weapon.

Hermione could push her feelings down if she had to, but when she felt her friends' safety threatened, it wasn't as easy to let it slide.

After Riddle had made his way back into the castle – which Hermione hoped would be for the rest of the day – she approached Harry, seeing in real time as he noticed her arrival.

Her tone was unavoidably clipped as she asked him, “So what was that about?”

Harry scratched the back of his hair, and gave her a small, crooked grin.

“Oh. Hi, Hermione.” A blush crept into his face, and Hermione's eyes narrowed. “Just talking.”

Just talking?

When did the two of them start just talking?

She chose to let that go, however, moving directly to the point.

“How did it go with him yesterday? Did he figure out you're soulmates?”

If Harry noticed her voice was a blend of eagerness and impatience, he didn't act like it.

“Yeah,” he responded, the awkward smile from before substituted by a fond one. “He did.”

Huh.

“Did you tell him, or...?”

“He, uh, he came to me. We fought, then we talked, and now we're on good terms.”

At that, Hermione raised her eyebrows, hoping her skepticism was clear. “Good terms? With Riddle?”

Harry let out a tiny snort. “I know, right? But we talked, *a lot*. Not everything is sorted out, but I do think he wants to make things better with me, and he's willing to change some of his behaviors for it.”

Hermione suppressed a scoff. Did he actually believe any of that? “Look, Harry...”

It must have been something in her tone, but whatever it was, it made him finally *look* at her, seemingly now aware of her darker mood.

"I know what you think of this, but I also know that he'll try his best to change. I made it clear that I won't accept any Voldemort-esque behavior from him."

Her voice was low as she replied, "I find that very hard to believe."

She observed as Harry blinked, seemingly caught off-guard.

"...What?"

"His change. I find that very hard to believe," she repeated in a deadpan delivery.

Harry sighed, his confidence seemingly deflating. Hermione tried to not feel guilty. "I get it. I do. Normally so would I, but I want to give him a chance. He... He told me about his Horcrux, about what happened with Myrtle. It was an accident. Yes, he used her death for the Horcrux, but he didn't plan it. I think I've been kind of harsh with him, acting like he is already Voldemort, but the truth is that he hasn't done any of it."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and said, in an exasperated tone, "He hates muggle-borns, Harry!"

"He doesn't, not really. It's just a show he puts on for the purebloods."

Would he ever stop trying to make excuses for Riddle?

"Unbelievable. Do you seriously think that he isn't playing you?"

Now Harry was also angry, furrowed eyebrows framing the fiery look inside his green eyes. "Dammit, Hermione, why won't you trust me?"

"I trust you. It's him I don't trust."

Harry moved toward her, his confrontational stance being replaced by a pacifying one. He was trying to deescalate things, but Hermione wasn't as eager to do so.

"In this situation, that's one and the same. You and I have been through so much together, yet you still seem to think I can't think for myself or make my own decisions. I've confronted much greater evil than Tom, Hermione, I can *see* it. I can recognize it. I'm not an idiot. I know he won't change personalities out of nowhere for me. I know he still wants things I can't persuade him out of. But I'll try. And—" His determined speech was paused, and there was a softness to his features now as he resumed it. "I'm... seeing a side of him I haven't before. Believe it or not, I do think he likes me and wants to try, and I would like you to support me on this."

I've been supporting you this entire time.

"Well, I would like you to support me too, instead of running around with the other Slytherins."

Hermione felt a pang of guilt in her chest as Harry's expression morphed into one of hurt. "I thought you understood what I was trying to do."

Hermione sighed. This was *so* not going as she wanted it to. “I do. I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just– We always did everything together. The second you had any ideas or suspicions, you came to me and Ron first. If anything was threatening you, *I* was there. And now... Now it feels like I won’t even know you’re in danger in time to help you if it comes to it.”

“’Mione.” Harry put a hand to her shoulder, but she refused to back down.

“You know I’m right.”

He squeezed his grip gently, apologetically. “I’m sorry. I really am. I know I haven’t truly been there for you since the end of the war, and then I left, and now I’m putting all my eggs in one basket with Tom, but... to be honest, this is the first time I’ve felt like I’ve had any agency, any independence, in a really long time. Maybe ever. I’m glad I’ve had your support through everything, and we both know I wouldn’t have survived without you, but, and it feels weird to admit this, I like knowing I’m doing this one by myself. That I’m learning from my mistakes all by myself, you know? I like feeling like I’m the reason Tom is getting better.”

Hermione instinctively winced at that last statement, and Harry noticed.

“What? What is it?”

She couldn’t procrastinate any longer.

“Two days ago... I bumped into Riddle inside the castle. We talked, and he was clearly angry about something.” It was Harry’s turn to flinch, which Hermione found herself curious about. “He was searching for something, too, because he used *legilimency* on me.”

She saw how he wanted to speak, but she didn’t let him.

“I didn’t tell you sooner because he didn’t find anything relevant on our origins – he only managed to get to the memory of me meeting Lucretia for the first time before I pushed him out. But he tried to *obliviate* me, Harry. I faked the effects, and I think he believed me, but my point is he’s still more than willing to bypass people’s boundaries, to hurt them. So, yes, I find it hard to believe just knowing you’re his soulmate would change things.”

Hermione could see he had gotten her point across now, and he wasn’t happy about it. Still, he spoke up.

“It wasn’t just that. Trust me, he was more than willing to ignore *that* fact.” The bitterness of his tone told Hermione there was a story there, but she didn’t press him for it at the moment, because he added first, “I... I told him everything.”

Are you fucking kidding me?

“What? Harry, why would you ever–”

“Look, I know, okay? I should’ve run it by you first, too. But I’m tired of lying to him, ’Mione. He already knew some of the Knights were no longer on his side, and I needed something to convince him that I wasn’t trying to dethrone him or something.” It was weird, seeing how vehemently he was defending his point. Hermione couldn’t remember ever seeing

Harry so certain about something – the closest had been, probably, when he had thought Malfoy was a Death Eater. “And it *worked*. You might not think I can spot the difference between Tom being manipulative and being genuine, but I need you to trust me on this. If I can’t do this, no one else can.” That, at least, Hermione knew was true. Both Harry’s face and tone got darker when he said, “And trust me, I’ll have some *words* about what he did to you with Tom. No one does this shit to my best friend, soulmate or not.”

Hermione took a deep breath. This was going nowhere, and the last thing she wanted was to keep fighting with her best friend over something that was already done.

“Just give me a chance,” he said, and she could hear how defeated he felt, just like her. “And, ‘Mione... I know I promised this before, but you won’t be left out of anything going forward. I’ll never not need you in my life. We both know I wouldn’t survive without your companionship, your advice, your help. You’re my best friend, and it isn’t just because of what you can give me.”

She had a hard time believing that, too, but she didn’t say anything. She was aware that she was operating out of her insecurities at the moment.

Harry continued, “And I want to know everything that has been going on with you. Please don’t ever think I don’t care about you too.”

Hermione bit her lower lip, trying to think, but she was coming up with nothing of substance. She didn’t have any alternatives to Harry’s approaches, and the damage was done. It was clear he desperately believed in what he was doing, and it wasn’t like there was anyone else to turn to for advice.

Plus, she had done more than enough outsourcing of her issues to authority figures in the past.

It hurt, but she knew she had to detach from this identity she had carved for herself as the problem solver. Harry was an adult, and all she could offer him was advice and support, *not* the solutions. She had to focus on her own journey, too.

“Well...” She began, and he looked at her with a hopeful expression on his face.

She didn’t acknowledge it; simply continued talking.

“I’ll need to think about this for a while. I don’t want to fight anymore, Harry. Maybe at some point I’ll be able to listen to you talk about him without feeling this way, but I need some time.”

He didn’t seem satisfied about this conclusion, but he nodded.

“Okay.”

She nodded in return, mind turning back to her main reason for being there. “Also, I have been thinking about it, and I think we should go to the Department of Mysteries. I get your

mind is on other stuff right now, but we should learn more about the Veil, try to gauge what the Unspeakables know about it in this universe.”

Harry’s posture became immediately hunched, as if he had previously been holding his breath in anxious anticipation, and his voice sounded distracted as he answered, “Yeah. I mean, sure. But not right now.”

Hermione felt like he seemed too caught up in the mess to see the bigger picture.

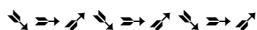
“I know you have no intention of going back or anything, and neither do I, but I feel like this matters. We don’t know what exactly happened to us when we crossed the Veil, and there might be some side effects we aren’t aware of. This is a completely different universe. They might know something ours didn’t.”

“I get it, ’Mione. I’m not disputing this. But I don’t think you’re necessarily thinking through the ramifications of a decision like that. I’ve seen the way the Unspeakables looked at me after the war, when they learned that I had died and come back to life. They might be part of the Ministry, but we both know how easily corrupted people in power can be. They didn’t do anything to me then because I was famous, people would miss me. But here, where none of us are legal citizens? To anyone else, we don’t exist, we are anomalies in every sense of the word. I, for one, don’t want to become an experiment. Do you? Plus, we might be forced to work for them, or be sworn to secrecy, and we both know I’ve already fucked up on that front. I mean, what if they decide to send us back?” He shook his head in discomfort at the idea. “We can probably find more stuff anyway by talking to other people. We should at least wait until after we finish Hogwarts.”

Hermione didn’t like that line of thought and the way it challenged her curiosity, but she had to admit his reasoning made sense.

“Fine,” she relented. “You’re right. About this, anyway.” She couldn’t resist the jab.

Harry rolled his eyes, but it didn’t carry any more hostility. “I know.”



JANUARY 2nd

At January 2nd, the students were back from the holidays, and the contrast was a bit jarring.

Hermione observed all the ones that were back, especially the Slytherins, and tensions seemed to be high among them. No one seemed to be looking each other in the eye, most of all the purebloods, and she wondered what could possibly have happened in such a short period of time for that to be the case.

She was still a bit angry at Harry, but as she had lied awake for a long time in bed the night before, she had come to the conclusion that it was a bit hypocritical of her to be upset at Harry for wanting to give his soulmate a chance when she had been doing the same thing. Sure, Lucretia Black wasn't one step away from becoming a terrorist, but she cared too much about her friend to fuck things up between them just to die on this particular hill. She might not be so sure that Harry was right, but she did trust his moral compass. Hermione knew he wouldn't put anyone in danger for Riddle, and for now, that was enough.

With that out of her mind for the time being and her trip to the Department of Mysteries shut down for the moment, Hermione found herself, yet again, following Lucretia around.

Except, this time, she wasn't so lucky at remaining undiscovered.

She should've known, really, when Walburga wasn't glued to Lucretia's side that it wouldn't be so easy.

"Are you going to stalk her forever or do you intend on actually talking to her at some point?" Walburga remarked from behind Hermione, and she turned around to face the girl, heart beating fast.

"As if she wanted to talk to me."

Walburga seemed to be on edge since being back, and her reaction just confirmed Hermione's observation. "Boo hoo. Cut it out with the self-pity. Your method didn't work? You try another one." Her eyes were pure steel, and her long, straight hair fell like a curtain around her face, creating a stern effect reminiscent of her portrait days.

Hermione wasn't easily intimidated, though. "Which one? She runs away from me every time I so much as look in her direction."

Walburga scoffed, the action relieving some of the austerity in her face.

"Well, Lucy isn't known for her flawless confrontation skills," she remarked, voice clearly mocking.

Lucretia's best friend, from Hermione's previous observations, had always seemed particularly kind toward her, so this shift in behavior seemed odd. "Why are you here?" Hermione asked.

Walburga looked her up and down before responding, "Helping you."

"Why?"

She snorted. "Because I want to. I know you Ravenclaws need all the answers, but sometimes it's as simple as that."

It was Hermione's turn to scoff. "Well, you Slytherins aren't known for their selfless tendencies either."

“Too bad you don’t believe me, but I am doing this for Lucy. She’s been self-sabotaging for too goddamn long.” The sigh Walburga let out made it clear to Hermione, then, that her change in demeanor was mostly a result of frustration.

Well, then. If she was being honest, then Hermione wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth. “How?”

“For starters, she’s getting married to her cousin even though she’s a lesbian.”

If Hermione had been drinking something, she would have spit it out. “Um... Okay?”

“She’s just so infuriating sometimes. She has her soulmate, *right here*, and she doesn’t even want to try. It’s not like things are easy for me either, but at least I’m doing something.”

Walburga’s speech was clearly more for her own benefit than Hermione’s, since she seemed to forget she was even there.

She’s “doing something?” Is she dating the Mulciber girl?

When did that happen?

Hermione shook her head, trying to focus on the present moment, and answered her.

“I just want to get to know her. I don’t have any expectations of a relationship or anything. I just want her to give me a chance, but she seems to hate people like me.”

Walburga rolled her eyes at her. “None of us really think anything of muggle-borns. You won’t find me fighting for muggle-born rights or anything, but honestly, we have to put on a show for our families. It’s just how things are. I’m an heir, and so is Lucy, and that sort of thing is a lot more complicated than it seems. It’s not just about money. She’s just doing what she thinks she has to, but what annoys me is that she doesn’t have to do this in here, not really.”

It was just like Hermione had gathered, it seemed. “I’m fine with keeping it a secret if her safety is at risk, at least until we leave Hogwarts and she can make it out of her family okay.”

A tiny smile sprouted from Walburga’s lips at her assertion.

“You know, I’ve seen you. I’ve heard what Lucy says about you. And believe it or not, I do think you’re telling the truth.” For a Slytherin, she was surprisingly honest and straightforward, Hermione remarked in her head. Walburga raised an eyebrow, assessing her. “Here’s something about Lucy: she’s really hostile to anyone at first glance. She was a bitch to me when we first met, too.” She grinned, a far away look in her eyes, and focused back on Hermione. “She’s also very competitive. That might be the easiest way in for you, however that might look like. And, she might kill me for telling you this, but she’s been using a spell to keep up with you in class. She’s been distracted lately, so... It’s a Dark one, though.” Walburga’s face closed off.

Hermione’s curiosity was crushing her.

“You can tell me. I won’t sell her out, I promise.”

There was a hint of mirth behind Walburga’s eyes, and Hermione felt like she was being mocked. “You’re just curious, aren’t you?”

Sue me.

“I swear no one believes me when I say Ravenclaws are vicious when it comes to knowledge,” Walburga murmured, and shook her head, amused. “Whatever. It’s *sagacitas revelata*, but it’s her own variation. I don’t know the details of it, though. Do with that what you will.”

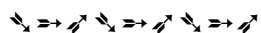
Hermione sighed, both in relief and confusion.

“I still don’t know why you are helping me, though.”

Walburga clicked her tongue.

“Take the win.”

Hermione watched her for a bit; and, despite the questionable source, she found it in herself that she had every intention of doing so.



As Walburga left through the opposite direction Hermione had been going down the corridor in – with a wink as well – Lucretia’s silhouette in the distance remained still as she looked out one of the windows facing out into the Quidditch Pitch. As she approached her, Lucretia saw her, and her face immediately morphed from contemplative to annoyed.

Hermione could tell when she wasn’t wanted, but she could also tell this wasn’t really it. If she had to give up on her soulmate out of all people, she wanted Lucretia to tell her to her face that she didn’t want anything to do with her.

And if she wasn’t going to do that...

Then Hermione had another plan in mind.

It might have been a little unhinged, but Harry had proven to her there were no rules here when it came to achieving what they had come for. If he could do it (and his soulmate was literally the doppelganger of a mass murderer) then so could she.

If there was one thing she knew was irresistible to Ravenclaws, it was excelling. And Lucretia wouldn’t let go of it, even if it meant being forced to spend time with Hermione.

It was time for her to unleash her recklessness and her cunning once and for all.

She finished walking Lucretia's way, deliberately oblivious to the girl's unwelcoming attitude, and leaned against one of the columns surrounding the window, a carefully calculated bored expression on her face. "So, how hard was it to get *sagacitas revelata* to work?"

Lucretia almost tripped as she turned to face Hermione, consternation clear in her hazel eyes.

"What?"

Hermione shot her a lazy smile. "Oh, come on, no need to play dumb. You're a Ravenclaw, after all. How did you get that spell to work for class?"

"Shut up," Lucretia hissed through her teeth, "or I'll make you."

This is fun.

"You can try, but we both know who would come out on top."

It was obvious from her stance that she was ready to fight Hermione's assertion, and that made her feel weirdly excited at the prospect.

"Do you always blackmail the people you're trying to impress?" Lucretia asked, voice dangerously low.

That made Hermione furrow her eyebrows.

"What makes you think I'm trying to impress you?"

Lucretia raised her chin, a neutral expression on her face. "Why wouldn't you be?"

Hermione huffed.

Classic pureblood entitlement. Not even Sirius had completely escaped it.

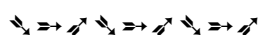
"You're funny," she remarked, and almost winced at her own words in embarrassment.

Lucretia, however, surprised Hermione by not getting angry at her retort, but instead actually looking a bit shy.

"I'm really not." She sighed. Lucretia played with a strand of her hair, suddenly looking very out of place. "What do you want for not telling the teachers?"

Hermione considered the question for a few seconds, and upon reaching a conclusion, smiled.

"I want you to teach me the spell."



CHAPTER 10. WE'RE THE MIDDLE CHILDREN OF HISTORY.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON OCTOBER 5TH, 2023.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from FIGHT CLUB.

“Seeing someone with their parents is a tangible reminder that we’re all composites.”

- I’m Thinking of Ending Things, 2016, Iain Reid

““Sometimes I don’t think people realize how lonely it is to be a kid. Like... you don’t matter.””

- Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, 2004, dir. Charlie Kaufman

CHAPTER 10 – WE'RE THE MIDDLE CHILDREN OF HISTORY.

OR, *BOTH ROYALS AND PEASANTS BLEED RED*

A WEEK AND A HALF BEFORE

PART 5 – LUCRETIA

They were preparing for the Ball in Grimmauld Place that day, and Lucy was already dreading the nightfall.

The Blood Ball was an old tradition hosted by Walburga’s branch of the Black family, and Lucy had been going to it since she could remember.

She hadn't needed to for the same reasons as everybody else, not since her sixth year when an accord had been struck between the Blacks and the Lestranges, but she had to stand there, side by side with Orion, the face of a perfect family.

Even though they were anything but.

She wasn't back home because her parents had missed her – she was home for the Ball, to officially take up the mantle of Black Heir (one of them, anyway), and to flaunt her upcoming marriage. They were supposed to show off a united front for the guests, regardless of the fact that every single one of them was well aware of her family's divide. For better or for worse, the Blacks were essentially famous, and every single wizarding family invited had their long-established ideas and preconceptions of them – not just as a unit, but as individual people, too.

They knew nothing of her, but they treated her as if they did.

The only ones who could claim to have some idea of who Lucy was were her brother, her best friend, and the pureblood girls she had kissed in dark rooms, a vow of silence in place before she even entertained the idea of an escapade.

Even then, they only knew so much. Her parents knew of her failings and her mistakes, her brother of her pettiness and vindictiveness, her best friend of the vulnerability she desperately tried to shed – all against her will. At least, when it came to her past lovers, they knew of the idealized image of detachment that she purposely put forth.

Regardless, there were too many people with incomplete pictures of her painted in their heads; and if Lucy didn't define herself by the unseen parts, she might have already completely lost the view of where she ended and the trauma began.

At the end of the day, though, the Ball wasn't about being herself, but about selling an image.

She had been anticipating the headaches that came this time of the year, especially when the stress was too much, and she had with her the last of her Potion stock. Money didn't buy her freedom, but it certainly helped when she got to bribe (or "hire," if you will) a talented student to brew for her. Charlotte was useful, if a little naive, and she thanked magic for at least having one coping mechanism left for the most torturous night of the year.

Worse than seeing the fake smiles on Aquila's and Adora's faces, though, was having to pretend to have anything in common with Orion.

Her brother was the definition of a doormat, walking around with the deluded muggle-born and Abraxas. Orion gave himself to people way too easily, yet he tried to pretend to be above it all. Anyone could see how fragile he was, like porcelain and china, except for him. There was a reason Lucy had been chosen to be Heir, after all, and it wasn't solely because of her age; he would give up any legacy left by their family to join a pathetic liar who tried to assimilate where everyone knew he didn't belong.

What made her scratch her head in confusion wasn't Orion's subservience, however, but Abraxas's loyalty to Tom Riddle.

She'd known Abraxas Malfoy since his second year, when he'd met Orion. They barely talked to each other, but it was more than it had been back when Orion hadn't joined Hogwarts yet. They weren't in the same house, and the only thing they had in common was her brother, but she'd spent enough time around him to know he didn't seem like the type to roll over and just take anything thrown his way. So for him to humor Riddle, even if that meant keeping Orion involved with him? It made no sense in her head, because she knew how protective of her brother he was. Lucy just couldn't stand the so-called Knights of Walpurgis and their useless tactics.

The fracture between her and Orion had been there for a long time, but what made Lucy hesitate for so long to think of mending it was how clear it was to her that she simply didn't know her brother anymore. They were strangers, and most of the time they spent together was forced cohabitation, filled with sighs and eye rolls. Just like generations of Blacks before them, they lived within the gaps of their distance, and never, ever shared the freedom.

There were still a few hours until the designated start to the Ball, and Lucy was alone in the living room with her thoughts.

Alone, that was, until one of their house elves popped in, bringing with her Lucy's tea.

Mara was a nervous little thing, not being aided by her old age in the slightest. She had been the kindest creature in the house when it came to Lucy, at times raising her more than her parents had ever done. It made Lucy feel constantly guilty when she was at home, seeing as the house elf felt so utterly lost when it came to knowing who to prioritize between her and her brother. Mara didn't want to hurt Lucy nor Orion, and the same dilemma extended toward her parents. She could only watch as they hurt the children, as house elves were bound to never question their masters.

Masters. As if Mara and Kreacher were property, something to own.

As Lucy mustered up the courage to get up from the awfully comfortable sofa to aid Mara with her tea – as the elf's hands shook dreadfully – the expected happened.

Mara dropped the teacup, and Lucy flinched as Kreacher stepped in to undo the damage.

The spillage and the mess were gone within seconds, but Lucy dreaded the possibility of the sound summoning her parents. If her parents were ruthless with their kids, then they were actual sadists to the elves.

The only footsteps to barge into the room were Orion's, mercifully, and Lucy sighed in relief.

Her brother didn't say anything, instead just looking wide-eyed at the elves, who were now bringing more tea. Orion looked scared, Lucy mused, and she wondered if it was solely due to the noise or something else.

“When are we supposed to be at Black Manor?” he asked, and Lucy thought of not answering. The Blood Ball had been all their parents talked about for months in letters – it was unbelievable that Orion did not know the details of the event by heart by this point.

Still, it would be petty for petty's sake, and Lucy wasn't in the mood for overt coldness.

"In two hours."

He nodded in acknowledgment, despite never once looking in her direction.

Just one more day at Grimmauld Place.

I'll be back at Hogwarts as soon as this chore is slogged through.

Lucy pushed aside the burgeoning thoughts about the challenges that whole thing would bring along, focusing instead on sitting on the sofa properly instead of lying down.

"Is Walburga going to show up before we get back to Hogwarts?"

It was a sort of rhetorical question, that one, and it betrayed Orion's nervousness at what was to come.

When he was anxious, he almost seemed to forget that he hated her.

"Wally hates Grimmauld Place, you know that." It was almost always Lucy going to Walburga, never the other way around, and Orion was aware of that.

"I don't know where she thinks she's going to live after we get married, but it surely isn't on that goddamn manor," Orion mumbled, and Lucy sighed.

"I don't get why you hate it so much." Black Manor was as somber as a funeral, but at least it wasn't Grimmauld Place.

There was a brief pause before he spoke, but to Lucy, it felt like eons.

"You don't get a lot of things," he said, voice gruff in an unusual way.

You speak as if you have understood me either.

It annoyed Lucy when Orion acted like this. Did he seriously not see how lucky he was? He didn't need to live out the rest of his life stuck with the responsibilities of being an Heir, no obligations or Wizengamot seats to take responsibility for. Lucy was politically driven, but part of the reason why she wanted to become Minister was precisely to change the rules surrounding Heirship. Once one became an Heir at their seventeenth birthday – or, if you were a pureblood that looked up to the Blacks, once you went through the ceremony in the Blood Ball – the ownership of the family's Wizengamot seats transferred to them, and they got access to all of the family's vaults where previously they'd only had access to those designated by their parents. It sounded marvelous in theory, but heirship could be revoked at any time by disowning their kid, and Lucy was well aware of the obstacles in her way if she didn't have the financial and political backing of the Black family name. She wanted to change heirship laws to protect kids from abusive families like hers, but to get there, she would have to play by their rules.

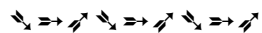
Orion didn't need to worry about any of that. He could leave if he wanted to – he wouldn't get the money, but he would get the freedom. It wasn't like he couldn't find any support; she had no doubts that the Malfoys would welcome him with open arms. As long as their parents had their heir, they would have no reason to fight to keep him.

It wasn't like they cared for their children as actual people, after all.

If they had, they wouldn't have cursed her.

“Whatever,” she said, and got up from the sofa. There was still time, but she was expected to look spotless, and doing so was a time-consuming affair.

Plus, hanging out with Orion reminded her of everything she wanted to forget.



Lucy was glad her family always got there early for Black events, but only because she got to spend time with Wally before everyone else arrived.

“Oh, I *love* your dress!” Wally exclaimed as soon as she entered the house, looking her up and down.

Her outfit had been one of the few things that hadn't been obsessively micromanaged by her mother – instead, she had chosen it for herself. It was a satin, ivory-colored, strapless gown. It was floor-length, and the skirt didn't cling to her body, though it wasn't particularly full. The bust area was made of two pieces of fabric placed on top of the other, creating a sort of braided effect, and she was wearing a deep purple, cape-like robe on top that was light and shimmery and closed around her neck with a single button.

She had her hair up in a bun with a section of it swept to the side, creating a faux fringe look, and while she didn't care much for dressing up, she felt pretty.

It was a shame it was for something like this.

“Thanks. I love yours too.”

Wally had opted for a more out-there option. Her princess gown was blood red, and while her shoulders were out, it ended in fairy sleeves. The front of the dress was adorned with buttons that stopped at the waist, and the skirt was full and delicate, the taffeta material making it shiny and eye-catching. Her long, straight, midnight black hair framed her heart-shaped face in such a way that it gave an edge to her soft, round eyes. Usually, Wally's whole appearance screamed sweet, but she knew how to undercut it with her strength of character that so often externalized as an austere demeanor. This time, with her dark eye makeup and red lipstick, she didn't need to scowl to look more serious – everything gave her the perfect contrast between kind and resolute.

“Is Orion here?” she asked, looking behind Lucy, an intense look in her grey eyes.

“Probably with our parents.” He didn’t really stray from them anymore in events like these, at least not when the only other people for him to stay close to were Wally and her.

Wally sighed, and gestured for Lucy to follow her, which she did, bothered by the lack of light around the house.

Black Manor was poorly lit – there was no better descriptor for it. It was dark both in a literal and magical sense, as if the ones behind its design had envisioned a ritual dungeon as opposed to a house.

It wouldn’t surprise Lucy if that was the case. The Blacks worshipped Dark magic, worshipped its potential for power and forceful *taking*.

When Lucy was small, she used to dread its obscured hallways. She would only ever cross them with Orion by her side, dragging him along even as he complained. She knew nothing would happen to her if she crossed it alone – she always knew the consequences of any action before it happened, like a sixth sense of sorts – but she still feared the darkened spaces of Black Manor. Grimmauld Place was worse, but at least it was smaller, more self-contained.

She didn’t mind it much now. Anywhere was better than home.

The ballroom, though, held a similar elegance to that of a cathedral, with a notable size to match. Its space had the open-air feel of a conservatory, and its location within the manor ensured its massive, floor-to-ceiling glass windows were purposive to the stunning view of its well-curated gardens. It was the opposite of the rest of the Manor, clearly made with guests in mind.

The ballroom was often turned into a hypethral whenever the night sky demanded it, and guests could, for one singular evening a year, feel like their impending unions were blessed by the stars themselves. At least, that was how it was marketed for the purebloods in attendance for the Blood Ball.

Lucy had never bought it. After all, she had been going to these things for her entire life.

This one, however, was *special*. It was tradition for the Heir rings to be passed down on the Ball for those who had recently turned seventeen, and it was Lucy’s turn.

Wally and Lucy sat down at one of the fainting couches near the windows, and Lucy spoke.

“Have you gotten around to talking to Lilith?”

Lucy didn’t know much about Lilith, but she seemed sensible, at least. A nightmare for pureblood society, but sensible.

Lucy liked sensible. It tended to drown out Wally’s unhinged tendencies.

Wally’s usually assertive stance shifted as she stared down at her hands. “Not yet. I might do it tonight, though.” Her tone didn’t inspire much confidence.

Lucy knew she was opening up the field to soulmate questions she didn't want to answer herself, but she wanted to be there for her friend.

"Do you have any idea of what you're going to do about this whole thing?"

"I'm not sure," she responded reluctantly, but her expression changed. "I do want to get to know her, though. My parents can't take away my soulmate from me. They've done enough."

While Wally's parents weren't as outwardly abusive as Lucy's, they were still quite... something. They were strict and distant – the Black specialty – but they were also odd in a way Lucy couldn't put into words. The one Wally used to describe them ever so often was *liars*.

They were always trying to make her change her mind about things, but they tried to do it in a way that made Wally think she had been the one to decide. They constantly lied to her, and when she questioned them, they told her they had never done it, that *she* was the one lying and trying to deceive them.

Lucy had seen in real time as Wally grew into an unwavering, unyielding, unchanging girl, refusing to even think twice about things because she refused to disbelieve her own mind like they wanted her to.

Even then, she could see how reluctant Wally was in hating them, especially her mother, who constantly tried to buy her affection and pretended it was an actual attempt at caring for her.

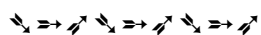
Lucy, at the very least, could see through her parents' façade, because they shed it the moment they left the company of other people. Wally's parents, though, kept it up.

Her best friend tried to pretend it didn't bother her that much most of the time, stating that at least her brother Cygnus – who was still a kid – didn't have to deal with it like she had, but Lucy knew it impacted her.

She was glad Wally was willing to fight to keep her soulmate nevertheless. She just wasn't sure how she intended on doing that, considering her parents didn't exactly like the Mulcibers and she was still sort of engaged to Lucy's brother.

"Well, I'm with you in this," Lucy replied, but before Wally could say anything, more guests started to arrive.

It was time for the social dance.



Lucy had these inexplicable headaches since she was a child.

The first time they had appeared had been after a dream she'd had as a kid. It was made up of colors and shapes, not very distinctive at all, but she had woken up with a clear feeling that something would happen, something that eventually did, exactly as she had dreamed it.

She had told her parents, and her mother had slapped her, not a single emotion behind her eyes. She had said, with no room for questioning, "You are not a seer, Lucretia. You don't have the gift. The only reason you exist is to fulfill the role you were assigned within this family, and if you stray from it, you won't need to."

Lucy had taken the reprimand for what it was: a warning.

She had swallowed her pain and ignored the feelings she couldn't explain, and she had accepted the destiny she could not change.

The only expectation she had allowed herself to bend was that of loneliness, as she and Orion were joined at the hip.

They had grown up together, experienced the ups and downs of their life together, almost like twins. As a kid, Lucy had never liked Walburga much – she saw her as entitled and mean, always saying everything she thought of everyone right to their faces – and Tymeo had been too shy and Cygnus too young, so Orion it was.

She loved her brother, and they had always made sense together. She balanced his mischievous and playful ways with her responsible and serious ones, and he helped her relax and engage more with the world around her.

It had been Hogwarts that had changed everything.

Lucy knew she liked girls from a very young age. She found her eyes glued to them – to their smiles, their laughs, their skin, their eyes, all of it, attracted to their softness and determination like a magnet. And when she had met Melissa Thorn, a muggle-born girl in Ravenclaw, on her first year, she had felt immediately magnetized by her.

She hadn't been aware of Orion's feelings of abandonment, not really, because, while she adored the company of her brother, she also relished the freedom. She relished not having to yield to the darkness of Grimmauld Place and her parents. She hated having to leave him there until he could join Hogwarts too, but she loved getting to know the world outside of their bubble.

She had come back to Grimmauld Place the summer after feeling pure euphoria, and excited to share the novelty with her brother. She just didn't know he would take it as badly as he did.

Lucy had realized he wasn't happy, but she hadn't known the extent of it. Maybe she had been a little naive, too star-struck by her new existence. She definitely blamed herself for how she had missed it, how callously she had thrown in his face all the good things he wouldn't get to experience yet.

Whatever it was, it had driven Orion to tell their parents about Melissa.

And *that*, well... It had led to disaster.

She had been called into her father's office by her mother with what she could only describe as contempt, and Lucy had gone, oblivious to what was awaiting her.

Adora was as cold as ice, but not nearly as fragile. Lucy could still remember that look on her mother's face exactly, a face so close to her own – it was like looking at a mirror, if the image reflected back was older and much crueler. She had told Lucy she had discovered about her friend, and despite her mother never telling her it had been Orion, there was no mistaking it. No one else would have told her about Melissa.

She had taken out the whip, an expert motion to it that made it clear this wasn't the first time. After beating her to the point that she was limping, Lucy had turned around to leave.

"Not so fast," her mother had chirped, and Lucy felt herself paralyzed, unsure whether her mother had cast a spell on her or if the cutting voice had been enough to stop her all on its own.

She had taken out a book, an old one Lucy had never seen before, and gotten her wand out. As her mother spoke the words out loud, Lucy felt a tug inside of her chest, and a golden line left her wand, hitting Lucy.

When she woke up, head pounding, her mother was observing her from above the ground, face carefully neutral.

And then she explained everything, and Lucy's world hadn't been the same since.

The terms were simple: if she were to ever get emotionally attached to anyone whose blood was impure, magic would retaliate, and they would get hurt.

At first, Lucy hadn't actually believed her mother would do such a thing. She had been angry at Orion for telling their parents, but she hadn't taken it out on him. So when she came back to Hogwarts for her second year, she had continued her friendship with Melissa as if nothing had ever happened.

She was there when Melissa had fainted, seemingly out of nowhere; and after a tense afternoon in the hospital wing, she was gone.

The book her mother had used to curse her was nowhere to be found, and Lucy had no way of undoing it.

She wasn't proud of the way she had acted that year at Christmas break, once she had returned home. She wasn't proud of the way she had listened to her brother gush about Abraxas Malfoy and how she had gone to their parents and told them that Orion liked boys.

She hadn't used Abraxas's name, but it didn't matter – the damage was done.

She had been so angry, so betrayed, so utterly *alone*. Because now, she didn't have her brother's trust, her best friend, or anyone else.

Why should he get to have what she didn't?

A while after, Orion had been roped into an accord with Irma and Pollux Black to marry Walburga, and she also had one with the Lestranges to marry her cousin Tymeo.

There was no way to repair what had been broken after this.

So she'd kept her mouth shut, started ignoring her brother, taking potions for her headaches, and focusing on the one thing she could still control – her career.

If there was one thing her parents didn't outwardly oppose, it was her choice of career. The thing with her parents was, simply, that they wanted power. They had chosen her as the heir because she was driven and because she was under their thumb in a way she could never escape, in a way Orion had never been. Her success would be their success, in their eyes.

They didn't know what she actually intended on doing once she became Minister, and they never would until it became too late, if it depended on Lucy.

Even as the dreams faded, she still had this instinct, this general idea of whether something she attempted would succeed or not. Lucy knew that, if she worked hard enough on her goals, she would achieve what she had to. She couldn't tell which obstacles laid ahead exactly, but it was enough. She just needed to persevere long enough to see the fruits of her labor.

It had seemed like fate was laughing at her, then, when her soulmate ended up being a muggle-born.

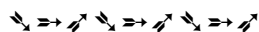
Even worse was the fact that, for once in her life, she didn't have even an inkling of what the right choice would be regarding her.

And she couldn't risk it. She couldn't put *her* at risk.

If that meant never getting to be happy, then Lucy was fine with it.

No one needed to know the sacrifices she was making. It was her burden, and her burden alone to bear.

She was strong enough to hold it.



ORION

The sun shone through half-drawn drapes in Orion's room as he woke up, and he remembered he was back home and not in the Slytherin dorm with Abraxas, Tom, and Harry.

He sighed.

These last few days had been tense, like they always were when Orion was home. It was odd, how unaccustomed he was to being back in Grimmauld Place, where he couldn't share his thoughts with his best friend or laugh at his housemates' stupidity. Lucy avoided him, his parents pretended he didn't even exist, and his only solace was writing letters to Abraxas and waiting for the day he could come back to Hogwarts.

It didn't help that the Blood Ball was just around the corner, where he would have to play the part of Orion Aquila Black, representative of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black.

As the younger one in the Knights and within the purebloods in Hogwarts, Orion was used to passing by unnoticed.

He wasn't used to being seen – not within Hogwarts, and not at home, where he was the backup plan if Lucy fucked everything up for his parents. Orion was useless until he wasn't anymore or he was useful until he was ready to be discarded, but either way, he was never seen as a full person.

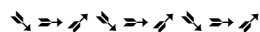
At least, not to anyone but Abraxas.

The only thing to bring him comfort was knowing that, because he was still sixteen, he wouldn't have to finalize his marriage arrangement any time soon. He was absolutely marrying Walburga, even though he didn't particularly like her, but he enjoyed still having time until then.

He liked feeding the illusion of having any escape.

Orion knew, at least, that Walburga also didn't like him, nor had any intention of expecting a romantic relationship with him.

That had to be enough.



Orion was impatient as he waited for Abraxas to arrive.

The ballroom was brimming with life, a festival of color and conversation. In addition to the Blacks and the Lestranges, the Mulcibers, Rosiers, Averys, Carrows, Greengrasses, and Prewetts were all in attendance. The Weasleys didn't like the Blacks, and neither did the Potters, so they were never in the guest list. The only ones he could tell were absent were the Prewetts's daughter – a Ravenclaw, he believed – and the Malfoys.

He would just have to endure until the only pleasant people he knew were present.

He tried to entertain himself by watching the various social dances going on around him in between the formal greetings and hawk-eyed stares from his parents, and he tried to tune out their talks as his father, anything but subtle, kept complaining to his mother about how pathetic the Mulcibers were, using some rather horrific language to talk about Lilith.

It wasn't like they held lots of other families in high esteem – if anything, it was only the Rosiers and the Averys, the former due to their equally harsh “disciplining” and the latter because of Bram's father, the Minister, while they thought of the Lestranges as spineless but harmless and were rather neutral about the Malfoys – but this was worse than usual. Perhaps it was because of the fact that Lilith would become the Mulcibers's heir; either way, Orion was reeling once Abraxas appeared, flanked by Iris and Nicon Malfoy.

He looked over at his parents, who seemed rather preoccupied with their gossiping, and then at his sister, who stood rigidly next to him and them. He wanted to go meet Abraxas, but he didn't want to face the wrath of his parents, especially not that day.

Lucy glanced at him, and then nodded.

“If they say anything, I'll tell them you went away to greet the Malfoys,” she whispered, and Orion shot her a grateful smile.

Lucy was already back to staring straight ahead before she could even see it.

He left, trying to stop the giddy feeling inside from making him run to Abraxas. Once his soulmate saw him approaching, his handsome face was taken over by a dazzling smile. He looked perfect in his suit, having forgone a robe entirely, and Orion got hit by a wave of adoration.

He loved him so much.

Abraxas met him nearly halfway, cutting his journey short, and hugged him. He kept it brief, however, and Orion knew it was because of the circumstances.

He couldn't wait for them to be back at Hogwarts.

Orion turned to greet Abraxas's parents, feeling a little shy all of a sudden, and Lady Malfoy smiled, sweetly and understanding. It always startled him, how eyes so alike his family's could be anything other than distant and cold.

“Welcome, Lady and Lord Malfoy,” he said, smiling politely at them. Technically he wasn't the one with the burden of welcoming new guests, since Black Manor wasn't his house and he wasn't the heir, but he *was* still a Black, and he genuinely loved Abraxas's parents.

“Thank you, Orion,” Nicon replied with that booming voice of his, and Iris put a gentle hand to his shoulder.

Orion looked over at Abraxas, who was watching the whole thing with a fond expression.

They exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes more, until Iris's face became clouded with concern.

"You know you are always welcome in our home, Orion. If push comes to shove, we will do anything in our power to help you." The last words were spoken with a sternness, a seriousness that made him wish he could believe them.

Because Orion knew. Nikon and Iris had already offered him a way out before, even if it required taking him by force from his parents. He couldn't take it, though. He couldn't leave Lucy behind, and he couldn't ask this much of them, especially since with Lucy as their heir, the fight would be much, much tougher to win. The problem wasn't believing they wanted, and *would* try, to help him.

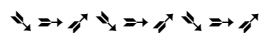
The problem was knowing Adora and Aquila would never let them if it meant dragging Lucy with him.

The wizarding society wasn't known to be sympathetic to heirs who wanted to flee their responsibilities, and they weren't sympathetic to the abuses they had to endure to fulfill those roles either.

"It is a fine offer, Lady Malfoy, but one I must continue to decline."

Lady Malfoy's face fell, subtle in all the ways purebloods were taught to mask and keep composure, and Orion wished, not for the first time, that he could say yes.

He didn't dare to look at Abraxas, but he could feel his gaze on his skin, leaving goosebumps all around.



"Did you tell your parents about us?"

As the Malfoys left to greet his parents and his sister, he stayed behind with Abraxas.

His soulmate's parents had always treated him like he was their own, but their looks toward Orion and their son felt a little too knowing this time around.

Abraxas shook his head.

"No. I knew you wouldn't feel comfortable with that."

Ordinarily, he would have no issue with them knowing it, but with his engagement to Walburga and Abraxas's insistence on remaining just friends, Orion felt like he would be disappointing the Malfoys, like they would be angry at him for hurting their son and refusing him.

Even if he knew that wasn't likely to happen.

Orion sighed. "Sometimes I just feel like they can see right through us. Right through me."

Abraxas chuckled.

"I had to learn it from somewhere." He paused, and looked at Orion with hesitancy. "But..."

"What?"

"Before I went to find you in that classroom after the meeting, back when we were still not talking... I told Tom. I had just found out and I didn't know what to do. I knew you wouldn't be with me, that you were still going to go ahead with the marriage regardless. I was really upset, and I just didn't know what to do. I understand if you're angry, and I'm sorry I didn't run it by you first. I know you don't really like Tom."

Orion sighed again. "I'm not exactly the biggest fan of him knowing it, but I get it. It's a delicate situation, and you had no one else to turn to. He's your friend, even if I don't really get it, and it's not like he doesn't know enough of our secrets already. He would find out eventually. I wouldn't get angry if you had told your parents either, to be honest."

Abraxas didn't seem dissuaded from looking upset, though.

"You know, it's not healthy, the way you keep making exceptions for me."

Orion fought with his urge to touch Abraxas's face.

"You've always been honest with me, Abraxas. What you said just now is precisely the reason why I make exceptions for you."

Orion felt he was ruining everything, ruining the one good thing he had in his life with his best friend, and it hurt. He wasn't being kind to him out of guilt, but it did compound his behavior, in one way or another.

"You know, you don't need to be around me all of the time if it's too painful. I get it, it's hard for me too and I need you, but I never want you to feel like you need to if you feel obligated," Orion argued. He never wanted to use Abraxas's good nature for his own benefit, and he couldn't deny that he felt at times like he had nothing to offer him back.

"Being around you has never been an obligation, O. You know that."

Did he know that? He wasn't sure anymore. "It's just... you don't owe me anything. You've given me more than enough."

Much more than I deserve.

Abraxas held his arm and pulled him out of the ballroom, right into a shadowy corner, away from any prying eyes.

Even as Abraxas's eyes narrowed in his direction and his eyebrows were furrowed, Orion felt a sense of relief at being away from everyone else. He always felt like he was wearing a mask when he was out there.

He held Orion's face with both of his hands, making sure they were holding continuous eyes contact with one another, and then dropped them. "Orion... This isn't me trying to pay a debt, or waiting around for you when you have made it clear you've made your choice. You're my best friend, and I love you, whether we can be together romantically or not. I like your company, and you bring joy and playfulness and light into my life. This has never been one-sided, me trying to make you feel better in exchange for nothing. You know that, right?"

He remained quiet – he didn't want to lie to him, so he said nothing.

"Orion..." Abraxas raised his hand again, fingers delicately grazing his jawline. Orion resisted his body's urge to shiver as Abraxas's face came close to his. "It's always been you, way before I ever saw those words on my wrist."

Merlin, he wanted to kiss him so badly it hurt, but he wouldn't put Abraxas at risk. He looked around, checking if anybody seemed to have noticed they were no longer around. No one did, but it was only a matter of time.

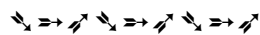
Orion whispered, "Don't. Not here."

Abraxas blinked, almost as if he had forgotten where they were, and took a step back, disentangling every part of them.

"I—" he began, but paused. "Sorry."

You have nothing to apologize for.

"I want you more than anything else, too," Orion whispered, and didn't dare to look at his face to see his reaction. It had been hard enough to go through with all the expectations people had of him when he thought Abraxas didn't love him. Now, though, it was torture, and letting himself see his feelings mirrored on Abraxas's face was just allowing it to hurt deeper. "It's why I don't want you to wait."



He couldn't find it in himself the energy to pretend, to act as if everything was okay, not as he felt it all closing in on him; at least not at the moment.

He had been gone for too long already, however, and his mother had always been great at cornering him at the worst possible times.

"And why are you sulking instead of networking? I know you already have a contract set up, but you know how those people are; you can never trust them to come through with

anything..." Adora said, as if *those people* weren't her own husband's family and her choice for Orion to bind himself to. She had been rambling angrily for what seemed like ages, and he couldn't take it anymore.

"Merlin, Mother, stop! I already know who my soulmate is!" he snapped, and immediately regretted it.

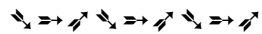
Adora's glare was ice cold. "Is that so? And who would that be?"

You'll never put your filthy claws on him, even if I have to die to stop it.

"No one," he whispered, dejected. He added, somberly, "I know my duty, Mother. And he knows it too."

Maybe it was her need to not make a scene, but his mother simply nodded and strode away.

After all, Walburga's parents were about to commence the opening ceremony, and she had no time to dwell on her son's misery.



LUCRETIA

One of the brightest spots about turning seventeen was the alcohol.

Sweet, sweet alcohol.

Her parents wouldn't allow her to embarrass them, and they were properly armed with hangover potion anyway, so Lucy didn't care if she went overboard.

Maybe that was why she had gotten so easily snuck up on by Abraxas.

"Merlin," she complained, and glared at him. "What are you doing?"

"Definitely not drinking myself to death," he replied, but despite the mildly amused tone, Lucy noted he didn't seem very happy.

Well, he was talking to her, so maybe that was the reason.

"You can't possibly expect me to get through this night sober."

Abraxas snorted, but didn't say anything in return.

The champagne had definitely turned her from tipsy to mildly south of drunk, and she couldn't take the awkward silence.

“Did you want something, or...?”

He sighed, and over-corrected his posture. “We need to talk. About Orion.”

Great. Of course this is about my brother, what else would it be about?

No one knows me.

Of course no one cares about me.

The opening ceremony was taking place in the background, with her parents, her aunt, and her uncle talking bollocks about unity, blood purity, and tradition. She had to suppress the urge to curse someone.

“You need to talk to him, Lucy. I get you and your brother haven’t been in good terms for a long time, and I know what Orion did, but this thing has gone too far. I don’t want to betray Orion’s trust, and he’ll be so mad I’ve even told you this much, but he misses you. He’s been unhappy without you in his life because he thinks it’s the right thing to do, and he won’t take the first step. I don’t want to make you feel bad, but trust me, what happened between you two is small when compared to the rest of your lives.”

Really? That was his take on the whole thing?

Abraxas didn’t know half of it, and Lucy was pissed he had to gall to act this sanctimonious. “Why are you lecturing me on things you don’t understand? Where was this energy when you should’ve kept my brother away from the weirdo in Slytherin?”

He looked genuinely flabbergasted at her words. “You mean Tom?”

“Of course I mean Tom! What were you thinking, Abraxas?” Lucy was so exasperated.

She shouldn’t be surprised, though – when had the Blood Ball ever been a pleasant occasion?

“Look, I won’t fight you over Tom and the Knights. Just trust me when I say I am taking care of things and of Orion. The real question here is why aren’t *you* doing something about it? Why aren’t you protecting your brother, then?”

I can’t.

She didn’t like Tom, but he was also a muggle-born. At the end of the day, Lucy knew he would only leave if Abraxas did, and she wasn’t going to spend time around Tom until she managed to convince him.

She had enough on her consciousness already.

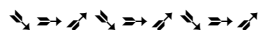
“Do you seriously think he would listen to me over you?” she retorted, and Abraxas’s expression turned guilty.

“I think you should at least try, though. You underestimate your influence. Look, I really didn’t want to force this if either of you didn’t want to talk to each other, but there’s a reason

why I'm being insistent. Just... talk to him. At least try, please. I know you care about him."

"Of course I do. He's my brother." Lucy cringed at the statement – she knew blood didn't mean anything in the grand scheme of things. "He's *Orion*."

"Just– Think about it, okay?" Abraxas added, voice soft, and left Lucy alone, drink in hand, wondering what else could this night bring her way.



TYMEO

Tymeo had been at the Ball for a while when he got approached by the Blacks, asking him to join Lucy.

He had been highly ambivalent to the whole marriage contract thing overall when it had first been presented to him. He didn't care about romance or sex, and it seemed to him like Lucy didn't care much about *him*.

He didn't know who his soulmark tied him to, and he hadn't been especially eager to figure it out, even before he had been promised to his cousin. He had hoped then that whoever it was didn't mind it staying strictly platonic, but now, he guessed it didn't matter.

He wondered if he would ever get to meet them. Especially now that he had betrayed his only real friend.

Ever since it happened, that day had been replaying in his head – the way he had rushed to get away from Lilith, how she had called him a coward, how he had searched for Tom and done a much worse thing to Lilith than she had to him. They had promised each other to find a way out and take it, and she had found one and offered it to him.

It turned out the hat was wrong.

Tymeo didn't have a single courageous bone in his body if his instinct meant hurting a friend for a cause he didn't even believe in.

Worst of all, she didn't even know what he had done. They hadn't talked since that day, and they had gone home right after it. For all Lilith knew, he was still thinking it over and she was giving him space.

Tymeo was terrified of her knowing the truth, but after what he had done – forced out of him or not – he had to find even a sliver of bravery within him and tell her the truth.

He owed Lilith at least that much.

He could see her, looking beautiful in her midnight blue dress, bored out of her mind next to her parents. The Mulcibers were so alike his parents, so eager to get the approval of everyone else.

Lilith wasn't like that; even when she caved in, it was never due to some innate insecurity that she believed others could fulfill, and he admired his friend for it.

Tymeo, unfortunately, couldn't say the same.

He had to stay with Lucy in the meantime, however, and he wondered, as she downed drink after drink, if he should bring any subject up.

He didn't think he was the most interesting guy in the room, and he had very specific things he enjoyed, but he wanted to make an effort for the Blacks.

Maybe then he'd be allowed to sneak out without hearing about it later.

"So, Lucy..." He wanted to call her *Lucretia*, keep some illusion of distance, but everyone knew she hated being called anything other than Lucy. "Did you hear anything about creature laws being passed in the Wizengamot?"

After what felt like forever of ignoring him that night, the question seemingly caught her attention, and she turned to his direction, face flushed and hazel eyes glimmering with the candlelight.

He expected mockery over his awkwardness, but Lucy surprised him. "I heard the Potters were trying out for some werewolf rights laws, but they didn't get it off the ground. Everyone knows that if they got something to be voted in the Wizengamot they'd win, so." Tymeo could swear she looked angry at the Potters' failure, which had him questioning just how much he actually knew about his cousin.

"Huh. Doesn't seem really fair."

Lucy snorted, very unladylike.

"I'm well aware of that."

Tymeo's eyes roamed around, and he could see Walburga was watching them, an inscrutable expression on her face.

"Your friend keeps looking at us. I think she's angry."

Walburga was Lucy's cousin, but she wasn't Tymeo's, and he didn't know much about her.

Lucy actually laughed at that, a little too loudly, and Tymeo saw a frown in Walburga's face. "Grumpy's just Wally's default. Don't worry about it."

He absolutely preferred to be unattached, but Lucy Black didn't seem to be the worst person to be unavoidably tied to.

She seemed to think so too, because she said, unprompted, “There will be no romance between us, so don’t expect that.”

He smiled at the attempt of seriousness in Lucy’s drunken face.

“We’re on the same page about that.”

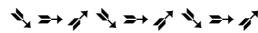
He saw a shadow moving on his peripheral vision as soon as he finished speaking, and Tymeo noticed as Lilith slipped out from her parents’ side, seeming upset.

“I, uh, need to talk to a friend.”

Lucy gestured vaguely in his direction. “Go ahead. Just don’t forget the ring ceremony will start soon.”

Right, he thought, but that was the last thing on his mind at the moment.

He needed to talk to Lilith.



He managed to catch up to her, and he had a front row seat for the vision of her angrily ripping off her shoes and sitting down on one of the steps inside the Manor.

“These bloody things...” she was mumbling, and a curl fell off of her highly stylized pinned-up hair.

“I’m sure there must be some spells for comfort,” he said, trying to be casual about the way he came off.

He was sure he hadn’t succeeded.

“Tymeo,” she greeted him, and he hated the way that single word was guarded, distant.

She didn’t even know what he’d done yet.

Only Merlin knew how things would turn out when she did.

“Lilith. I have something I need to tell you,” he blurted out. Good, he sighed, now he wouldn’t be able to back out.

“It’s about Tom, isn’t it?”

Was he that transparent? Or was Lilith just really good at reading him?

“After we talked, I was really angry. I wasn’t thinking. I swear I didn’t intend on telling on you, but I ended up where Tom was, and...” He swallowed dryly, and pressed the palm of his

hands to his eyes. “He used *legilimency* on me. I didn’t even know he could do that. I don’t know whether or not I intended on telling him, like I said, I wasn’t thinking, but either way, I didn’t get the chance to figure that out.” He exhaled sharply, and breathed deeply once more. “I’m sorry, Lilith. You trusted me and I let you down.”

Lilith had always been the scary sort of angry, the one to remain calm and collected on the outside. Like Tom, sometimes the only way to tell when she was really upset was by the way she stood very, very still, with a blank look on her face.

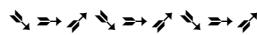
Tymeo could see it now.

He didn’t know if she had made up her mind about him, whether she was trying to think of the consequences of his action, or if she was fighting with herself over the best way to react.

I should’ve been open about our friendship from the very beginning.

Maybe then things wouldn’t have taken such a turn for the worse.

It turned out she hadn’t been planning on reacting at all, he realized then, because Lilith put her shoes back on, adjusted her hair, and left, not even sparing him a single glance.



LILITH

House elves were popping in and out of the ballroom, cleaning tables and bringing new items, and there was a loud, magical *clink*, like someone had hit a glass of champagne with a metal spoon.

It seemed it was time for the Heir Ceremony.

The hosts would usually call up the heir to each family invited and say a few words about them – which, more often than not, were only about whether they had big career aspirations or connections or were prodigies in school, nothing about them as people at all. Lilith could already tell her turn would lead to only embarrassment, and she turned out to be right.

Everyone looked at her as she walked toward the other side of the ballroom, and after she took her ring – with no words about her achievements after her name had been uttered – she made her way back to where she stood before, away from Tymeo and her parents, and tried to pretend no one else existed.

She hated how she felt as numb as she had after Tom had saved her life.

Lilith had nothing to her name but that ring, nothing but shame and depression. Her only friend had butchered her remaining chance at hope, her parents hated her, and her only aspirations felt like a joke in retrospect.

Lilith had always wanted to become an actress, always entranced as a kid by the wizard performers, probably because she knew she was living a lie.

After she had become more herself, her ideal career had been about getting to choose which performance she put on instead of everyone else choosing for her.

But she didn't get to choose anything, it seemed, and her dreams were nothing more than delusions.

Her parents had told her, in the week leading up to the Ball, that she had to put herself out there. They didn't really believe anyone would want her, but if she had joined the Knights, if she had been included in something so exclusive within the purebloods, then, in their eyes, something must have been going right for her. This was essentially her last chance, but it was clear she had botched it, like she did everything else.

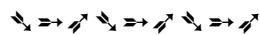
She had hoped, too, that she might finally find out who her soulmate was, but so far, no luck.

Or maybe it was luck protecting her; what if she found out who they were and they rejected her?

She wanted to leave, wanted to disappear, but she didn't know where else to go. She couldn't Apparate yet, and the last thing she wanted was to cross paths with Tymeo again, to hear him apologize in that way of his that made her want to forgive him, even when she knew she actually didn't.

Just when she felt she was about to lose it, a hand touched her arm while a voice spoke to her.

"Come with me," Walburga Black said, and Lilith, almost as if in a daze, followed her into the dark depths of the Black Manor.



They were in a large room consisting of a king-sized bed and not much else.

"You seemed like you were about to pass out. Or curse someone. Or yell. Honestly, it probably looked like all three."

Walburga was taller than Lilith by a little bit, and she looked so imposing in her red gown that Lilith, despite feeling relief at no longer being gawked at in the ballroom, still felt quite intimidated.

She and Walburga hadn't spoken much to each other at all in the past, and Lilith was quite aware of that.

"So your solution was to save me?" she asked, voice coming out a tiny bit hysterical to her ears.

"You're my soulmate, so, yes."

It took some time for Lilith to process what she had just said in such a casual tone, and there was a tiny bit of exhilaration seemingly blooming on top of all the anxiety. "How did you know?"

Walburga smirked, and that changed her whole face, making her seem much more approachable. Somehow that didn't appease Lilith much. "My mark. You told me your last name when we met on the train."

She didn't remember it, but she believed her.

No one would claim to be her soulmate if it wasn't true, and there were no other Mulcibers in Hogwarts at the moment. Most of them had been sent to schools abroad because of the war.

"Why are you telling me this? Why now?"

Walburga licked her lower lip, and without intending to, Lilith watched the action.

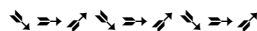
"You interest me."

That was not what Lilith had been expecting the other girl to say at all. "I'm interesting to you? Really? You've never even spoken to me outside of that time in the train."

Of that Lilith was sure. She remembered that time, now, and every other time she had seen the girl walking around the castle, never even looking at her twice.

Walburga was still watching her, a curious look in her eye. "I was wrong. Maybe I should have."

The exhaustion of that night was weighing Lilith down, and she had no energy to measure her words or reactions anymore. When she responded, then, it was with no filter at all. "Maybe you should have."



CHAPTER 11. EVERYTHING IS A COPY, OF A COPY, OF A COPY.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON OCTOBER 5TH, 2023.

Chapter title is from Fight Club and the second title is from “Song of Myself” by Walt Whitman.

Chapter Notes

I’m not 100% sure of how long this fic will be, but my current estimations tell me we passed the halfway point on chapter 9 part 2 (AKA chapter 12).

I like to think of this story as having 3 or 4 parts – part 1 went from chapter 1 to chapter 10 and it covered the whole beginning of the story, establishing the characters and their dynamics with everyone, and Tom finding out Harry is his soulmate, and it spanned 4 months (from September to December).

Part 2 starts in this chapter and will go for a while still, possibly spanning around 2 or 3 months in the story, and it has what I like to call "the bonding period".

Part 3 will probably span 2 and a half months, and will follow the drama and the climax of a lot of storylines, and part 4 will probably be the smallest, only finishing up all storylines, all characters' journeys, and the school year, also including the epilogue.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*“I’ve met God across his long walnut desk with his diplomas hanging on the wall behind him,
and God asks me, ‘Why?’*

Why did I cause so much pain?

Didn’t I realize that each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness?

Can’t I see how we’re all manifestations of love?

I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God’s got this all wrong.

We are not special.

We are not crap or trash, either.

We just are.

We just are, and what happens just happens.

And God says, 'No, that's not right.'

Yeah. Well. Whatever. You can't teach God anything."

- Fight Club, 1996, Chuck Palahniuk

CHAPTER 11 – EVERYTHING IS A COPY, OF A COPY, OF A COPY.

OR, *"DO I CONTRADICT MYSELF? VERY WELL THEN I CONTRADICT MYSELF,*

(I AM LARGE, I CONTAIN MULTITUDES.)"

HARRY

JANUARY 2nd

The morning of January 2nd at breakfast – that'd been the precise moment Harry had felt everything starting to fall apart.

Tom was already gone from their dorm by the time Harry had woken up, as well as Abraxas and Orion, and when he walked into the Great Hall and to the Slytherin table, he saw that Tom had already chosen his seat, sandwiched between their two dorm-mates, with no place for Harry near him.

And, worst of all, he noticed that every time he tried to catch his gaze at their table, Tom averted his eyes.

I should've known this was way too good to be true.

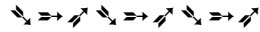
He went to their morning classes and tried to talk to Tom, but he was rebuffed every time by his insistence at not even acknowledging Harry's presence, let alone leaving the Knights' side to talk to him. It felt annoyingly reminiscent of Harry's first weeks there, where Tom almost always had a bodyguard around.

Except now, to his chagrin, Harry had actually hoped things would change.

They hadn't discussed what their relationship was, how it would look like once everything went back to normal, or even whether it was a secret or not, but, Harry, for once, had let himself hope for more, only to be so abruptly disappointed.

By the time their free period had come around, Harry felt completely exhausted of his feelings.

He left for the library, then, and tried not to think too much about his stupid heart and its stupid need to be near his soulmate and to be seen as his by everybody else.



HERMIONE

“Do you want to learn the spell or not?” Lucretia asked, impatient, but Hermione had a plan.

Well, the skeletons of one, at least.

She couldn’t just get her answer and move on – after all, the reason she was doing this in the first place was to spend more time around her soulmate, to try to understand her.

They were both in the library. It was one of the free periods they had that week, and Hermione was taking her time using her observation skills to try to crack the puzzle that was Lucretia Black.

It turned out, it was a very interesting one... when Lucretia wasn’t glowering at her, that was.

“Yes,” she replied, trying to find the perfect answer to not end this too soon, and she thanked her job at the Ministry for her ability to think on her feet as she came up with it, “but I also need to know the ins and outs of Dark magic first. I can’t just learn the mechanics of the spell without the theory first.”

Lucretia looked around in caution, and then back at her. “Don’t be so loud about it.”

“It’s fine. I cast a non-verbal silencing spell around the table as soon as we came in. What do you take me for, an amateur?”

Lucretia rolled her eyes, but Hermione saw only a hint of annoyance contained in the gesture. “Just because you’re bloody intelligent and gorgeous doesn’t give you the right to talk like you’re better than everyone else.”

Hermione felt unable to ignore the fluttering feeling in her chest.

She was always getting surprised by Lucretia, it seemed.

“You think I’m gorgeous?”

Hermione knew she was intelligent. Being called that didn't surprise her – the fact that it had come from Lucretia's mouth was what did – but gorgeous? That Hermione had a harder time with.

Lucretia was flushed when she answered. "Obviously. Haven't you looked in the mirror before?"

It wasn't that Ron or Harry had never complimented her – they did, all the time. But it was always her brain that intrigued everyone. And while she liked that people weren't superficial when it came to her, it felt nice to feel desired. It felt nice to be liked by something that didn't necessarily benefit others or put their needs above hers.

Still, she wasn't about to be caught off-guard and let her leverage slip away.

"You know, Lucretia, maybe you're projecting a bit?"

"What?" Her soulmate's hazel eyes were wide, and Hermione found it oddly cute.

"Were you told a lot that your confidence was a sign of arrogance?"

Lucretia's face morphed into one of realization, but she didn't budge.

"Let it go, Granger. And it's Lucy, not Lucretia."

Was that a sign of trust? "Hermione. If you go by Lucy, then I go by Hermione."

Lucy sighed.

"Don't push it, Granger. I'm doing this because I'm being forced. Don't get it twisted."

"Look, I'm not trying to show off, I promise," Hermione reasoned with her.

Lucy didn't accept her attempt at deescalation, though.

"You're in seventh year but you act like you know more than any of our professors. How is that not showing off?"

"Would you prefer I pretended I was less knowledgeable than I actually am?" Hermione doubted that was the case. Lucretia didn't seem like someone who wanted a meek and understated partner.

If they ever came to this, of course.

"I would prefer you didn't get the best grades in class without putting any effort in, actually."

Hermione wanted to argue that she *had* put in a lot of effort, that she simply didn't need to do so anymore, but that would open up a whole other can of worms, and she wasn't ready to just spill her whole history to her like Harry had to Riddle so fast. "Why? Why is this such a big deal? You're already one of the best students in Hogwarts, Lucy, you're all set."

A stubborn frown made its way into Lucy's forehead. "No, I'm not 'all set'. Not if I want to become the youngest Minister of Magic in history. It's going to take a lot more."

Hermione had heard of that goal before, but she still found it surprising that a supposedly forgotten Black had had such big ambitions once upon a time. "Why is it so important to you that you become the youngest Minister ever?"

Some of Lucy's hostility slipped away as she answered. "It's not about the title, if that's what you're thinking, though the status of that would surely help. There's just so much wrong with the world, and I want to be able to fix it sooner rather than later."

"That's noble, you know."

It really was.

Lucretia – *Lucy* – rolled her eyes, but there was a smile blossoming there. "I guess. Whatever."

It was in that moment that Harry walked in. She watched him, and he shot her a small smile, which Hermione reluctantly returned.

"What was that about? Trouble in paradise?" Lucy asked, eyeing the interaction curiously.

"Nothing. Harry and I are just in a weird spot, that's all." Hermione didn't feel like explaining the nuances of the whole situation, nor could she if she wanted to.

"Sure," Lucy drawled skeptically, but she didn't press the issue any more. Instead, she changed gears. "Fine, if you want theory, let's talk theory. What do you know about magical affinities?"

Hermione had heard of them before, but it had been mostly spoken of in books as a non-tested hypothesis, not a fully realized thing.

"Not much. I thought they weren't real."

Lucy actually laughed in response, leaning back in her chair. "It doesn't surprise me. Something tells me you've been hanging around Light wizards a lot, and trust me, they don't know everything." She cleared her throat, and Hermione saw the fire behind her eyes as she suddenly seemed very comfortable with passing on the knowledge. "See, Dark wizards have a spell to find a wizard's affinity, though it isn't very necessary – most people have a very clear inclination. But lots of them don't realize they have another option other than Light magic, because they never actually get to try Dark spells or don't want to because of prejudice."

"Why would they? Dark magic seems to be inherently skewed toward immorality, after all."

"That's..." Lucy shook her head in disbelief. "Merlin, I swear, they're teaching nothing of values in schools," she mumbled, and huffed. "The only thing to determine whether something is Dark or Light magic is whether the intention behind the spell or the caster is either to harm or protect. That's it."

Hermione's first instinct was to say that sounded like the same thing she had said before, but she realized that wasn't right. Being on the offense could be just as much about protection, if not more, at times.

But there was still an unasked question lingering. "What about spells that do neither?" There were quite a few like that being taught at Hogwarts, after all.

"That's Neutral magic. You don't need to have a specific affinity to perform it fine."

Well, that raised more questions than it answered, that was for sure. "Is this some part of pureblood culture that no one else knows?"

"Kind of, yes."

"I wonder what my magical affinity is," Hermione thought out loud.

She expected Lucy to roll her eyes or be sarcastic about it, but she answered her surprisingly honestly. "At first glance, I would've said Light magic, but now... I'm not sure."

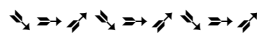
Hermione wasn't sure what that meant, whether it was a compliment or an insult, but she decided to not make any assumptions.

"Well, we have time to figure it out."

Lucy looked at Hermione like she had told her she killed her cat. "For now."

Hermione smiled innocently at her, and Lucy just sighed.

Hermione couldn't wait to fill that time up.



TOM

Remembering Harry's face that night by the Black Lake – with a glint of happiness in his eye, serenely gazing at the stars above – Tom knew there was more to his willingness to try something else than just liking Harry's company or his touch.

Tom knew he was touch-starved. It wasn't news to him. He knew he had spent years searching for the comfort of touch in any way he could handle through magic, it being the only way he wouldn't have to admit his weakness to anyone, so having Harry, having a *partner* like that, that not only was willing to help ground him that way but actually wanted to, it was... heaven. The same heaven Mrs. Cole had so categorically assured him he didn't deserve.

Tom knew he was a bit out of his mind because of that. He knew he would have been a lot more resistant to the soulmate revelation if he hadn't been taken by surprise by the intensity of everything that Harry's existence brought him.

But, no, there was definitely more there.

It had been the way he had challenged Tom, questioned him, taken him seriously in a way no one had before. People were either scared of Tom or using his talent and charisma for their own gains, but never actually believing in what he had to offer, in his potential to heal and destroy in equal measures. The only one who seemed to see him was Abraxas, but even then, he more often than not chose to ignore the red flags.

Tom didn't have the luxury of turning a blind eye to his rage, his fear, his history of violent behavior that seemed to be so entrenched within him he often wondered if it wasn't simply his nature, no more a choice than the urge to breathe. Abraxas didn't know everything about him, so it wasn't really his fault that he held such preconceptions, but the truth was, he had never felt connected enough to anyone – never let anyone in enough – to feel like they could handle ~~he couldn't handle them~~ knowing the full picture.

But Harry...

After Tom's adrenaline had faded, he could see things clearer than he had ever been able to before. And while Harry's story had sounded unbelievable, deep inside of Tom, he had known, sure as the knowledge that the sun would rise the next day, that he was telling the truth.

And that brought with it so much to think about. It made Tom realize Harry was like him, but better. He wanted to leave an impact on the world, but he wanted to do so by being kind, by protecting people instead of using them. Tom didn't deserve someone like him. Thinking about everything Harry had gone through was something Tom had never thought he would have to confront, as he would have lived his life with only hindsight as a judge. Now, though, he knew exactly what would become of him and the world if he chose wrong.

Tom didn't regret being immortal, but he had started to question his Horcrux as the method. By communicating with the diary that one time, it had become obvious to him that by making a Horcrux, he was, undoubtedly, leaving a part of him behind. Harry's encounter with it on his second year seemed to confirm that.

It seemed as well that the more Horcruxes he made, the more he lost himself.

It went against everything he had been doing, if he let his fear-led choices impair his progress in what mattered. If his judgment became clouded by the Horcruxes and he became a revenge-driven person no longer focused on what had always been his reasoning, then was that really who he wanted to be, what he wanted to do?

He was already immortal. There was no need to go down that path.

But Harry seemed to believe there was potential for evil in who he was right now, too. He could see, could *feel* how it scared Harry, the possibility of Tom doing something irreversible

that he couldn't see coming this time around.

He didn't want to be another Grindelwald. That had never been the example he had wanted to follow.

Tom hadn't noticed it before this wake-up call, but he was tired of letting his worst impulses guide his actions instead of his intellect and ideals.

And he knew Harry was the key to this change of heart.

It made sense – magic had seen how they complemented each other and made it official.

He disliked the idea of fate, but he couldn't deny that as he looked at Harry and his heart skipped a beat. There was *so much* there, feelings Tom had never even entertained the possibility of, and while Tom's head felt confused at how foreign they felt, his very being seemed used to it, like it had been buried underneath the surface just waiting for the opportunity to rise.

Harry was sassy but kind, determined but soft-hearted, self-sacrificing but so full of desire for life. He was everything Tom wished he could still be, even as his brain yelled at him that it was all symbols of weakness.

He hated how he had let his head turn power and *not feeling* into synonyms.

Because he knew. He knew that he felt the most powerful precisely when he was feeling, whether it be anger or hurt or affection or–

He didn't *just* want to touch Harry. He wanted to be like him, to share all the virtues everyone swore he couldn't have. Tom had always appreciated a challenge, had always loved proving everyone wrong when they said something was impossible.

Tom was scared of what it would mean for him if he was wrong, but he was more scared of becoming Voldemort.

What was the point of power if it only destroyed you even more? Becoming a Dark lord had been precisely the thing that had led to the destruction of his immortality. Being a Dark lord had made the prophecy viable in the first place.

Choosing this path had doomed another version of him to be forever stuck in the in-between, not living but not dying.

No power, and no rest.

He wasn't ready to just ditch everything and start over, to let all his efforts go to waste, but he wanted to dare himself to dream up a new way. It had been years since the last time he had given his trajectory a second thought, and as it stood, that had clearly been the faulty approach.

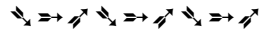
And even though he wished he could ignore it, the fact that his Knights had been so miserable working for him, that Lilith had been on the brink of ending her life because of

him, mattered.

He prided himself in being smart, cunning, in seeing the big picture.

It overwhelmed him to think about it, but, for once, it seemed like what he wanted, what he needed, and what he desired could actually be in sync.

He just needed, then, to prove to himself and to Harry that he meant it.



With the Knights back, Tom decided to take a step back from his Harry bubble and look at the bigger picture.

Putting all he felt for Harry aside, there were still some more reasons to not follow through with his current plans. Harry wasn't wrong when he said his Knights didn't really like the choices he had been making.

He had thought that, in order to fit in, he needed to subscribe to the blood purity ideals everyone else did, but that just made it endlessly ironic for Tom to realize that he had, subconsciously, mostly recruited people who didn't put that much stock into it.

It made sense for him to use that to his advantage, and by distancing himself from that image, he could keep them as allies in some capacity still.

When he called upon them with the mark to join him in one of the abandoned classrooms on the dungeons for an emergency meeting, he knew he'd be in for a tense period of time.

He never arranged meetings in their free periods, or even during the day – it was always nighttime, always in the Astronomy Tower, always at the same hour, the same day, to the point that he didn't even bother with the mark anymore most of the time.

But now, not only were Bram and Sébastien excluded, but the convocation also broke every rule in the book. He wasn't entirely sure of Rosier's personal beliefs and Avery was clearly anti-muggle-born, so he only called upon the rest.

He knew they'd be wary. He had prepared for that.

What he hadn't prepared for was the absolute lack of reaction on their part.

Tom didn't show it on the outside, but he actually had no idea how to proceed as Lilith, Tymeo, Abraxas, and Orion looked vacantly at him, unquestioning.

He guessed that he deserved that. He had been the one to cultivate the atmosphere of blind obedience, after all. But no questions or even a reaction about the two missing Knights? That was odd.

He combed through his mind for the best opener, standing close to the classroom's door, and willed his brain into compliance.

"I am not here to punish any of you." No reaction. "I assume Tymeo has filled all of you in on my knowledge."

Well, not all of them. Lilith, absolutely, and she had probably shared it with the rest.

There was no answer, and the only movement Tom caught was Abraxas's soft, resigned sigh. "You may speak freely," he added dryly and waited.

"What do you expect any of us to say?" Lilith asked, almost sarcastically, but seemed to rein herself in on her next response, which was with a mellow cadence that seemed too composed to be honest. "I presume you have spoken to Harry?"

If that was her way of shifting blame and excusing herself from having to explain things, then Tom had to commend her.

Bringing up Harry was a sure way of making him distracted.

Nevertheless, he tried to not let any fondness or conflicting feelings show. "Yes. He has given me quite a lot to think about."

That finally drew a response from the Knights, who tried to, inconspicuously, share a look between them. Tymeo, however, was been the only one to keep his gaze lowered to the ground the entire time.

Was he feeling guilty?

Tom could tell there was something exploitable there, but not where it came from exactly. That had been Orion's job.

Alas, he seemed unlikely to provide it anytime soon. If he tried, anyway, it wasn't as if Tom could ever fully trust him or any of them ever again.

He sighed.

If there was one thing Tom absolutely resented Harry for, it was how paranoid he had made him.

"I know you have no reason to believe me, but I intend on doing things differently from now on."

"Like what?" Abraxas interjected, apparently deciding to build upon Lilith's bravery.

"For starters, I am making myself clear, at this very moment, that our goals have shifted." He made sure he was as incisive as he could as he made his point. "From now on, there will be no more resistance to muggle-borns. They are to be left alone in every capacity. And—" He felt as if a sharp needle had penetrated his chest suddenly, but he ignored the stab and what it meant. "I have decided to call off the Charlus plan." He breathed deeply, as deeply as he

could without drawing attention to himself, and exhaled. It was done. No turning back. “You may pass that on to Avery and Rosier.”

Their reactions ranged from disbelief and confusion to complete dismissal, all on their faces for Tom to have absolutely no doubts about his interpretation.

It wasn’t often that purebloods were this blatant about their emotions, and Tom didn’t know how to handle the turmoil inside that the vision brought him.

A chair scraped obnoxiously on the floor as someone moved, and it interrupted Tom’s self-assessment, causing him to wince. He found the culprit – Orion, who was sitting the farthest away from him – and gave him a mild glare.

He’d expected questions, outrage, groveling, *relief*, yet he was greeted with nothing but nods and silence.

Where were the wizards that had gone behind his back with no remorse? Why were they so meek all of a sudden?

It was like they didn’t even care.

Tom had no immediate answers, and he felt undeniably frustrated. He didn’t like feeling out of the loop when he so often was the one calling all the shots.

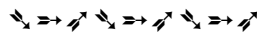
He mentally cursed Harry and his promise to not use any punitive measures.

“You’re dismissed.”

It wasn’t all he wanted to say, but it was a start. In Slytherin, it was so common for things to be stilted that it had taken an outsider like Harry to make him realize how uncomfortable it truly felt. Especially in groups, it had always been like this, but Tom had been so caught up in his orders that he had never had the time to feel bothered by it.

Now, though, he wished he could have a closer – if only by just a little – relationship with his followers.

The sense of betrayal was still there, but Tom found that, more and more, he had started to feel like it had been both a matter of time and his own doing.



ORION

After Tom and Tymeo had left – the latter with a guarded expression on his face that had Orion rolling his eyes – Lilith, Abraxas, and him stayed behind to talk about the sheer absurdity of the situation. The longer they just stared at each other, however, the more Orion had to repress a disbelieving cackle.

He had known that they shouldn't trust Tymeo; that wasn't surprising. It annoyed him that Lilith had gone behind their back with it, sure, but this, *this* was far more pressing.

"So we all actually heard that," Lilith opened the discussion, her dark green eyes wide and restless as she stood up from her seat.

"Yep," Orion replied, and turned to Abraxas, who was abnormally quiet.

He was the closest to Tom out of the three of them, after all, so Orion understood. Orion didn't like Tom, but he couldn't help feeling compassion for his soulmate's clear consternation. He was openly addressing Abraxas as he added, "So we're all on the same page about Tom's bullshit, right?"

Lilith nodded somberly, but Abraxas didn't even seem to notice Orion's half-rhetorical remark.

"Brax?" the name spilled out, and Orion felt like he had surprised himself. He hadn't used his nickname for Abraxas in a long time, not since Tom had told him in no uncertain terms that nicknames were childish and unbecoming.

Merlin, he hated how he had conformed to Tom even in the privacy of his own life without noticing. The word, though, did seem to shake Abraxas off of his dazed state as he asked, "Isn't there a chance he's being honest?"

Orion believed him whenever he had a hunch – especially because his "hunches" were usually a result of his careful, long-term assessment of people – but he had a hard time doing so when it came to this. Leave it to Abraxas to believe his best friend against all evidence to the contrary.

Before Orion could say anything in return, Lilith replied to him, "No, Abraxas. Have you forgotten everything? Even if he somehow is, who's to say it's going to last, or that this whole thing isn't a setup for something worse? Do you seriously believe Harry has managed to get through to him this easily?" Lilith scoffed at the notion, and then let out a snicker. "You saw how he reacted when I brought up Harry, right? The look on his face? I've seen good acting, and that was definitely it. The way his face shifted to that fond look, the way he supposedly tried to hide it? I have no doubt they've spoken to each other, which, by the way, was a shitty move by Evans, but I don't believe for a second it was that productive of a conversation." As she finished her speech, she dusted off invisible dirt from her uniform trousers, and eyed the classroom's door. "I'll tell Sébastien and Bram what Tom said." Lilith sighed. "Whether this is serious or not, we have to make sure Charlus Potter doesn't get hurt. We'll talk later."

"Wait," Orion interjected, suddenly hit by an unpleasant thought. "What if this is a test? What if he's trying to make sure we're still loyal to him and his goals regardless of how reluctant

we might be to see them through?”

Orion could tell Abraxas had stilled in his peripheral vision, but he only had eyes for Lilith.

She was the smartest and most practical out of the three of them, thus he hoped she would know what to do.

Lilith blinked and stopped halfway through her walk.

“Then we’ll fail.” Orion’s stomach sank, but he waited for her to finish. “I refuse to hurt that kid the way I was hurt. I refuse to keep playing this game. Let Tom ruin me again if he has to. There are worse things than bullying, and at least in Hogwarts, I’m...” Orion didn’t miss the way she winced, “safe. You two certainly are,” she concluded, and didn’t look back as she left the room.

Orion didn’t allow himself to think much about the implications of Lilith’s decision.

Instead, he wanted a second opinion.

“What do you think?” he asked Abraxas.

Orion turned to look at him, but Abraxas was already watching him. He knew how to read the love of his life, and he could tell by the way his eyes narrowed and he frowned that he was about to say something Orion wouldn’t like.

“I know you don’t think so, but there was something about Tom. I think he was being serious. Almost like— almost like he wanted our approval. Almost like he was scared of our rejection.”

Orion didn’t want to hurt Abraxas, especially as he seemed vulnerable enough already, but he couldn’t help the scoff that left his mouth.

Tom, scared of rejection? It was a terribly comic thought.

“I mean it,” Abraxas doubled down, this time looking actively annoyed – a rare feat in Orion’s book. “I know Tom. I know when he’s bullshitting us, and I would appreciate it if you trusted me when I say this isn’t it.”

He wished he could. He wanted nothing more than to trust Abraxas’s intuition.

But right now, he couldn’t, and there was a reason for it.

“Do you remember your fifth year?” He wouldn’t make Abraxas believe he was being dismissive of him for no reason, and if he had to tell this story for that, so be it. Orion swallowed his anxiety the best he could. “When I wanted to leave and tried to convince you to do it too?”

Abraxas sported a look of resentment in his eyes at his reminder, and Orion tried to ignore his latent guilt. “You told me I was being naive and mind-controlled and that you were tired of

indulging in, and I quote, ‘this rubbish.’” Orion winced. He hadn’t been his best self then, that was for sure, but he *had* apologized.

“Right.” He took a deep breath, and closed his eyes as he finally made his point. “After that, I came back and told you I understood why you were okay with the Knights, and that I was wrong. That I wanted to stay.” He refused to open his eyes, still, and continued. “Well, I didn’t change my mind on my own. Tom figured out I had tried to convince you to leave, and—” Fuck, that was hard. “He threatened to tell my family about us. You know they know about me only liking boys but not about you. You know how hard it would be for us to see each other if they knew how I feel about you, and Tom knew. He knew I love you, and he made sure to turn that into a weapon. You were too useful to him to leave, and he knew I wouldn’t leave without you as well, so he got to keep both of us. And you might think it was an empty threat, but I know it wasn’t. I actually found a letter he wrote, all ready to be sent. He left it out in the open on purpose so I could see how serious he was.” Orion opened his eyes, and was actually startled by the rage he saw in Abraxas’s.

Does he hate me?

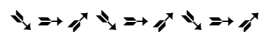
“Brax, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you—” he started his groveling process, but Abraxas put a hand on his shoulder, eyes softening just a bit.

“It’s not you I’m angry at, O. It’s not you at all.”

Orion sighed, relieved, and brushed a curl away from his eyes. “But you know what I mean, right? Why I don’t believe him? If he is willing to do this when any of us tries to leave, if he’s willing to punish *his best friend* by proxy just like that, then there’s just no way he had a change of heart, soulmate influence or not.”

Abraxas nodded as his gaze hardened again, his grey eyes as intense as Orion’s, and made his way to the door, so abruptly Orion almost got up to follow him. “Don’t wait for me. I have something I need to do.”

Something in Abraxas’s demeanor told Orion he really wasn’t sure he wanted to know what it was.



TOM

Tom knew there wasn’t a lot of time until his next lesson, but he felt too restless to walk to the classroom. He hated missing class, but he did have the privilege of doing so without getting bad grades, so he took advantage of it and hid in his dorm. It wasn’t long before Sébastien found him there, a worried look on his face.

That was fast, he thought, almost bemusedly.

Sébastien looked him up and down, and asked whether it was true he had told Lilith and the others to drop the Charlus thing.

It was rather surprising that Sébastien out of all people would question him like that.

“Tell me, Sébastien – are you eager to follow through with the plan because you believe in the cause we are championing or due to your never-ending search for your parents’ approval?”

When Tom felt anxious, he had a proclivity toward being vicious, and it seemed like not even Harry’s influence managed to tone that down.

Sébastien shook his head, a red flush creeping up from his neck to his face. “That’s not what this is.”

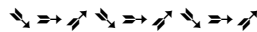
Tom kept his voice low and unbothered as he asked, “What is it, then, that has you so on edge?”

Sébastien, who had previously been looking anywhere but his eyes, met his gaze. “You didn’t tell the rest of us yourself. What is going on? If you have some other plan, you can tell me. I’ll help you.”

The conspiratorial tone he employed made Tom laugh. He could hear how hysterical it sounded, but he really couldn’t care at the moment. It was like he was a second away from exploding.

Tom sighed so he wouldn’t scream.

“Go back to class, Sébastien.”



“What the fuck were you thinking?”

Sébastien had just left when a very familiar voice approached Tom, and he turned around to face his friend.

“Abraxas?” he asked, frowning.

Was this about the meeting? His friend’s face felt almost foreign with the intensity of his sneer.

Abraxas didn’t look any less angry as he retorted, though. “Don’t you dare act all innocent. Orion told me what you threatened him with fifth year. How could you do that? Do you have

any idea what his family is like?”

Oh. Maybe it had been the expression on Abraxas’s face, something he had never seen directed toward him before, but Tom actually felt guilty as he recollected the event. He had been so desperate, then, to keep both of them with him.

In his head, if he managed to keep the group together up until his last school year, then there would no more reasons for them to try and undo their years-long effort after. It appeared he had been quite wrong in his assumptions.

The fact that Orion had kept it a secret for so long, especially from his soulmate, felt odd to him too. It should’ve been flattering to know he was that scared of Tom, but as it stood in that moment, it wasn’t.

There was nothing flattering about having the one person who had always believed in him look at him like he was the worst person alive.

“I understand you’re upset, but it had been the only strategy I had at the time. I wasn’t intending on going through with it.” It wasn’t quite true, but he was trying to do damage control.

He had forgotten, however, that Abraxas was a human lie detector.

“Stop. Just *stop lying*. Be honest for once in your bloody life.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, and Tom looked at a spot far away, transfixed, trying to tap into that part of himself that stopped the flood of emotions and allowed him to ignore them unscathed. It wasn’t really working, and he hated the sense of panic that was building inside. Why was he always expected to handle the fallout of everything? Couldn’t he just get a break for once? “I tried to defend you, tried to believe in your best instincts, but you’re just selfish, Tom. You’ve proven it again and again, and I’ve been foolish to give you a pass. You see people as objects, *your* objects, your puppets to control and abuse for your own pleasure. Well, I’m done with that. I think it’s pretty clear that none of us believe a single word you say by this point.”

Abraxas moved to the side, blocking Tom’s point of view, forcing him to face him. “Tell me, was there any semblance of truth in that hogwash you spilled at the meeting or were you just playing us?”

Tom desperately wanted to answer yes, desperately wanted to let him know he was trying, but nothing came out of his mouth. Instead, he forced a nod out, but Abraxas just shook his head, something else replacing the rage.

Tom could take the anger. He could take the hatred.

But the disappointment in his best friend’s face?

That hurt a little too much, and he wished he could deny it, to no avail.

He couldn’t stop Abraxas from leaving, from striding away with a deflated posture, not as his breathing got caught in his throat and no amount of inhaling seemed to fill his lungs.

What—

His brain tried to make sense of his predicament, but there was no space for thinking. He was being overtaken by his physical reactions, his body using his own senses to attack him.

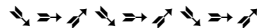
I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe

He needed to get out of there *now*.

No one, *no one* could see Tom like this.

He left the dorm, crossed the common room, and stumbled down the hallway, trying to fight through the way his vision was closing in on him, and the only person that crossed his mind, the only thing that felt safe to him at that moment was Harry.

He needed to find Harry.



Black spots crowded his field of vision, and he was losing sight of everything around him, like a vignette at the end of an old movie. He was breathing, but it felt like suffocating – the more he tried to inhale, the harder it became, and his body felt limp.

Had he reached his destination? He couldn't tell.

“Hey, *hey!* I'm here.” Harry's voice sounded distant, like it was coming from around the corner. It was disorienting, trying to think in the middle of it. “Close your eyes. C'mon, trust me. Can you do that?” Tom nodded dutifully, even if he couldn't properly focus on Harry's commands. “Good. Close your eyes, then. Yeah, just like that. Breathe. Just follow my breathing, you just need to do it exactly the same way.”

It was ridiculously hard, but he could feel the panic starting to lessen, his palms now not only cold but also sweaty.

“Keep listening to my voice. Good, that's it.” Harry was smiling, Tom could hear it in his voice. Was it relief? He wanted to check, but he didn't. “None of this stuff from the outside is happening inside your head. It's just you in there, and me in here.” His tone was too gentle, too kind. It unnerved Tom. “Focus on my voice, Tom.” *I'm trying.* “My godfather, Sirius, that's what he did when I felt like this,” he began, and Tom frowned. Right, he realized, a distraction. “He told me it's what he would do when he was trapped in Azkaban and the reality of the situation got to him. Sometimes, he would have these moments of clarity that cut through the confusion and the depression, and he would realize how long he had been trapped, how much time he had lost, and the only thing that would calm him down was closing his eyes and focusing on the feeling of his magical core. He would let it wash over him like an aura, calming down each part of his body from head to toe, and that's what you need to do. You can feel it, right? I know you can see magic, but you don't need your eyes for

this.” Tom’s breathing was stabilizing – Harry’s story had actually worked to detach him from his body’s reactions. He followed Harry’s direction, and was pleasantly surprised when his attention going back into his body to feel his magical core didn’t trigger his panic more. “That’s it,” Harry praised him softly, “you’re doing so well.”

His magic was warm, comforting, and he almost felt like things weren’t crashing down around him.

“Now, listen to me,” Harry’s voice shifted into a more serious tone. “You have time. You’ll always have time. I don’t know what happened, but the more you choose to react in the moment out of desperation, the more likely it is for you to say or do something that contradicts all your efforts so far, and I know you don’t want that.”

He was thrown right back into his head, and the panic started to settle in again.

Harry didn’t know what was at stake.

“You don’t get it, Harry, this isn’t as fixable as—”

Harry interrupted his spiral. “Hey, Tom, breathe. Please. Look, I know you have an immense amount of control over everything you feel, but it was bound to break eventually. You know why? Because *you pushed it down*. You aren’t erasing your feelings from existence, you’re ignoring them, and that just makes it so every time you feel the same thing and you push it down again, you’re filling that cup, and it can only take so much before overflowing. It’s overflowing now, Tom, and if you don’t let it spill over, it’ll just get worse and worse until you do something you regret. So I need you to feel everything, but not *do* anything until it blows over. You’re safe with me. Can you do that for me?”

For you?

Tom didn’t know, but he wanted to.

Harry didn’t touch him, but he was close enough for Tom to feel his body heat. It felt oddly calming to him, but he didn’t analyze it further – rather, he focused on Harry’s next words. “After the war, I spent months pushing it all down. I didn’t know any other coping mechanism, and that was what I thought I had to do if I wanted to survive and get things done. But once the funerals ended, the adrenaline settled, and when I had nowhere to be and no one expected anything from me, I crashed. I had to deal with the reality of it all, except I had never allowed myself to even think about it, so I made impulsive decisions that I ended up regretting. I pushed people away. I left. I came back in secret and remained like that for a whole year. And you know what I learned that year? That I didn’t know anything, not about the world, and not about myself. I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life, and when I got the chance to come here, I took it. I took the chance for a new beginning, to leave all the bad memories and the people attached to them behind, except I wasn’t actually leaving anything behind. I was trading one reality of trauma for another. I was leaving that trauma only to repeat the patterns of avoiding my feelings, of pushing everything down. I chose the adrenaline again because I didn’t know who I was without it. Because, Tom, at the end of the day, that is what happens when you don’t work through things – they keep coming back. And

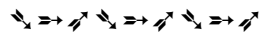
if you rush from one thing to the other without giving yourself time to think about why you even want it, then that's what you'll end up doing too."

Tom felt his shoulders hunching forward, the excess energy leaving him, and he couldn't help but wonder – why was Harry, the one who had *the* most reasons to hate him, trying to help Tom out of the traps he had himself created?

"How can you stand to look at me? It might not have been me, but someone who looked exactly like me ruined your life. He destroyed everything, and he had the same face, the same name. You– You fought tooth and nail to handle your own trauma. I don't understand why you would give up everything to fix me, to have to go through all of this again. Aren't you tired of all the ways I'm fucking up your life?" His voice came out higher than usual and still clearly tinged by a shortness of breath, even as he felt more in control.

Harry, however, remained stoic and level-headed.

"Why are you assuming you are ruining my life? You are right, after all: that was not you. I– I'm not going to lie and say you don't remind me of him sometimes, and it's not like I came here strictly with the intention of giving you the benefit of the doubt; I had my preconceptions of you from the very start, before I even knew anything about how this universe operated. But if there's one thing I've come to notice, is that, even when you awaken that adrenaline in me, I don't feel like running. I don't feel like putting my head down and letting other people point me where to go. A while back Dumbledore actually went to me and Hermione. He wanted us to tell him things about the future, about you. I could have given him a heads-up, you know, just in case I failed and you went on to become Voldemort. But I didn't." The mention of Dumbledore was what finally cut through Tom's hazy thought patterns, bringing him right back to the present moment. "I think... I think that was the first time I truly realized I wasn't okay with all the ways he had manipulated me, not really, even if it had led to a peaceful world. And I realized that I wanted to give you a chance. I wanted you to be your own person. And, most of all, I wanted to do things for myself, too. So, no, Tom, I don't hate you or think you are ruining my life. This was *my* choice, to give you a chance, and I don't regret it, because for once, I don't think I made it out of desperation or conditioning. I made it because I see the good in you, and I want you to see it too."



HARRY

There was a silent period, then, and Harry patiently waited for Tom's response on the outside, but on the inside, he was trying to figure out what could have possibly caused this reaction out of him.

Tom gulped down hard as he finally looked up to meet his eyes, but he seemed more in control of his emotions now.

“You were right,” he spoke, voice now low and defeated. “They don’t trust me.” *So that’s what this is about.* “They just tell me what they think I want to hear. I used to think pressing where it hurt was the most reliable way to get to the truth, but maybe it just means they’ll say anything to stop the pain.”

Tom’s forehead was doing that thing, where it was furrowed but also raised, creating a look of sorrow and confusion that tug at Harry’s heartstrings.

He loved that Tom felt secure enough in him to ask for advice – however indirectly – but not how it seemed to require genuine distress for him to even consider doing so.

“I don’t even know where to start mending those bridges. How do you make someone trust you?”

Harry wished he had the easy answer he was looking for, but he also knew someone like Tom needed to work through the hard parts first in order to not quit halfway.

“That’s the whole thing: you don’t. You show them you can be trustworthy, and then you trust they will see it and choose to trust you.”

Tom wrinkled his nose. “Ugh. Sounds too convoluted. Blackmail is so much easier. It worked for Orion all the time.”

Harry smiled at the borderline childish response.

“Look, I get it. As a kid, I couldn’t trust anyone around me, and that made it very hard to connect to most people. I couldn’t trust words by themselves, so I over-relied on action. I got too obsessed, too hung up on small things, so convinced they were signs people were evil all along. The worst part is that it was war, so most often than not, I was right, so that just confirmed my skewed worldview.” Harry sighed, Draco Malfoy’s face popping up in his head. “At the thick of it, it was a fine, useful defense mechanism. People forgave my suspicions because it was war, enemies were everywhere, and more often than not, secret meetings were being held, so they understood my behavior. But by the fifth time you’ve eavesdropped on your godfather because you’re anxious he’s hiding something from you, well...” he chuckled humorlessly, “you start to realize healthy skepticism and stalking are actually worlds apart from one another.” Harry had always been stuck between two extremes: forcefully trying to be kept on the loop at all times or withdrawing himself from it without a second thought.

Tom nodded, but still sighed heavily. “It’s just that me and the Knights, we’re like coworkers. We’re... *They’re* coercively strung together by the same goal. We’ve never been kids, and allowing immaturity and indecision to fester seems like a recipe for disaster. Maybe you could try and convince them I’m serious.”

He had thought about it, but Tom’s actions had immediately put an obstacle in place. “I don’t think they’ll hear me, Tom. I’ll talk to them, I owe them as much, but if they think I’m on

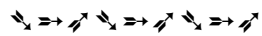
your side, they might not trust me anymore either.” He had done this whole thing with them for Tom, yes, but he still felt like he had betrayed them by immediately joining him. “I’m not asking you to stop following through with your plans, but you may have to for the time being, at least to convince them you mean it. Or...”

“Or?” Tom asked in a hopeful tone. His panic had subsided, but he still had a wide look to his eyes, a manic tinge to his disposition.

“You’ll have to do something to prove you’re being honest. Maybe *not do* something you usually would, especially if you’re used to retaliating.”

He sounded a bit too eager when he responded, “I can do that.”

“But, Tom...” Tom looked at him and waited, and Harry swallowed dryly. *Let’s see how far he is willing to listen to me.* “You have to accept that it might not work, or that it might take some time. Time that might stretch on for longer than you’d like, and, you know, it’s a continuous effort, to try to make up for what you’ve done.”



TOM

With his fight or flight now disarmed, Tom’s body felt heavy with exhaustion.

Time was all he had... and all he didn’t.

So much could be undone in a few months’ time. Minds and ideals could change, circumstances that caused their allegiance to him could loosen and soften their grip. Tom liked to think he could find replacements easily enough, but he wasn’t entirely certain of that. Trust – or even a sort of scared idolatry – was not easily won over, and the last seven years of escalations proved that.

It was a big decision, and he still wasn’t sure how he felt about the supposed reward.

Tom breathed deeply, and exhaled for even longer. If he came to regret it, then at least he would be able to reverse things more easily.

“I’ve already started with the easiest part. I called off the attack on Charlus. But there needs to be some sort of substitute. By giving this up, I’m essentially doing nothing as the Ministry continues to break down our traditions, one at a time.”

Harry frowned. “Don’t get me wrong, but why does it matter if the Samhain rituals aren’t celebrated anymore? I’ve learned a lot about Dark magic these last few years and I get the curiosity about it, but...”

There was a pause, and Tom took the opportunity to ask.

“How much do you know about our culture, Harry?”

There was a far away look in Harry’s eyes as he responded, “Not enough.” It looked to Tom as if that had been a grievance he’d had for quite some time.

Tom could make that better, he knew, and maybe even get an ally for his goals in the process.

“I didn’t know anything when I came to Hogwarts, and if it weren’t for Abraxas, I still wouldn’t. The Restricted Section itself is incredibly limited when it comes to Dark magic, even in a solely educational sphere. I want to teach you more about it, if you’ll have me.”

Tom observed eagerly as Harry nodded.

“Yes. I can see that it matters to you, and I want to know why you’ve been doing what you’re doing.”

Tom smiled. Harry, however, didn’t.

“Okay,” he said, and turned Tom’s chin in his direction so he’d face him. When he spoke again, it was with a deep, serious tone. “I know what you did to Hermione.”

The cold he’d felt in the midst of whatever that reaction had been was now back in full force.

“How?” The last thing he wanted was to lose all the good faith he had been building with Harry.

Harry, though, didn’t even blink. “She told me.”

This makes no sense.

“She... *told* you?”

Tom hated sounding so uncertain.

“Yes. It turns out Hermione is very skilled at deflecting spells.”

Tom really didn’t have the mental energy to break that down in his head at the moment, and the only thing he cared about was making sure Harry didn’t hate him. “Harry, I...”

Harry still had a dark look to his face and voice, though, and he continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “I’m not the person you need to apologize to. And trust me, you *will* apologize for it.” Tom sighed, but Harry wasn’t finished. “Listen up, because I’m only going to say this once. If you ever think of doing anything like what you’ve done to Hermione again, I’ll make sure you never achieve anything you set your mind to. I’ll make it my life’s goal to destroy you. I killed you once, I can do it again. Do you understand me?”

Tom gulped down, hard, and licked his lips. Was it insane that he found Harry’s threats hot? “Yes.”

Harry's eyes softened, and Tom felt the knot inside of his chest loosen a bit. "Good. Now come here."

Harry enveloped Tom in his arms. Tom froze, but tried to relax, and Harry let out a deep sigh as Tom rested his head on his shoulder.

"I know I went too far," he whispered, nose nuzzling Harry's neck. His own gesture sent shivers down his spine as he got in contact with Harry's warm skin, and he could feel goosebumps forming all over. He wasn't sure if it was a good feeling or not. "Thank you for not leaving me."

Harry distanced himself a bit, and kissed his cheek. His tone was gentle when he spoke. "Hermione is to me what Abraxas is to you. What would you do if I hurt him?"

"You wouldn't," he said, surprising himself, and Harry blushed at the vehement swiftness of Tom's response.

"Not the point."

The reference to Abraxas made Tom relive their discussion in his head, but he refused to let it color the progress he and Harry were doing.

And at the end of the day, even with Abraxas mad at him, his answer would still be the same.

"I would make sure you could never walk again, and that every single one of your days was filled with misery. That is, of course, until I left Hogwarts." His delivery of the words was completely emotionless. "Then I would torture you and kill you, and dispose of your body in a way no one would ever find it."

Harry seemed a bit freaked out at his response, and Tom privately found it amusing. "Right. Well, then you get it."

"Yeah." Tom's voice softened without his permission, and he breathed deeply. "I do." He raised a hand and started drawing circles on Harry's neck, reluctant to keep talking. "Speaking of Abraxas, though..."

"What? Did he say anything?"

He couldn't explain the urge to tell him something like this, something that had nothing to do with them and all to do with Tom and his friendship, but he found in himself the desire to share.

So he did.

"Back in fifth year, Orion tried to leave and get Abraxas to do the same. I... didn't handle it well. I threatened to tell his family he was in love with Abraxas. He gave up, and told Abraxas he was okay with him staying. But apparently Orion had never told him about what I did, and now that he knows, he... Let's just say he isn't as understanding." The words seemed to come out of Tom's throat like razors, butchering their way through.

Realization seemed to bloom in Harry's eyes.

"Is that why you had a panic attack?"

"That's what that was?" *Huh*. He had heard of the term before, but never been able to attach it to something concrete. "I guess."

Harry took Tom's hand that was still on his neck and kissed the palm, and for some reason, the gesture felt even more intimate to Tom than the way they had been standing before. How was this so easy for Harry? How did it not make him feel as vulnerable as Tom did?

Suddenly he felt very conscious of the fact that they were doing this whole thing in the middle of the library.

"Why aren't you in class right now?"

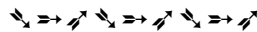
Harry blushed, and Tom's curiosity was piqued.

"Honestly, I just didn't have the mental capacity to handle Slughorn right now. I... I thought you were ignoring me, that you didn't want anyone to know we were together now that the castle is full again."

Oh.

Tom traced Harry's cheek, following the pink spots, and looked him in the eye.

"I wanted to sort everything first so it wouldn't be on our way moving forward. Because I want to be with you, Harry. Merlin knows I didn't even care much about soulmates before I met you, but now, I have no intention of letting you go." Tom injected as much certainty as he could into his eyes, and he didn't try to disguise the possessiveness in his tone as he spoke, "You're mine, now. I think you always have been."



FOUR DAYS LATER

HARRY

Things had changed between them.

Harry could feel the shift. What had been gradual throughout the last few months had become much more in just a few days.

Harry didn't know what he had done to earn it, but Tom seemed to trust him.

After he had helped with Tom's panic attack, they had spent all their free time together, studying, talking about Dark magic, or just getting to know each other. Tom often asked questions about Harry's childhood and life, but he was still closely guarded about his. Harry didn't push him – he knew, from Tom's complicated history, that there might be many traumas that he wasn't aware of, and he knew from his own experience how hard it was to speak about them.

Still, for some reason, Tom was a lot more patient with him than Harry would have ever expected, especially when in comparison to his previous reactions. Harry kept expecting Tom to get pissed at him, to get annoyed at his ignorance or their inherently different ways of seeing the world, but he was always holding his frustrations back.

They were in their dorm that day, both sitting in Harry's bed after dinner while Orion and Abraxas were still in the common room.

“You do know you don't need my help for everything, right? You're a pretty self-sufficient guy, you can handle this. How did you gain their trust in the first place?”

They were once again talking about Tom and the Knights, and he could tell Tom didn't want to admit he was scared of confronting them again, so he was stalling.

“‘Gain their trust’ is a bit of an overstatement.”

“Fine. How did you become friends with Abraxas?”

“Abraxas is odd. He decided on his own.”

Harry was exasperated, but he resisted the urge to bury his face on a pillow. “Now you're just being deliberately obtuse.”

Tom sighed.

“I honestly don't know. We met on the train, first year. Since then he's just... been there. Whenever I needed him, just there. I guess I started to lean on him when I realized he wasn't going to run or turn on me out of nowhere.” Tom said the last part with a bitter expression on his face.

“Is there any moment in particular that stands out to you as a bonding moment? When you stopped being acquaintances and became actual friends?”

Tom thought about it for a minute, looking pensive.

“Maybe? I remember the first time I brought the idea of the Knights up. I was pretty excited, I think. Things had been going well, and the Slytherins had started to see me as more than just dirt on their shoe. Abraxas just looked at me and told me he thought it was a good idea.” Harry noticed as Tom's face fell, a sadness creeping into it that made Harry want to hug him. “It was the way he said it, though. Like he was proud of me.”

Harry *didn't* hug him, but he tried to inject as much affection as he could into his gaze.

“You’re likable, Tom. You just have to let yourself be it outside of the context of flattery and manipulation. Abraxas will see it again, too.”

“Yes, well, he’s the one who needs to apologize, not me,” he dismissed Harry and went back to the stack of homework in front of him.

Harry didn’t bring up the subject any longer.

They studied for a while, but Harry was feeling restless. Tom had been telling him all about the theory of Dark magic – magical affinities, the differences between the types of magic, which spells were classified as one or the other and why – but they’d hardly done anything practical with it, and Harry still wanted to fully understand why Tom was so invested in preserving Dark magic, why he felt so connected to it.

He didn’t know how much time had passed as Tom told him things, showed him books he had on the subject he had gotten from the purebloods, and answered any question Harry had. He liked seeing Tom so excited, and it turned out he was a great teacher when he actually cared that the person listening was learning.

As Tom rhapsodized about Herpo the Foul’s actions, though, Harry’s eyes narrowed in his direction.

“You don’t really mind the way Dark magic can be used for evil, do you?”

He wasn’t sure whether or not Tom had processed his wary tone.

“I don’t see why I should blame magic for the actions of people.”

“No, I get it. I don’t think that should be done either. What I’m saying is that you think it’s okay to use it like that if the end goal is an interesting or good one.”

It was true; Tom didn’t seem to truly make a distinction between the interesting and useful actions done with Dark magic he had told Harry about and the vile, repulsive ones.

“I know you are unflinchingly noble and all, but it is quite naive to believe any real, lasting change can be achieved without sacrifice.”

He hated being called naive. There was nothing naive about choosing the hard road. It was in moments like these that Harry was hit by the reality of how opposite to each other they had the potential to be.

“Would it actually be a sacrifice for you to do those things?”

He regretted it the moment it came out of his mouth, but he didn’t take it back.

Tom huffed, his brow creasing in hurt disbelief. “Fuck you, Harry.”

Harry’s heart starting pounding in his chest in a chaotic fashion.

“No, wait.”

“Why? So I can hear about all the ways you still see me as a monster?” Tom asked, voice cutting.

He was acting like he was a victim, like he had never done anything wrong. It made Harry’s blood boil, the fact that Tom thought himself worthy of always getting the benefit of the doubt.

“How about you stop acting like one, then?” he began, and once he got going, he didn’t stop. “You’re *just* like Dumbledore. You act like he’s always been wrong about you, yet you’re constantly proving him right. You think the ends justify the means, just like he did, but at least the circumstances were life or death then. You’re just creating constraints around yourself so you can justify your bad choices as the only ones available, because that’s the only way you can fucking sleep at night.”

Tom looked as if he had just been slapped. His eyes were wide and his lips partially open, and as Harry finished his speech, he blinked, chin thrust forward rigidly, and he got up from Harry’s bed.

“Right. Don’t waste your time on me, then,” he said through his teeth, brown eyes intensely staring into Harry’s.

Tom’s reaction immediately caused Harry’s anger to deflate, leaving only a pang of regret behind.

He wanted to hit himself, hit his tendency to just say things without thinking of the long-term consequences first. “Shit, Tom, I’m sorry—” he pleaded, hating the way he sounded defeated. Harry hurried to Tom’s side, only to be physically rebuffed by the way the other boy stopped, hand a little too tight on Harry’s shoulder.

“Why are you apologizing when you meant every word?” Harry had no idea what he had been about to say before Tom interrupted him, but he was willing to improvise, whatever it took to show Tom he didn’t mean to say it like that. However, Tom’s venomous tone had Harry’s mouth aggressively snapped closed. “You’re not sorry. You’re just scared that I’m a ticking time bomb, that I’m so emotionally fragile I’ll become Voldemort the moment I leave your side.”

Tom’s grip on him became painful, his long fingers white with effort, and he hissed out the next words, making Harry’s panicked thoughts veer into the stray remark that it sounded like he was going to start speaking Parseltongue. “Well, no need to babysit me. There will be no deaths tonight just because you think I care enough for you to hurt my feelings.”

Tom released him and started turning around to leave. If Harry didn’t know any better, he would have sworn he saw a hint of hurt in Tom’s expression.

As he left, Harry groaned, hands covering his face. *I’m such a fucking idiot.*

He spent a few minutes wallowing in self-pity before deciding he needed to find Tom and apologize.

For real, this time.

He didn't have the Marauders' map anymore, but he knew there was a limited amount of places Tom could've gone to. He wasn't speaking to the Knights, so he was probably alone, and he obviously wasn't in their dorm.

Harry didn't need to go far, however, because Tom hadn't even left Slytherin's common room.

He couldn't help the thought that told him that Tom had stayed behind because he wanted him to find him.

"Hey," he began, reluctantly, walking slowly as if trying to corner a lion.

Tom didn't look in his direction, and Harry could see a muscle moving in his jaw as he kept his mouth tightly shut.

Harry sighed, and joined Tom on the sofa near one the windows facing the Black Lake.

"You promised you would be open to it," Tom murmured.

Harry felt the guilt inside of him multiply tenfold.

"I'm trying. I'm sorry I freaked out. I don't think you're a bad person, Tom. It's just that you trusted me to be your moral compass, and I can't help but take that responsibility seriously," Harry explained. He really meant it.

"It doesn't mean you need to assume bad intentions in everything I say or do, Harry." Tom finally looked at him, a smirk on his face. Harry knew he wasn't fully forgiven, but he was relieved Tom didn't immediately call off the whole thing between them. "Plus, you can't deny there's a certain fascination with the macabre imbued in all humans."

Harry rolled his eyes at Tom's statement, and he bumped his shoulder playfully.

"Thanks."

Tom frowned. "For what?"

Harry smiled at him. "For not assuming the worst of my intentions even when I inevitably do of yours."

Harry hadn't really noticed it before, but, now, as he observed him, he could see how Tom seemed relaxed around him in a way he wasn't anywhere else. Tom had embraced one of his legs to his chest, so unlike his rigid posture around the Slytherins, and tilted his head toward Harry.

“You put your faith in me in a way I’ll never be able to repay by coming here, Harry. I’ll keep making mistakes and you know that, but I’m trying to stop the worst of me from burning this bridge down.”

Harry could see that was true.

And that made him realize something.

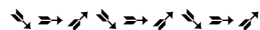
Tom had given him two choices: to spend time with him for the rest of the school year trying to change his mind, or to try to fully get the Knights to completely desert him. He had, without even thinking about it, categorically chosen Tom, and was surprised at how utterly sure he was that he had made the right decision.

Not just because he was solving the issue by addressing the root of it, but also because he was starting to feel things he never had before in his life.

He had liked people, loved Ginny, but it had never been like this, never felt like the possible end of it would destroy him from the inside out.

He didn’t know what his feelings meant, how deep they ran, but Harry knew, without a doubt, that he would remain there, trying to figure it out, until the very end.

Even if it ended badly.



There was a sort of timestamp floating in the air in Harry’s mind as they lay there, eyes to the wild above, everything silent and still except for the sound of wind and the imaginary twinkling of the stars. It was as if he could see himself looking back at that moment, fondness and melancholy replacing the overwhelming feeling of presence.

Looking at Tom was as mesmerizing as looking at the commanding, boldly expansive night sky. The small blemishes on his face were just like the constellations; his eyelashes, curving roads of freedom, like dark, soft feathers. His eyes reminded Harry of tree barks, not empty as a smooth surface, but full of details, little lines that were darker than the rest, pieces that shined just a little brighter than others, all intertwined and giving a sense of texture that shouldn’t feel possible but was nonetheless. His hair framed his face perfectly as it fell almost all in place, but the parts that caught Harry’s eyes were the ones in disarray: how the strands caressing his neck curled out of its carefully chosen place in disobedience, how the curl dripping down his forehead had pieces frizzing up, how a small amount of hair was growing on the sides, starting to make its way onto his ears, ruining the perfect haircut Tom always sported. His thin lips looked a bit dry, and they were half-open as he continued looking up. It all brought a sense of humanity to the statuesque and graceful posturing of Tom Riddle, and these supposed flaws only emphasized how gorgeous he truly was. Harry had never been one to find beauty in someone for beauty’s sake – he hardly felt like he considered

attractive what everyone else did. It was someone's expressions, the way they used their vessel that enchanted him. Someone could go from beautiful to ugly incredibly fast depending on their actions, and that had been his experience with the Tom Riddle from the diary.

Nothing, however, seemed to steer Harry away from this Tom. He was beautiful when illuminated by daylight, and just as stunning when shrouded in shadows.

Harry felt bold, then, and started tracing the freckles on Tom's left arm, satisfied as goosebumps followed his finger's journey. Tom said nothing, and nothing about his body language seemed to imply he was uncomfortable.

Harry had always loved the stories people's skins told – from scars to bruises to chewed nails and skin, body hair and stretch marks, sweat, tears, blood.

He had never loved his own scars, but he had learned to embrace them. By seeing the beauty in other people, he was starting to see his own, the one passed down to him by all the people he had never met but still loved.

He didn't look up at Tom's face again, not yet, not willing to ruin his exploration with the possibility of rejection.

What he didn't expect was Tom turning to face him, so close he could feel his breath.

"I'm not very good with words when it comes to vulnerability, but..." Tom paused, hesitantly, but with a tinge of wistfulness that took Harry's breath away. "There's nowhere I'd rather be now than right here with you, Harry."

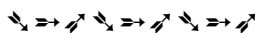
Fuck, Harry's brain said as he shot up in bed, sweat covering his back and forehead. His head was such an asshole, preying on his insecurities and desires, the way he wanted Tom to finally feel safe around him.

He was getting too caught up on the unsaid. He wanted to know Tom, all the intricacies of who he was and who he wanted to be, and going off of assumptions was a surefire way of misfiring.

He had to do the thing he craved the most but often neglected; he would have to communicate.

Not just try to get Tom to talk, but also himself.

He was dreading it already.



It was late, but Harry was still awake. His dream had woken him up, and after tossing and turning for what felt like hours, he made his way toward the common room, sitting down on one of the armchairs facing the fireplace.

Not long after, he heard muffled footsteps approaching, and Tom faced him.

“Can’t sleep?” he whispered. Tom’s hair was messy in a way that Harry had rarely gotten to see, but he managed to look regal even barefoot and in his pajamas.

Harry shook his head. He flattened his hair, feeling a bit self-conscious over his tired state, and watched as Tom looked pensive.

His soulmate responded to his gesture with, “Me neither.” He remained standing as Harry got up and leaned onto the armchair that was closest to him.

“So... what now?” Tom asked, raising a hand to rub the back of his head. Despite the action coming across as nervous, his face was closed, guarded, and Harry couldn’t tell what he was feeling.

“What do you mean?”

“What are we?” he clarified, and Harry thought about it for a second.

Tom had made it clear he was committed. It felt ironic that Tom had been the first to ask that question, but at the end of the day, Harry realized they were both equally invested in whatever this was.

He couldn’t reckon with how lucky he had gotten.

But, then again, maybe he should’ve known. After all, Tom Riddle – any and all versions of him – seemed to have quite the proclivity toward obsession.

“Whatever we want it to be. We don’t need to rush this. We don’t need to label it. It’s true this thing started way before you had the confirmation that we were soulmates, at least to me, but we’re still getting to know each other. I don’t want to keep going based on misconceptions. Plus, you promised me I would get to know more about your ideas and your past.”

Harry didn’t count the memories Dumbledore had shown him as information about Tom, not really. They were things *on* Tom, not *about* him, and what he actually wanted to know was what Tom deemed important about his life, not snippets rearranged by someone else to paint a bad picture of him.

Tom licked his lips absentmindedly, not really looking at Harry. He replied, “We can do that.”

“And, Tom?”

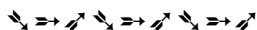
“Yeah?”

Tom’s head had now tilted toward his direction, his eyes wide and – oddly enough – innocent, and Harry hoped he wasn’t blushing. “I like where this is going. I like you. And I

don't want to stop the kissing or the touching, but I want to be your friend, too. I want this to have a foundation, to last."

Tom seemed taken aback by his words. He blinked, however, and leaned down a bit, kissing the top of Harry's head. "I want that, too."

Good.



TOM

"I did this bastardized version of twenty questions with Orion a while back, so I was thinking we could do something similar. Just ask whatever we want to know, no filter. Is this okay with you? You don't need to answer anything you don't feel comfortable sharing." Harry was searching for Tom's approval, with those puppy eyes of his, and Tom nodded, suppressing a smile. "Here's a question to start it off: what is your first memory?"

What a trip down memory lane that was. Tom's recollection was almost cruelly excellent, which was both a blessing and a curse, and he knew exactly what the answer to that question would be.

"I was around three, I believe. One of the nuns were holding me, and I was clinging to her finger. I was trying to reach one of the flowers on the ground. She had something in her pocket – I don't think I saw what it was – and it fell as she tried to stop me. She secured me in her arms, and tried to bend down to get it, and I remember being upset that she was leaning away from where the flowers were, so my accidental magic made the object move toward where I wanted. I remember her looking at me, like I was special. She collected the object and picked a flower for me." He could still see the nun's face, the colors of the garden, could almost *feel* the breeze on his skin. "I don't know what happened to her after that. I never saw her again, though. It makes me wonder if she told anyone and they didn't believe her, or worse, if they did and hated that she didn't think it was abominable. I wonder where she is right now." Tom walked to Harry's side, leaning onto the armchair the exact same way, and his shoulders started brushing Harry's. "There weren't a lot of kind moments for me after that."

"Can I ask you something? I really should've done this before, so I apologize if I made you feel uncomfortable in any way."

In the flickering light from the fireplace, Tom could see every tiny detail of Harry's eyes, of his beautiful face. Tom's attention felt perpetually divided between listening to his words or watching his body language.

“Go ahead.”

“What are your boundaries? What are comfortable and uncomfortable with? You don’t need to share the reasoning, I just want to know how to make you feel the best you can feel, like you can trust me.”

No one had ever asked that question to Tom. No one had ever seen beyond the tough exterior, the mask he wore that implied he could take anything without flinching, without breaking.

It made him want to run and hide, but somehow also tell the boy next to him everything.

“I’m not a fan of surprises. I don’t like getting caught off-guard or approached suddenly. I can take it if I have to, though.” He had, he always had. Life was hard and unforgiving, and Tom was well aware of the way his weaknesses could lead to his premature end.

His Horcrux had been the ultimate precaution, and he had taken it for a reason.

“You shouldn’t have to.” Harry adjusted his posture, and Tom grieved how the contact point between their shoulders vanished. “Is this why you had that reaction when I kissed you the morning after your birthday?”

Tom nodded. “It was part of it, yes.” He was glad he didn’t need to broach the subject himself. “But it’s easier with you, because I know you’ll listen if I ask you to stop.”

Harry’s lips curved into a close-lip smile. “Always.”

His reaction spurred Tom on, and before he had even fully thought through it, he continued. “Um– I’m not a fan of loud noises? Maybe that’s downplaying it, actually,” he mumbled the last part. “The bombs, they were so loud. But even worse than the bombs were people’s screams, the thumping of their running. I remember this one time, they were hitting so close to where we were hiding. The other kids, they just covered their heads and remained close to each other, but they were scared of me, so I was always alone. They had pushed me toward the door, so when one of the bombs hit again, I could hear this woman. Her crying, it was so loud it was closer to a wailing. I heard what she was screaming, too, and she was calling out for her baby.” Tom hated that memory, hated how even speaking about it could conjure up the sights, the sounds, even the taste of ash on his tongue. “One of the kids heard it too, and she wanted to leave, to help her find it, but I knew by the woman’s crying that her child was dead. The nuns didn’t say anything – they were too busy trying to cope with the chaos, so that kid tried to leave the bomb shelter to help. I had to stop her.” He wanted to close his eyes, but he knew it wouldn’t help. “I never really had friends in Wool’s, but me and that girl, we were civil. After that, though, she never spoke to me again. It was like I didn’t even exist.”

Tom’s recollection got interrupted halfway by Harry’s soft voice.

“I’m sorry this happened to you, Tom. You didn’t deserve any of it, and I hope you know you couldn’t have done anything for that woman. You were just a kid, and you were protecting yourself. You were right to stay behind and to keep that girl there with you.”

Tom didn't know how to feel as he processed Harry's words. He brought his hand up to rub his eyes, but stopped in the middle of the way, noticing they were shaking.

Harry noticed it too.

"May I?" he asked, body completely facing his now, and pointed to Tom's hands.

He didn't know what Harry was asking, but he nodded.

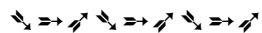
Harry, ever so gentle, touched his hands with his, holding them together and bringing them to his lips. He kissed each one of his knuckles, slowly as if they had all the time in the world, and when he finished, intertwined his fingers with Tom's.

He was still shaking, he could tell, but Harry's calloused hands grounded him, their cold embrace somehow relaxing.

"You'll never have to go back to Wool's after the end of the school year. You'll never have to be anywhere near the war if you don't want to." Harry's eyes were so intense, the green like a lantern shining just for him. "I promise."

He wanted Harry to touch him in ways no one ever had before, to pull his waist toward his and join their body heat until it was hard to breathe.

Tom didn't do any of that, though. He just kissed Harry's lips softly, just once, and rested his forehead against his, eyes closed.



Chapter End Notes

fun fact: originally this chapter had a scene in it where Hermione asked Harry whether he liked Tom, and Harry answered "what? like we're children in a playground and he's pulling on my pigtails?" but I couldn't find an organic way to add it in, so it got cut.

CHAPTER 12. I DIDN'T THINK IT WAS ANYTHING SIGNIFICANT UNTIL IT WAS.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON OCTOBER 20TH, 2023.
Chapter title is from I AM THINKING OF ENDING THINGS by Iain Reid.

*"Maybe that's how we know when a relationship is real. When someone else previously
unconnected to us knows us in a way we never thought or believed possible."*

- I'm Thinking of Ending Things, 2016, Iain Reid

CHAPTER 12 – I DIDN'T THINK IT WAS ANYTHING SIGNIFICANT UNTIL IT WAS.

OR, *THE REALITY OF UNITY*

TWO DAYS LATER

HERMIONE

"Do you want to try doing the ritual?"

They've been spending every second they had together through these last two days, Hermione and Lucy, working on learning about Dark magic. Lucy was halfway through a lecture on prejudice when she asked Hermione the question.

"What?" Hermione didn't expect the sudden shift, and looked up from one of the books to face Lucy.

Lucy chuckled, half mean-spirited, half genuinely entertained.

"You've barely been able to focus on anything else. I know you've been thinking about it nonstop. I was too, growing up. I just needed to know," she said in a conspiratorial tone, a smirk on her face.

Hermione didn't like the way she found Lucy's sense of humor endearing, especially when it was at her expense.

"I have been thinking about it," she reluctantly began, and tucked a portion of stray hair behind her ear. "What's your affinity?"

Lucy watched her with those attentive eyes of hers, and Hermione tried to stop a blush from emerging. "I'm Dark." The way she said it – with no shame, no secrecy, yet with that husky tone of hers making it sound interesting, *enticing* – made Hermione want to scream. "Don't you want to know yours?"

She wanted Lucy to stop trying to goad her into accepting the Dark. She also knew that was stupid, because she had been the one to ask to learn more about it.

Hermione constantly felt like a hypocrite, and she hated it.

But she knew she wasn't yet ready for this, not when she wasn't sure of what it would mean for her as a person, as a witch.

"I do, but not now," she spoke, resolutely and with finality.

Lucy just looked at her, as if trying to read her thoughts, but eventually nodded.

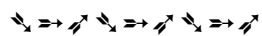
"Okay. When you're ready, I'll be here." There was a pause, and then Lucy's expression morphed into one of amusement. "I *am* being blackmailed into this, after all, it's not like I can give you any other answer."

Hermione rolled her eyes and threw a rolled-up piece of parchment in her direction.

Lucy ducked and smiled at her for a second, before settling back into a mask of indifference.

It was always the same with her, this pattern of retreating after realizing she had given too much away, and Hermione was starting to get impatient. She had completed part one of her plan of spending time with Lucy.

Soon she would have to do the same for part two.



HARRY

Harry had a plan for speaking to the Knights about the changes happening.

He knew it would be unfair to ask them to just believe him about Tom with no solid evidence, but it wasn't as if he could simply prove, without a shadow of a doubt, that Tom had changed. There was no non-empirical proof to back that up.

So he would have to get creative.

It was Friday, and Harry didn't have Slughorn's class that day. But he did know a part of his schedule, courtesy of Hermione and him knowing *her* Ravenclaw schedule, so he knew when he would be out of the Potions classroom at that time.

That would leave it free for him to steal a vial of *veritaserum* for his meeting.

Harry tried his best to be inconspicuous as he made his way to the dungeons, despite him having to skip double History of Magic classes for that. He managed to get there fairly unnoticed, which left as the only challenge opening up the supply cabinet full of potions.

He wasn't stupid – he knew a simple *alohomora* wouldn't cut it. He had researched several unlocking spells beforehand, all created as counters to other, more complex locking charms.

Harry first used a diagnostic spell to check for any defenses surrounding the cabinet, pleased to see it seemed safe. He started on his task, managing to get through most of them with no luck before someone unlocked the classroom behind him.

Fuck.

He turned around, trying, unsuccessfully, to look like he wasn't attempting to steal from a professor's stock. Harry sighed, however, at the realization that he had been caught by that very same professor.

Slughorn's frown was pronounced, and he had none of superficial charm he usually sported when trying to gain a student's attention.

"Mr. Evans. Care to explain why I have been notified of an attempt at a break-in into my potions cabinet?"

He had, perhaps naively, thought Slughorn wasn't a very savvy professor. He hadn't found any alarm spells on the cabinet, so he had assumed it was safe. But then again, Harry wasn't Hermione or Tom.

He was used to getting himself out of trouble, not avoiding getting into it in the first place.

"I'm so sorry, Professor." He attempted to be smooth. "I know I shouldn't be doing this."

"Then why were you, Mr. Evans?" Slughorn's tone was cutting, as far from forgiving as one could be.

For once in his life, his status couldn't save him from punishment.

Harry sighed again, trying to think of an excuse. "One of my classmates forced me into a magical bet. They wanted *veritaserum* for a game." Anything was better than the truth, he

assumed.

Slughorn seemed to buy it, but he didn't look very satisfied either way.

“And who might this colleague of yours be?”

Yeah, there was no way Harry was implicating an innocent person in his mess.

“Sorry, Professor. Can't say. They forced me into a vow, too.”

Slughorn sighed. Harry almost jumped with glee at the success of his lackluster attempt at subterfuge.

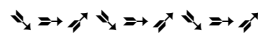
It wasn't enough to get him out of trouble, though.

“Come with me, Harry. I'm afraid this must be brought directly to the headmaster.”

He was a muggle-born there. He wasn't a celebrity. And he wasn't just out after curfew or getting into trouble for hexing a classmate – he had been caught in the middle of trying to steal a dangerous potion from a teacher's stock.

It didn't matter that Dippet knew about him.

He was fucked.



Headmaster Dippet was, as expected, not happy.

Slughorn had quickly explained the situation to him and left, apparently not interested in delivering punishment to Harry himself. It wasn't as if he had cared about him at all anyway. Apparently, Harry didn't seem that interesting to his Potions professor.

Dippet, however, *did* find him interesting.

It just wasn't in an advantageous way.

“I find myself very disappointed in you, Mr. Evans,” he stated, sitting down behind his long desk. He was assessing him, a disapproving look on his eyes and a thin line on his lips.

It had been a while since Harry had last felt bad at disappointing someone in a position of authority, but he did now.

Dippet had been the one to allow him into Hogwarts, to allow *Hermione* to follow him, even with no actual evidence to his claims.

And here Harry was, making him regret it.

“I’m sorry, Headmaster.”

Dippet simply shook his head.

“Care to explain what you were trying to do? Or must I expel you instead?”

Harry’s stomach sank, and he couldn’t help the despair building up inside him.

Harry felt he owed the headmaster the truth, but he had no idea where to start.

And if he was being honest with himself, he didn’t really trust him. Not as he knew Dippet had been conversing with Dumbledore about him and Hermione.

Speaking of the devil, Dippet suddenly changed his posture as if hearing something, probably feeling something within the wards, and said, out loud, before any knock on the door:

“Come on in, Albus.”

Harry wanted to protest, to tell Dippet to not let the professor into the conversation, but he didn’t exactly have a moral high ground there. He remained quiet as his former headmaster waltzed in.

“Hello, Mr. Evans,” Dumbledore greeted him chirpily, as if nothing serious was going on.

Harry suppressed the urge to glare at the younger version of the man.

“Hello, Professor.”

Dippet gave Dumbledore a brief nod, and turned to look at Harry, waiting for his explanation.

Harry bit his lip.

“I promise I wasn’t trying to do anything bad, Headmaster. I just needed a bit of *veritaserum*.” He knew Dippet wouldn’t buy the excuse he had fed Slughorn, not when he knew of the unorthodox circumstances behind Harry’s late arrival. “I need to prove I’m telling the truth to someone, and that was the only way I knew how.”

Dippet kept staring at him, as if he could gauge Harry’s intentions or pry the truth out of him simply with his eyes.

With the way Harry kept shifting in his seat, he felt like the headmaster might actually be on to something with that tactic.

Harry ignored Dumbledore’s curious gaze and focused on Dippet’s response. “I see. Is that *someone* the soulmate you came here for?”

The last thing he wanted was to talk about Tom in Dumbledore’s presence. But there was no other way out of this situation that he could see at that moment.

“Kind of. More like proving to someone else something about him.”

Harry could tell his vague responses were getting under Dippet's skin. He didn't want to end up expelled, but he also refused to let Dumbledore know details about Tom and what he had been doing, so he found himself in an impasse.

Whatever the result may be, he was sure it wouldn't be a great one.

"Mr. Evans..." Dippet sighed, but he got interrupted by Dumbledore.

"I'm sure this was a one-off event, Armando. Harry here knows the consequences of his actions. He is aware they are greater than those of an ordinary student. I am positive he will think twice before doing something like this again."

Harry shot Dumbledore a surprised, grateful look, but his former headmaster kept his gaze strictly on Dippet.

The two of them had a silent conversation with their eyes, one that went on for far too long, and Harry was getting even more restless by the time Dippet opened his mouth again.

"So we're settled. Your punishment will be detention with Slughorn, at whatever time and day he sees fit. I am willing to overlook it this one time, Mr. Evans, but if I ever catch you breaking any other rule, your punishment will be far more than a simple detention. Are we clear on this?"

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who was watching the headmaster with that characteristic glint in his eyes, and then back to Dippet, nodding avidly.

"Absolutely, sir. Thank you, sirs."

Dippet nodded, very much not satisfied with the resolution of the issue, and gestured toward the door.

"Off you go."

He got up from his chair as fast as he could without tripping, not wanting to give Dippet the opportunity to change his mind.

Once he was out of the office and into the hallway, he realized he had been followed by Dumbledore. He felt a momentary feeling of annoyance, but got surprised by how fast it faded.

He couldn't repress the urge to ask, however, even though he felt he wouldn't like the answer.

"Sir, why did you vouch for me?"

Dumbledore's appraising look was one Harry took his time interpreting. There was grief there, but also curiosity, confusion, hope.

He didn't know what it meant.

“Mr. Evans– Harry. I am quite well acquainted with loving someone filled with darkness, of having a soulmate so diametrically opposed to you. I know how it feels to want to do everything in your power to change him.” *Whatever that meant.* “I can see your intentions are pure, my boy. Just make sure they don’t get clouded by naivety.”

Harry’d had his fill of Dumbledore-isms, enough for a lifetime, but he found that he didn’t mind it this time.

This time, he was being as clear as he was capable of being. He had let Harry know he knew of his feelings for Tom and that he didn’t judge him for it.

He had warned him, but not in a way that spelled out his certainty of Tom’s evilness.

No. Behind his words, Harry could hear Dumbledore’s hope. Not in Tom, but in Harry’s ability to know what he was doing with him.

He didn’t know what he had done, what Dumbledore had seen to hold a confidence in him he’d never had in Harry’s previous life, but he appreciated it.

What he appreciated even more, however, was Dumbledore’s hand outstretched in his direction, containing a single, small vial of *veritaserum*.

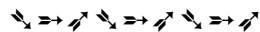
“Sir–” he started, shocked, but Dumbledore simply put it in his hand, closing it right after with his own.

“Good luck, Mr. Potter.”

The name change seemed symbolic.

Harry didn’t think much about it as he left, however, hurrying toward Charms class instead.

He had something important to do.



With his weird success at getting the *veritaserum* – however lucky it had been – Harry started wondering about his next step.

Ordinarily Harry would aim for Abraxas, but he felt odd going after him after Tom’s reaction. Orion was out of the question – if he believed Harry had switched sides, he’d be borderline impossible to convince of the contrary.

That left Lilith, then. It wasn’t like he didn’t want to check on her either way. He had promised her that he would end the Knights by the end of the school year, but he knew that, for anyone looking, him talking to Tom seemed as if he had abandoned his goal. And if they

were to come clean to everyone about their... *relationship*, then that would just sound like a confirmation of where his loyalties lay.

Yes, he had told Abraxas that he was doing this for Tom and that had been the reason why he had even offered his help, but Lilith didn't care about Tom.

She just couldn't take continuing as she was.

Charms was a drag to get through as Harry waited for the opportunity to approach her. As soon as the professor dismissed the class, he hurried to her side.

"Lilith, hey. Can we talk?"

"We have class, Evans. Or whatever your real name is."

"I'm fine with Evans. It was my mother's maiden name. Look, I know you know I've talked to Tom. And I know what he did. Or didn't do. I just want a chance to talk to you and the others after class. If you could get Tymeo too..."

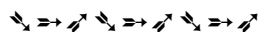
"No." She was curt in her response. As he hurried to protest, she cut him off before he could even start. "No to Tymeo, not everything else. He and I aren't exactly speaking at the moment. I don't know if you know, but he was the one who let Tom know what we were doing."

Well, that answered it. "I had a suspicion."

"I'll call the others. We can meet after the end of classes today. But don't think I won't be keeping an eye on you, Evans. I don't believe you and Tom are the best of friends now and that he just happened to call off the attack on Charlus because you asked nicely."

Even though Lilith was clearly antagonistic toward him, he felt nothing but relief.

"Thank you. I just need the chance to explain. That's it."



The classes were over for the day, and he'd had confirmation that the Knights – minus Tymeo, Sébastien, and Bram – would be meeting him in an hour in the Room of Requirement.

Harry felt like he was full of electricity, as if he could explode at any moment, but this was his chance. He held onto the vial of *veritas serum* in his pocket, the small weight doing little to ground him, and he made a last minute decision.

He needed to get Hermione.

He missed her, and he had been neglecting her for too long. While she *had* asked for some space, he knew she would appreciate finally being included in this meeting.

As he walked the hallways toward the moving stairs, knowing the library would be the most probable place to find her, he passed by a few kids playing.

His eyes instinctively focused on a boy and girl not far from him, and he watched their interaction.

“Minnie, stop that!” the boy shouted, playfully hitting the girl’s wand hand pointed at him, and the girl laughed in response. There was something familiar about her, but Harry couldn’t pinpoint what it was exactly, and it bugged him.

The girl sprinted away, the boy not that far behind, and one of the professors bellowed out, “Minerva Bellona McGonagall, come here this instant!” causing Harry to freeze in place.

Sometimes he completely forgot he was surrounded by people from his past.

He kept walking on to find Hermione, and he was still on a nostalgic mood as he got there.

As he predicted, she was surrounded by books, sitting down – or rather, almost perched, one leg half-bent on a chair and another straight on the floor – her attention fully on a heavy tome on her arms. Lucretia Black was sitting around the same table, also fully immersed in a book.

Harry felt a small smile take over his face without his permission at the sight.

He was so glad Hermione was getting along with her soulmate. He had so many questions to ask her about it! Harry hated having to interrupt it, but he knew it was important.

“Hey, ’Mione,” he said, and she lifted up her head to acknowledge his presence.

“Hi, Harry. What are you doing here?” Her question was innocuously presented, but Harry, perhaps wrongly, felt like there was an edge there.

He tried to keep a wince off his face.

“Um, can we talk?” He felt self-conscious as Lucretia looked at him, not a sign of a pureblood mask as she gave him a sharp appraisal with those soft hazel eyes.

Hermione didn’t change her neutral expression as she answered, “Sure.” She turned to the girl next to her. “Lucy, I’ll be back. Soon...?” She looked at Harry.

“Maybe not so soon?” he answered, looking apologetic. “There’s something important I want you to be present for, if that’s okay.”

He could tell she had understood what he was referring to, and her expression became softer, less guarded.

She turned back to Lucretia, and Harry wondered when she had become *Lucy* to Hermione.

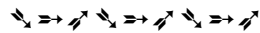
Merlin, I've been a really shitty friend. I missed so much.

"We'll keep this up tomorrow. Is that okay?" she asked her soulmate, and Lucretia smiled at her, almost imperceptibly to anyone not aggressively staring.

"Sure. See you tomorrow, Granger." Hermione rolled her eyes, and Harry ignored his curiosity for the time being. "Bye, Evans," Lucretia added, and Harry turned to her, surprised at the girl's acknowledgment.

"Uh, bye, Black." He found himself scrambling to keep the last name thing going.

Lucretia rolled her eyes as well, but there was no hostility behind it. Harry swallowed his curiosity and went back to Hermione, gesturing for her to follow him.



"What's up?" she asked Harry as they left the library and started moving toward the Room of Requirement.

He thought through the best way to present his issue.

"You were right, when you said we haven't been spending that much time together. I get that you asked for some space about the Tom thing, and this isn't about him. I mean, not directly. He won't be there or anything, if you are worried—" he rambled, and Hermione put a hand to his shoulder.

"Harry." She looked at him with affection, and the familiarity of the gesture made him a little less nervous.

"Uh, right. Sorry. I'm meeting the Knights in an hour to talk about what has been going on with Tom since he found out about our connection. They know I've been in contact with him, so. I promised I would introduce you to them, and in a way, you're part of this, too, so it just makes sense. They already know my history, and that you're from where I am as well, so, yeah. I just want all the cards on the table."

Hermione nodded, her curly hair moving with it, and Harry noticed the way her eyes were bright with interest at his proposition.

"Do they know I'm coming? And what do you intend on telling them, if they know you have been talking to Riddle?" She asked the questions unfairly fast, eagerly.

Harry hid the smile threatening to come out at her enthusiasm.

"Not really. Lilith wasn't exactly receptive to me. And, well—" He took out the vial from his pocket and showed it her. She took it from his hand and smelled it.

“*Veritaserum*? Where did you even get it?”

“Isn’t it odorless? How did you know?” Harry asked, frowning.

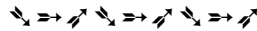
“Exactly,” she said, and smirked at him.

Of course Hermione Granger would recognize it that easily.

“Dumbledore, of all people,” he answered, pocketing the vial again, and she raised her eyebrows, curious. Harry sighed. “It’s a bit of a long story.”

“Well,” Hermione cast a *tempus*, “we still have time, if we’re skipping dinner for it anyway.”

Harry weaved his fingers through his hair, pulled at it to ground himself, and started his tale.



Everyone else was at dinner when the Knights joined them, and Harry started pacing, wishing for the best room for their meeting.

He ignored the way Abraxas, Orion, and Lilith looked at Hermione, and when the door appeared, he walked in.

The atmosphere was strange around them as the rest of them followed him.

This time, the Room didn’t resemble the Slytherin common room. He had asked for a room to collaborate in – that had been the exact word he had used – and it seemed like that had been interpreted as somewhere their differences didn’t need to be acknowledged or fought over.

For starters, there was no Slytherin green, no Ravenclaw blue – the space was composed of a soft shade of white, beige-ish, almost. There were no chairs or armchairs; instead, the center of the room was made up of an incredibly soft floor, as if it was a massive pillow, or perhaps the stuffing of a sofa. It seemed like the Room of Requirement wanted them to be as close as possible as they discussed things.

It wasn’t the first time Harry wondered if it was somewhat sentient. It sure seemed to have some sort of sense of humor.

“We’re here, Evans. Let’s get this over with,” Orion said, looking almost entertained by the secrecy of it all.

Abraxas was the first one to sit down on the floor, doing so in complete silence. The others soon followed suit, including Hermione, who seemed incredibly out of place among them.

He cleared his throat, annoyed at the fact that it seemed that he was only good with words – or witty enough to pass for it – when he was angry or didn't care about the consequences of his actions.

He took out the *veritaserum* and showed it to them.

“I got *veritaserum*. I'll take it, and you can ask me anything you want the answer to. I want you guys to trust me, to know my intentions without any doubts, and if this is what it takes, then so be it.”

He was preparing himself to down it, not wanting to think too much about the possible results of his actions, but Abraxas stopped him.

“Show it to me,” he requested, hand awaiting.

Harry reluctantly gave it to him. Abraxas took out his wand and whispered a spell. The vial turned bright green, almost neon, and Abraxas gave it back to him, seeming satisfied.

Hermione was eyeing him curiously.

“What was the spell you used for?”

Abraxas watched her, not much of anything on his face, but answered.

“*Potionem revelare*. Each color it shows represents a particular potion. The green in this one confirmed Harry is telling the truth.”

Hermione frowned. “Is it Dark?”

“Is that a problem?” he retorted, and the subtle amount of venom in his voice reminded Harry that Abraxas, albeit innocuous-looking, was still a Slytherin.

“No,” Hermione answered, and Harry was pleasantly surprised as he realized she meant it.

Abraxas apparently reached the same conclusion, since his voice softened.

“It leans more toward a Neutral one. Very useful, too.”

Hermione nodded, apparently understanding precisely what Abraxas had been referring to.

Harry took the potion, looking at each person in the room as he did, and waited for it to kick in.

He could feel its effect on him, the way his mind became less muddled.

Orion decided to jump into the conversation.

“Are you and Tom soulmates?”

“Yes,” Harry answered immediately. He frowned. He wasn't a fan of how the answer seemed to flow out of him, as if it hadn't been his choice to speak at all.

“Did you tell him about us betraying him?”

“He already knew when he confronted me about us being soulmates.”

Orion nodded, as if expecting that answer.

“Did you intend on telling him about us?”

“Not until it was too late to change things.”

Lilith interrupted Orion’s array of questions.

“We don’t have time for gauging intentions this way, Orion. It won’t last forever.” She turned to face Harry, a determined expression on her face. “Evans. *Potter*. How much of what you told us about who you are is true?”

“All of it.”

“I see.” She looked over at Hermione. “Why is she here?”

Hermione had been quiet ever since arriving, just watching the entire thing, and Harry felt a bit protective over Lilith’s words.

“I invited her. Hermione already knows everything, I told her. She is my best friend, she knows all of my history because she lived it with me, and she can help. She is extremely smart and hard-working, and she’s a good person. She doesn’t really like Tom either. If you can trust my words under the *veritaserum*, then you can trust her.”

Lilith turned to Hermione. “Can you swear secrecy on a magical vow? Not an Unbreakable one,” she amended, “just a regular one.”

Hermione didn’t even hesitate before answering.

“Yes. The only ones who will know of my involvement and the topics discussed here will be the ones present in this room and whoever else we collectively decide should join in.”

Lilith seemed pleased with her wording, as they finalized the vow.

Lilith then smiled, but there was no warmth behind it. “In fact, I think we should all make the same vow.” She searched for dissent in all of their faces, and when she didn’t find any, she nodded.

She turned her attention back to Harry. “And Tom? What is he planning with his supposed change of heart?”

“I don’t know.” Harry frowned. He hated how *veritaserum* worked. Apparently, if he was asked about the intentions of someone else and he didn’t have direct access to that person’s thoughts, he couldn’t claim to know it for certain. “I haven’t used *legilimency* or *veritaserum* on him, but we’ve talked.” *And more*. “And more.” *Fuck*. Harry blushed. “He has been changing, I can tell. He told me a bit about his plans. I know what I’m doing, okay? I

promised we would end the Knights, but it's not that easy. Tom is shitty at communicating, but from what I've gathered from him, he actually wants good things for the wizarding world. He just focused on blood supremacy because he thought that was the talking point that would get all of you on board."

Harry saw as the Knights present seemed uncomfortable at his statement. Even Abraxas had a guilty frown on his face, even though Harry was sure he hadn't been one of the people who had made Tom think he needed to turn to that.

He continued, "He wants me to help out, to give suggestions and corrections along the way, you know, to make sure he's not going too far. I think we should start there. That way, you guys, especially you, Lilith, can keep your protection while also not having to do things like what he was planning on doing to Charlus." He kept talking, trying to not look at them. "He told me he let you guys know that the plan was off. It's a start, right? I know you have no reason to believe Tom means it, but you don't need to trust me, just the *veritaserum*."

Orion scoffed, and Harry lifted his eyes to face him. "So you believe him, like an idiot. What does that mean for *us*?"

"I—" Was there a line he could successfully skirt when it came to telling them things about Tom? "Fuck. Ugh. Something happened. Something big. I don't want to tell you what it is because I don't want to betray Tom's trust, but he isn't a machine. He feels things. I get that he hurt you. I get that he used you, threatened you, manipulated you into joining. I get it. I'm not asking you to forgive him or turn a blind eye to all of that. Not at all. You don't even need to interact with him if you don't want to. But he still believes in the things he wants to do, like fight for Dark magic to not be drowned out of existence, and we don't actually achieve anything by undoing this alliance. I'll make sure nothing like the latest plan is ever necessary from you, and if any of you truly want to leave, I won't stop you. I don't think Tom will either. But we can still make a difference. And, Lilith..." He swallowed. "I'll make sure that, if you walk away, Tom makes it clear that you aren't to be messed with regardless. We can even do it in a way so that everybody thinks you're still in the Knights to make sure no one tries anything by going behind Tom's back. I promise you, I won't let anything happen to you as long as you are in Hogwarts."

Lilith's carefully calculated expression melted into one of vulnerability, and the others noticed.

"What is he talking about, Lilith?" Abraxas asked, and Harry looked at him.

They clearly knew what Lilith had gone through, but it seemed to Harry like Abraxas was asking about more than just the bullying. He had noticed what lay behind Harry's words.

It dawned on him that he truly was the only one to know of the way Lilith had been feeling.

Except for Tom as well now, that was.

Harry wanted to jump in to correct his words, to try to come up with an excuse as to not force her to talk about something she didn't want to, but he could tell by Lilith's eyes that she didn't want him to save her from that.

She was ready.

“I haven’t been doing well,” she began, avoiding everyone’s eyes. “I had just learned of what we were expected to do to Charlus, and it reminded me of what had happened to me. Harry found me on the Astronomy Tower. I was ready to jump off.”

Lilith paused for so long, the silence stretching so far, that Harry believed she wouldn’t speak again.

Still, no one dared interrupt her process, and eventually she opened her mouth once more.

“He stopped me. He promised me he—” She turned her eyes to Abraxas and Orion and then back to Harry, speaking to all her colleagues now, “you could protect me. That you could end the Knights as we know them until the end of seventh year. He promised me things could change, that I wouldn’t have to feel so alone. That I wouldn’t need to feel this trapped forever, feeling like I was being forced to be this horrible person simply to stay alive. I refuse to be the kind of person that hates on someone else for something they can’t change or uses them for their goals. I can’t be that anymore.”

She stared into the distance, clearly fighting hard with herself to not cry in front of everyone. Her resolve, however, became null as Orion, of all people, approached her and hugged her tight.

Lilith seemed surprised, completely stilted in her seat, but Harry watched as she slowly melted into his embrace.

Tears were set free, and Lilith finally stopped holding back.

Orion didn’t let her go, and neither did Abraxas, who had hugged her too right after.

Harry didn’t know if he was supposed to intervene, to add to the moment. It felt so intimate – like something shared between these people who knew each other for years, and he knew he didn’t fit into that.

Hermione clearly thought the same thing, because she stayed behind with him, just watching.

Eventually, Abraxas and Orion let go, and Lilith sniffed, using her robe’s right sleeve to wipe off her tears.

“Well, that was embarrassing,” she laughed it off, still unable to meet anyone’s eyes.

“Wasn’t embarrassing,” Abraxas reassured her, smiling softly. “I’m glad you’re okay, Lilith. And what Harry said... We’ll do it. We’ll do anything in our power to ensure no one touches you ever again. With Tom or no Tom.” His tone, somehow, became even softer. “Knights or no Knights, you’re one of us.”

Lilith grinned, then. It was full of gratitude, of care, and of a little bit of embarrassment, but Harry realized this was probably the first time he had seen her have on what felt like a genuine smile.

Abraxas got up, expression much more peaceful, and started to lazily pace around the room. "So, what now?" he asked, and looked directly at Harry.

What now, indeed. It seemed like they trusted him, like he was one of them, and that, at the very least, they saw Hermione as a non-threatening addition to the group. That was all great, but those things were only relevant if they led to something.

"I think—" Harry breathed deeply, then sighed. "If we will stay as a group with Tom knowing about it..." he began, and everyone in the room looked at him. "Like I said, he doesn't need to be a part of this if you guys aren't comfortable with it. But I don't want to lie to my soulmate about the group I essentially stole from him. I will swear on the magical vow regardless," he reassured them, "but I'm not trying to be a leader. I'm not looking to be the one leading the Knights of Walpurgis. My intention was never to replace Tom, it was to separate him from you, to stop him from having enough influence over people so he could force you to do anything terrible he sets his mind to. But I've told you, I don't see the point in just dissolving this alliance anymore. You guys are part of some powerful families. You have influence, you can do a lot of good if you choose to. I can help, Hermione can help, but it's up to you.

"I want to tell Tom what we've discussed here. I want to give him a chance of sharing his real goals with you guys, whether that's in person or through me. You can decide whether or not you think that's a good idea. You hold all the power now."

He could tell they were feeling conflicted, especially Abraxas. Lilith seemed to be thinking deeply about it, to be analyzing the pros and the cons despite the emotional reaction she'd had before, and Orion, though closed off, didn't look as dismissive as Harry had expected. Hermione was smiling encouragingly at him, and he returned the smile, happy that, regardless of their disagreement over Tom's intentions, she seemed to believe in what he was doing.

Abraxas, however, was impossible to read.

Harry trusted his opinion, arguably more than the other two, because he was the closest to Tom outside of himself. If he didn't believe Tom had good intentions – at least on paper – then no one else would either.

They all waited for his assessment of everything before giving their own opinions on it.

"I think we need to distance ourselves from Tom for now," he said, and Harry avoided looking too dejected. He didn't like the idea of having to separate the two elements of his existence in Hogwarts, but he would if it came down to it. "But, in my opinion, we can still listen to his ideas. We can still try to put them in practice if we deem them worthy as a group."

Harry, while listening to his words, imagined Tom hearing the whole thing – how angry he would get at the blatant insubordination, how secretly upset he would be that they didn't trust him to lead them anymore.

Still, he liked to think Tom would understand, even if he didn't show it.

After Abraxas finished his mini speech, Lilith spoke.

“I agree with Abraxas.”

Orion nodded. “Me too.”

Harry was incredibly relieved.

“That’s good. That’s great.”

Hermione chuckled at his enthusiasm, and the others smiled, too.

It was her, however, that brought back into discussion something they hadn’t fully talked about yet.

“But there are more people in the Knights, right? Avery, Rosier, and Lestranger?”

Orion sighed, nodding. “Yeah.”

Lilith’s eyes darkened. “They can’t be trusted to get introduced into this new setup. But if we’re not going to keep up the ruse of the weekly meetings with Tom...” She trailed off, frowning.

Harry hated making promises when he wasn’t sure he could back them up, but he wanted to ensure this meeting was still a success.

“I’ll talk to Tom. See if he can stop the meetings for now, at least until we see if we can get Bram, Tymeo, and Sébastien on board with this.”

They thought through his words for a few seconds.

After, Abraxas spoke, voice soft and quiet and knowing. “You really trust that he will listen to you, don’t you?”

Harry blushed, but answered him with his voice steady. “Yes. I get that it seems strange and a bit fast, but I do. Tom and I, we’ve been talking a lot. I’ve realized I’ve had a lot of ideas about him that were based more on the way he presented himself and my own biases with Voldemort than who he truly was.” He could feel multiple sets of eyes on him, but he didn’t let that put him off his speech. “He puts on this mask all the time, but he is lonely. I don’t think he has ever felt like anyone really saw him beyond it.” Harry was scared that he was coming off as if he believed Tom was a victim and the Knights were to blame for his actions, and he hoped they didn’t see it like that. “Except for you, Abraxas. But I think he is scared that he has let you down.”

Orion interrupted him. “Abraxas has done nothing but be kind to Tom, even though he has barely ever earned it.” His eyes were grey as a storm as he jumped to Abraxas’s immediate defense.

Abraxas sat down next to Orion again, and rested his hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay, O.” He spoke directly to Harry next. “I assume he’s told you we had a fight?” Harry nodded, and

Abraxas huffed softly, looking mildly surprised. Orion was frowning at the display, and Harry wondered if Abraxas had even told him yet. “It wasn’t my finest moment, but I don’t regret it. He needed to hear some version of it.” There was something fierce in Abraxas’s expression, and Harry had the stray thought that he looked like Draco, then. “Tom has a long road toward proving to us that he is trustworthy. I believe you believe these things, but it’ll take a lot more.”

“I know,” Harry said. “He knows it, too.”

“Good,” he replied, and looked at Harry and everyone else. “Think you can get Tom to agree to this?”

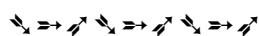
Harry nodded. He wasn’t a hundred percent sure, but there had been something in the way Tom had opened up to him. He wanted to make sure Tom’s feelings toward him were solid before letting him know how things would be moving forward first, but he would do his best to make sure things flowed as they should.

The Knights got up from their sitting spots, and Harry and Hermione followed.

“Then we’ll add Tom as one of the Knights into the vow,” said Lilith, and they gathered around to make the words magically binding.

Harry knew he had taken a huge leap of faith, one he had no idea could end up paying off. But, for some reason, deep inside, he felt a lot lighter.

He hoped he’d done the right thing.



After the meeting, Harry and Hermione were left alone outside.

“Do you think I did the right thing?” he asked her.

Harry didn’t want the answer to be no, he didn’t want to give himself a reason to feel even more anxious, but he trusted Hermione’s opinion above anyone else’s.

He needed to know.

Her eyes were present and clear, but there was something in them that felt to Harry like compassion. “I think you did the right thing for you, and the right thing for them.”

“Is that the same as the right thing, period? Is it the right thing for Tom?”

“I don’t think there’s a perfect answer here, Harry. And the only way to know if this is the right thing for Tom is to ask him, to see his reaction. If you believe he will see where you’re coming from with this, then I’ll try to believe you.” Hermione gave him a reassuring smile.

“You did a good thing here. These people, they arguably know Riddle even better than you do, yet they trusted your assessment. They saw the reason in your arguments. That means something. I’m not going to pretend I feel the exact same way, but we both know I have the same point of view as you do, with the same biases. I know a version of Riddle that is different from theirs, and different from the one you’re seeing now. So I trust you. I’m sorry if it seemed like I didn’t before.”

Harry exhaled. He hadn’t realized how much the lack of Hermione’s approval had been weighing on him until he got it.

“Thank you.” He eyed her, and smirked. “You and Lucretia, huh?”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but she was blushing.

“How did that happen?” he asked, and saw as she struggled to find the words.

Her expression, however, soon morphed into a deadpan one. “Walburga Black apparently likes the idea of me and Lucy together and gave me information on her, so I blackmailed Lucy into spending time with me.”

Harry knew Hermione wanted him to think she was kidding, but he knew his best friend.

Every part of that sentence was entirely possible.

“That is…” He searched for the right word, and smiled. “So very you.”

Hermione laughed, loud and unashamed, and Harry did the same, feeling good.

That was, of course, until they heard footsteps approaching them.

“Shit, I think that’s a prefect,” Harry murmured, and hurried to hide behind a corner, carrying Hermione by her sleeve with him.

“Tom?” she asked, and Harry shook his head.

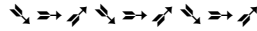
“He doesn’t patrol today.”

They were definitely out after curfew, and Harry could not be seen. He had already gotten into trouble as it was.

They disguised their sounds and waited for whoever it was to leave.

After a few minutes, the heavy footsteps were gone, and Harry and Hermione stared at each other.

Harry thanked the universe for silencing spells as he and his best friend burst out laughing for the second time that day.



ONE DAY LATER

When Harry woke up the next day, Tom wasn't in the dorm. And as he walked into the Great Hall for breakfast, he wasn't there either.

He made his way around the castle, eventually stopping at the library, but Tom was nowhere to be found.

He was starting to get frustrated when he decided to look out the library's window, and that was when he saw him.

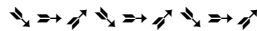
Tom was walking around the lake. He slowed down as he came close to two small creatures crossing his path, stopping to let them finish theirs.

As one of them fell, he watched and waited. As it became clear it couldn't stand up on its own, he knelt down and gently helped it up.

There was something so tender and foreign about the gesture, so unlike Harry's vision of who Tom was when he was alone. Harry had tried to convince him he was more than the worst things he had ever done, but Tom himself didn't believe in it, and Harry had to admit, that, sometimes, he doubted it as well. It was in moments like these, however, that Harry actually saw it, in actions instead of words.

He couldn't imagine the hurdles, the frustrations, the pain of isolation and loneliness, the effects Dark magic had on him, all that had led Tom to become Voldemort in the first place. Harry hoped with all of his heart that what he had done so far was enough to at least show Tom there was more to life than the path he knew he would have ended up following otherwise.

And Harry hoped that what he wanted to do moving forward was enough to convince Tom he was utterly lovable as the person he was instead of the one he thought he had to become.



TOM

Tom had never expected it, how good it was to be vulnerable, to open up.

He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the catch to become known, but there was nothing. All there was to it was Harry's care, patience, understanding.

It made him wary, how *not* wary he was. How he found himself smiling more often, not a smirk or a mask, but something real. Something lasting.

He had been doing his own version of exposure therapy, in a way, and he found out that he wasn't just tolerating it, accepting it, or even liking it.

He loved feeling as he was, and it was all because of his soulmate.

It made him want to share. The more he talked about things and Harry had a good reaction to them, the more open he felt.

Most of all, Tom had realized that he wanted to use Harry's new reality in Hogwarts to make it a better experience for him. To rewrite the bad with something better.

He wanted to bring Harry to the Chamber of Secrets.

To Tom, finding it had been a moment of exhilaration, of excitement. It was getting a piece of his history back. He had been an anonymous orphan all his life, just one more faceless child in a crowd, and knowing he had a legacy was everything he had ever wanted.

That was then, of course. He still cared about legacy, but it meant something different now.

He didn't want it to be about his name on history books or distant consequences for people he would never get to be close to. He wanted to be there. He wanted to make things better for the people he cared about, and to make friends out of the ones he didn't yet.

It was frustrating to realize he didn't know what friendship entailed or how to conquer it, but the examples that were being set to him made him feel like there was hope for him still.

But bringing Harry to the Chamber carried within it an obstacle Tom wasn't a hundred percent sure he was ready to face.

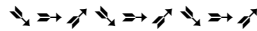
He needed to talk to Myrtle.

He hadn't spoken to her since he had gotten her killed. Tom had never liked Myrtle Warren, and he wasn't thrilled to have to pretend to feel remorse for something he had seldom thought about in years.

Tom wasn't a monster, but he also wasn't a saint. He didn't kill Myrtle on purpose, but he couldn't say he felt guilty. He couldn't say he truly regretted it. Not as he had gotten a Horcrux out of it.

He wanted to become better, but this was too big of a step for him right now.

But, at the end of the day, that wasn't actually the reason he was going there.



“Riddle?” Her voice was tiny, fickle. As Tom approached the stall, he could see she was hiding – no, not hiding, *cowering* – from him, as if he could still hurt her.

As if he hadn’t already done to her the worst he could possibly do to someone.

He felt–

Tom felt...

He felt big. Monstrous. Menacing.

And not in a good way.

“Warren.” He didn’t move from where he stood, facing the bathroom stall where Myrtle’s translucent form crouched in fear. He wasn’t sure he could if he wanted to. “Can we talk?”

She eyed him as a rabbit would a wolf. Tom was sure several minutes had passed before her position became a tad more lax and she deigned to give him a response.

“You haven’t set foot in here since you were fourteen.”

He didn’t reply, letting her process his presence however she needed.

“Something’s changed.” Her voice turned higher, breathier. She was scared. No, not scared, Tom thought, after all, she is dead. No. *She is reliving it.* “What are you planning?” Her question echoed through the room, and it felt as if Tom was being asked it twice.

He was Slytherin to his core, it seemed, if everything he ever did had to come with strings and a scheme tied to it in everyone else’s eyes.

He suddenly felt trapped in his memories.

Tom didn’t think the Chamber would feel like home when he’d first sat foot in it, but it did.

Like with the rest of Hogwarts, he’d always felt better within places full of history, of intrigue; places he didn’t feel like he had to fill with character, taste, *life*. After all, Tom had spent the majority of his wearing a mask, polishing the machine, knowing there was no time to build his personality instead of his persona – at least not one outside of the identity he wanted to tout to oppose the one forced upon him.

The Chamber felt like home as Hogwarts did, but even more so, in a way. It held history, but *his family’s* history above all, the one he was so very curious about. Yet, he hadn’t had the opportunity to enjoy it as he wanted to. When he’d found it, Tom had been terrified of not belonging, terrified of having assumed wrong, of not being the heir of Slytherin. He’d had no time to appreciate the treasure hunting, the awakening of something long laid dormant at the time, not really – he’d looked around, sure, but not quite as thoroughly as he would’ve liked.

And *then* he'd had to cover his tracks, and he'd ended up spending quite a bit of time away, trying not to attract any more attention to himself and his extraordinary discovery, lest his first home be taken away from him completely.

He missed it. He wanted to perambulate through its long, winding passages and find every secret it contained. He wanted to learn everything he could possibly know. He wanted to know who his ancestors had been, how he had come to be.

And, it turned out, he wanted his soulmate to experience it with him.

So Tom focused on the present, sucked it up, and did what he had gone there to do: lay the groundwork. Prepare everything for when he finally managed to take this step.

Now giving his entire attention to Myrtle, he truly processed what she'd said, nearly wincing at her biting question. "Nothing nefarious," he answered quietly.

He hadn't anticipated how complicated it would be to work his way through this. He had no excuses for what he had done; no flattery would suffice to bypass her traumatized instincts from not trusting him. Lying would do nothing for him, but neither would the truth he had just shared. She had nothing to gain for doing him a favor.

Myrtle couldn't stop him from accessing the Chamber – if she could or felt inclined to get him in trouble then Tom would've been gone from Hogwarts a long time ago – nor would she sound any alarms against him. However, for once, it was not fear of punishment that drove him. If anything, it was quite the opposite, and that was infinitely more easy to sabotage for someone like Warren, someone with motive.

Would she immediately try to warn Harry of Tom's wickedness? Would seeing her, Tom's victim, remind Harry of just the type of person he truly was?

It wasn't as if he didn't know or had forgotten, of course, but seeing was believing. This could make an irreversible impact in their relationship.

Tom wanted her gone.

He didn't know how to exorcise ghosts or whether it was even possible, but he'd try anything to make her not be there when the time came.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, sounding one word away from screaming. Tom swallowed his annoyance.

"Myrtle, listen. I'm not here to hurt you. I *can't* hurt you. I'm not here to hurt anybody. I'm just here to ask you something."

She assessed him for what felt like a long time, eyes narrowed in suspicion. Eventually, she got up, and was floating slightly above the ground in front of him.

"What makes you think I would do anything for you? What is in it for me?"

Tom raised an eyebrow. It seemed Warren was more than just your average Ravenclaw. There was some Slytherin bite in there, too.

Tom might not have spent a long amount of time around her in life *or* death, but he knew what she would want.

He knew, because Death was his greatest enemy. Because he would want the same thing in her shoes.

“I know you are lonely. I know no one has sat foot in here since what happened. They think the bathroom’s haunted,” Tom laughed in the privacy of his mind, “so they avoid it. Avoid *you*. If you do something for me, I’ll visit you. I’ll keep you company.”

He could see how her eyes lit up, a spark of hope shoddily concealed. He wanted to roll his eyes at her predictability, at how absolutely insane it was that the promise of a visit by her own murderer was somehow enough to make her happy.

Still, it seemed he had underestimated her.

Myrtle lifted up her chin like she was challenging him. “I’m not agreeing to it this easily. First, I need to know what it is that you would require from me.” Her bravado, however, slipped a bit once she stated her next demand. “And secondly, I need to know. I need to know what you did to me, Riddle.”

There was a tinge of desperation to her tone. Tom, all of a sudden, felt strange. Because, as it were, right then her voice didn’t sound whiny or angry.

It sounded instead like the isolation and the lack of answers had cracked her; like they had destroyed her spirit entirely.

“What do you mean?”

“*Why can’t I move on?*” she nearly growled. Still, Warren’s fierce and accusing response didn’t disguise the pain behind her voice. “You know, I saw you. You did something in this very bathroom after I died. You did something with my body. You used it... *me*... for something. I wasn’t... I was still settling into my new form, but I saw you.”

He remembered. It had been only after the Horcrux ritual that she had appeared to him, though, and he had left as fast as he could as soon as he’d realized it.

He didn’t know she had been there the entire time.

“I don’t think...” Tom began, but his speech faded gently.

He had been about to say he didn’t think the Horcrux ritual could’ve been the cause for her permanent stay as a ghost, but he didn’t know.

He had never researched the effects on the people killed once their death had been used for the splitting of one’s soul.

Was it possible that Voldemort had left multiple ghosts in his path? That he had doomed so many to a prison of unlife, of unrest?

Had he been haunted until the very end?

Tom didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to feel anything about it.

Still, he answered her, choosing to tell a half-lie. Or, as he preferred to think of it, to subvert the narrative. "What I did, it shouldn't have had an effect on you. Your death was an accident. I just wanted to let the Basilisk out. No one was supposed to be here." The last part was actually true. He saw how Myrtle's gaze softened at his words, how she was seemingly convinced by his conviction.

"What do you want from me?"

"I just need you to be gone for a while. I intend on coming here with someone," he wasn't sure whether he should mention his intent of opening the Chamber or not, "soon, and I don't want him to have to confront you."

He wasn't sure whether she could even leave the bathroom, but he tried.

Warren had now a strange glint in her eye.

"Who is he? You're scared of him knowing what you did?"

Tom truly didn't trust her.

How had he missed how cunning she was before her death?

Well, he reasoned with himself, it wasn't as if he'd given a lot of attention to random Ravenclaws in the past.

"He already knows. I told him."

Tom didn't miss the way Myrtle noticed he hadn't answered her first question, but she didn't press him on it.

"You're telling the truth. Why would you have told this person the truth?" she mumbled, most likely thinking out loud, and her gaze was still on him, but distant, as if looking past Tom. After a few seconds, her eyes shifted to him once more, this time fully sharp and alert. "Doesn't matter. For now. I'll do it, but you'll have to come and see me three times a week until the end of the school year, starting now, before your little meeting occurs. I'll have you know I *can* leave, the bathroom just happens to be where I am drawn to. It takes a bit of effort, but it's not impossible. If you break your promise, or if you stop coming to see me after you get what you want, then everyone will know what happened here. You'll be thrown out of Hogwarts, and something tells me that's the last thing you would ever want."

If she was telling the truth – and Tom was inclined to believe she was – then she could've told on him this entire time, but didn't. It didn't make sense to him, why she wouldn't want revenge on her death, why she wouldn't take any chance she had to be acknowledged, *seen*.

“Why haven’t you done it already?”

Myrtle looked contemplative, pensive. She was staring at the door almost longingly when she answered.

“There was something about you, when you were doing your... ritual.” She stumbled upon the word, voice soft and low. “You didn’t look happy. You didn’t look triumphant. You looked terrified.” She looked straight at him now. “You looked as if you were being forced by some entity to go through with it, like there was no other choice. I watched you for years in this school, Riddle. But that was the first time I felt like I actually saw you.”

She sighed, resigned, and Tom’s stomach felt like it was completely tied into knots.

“I don’t know whether you are the reason I’m trapped as ghost, but you are not the reason I’m dead. Not directly, at least. Don’t think I won’t tell on you if I have to, but I have been waiting for years for you to show up. For you to come back and face what you’ve done. I don’t know who the person you’re willing to do it for is, but whoever they are... Let’s just say I’m curious. I might not get to meet him, but I definitely want to hear about him.” She grinned at him, almost innocently, but Tom knew better. “And we got time, don’t we?”

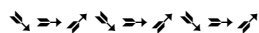
He would absolutely regret this. He was already regretting it.

But, at least, he could tell it would be worth it.

Tom left the bathroom feeling... not lighter, per se, but slightly less burdened.

It was still a little early, and it was also the weekend, so he made his way toward the Black Lake for a walk. Tom tried focusing on something else, tried to clear his mind, but he ended up thinking, the whole way through, about how it would feel to reintroduce the Chamber to Harry.

And, despite his overwhelming anxieties, Tom realized he couldn’t help the warm feeling that had started to overtake him at the thought.



HARRY

Harry went down to the Lake to meet up with Tom. For some reason, he found that he was feeling kind of nervous.

He knew he wanted all the cards on the table, to know what was going on in Tom’s head, and if he was truly feeling like Harry was, and that was not just for himself, but for the Knights,

too. But he didn't really know how to raise the issue, and he didn't have Hermione to help him out with the specifics.

So he would have to do the Gryffindor thing this time and be impulsive and direct about it.

He approached Tom, who was still gazing out into the horizon in silence, and spoke.

"I need to know how you feel about me. With words."

Tom turned around to look at him, seemingly caught off-guard by his sudden appearance. His brown eyes were slightly wide, and Harry fought his urge to keep staring at them instead of speaking.

"Hi. What's this about?" Tom asked, and tilted his head in a confusingly endearing gesture.

Goddammit, Harry thought.

"Hi. Sorry, this was abrupt. I've just been thinking, and--"

"That's a first." Tom chuckled, and Harry rolled his eyes.

"Twat. Stop deflecting and let me finish." He took in a deep breath. "You've been sharing a lot with me, and I'm grateful. I truly am. I love getting to know you, and I know I said I want us to be friends, and I meant it, but I also know myself. I'll drive myself crazy if things aren't all on the table, with no ambiguity regarding us as a unity. You've made it clear you want to make this official, and I'm very much into that idea. I want it too. But first, I need to know exactly how you feel about me."

Tom frowned, and his previously playful and serene energy got replaced by what seemed like frustration.

Harry hated making Tom more stressed, but he really wanted to know.

"Can't I just show you?"

Harry's mind got momentarily distracted by the image of what exactly that would entail, but he shook his head, forcing himself to focus on the task at hand.

"No. I want you to tell me."

It felt extremely counterproductive for someone as action-focused as Harry to be so adamantly against it, but he knew he needed to stop doubting Tom's feelings. He couldn't read Tom's mind, and it was unfair of either of them to expect and believe him to do so.

"Fine," Tom snapped. His frustration had grown into full-blown exasperation, and his eyes were wider still, wild and manic-looking. "Fine. You want me to tell you? I'll tell you."

Tom got so close to him that Harry could count the freckles on his nose if he wanted to, and his breath got caught in his throat.

“When I met you, I hated you. I hated the way you shook the entire structure of Slytherin, I hated how you openly defied me, I hated your face and your glasses and your voice. I hated everything.” Despite the meaning of his words, Tom’s low voice felt terribly erotic to Harry.

He wanted him to keep talking forever.

Oh. His hand was on Harry’s collarbone now, subtly sliding under his shirt. *Fuck.*

“Except... I didn’t. I thought it was hate because I had never felt quite this intensely and confusedly about anyone before. I just didn’t know how to interpret why you were suddenly creeping into my dreams. Why I found myself using up all my free time to try to find you, even when I knew we would just end up arguing and bickering anyway. Why I—” His voice cracked, and Harry realized that Tom’s vulnerability was even better than his confidence. “Why I so desperately wanted to touch you. Why I was thinking of how you tasted, how you would react if I did all the things I wanted to do to you. The *sounds* you would make, the way you would say my name. Why I couldn’t stop thinking of all your brain space being taken up by me.”

Merlin.

Harry was barely coherent inside his brain now. He couldn’t *think*, he didn’t know how to react. He wanted Tom to ravish him right then and there.

“I couldn’t stop, and I didn’t want to. I still don’t understand why I’m so willing to carve out a space for you, why I let you become every single one of my exceptions. Why the colors of your hair and your eyes and your skin suddenly became my favorites. Why I want to know everything you can possibly tell me about you, even the most inconsequential things, and I—Fuck, I don’t understand why even the thought of you having loved anyone else feels like being stabbed in the heart. Why I want to be the only one you ever consider worthy of you.”

To punctuate his words, Tom licked his lips, following every movement of Harry’s mouth with his eyes.

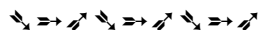
How does anyone control themselves around their soulmates?

Is it always like this?

“I don’t understand, *Harry*, how I’ve never had a favorite name but suddenly yours is the only one I like the sound of. I don’t understand how hard it is to restrain myself when I’m with you. I don’t know why, even though I’ve always hated touch, I seem to crave yours constantly. And... I don’t know why you’re the only one I would trust to comfort me after I have a bad dream. Why you’re the only one I don’t even question as a part of my future. Why I feel so oddly inclined to change my plans if it means you’ll fit into them. I don’t want to stop. I don’t know why, but I don’t ever want this to end. I want more. I want you in my life, and I want to be better because you show me I can be.”

Tom blinked slowly, as he had not stopped making eye contact once through the entirety of his speech, and Harry did his best to take in everything about Tom then, trying to engrave this moment in his mind so it would last forever in his memory.

“I’ve told you things I’ve never told anyone before. Is this enough for you to realize how hopelessly devoted I am to you?”



TOM

The effect he had on Harry was clear, and Tom felt a bit proud of it, oddly enough.

And then Harry breathed out, “I really, really want to kiss you right now,” and Tom lost any chance he still had of controlling himself.

Because they were in public.

Everyone around them would be able to see them, and soon everyone in Hogwarts would know Tom and Harry were together.

Including the Knights.

Including Dumbledore.

Yet Tom couldn’t find it in himself to care.

He pulled Harry closer by his collar, both of them colliding as if magnetized by the other.

Tom had never been so happy to relinquish control as Harry moved with him, moved *him*. How had he lived seventeen years without this, seventeen years of a dull existence, where any light or hope resided in a hypothetical future?

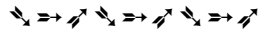
Suddenly, Tom understood the concept of soulmates perfectly. Not even hundreds of varying explanations could truly tackle the simplicity and complexity of what their proximity brought.

He wasn’t Harry and Harry wasn’t him; they weren’t becoming the other, they weren’t merging into each other. Tom didn’t *need* him, not really. He knew he would survive without Harry, possibly even thrive if he allowed himself to.

But he couldn’t deny how he felt like he finally understood what other people deemed to be the reasons to stay alive when he had Harry in his arms, somehow feeling completely safe inside the unpredictability of their feelings.

Tom took Harry’s hand in his.

Maybe it was time everyone knew.



HARRY

They didn't need to say it out loud. They both knew what they had to do.

As they walked into the Great Hall for lunch, still holding hands, Harry had eyes for no one but Tom.

He only realized everybody had been staring at them once he sat down on the Slytherin table with everyone else.

"So, uh..." It was Avery that took the step, of course, as always. "Is this a thing now?"

Harry was expecting Tom to snap at Bram, to glare at him for daring to question him.

But Tom just glanced at Harry, a soft, subtle look on his eyes, and said: "Yes. We're soulmates."

Conversation erupted around the table in a second, chaos taking place, but Harry had never felt such inner peace before.

Tom was willing to acknowledge the unspeakable to everyone without a shred of fear.

When he finally deigned to give his attention to those around him, slightly annoyed at having to look at anyone that wasn't his gorgeous soulmate, Harry decided to focus on the Knights' reactions.

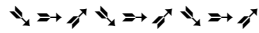
Orion had his eyes narrowed, staring at Harry with something akin to resigned annoyance. Lilith's face was carefully blank, not even a sliver of emotion passing through her mask. Tymeo was frowning in confusion, Sébastien was looking down as if embarrassed, and Abraxas... Well, Abraxas just stared appraisingly at the two of them, and his sharp gaze made Harry squirm a bit in his seat.

God, he didn't even want to think of what Hermione would say about his public coming out.

Tom, however, looked at him in a way that made him forget anyone else even existed, and he felt grounded, secure.

He knew they would question how loyal he was to them if he was this close to Tom, but for now, this was solely about him and his soulmate.

And nothing had ever felt so right.



ONE DAY LATER

Harry realized Tom had been avoiding Hermione.

Every time he brought her up in conversation, Tom seemed to immediately become guarded, even going as far as looking physically uncomfortable. He had made it clear to Tom that he wanted him to apologize, to make peace with Harry's best friend, and he could tell Tom knew Harry hadn't forgotten about his request.

He was just avoiding it, and Harry wondered why.

It was obvious to him that Tom wasn't used to apologizing to anyone, or to even having to. But he hadn't fought Harry over the notion that he should do it, which made Harry think Tom knew he had done something wrong.

He wondered if it would be the right move to nudge him a bit, to bring it up in conversation.

He desperately wanted his soulmate and his best friend to also become friends, but if he couldn't get that, then at least he wanted them to be civil.

Forcing him into it didn't feel right, because Harry wanted Tom's apology to be real, *but* he also wanted it to happen soon. Harry knew he was being contradictory and that pushing Tom would most likely lead him to do it out of obligation, so he tried to find the least intrusive way to be, well, intrusive. Tom had been making such huge strides; he didn't want to be the cause for a setback.

So he brought up Hermione again, and this time, when Tom tried to deflect, he interjected.

"Are you okay?"

Tom furrowed his brow. "Why?"

"You know I don't hate you for what you did to Hermione, right? It wasn't a good thing, but you promised me you wouldn't do it again, and I believe you."

"I know," he responded, but made no attempt to continue talking about it.

Harry sighed.

"I just wish you guys could get along. I know for a fact that Hermione is a bit wary of you, but I also know you have so much in common. I just hope one day you two can become friends, or at least friendly."

Was Harry being manipulative? He sighed. He definitely knew the answer.

But he was tired of dancing around the subject, and, well, he *was* a Slytherin, wasn't he?

Tom didn't answer, but Harry knew he had gotten through to him, if only by the way he had remained in place. Tom had a tendency to physically run away when he didn't want to deal with a verbal confrontation, and Harry could tell he didn't intend on doing that now.

"Anyway," he deflected, smirking, "I desperately need help with that History of Magic essay. Can you help me?"

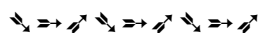
Tom narrowed his eyes at him, but it was in a playfully staged way. "So you *do* need help with the easiest subject in Hogwarts. Why were you offering to help *me* with it, then?" he asked, recalling a conversation they'd had in the library early on Harry's arrival.

"I wanted an excuse to spend time with you."

Tom smirked, but Harry could see his words had penetrated his playful armor.

"You don't need an excuse anymore," he replied, and went back to browsing one of the shelves as if he hadn't just completely rattled Harry.

The truth was that it was becoming harder and harder for Harry to pretend he wasn't completely taken by the boy in front of him.



TOM

Harry hadn't exactly been subtle. Tom knew he wanted him to talk to Granger.

It wasn't as if Tom was against it, per se. Harry had submerged himself into Tom's world, even if in a completely unorthodox way, and he wanted to do the same.

And it wasn't like he wasn't intrigued by Granger either – he was. She seemed like a formidable witch, and he was still questioning how he'd missed her deflecting his spell. But something was holding him back.

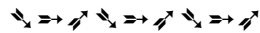
It wasn't regret, exactly, but perhaps it was shame.

He had gone after her, attacked her, all to try to find something about Harry to exploit and hurt. Now he no longer wanted that, but the last memory Granger had of him was from when that had been his primary goal.

To apologize was to recognize it, to relive it, to deal with the consequences he'd cultivated. And Tom's way of surviving had always been not letting himself feel bad about his past deeds.

But he wanted to prove himself, to prove he was capable of change, and if that was what was demanded of him, then he would do it.

He might not be a Gryffindor, but he sure as hell wasn't a coward.



HERMIONE

The next time Hermione got cornered by Tom Riddle, she was ready.

She had been waiting for him to make a move, any sort of move, since that day in December. She had been avoiding his eyes every time she looked in his direction, and she was already prepared for a fight to erupt.

She would never tell Harry that, but regardless of his insistence that Riddle was changing, she was always expecting something, adrenaline rushing through her nerves every time she saw him.

It had been only her quick thinking that had stopped the memory charm cast on her both times, and she didn't want to rely on that every time.

Riddle didn't look as menacing as he had last time, but that would no longer be enough for her to let her guard down.

She trusted her best friend and tried her best to trust his judgment, but she definitely didn't trust Tom Riddle.

"Granger," he greeted her as he approached her after dinner on one of the hallways. Hermione didn't respond. She was way too busy holding her wand tight between her fingers.

Riddle undoubtedly noticed it, as he pocketed his own wand and didn't take a single step toward her.

She eyed him with suspicion, but Riddle just sighed.

"I'm sorry, Granger. I understand you have every reason to be wary of me. I just learned from a very young age that I needed to protect myself first, either physically or emotionally, and somewhere along the way that became 'strike first.' Still, it wasn't right."

That was a much more thorough explanation than she had been expecting, but, then again, Riddle was exceptional at using emotions to lower someone's guard.

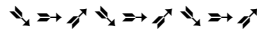
"I still don't trust you."

Riddle smiled in a way Hermione could only describe as *sad* as he responded to her with, "I know."

He didn't wait around for her reaction; he didn't even seem to be fishing for a memory he could show Harry, for a way of saying '*here it is, I did it, she accepted it, we're good.*' All Hermione was left with, then, was a fragment of a feeling she had never expected to feel toward any version of Voldemort. Something that felt way too foreign for her to fully comprehend.

Doubt.

Not toward his intentions, but her own expectations.



CHAPTER 13. PART ONE. IT WAS SO INTIMATE; LIKE WE WERE ALREADY LOVERS.

Chapter Summary

MINOR EDITS HAVE BEEN ADDED ON OCTOBER 22ND, 2023.

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: there is some talk of suicidal thoughts in the last portion of this chapter. It starts with Myrtle's dialogue in "You know, when I was alive..." and it ends with "I don't know how much longer I would have lasted". If you feel like you could get triggered by a character talking about their experience with passive (and active) suicidal ideation, then you absolutely can skip this portion. The conversation should be overall understandable still without it.

The chapter's title is from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

"That's the thing. Part of everything will always be forgettable. No matter how good or remarkable it is. It literally has to be."

- I'm Thinking of Ending Things, 2016, Iain Reid

CHAPTER 13 – PART ONE - IT WAS SO INTIMATE; LIKE WE WERE ALREADY LOVERS.

OR, *ENEMIES, FRIENDS, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN*

HARRY

"Tom?"

It was two days after the Knights' meeting. Tom was sitting down on his mattress, engrossed in a book about the history of wand-making, and Harry was watching him. His curtains were

completely undrawn, despite the fact that he preferred privacy to read as to not be disturbed by his roommates, and the sight did something to Harry's heart.

It seemed Harry was, indeed, all of his exceptions.

"Yes?" His soulmate gave him a curious look as soon as Harry called him, immediately putting down his book, and that just made him even more nervous.

Either way, Harry joined him on the bed, acutely aware of how intimate that felt, and he decided to bring the topic up before Abraxas and Orion came back from the common room, where they had been studying together for quite some time.

Harry was dreading this talk, but Tom had made it clear to him he was anything but fond of surprises. The vow explicitly stated that he was forbidden from sharing the existence of the group or the contents of the meetings with anyone who wasn't decided on unanimously, but they had given permission for Harry to tell Tom, and he wouldn't hesitate to do. Tom deserved to know where his (current) life's work was headed.

"I had a talk with the Knights two days ago, you know, about us." In retrospect, he really should have told him he was thinking of it before he even went ahead with it, but Harry was nothing if not an impulsive decision-maker.

Tom's mask wasn't gone for good, but it had been slipping more and more around Harry. Now, however, it snapped back on, with an ease that Harry had not been expecting, and it felt like an omen.

He didn't even allow himself to feel upset over it, though – this was his own doing, and he knew it.

"Before I say anything else, I want to make it clear to you that I refuse to keep anything else from you. No more secrets from me, Tom. I promise. This is just me fulfilling that."

Tom nodded, silent as a tomb.

Harry sighed. In times like these, he severely missed the snark.

"Please, say something."

Tom exhaled gently, and his words had a hint of sarcasm casing them as he answered. "What do you want me to say?"

Harry ignored the way his hand was starting to close into a fist. *Are the Knights always going to be a point of contention between us?*

Duh. Obviously. Harry didn't get to pretend this wasn't his own making, not anymore. *The first thing you did when you got here was sabotage him. He has every right to be defensive.*

If anything, Tom is way too forgiving.

Harry, coming to this conclusion, did his best to keep his voice unchallenging. “What you’re thinking. That’s it.”

Tom was rough in his response, but not quite aggressive, and Harry blinked.

“Well, what I’m thinking right now is that I was foolish to believe it would be just you and I from now on, that you would start believing me without needing a backup plan. What I’m thinking right now is...” He paused, and sighed once more, his voice becoming softer, “is that I’m grateful you’re telling me this.”

Harry felt like his heart had swelled up inside of chest. He felt inclined to just kiss him and forget about this, but there was something Harry had been feeling for a while, something that needed to be acknowledged out loud.

“If us talking about the Knights is going to become a thing, if we’re to stop fighting about it all the time, then I need to be honest about this.” He tugged at his hair, looking for anything to soothe him, and went ahead with his speech. “I don’t regret what I did. I don’t regret ‘turning the Knights against you,’” he hoped the quotes were crystal clear in his tone, “because I had no way of knowing who you were going to be. And you know my history, Tom. You know how paranoid I can be. And you are a strategist. You would have done the same if you believed there was even a small chance that the Knights remaining as they are could lead to what happened to my universe. I needed leverage first, and it worked, and while I’m glad we can now work on this together instead of it being built on rivalry, I don’t regret it.”

Did I go too far?

Fuck it, Harry fought with the self-doubting part of himself. I’m tired of acting as if he is a ticking time bomb, as if anything can set him off. If that’s the case, then I can’t do this forever, and I want to.

Tom was looking out of the window, body angled away from Harry in the bed, and his eyes and hair got caught by the sunlight. Harry could clearly see every tiny detail of Tom’s face, and he got struck just by how young he looked.

How young he *was*.

Tom always acted as an adult, even when being immature – he always either had this edge, this severe demeanor on, or he turned up his charm to eleven like a trained mechanism. From everything Tom had told him, it was clear to Harry that those had been his only ways of reacting to conflict. He either fought or fawned his way through, because he had never been told being supported throughout his growth was an option.

With Harry, he did choose another coping strategy when he felt vulnerable – fleeing – but his history made it clear that was an outlier, not the rule.

He told Tom everything that had happened in the meeting, watching his reactions like a hawk.

“That being said, what I told them was that I wouldn’t be their leader. I never wanted that,” he added. “We decided to keep the group running because I get what you’re trying to do, and they do, too. They told me they weren’t comfortable with keeping it up with you involved directly, but I told them I would talk to you and ask you to tell me your ideas to bring to them. That way you’re still involved and you’re still making a difference until they are ready to welcome you back.”

He stopped speaking for a second, and the silence felt deafening. Tom had barely interacted at all through the whole thing. “How do you feel about that?” he asked at last.

His soulmate looked lost in thought, but besides the pensive demeanor, nothing else was bleeding through.

“I think that I hate it, but that’s my own bruised ego speaking.”

So...

“So you’re okay with this plan moving forward?”

Harry realized he really liked this side of Tom, how blatantly direct and truthful he was being.

He also realized, with something akin to a pull in his chest, that more and more he was finding things to like about him.

He started wondering if there was anything he *didn’t* like, anything he didn’t find amusing or sweet if spun into a different direction or seen in a different light.

“To be honest, I’m surprised you advocated for my involvement and for the Knights to continue at all,” Tom remarked, a frown on his forehead. “I thought you’d want me to avoid anything that might make me get too close to him.”

They both knew who Tom was referring to.

“Well...” Harry smiled awkwardly, feeling self-conscious. “To be honest, I would hate the idea of you resenting me for getting in the way of your goals. And if what you want for the wizarding world works out as noble as you want it to, then I’m not opposed to it at all. And I gave them the chance to back out. None of them did.” He was still shocked that it had worked so well. “I still can’t believe you are allowing me to have this much reign over your life.”

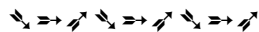
It was true. Tom had been so territorial in the beginning, so unused to sharing. It was odd to see him this open to it now.

Tom shrugged. There was a rigidity to the gesture that contradicted its supposed indifference, but Harry didn’t draw attention to it. “We’re partners. I never really knew it before, but that’s what I’ve always wanted out of a relationship if I were to ever have it. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons why I never had one – no one seemed up to the task of being my equal. If you’re not stepping on my toes, then I won’t let my pride ruin a good thing. Not like I ruined the Knights. Because that was me, Harry, not you. It’s me who has to fix it, and you’re giving me

the chance to do it.” Tom lay down on the bed, then, staring at the ceiling. Harry couldn’t help but track the movement of his breathing, his chest slowly rising and falling. “You might not want to be a leader or feel like one, but there’s a reason they are listening to you. You’re so— Honest. Transparent. Once someone gets to know you at all, it’s so abundantly clear when you’re lying or telling the truth. You don’t try to fake it.”

Tom tilted his head to look at Harry, silent for a second, and his tone turned from a serious one to one of mockery as he stared with amusement in his eyes. “My little Gryffindor.”

Harry ignored the blush that appeared at being called Tom’s anything, but, with his voice a little hoarse and a faux indignant attitude, replied to his taunt with a simple, “Shut up.”



THROUGH THE NEXT FOUR DAYS

Detention with Slughorn days before had carried a theme of dread attached to it.

The professor had hastily welcomed Harry in, barely speaking a word at all, and, unlike Snape, had kept him working on homework for the majority of his time there.

He almost seemed to be frightened by Harry, with the way his eyes shifted and he sported a careful disposition. He was on edge the entire time, Harry could tell, eyeing the exit as a hostage might do to plan their escape.

It was an utterly bizarre experience, and it made Harry aware of how much he hated being feared.

But as time passed on with a metaphorical clock ticking inside Harry’s brain, the silence between them became more and more mortifyingly pronounced, and Harry couldn’t help but watch him, reaching an even odder conclusion.

He wasn’t scared of Harry – he was scared *for* him.

Upon further exploration, perhaps that was an inaccurate way to put it. He *did* seem to be scared of him, but in a way that implied he believed Harry was under Tom’s control, as if he were simply a puppet, there to attack him or take something away from him. Slughorn’s memory flickered through Harry’s mind, and it hit him, how visually similar this whole situation was to when Tom had asked him about Horcruxes.

And it was clear too, then, how strange it was that Harry had missed the fact that Slughorn had been unusually distant from Tom, never praising him in Potions as one would expect. How many people were scared of his soulmate on a daily basis that he had never noticed?

It actually pissed Harry off, how it seemed Slughorn had actually believed Tom capable of evil since then yet had never done anything about it for years until it was too late to stop it or warn anyone about it. He was a teacher, an adult with authority to help, yet he had seen the warning signs, and instead of stepping in, had decided to *fear* his student.

Fear a teenager with supposedly a lot less magical knowledge than he did.

It could have been funny, had it been any other situation, but in this one, it was just infuriating, and Slughorn's behavior, in turn, made Harry feel uneasy. What should have been easy work for class became a chore to get through, and he heavily disliked the unwelcomed thoughts about Tom's past, the ways people had failed him, and how they made Harry himself reappraise his own neglected resentment over being encouraged to fight in the adult's playing field.

When there was only half an hour left of his punishment – if it could even be called that – Slughorn had looked to the door for the thousandth time, it felt, and Harry had had enough.

His classic Gryffindor-esque impulsivity led the way.

“You know, professor, you are the one in charge of my detention. If you want me to leave, go ahead, call the shots.”

Slughorn's head jerked in his direction, eyes lifting from what seemed like paperwork that he clearly hadn't been focused on with his eyes wide in surprise, all for the totality of three seconds.

Then, his face settled on one of mock authority, and Harry felt surprised at how Slytherin he looked, how easily he had shifted back into his mask of professor.

Harry had a tendency to underestimate people a lot, he realized, from how often he surprised himself with their hidden dimensions.

“I don't quite understand the point you are attempting to make, Mr. Evans.”

Harry sighed at Slughorn's response, and he almost quit right then and there.

If he were asked in the future, he wouldn't be able to discern what had compelled him into saying such a thing. But as it was, at that moment, it had felt like the right thing.

“I know what he asked you,” he said, and once he did, he realized he couldn't *not* expand on it – especially as Slughorn blanched, so pale Harry became worried he would have a heart attack. “Tom, I mean. I know what he asked you. And...” He wasn't sure he meant what he was about to say at all, but he said it nonetheless. “It's not your fault. He would have figured it out anyway.”

Slughorn got up from his chair rather abruptly, causing the jarring sound of metal scraping against the concrete floor to rise up. Harry winced, suddenly reminded of uncle Vernon, of all people, and the professor made his way toward his desk, clumsily but determinedly.

It seemed he was done playing clueless.

“How do you know about this?” Slughorn all but hissed like the Slytherin that he was, but Harry didn’t feel threatened. Despite the hostile dressing behind his words, all Harry could see was fear, regret, guilt.

So, *so* much guilt.

“Tom is mine.”

Harry’s sentence was mild, no possessiveness behind it. He didn’t elaborate, but he knew he didn’t need to. Slughorn understood what he meant by it perfectly.

He didn’t understand anything else about the situation, however, and Harry knew it from his next words. “You are just like him, then. You know what he wants to do, and you won’t stop him.”

Hell no.

He rushed to amend his statement. “No, that’s not— No. I know him, yes. But I don’t condone his actions and desires. Not when it comes to this.” *Never when it comes to this.* “You don’t need to be scared for me. I’m not Tom’s lackey. He doesn’t control me. And— he listens to me.”

I still can’t believe this, but he does.

Slughorn still seemed suspicious, eyeing him up and down, but Harry stood his ground. He kept looking forward, and while he didn’t stare directly in his eyes — one could never be too careful when it came to *legilimency* — he had his head held high.

“It’s not your fault, professor. You are not the one to blame for his darker impulses.” Harry meant it now. He was more certain of it, too. Maybe it would have taken Tom much more time to find out about Horcruxes had his professor not helped him with it, but he would have had at some point anyway. While Slughorn should have never shared that with him, while he should have been more proactive when it came to his fears surrounding Tom, Harry didn’t think he was entirely to blame.

In reality, he never had.

And that, hopefully, had seeped into his voice.

“Get your things, Mr. Evans,” his professor sighed, what seemed like a deep-rooted sadness creeping into it. “And back to your dormitory. You wouldn’t want to arrive after curfew.”

Harry had been expecting a different answer, but he shouldn’t have, and he knew that. In Slughorn’s eyes, they were not in equal footing. He was a student, and he would remain as solely that.

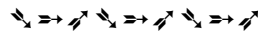
He stashed away his ink, quill, and pieces of parchment, putting it all into his tattered, second-hand bag. Harry threw it carelessly around his shoulder, got up from his chair, and was almost all the way out the door when Slughorn’s voice chimed back in.

“Thank you, Mr. Evans.” There seemed to be almost a tiny hint of confidence in his cadence, and that made Harry stop in his tracks. “And good luck.”

Harry inhaled, holding his breath in, and he left the classroom without another word.

When he exhaled at last, several steps out, it felt like something he had been holding inside him for years had finally been released. It felt like it had joined the outside with the Horcrux connection and all the emotions that had never belonged to him in the first place, and for once in his life, Harry felt almost close to content in his own skin.

Like an endless cycle had been broken.



Harry knew Tom hadn't been happy when he had shared with him the Knights' decision, even though he tried to hide it, but he hadn't let that get in the way of them.

They were still spending time together, still sharing feelings and thoughts, and Harry's mind was so dominated by Tom that it scared him.

But what scared him the most was knowing he wouldn't have it any other way.

That day, in between their observations and studying in their dorm after classes, Harry had started thinking about Tom's fears.

More precisely, about his fear of death.

Accepting Death had always been a side effect of Harry's life thus far. He had been branded for it as a toddler, after all. Before he even knew of Voldemort's crusade against him, Harry had been well aware of all the times death had come way too close, from starvation to beatings to the moments his accidental magic had saved him from his certain doom.

Death, for Harry, was easy; surviving took a little more effort.

Living, though? Actively searching for meaning and building a path for himself, figuring out what he wanted, which version of himself he wanted to put forward?

That was the hardest part.

That was why he had such a hard time understanding Tom's most prolific fear. Harry had always seen death as relief, an option if everything became too much. But to Tom, it had always been an enemy.

Tom did have more to live for and to look forward to, he supposed. Still, he was curious.

“Why are you scared of death?”

His question had probably seemed entirely unprompted to Tom, but to his credit, he was more than accustomed to Harry's impulsivity, so he didn't even blink before answering.

"It's the ultimate unknown, I guess. But to be honest, I fear oblivion much more. The impossibility of leaving behind a legacy, of knowing I will be forgotten in a generation's time... that is what terrifies me, thinking I'll leave nothing of value behind. That I will leave this war-torn world as just another victim of its clutches, as just another wasted potential."

Tom looked so statue-like in the way he stood. While he didn't have perfect skin, his nose had clearly been broken before and healed in a less than ideal manner – causing it to be slightly crooked – and he had a (rather charming, in Harry's opinion) small gap between his front teeth, he was every bit as imposing and timeless-looking as a statue carved out of marble meant to represent a historical – and historic – figure.

It, alongside Tom's drive, ambition, and cunning, made it utterly impossible for Harry to imagine a world where Tom Riddle didn't create an unforgettable impact.

He reached out and took Tom's hand on his own, giving Tom ample time to understand what he was doing and back out. Tom didn't, though, and looked down, at the way he immediately intertwined his fingers with Harry's, as unthinkingly and easily as it could possibly be done. Tom looked away, a blush creeping into his cheeks, but he didn't pull his hand away.

"How is this so easy for you?" he asked, eyes slightly wide. Harry watched him.

"You think this is easy?"

Tom nodded, now looking down at their joined fingers. "It feels like it, yes."

Harry chuckled softly. "It's not easy. Well, at least, it wasn't always. I fear rejection all the time." He smiled playfully at Tom. "I just have poor self-control."

Tom bit his lip, and Harry had, once again, to resist the urge to kiss him. "Do you want me this badly?" his soulmate asked and immediately blinked in surprise.

Harry loved when Tom didn't hold back his words, so he didn't hesitate at all in his answer. "Yes."

Tom huffed softly. "I didn't mean to ask that," he mumbled, but Harry just kept smiling at him.

Tom looked a bit shy when he added a "...Why?" and Harry ignored the pit in his stomach, the anxiety mixed with sadness at how Tom didn't seem to understand how utterly lovable he was, especially when he didn't try too hard to be what others wanted of him.

Ever since Tom had told him how he felt about him, Harry had known he needed, *wanted* to do the same.

He took a deep breath. He would really need his Gryffindor courage now.

"Well, you told me how you felt. I guess it's my turn."

Harry cleared his throat and stood taller. If he was to be this vulnerable with Tom, he might as well do so proudly.

“You know, I keep waiting for this to be just a dream,” he remarked, and stared at their still interlinking fingers, caressing Tom’s with his thumb. Tom gave his hand a little squeeze, like an encouragement, and that drew an instinctive smile out of Harry. “I keep waiting for the one thing that will make me not want you, not—” Harry swallowed the word that wanted to come out, choosing to entirely ignore its existence for now. He lifted his other hand unintentionally to bury his fingers in Tom’s hair, but he withdrew it. Tom, however, as if reading his mind, touched it, putting it on his face.

Harry wanted to scream at the way he immediately felt safer.

He is so fucking perfect it's insane. Like he knows what I'm thinking without even trying to read my mind.

His stomach still felt unstable, like there were a million butterflies taking residence there. “I keep waiting for the moment I’ll stop seeing you as I do, but it just never happens. I don’t think it ever will.”

If Harry had to describe the expression on Tom’s face as he watched him without letting his own hesitation or insecurity stop him, he would probably use the adjective *enraptured*.

It made him feel good, to feel like he could command Tom’s attention just as easily as Tom could command his. Still, it didn’t completely erase his anxiety.

His soulmate’s response was nothing more than a whisper. “How do you see me?”

The words catapulted into existence as if brought out by *veritaserum*. “You, Tom Marvolo Riddle, are everything.” He wasn’t watching Tom’s reaction anymore as he said it, too scared of his intensity – or, worst yet, the possible lack thereof. “You’re the first thing I think about when I wake up, after I spent the entire night dreaming of you.” His voice came out in a disjointed tone, like a mild shudder. He dared, then, to give Tom a self-deceivingly cursory look. “You’re—” Harry was unable to continue, however, as he finally *saw* how Tom was looking at him now.

He knew he was blushing a deep shade of red. There was no way he wasn’t, not when Tom seemed as if he wanted to eat him alive. It was almost as if Harry could read his thoughts, and they brought some very colorful images to his head.

He suppressed a groan, but Tom clearly didn’t want to let him off the hook that easily.

He leaned forward, his mouth hot and soft on Harry’s earlobe, and whispered again, this time with some less-than-pure intention. “What do you dream about?”

Harry had never been more aware of the body he inhabited on this Earth than he did in that very moment.

“I...”

Yeah, there was no way he could say that out loud without dying of embarrassment.

Harry realized Tom was only ever shy when he was the one feeling vulnerable, as the absolute asshole softly bit the tip of his ear, tugging at it with his teeth.

Every part of Harry's body was on fucking fire, and he couldn't *think* anymore. "Tom, *please...*"

Had he ever sounded this wrecked before? Harry didn't remember that ever being the case. He didn't feel bothered by it, though, simply because the sound made Tom step back, looking quite red himself.

Still, Tom didn't back down. If anything, he doubled down on it. "Tell me, Harry," he spoke with a husky tone that went right to Harry's *everything*, his nerves overreacting, and Tom lowered his head, licking Harry's right collarbone.

He was painfully turned on, and this time, he didn't suppress the moan that left his throat.

Tom caught the sound with a kiss, stopping only to bite Harry's lip.

"You have a thing with teeth, don't you?" Harry remarked breathlessly, surprised his brain went back online long enough for him to say something. Tom laughed, and that beautiful sound made Harry want to write him love poems.

"I have a thing for making you react," he corrected, and kissed Harry again. "This seems to do the job quite well."

It sure does, but...

"Anything you do does the job," Harry confessed, entranced by Tom's words. "You just *standing* here makes me want to do things to you."

Tom closed his intense eyes, and Harry watched as he took a deep breath in, a wavering quality to it that had Harry feeling like he was losing his mind. He couldn't believe he has as much of an effect on Tom as he had on him. It didn't feel like real life. "Tell me your dreams, then," Tom repeated. "*Make me* react."

Fuck. If *that* didn't convince him, nothing else would.

"Tom," he started, and decided to follow his thoughts, bringing Tom's hand that was still linked with his to his mouth, licking his knuckles. Tom's eyes shot open immediately, filled with what Harry could only describe as barely controlled *lust*. "In my dreams, I'm always up against a wall. You're always the one keeping me there, unable to escape, and I don't want to."

As if his words were a command, Tom did just that – he cornered Harry against the wall, long arms on both sides of his body pinning him to it, the pressure tight enough around him for Harry's head to spin with desire.

“You—” He lost his voice for a second, almost biting his tongue. “You put your hand on my chest, and every time I breathe, I push against it, as if you were controlling my body.”

Again, Tom followed his words. As he got even closer somehow, Harry noticed how flushed he looked, how his breathing seemed as ragged and shallow as Harry’s.

He was gorgeous like this, as taken by Harry as he was by him.

“Then I—”

Tom remained in position, but Harry’s pause made him hesitate, his eyes were now filled with a bit of concern as well as lust. “You?”

“I ask you to not hold back. To take what you want.”

He could tell the exact second something changed; his words made Tom immediately step back, spell broken, and he no longer faced Harry.

“Tom?”

“I can’t,” he responded, his voice now broken with something other than desire. Had Harry done something wrong? “Not like this.”

Harry felt his body deflate. He was torn between confusion and hurt, understanding and a feeling of rejection, and he wished he hadn’t said anything at all. He wished he hadn’t been so open about his fantasies.

“Okay,” he replied, tone clipped, and moved toward his bed. He was shaking his head as he spoke, “I shouldn’t have said anything. That was stupid. I don’t know why—”

Stupid stupid stupid

That’s on you for pushing it too far.

Tom grabbed his wrist halfway, however, and spun him until they were once again facing each other.

“Don’t. This is not about you. You did nothing wrong, Harry.” His voice was so filled with conviction that Harry found himself having to blink back tears he didn’t even know were biding their time. “The word choice just felt reminiscent of something I’d rather forget,” Tom said, almost half-hazardly, as if he didn’t want to explore it any further. Harry was now feeling clearer on Tom’s shift, and his eyes were still burning, but there were no more waterworks.

“You,” Tom continued, his hand following a path from Harry’s wrist to his biceps, “are perfect. And I want everything you’re willing to give me. Including this. Merlin, you have no idea how much I want this.” He panted the last words, staring at Harry’s body like he was barely controlling himself.

Harry was much of the same, far too often, and Tom's looks once more brought him back to that edge.

He felt like a teenager again.

Tom's open palm on his biceps tightened slightly. "I was the one to ask, darling, because I wanted to hear you say it. If any of my reactions is ever because of something you did, I promise, you'll know."

There was a long pause taking place between them. Tom didn't move – his hand remained where it was, and Harry didn't protest.

He would never tire of Tom's touch. He was touch-starved for him especially, and it felt like the bond between them only made him long for more.

After a few minutes, however, Tom kept looking at him as if trying to make some sort of decision, and Harry started to find it a little bit unsettling.

"What is it?" he asked delicately.

As a response, Tom's hand moved to touch his jaw, light as a feather, and he hunched down a bit for his lips to find Harry's.

There was something different about the way Tom kissed him, then. It didn't feel to Harry like it was about the sensation or desire of it at all – no, it felt to him like this was Tom's way of saying thank you, somehow.

It was short and sweet, and Tom weaved his fingers through Harry's hair, both caressing it and untangling some of the knots along the way.

It brought a smile to Harry's face.

Who would have thought Tom Riddle to be the physically affectionate type?

"Could you do something for me?" Tom asked, suddenly seeming more hesitant than ever before.

Sometimes I think I would do anything he asks.

"What?"

Tom's breathing quickened a little, in a very different way from their past moments, and Harry started anticipating a panic attack like last time. Thankfully, it didn't come.

"Don't hold yourself back from touching me. Don't stop unless I specifically ask you to."

Harry frowned. He would love to have Tom's permission to touch him whenever, but that didn't sound right, not with that he knew of him.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to overstep any of your boundaries. I don’t want you to feel like you owe me affection, Tom. It’s always freely given.”

His soulmate didn’t let Harry’s words stop him. “I’m sure. I need to get used to it. I haven’t told you this, but, there’s a reason why I’m so... skittish.” Tom spoke as if tasting the word he chose, but, despite seeming unsatisfied with it, he pressed on.

He told Harry of his experiences with sexual assault as a child, of never having experienced any real affection that wasn’t meant to be a bribe or the softening of a punch.

Suddenly so much of Tom’s behavior made sense, and he felt terrible about what he had said, the way he had chosen to posit his dreams.

But, most of all, he felt the surge of his red-hot anger, the monster in his chest, and he wanted to kill anyone that had ever hurt Tom – because, when he looked at him, all Harry could feel was an overwhelming need to protect and care for him.

It felt so much like...

Tom spoke again, his brown eyes filled with vulnerability. “I need you. I want to overwrite this on my skin with you.”

I think I love him.

“I trust that you won’t try to hurt me or use me like that. I need to have good memories attached to this.”

I really do.

It felt to Harry as if he had been punched, the way that realization had sparked up. It was both out of nowhere and something that been simmering in the background, and now, it was everything he could think about.

God, it’s been such little time, but I really, really do.

Harry tried to put his brain’s confirmation aside, however, with much effort, and answered, “Let’s make some, then. Just remember you can change your mind at any time. I won’t be upset, I promise.”

Tom’s eyes hovered on his for a few seconds, and he kissed Harry’s forehead. Whenever he did that, it made Harry feel the safest he had ever felt, as odd as that sounded.

“Thank you, darling.”

He loved being called *darling* by him, and he loved, well... him.

“And... about my feelings,” Harry mentioned the start of it all again, now suddenly feeling a lot less nervous about saying what he wanted to say. “You are everything I have been looking for without even knowing it. You challenge me, you made me feel when I had grown used to being numb, and you remind me it’s okay to want things. It’s okay to exist for myself, too,

and right now, I want you. And everyday I can't help but wish I had been here with you this entire time. That I had been able to witness your entire journey." He smiled – a little strained over the breakdown that was building and he knew he would have later on – and watched Tom closely as he spoke his next words. "I wish I had gotten to support you, to hold you, to comfort you, to make your day better. I wish it had been me you came home to everyday."

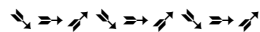
Tom swallowed, and Harry gaped at the journey of his Adam's apple. Tom looked down as he answered, voice small and low but still powerful. "Hogwarts has always been my home, but... lately it only ever feels complete when I'm with you."

Light filled Harry's chest in an overwhelming way.

I love you I love you I love you I love you

Harry hugged him, tight and unwavering, and was, at once, unable to deny how desperately aware he was of the chorus chanting the words inside of him as the world's most natural and true heartbeat.

He would have to deal with that eventually, but, for now, all he wanted was to be close, close, *close* to Tom.



They were in the library again, and Tom was in professor mode. Like it usually presented itself, it was with an intensity that felt like a magnetic field.

Tom could recite the alphabet and have everyone around him looking at him in awe.

"The Dark Arts have been under persecution ever since the goddamn Witch Trials. Back when Slytherin, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff founded Hogwarts, around the 9th or 10th century, Dark magic was nothing more than another type of magic. Not even that, because they didn't use to separate magic into categories like that. Wizards would learn how to work with each of their instincts in order to hone in their magical prowess, whether they found it easier to work with protective or offensive magic. Since everything was seen as useful, there was no need to prioritize one over the other."

Ever since Harry's whole being had decided he loved the boy in front of him, the words had been echoing on repeat inside his head. He was genuinely surprised every time he managed to not blurt it out loud, especially when watching Tom give one of his delightful lectures.

"But, then, of course, muggles brought their hysteria into it, and the few non-magical communities that knew of wizards turned against them. It became such a widespread belief that Dark magic was bad that, beyond killing a few actual wizards, soon enough muggles with no idea of our real existence started killing their own as well under the guise of exterminating us. Their ignorance actually reached our world, and soon we had our own

version of the witch trials. Half of it consisted of the sanctioned killing of suspected Dark wizards, while the other half of Dark wizards using Dark magic to kill the ones exterminating *them*. Either way, it was solidified then that Dark magic was the root of all evil, and it has steadily been obliterated and criminalized, one ritual or spell at a time, ever since.” Tom scoffed, a bitter expression on. “All because muggles were jealous of our power and couldn’t stay out of what didn’t concern them.”

Harry’s quiet and entranced listening was cut short by his soulmate’s anti-muggle rant, and Tom sounded so close to Draco Malfoy that Harry actually choked at the sight.

“*Tom*,” he protested.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, muggles aren’t always the villains. Still, let’s not do history revisionism for the sake of your comfortability, Harry. Muggles were the ones to first instill this idea of evil being weaved into magic, and pretending otherwise is choosing willful ignorance.” Something about the way he said that reminded Harry of Hermione, and he tried to ignore the sense of whiplash he felt at Tom’s mercurial moods. “The Founders would have hated to know this ideology has overtaken Hogwarts as well, especially when muggle-born students, the ones who know the least about our world, buy into this idea of learning less about magic in order to be seen as ‘pure’ or ‘good.’”

Harry knew Tom was right, of course, but that didn’t mean he enjoyed how he would blame muggles for the hatred of Dark magic when wizards themselves had been just as vicious of perpetrators to such. Plus, he just had to ask. “Wasn’t Salazar Slytherin against muggle-born students joining Hogwarts as well?”

Tom stopped in his tracks from his next tirade as if he had been caught off-guard by the question, his face overtaken by a frown riddled with confusion.

“Where did you hear *that*?”

“I—” *Wasn’t that common knowledge?* “I mean, everyone knows that.” Tom’s frown didn’t let up. “...right?”

Tom shook his head, eyes wary. “Maybe in your universe, but not here. Slytherin didn’t hate muggle-borns. He wasn’t a muggle lover by any means, though, and that certainly helped with the widespread belief nowadays surrounding purity of blood inside our house. But when it comes to muggle-borns, no, he wasn’t *against* them. He just believed it would be better to isolate them from muggles and bring them all into our world, since they were most likely descendants from cast out squibs.” There was a prideful glint in his eyes as he added, “I of course agree with him.”

That was another can of worms Harry certainly didn’t want to poke too hard at, to know Tom believed in the forceful assimilation of muggle-borns into wizarding society. He would have to talk about that, eventually, but for now, he was more curious about everything else they were exploring.

“What do the Smiths think of that?” Were there any Ravenclaws left, either?

Once more, Tom seemed beyond confused.

“There isn’t any wizarding family by that name.”

This was getting ridiculous by the second, Harry’s head chimed in.

“What do you mean? The Smiths are related to Helga Hufflepuff, right?”

Tom shook his head once again, but now the gesture leaned more into a stern disagreement. “Harry, the only Founder who left any descendants behind was Salazar. It’s not even properly known whether he knew of his son or not before he and the rest of them went missing.”

Missing.

Missing?

“The Hogwarts Founders went missing in here?”

Tom’s eyes were almost comically wide.

“They didn’t in your universe?”

Merlin’s balls. Hermione would have a field day with this. “No? I mean, after a while people didn’t really hear of them anymore, but I guess people assumed they just died of old age. If I remember it correctly, the only one to not leave any known descendants was Godric Gryffindor. I mean, your Horcruxes—” Harry bit his tongue, and Tom raised an eyebrow. “Um, three of your Horcruxes were Founders’ relics. One was Rowena Ravenclaw’s Diadem, which you got from the ghost of her daughter, and the others were Hufflepuff’s Cup and Slytherin’s locket, both of which you stole from one of Hufflepuff’s descendants, Hepzibah Smith.”

Harry had told Tom pretty much everything, but he hadn’t gone into detail about Tom’s memories that Dumbledore had shown him. He had seen it as a sort of strategy, then, to not anger Tom further by letting him know he was aware of details of his thoughts and memories. He surely wouldn’t like knowing someone else had had access to the deepest parts of him, to the worst recollections and moments of his life, and he had seen it as a small mercy, then, not to share.

He wished now that he had been honest from the beginning, at least a little bit more.

“Ravenclaw got sick, and was apparently the first one to die of the four of them, after her daughter stole the Diadem from her. But if that’s not how it went here, then...” He didn’t know how to conclude that sentence.

“All of the Founders went missing at the same time. They founded Hogwarts, left someone in charge to run it, and then were never seen again.” Tom’s voice was distant and serious, and Harry was once again reminded of how strange it was, the way this universe felt so right for him, like his rightful home, while also being so entirely different. It was like getting a whole new introduction to the wizarding world. “For a long time, it was assumed they hadn’t left any relatives behind, especially since Slytherin’s son didn’t really know who his father was,

but I guess it's obvious that's not the case. I mean, it's weird he built a whole chamber for a supposed heir, but I don't think he meant it as literally as people took it. Slytherin wasn't the only one who could speak Parseltongue, but it did seem he was the only one in this part of Europe to do so back then. I always knew I could speak to snakes, but I didn't realize the significance of that until I came to Hogwarts. I didn't even know about his rumored Chamber until well into fourth year. By then I was already exploring Hogwarts, and one thing led to another. I knew Slytherin wasn't against muggle-borns, and I wasn't intending on actually hurting anyone, but the Slytherins surely were, and I thought I could both use my status as the Heir and their prejudice within Slytherin to my advantage, so I wrote those messages about the Chamber being open."

If there was one thing Tom hadn't been forthcoming about was what had transpired with the Chamber of Secrets, so it was incredibly meaningful to Harry that he was choosing, on his own, to share.

"It wasn't very smart on my part, though, that was for sure. Nor was releasing the Basilisk. At the end of the day, revealing my status as a Parselmouth and the Heir would just give cause for Dumbledore to convince Dippet to expel me. And then the petrifications happened, and Myrtle died, and the school almost closed. I couldn't trust everyone in Slytherin to keep my secret just like that. I knew the news would spread, so I had to remain quiet, pretend I didn't know anything." Tom bit his lip, and stopped talking.

A part of his history still made Harry curious, and it seemed like a fairly innocuous one, so he asked, "If no one knows you're Slytherin's descendant, then how do they respect you so much? How did you gain so much clout in our house?"

He knew he had asked the right thing when Tom preened.

"Well," Tom smirked in a mischievous way, "let's just say the Slytherin Duel Contest had never seen such a brutal win before."

Harry blinked. *Okay...* "What the hell is the Slytherin Duel Contest?"

Tom's face lit up like he had just been told Christmas had come early.

"That was my question when Abraxas brought it up in his Slytherin history lesson," he grinned. "It used to be a popular way inside Slytherin for students to claim superiority within in. Our house was always filled with purebloods, each from very powerful families, and there was so much infighting over who got to rule it that the Contest was the best way of determining who was worthy based solely on their magical prowess."

Well, that was *certainly* on brand.

"I lost my first duel to Sébastien in class at the beginning of fourth year, and that certainly didn't help my inherently stained reputation. I had already started making plans for the Knights, but I wasn't popular enough to pull it off, so when Abraxas brought it up, I started thinking. Sure, the Contest had been abandoned decades prior after one of the students had suffered an especially gruesome death..." Just like the Triwizard Tournament, Harry remarked

in his head, shivering, “but I didn’t intend on killing anyone, and I surely didn’t intend on dying. It was the perfect way to prove myself.”

“What the hell, Tom,” he mumbled, both awed and horrified, but Tom didn’t seem to listen. Tom was too focused on *impressing*, creating an atmosphere with his story – whether for Harry or himself, though, he wasn’t sure.

“I convinced Abraxas to talk to the other Slytherins. We gathered as many purebloods as we could, and he explained the rules and guidelines to them.

“Abraxas didn’t really want to be a part of it, but I managed to convince him that he was needed, so the participants were me, Abraxas, Orion, Sébastien, Bram, Tymeo, Delia Carrow, Heather Rowle, and a few others as judges. Aside from me and Rowle, all purebloods. The first round was to simply gauge everyone’s performance and eliminate the worst ones. Out of all of us, I, Sébastien, Bram, and Abraxas ended up as the highest rated, and Tymeo, Orion, Carrow, and Rowle as the lowest rated. The supposed arbiters decided to pair me with Sébastien, since we were the best ones, and Bram and Abraxas together. When it came to the lowest rated, the pairs were Tymeo and Orion, and Carrow and Rowle,” Tom rolled his eyes, “since *someone* in the group decided to pair the girls together despite the fact that Rowle was leagues ahead of Tymeo. Either way, I won my duel, Abraxas won his, Orion won against Tymeo, obviously, and Rowle against Carrow.

“The next part stated that the winner from the lowest rated tier would duel the loser of the highest rated, and the winner of *that* would duel the winner of the highest rated until there were only the best ones left. So Sébastien went against Orion, and Bram went against Rowle. Sébastien and Rowle won their respective duels, so I went against Rosier and Rowle went against Abraxas. I’m sure you can see the pattern by now, but I won again, as did Rowle. So we went against each other... and I emerged victorious.

“Let me tell you, the look on their faces? Priceless. There were a lot of bets being made that day, and they lost a lot of money because of me. The best part, though, was the finale. While it wasn’t unprecedented, per se, most Contests ended there. But not mine. The purebloods were pissed that a mudblood was winning, so they invoked the secret clause.” Tom raised his eyebrows, almost as if trying to dramatize it further, and Harry smiled at him. “I had to go against Rowle again, but not only her. I would also have to duel the one I had won against before, which, in this case, was Rosier. Both at the same time.”

Harry was more invested in that tale than he had thought, and he chimed in with, “Let me guess, you won again?”

Tom smirked.

“I couldn’t end my winning streak there, now, could I?”

“Then how come I’ve never even heard much about Rowle?” He knew her from around Slytherin house, but she wasn’t one of the Knights. Or very well-liked either.

Tom’s face fell a bit.

“Rowle was a formidable witch, but Sébastien has won multiple times against her since, so no one really believes her to be superior. Plus, she’s a half-blood. If she had won the Contest, people might have seen her differently, but as it stands, she’s not much of anything right now.”

Harry nodded, seeing his point.

“Why haven’t I heard of anyone talking about that legendary win of yours?”

Tom ran his hand through his hair, mussing it up. “Well, it is secret for a reason. Plus, you’re seen as muggle-born. Trust me, we’re very careful about which information gets out and which does not. There are stupid purebloods everywhere, but no one wants more muggle-borns to have inflated egos thinking they can be the next me, or for the staff to hear about that.”

He pursed his lips and continued. “Either way, it was easier to establish a presence in Slytherin after that. I was already being backed up by a pureblood with Abraxas, and Orion eventually fell into place, so when I started recruiting for the Knights, no one would have dared to stand up against me face to face, to question my right to do it.”

“Well,” Harry began, being honest but also intentionally condescending, and rested his head on Tom’s shoulder. “I’m sure it was very impressive.”

The placement of Tom’s lips transmuted into a lopsided grin, and he put his hand on Harry’s chin, bringing it forward so he could kiss him.

“Despite your cheek, you aren’t wrong.”

They spent some more time like that, then, in silence and enjoying each other’s company, and Harry felt almost sorrowful before choosing to interrupt the peace.

“I have a question.”

Tom just watched him, and Harry piped up again.

“What have you accomplished with the Knights so far? What can I bring up to them?”

Tom’s stare at him this time came with a blank expression. “Those are two questions.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Oh, shut up.”

“Then how can I answer you?”

Harry managed to make out a well-concealed hint of mirth in Tom’s expression, and groaned softly. “*Tom...*”

“Okay, okay,” his soulmate responded with his hands in front of him in a mock surrender. Harry had no idea how his silliness could end up being so goddamn endearing instead of awkward. “We’ve had a few successes. When we started, Orion couldn’t give a rat’s ass about preserving Dark magic, Abraxas was constantly trying to rein everybody in, Sébastien

didn't contribute at all, Bram was always insulting everyone, Tymeo couldn't even speak in my presence, and Lilith seemed one second away from bolting. A lot of our work was put into functioning as a unit in those first few months." Tom's gaze was distant as he recalled the past, and he sighed. "I didn't really know how to do it in any other way outside of making them fear me, though, and while Abraxas kept trying to be a mediator, back then they didn't really respect him. They thought he was too soft-hearted to be useful and make a change."

Every time he mentioned his best friend, there was an undertone of sadness there, and Harry hated it.

"He will speak to you again, Tom. I promise. Just give him time."

It wasn't as if Tom was making any efforts to salvage the relationship either, but Abraxas knew him, and Harry knew he would know this didn't mean Tom didn't want them to remain in each other's lives. Tom was just... difficult. He didn't know how to apologize and he refused to admit he was wrong.

Tom didn't acknowledge his comment with words. Instead, he chose to bypass it entirely.

Harry sighed in exhaustion.

"Our first real victory came with an anti-creature's rights legislation the Ministry was trying to pass. I remember Tymeo was particularly passionate about it. I wasn't sure whether working against it would be the right move when it came to optics with the Knights, but his reaction convinced me. Bram is kind of scared of his father, though he'll never admit to that, so he hasn't really succeeded in bringing anything up to him yet. Sébastien had more luck this time, though. His parents are quite influential within the Wizengamot, but they didn't care about stopping it. We managed to work together to find arguments to convince them, however, and he brought them up to them." There was a small smile on Tom's lips then. "And it worked. They decided to vote against the legislation, and they swayed enough minds that the little rights creatures like giants and werewolves currently have didn't get taken away from them."

"Everyone was in a bit of high after that. I think it helped solidify what we were doing in their heads. Suddenly, it didn't seem to utopic anymore. Even Bram, who couldn't care less about creature's rights, was celebrating right next to us."

Harry was so in love with him it hurt.

"That's great, Tom."

"Well, it wasn't all sunshine and daisies. While I managed to change the Knights' ideas on Dark magic – which was not an easy feat, considering some of them have seen it being used rather horribly by their families – we haven't been as successful when it comes to stopping the decimation of the culture surrounding it. I've had news from the Wizengamot lately." Tom paused, and looked directly at Harry. There wasn't any accusation within his gaze, but Harry felt somewhat guilty nonetheless. "The Samhain legislation, it passed. It is now illegal to use Dark magic in any kind of ritual during Halloween. Families who have been using these rituals for centuries to communicate with their dead family members now have to risk

going to Azkaban for it. That if they manage to procure the ingredients needed for the rituals, which will now be near impossible to find for non-wealthy and well-connected families.”

Harry felt like a stone had sunk into his stomach.

“I’m sorry, Tom. I–”

Tom didn’t let him finish his thought. “I don’t think we would have had succeeded regardless – it was a very risky plan. Who knows if Charlus Potter would have been scared enough to talk to his parents, let alone managed to convince them. If anything, I’m sure they would have seen right through him. Gryffindors are disgustingly Light, and so are the Potters.” Tom smiled slightly in his direction. “No offense.”

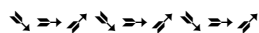
He was a *bit* offended at the idea that being Light was a bad thing, but he knew a joke when he saw one. It was clear Tom was desperately trying to convince himself he hadn’t failed, that trusting Harry’s discernment hadn’t been a bad idea, and Harry wanted him to believe it.

He knew he had done the right thing by protecting Charlus, but he still wondered whether he could have done more before it was too late.

“None taken,” was his reply. “So... do you have any ideas to bring up to the Knights?”

Tom slid toward him a piece of parchment he had been writing in, something like a determined-yet-slightly-nervous expression on his face, and Harry saw the paper was filled to the brim with words. Tom shrugged.

“I have a few.”



ONE DAY LATER

TOM

Per her request and his promise, Tom was back at Myrtle’s bathroom.

He felt annoyed that he had to visit her three times a week, but he found that he still thought it was worth it. Plus, he intended on using that time to follow through with the diary mystery and ask his other self a few questions.

It was so cold that day, the type of cold that didn’t leave even with several heating charms, and Tom was not excited to spend time in a wet environment. Either way, he sucked it up,

walked in, and was immediately welcomed by Warren's ghost.

Well, *welcomed* was a bit of a stretch.

"Look who's back," Warren drawled in a sardonic way, her ghost floating toward him from her hiding spot in one of the stalls. Tom, however, heard the real sentence in his head, the version without her attempts at masking it: *you're actually back*.

It's not like I had a choice, is it? he thought, gritting his teeth. Yet, what he said was: "Yes. I'm... back."

Not giving Warren the chance to react in any obnoxious way, Tom sat down on the floor after having scourgified his "seat." He did his best to avoid any wet spots, and brought out his diary.

He had thought through it, and he had come to the conclusion that he didn't care if Warren knew about it or not. If she hadn't sold him out about his ritual before, there was no reason for her to do it now.

"Is that...?" Warren frowned. Tom didn't answer. "What did you do to it?" she asked again, eyeing the book with suspicion.

Tom sighed. "We're not friends, Warren. You don't need to know every detail of my life."

Warren approached him, and she came close enough for Tom to realize he could see right through her if he focused. She sat down next to him, and Tom resisted the urge to push her away.

His hands would just go through her like smoke either way.

"We might not be friends, but you didn't think you would just sit here and ignore me for the entire time, did you?"

He hadn't, but one could hope.

"Why did you bring your diary with you anyway? Did you think the sight of it would make me hysterical and force my hand into releasing you?"

Once again, Tom hadn't dared to be this optimistic, but it was an interesting idea. Shame it didn't seem to be working.

Tom breathed deeply, already feeling frustrated. Warren did not seem willing to let him just be quiet for an hour, so he might as well control what the conversation would be focused on.

"I think better when I write it down."

Something about Warren's semi-transparent expression made Tom feel uneasy, like a bug caught in a spider's web. "What do you need to think about?"

"Again, *not* friends, Warren. Let's talk about something else."

She asked. “Okay. Sure. What about that boy of yours that you’re bringing here? When is that going to happen?”

For fuck’s sake, Tom groaned in his mind. “Aren’t you curious about the castle? About other people who aren’t, you know, your murderer?”

Warren eyed him with what seemed like a mixture of caution and amusement. “Jeez. You must be really pissed if you’re bringing *that* up unprompted.”

Tom really, really disliked that girl.

Even in death she managed to be prying into his life, no sense of boundaries whatsoever.

“Don’t you want to know about your family or something?”

She raised her right eyebrow. “Do you know anything about my family?”

Not if he could help it, he thought, and remained silent.

He expected another snarky remark or retort, clutching to his neglected diary, but nothing of the sort came out of the girl’s mouth.

“I don’t remember much about my life,” she said, voice so low it came closer to a whisper. The sudden shift had Tom’s gaze focused entirely on her now. “I remember the bullying. I remember you. I remember everything that happened that day and everything that has happened since, but not the before. Not the little things.”

Tom was no longer annoyed; now, he felt oddly invested.

“I miss my parents, but I don’t really remember them. They’re this phantom pain, almost. It’s knowing there’s something I’ve forgotten, but, no matter the effort, it never comes back. It’s just a hole in my brain.” There was a brief pause, and then she added, voice even lower, “It’s kind of like how I imagine living forever would be like.”

Tom wanted to deny her assertion; he very vehemently wanted to deny it, to make the counterpoint that immortality was about building knowledge, becoming powerful, etching oneself into the fabric of society and history, the *opposite* of forgetting and being forgotten.

Because it sounded terrible, the forgetting. He couldn’t possibly imagine living so long only to have every thing he learns along the way barging in by evicting the parts of himself that mattered, the parts that made him who he is.

But maybe that was the point. He couldn’t imagine it because he didn’t need to live it. Warren had only been dead for around three years, but as a ghost, she had a long way to go. Tom had never been too interested in the magic behind ghosts – why would he when he had made sure he could never become one? He had more important things to worry about, after all. But one thing he knew was that whatever caused ghosts to stay behind and what caused them to finally leave was highly inconsistent, understudied. For all he knew, Warren *could*, in a way, go on to live forever.

And, perhaps, that meant that some part of life – and afterlife – would have to be forgotten, like it had already begun to be for her, because there simply wasn't enough space for everything.

The thought terrified him, and the feeling reminded Tom of why he despised feeling vulnerable.

Warren, oblivious to his inner struggles – or perhaps simply immune to them – kept talking. “You know, when I was alive... it's kind of ironic, but I kept thinking about dying. In the beginning I would chastise myself, tell myself I was being silly, stupid, dramatic. Why else would I be thinking about dying as a teenager? Sure, the bullying got bad, but I don't know. It sounded stupid. But then it got worse.

“It's weird. *It* was always this voice in the back of my head. Quite literally in the back of it. It wasn't that it was whispering, just that it was so far from me here in the front of my brain that it was easy to ignore. Most of the time it was so quiet. Like it was bringing up a far away possibility rather than a command. I could feel good, be doing good for a while, but it was always there. Always. In the worst moments, though, that was when it snuck from the back and made its way to where I was. And it got closer, and closer, and I couldn't stop it. And the thing was, it felt so *passive*. I never felt like I was thinking of killing myself, because I knew that voice wasn't me. Dying like that would be something that happened to me, not something that I did. It wasn't my responsibility, it was collateral damage. But then...” Warren – *Myrtle* – ceased speaking. Tom was mildly surprised when her voice was no longer soft and unemotional, but, instead, her high and childlike voice became thin and strained. “Then, it replaced me. I was the one in the back, and *it* was the one commanding my decisions, my thoughts, my *actions*. The truth is, when you hurt me, Tom, I was already watching everything from afar. And... I don't know how much longer I would have lasted.”

Why was it that it was so difficult to see someone's inner lives when they went through something like this? Why there didn't seem to be any signs?

Tom didn't know, but he had started to realize that, when it came to him, it wasn't that it was difficult, *per se*.

It was that he simply hadn't bothered to care enough.

“It still doesn't erase what you did, though,” Warren said, looking straight at him. Tom refocused his eyesight on her, and tried swallowing what felt like a rock lodged into his throat. It didn't work. “I need you to know that. Because *you*... you took from me any chances I had of turning things around. You took away my future, Tom Riddle. I'll never know what could have been, and now I'm stuck here, surrounded by some much potential that I'll never match, and that's because of you. I'll never get to see who I would have become. I can't forgive you, even if I do believe you didn't intend for me to die. And I can't forget it either.”

There were no reasons for those words to hit him as hard as they did – Tom didn't care, he *didn't*.

Yet...

Maybe Myrtle could read him well; perhaps she didn't care. Either way, she said, in a much softer tone, "But you're all I got, and I don't hate you anymore. If anything, I'm curious. I want to know what is left for you. I want to know how everything is moving on without me. And, perhaps resentfully," she chuckled, "I want to know how my death has affected you. I want to know how it burns, if it stings, if it takes space in your brain even if you're sure you're completely indifferent to it. Because something like this leaves scars, and I don't believe you're as detached as you make yourself out to be. And you owe me this much. You owe me to know you, because you took away all opportunities of people knowing *me*."

She *could* read him, Tom realized. Scarily so. He didn't know how to feel about it. Normally he would have scoffed at the thought of owing anyone anything, but, right now, he didn't want to fight that idea.

On one hand, he hated feeling vulnerable, feeling known, feeling *seen* in this way, a way that showed he had flaws, he was weak, he was *human*.

On the other hand... she had no one to tell these things to. She was dead, there were no more stakes for her, but she was still being as vulnerable as he was, and he believed Myrtle would keep his secret.

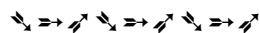
If he had to spend time with her that frequently, he might as well use that to his advantage. After all, if Tom had to be put into a situation he disliked, then at least he could control how it went, what he got to share and when.

So Tom told her. He told her how Hogwarts had been since her death, what had happened to her bully, everything from banal to heavy, silly to painful, and Myrtle listened, eagerly.

It was only hours later that Tom realized he had never gotten around to writing in the diary.

But as it was, so far, that had been much less unpleasant than he had anticipated. Perhaps he could continue to use that time to unwind in the future.

It was odd, but Tom was finding, with every second that passed, that, perhaps, Myrtle Warren wasn't such bad company, after all.



CHAPTER 13. PART TWO. CANDOR DISARMS PARANOIA.

Chapter Summary

Chapter title is by Allen Ginsberg.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I never dreamed the sea so deep,

The earth so dark; so long my sleep,

I have become another child.

I wake to see the world go wild.”

- Excerpt from An Eastern Ballad by Allen Ginsberg

CHAPTER 13 – PART TWO – CANDOR DISARMS PARANOIA.

OR, *A(N) (UN)TIMELY CONFESSION*

JANUARY 22ND

HARRY

That January had shaped itself up into quite the frosty winter, with delicate ice encasing branches like diamond earrings, naked trees like exoskeletons, and an early onset nightfall. Even then, it didn't feel as dark as it should have been, as if Harry's and Tom's moods were somehow bringing a sense of aliveness to nature's blooming hiatus.

Hogwarts, as it was, was a Christmas card, the snow painting quite the wintry picture as it fell like pillows on the castle's sharp edges, giving its Gothic visage a more welcoming feel. Proper sunlight was rare, and warmth was rarer, but Harry found that he didn't mind the cold – not as it framed his home so nicely, and not as it fit so perfectly with Tom's complexion.

He could tell Tom loved winter. It was in the way he relished the steady fall of snowflakes, a subtle smile ever-present in the corner of his lips; it was in the easy-going, laid-back, unburdened posture of his free period wanderings around school grounds. He would look up, eyes to the constant white of the cloudy sky, and Harry would be struck by the contrast of his black eyelashes to his fair skin, of his tall-and-proud standing to his delicate-looking bones. He was a vision in his Slytherin uniform and in the flowing-yet-heavy look of his robes, the clothes only highlighting his attractiveness.

But that wasn't what caught Harry's eyes, what had him so intensely focused on his soulmate's presence; it was, and always had been, his disposition.

Tom donned so many masks Harry had to wonder which ones were real, or whether, unbeknownst to him, they all were. Words he had overheard months before intrusively took residence in his brain all the time, whispering of a disappointment looming over him soon: *'you know nothing keeps Tom's attention for too long. He gets bored way too easily.'*

It was a hardship for Harry to believe the title of "soulmate" alone could shoulder the weight of keeping Tom interested in him forever. He was larger-than-life by himself, while Harry... His fame had been solely born out of misplaced status. Sure, he was talented at Quidditch and had a knack for spells like the *patronus* and *expelliarmus*, but what was that compared to Tom's hard work, innate talent, charm, and cultivated influence? Who was he to keep his eye?

Harry was headstrong and stubborn, though, and he wouldn't let any insecurities he had soil his relationship. If something was to put a halt to this, then it would be some sort of irreconcilable difference, nothing else. And Harry was more than willing to make sure nothing was impossible to sort out between them.

It all felt surreal to him, sometimes. If someone had told Harry he would have fallen in love with Tom Riddle just months ago, he would have laughed at the prospect.

Not because Tom was a boy – he'd had that realization after the war ended and he'd nothing but time to wallow in his past experiences. He knew who he was and who he liked, and he had finally admitted to himself way back that he had always found Tom attractive.

But falling in love with Voldemort, even if a younger version of him? Impossible.

But this was Tom, not Voldemort. And Tom was... quite something.

Harry would watch him with the same obsessive focus he'd once reserved for Draco Malfoy, but now with a lot less shame involved. Even with the Knights temporarily out of the picture, Tom was frequently hounded by the other Slytherins, just like a celebrity would. A particularly insistent fourth year Carrow had gotten Harry's teeth grit in anger. He wasn't jealous, per se – he could read Tom like a book now, and he knew his charm offense was made up of nothing more than well-observed annoyance – but it still got under Harry's skin, how little respect his fellow Slytherins, and what it felt like everyone else, had for the fact that Tom was taken.

Because he was. They hadn't exactly been secretive about it after the outing of their shared soulmate status. Tom wasn't one for public displays of affection, but they did spend copious amounts of time together, always sit next to each other in the Slytherin table, and were each other's partners in class almost universally. None of their professors protested – not even Dumbledore, to both his surprise and resignation – and, well, Harry wasn't about to complain about it. At all.

He and Hermione spent time together in the Knights' meetings and after them, and he was always inordinately entertained by her odd relationship with Lucretia Black. Hermione was always flushed when he mentioned it, like she was keeping a secret. But it didn't seem like a serious issue, and Harry trusted Hermione's judgment, so he didn't say anything. She would tell him when she was ready, and he would respect her privacy for the time being.

It had taken him a while, but Harry could now categorically say that he had friends in 1945.

It felt odd, how easy conquering Orion had seemed. The boy had been so suspicious of him in the beginning, and the fact that just Abraxas's reassurances and what Lilith had said about him had done the trick didn't track with what he knew of him and his family. Sure, the *veritaserum* had helped, but he'd been willing to listen to Harry even before it, and Harry found it strange.

So he had questioned him about it.

And... that had been the day he learned that there was a Dark spell to undo the glamour and reveal someone else's soulmark against their will.

And that Orion had been a sneaky, sneaky little bastard. It turned out he actually had gone as far as to perform that spell on an unconscious Harry to confirm his assertion that he and Tom were soulmates, right after Abraxas had told him.

Harry knew he should've felt more violated, but it made sense to him on a personal level. Orion would do anything to make sure Abraxas was safe, and Harry... Harry would do the same for those he cared about, even if it ended up being a little questionable.

After that, he and Orion had developed a weird dynamic. They weren't friends in the usual sense, and they communicated in snark and sarcastic quips above all else, but it felt natural. Orion made fun of Harry's clear obsession with Tom, and Harry made fun of the way he folded the second Abraxas so much as looked at him.

They were both far too gone for the ones they were in love with, and that was their way of feeling on top of what they couldn't control.

Harry was glad he got to do that with someone like him. It felt like honoring Sirius's legacy without replacing or forgetting him. Potters and Blacks were joined at the hip, it seemed, in any universe, under any circumstances.

At the end of the day, Orion was the one Harry had the most fun with, but Abraxas was the one he felt the safest around.

He had this way of making one feel comfortable in their skin, like they didn't need to prove anything in his presence. Harry could see why Tom had felt drawn to him, why Orion loved him. He reminded Harry of Hermione at the moments they weren't fighting for their lives, when they didn't need to be constantly arguing about the right and wrong choices and paths ahead. In the quiet moments, it was just them – Harry's restless energy being matched by her eagerness to find something worthwhile to redirect it to, Hermione's need for intellectual stimulation being indulged by Harry's interest in her brilliant takes, Harry's paralysis being undercut by Hermione's practicality and refusal to let him retreat into his own head, Hermione's difficulty in living in the moment being challenged by Harry's ease in reacting to what was being shown and said instead of the possible indirect consequences... In the same way, Abraxas both complemented and matched a lot of his traits, and his patience, most of the time, compensated for the lack of familiarity with Harry that Hermione had.

Lilith was a tougher nut to crack. It wasn't like she didn't like or trust Harry, but she was often so distant and professional, not just with him, but with everybody, even after her breakdown in that other meeting. She was a great actress, and he wanted to break through her shell, to finally convince her it was safe to trust them. It frustrated him to no end, but there didn't seem like there was much he could do, because it wasn't about him.

Either way, through the good and the bad, things were looking up. The Knights had given Tom a chance and he was determined not to blow it. It was endlessly cute, seeing him so focused and serious. This version of him had Harry staring at him for hours on end, in awe and ready to do just about anything Tom asked him to, and Harry felt embarrassed, but not enough to try to go back to the feeling of trepidation of their first moments. If he had to accept within himself what he felt for Tom, then he would, even when it felt dangerous, to know how far he had fallen.

Their moments as of late just felt different. A lot of the tension had slipped away, their conversations no longer ending in or starting with dissent. They never properly experienced a honeymoon phase, but this was the closest to it they'd had so far.

He blamed it on their trip to the Chamber of Secrets.

It had begun as it often did, with Tom taking the lead.

The latest Knights' meeting had gone well, and, while Harry and Tom were still constantly together, there were still stretches of time where Harry couldn't really find him around the castle. He didn't want to come off as clingy, however, and he knew Tom was, at his core, a lone wolf and needed his occasional time alone, so he didn't say anything.

He was curious, of course, but not enough to infringe on Tom's privacy, not anymore. It'd been all about building trust, for them, and he wanted to honor it, regardless of his deep-seated instincts. ~~Or insecurities.~~

After one such week where Harry hadn't seen Tom much, the first thing he had woken up to that weekend had been his soulmate approaching him.

"I want you to go somewhere with me," Tom said, eyes glinting with barely concealed enthusiasm.

Harry certainly couldn't say no when that, whatever it was, caused Tom to essentially drop any hint of his mask.

Harry followed him blindly, surprised once their path seemingly ended in Myrtle's bathroom.

"Are we going where I think we're going?" he asked, and Tom smirked, but he looked nervous, like he was about to introduce his boyfriend to his parents.

Harry, then, decided to do the heavy lifting for him.

"*Open*," he hissed in Parseltongue.

He could feel Tom's eyes burning into him, and he felt weird. "What?"

Tom hummed softly. "I never thought I would find anyone else like me. You know, I thought the first thing I would think when hearing someone else speaking Parseltongue would be something like 'we are kindred spirits,' or even 'we must be related,'" he joked, smiling playfully at him. Harry almost cursed as the smile became flirtatious. "The last thing to ever cross my mind, though, was thinking 'this is hot.'"

Harry could feel the blush settling on his face rather fiercely as Tom's face got closer to his. "Am I hot to you, Tom Riddle?" He laughed, but inside he knew he would be replaying Tom's low voice saying "hot" with alarming regularity.

Tom's warm breathing touched his skin, and he kissed Harry's neck, just a little hint of tongue in there.

"Do you really need to ask?"

Harry rolled his eyes, but deep down, he was very pleased.

"I'm not having sex down here," he said absentmindedly, still very focused on Tom's tongue on his skin. He almost missed how, in his peripheral vision, Tom froze.

Almost.

Uh...

It didn't last long, however, and he joined his fingers to Harry's, causing Harry's skin to warm up.

"Trust me, when it happens, it'll be in a place with a bed," Tom replied, all confident and casual.

Fuck. Now Harry was imagining it.

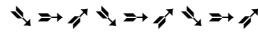
Was Tom thinking about it too?

One look at his blushing form, the opposite of his tone, told Harry that the answer was a categorical *yes*.

“Come on,” Tom steered him, fingers still connected, “I want to show you something I’ve found a while back.”

Harry helplessly followed him, caught in the stream of his emotions.

He always did.



Despite how much fun he was having with Tom, he couldn’t help the sense of trepidation that slowly choked him as he spent more and more time in the Chamber.

And, by the time they reached the Basilisk, Harry’s stomach felt in knots.

It wasn’t the same and he knew it, but having Tom in his Slytherin uniform and Salazar’s beast in the Chamber of Secrets at the same time as him brought him right back to twelve. He had to actively fight his fight or flight as not to flee the Chamber as he did years ago.

But he was restless at the best of days, and Tom didn’t seem to notice the difference.

“She’s asleep,” Tom said, his voice echoing through the huge space around them. He looked wistfully at the gigantic snake, not focused on Harry. “I’m not going to wake her up again.”

Tom’s words seemed to work to bring Harry back to the present for a second. This wasn’t *that* Tom, the Basilisk wasn’t being told to attack him, and he wasn’t a kid anymore.

Harry exhaled softly, and rested his head on the side of Tom’s arm as the two of them watched the unnatural, statue-like stillness of the great beast with completely differing feelings toward it.

For some reason, Harry felt somehow like he was living in two different realities at the same time – in his, full of anxiety and trauma, and in Tom’s, full of peace and remembrance, and Harry could only imagine what it all meant to his soulmate. He certainly didn’t have any nostalgia for his first visit to the Chamber.

“You wouldn’t think so, but a Basilisk is a great friend,” Tom continued. His brown eyes lit up. “She would listen to me for hours. I wasn’t a prefect by then, but I was good at sneaking around the castle at hours most students wouldn’t be able to without getting caught.” Harry had straightened his back, and Tom rounded the snake, reluctantly lifting up a hand, as if to pet her.

He didn’t, though.

“I wasn’t sure I would be able to wake her up, but managing to do it was the confirmation I needed that I was the Heir of Slytherin.” At his words, he puffed up his chest a tiny bit. He was clearly still proud of his ancestry, and Harry didn’t know how to feel about that. “The

thing about a Basilisk is that they aren't meant to be domesticated. Human beings are nothing but intruders and a potential source of food to them. But Salazar actually managed to befriend one. It's a kind of theory I have – that wizards evolved to speak Parseltongue to be able to communicate with certain beasts. That way, they can establish some sort of truce, keep creatures like the Basilisk away from everyone else. Wizards are powerful, but we are nothing next to creatures like her. Yet, she kept me company." Tom chuckled. "Didn't try to kill me once, despite me trespassing on her territory. All because I was distantly related to Salazar."

Harry was so interested in what Tom had to say, but he was constantly fighting the images in his head brought up by his words.

It also didn't help, the fact that the Basilisk's eyes seemed open and clear. Snakes didn't have eyelids, and the beast shut an invisible membrane to keep herself from petrifying or killing anyone when asleep – still, Harry felt himself shiver at the thought that she could essentially open her eyes at any time and he wouldn't be able to tell the difference before it was too late.

Harry didn't see as Tom exited his memories and got back to reality, finally noticing his torn expression. He just felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, as if Tom was wary of scaring him off.

He was dead serious and stern when he said, looking straight into Harry's eyes, "No version of me should have ever thought it was okay to use her as a weapon." That was the closest thing to an apology Tom could give him as someone who wasn't actually responsible for what had happened to him, and Harry knew that; so he took it, kissing Tom's cheek.

"Hagrid would have loved her," he remarked, not thinking through the implications for the other boy. Tom's hand was still on his shoulder, and Harry felt it tighten slightly at his words. Still, he decided he didn't want to measure his words around Tom. He didn't want to edit his history, to break his back to not make Tom feel guilty for things he had actually done.

Tom let his hand slid off of Harry in what felt almost like a flinch, and Harry thought it was better not to call attention to it. "He was an animal lover, magical or not. Looking back, he definitely wasn't a qualified teacher, regardless of how much he knew about the creatures he taught us about, but he did his best to instill an appreciation for them in us. It definitely worked on me." He shrugged. "I still can't really hate any creature, whether it almost killed me at some point or not. Not the dragons, and not her." He shot a look at the Basilisk, and hoped Tom took that as intended. "My favorites were always the thestrals, though."

Tom exhaled softly as if he had been holding his breath. "I've never seen one."

Harry didn't know whether he found that surprising or not. "Really?"

Tom joined his hands behind his back, and his expression morphed into one of soft emotional distance, all blank and smooth and detached.

"Never got in contact with one. When I first came to Hogwarts, I didn't see them yet, and after, when I already knew what pulled the carriages, I just avoided them. I've seen a lot of death since then, but..." his voice trailed off, and his mask slipped a bit.

“They’re beautiful,” Harry answered. Thestrals were a manifestation of death, and if he could help Tom shift his perception of it in any way, even if through his idea of thestrals, then he would try. “What about Dementors?”

Tom turned to face him, a frown in his forehead. “No Dementors either.” *That* surely wasn’t surprising. They mostly guarded Azkaban. “Though I learned a lot about them a few years back, when I heard that they also guarded Nurmengard, the prison Grindelwald will likely be sent to if he is ever arrested.”

Right, he cringed. *The war*.

Harry felt guilt at how easy it was for him to forget the war still raging on the outside. Besides the fact that he was living in 1945, he didn’t consider himself from that time, and all the historical events from it felt like some sort of dream, like looking at them through a history book.

The thought brought forth memories of Hermione’s talks on privilege and how the ones not affected by oppression often chose to ignore its existence entirely. It was especially bad for Harry to do so when the war was such a big part of Tom’s existence, and he felt even more guilty.

Still, Tom kept talking, and Harry swallowed his shame down to hear him.

“Did you know that their original habitat is meant to be living around unicorns? Unicorns produce an excess amount of what they call *pure energy*, and Dementors feed off of it. They share a symbiotic relationship, so no harm is done to the unicorns. If anything, it’s beneficial to them.”

Harry didn’t know that. He wondered why no one seemed to, either, in his time. He doubted there would be many creature rights activists clamoring for the relocation of Dementors regardless, especially if the focus on well-being was on them instead of on the prisoners. At the end of the day, no one really liked Dementors.

“When Azkaban was created, the Dementors were brought there as guards, but that was never what they were meant to do. As a result, they feed off of the prisoners’ pleasant memories, because those are the closest thing they have to the energy from the unicorns. They can’t help their effect on those around them. Dementors are more intelligent than most people think, you know. By feeding off people’s memories, they are forcing themselves into constant starvation – memories are not nearly as strong as positive feelings experienced in the moment. All because they know what a Kiss would do to wizards, and they avoid it to the best of their abilities. It’s why they only do it when given permission. Wizards have been exploiting unicorns for such a long time as well as forcing Dementors to work for them that they can’t really escape these conditions nor find a better place to settle, not as unicorns have become more and more rare.”

What was Tom doing with all these stories?

If Harry didn’t know better, he would think he was somehow trying to make Harry feel better about his own experiences.

It was utterly bizarre; not because Harry thought he didn't care about him, but because Tom was hardly this proactive about his feelings or as subtle about his attempts at comforting him.

He didn't dislike it, but the lack of directness from Tom made him feel even more restless than usual. "Tom—"

Tom kept talking as if he hadn't heard him. "You know, apparently there used to be people who could communicate with dragons like we do with snakes, but they got wiped out back in—"

"Tom."

His second interruption seemed to do the trick as Tom stared at him, a faint blush on the top of his cheekbones. "Yes?"

"I know what you're doing." Tom looked like he wanted to deny doing anything, but Harry didn't give him the space for it. "And thank you, but it's okay. You don't need to rewrite history in my mind. I had a lot of time to dwell on these things, a lot of time to process them and move on. I'm fine now."

Tom watched him, looking for something in his face. After a few moments, however, he grinned.

"I keep forgetting you're twenty years old and not a teenager." Harry rolled his eyes at Tom's reaction. "How did you even get Dippet to let you join seventh year?"

Harry gave him a mischievous smile.

"Who said anything about him knowing my age?"

Tom shook his head, but Harry saw the blush on his face only become more pronounced.

That gave Harry pause.

"Tom Riddle," he approached him, putting his hands on his chest, "do you like the fact that I'm older than you? Do you have a competence kink or something?"

Tom's face was redder than Harry had ever seen before. Harry wanted to bite it. "I don't know what you're talking about," Tom responded, tone indifferent and borderline cold, but his eyes shifted to the Basilisk instead of Harry.

He couldn't believe it. "You do! Who would have thought—"

Tom slapped Harry's hands on his chest away, and took a step back. "Shut up. Just, shut up."

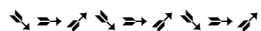
"Don't worry, baby," he said in a low voice, delighting himself in how Tom became even more flustered at the pet name, "the power is all yours. You're still the most competent one out of the two of us. You don't need to feel embarrassed about it."

Tom rolled his eyes, but he mumbled something like "humble twat" under his breath.

Harry smiled and kissed him briefly on the lips.

“Well, this date isn’t over. Show me some more stuff, I like hearing you rant.”

Tom nudged him playfully at that, but he took Harry’s hand on his and kept walking.



Tom was back to rambling about secret passages, locked doors even he couldn’t open, and other things he had found around the Chamber, and Harry realized he had never seen Tom like this – not only excited, not only curious, but, maybe more than anything else, *happy*.

Like he finally had someone to share his real self with.

As he spoke, Tom gave him a smile that had Harry completely paralyzed in place.

That smile made him realize he had never actually seen a real Tom smile, because now, Harry noticed he had fucking dimples.

That’s it. I’m dead.

Tom noticed him watching him, and ceased his talking. “What?”

Harry just smiled softly and shook his head.

Tom narrowed his eyes at him, but he was still smiling. “Tell me.”

“Nope.”

Tom tilted his head, as if deciding what he would do, and, in a move Harry didn’t see coming, started tickling him.

“Tom, no, what the fuck—” He couldn’t stop laughing, and Tom’s voice joined him.

The tickling stopped, but Tom didn’t drop his arms from around him, now behind Harry, holding him close. His head was resting on Harry’s right shoulder.

Tom wasn’t the only one who was happy – Harry was, too.

The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. He didn’t remember being happy like this, at all, and certainly not since the end of the war.

“You win,” he said, and turned around, all without leaving Tom’s arms. “I was thinking you look happy, and how absolutely captivating it is.”

“I *am* happy.” Tom sounded reluctant, as if just realizing it himself. “I’m with you,” he added simply, as if Harry was the only possible cause, the only logical conclusion to draw.

As if the only possible outcome of being with him was happiness.

“I love you,” Harry blurted out, unable to hold back any longer, and he looked down, closing his eyes so he wouldn’t see Tom’s face. He was frantic as he continued rambling. “I know this is a bit too soon and I don’t expect you to say it back but I just needed to say it out loud.”

As the silence stretched out with only the echoes of the Chamber to fill the space, Harry wished for a moment that he still had a soul connection to Tom; at least then he would know what his soulmate was feeling, whether he was being quietly rejected or not.

“Harry,” Harry didn’t open his eyes as Tom’s silky voice sounded even lower than usual, “open your eyes.”

I can’t, he fought with himself as if Tom could read his mind. I don’t want to pressure you but I’m too much of a coward to hear a rejection right now.

But Tom held his face in his hands, kissing Harry’s eyelids, and then, finally, his lips, and Harry returned the kiss enthusiastically as he always did. After, Tom rested his forehead against his.

“I don’t think I can say the words right now,” he whispered, and Harry tried to ignore the way his stomach sank, “but I want to. And I will.”

Okay, Harry sighed. Good.

That was more than anything Harry should have ever expected from Tom Riddle, so he nodded.

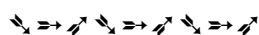
He was beyond happy with what he had right now. Anything else would be just a bonus, would be being too greedy, would be something more for fate to take away.

“Let’s find some of Salazar’s snake memorabilia and hiss at it,” he joked, and finally opened his eyes.

Tom’s smile just then was blinding and endlessly fond, and Harry couldn’t handle it.

He wasn’t used to being cared for like this, to being looked at like this.

And despite Tom’s inability to say it back, it sure looked like love was what was written all over his face.



It was getting late by the time Harry told Tom about the box he had found in the Chamber a few weeks ago.

Harry hadn't had much time to think about his finding since. He had been cornered by Abraxas soon after his discovery, and his focus had been entirely on that, so the box had been stashed inside of his trunk the entire time.

It wasn't like he had found a way of opening it, either – whatever magic kept it like that was beyond Harry's scope of knowledge.

"Can I see it?" Tom asked, right after they emerged back into Myrtle's bathroom, and Harry nodded.

"It's in my trunk."

A few hours later, Harry had gotten bored of watching Tom try every spell he knew to open the box, a frown overtaking more and more of his face as he continually failed at his task. He mumbled complaints throughout, from "this makes no sense" to "who designed this?" both in English and Parseltongue.

Harry loved watching him, but he wasn't exactly amused at his soulmate's anger.

Harry had sighed for what felt like the hundredth time when Tom finally lifted his eyes to look at him.

"Can I keep this?"

Abraxas and Orion would be back to their dorm for curfew soon, Harry knew, and he also knew that Tom would not want them to find him tinkering with the box equivalent of an impossible figure.

He had no idea what was inside of it, and he felt a little reluctant about letting Tom have it, but he trusted him with this.

Well, Harry wanted to, either way.

"Sure."

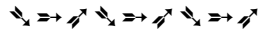
Tom put it away in his own trunk, holding the box as if it was incredibly precious, and then went back to his bed. Not long after, Abraxas and Orion went into their dorm, settling into the easy dynamic of their nighttime routine, and watching it all made Harry feel peaceful.

Both sides of Harry's life, right now, felt balanced. Not even the freezing leaves outside or the untenable conditions of living down on the dungeons could rattle him.

Though, if one asked, he would surely say he wished Tom would sleep in the same bed as him... for the body heat, of course. Nothing else.

He suppressed an ill-timed chuckle.

And drifting off to sleep a few hours later, Harry found that he was plagued by no dreams at all.



JANUARY 23RD

HERMIONE

The last time they had ever fought over Riddle had started like this.

“...and he’s so talented! He’ll just start talking about magical theory and he’ll go into such detail you end up feeling like he invented it or something. And goddammit, he has this smile, like honestly the first time I saw it I just knew it was over for me, like seriously—” Harry had been speaking for several minutes on his unbridled feelings for Riddle, and Hermione couldn’t take it anymore.

“Harry,” she interrupted him, completely deadpan, “what the fuck.”

“What?” he asked, blushing furiously, unable to meet her eyes.

She had a sort of awed expression on her face, she knew, when she said, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this in love before. Like, ever. And with Tom Riddle, no less.”

She hadn’t meant anything by it, but that last part made Harry so clearly annoyed he immediately launched into a rant.

“Yeah, okay, let’s make one thing clear. I know he’s Tom and all that, but he’s actually trying. He’s been through a lot, and he’s fucking great. He’s confident and he knows the power he has over people, and, yeah, he can be kind of arrogant sometimes, but he can also be shy, open, vulnerable. He is so passionate, and he’s curious, creative, hardworking, and a surprisingly good teacher for some reason? And he might not think so, but he’s really loyal, too. Once he thinks you’re worth it, he’ll stick with you. I was so scared he would get bored of me, but he challenges me in a way that helps me challenge him right back, so that never happens. He’s also the first boy I’ve ever been in love with, but...” Harry was still blushing, but he refused to let his embarrassment stop the point he was trying to make. “He might also be the first person I’ve ever loved for real at all, too, and while I won’t forget about what he is capable of, I’m tired of keeping it in the background of every single one of our interactions, and I won’t let you forget he’s a whole person either. He’s just a teenager, ’Mione. He’s not *him* yet, and I don’t think he will be.”

Hermione blinked, and she paused for a second before responding. “Wow. Okay. I mean, I don’t really see it, but if you say so.”

He nodded resolutely. “I do.”

After that, Hermione decided she would stop making such a big deal out of it. Sure, it was less than ideal, the fact that the one way Harry had finally gotten to choose himself first was by falling in love with Tom Riddle, but he hadn't chosen his soulmate, and he deserved happiness, in whatever way, unorthodox or not, that it came to him.

Hermione refused to be the one to sour that for him, especially since she knew Harry was selfless enough to let his happiness go if she asked him to.

"You know, he apologized to me," she commented. She wasn't sure why she'd said it.

The look on Harry's eyes, though, was a mixture of surprise and fondness, answering the main question inside herself of whether he'd put Tom up to it or not.

It was good to know he hadn't.

"He did?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

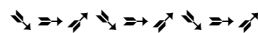
Harry looked down to their table in the library, a soft smile on his face. "Huh," he said, his voice low.

At that moment, Hermione knew she was glad she'd told him.

She loved Harry. He was her best friend. She wanted him to be happy.

And he was.

And that, it turned out, was enough.



Chapter End Notes

I would really, really appreciate some feedback here - I've noticed I'm always getting some traction, but comments are truly the thing that makes me work and motivates me. I've been trying to break my habit of checking stats, especially since I know they don't mean much, but it's hard. Comments at the very least give me actual feedback to work with instead of just numbers, so, yeah.

By the way, while I've been having a hard time with certain aspects of I&DD, I have not stopped writing. In fact, I've been writing quite a bit, especially one-shots, and they are all Tomarry and/or Harrymort. Some of you are subscribed to me so you know, but to whoever is not, I'll link them here.

There is [There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in](#) which is a one-shot

where there is no Voldemort, Tom and Harry go to Hogwarts together, and Lily is alive (while James died on duty as an Auror). Harry has a crush on Tom, but they are rivals, since Harry is number one in Defense and Tom very much wants to surpass him. This story is an exploration of grief and parental expectations, and I am already planning a sequel.

There is [Hope is Hell's Final Torment](#) which is a post-war story, where Harry never killed Voldemort, since Dumbledore died before telling Harry of the Horcruxes and Harry ended the war by de-aging Voldemort and making him forget everything. He eventually goes to visit him in Azkaban, only to discover he's been experimented on for ages. It's mostly a character study and exploration of Voldemort's (now Tom's) psyche, and how he's (ironically lol) been suicidal. I've been planning a sequel where Harry breaks him out and I explore their odd dynamic, and HIFHT might be one of my favorite pieces of writing I've ever done.

And there is [Earnest](#) which is an AU where Hogwarts is an Arts School, Dumbledore adopted Tom and became Headmaster, and Tom is an actor (just like Dumbledore used to be), Harry is a violinist, and they have a meet-cute in the Astronomy Tower, where they bond a bit. This particular one inspired me a whole bunch, and I ended up writing a multi-chapter sequel set years later, which has some quite insane lore, if I say so myself, called [Unlucky Streak](#) which might be, no joke, THE favorite writing I've ever done. I'm having so much fun with it, y'all. So much fun.

I'm done with the sales pitch now, I promise. It's just that I've really loved writing these short stories, and I intend on expanding them in the future. I&DD is still the priority, but stifling myself is not an option when you have a brain like mine, pulling me into all sorts of directions. If you guys like any of my stuff, I recommend subscribing to me or the stories for more content.

Anyway, thank you for reading!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!