

To Live Is The Rarest Thing

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To Live Is The Rarest Thing

by [Maeglin_Yedi](#)

Summary

A disastrous trip to a waterpark (thanks, Dudley!) unleashes almost 200 lifetimes worth of memories, and now Harry is stuck as a ten-year-old while his soulmate is a wraith set on killing him.

A very old and cynical Harry sets about correcting Tom's poor life-choices while avoiding Dumbledore and his Order's panicked searches for the Boy Who Disappeared.

As far as Harry is concerned, the whole world can fuck off. He couldn't care less he's finally Harry Potter again, or that he can finally see his original loved ones again. The only thing that matters is getting Tom back safe and sane and with his soul intact.

Notes

Here I was, working diligently on the next chapter of The Darkening of your Soul when this idea popped into my head and wouldn't let go. After a few days of getting distracted to the point that no writing was happening, I decided to get it over with and write it down. No idea where this is going or when it will be updated. There may be some similarities with The Darkening of your Soul on the surface, but this is a very different Harry. Much older, much more cynical and much less willing to compromise. He pretty much does what he wants and fuck everyone else. For reasons which will become apparent in the story.

Credit for some of the ideas in this story must go to Tetsurashian and her story 'Full Circle', which if you haven't read it yet you must do so at once. It's wonderful, yet sadly hasn't been updated in eighteen months. My story is a different interpretation of a similar idea, with a much darker tone and very different directions for the plot.

Now I promise to get the next chapter for Darkening of your Soul out next while you all hopefully enjoy this. Thanks for reading, as always!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

To live is the rarest thing. Most people exist, that is all. – Oscar Wilde

Chapter 1

Mrs Figg was ill and Harry couldn't be happier. Not because he hated Mrs Figg, because he didn't even if she was a little weird with her cat obsession, and even if her house smelled like cat pee whenever Harry had to spend a day there. No, Harry was happy because for the first time in pretty much his whole life he got to go to a waterpark with his family.

Well, family being a very strong word for Harry's relatives because the people Harry lived with really didn't treat him like he was family. More like he was an unwelcome burden they were forced to put up with. Once, Harry heard a fairy tale about a girl who was forced to clean all day by her wicked stepmother and Harry had felt an unbelievable kinship with this character. Though Harry didn't have any parents, step or otherwise. He only had his Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon and Dudley, his cousin who despite being only a few months older was easily twice Harry's size.

Dudley always used his size to his advantage whenever he decided to beat Harry up, which was at least a few times a week. Harry was fast, though, and about half the time he got away before his cousin could lay a hand on him. The other half of the time...well, Harry had his fair share of bruises and cuts and broken bones to speak for themselves. Dudley was the reason Harry got to go to the waterpark. Dear Dudders almost had to stay behind a grade in their primary school, but Aunt Petunia got him a tutor and after much whining, complaining and a few temper tantrums, Dudley did the minimal amount of work and got barely high enough grades to pass after all. And as a reward, Dudley got to go to this luxury waterpark that had opened just the previous month in Surrey, half an hour away from where they lived in Little Whinging. And because Dudley refused to postpone his trip, and because there was no one who could watch Harry for the day, Harry got to come along for the first time in his life.

And even though Harry wasn't a very strong swimmer he was looking forward to spending a day outdoors while hopefully having a little bit of fun without being beaten up by his cousin. Harry had only had a few swimming lessons as they were provided by their school, to learn the very basics like treading water and being able to swim from one end of the pool to the other end. But that was about it, as parents were expected to pay for further lessons for their children and while Dudley had received such lessons, Harry had been told, like usual, that his aunt and uncle refused to spend their hard-earned money on a waste of space like himself.

The car ride was a loud affair, with Uncle Vernon loudly complaining about pretty much every other driver on the road, and Dudley talking non-stop with his friend Piers about which waterslides they were going to take first and why. Apparently there were many and all had their pros and cons. Harry had no clue but listened quietly and figured he'd be lucky if he could manage to take one slide without Dudley interfering.

Aunt Petunia gave Harry a very pinched look when she had to pay ten pounds for his entry into the park and Harry wisely pretended not to notice. They got changed in some cubicles, and Harry had one all to himself as he pulled off his oversized jeans and shirt to reveal his oversized swimming trunks. All of them were Dudley's hand-me-downs, naturally, and Harry was ever so grateful the string in the waist of his swimming trunks allowed him to pull it tightly so it would at least stay put on his scrawny body.

After Uncle Vernon gave him a few harsh warnings about not causing any trouble and basically leaving them alone for the day, Harry was allowed to roam the waterpark by himself. He was already ten years old, if only just, so hardly a little child who needed constant supervision.

Having no clue how to go about enjoying a waterpark, Harry quietly shadowed Dudley and Piers, making sure to stay out of sight as he observed them climbing the steps to a huge waterslide called the 'Splash Smash'. Harry allowed about a dozen people between himself and his cousin and then took the steps as well. It was slow going, but the slide itself, with many loops and curves and even some covered parts, did look like a lot of fun. Once at the top, Harry inhaled a deep breath, smiled at the attendant who waved him forward and sat down on the slide. One push with his hands behind him and he was off.

It was the best thing Harry had ever felt! Such speeds, the wind whipping in his hair, water spraying in his face, and Harry couldn't hold back his shout of sheer joy as he raced towards the bottom. He landed in the pool with a mighty splash and a startled cry, but it wasn't very deep so he resurfaced almost instantly.

"That was amazing," Harry told himself, determined to spend the whole day taking this slide. He didn't care how long he had to wait on those stairs every time. He could be patient for an experience like this.

"What do you think you're doing," Dudley yelled from behind him as he pushed Harry in the back. "Are you following us? Are you, freak?"

Before Harry could answer, Dudley pushed him again, so hard this time Harry lost his footing and went under. Out of sheer shock, Harry inhaled a startled breath, but of course there was no air, only water that streamed in his mouth. Harry flailed his arms and tried to steady his feet enough to get a grip on the bottom of the pool to push himself up, but Dudley was on top of him, using his huge weight to hold Harry under the water.

Panic gripped Harry as he tried to claw and punch his cousin, desperate to reach the surface and take a deep breath. His mouth was full of water and his ears were ringing and his eyes weren't working as they should because everything became darker and darker until there was nothing left at all.

Harry woke up in an unfamiliar bed, staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling, but he'd spent enough time both working and staying in hospitals to recognize in what type of place he was. He sat up, blinking his eyes against the onslaught of memories that were suddenly available to him.

So Dudley had actually killed him. Fucking hell.

Harry blinked again when the enormity of his situation became clear to him. He was Harry Potter again. After having lived almost two hundred lives he was Harry fucking Potter again. He wasn't sure of the exact number of lives. He never kept track, Tom was the genius with numbers.

Fuck.

Tom.

Harry glanced around the hospital room as if his soulmate was hiding in a shadowy corner. But of course he wasn't. Tom was a wraith at that time. But why hadn't they gotten their memories back when Tom came to kill Harry and his parents back in 1981? Hadn't they looked in each other's eyes? That was how they usually remembered all their lives all the way back to number 1 when they were Harry Potter and Tom Riddle for the first time. That, or one of them died but was resuscitated back to the land of the living. That also gave them back their memories, but only for the one who had died. The other one remained ignorant until they finally met and looked in each other's eyes.

Rubbing his hands across his face, Harry leaned back in his bed, sinking into his pillow. What a fucking mess. His last life, the one that had just ended, had been less than ideal, though Tom would argue it was simply another life to live, no matter what horrible things Harry ended up doing, but the less said about that life the better, at least for what Harry was concerned.

He was Harry Potter again, and Harry wasn't sure how he felt about that. The first time he'd been Harry Potter he'd gotten into this everlasting cycle of reincarnation after all. Not to mention, losing his loved ones the first time around when he was reincarnated into life two and three and four and onwards had messed Harry up pretty badly. He still wasn't proud of all the crap he'd pulled in life number six until he finally got his act together in number seven and started acting like an adult who dealt with his emotions instead of an immature asshole who hid from them in the bottom of a bottle or the tip of a heroin-filled needle.

Yeah, number six had been a bit of a trip, all right.

Not to mention those first ten, fifteen lives had been stressful because he kept running into fucking Voldemort...well, Tom Riddle, really, because from their second life on Tom hadn't tried to randomly kill people for their blood-status or take over the world or some such nonsense. Having a complete soul did wonders for Tom's sanity, as it turned out, and he was a fairly reasonable human being under all the arrogance that seemed to come naturally to him.

And he was Harry's soulmate in every way possible. In all the ways it mattered, and more besides.

The way Harry and Tom figured things were supposed to go, was that the universe didn't like waste. Or rather the multi-verse, because as Harry and Tom knew from personal experience there were basically an infinite number of universes, all with their own earths with their own populations of humans and their own histories and their own types of magic. Or no magic at all, which seemed to be the case for most worlds they'd lived in.

Anyway, the multiverse didn't like waste, so it recycled. This included souls. When one died, one's soul got stuffed into a new body somewhere and sometime in the multiverse. One life one could be a male CEO of a billion dollar company in the USA in the 1990s and the next life one could be a female subsistence farmer in the Gurjara-Pratihara Empire in the year 761 in what one day would be India. There was no rhyme or reason as to how souls were reincarnated, at least none that Harry and Tom had found. And they'd looked.

Because in life number one Harry had, quite accidentally, become the Master of Death, and because Tom had, also quite accidentally, turned Harry into his horcrux, they were reincarnated with their memories intact as opposed to everyone else who lost their memories once they died. This was apparently the perk of being the Master of Death, and because Harry's soul was made up of both his own and the sliver of Tom's soul that had attached to him as a baby, Tom got to have this perk as well as long as they met each other and looked into each other's eyes.

Harry believed that they were destined to meet each and every life time. They always did, after all.

Tom argued they simply couldn't be sure they weren't living dozens of lifetimes in between the ones where they met and regained their memories. Harry thought they would have memories of those lifetimes whenever they regained their memories in lives they did meet. Tom figured they might only keep the memories of the lifetimes in which they met.

Needless to say, they'd spent much time debating their fate and even after almost two-hundred lifetimes they still hadn't come to any solid conclusions on what was really going on.

In other words, they were stuck in an unending cycle of reincarnation and all they could do was make the best of each and every life they were given. And they did, usually, though some lives were most certainly better than others.

It had taken ten or so lives before Harry and Tom had been on speaking terms, and then it had taken another life or two before they'd started fucking each other. The first time that happened was when Tom was the Minister for Magic in France, and Harry was the head Auror. Both were male and neither was married at that time so they figured they may as well be friends with benefits. After that, sex had become a regularity but it took another few lifetimes before they married and had children together.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut as he remembered some of their children. They'd had so many in so many lifetimes that it was impossible to remember them all in just a few thoughts. Those were the best lives, as it turned out. When Harry and Tom got to live quiet lives filled with kids and loving family members. Parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. He and Tom had been blessed indeed with having been part of some wonderful families, not to mention having created their own loving families too many times to count.

Those were the lives Harry missed the most whenever they ended, but that was the price they paid for their unique situation. With love came loss, and every life, no matter how amazing, had to come to an end. Something that eventually he and Tom had learned to accept, but that didn't make the pain of losing your friends and family any easier.

Inhaling a deep breath, Harry pulled himself out of his memories of lost loved ones and focused on the here and now.

Harry missed his soulmate like he missed a limb, and Harry had lost a few limbs in a couple of lives, so he knew what he was talking about. But Tom was a wraith, hidden somewhere in Albania, with no memories of who Harry really was to him. Tom as he was currently still wanted to murder Harry more than anything else.

Ah.

There was the answer.

The reason they hadn't gotten their memories back when Tom killed Harry's parents and tried to kill Harry as a baby was because Tom's soul was in tatters. Without a complete soul apparently their little memory trick didn't work.

Well, that meant Harry had to simply gather Tom's horcruxes and start stitching his soulmate back together.

And even though most of their lives they'd lived as Muggles, Harry had still been a wizard or witch enough times to have spent years and years studying soul magic, so he had a few ideas of how to go about fixing his soulmate.

The one thing that made it difficult right now was the fact that he was ten years old and lived with the fucking Dursleys.

Yeah, no, Harry wasn't staying with those assholes. He'd likely murder them in their sleep and feel no regret or remorse, especially considering what he'd gotten up to in the life before this one. He was doing the Dursleys a solid favour by running away from them as soon as possible.

But he was only just ten years old and his Hogwarts letter wouldn't come until next year. Which meant he needed to find magical accommodations where he could spend all his time working on putting his soulmate to rights. Everything else was irrelevant until he had Tom back with him.

It was funny, in a way, that the older they got, the more lives they lived together, the more co-dependent they became. Harry honestly didn't give a flying fuck about anything in the world except for his soulmate. That was, until he remembered in this lifetime Ron and Hermione and Ginny and the rest of the Weasleys and Neville and Luna and Sirius and Remus and Tonks and so many others were still alive.

Harry's breath caught in his throat. All the people he'd spent mourning for lifetimes, whose loss had messed him up for hundreds of years, were still alive in this world. Harry didn't even remember what any of them looked like, but the thought of them made his heart skip a few beats. That was until he remembered that his soulmate needed his help to regain his sanity and his body and that was more important than any lost friends and loved ones.

Just as Harry tried to decide whether to leave the hospital immediately or spend the night to get some rest and some food before taking off, the door to his room opened and a nurse wearing a bright blue uniform entered. Her name tag read 'Fiona'.

"Awake, I see," Fiona the nurse said cheerfully. "How are you feeling, Harry?"

"Alive," Harry said quietly, which was true enough.

"You were lucky indeed that your cousin found you after you hit your head coming out of that slide. You'd stopped breathing and the lifeguard had to perform CPR but he got you going again," Fiona the nurse babbled as she held a thermometer to his forehead and shone a light in his eyes to check his pupils.

Harry stared at her. "That's not what happened," he said bluntly, because he was too old to pretend child abuse in any way, shape or form was okay and could be ignored. "My cousin is a bully who likes to beat me up. This time he did it in a pool and accidentally drowned me. As far as I'm concerned he should face charges for second degree manslaughter, or whatever we're calling it in Britain, haven't been a copper here in a while. But I doubt dear Dudders will get so much as a slap on his wrist for his criminal behaviour."

Fiona gaped at him, clearly very confused about what Harry had just said. "Well...how about I see about getting you some dinner, all right?" And with that she all but fled from the room.

Harry sighed. He should really tone down his adult attitude when he was officially only ten. He couldn't express how grateful he was that in most lives he and Tom didn't get their memories back until they were young adults or late teens at the earliest. The times they did meet as children and were suddenly stuck with adult memories and ideas were difficult to say the least. More than once they'd pretended to be geniuses just to get away from the children around them because being an adult stuck with nothing but small children to socialize with for years got old quickly.

Fiona returned with a plate of mashed potatoes, mushy peas and a piece of deep-fried, battered fish, which Harry tucked into at once. He'd actually faced real starvation in several life-times. He'd never turn his nose up at a mediocre meal because calories were calories after all. After he finished his plate, Harry made use of the bathroom and opened the wardrobe. There he found a set of Dudley's best hand-me-downs, probably delivered by Petunia so he'd have something to wear once they released him from the hospital, most likely the next day.

But Harry wasn't waiting around that long. After he was dressed and got his shoes on, he inspected the room and looked for any useful items to take with him. He stuffed a towel down the waistband of his jeans. It could function as a blanket for the time being, or a makeshift pillow. Harry opened the door to the hospital room and peeked out into the hallway. It was evening and the nurses seemed busy. Harry waited until the hallway was clear before slipping out of his room and down the hall. He made a brief stop at the nurse's station where he scored two vests and a handful of small bills and loose change from a charity collection box that he cracked open with a pair of scissors. He kept the scissors as well, since they could easily function as a weapon and since he was a kid alone on the streets from now on he might need something to defend himself with.

Harry left the children's floor quietly and took the elevator down where he strolled across the entrance hall and out the door as if he didn't have a care in the world. He realized he was in the hospital in Dorking after reading some signs and that there would still be trains going to London. It was easier to hide in a city as big as London and Harry had business in Diagon Alley the following day. For now he was counting on the Dursleys' disinterest in his well-being to keep his disappearance from Mrs Figg for at least a day so that would give him twenty-four hours to get his shit together until Dumbledore unleashed the Order of the Phoenix to search for him. Not to mention what the Ministry would do should they learn he'd disappeared.

Harry walked towards the train station after getting directions from a friendly cabbie. It only took him half an hour to get there and on the way there he pickpocketed at least five people. He didn't even have to use wandless magic for that, since both he and Tom had perfected their pickpocketing skills many, many lifetimes ago. One never knew when such skills came in handy, as Harry's current situation proved. Once Harry removed all the cash from the wallets he got, he had just over three-hundred pounds and change. At the train station he bought a one-way ticket for the last train to London and pickpocketed another four people, netting him another two hundred pounds or so, before treating himself to a glass of orange juice and a slice of apple pie at a little café while he waited for the train to arrive.

The ride to London was uneventful, except that Harry liberated a few more wallets from their owners. He really couldn't care less at this point in his very, very long existence. Once, he would have been appalled at the idea of stealing from innocent people. Nowadays he merely thought people should look after their shit better if they didn't want it stolen. By the time he arrived in London he had about 800 pounds, which was a decent amount to get him started.

At King's Cross station, Harry used a wandless unlocking charm on a door to the maintenance section, deserted that time of evening, and slipped inside the first supply closet he found. It had taken lots of practise during a few lifetimes but Harry had become quite proficient at wandless magic. Though there were limits to what could be done without a wand and Harry's young physical age also worked against him, something as simple as an unlocking charm wasn't a problem.

Harry used the towel as a pillow and the two vests as blankets while he curled up in a corner of the supply closet for some much needed sleep. Tomorrow he'd go to Gringotts to exchange most of his Muggle money for galleons. He couldn't yet access his vault without a guardian present until he was eleven, he knew, so he'd have to make do with what he had.

What he needed most was a wand, but he couldn't go to Ollivander's for that. Thankfully Harry knew there were plenty of places in Knockturn Alley that sold second-hand wands and the match didn't have to be perfect for what Harry needed a wand for.

Then he needed to decide where to live for the next year until he could go to Hogwarts. If he went to Hogwarts, because that all depended on how he was doing with saving his soulmate from his own poor life-choices. Harry's best bet was probably just to find an abandoned cottage somewhere in the countryside and put it under a Fidelius. It didn't have to be perfect, since Harry could fix anything with magic.

Yes, he was planning on stealing a house from some unsuspecting muggle. Harry hadn't been lying when he said he didn't give a flying fuck about anyone other than Tom in worlds where they didn't have a family. Not anymore. Once upon a time he'd been naïve enough to think he should care about complete strangers, but that was before he'd lived almost two-hundred lifetimes and lived through some absolutely horrible times in history. Harry had seen first-hand what humanity was really capable of doing to their fellow man, everything from the transatlantic slave-trade to the holocaust. After that, Harry couldn't give two fucks about humanity anymore.

Harry fell asleep eventually and woke up again early the next morning from the sounds of the maintenance crew arriving. He slipped out of the hallway unseen and on his way out of the station he helped himself to some more wallets from some early morning travellers. Now he had well over 1200 pounds so that should hold him over for a few days. Once you knew how to pickpocket it really was like taking candy from a very small, completely defenceless child.

The walk towards Diagon Alley was uneventful and very few people paid Harry any attention. Harry bought a croissant and a small bottle of chocolate milk for breakfast from a corner store but that was the only distraction he allowed himself. He wanted to be in and out of there before he was reported missing in the wizarding world.

He marched through the Leaky Cauldron and used wandless magic to tap against the bricks in the correct places to open the gateway. Once inside the alley, Harry rushed towards the bank and got in line to have most of his money exchanged into Galleons. The goblin behind the counter barely looked at Harry, or mentioned his young age, while he gave Harry a money bag filled with gold coins. Once outside, Harry slipped inside Occasion Alley where one could usually find second-hand clothing shops. Harry found some items in his size and the clerk allowed him to change out of his oversized clothes. Harry also purchased a bag to stuff all his possessions into, including Dudley's hand-me-downs. One never knew what some extra fabric might come in handy for. But what Harry really needed was a black cloak, one with a hood he could pull over his eyes and hide his features as he walked down Knockturn Alley. He found it a few sizes too big in the second clothing store he visited, but the clerk shrunk it for him, no questions asked.

And thus Harry was ready to venture into Knockturn Alley. His first stop there was an apothecary, where he picked up all the ingredients for a huge batch of aging potion, plus a few other things that might prove to be useful. The owner didn't say a word as she rang him up and accepted his gold. That's what Harry loved about Knockturn Alley. Everybody minded their own business and didn't ask questions.

In a second hand shop that specialized in housewares and other practical items, Harry found a used potions set, cauldron included, that would serve him well enough. He picked up a few more items, some cookware, furniture and a bedframe, and some used linens that would see him through the first few weeks. The owner shrunk everything for him without much prompting, used to such requests.

Finally Harry made it to a curiosity shop he knew sold second-hand wands. The proprietor gave him a once over before offering Harry a sizable box filled with worn and chipped wands. Harry took his time holding each one until he found an ash wand with what he

thought was a phoenix feather core that had seen better days but that felt near perfect in his hand. Harry levitated a nearby vase and gave the proprietor a genuine smile. Three galleons later, Harry had his wand.

His last stop was a second-hand bookstore to pick up some history books. Harry wasn't sure if this world was the same one in which he'd lived before as Harry Potter. He didn't think so, because in his first life he was sure there wasn't a waterpark in Surrey, or at least the Dursleys had never gone there, with or without Harry. So this most likely was a whole new world, which meant that there were always events that happened differently and Harry didn't want to get caught unaware. Thus, he needed to research recent events to find any differences that he needed to be aware of.

As Harry strolled out of Knockturn Alley he considered where to go next. Where to find an abandoned cottage? And how was he going to find all the horcruxes once he got settled in somewhere?

At once two things connected in his mind and Harry knew exactly where he was going to set up camp, at least for the foreseeable future. After all, it was far more efficient to kill two garden gnomes with one spell.

Right outside the Leaky Cauldron there was a quiet side alley where he could apparate. Having a wand greatly helped Harry in gathering enough magic in his young body to apparate without splinching himself and a moment later he found himself standing in a familiar cemetery overlooking an old, abandoned manor house. For a moment Harry was tempted to move into Tom's father's old house until he remembered there was still a caretaker living on that property and Harry didn't want to deal with an old man and draw unnecessary attention to himself.

Nope, Harry was moving into Tom's mother's ancestral home.

It took a while to even find the Gaunt shack and by then Harry was tired and hungry and cursing himself for not picking up any lunch or dinner. But food would have to wait for a while because there was a very dangerous object Harry had to deal with first as he approached the overgrown cottage that had definitely seen better days. The slate roof looked like it was caving in on the south side and the window sills were rotten, not to mention the weather-beaten doors which completely lacked any kind of paint. The walls had once been white, but were now so overgrown with ivy Harry could barely see them.

Harry took a moment to study the wards, but they were fairly simple for a parselmouth. Tom had been arrogant enough to think he was the only one able to speak parseltongue left in the world. Harry was about to prove him wrong.

"I speak your tongue," Harry hissed in parseltongue to the charmed snake nailed to the door. The snake moved in place, staring at him with dead eyes before the door swung open. Harry cast a few more diagnostic charms, but there were no more surprises waiting for him.

Except for the very dark magic radiating from the ring hidden beneath the floorboards, of course.

Tom had told him ages and ages ago about what kind of magic exactly he'd used to make his horcruxes and what kind of curse he'd put on the ring. It was a nasty piece of work, as Dumbledore had once found out personally, but it was a singular curse, meaning that once it was spent the item was safe to handle with the curse gone unless reapplied. So all Harry had to do was trigger the curse. He aimed his wand at the open door and summoned the nearest rabbit. The poor thing came flying into the cottage, squeaking and thrashing in its invisible hold. Harry ignored it while he briefly stuck it to the wall. He summoned the ring after levitating the floorboards out of the way and used his wand to direct the cursed thing towards the rabbit. The moment it made contact, the rabbit released a high-pitched scream Harry didn't even know rabbits could make while its fur withered away at once and its exposed skin turned black and started to peel off. The ring dropped to the floor, curse spent, and Harry cast a quick bludgeoning hex at the rabbit's head to put it out of its misery. He levitated the small corpse outside the door and set it on fire, the only way to safely deal with cursed remains like that.

The ring gleamed in the little bit of sunlight that managed to filter through the dirt-stained windows.

"Hi, babe," Harry said as he picked up the ring, smiling now that he'd found at least one part of his soulmate. The ring felt warm in his hand and Harry liked to imagine this little piece of Tom's soul was happy to be found by his soulmate instead of sitting idly under some floorboards in a run-down shack.

Speaking of a shack, Harry slipped the ring around his thumb, which proved too big even for that digit, so instead he picked up a twig from the floor, transfigured it into a simple chain and hung the ring from it while he put on the necklace. Then he looked around the room with what he had to work with.

There was definitely a lot of work to be done to make the Gaunt cottage liveable. There were mushrooms growing out of the floorboards in one corner of the main room, for fuck's sake. Still, it wasn't the worst place Harry had ever lived in and he knew more than enough transfiguration and household charms to make the place into a cosy little cottage.

So Harry got to work. He scrubbed every surface inside the cottage clean with just about every cleaning charm he knew. He fixed broken windows, broken floorboards, broken doors and the broken roof. He stripped old, blistered paint away and polished the exposed wood. He transfigured a rock into a huge bottle of furniture oil and treated all that wood until it shone. All the many layers of dust were vanished and the old-fashioned enamelled sinks in the kitchen and small bathroom were scrubbed vigorously. Crooked kitchen cabinet doors were straightened and moss and vines were removed where they'd grown through a broken window.

A few hours later a very dirty and sweaty Harry stood in the middle of the cottage and took in all the work he'd managed so far. The cottage was unrecognizable. It smelled like furniture oil and fresh air instead of mould and rotten wood. Everything was clean and fixed and while it would never look completely new again, it now looked lived in instead of dilapidated. All in all, it was a place Harry was happy to call home for the foreseeable future.

The cottage had a main living room with a huge fireplace which also held the small open kitchen, a small adjacent bathroom with toilet, sink and basic shower stall, one bedroom on the ground floor that was the biggest one, and two more bedrooms on the second floor which both had slanted ceilings and weren't very big, but they would do fine for storage, which is what Harry planned to use them for.

By then Harry was starving and he cast a few quick cleaning charms on himself before walking into Little Hangleton. He'd been there before, at least in a different world, and where he knew there was a pizza restaurant was now a fish and chips shop. Harry didn't mind since he liked both, and he had an early dinner of greasy food. Afterwards he found a small Tesco and he stocked up on all sorts of food items he'd need to make it through the next couple of weeks. He'd have to charm one of his kitchen cabinets into a cold storage, but that shouldn't be a problem and this way he could keep milk and meat and eggs fresh.

By the time he made it back to the cottage and he got all his purchases put away, Harry was more than tired. He unshrunk all the furniture he'd bought and he barely managed to lay down on the couch before he fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

He dreamed.

Tom bought him from the auction block, whip marks still oozing blood down his back.

Tom told him those cigarettes he liked smoking would kill him, and when he was dying of lung cancer at the age of 49, Tom stepped into his hospital room, said 'I told you so' and walked out again.

Tom smiled at him and squeezed his hand with her smaller one when their son won Olympic gold with the British rowing team.

Tom told him they would get through this when Yellowstone blew and the super-volcanic eruption ruined crops all over the world and made it snow in July on the Croatian coast where they lived.

Tom was crying while giving Harry a huge smile as Harry clutched their child to her tired breast after she just gave birth.

Tom offered Harry a charred tarantula with a grin, knowing that eating those still freaked Harry out, even though it was perfectly good food for the native tribe they belonged to somewhere deep inside the Amazonian rainforest.

Tom slammed his fists down on the desk of the startled police officer after their teen daughter had been missing for a month and the police refused to take it seriously.

Tom had rarely looked so proud when they announced Harry's name as the winner of the Oscar for best original screenplay.

Tom held the camera and kept telling Harry to hold still while Harry bottle-fed two squirming orphaned baby grizzly bears that had been handed over to their wildlife sanctuary by the US Fish & Wildlife division.

Tom looked about as handsome as Harry had ever seen him as he stood on the bow of the longboat while they sailed from their homes in Sweden with their kin across the sea to find riches and spoils in mainland Europe.

Tom argued with Harry's parents that the only way they could leave Hungary and make it to the US was to pretend to be Italian because no one was allowing Jews in, no matter what was happening in Germany at that time.

Tom leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear that he loved Ilvermorny just as much as he loved Hogwarts on their last day attending it.

Harry woke with a gasp, sitting upright on the couch as the early morning sun streamed inside through the clean windows. He really needed to get some curtains. And a mattress. Harry rubbed his eyes and slowly got up while his mind whirled with memories of almost two-hundred lives. Harry's dreams were always random moments of his and Tom's many shared lives and it always made him miss Tom even more whenever they were apart. Harry held the ring in his hand while he shuffled to the bathroom and then to the kitchen. He fried some bacon and eggs and made a strong cup of tea, and while he enjoyed his breakfast he mentally made a to-do list for the day.

First things first, he needed to brew the aging potion. He needed to be able to go out as an adult. So far people had ignored Harry as a child doing fairly adult things, but he knew that wouldn't last and sooner or later someone would stick their unwanted nose in his business. Harry was a Potions master so brewing the aging potion wasn't difficult at all. He got the whole thing going and while it simmered for twenty minutes he got dressed. Then he got undressed again while he took a dose of the potion. It was fairly uncomfortable, to grow a foot or more in the span of a minute, but nothing Harry couldn't handle.

Once his body was done growing, Harry released a relieved sigh, glad to be an adult again. The potion worked for up to 30 hours, so as long as Harry took a dose every day he'd stay an adult without any problems. There was nothing in the ingredients of the potion that would cause problems in the long run so Harry could keep using it for the next year at least.

He enlarged his clothes and got dressed again. That was when he realized he didn't have glasses. Harry knew he'd had glasses in his first life, so was that a difference in this one? Harry peered out the window into the overgrown garden. His eyesight seemed a little fuzzy the further away he looked, so perhaps it couldn't hurt to brew an eye-correction potion and take it. He also needed to pick up a few items for the Fidelius charm, which was a priority.

Harry looked at his adult reflection in the bathroom mirror and charmed his green eyes brown and his black hair a dirty blond with a long fringe that covered his scar. He looked nothing like James Potter, and even less like what people expected a ten-year-old Harry Potter to look like so he felt safe to go to Diagon Alley.

He apparated first to Piccadilly Circus to withdraw some money from a few unsuspecting tourists, and then he popped over to Diagon Alley. On his way to Gringotts to exchange more money, Harry noticed quite a few red-robed Aurors stopping people to question them.

“Excuse me, Sir,” Robbarts said while he stepped in front of Harry, who remembered working with the man for years during his first life. “Have you seen this child?” Robbarts showed him a very poorly done sketch of what was pretty much a James Potter miniature and actually looked very little like Harry. There was a rudely drawn scar smack dab in the middle of the forehead and a pair of round glasses that this Harry had never worn. It amused Harry to no end that apparently they hadn’t been able to find an actual picture of Harry. The Dursleys certainly had never wasted any film on him.

“No, haven’t seen him,” Harry said honestly as he gave Robbarts an inquisitive look. “Who is he?”

“That’s Harry Potter, Sir. He’s been missing since yesterday.”

“No,” Harry said, feigning shock. “Harry Potter is missing? Whatever happened?”

“Can’t tell you that, Sir,” Robbarts said with a firm look. “Just that he’s gone missing from where he lived.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for him, Auror,” Harry said as he took one more look at the ridiculous sketch. “I hope he’s all right and that you find him soon.” And with that, Harry moved away from the Auror and continued his trek to Gringotts. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mad-Eye Moody and Hestia Jones walking on either side of the alley.

Well then, it looked like Dumbledore had sent out his dogs of war to look for his lost little sacrificial lamb.

Dumbledore could eat shit and die while his minions looked for the Boy Who Lived one too many times.

Harry wasn’t about to be caught.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

For a hot second Harry was tempted to approach Moody and Jones and offer his services to the Order of the Phoenix to help them search for poor little lost Harry Potter, if only because it would be hilarious to see them all running around in a panic looking for him while Dumbledore had to explain away things like the fact there were no pictures of Harry or why he'd slept in a cupboard. Harry assumed the Ministry had thoroughly searched the Dursleys' house by now and found out about that dirty little secret.

But no, as fucking funny as it would be to see those events unfold first-hand, Harry knew his priorities were getting his soulmate back, not antagonize Dumbledore and his order of the headless fried chicken.

Inside Gringotts, Harry exchanged his newly acquired muggle pounds into more Galleons and then asked to open an account.

"Follow Clawhammer," the goblin behind the counter grumbled, barely taking notice of Harry as he waved him to the side.

Harry followed a short, stocky goblin to the private meeting rooms in the back, and he was almost sure this goblin was a female, but honestly, it was very difficult to tell without literally undressing them and checking what sat between their legs. And only a person with a death wish would try such a thing with any goblin.

"Name?" Clawhammer asked once they were seated around an ornate desk.

"Jack Bird," Harry said with practiced ease while adding just the slightest bit of American twang to his accent. It had been his real name in life number 2 and since then it was an alias Harry used whenever he needed an alias. It was short, easy to remember yet easy to forget, it had been Harry's actual name so he naturally responded to it, and most importantly, it had no association at all with Harry Potter for anyone save for Harry and Tom. While taking a shower early that morning Harry had come up with a simple background for his adult persona.

Jack Bird had a British muggle mother and an American muggleborn father. His parents were too poor to send him to either Hogwarts or Ilvermorny so Jack had been home-schooled and thanks to piles of cheap, second-hand books, he'd been mostly self-taught. He was a talented, powerful wizard who was able to teach himself pretty much anything. After his parents had died in a car crash in the States, Jack had decided to settle in Britain to get to know his mother's country of origin since he'd spent most of his younger years in the States.

It gave Harry a plausible background that was difficult to check in detail. And Harry didn't plan on drawing much attention to himself other than establishing an identity so he could move money around and receive mail and other simple things like that.

“What sort of protections do you want?” Clawhammer asked him as she scribbled on a piece of parchment. “Key, blood or dragon? Or all of the above?”

“Key and blood will do,” Harry said with a polite smile. Having a vault guarded by their dragon was bloody expensive and overkill for simply guarding some gold. But only a fool would use only the key protection. That meant that anyone with your key could enter your vault without verification of their identity. And Harry wasn’t a fool.

“Three drops on the key.” Clawhammer slid a small golden key towards him, and Harry pricked the tip of his finger with a silent spell and squeezed three drops of blood onto the key. It glowed and Clawhammer gave a satisfied nod. “That is your key, verified to your blood and magic. Don’t lose it since it will cost twenty Galleons to replace it.”

Harry slid the key in his pocket.

“Opening the account costs thirty Galleons and the minimum first deposit is ten Galleons. After that it costs ten Galleons a year to keep the vault. If you want to receive quarterly vault statements it will cost five Galleons per year.”

“I’ll take the statements,” Harry said as he counted out the required amounts of Galleons. He made his first deposit a hundred Galleons, wanting to have a little bit of savings in case he needed money quickly. With the current exchange rate a hundred Galleons was around five-hundred pounds, enough for Harry to live off in terms of food for up to six months or more if need be. But Harry already had plans to make more money legitimately in the Muggle world and direct that into his wizarding vault. Plenty of muggleborn wizards and witches, not to mention squibs, had jobs in the muggle world but deposited most of their salary in Gringotts so they could buy magical items and live in the wizarding world. No one would raise an eyebrow at Harry doing the same.

“Sign this,” Clawhammer said as she offered him the parchment and a self-inking quill. Harry did so, using his authentic Jack Bird autograph he’d used in life number 2, since he knew that by heart. Clawhammer copied the parchment with a snap of her fingers and gave him the copy. “We’re done.”

And with that Harry had his own Gringotts vault, number 823 to be exact. He nodded his thanks at Clawhammer and left the meeting room.

Just ahead of him, Narcissa Malfoy walked out of another private meeting room and at once a plan formed in Harry’s head to get his hand on one, probably two, horcruxes. This was an opportunity he couldn’t pass up and Harry sprang into action at once. Thankfully he’d always been good at thinking on his feet.

Pretending to be absorbed by the contract in his hand, Harry lengthened his strides and walked right into Narcissa’s back, pushing her to the ground. Simultaneously, Harry slid his wand out very briefly and cast an imperius curse silently. The shock of her fall made it so Narcissa wouldn’t notice magic had just been applied to her and before she could even look up Harry had already tucked his wand away again.

“Oh, I am ever so sorry, Ma’am,” Harry said, laying on his American accent a little bit more. “I am such a klutz, not looking where I was going and running straight into a beautiful lady such as yourself. I do sincerely apologize, Ma’am.”

Narcissa looked him over once and in seconds she judged him as only a rich pureblood lady could judge someone. Harry knew exactly what she saw: second-hand robes that were obviously enlarged, scuffed muggle-made shoes, a foreign accent. Yeah, Narcissa judged and the outcome wasn’t favourably for Harry, which suited him just fine.

“Here, let me help you up, Ma’am,” Harry said, trying to grab Narcissa’s arm but she pulled it out of his reach at once.

“You’ve done more than enough already,” Narcissa said with a sneer as she narrowed her eyes at him. She got up surprisingly quickly without any help.

A goblin who entered the hallway looked them both up and down. “Is everything all right in here or do I need to call security?”

“Everything’s fine,” Harry said with a helpless shrug and a winning smile. “Just me bumping into this here lady. My bad.”

Narcissa sniffed and brushed non-visible dirt from her skirts. “Other than your poor taste in new clientele, everything is indeed fine.” Without looking back at Harry, she strode out the hallway with her head held high.

Harry offered the goblin a knowing smile and left the private area, immensely pleased he had Narcissa under the imperius and she didn’t even realize it. Harry’s imperius had always been very strong yet very subtle. And Harry found that as long as he gave people commands close to what they might do on their own accord hardly anyone would fight such commands very hard. Harry had an idea on how to go about getting Narcissa to hand over not one, but two horcruxes, but before he gave her any commands he had to check a few things. It didn’t matter. The curse connected them now and Harry could control her at any time he wanted to.

Outside the bank Harry spotted the post office and decided to make that his next stop in setting up his new identity. He opened up a post box in Jack Bird’s name, which would redirect all his mail to the post office where it would be scanned for curses and such before being delivered to him through a pair of enchanted boxes, one stationed at the post office and the other at Harry’s home, much like vanishing cabinets worked. These kind of post boxes were most often used by businesses who didn’t want to deal with owls flying in and out all day, but private individuals could also use them as long as they paid twenty galleons a year to rent the box. Harry did and shrunk his box and stuffed it in his pocket before moving on to his next order of business.

Harry strode into the Daily Prophet office with a charming smile on his face. “Hi there,” he said to the young witch behind the reception desk. “I’m looking to sign up to your fine newspaper. You know,” he said as he stared deeply into the blushing witch’s eyes. “Your shawl really brings out the blue of your eyes, anyone ever tell you that?”

“No,” the witch said with a soft giggle, and Harry leaned against the reception desk as he gave her his most charming smile. Harry knew exactly how to charm anyone if he put his mind to it. He had been a professional con-man in more than one lifetime, after all.

“Well, the people in Britain must be blind if they’ve never told you how pretty your eyes are.” Harry held out his hand. “Jack Bird’s the name, and I would be more than honoured if you’d tell me yours.”

“Agnes,” Agnes said while she shook Harry’s hand with another giggle. “Agnes Butters.”

“It is truly a pleasure to meet you, Agnes,” Harry said with a wink, which turned poor Agnes beet-red. “Say, my great-aunt back in the States told me about an old friend she had in her younger years here in Britain and she was wondering if she was still alive. Her name’s Druella Rosier. Married a fellow named Black, I believe. Do you have a registry here where I can check obituaries or something?”

Agnes’ face fell and she offered Harry a sad smile. “Druella Black nee Rosier died last year,” she said softly. “I always read the obituaries and I never forget a name. Especially not from someone like her. She had quite the elaborate funeral. Rita Skeeter even wrote a small piece about it.”

“Well, I am truly sorry to hear that,” Harry said with a solemn nod. “My great-aunt it going to be disappointed, but such is life, isn’t it? Say, how about you help me get a subscription, Agnes?”

And Agnes was more than happy to hook him up with just that. Harry didn’t care much for the Daily Prophet but it was Britain’s most important magical newspaper so if he wanted to keep up with what was happening in the wizarding world Harry had little choice but to read it. Though he did make a mental note to also sign up for the Quibbler, just for fun.

After he bid a flustered Agnes a charming goodbye, Harry left with a smile and made his way to Madam Malkin’s. There he ordered two sets of decent wizarding robes in his adult size that would allow him to make a better first impression than the second hand clothes he was wearing now. Harry kept one of the robes on while he left the store and headed to Occasion Alley to buy more second hand clothes for his adult frame, just stuff to wear around the house or while out gardening or talking a walk around the countryside. No need to buy expensive, brand new clothing for that purpose. After that he headed back to the apothecary in Knockturn Alley, whose prices were slightly better than the one in Diagon Alley, and he stocked up on all common potions ingredients he would need to make more aging potion (Harry wanted at least a three month supply), to brew the eye correction potion to fix the slight fuzziness in his vision and a handful of first-aid potions he liked to keep on hand, just in case. Things like blood-replenishing potions, bruise balms, burn salves, essence of dittany, and a few more like that. You never knew when you’d need a potion like that, and when you did you never had time to brew them, so Harry liked to stock up.

After handing over a substantial pile of Galleons to a very happy owner of the apothecary Harry had enough ingredients to start stocking his own potions lab and he realized he might as well set up one of the spare bedrooms upstairs as a dedicated brewing space.

Harry had one last thing to buy before heading to the Ministry. He needed an owl. He knew that in his first life as Harry Potter he'd had a beautiful snowy owl named Hedwig, who he'd lost during the war. Harry had loved Hedwig, but thinking about her now did very little to him in terms of feelings of loss. Harry had so many beloved pets over the years, including at least a few dozen owls in his lives as a witch or wizard, not to mention the hundreds, if not thousands, of dogs he'd had over his many lifetimes, that remembering one pet, no matter how precious she'd once been to him, wasn't even a drop in the emotional bucket of beloved pets he'd lost.

During life number 2, after a two-year-marriage that ended in divorce because his wife was convinced he was cheating on her (Harry wasn't, he just spent a lot of free time desperately seeking for signs of the wizarding world all over Britain, to find ways to get his lost family back but never finding any evidence the wizarding world even existed in that universe), Harry bought his first dog. A German shepherd puppy from a puppy mill. Harry was clueless about such things but he quickly learned not to buy such dogs again. At any rate, he'd loved his dog so much he got a second one, this time a Staffordshire bull terrier he adopted from Battersea Dogs and Cats Home. His sweet, loyal girls had started an obsession with dogs that followed Harry through every lifetime. Whenever it was practical to have a dog, Harry had a dog. Or two. Or three.

Tom liked to complain about this, while not so secretly also loving dogs. Especially golden retrievers. In life number 2 for Tom his parents had shown and bred golden retrievers and Tom had grown up with them and ever since then preferred them over any other breed.

Harry still adored German shepherds but over their many lifetimes they'd owned just about any dog-breed that had ever existed and a few that had gone extinct over the centuries. Not to mention the many, many wonderful mutts they'd shared their lives with. Harry wasn't picky and even in his current situation he was tempted to book it to the nearest shelter and adopt a furry friend. But he wasn't sure if he would be going to Hogwarts in a year so he couldn't commit to having a dog at that time. Unfortunately.

Still, Harry did need an owl, if only to be able to send mail and perhaps to have a feathered companion. Some owls were more sociable than others but it was hard to predict how they'd turn out when buying one.

Harry glanced around the owl shop but saw no snowy owls available. Not surprising since in his first life he hadn't gotten Hedwig until a year later. Harry settled on a pretty yet unremarkable barn owl. They were so common in Britain, both in the wild and as post owls, that they afforded one a great deal of anonymity when sending mail.

"Your name is Pluto," Harry whispered to his new owl as he carried the cage outside. "Not for the Disney dog, no matter what Tom might one day claim, but after the non-planet."

The newly-named Pluto blinked large, slightly confused eyes at him.

"I'm going to set you free since I need to make a quick trip to the Ministry. Fly to the Gaunt Cottage in Little Hangleton, that's where I'm staying." Harry smiled at his new owl as he unlocked the door and watched him take off towards the north. He shrunk the cage and stored

it in his bag with his other purchases. Then he apparated to just outside the visitor's entrance for the Ministry of Magic.

"My name is Jack Bird. I'm here to get an apparition license and to sign up for OWLs and NEWTs," Harry told the automated voice after pressing the right numbers inside the phone booth.

A name tag appeared with 'Jack Bird, Department of Transportation and Department of Education' printed on it. Harry pinned it to his robes as the phone booth took him down.

"This wand is registered to a dead person," the wizard at the security desk told him as he examined Harry's ash wand.

"An heirloom. I had a perfect wand from Tatanka Wand Makers in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, I'm sure you've heard of them, an intelligent fellow like yourself," Harry said with a crooked smile. The security wizard stared at him with a blank, uncomprehending look. "But I broke it in a duel just a few months ago. I was competing in the South Carolina state duelling championship but some punk blew up my wand in the second round, can you believe that? Anyway, now I'm using an old family wand until I can make my way back to Sioux Falls for a new one."

The security wizard remained silent for a few moments as he obviously needed some time to take in Harry's Americanism. "I'll be registering this wand to you then, shall I? Your name, Sir."

"Jack Bird, and my thanks is both sincere and enormous." And Harry wasn't lying about that. Having an officially registered wand at the ministry added more legitimacy to his identity as Jack Bird. That was also the reason he was signing up for his OWLs and NEWTs. With official exams in his name Harry could be Jack Bird for the rest of his life if need be. Harry Potter need never resurface if Harry didn't want him to, and boy was it tempting to do that. But Harry wasn't sure yet what the future would bring so he kept his options open for now.

One short trip to the Department of Transportation later, Harry had his apparition license. On his way to the Department of Education, Harry heard raised voices. He quickly turned his back and pretended to read his newly acquired license while Dumbledore, Fudge, Umbridge and Amelia Bones rounded a corner and marched towards him.

"It was never your place to assign the boy's guardians, Dumbledore," Fudge said in a furious tone of voice, his cheeks red with obvious anger.

"They were his only living relatives, Cornelius," Dumbledore said with a far too reasonable smile.

"You should have at least checked up on him," Amelia Bones said. Even she sounded quite cross.

"Perhaps I should have, and I'll have a stern talk with the Dursleys once we get Harry back to his family," Dumbledore said as if he wasn't just condemning a little boy to go back to his abusers.

Even Umbridge seemed taken aback by that. “They were keeping the boy in a closet.”

Was Umbridge defending him? What the fuck? In Harry’s memories she was a horrible monster of a witch who thrived on causing others misery. Was Harry misremembering things?

“After the boy is found he needs to be placed in a ministry-approved family who will teach him proper wizarding values,” Umbridge said to a very unimpressed looking Dumbledore.

And there it was, there was the Umbridge Harry remembered. His skin crawled as they passed him by and he made an extra strong vow to himself to not get caught because he did not want to find out what type of family Umbridge would think suitable for a small child.

“Quite right, quite right,” Fudge said with a firm nod. “From now on the ministry will take over the care of Harry Potter.”

“Now, now, Cornelius,” Dumbledore said, but they rounded the next corner and Harry couldn’t make out anymore words that were spoken. He released a deep breath and continued his way to the Department of Education.

“All of them,” Harry said when the young witch with a nametag that read ‘Ellen Foster’ asked him for which subjects he wanted to sign up.

“All of them?” Ellen asked with a slow blink of her large brown eyes. “For both your OWLs and NEWTs?”

“Yep,” Harry said, leaning sideways against the desk. “All of them.”

“It’s five Galleons per subject so that would come to twelve subjects times two is one hundred and twenty Galleons,” Ellen said.

Harry blinked. Damn. He wasn’t even sure he still had that many Galleons on him. He had gone a little overboard in the apothecary after all. “All right, let’s drop some things like history, divination and muggle studies and see where that gets us.”

Ellen’s smile communicated very clearly that she wasn’t surprised in the slightest by Harry’s change of mind. In the end Harry signed up for both OWLs and NEWTs in Defence, Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Herbology, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Care of Magical Creatures. That cost him a total of eighty Galleons, which he thankfully still had in his money pouch. Ellen accepted them while Harry filled out the forms and with two signatures Jack Bird was registered to take the exams in December. The ministry only offered them in June and December for those who were home-schooled, students who had failed one or more exams at Hogwarts, or those who wanted to take additional subjects years after they’d already left school. This gave Harry plenty of time to read through the appropriate course books. He knew all those subjects by heart after having lived many lives as a wizard or witch, but it was easy to forget small details or certain parts of magical theories that might appear on an exam. So at the very least Harry would read some books to brush up on his theoretical knowledge.

After leaving the ministry Harry stopped at a muggle pub for some well-deserved lunch consisting of an excellent mushroom and chicken pie and a large pint of Guinness. Harry wasn't a big drinker, having been an alcoholic in more than one lifetime and nowadays always being careful how much he consumed, but it was a hot day and Harry got lots done so he'd earned a pint. After finishing his meal Harry dropped by Marks & Spencer's where he bought some underwear, socks and t-shirts. For some reason those were always cheaper in the muggle world. Apparently producing basic clothing in sweat shops was cheaper than charming them together with magic. Who knew? He also got two pairs of jeans and a grey muggle suit with a light-blue shirt and dark-blue tie. He added some black dress-shoes and kept the suit on as he walked towards the financial district.

He pickpocketed a few more people, just because he could, but it wasn't a sustainable way to earn a living. There was always the chance of being caught. Harry could simply obliviate any muggles who did catch him in the act, but that might draw the attention of the ministry, that there was a wizard going around robbing muggles and obliterating them after, and Harry really didn't need that kind of attention.

Thankfully, over their many lifetimes, Harry and Tom had transformed making money into an art-form. The easiest way to make legal money was to market a product that would sell well and investing some of those earnings into the stock market. Of course, putting money in stocks came with risks, even though Harry and Tom had plenty of knowledge which businesses should be successful and which shouldn't.

But there were variations between worlds and that translated equally to the stock market. Harry well remembered one life when they had invested fifty thousand dollars into a little start-up company named Facebook, thinking they'd make a lot of easy millions in a few years, only for Facebook to go bankrupt within a year while Myspace became the world's most popular social media platform.

Yeah, Harry still wasn't sure what the fuck happened there, but it did happen and it was a good lesson to learn about the risks of investing in different worlds.

They had invented plenty of products over their lifetimes, suitable for all manner of centuries and decades. Not to mention they had no problems stealing other people's ideas across different worlds. Sure, he and Tom hadn't ever invented a steam engine themselves at any point, but whenever they lived during the Victorian era they marketed the crap out of those things while taking all the credit and earning all the cash.

It was 1990, and that meant that soon mobile phones would become big. Also, renewable energy once the muggles got their heads out of their arses concerning climate change. Harry also had an arsenal in new types of filters on offer, to be used in things like cars, vacuum cleaners and air conditioners. Combine that with a new type of battery for mobile phones and a new type of efficient solar panel, and Harry would make plenty of money over the years to come. And once those products had their run Harry could sell other, more modern products to keep the cash flow going.

Harry stopped in front of a huge building owned by Mahatma Khan's investment company. Harry had worked with a version of the man in a different life when Harry had been the CEO of a small start-up company Khan had invested in. Together they'd made billions over the

years, and Harry had come to know Khan as a straight-forward, cut-throat but reasonable business man and he'd be happy to do business with him again.

A few imperius curses later Harry entered Khan's office. Yes, he could charm his way inside but honestly, he had other things to do with his time so imperius curse it was. That's why he also put Khan under the imperius, because it was the most efficient way to do business. And he wasn't there to rip the man off. Harry's inventions would earn the man millions over the coming years.

"I've got four designs for you to sell. We'll split 60/40, have your people draw up a contract. Have a computer with a decent graphics program available for me tomorrow, so I can draw up the designs."

Khan gave him a wide grin. "I'm going to enjoy doing business with you, Mr Bird."

"Likewise," Harry said, and left Khan to it, planning to come back tomorrow to sign the contract and create the designs Khan could license. Harry was sure Khan was already on the phone with Nokia for the new phone battery.

For now Harry needed to establish an identity in the muggle world.

Harry popped into the HM Revenue and Customs offices and a few imperius curses later Jack Bird had a tax I.D. and was a legal citizen of the UK. Yes, Harry planned to pay taxes as Jack Bird. If there was one thing he'd learned during his long lives, it was 'don't mess with the IRS'. Or any other tax collection agency, depending on the country they lived in. Seriously, one very easy way to fuck up your entire life was to be a cheapskate who refused to pay taxes. Sooner or later, they'd catch up with you and your life would never be the same again.

In one earlier life Harry's older brother had been such a cheapskate, who ran a successful small business while thinking he owed the IRS nothing. The IRS firmly disagreed, and so did an eventual judge and jury, and Harry's brother got to spend ten years in prison for his idiotic behaviour. That had been a lesson well-learned for both Harry and Tom and ever since then they paid their taxes, end of story.

Harry briefly stopped by a post office to set up a PO box so he could receive muggle mail and finally he popped into an office of Lloyd's to open a muggle bank account so he could receive all the muggle money he'd soon be making. He deposited five hundred pounds into the account so he had a little bit of savings squared away in the muggle world as well.

And then he was done establishing his identity as Jack Bird in both the wizarding and muggle world, at least for now.

It was time to give Narcissa her first command because Harry was determined to get his hands on the diary as soon as possible. Harry walked towards King's Cross station while he gave Narcissa the gentle but firm mental command to bring the diary to him at the station's busy entrance hall. Harry choose that location because it was crowded with muggles so easy to not be noticed while it was also a location Narcissa knew and thus could apparate to. Harry made sure to give Narcissa the command not to tell Lucius anything, but apparently Lucius was away on business in France for a few days so that made everything even easier.

Harry bought a can of Fanta, a mars bar and a muggle newspaper and found an empty bench to sit on while he enjoyed his treats and read his paper while he waited for Narcissa. She appeared fifteen minutes later, looking perfectly composed in her silver robes surrounded by dozens and dozens of muggles.

“Thank you, Narcissa,” Harry said the moment she handed him the diary. Harry tucked it away in his bag immediately, not wanting anyone to see what he’d just received. One couldn’t be too careful. He quickly obliterated any knowledge Narcissa had of the diary’s new location from her mind. “Isn’t it a shame that your oldest sister has inherited all your mother’s jewellery?” Harry asked Narcissa while silently giving her a few mental commands.

This was how he planned to get his hands on the cup in the Lestrangle vault. Harry had no intention of robbing Gringotts again. Goblins were vindictive little bastards and in his first life, even after paying a very hefty sum for the damages he’d caused, Harry had never been on good footing with the goblin community again for the rest of his life. He was always addressed as ‘Thief’ whenever he had business in the bank. It got so ridiculous that eventually Ginny had done all their banking business. Harry had learned that stealing from goblins was just as idiotic as not paying your muggle taxes, so he avoided it ever since.

Thankfully, having Narcissa at his disposal gave him a chance to have someone legally enter Bellatrix’s vault. That’s why Harry made sure Druella Black nee Rosier, Narcissa’s mother, had passed away already. It was custom in pureblood circles for the oldest daughter to inherit all their mother’s jewellery. It would be automatically sent to Bellatrix’s vault upon Druella’s death. And while Narcissa might have received a few small heirlooms to remember her mother by, the lion’s share would have gone to Bellatrix, no matter she was stuck in Azkaban for life.

“I suggest you have a solicitor draw up a legal agreement to give you right of access to Bella’s vault,” Harry whispered to Narcissa meanwhile confirming his commands mentally, and adding a few more details to it. “Then visit Bella in Azkaban and have her sign the agreement.” Harry was sure Narcissa was clever and cunning enough to convince Bella to sign one way or the other. “And then you can enter her vault and take your mother’s jewellery home so it can be worn instead of rotting away in a goblin vault.” And you can take Hufflepuff’s cup and bring it to me, Harry added silently.

“Yes, I will do that,” Narcissa quietly agreed, eyes vacant. Harry smiled at her, patted her on the arm and sent her on her way. He’d have the cup within the week, he was sure.

Exhausted, Harry apparated home where he fell down on his couch with a weary sigh.

He had the ring, he had the diary, the cup was soon to follow. Now he needed the diadem, which was at Hogwarts. It was the second week of August so that meant the school was still deserted. Not the best time to sneak inside since any person intruding the wards would stand out with only a few staff members occupying the castle. Best to wait until after September first, when the castle would be crawling with students and one extra magical signature wouldn’t stand out.

That left the locket, which was currently hidden at Grimmauld Place, under Kreacher’s watchful eye.

Harry rubbed his hands across his face and got up to drink a glass of water and make a cup of tea. He was parched, having run around London all day.

How to get the locket while drawing the least amount of attention to himself? Harry could ask Kreacher, but Kreacher was a fickle elf, cranky as can be, and he might very well decide a half-blood like Harry Potter or Jack Bird, depending on which persona Harry showed the elf, wasn't worthy of finishing Master Regulus' noble task of destroying the locket. Besides, as far as Harry knew, Arcturus Black, the family patriarch and Sirius' grandfather was still alive and was ultimately in control of Kreacher. Who knew what kind of commands he'd given Kreacher about reporting any and all visitors to Grimmauld Place to him personally. It's what Harry would do in his situation, and the last thing Harry wanted was to draw the attention of someone like Arcturus Black while he was asking his house-elf for a piece of Voldemort's soul.

The easiest way to get the locket without undue attention was probably to free Sirius. It was something Harry wanted to do anyway, since his godfather didn't deserve to be locked up in Azkaban. And the easiest way to accomplish Sirius' freedom was to get his hands on Wormtail and hand him over to the Ministry.

After liberating Tom's wand from the rat, of course.

Currently, Wormtail was masquerading as Scabbers, Percy Weasley's pet rat. And at that moment, Percy was at the Burrow. And yeah, Harry wasn't stupid enough to go to the burrow to possibly harass or assault Percy to get his pet while he was under the protection of Molly Weasley.

Harry had seen his former mother-in-law turn Bellatrix Lestrange into minced meat in a one-on-one duel and since that time Harry had sworn never to underestimate Molly, especially when she was defending her brood. Harry thought he might be able to beat Molly, since he was a world champion duellist in at least two lifetimes, not to mention he could go toe to toe with Tom in a duel, having learned all the man's tricks, but he wasn't actually sure if he'd win from Molly. So he'd be crazy to go to the Burrow. He'd wait until after September first, when Percy was at Hogwarts and Harry needed to be there to get the diadem anyway.

That meant that for the coming days, Harry had no pressing things to take care of.

Except get a mattress, Harry remembered as he walked into this bedroom to put away his clothes. In a non-existent wardrobe.

Harry sighed. He really wanted to sit down and relax for an hour, but he was absolute shit at transfiguring mattresses and he wanted a good night's sleep. The previous day, Harry had dumped out all the furniture that had been left in the cottage outside since all of it was beyond saving even with magic, and Harry planned to use them to create garden beds after he cleaned up the yard. That was pretty much all they were good for.

With another, deeper sigh, Harry got up and apparated to York, the nearest city. There he got directions to a mattress store and a furniture store from a friendly clerk at a bakery, where he also picked up a few pastries for dinner, because why not?

Once he reached the mattress store Harry was so done with the day, he simply disillusioned himself, shrunk the first mattress he found that seemed comfortable and fit his bedframe and stuck it in the pocket of his suit jacket. He picked up a duvet set and pillows in a similar fashion. In the furniture store a few streets away he did the same thing with an oak wardrobe and matching nightstands and dresser. There, furniture problem solved.

Harry had once been a Norseman who pillaged his way across Europe. Stealing a few pieces of furniture right from under the muggles' noses meant nothing to him.

Once back home Harry unshrunk his spoils and arranged everything in his bedroom. He gave all his clothes, new and second-hand a once-over with a washing charm before drying them and hanging them in his new wardrobe onto some quickly transfigured clothes hangers. Thankfully his yard was so overgrown Harry didn't lack any spare wood to use for transfiguring any small items he needed, and he had a mastery in transfiguration so he had no problem creating whatever he needed.

As long as it wasn't a mattress.

After everything was put away and his bedroom actually resembled a cosy place for relaxation and sleeping, Harry went back into the living room to munch on his pastries while he placed the diary on the small coffee table in front of the couch. The diary thrummed in his hand while he touched it.

"Hi, babe," Harry said to the diary, stroking the leather cover. "I'm sorry I can't let you out just yet, Tom."

And he couldn't. Harry had briefly contemplated just giving the diary to a criminal of some sort, let them write in it until teenage Tom had enough energy to regain a body. Except Harry was quite sure teenage Tom wouldn't remember him as his soulmate, wouldn't have enough of a soul to trigger his memories of their shared lives.

And then Harry would be stuck with a suspicious teenage Tom who most certainly wouldn't believe a word Harry told him since the story of their shared lives was too difficult to believe even on a good day. And then teenage Tom would sneak out unless Harry locked him up, and Harry would be busy trying to persuade teenage Tom to come back home while teenage Tom would probably suspect Harry was some kind of pervert who wanted to touch him in his no-no-places.

Which, okay, yes, Harry did want to touch Tom in those kind of places, had touched him there many, many times before, but he only wanted to do that with Tom's full consent, naturally.

Anyway, no matter how Harry turned the idea of unleashing teenage Tom around in his mind, it never ended well in his imagination. No, best to let the diary be until he could get his hands on Tom's main soul piece, or what was left of him, that was currently floating around Albania as a wraith and then combine all horcruxes in one fell swoop.

Harry placed the diary in his nightstand and called it an early night, enjoyed his new mattress and duvet immensely, and he woke up refreshed the next morning. He had breakfast, a nice,

hot shower, dressed in some comfy clothes and set to applying the Fidelius charm.

He found Pluto roosting in a large oak tree outside and wanted to smack himself for having forgotten all about his new owl. In apology, Harry transfigured Pluto a very nice perch with different levels out of some broken off branches and invited his new owl to roost inside the house. Pluto accepted after giving Harry a few long looks. Harry filled his water bowl and gently scratched Pluto's feathery head before letting him sleep.

The Fidelius charm, before Harry and Tom improved it, required the caster and the secret-keeper to be two different people. This explained why Dumbledore, who had cast the difficult charm on his parents' home, hadn't been the secret-keeper himself. The subject of the charm also couldn't be the secret-keeper, which explained why neither James or Lily had carried the secret in their souls and required outside help.

But Tom and Harry had perfected the charm over a few lifetimes and Harry could be the secret-keeper even while casting the charm. Besides, he didn't want to personally be the subject of the charms, like his parents had been, but he wanted to put the Gaunt shack under it so no one could find the house or see it when passing by. Harry himself wanted to remain available, so he could interact with the world whenever venturing beyond his new home's borders.

Casting the charm took about two hours' worth of preparation and chanting. Inscribing the corners of the property with some runes, setting up some strategic, magically-charged candles, and walking around and around his property while chanting the same Latin over and over again while moving his wand in specific patterns. It wasn't an easy charm by any means and it left Harry exhausted, but it worked just as he knew it would. Harry had cast it plenty of times before.

Now Harry had a truly private, safe place to live that only he, and Pluto once Harry told him the secret, had access to. For now. Eventually Tom, of course, would be told the secret as well, but Harry had no intention of inviting just anyone into his home.

Maybe Sirius, depending on how well Sirius took to Harry's new identity. Harry wasn't sure yet how much to tell Sirius. Perhaps he should tell him the truth about everything, or perhaps he should only introduce Jack Bird to him. Harry wouldn't know for sure until he met Sirius and could assess his mental state for himself. Harry had a doctorate in both psychology and psychiatry. He was confident he could make a reasonable assessment of his godfather's mind.

For the next few days, while Harry patiently waited for September first to come around, Harry spent his mornings in Mahatma Khan's offices, creating the designs Khan would license for them. He signed the contracts, answered any questions Khan had about the properties of the new products, and then let Khan do his thing in finding businesses who'd be interested in their products.

The evenings Harry spent in the spare bedroom he slowly changed into a potions lab. He transfigured shelves and a sturdy work table and started on brewing all the potions he needed. He never would have thought that one day he'd genuinely enjoy brewing potions but apparently, if one lived long enough, one could learn to enjoy anything.

In the afternoon Harry spent hours clearing the garden. He chopped down trees, leaving only the ones around the perimeter of his property, so he had space to create garden beds. Harry had faced starvation a few times, had seen his children and family and Tom slowly starve to death because of bad weather or wars or both. Nowadays, Harry and Tom always made sure to grow at least some fruits and vegetables whenever they had the space to do so. Having at least some supply of his own food eased some of the anxiety Harry always felt about having enough food ever since starving to death. Not to mention Harry genuinely enjoyed gardening. He found it an excellent stress-relief, to putter around plants and get his hands dirty in the soil while enjoying some sunshine.

He contemplated getting some chickens as well, and found a small advertisement on the notice board in the local Tesco, where someone offered three laying hens plus a small coop for sale. Harry picked those up at once and now he could turn his kitchen scraps and garden waste into lovely eggs to eat.

He also discovered a horse farm nearby, with mountains of well-rotted horse manure, and Harry helped himself to as much as he wanted after getting the okay from the owner. He filled his garden beds with it, and then inscribed the wooden panels of the beds with runes to stretch the growing season. It was really too late to start any vegetables this far into the season, that was if you grew things the muggle way. But thanks to magic Harry was able to plant a full garden of all manner of veggies, from carrots and onions to cabbages and leeks.

He also spent a whole afternoon transfiguring lots of wood and rocks into an magnificent greenhouse where he could grow things like cucumbers, tomatoes and bell peppers. He planted strawberries and raspberries and blackberries around the property, with a few gooseberries and blackcurrants around the cottage. He added a few apple and pear trees, and some cherry and plum trees, all fruits he really liked.

Lastly, Harry transfigured some more thick branches into some patio furniture so he could sit in the afternoon sun and admire his handiwork while his three little hens pecked around his feet.

The only thing missing was Tom, really, and then Harry would be completely happy. He'd always preferred the simple lives. A little cottage, a beautiful yet functional garden, and a soulmate. That was all Harry needed in life.

Okay, and a dog or two, but those would have to wait until Harry was certain he could commit to owning them.

By the end of the week, Harry got the mental impression Narcissa had finished her task. He met her again at King's Cross station where she handed him the cup and Harry obliviated any knowledge of it from her mind. He kept her under the curse, even if he gave her no new commands for the time being. It hardly cost him any energy and who knew when having Narcissa Malfoy under the imperius curse might come in handy again in the future.

Harry placed the cup on his bedside table, exceedingly happy he had one more piece of his soulmate nearby.

And then, finally, September first came around and Harry was more than ready to break into Hogwarts.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Harry didn't actually break into Hogwarts on the first. No, he waited until September second, since the students didn't arrive until the evening of the first and then spent most of the time in the great hall before all leaving for their dormitories. Having an individual room the castle would still stand out in the wards during that time.

But on the second of September, in the afternoon, when all the students were attending classes, walking down hallways, heading to the library, the great hall or the grounds for some fresh air, that would be the perfect time to enter the castle.

To calm his nerves, Harry decided to do some cooking first thing in the morning before heading off to Hogwarts. Cooking always calmed him. And between the two of them, Tom might be the Michelin rated chef (Tom had owned and operated a two-star restaurant in Madrid, Spain in life number 7, before they were on speaking terms), but Harry had ran their small family restaurant they'd owned one of the times they'd lived in Jamaica, and people far and wide came there especially for Harry's goat curry. And that was what Harry was making that morning. He'd discovered a nice little Caribbean speciality shop in London and he'd stocked up on goat meat and scotch bonnet peppers and curry powder and fresh veggies to add. He got all the ingredients going in a large pot on the stove until the whole cottage smelled warm and spicy and Harry had to swallow against a large lump of nostalgia that lodged itself in his throat.

Tom loved his goat curry and it hurt Harry he wasn't there to share it with him.

Patience. He had three horcruxes already and would get a fourth later that day. He would get Tom back in one piece and then they'd laugh about it all while enjoying Harry's curry and Tom's excellent panna cotta for dessert before snuggling together under the covers of their bed.

Ah, and there was that annoying lump of nostalgia again. Harry cleared his throat and focussed on his curry. He cooked some rice and put it away in the cooling cabinet and he charmed the pan of curry to slow cook for the rest of the day so the meat would become fall-apart tender and Harry would have an amazing dinner waiting for him the moment he came home.

The rest of the morning Harry spent in his small potions lab, putting the finishing touches on his eye correction potion. It was now ready to apply, a few drops every day for a month and his eyes would be perfect. Not that they were that bad. In his first life his eyesight had been much worse for some reason.

He had a simple grilled ham and cheese sandwich for lunch and afterwards he took a leisurely stroll towards Riddle Manor and back, which took him about 45 minutes, to help settle his nerves and get rid of some of his excess energy.

And then it was finally time to go. Harry pulled on his robes, disillusioned himself and apparated to Hogsmeade. He'd considered how to get into Hogwarts. He could change into his Animagus form and simply fly to the castle and land on the astronomy tower, but his form was fairly big and not native to Britain so it would stand out too much. No, Harry realized his best bet was probably just to stick to the tunnel that lead to Hogwarts from the basement of Honeydukes. And so Harry entered the sweet shop on the tails of some unsuspecting customers and slipped into the cellar unnoticed. His disillusionment charm was so strong these days he was practically invisible. Perhaps someone like Moody with his magical eye might make out the faintest of shimmers but that was about it. Harry wasn't worried someone in Hogwarts would spot him.

The trek to the castle was long, cramped and boring. There was no wave of nostalgia. Harry had attended Hogwarts quite a number of times already in different lives. Not to mention Ilvermorny, Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, Uagadou, Mahoutokoro, and Castelobruxo. The only wizarding school Harry and Tom hadn't yet attended was Koldovstoretz in Russia, since the one time Harry had been a Russian wizard his parents had sent him to Durmstrang where he'd met Tom, who'd been Polish that time.

People might imagine they'd long for the days they'd attended Hogwarts the first time while in Harry's shoes, but they'd be wrong. Harry had very little emotional attachment to the child versions of all his loved ones as he'd known them during their Hogwarts careers. He'd only known the teenage versions of Hermione, Ron and Ginny for less than a decade. But he'd loved their adult versions for just about a hundred years. It was the adults he'd missed so badly for several lifetimes before he finally accepted his fate and moved on. It was the adult Ginny, with her wrinkles and laugh lines and slightly greying hair that he'd missed desperately. It was the adult Hermione and Ron, Luna and Rolf, Neville and Hannah, George and Angelina, and all the rest of the Weasleys. It was a white-haired Arthur, sitting in his chair in the Burrow with a grandchild in his lap and one on each knee, while Molly waved her wand around in the kitchen with a soft, wrinkled hand full of liver spots that Harry wanted to see again.

The children they had once been had nothing on the adults Harry had spent almost a century with until they all started dying one by one. Harry had gone before Ginny, after suffering a mild stroke at the age of 103 that saw him held up in St Mungo's for a day or two. He'd been released to return home and he'd spent one last day with his family where all his kids, grandkids and great-grandkids welcomed him home until a much bigger stroke took him out the next day. The last thing he remembered that life was Ginny's brown eyes filling with tears as she held his head in her lap after sending her Patronus to get help. Then everything had turned black and the next thing he knew he was Jack Bird, twenty-year-old student at Oxford University, majoring in computer science who'd just been introduced to Andrew Chamberlain, studying psychology at Edinburgh University, and visiting with his sister during the annual Boat Race with Cambridge.

And Harry knew without a doubt his name was Harry Potter, not Jack Bird, and that the young man staring at him with wide, disbelieving, blue eyes was named Tom Riddle, or Lord Voldemort, but certainly not Andrew Chamberlain. And Harry knew he had a family, a large, loving family that he missed so much it physically hurt and he'd do anything to get them back again, no matter how impossible that was.

A few years spent at a wizarding school with a bunch of kids had nothing on those experiences that had lasted a lifetime.

But even his longing for his original family and friends in his first life had faded over time. Yes, it had taken Harry seven lifetimes to accept his new situation, to get to grips with all the losses he'd suffered already and to move on from desperately clinging to the idea of a family he'd lost rather than the individuals he sometimes had trouble remembering at that point.

Time did heal all wounds, and Harry had lived for plenty of it that now that he was Harry Potter again his interest in Ron and Hermione and Ginny and Sirius and everyone else was one of mild curiosity what it would be like to see them again instead of a desperate longing he'd once felt for them throughout lives numbers 2 to 6.

The desperate longing he felt these days was reserved for his soulmate and no one else.

The tunnel started curving upwards, telling Harry he was almost at the castle. He had to bend down quite a bit to squeeze passed the statue of the humpbacked witch but he managed. His first stop was Gryffindor Tower to learn the password so he could sneak in later to get Wormtail. Harry strolled to the seventh floor and waited patiently standing against the wall near the Fat Lady's portrait until a few students entered the common room and loudly said 'Fortuna' to do so.

That taken care of, Harry turned around to head to the Room of Requirement. A few passes in front of the blank wall later, Harry opened the door that appeared and entered the cathedral sized room that housed centuries worth of junk and also quite a few treasures.

In different lifetimes, while attending Hogwarts, Tom and Harry had stripped whatever versions of the Room of Requirement they found completely bare during the seven years they attended school. It had always gained them an interesting personal library, artifacts to experiment with and enough random items to sell to start their adult lives with a very nice little nest egg in their Gringotts vault. And Harry planned to do the same thing this time around.

But first things first: the diadem. Collecting Tom's soul was the most important thing for now. Harry walked into the general direction where he thought he'd found the diadem in his very first life, but honestly, it was such a long fucking time ago that he really wasn't sure. Harry roamed the stacks for a while, taking in what kind of junk there was while keeping a very sharp eye out for the diadem. He finally found it, after what must be at least an hour of searching, near a marble bust that looked familiar.

Harry picked up the diadem and gently stroked it. "Hi, again, babe. Do you come here often?" Harry winked at the diadem and snickered to himself while he carefully placed it in his bag. Then he cracked his knuckles, got out his wand and prepared to start breaking down the room around him.

He commanded the room to place all the trunks in front of him. That got him at least fifteen of the things, in all states of repairs. Harry upended them all and cast undetectable expansion charms on each so he'd have more room to store items in. Then he started to sort things by commanding the room to gather certain categories of items in front of him.

Books first and there were plenty of those. So many in fact that they filled three whole expanded trunks. Then Harry asked for clothes, which was another trunk full. Wands and potions equipment earned him quite a few items, including about a dozen cauldrons Harry could use for himself. Also plenty of vials which, after a good cleaning and sanitation, Harry could use for his own potions. Any wands that didn't work for him Harry would sell. Games and recreation gave him everything from beater bats and quidditch balls to chess sets and gobstones. Not to mention over a dozen brooms, including a very early version of a Shooting Star from the 1700s in excellent condition that Harry knew was worth at least a few hundred Galleons. Nice.

Money and jewellery got him a bunch of money pouches, plenty of loose knuts and sickles and even a fair few galleons. He also got necklaces and bracelets and rings, none of them worth fortunes but they still would earn him a nice little sum when selling them on. Writing equipment got Harry a pile of broken quills he incinerated without a second thought, a collection of ink bottles of which he would sell the majority and keep the nicest for himself, and a pile of notebooks he stuffed in a trunk to go over later. There might be interesting notes to be found in some of those, though Harry expected most to be worthless. But one never knew and Harry needed something to do to keep him busy and out of trouble.

Magazines earned him a pile of porn, which Harry kept. For reasons. It also got him Quidditch magazines he'd keep for himself as well and plenty of other topics he'd probably sell on in a large batch. Decorations got him things like mirrors and paintings and candleholders and lamps he could use in the cottage. He took everything anyway and he'd sell what he didn't keep.

Finally Harry browsed some of the furniture and shrunk the best pieces. Some, like a few bookcases and a nice, solid desk he would keep so he could turn his second spare bedroom into an office and small library. The rest he would sell.

The room was significantly emptier by the time Harry called for magical artifacts. Mostly small items appeared, things like remembralls and sneakoscopes and omnioculars. But besides those there was also a vanishing cabinet Harry knew he could sell to Borgin and Burke's, since they had the other one and a complete set was worth some money. He'd even fix it for them before selling, bringing up the price significantly.

And then mostly broken furniture and random items remained and Harry was tired and hungry and out of empty trunks to fill. So he shrunk all the trunks, stuffed them in his bag, reapplied the disillusionment charm and left the Room of Requirement. He'd come back some other day to sort through whatever remained, but he was convinced he'd gotten the most valuable items already.

As Harry walked towards Gryffindor tower to fetch the rat, he realized something.

There was one last very valuable item at Hogwarts.

The basilisk.

Harry stopped in his tracks. For the first time, Harry could actually enter the Chamber of Secrets again. In all their previous lives at Hogwarts, neither Tom nor Harry had been a

parselmouth so while they knew where the Chamber of Secrets was, they couldn't enter it so they had to leave the basilisk be.

But now...now there was nothing stopping Harry from bringing a cockerel with him inside the chamber and dispatching the basilisk quickly. Harry knew how to harvest big game like that, and he also knew he could sell the basilisk for a lot of money. They were rare and all their parts were valuable.

Harry could do all that, except he wasn't sure how Tom felt about Harry killing Salazar Slytherin's thousand-year-old murder snake. Perhaps they could simply talk to the basilisk and convince it to give them venom and collect any shed skins. That would earn them money, too.

Yeah, perhaps it was better to wait to talk to Tom about what to do. Besides, Harry wasn't hurting for money. On the contrary.

Putting thoughts of the basilisk aside, Harry resumed his walk to his old Hogwarts haunts. He whispered the password and slipped inside. It was well after dinner so the common room was packed and no one paid the door opening and closing on its own any attention. Harry walked up the stairs to the boys' dormitories until he found the one belonging to the fourth years, which he was sure Percy was at that point. He peeked inside the half opened door and found one student he didn't know sitting on his bed, apparently writing a letter. Harry cast a silent sleeping charm on the boy, a light one so he'd wake up in half an hour and simply believe he'd nodded off.

Then Harry slipped further into the room and spotted the rat sleeping on Percy's pillow, just like he'd always done once he became Ron's pet. Harry approached him with quiet steps and cast a silent stunner at the thing before Wormtail even knew what was happening. Harry pulled a shrunk cage from his pocket he'd transfigured the previous day specifically to hold the rat. He dropped an unresponsive Wormtail inside it and then he shrunk the cage again and stuffed it back in his pocket.

It took Harry another hour to get out of the castle the same way he'd come in and once he stepped through his front door he dropped his bag, got out Wormtail's cage and enlarged it. Wormtail was awake by then, but Harry ignored his squeaking as he used his wand to levitate the rat out of the cage. Harry was still disillusioned so he wasn't worried about Pettigrew recognizing him or passing his description on to the ministry under veritaserum.

Harry forced Pettigrew to transform with a spell, and a sputtering man sat on his living room floor, looking around in a panic. Harry stayed silent as he summoned Tom's wand, and on second thought Peter's as well. Then he cast the cruciatus curse on the traitor until he transformed back into a rat again.

Ah, unforgivable curses could be so efficient, Harry had learned many, many lifetimes ago. He now understood why Tom had been so fond of them back in their first life.

Harry obliviated any knowledge of the last day from Wormtail's mind and also reinforced the idea that Voldemort was well and truly dead. At the moment, only Dumbledore suspected Voldemort was still alive in some form but even he didn't have actual evidence for this. Harry

figured the Auror department would question Pettigrew about Voldemort extensively and Harry wanted to make sure all they heard was that Voldemort was dead and gone.

This way, Voldemort could stay dead and gone once he brought Tom back, knowing Tom would prefer that scenario as well. No need for the Dark Lord to resurface. Tom could simply create a new identity for himself like Harry had done and live his life peacefully without Dumbledore breathing down his neck.

Harry shrunk the cage again and attached it to a letter he'd written the day before, addressed to Amelia Bones in which he told her in detail what had happened that night back in 1981, who the secret-keeper had been, that Sirius Black had never had a trial and deserved one yesterday, and how she could enlarge the cage and find Peter Pettigrew, the real traitor and murderer, in his Animagus form inside.

"Please take this to Amelia Bones and deliver it to her at her home," Harry told Pluto, who accepted the package eagerly and took off through the window Harry opened for him. Harry knew Amelia wouldn't recognize the owl, since barn owls were so common. He also had faith that Amelia Bones was an honest law enforcement officer with a sense of fairness that would see everything through no matter what Fudge or Dumbledore would try to pull when it came to Sirius Black and his unlawful imprisonment.

When all that was done, Harry fixed himself a plate of his excellent goat curry and enjoyed it while relaxing on his couch, mentally preparing how he was going to sort through all the stuff he'd brought with him over the next few days.

And that's what Harry did. He kept a close eye on the Daily Prophet which was delivered through his mail box every day, but there was no sign of anything publicly happening to Sirius just yet. There were still daily articles written about Harry himself. His disappearance had shaken the wizarding world and the Prophet was calling for everyone's head for losing their precious Boy Who Lived. Harry thought the whole thing pretty entertaining, how everyone from Dumbledore to Fudge to Rufus Scrimgeour got raked across the coals every day while random witches and wizards sent in letters to the paper lamenting the loss of their child saviour, which Harry always mentally corrected to child soldier.

Yeah, it had taken him a few lifetimes before he came to the conclusion he'd really gotten a rotten deal in his first life, stupid prophecy or not. Dumbledore had groomed him into a perfect little sacrificial child soldier. Even after all his lifetimes, that still pissed Harry off. Not to mention Tom, who could rant for hours about Dumbledore's many shortcomings as a human being and an educational professional. It was also one of the main reasons Harry genuinely hoped he could keep Harry Potter missing for the rest of his life this time around, just to send a big fuck you to Dumbledore and his plans for him.

Harry got started on turning his second spare bedroom into an office and library. He enlarged the room magically, installed bookcases and the sturdy desk he'd found and got a system of library charms going so he could log every book he added to his library and he'd have a ledger to consult if he ever needed to check if he had a specific title or not. There were plenty of interesting books to be found amidst piles of textbooks. Harry kept the most modern versions of those as well, to use for his OWLs and NEWTs in December but all the other text books he sold to a second-hand book store in Occasion Alley. Pretty much every other title he

kept, no matter how boring or ridiculous the subject. Harry didn't think he needed a book dedicated to breeding and raising bowtruckles for fun and profit, but you never knew. He also found a few highly illegal books full of dark arts, which he happily added to his collection. Once upon a time, Harry Potter had been a goody two shoes when it came to magic and had stuck only to the light side of the force, as it were. But that had lasted only exactly as long as it took for Harry to get bored with learning the same light spells over and over again in different lifetimes and then he'd dived headfirst into the dark arts and he hadn't looked back since.

He also wasn't worried about the ministry finding his growing collection of illegal texts. They didn't know anyone lived in the Gaunt shack, and even if they did, they couldn't find it thanks for Harry's Fidelius charm.

Once the books were sorted and Harry's office and library were finished he moved on to all the rest of the stuff. He used plenty of decorative items around his home. He fixed up a charmed mirror to hang beside the front door. Now every time he headed out it told him to fix his hair. He also fixed a wireless and got it going so he could listen to some music or the live commentary on Quidditch matches while he worked. He placed a beautiful brass chess set on a little side table beside the couch and placed a thick wool rug under the coffee table. He hung up lamps and placed candlesticks around his home.

The only things he refused to consider for his home were the paintings he got. The problem with magical paintings was that you never knew what other painting they might be connected to and thus who might be able to spy on you. Yes, there were charms to check for such connections but Harry thought the risk far too great all for the sake of a mediocre still-life of some mushrooms and pears in a red bowl. So all paintings were sold and Harry ventured into the Muggle world to create some art for his walls. Harry had been an actual artist in more than one life and he could paint portraits and landscapes like there was no tomorrow but he didn't want to spend the time on that now so he simply created some acrylic pouring art to decorate his home.

A large canvas with lots of blues and purples and whites for his bedroom, a few smaller pieces of red, orange and black for his office and for the living room he kept it simple with two matching pieces with browns, golds and light blues and yellows.

And after he put up his art and looked around this living room Harry concluded that he truly had turned the filthy shack he'd found into a comfy, cosy home for himself. And Tom, eventually. He couldn't wait to see Tom's face when he saw what had become of the Gaunt ancestral dump.

Harry sorted the clothes very roughly, only keeping a few robes for himself. He had enough clothes anyway and didn't need anymore. He sold the whole mountain of clothes that were left in one batch to a second-hand store, who seemed delighted with the offering.

The broomsticks earned him almost 800 galleons, a very nice sum, thanks mostly to the antique Shooting Star. Harry kept the most modern of the brooms he'd found, a century old Cleansweep, to fix up himself. He liked charming broomsticks and he looked forward to fiddling around with it until it could match at least a Nimbus 2000 in terms of speed.

He kept a few items of jewellery, since you never knew when you needed some to charm with protective magic or something like that, but the majority he sold to a curiosity shop. The same with the wands. Harry kept three wands that responded fairly well to him but the rest felt dead to him so they were useless. They'd be useless for Tom as well, since in all their lifetimes as wizards or witches they'd always had similar wands. Their souls were connected, after all. He fixed up the vanishing cabinet and sold that for 50 Galleons to a very cranky Burke after some serious negotiations.

Everything else was sorted and sold as well and before Harry knew it a week had passed and he'd added almost 3000 Galleons to his Gringotts vault, which translated to 15000 pounds which meant he now had enough money to live off until his muggle earnings started coming in. That was one less thing to worry about.

What Harry did worry about was the fact that he still hadn't seen anything about Sirius in the papers. Then again, the Ministry was still in absolute chaos about his disappearance so perhaps that was why it was taking longer than Harry thought it would.

What Harry also worried about was that he now had very little to do while he waited for Sirius to be freed so he could get his hands on the locket.

In a moment of sheer boredom and frustration, Harry took out the diary and wrote in it.

'Hi, babe! I miss you!'

A few very long moments later a very hesitant reply followed in Tom's neat handwriting.

'Who is this? What is your name?'

Harry grinned as he poured out his heart. 'I'm your soulmate, Tom. We're stuck together for all eternity and we keep getting reincarnated together and we've been married more times than I can remember and have had probably hundreds of children together, who for the most part turned out all right. We've grown old together so often, wiping each other's butts when one got too ill to do it themselves. You know, Tom, that is what true love is all about. Wiping your spouse's shit off their ass while telling them you love them.'

No reply followed and Harry felt the compulsion charm that the diary had been trying to attach to him to keep him writing quickly retreat until no magic remained.

Harry cracked up and rolled around on his bed, laughing hysterically at the thought of teen Tom absolutely freaking out inside the diary about what kind of lunatic had gotten his hands on his diary. Harry knew his Tom would get an enormous kick out of this once Harry told him about it.

Anyway, the hilarious episode with the diary did show Harry that he needed to find stuff to do. Harry knew from experience that having a structured day, filled with tasks that gave one a sense of accomplishment were vital for one's mental health. And Harry was well aware he was hanging on by a thread. His last life had been a traumatizing one and Harry was well aware that he was in firm denial about what he'd done and how much innocent blood was on his hands. He simply didn't have time to deal with any of that right now. Getting Tom back

was more important. Which meant that Harry would probably fall apart the moment he got his soulmate back and his brain realized it was now safe for him to do so.

And if he didn't find things to do, he might very well fall apart before that and Harry couldn't afford to so he set about filling his days with constructive shit to do .

He started with getting electricity to his cottage. During one lifetime, when they'd been a witch and wizard in Japan, the grandson of the CEO of Nintendo was a muggleborn who was determined to make electricity work around magic. He funded a team of experts that included Tom and Harry, and they spent two years working day and night to crack the secret. They did, eventually. It took a combination of enchantments, runes and alchemy of all things to get it done but by the end of it they made electricity and electrical appliances work around magic.

Tapping into the mains was risky, though, magic or not, but Harry was not only an electrical engineer, he was also a certified electrician from the time he'd earned a nice living as a handy woman. Still, he was careful when he hooked his cottage up after running wires inside the walls and installing wall outlets in every room.

But then he had electricity and he bought a second-hand TV locally and installed an antenna on his roof and from then on he could spend his evenings watching the BBC. He popped back into the furniture store one night to nab a Lazy Boy recliner. Those things were the shit when it came to relaxing in front of the telly and Harry found himself dozing off in his more than once while watching a movie or some sports. He also bought a muggle radio and cd player, with speakers he installed in every room, so he could listen to muggle music.

When that project was done Harry put up an advertisement on the notice board at the local Tesco offering to walk anyone's dog that needed walking for free.

He got two requests in the first week. The first was a border collie named Quinn, whose owners were expecting their first child. Mark worked long days as a store manager in York and Bridget, who was seven months pregnant, had been told to stay off her feet as much as possible until the baby arrived. Poor Quinn was missing his long daily walks, but Harry got him sorted.

The second was a Welsh springer spaniel named Lucy, whose owner was a woman in her late fifties who'd broken her ankle. She had a big yard for Lucy to romp around in but a dog like that needed more exercise and Harry happily supplied it, taking Quinn and Lucy together on hour-and-a-half long walks around the countryside almost daily. Cindy, as the owner was called, had lost her husband Jim two years prior to pancreatic cancer.

Harry had been an oncologist once, not to mention that between him and Tom they'd died of just about any type of cancer imaginable, so Harry knew that pancreatic cancer which had spread to the liver was a nasty one and poor Jim hadn't stood much of a chance. Cindy didn't have any children and while some of the neighbours helped her out Harry could tell she was lonely.

Funny, so was Harry.

Cindy was also an observant woman and the first time she told Harry to stay for tea after he returned Lucy from their walk, she asked him, “So, luv, who did you lose?”

“Excuse me?” Harry asked as he got the kettle boiling and the teapot ready while Cindy sat in her comfy chair with her broken ankle elevated.

“You’ve got that look about you,” Cindy said with a knowing smile.

“Well, my parents,” Harry said, sticking to Jack Bird’s history.

“Hm.” Cindy tilted her head. “But that’s not all, is it?”

Harry sighed. There was no way he could tell her the truth, of course. That currently his soulmate was a disembodied wraith dead set on killing him, but deep down he loved him, promise! Harry almost snorted out loud. But perhaps he could offer some sort of muggle-friendly explanation for his wounded demeanour. “My boyfriend got a job in Albania and he broke up with me because he doesn’t believe in long-distance relationships or something like that. He’ll be back next year but I miss him a lot.”

“Your boyfriend,” Cindy said slowly with wide eyes and Harry wanted to smack himself. It was only 1990 and there was still plenty of homophobia going around and he should have known better than to forget about those issues. But Cindy gave him a big smile and quickly put him at ease. “Oh, that’s fine by me. It takes all kinds, luv, is what I always say.”

“Yeah, I’m gay,” Harry said with a shrug as he poured the boiling water into the teapot.

“And you also fell in love with a fool, if I heard it right,” Cindy said while gesturing at Harry to put the tea set on the coffee table.

Harry snorted with laughter. “I’m sure he’d tell you it was the other way around.”

“Two fools in love, then.” Cindy winked at him as she accepted a cup of tea from him. “The best kind of love.”

“Yep, you’re right about that.” Harry sipped his cup and spent another hour chatting with Cindy about love and life and loss. Once he realized Cindy only had one elderly neighbour to do her grocery shopping for her, Harry offered to do it instead. He also got into the habit of bringing her little containers of his homecooked food since he liked to cook. A lot. And he always had leftovers. Cindy proclaimed his goat curry spicy but delightful and waxed poetically about his spaghetti alla puttanesca, after Harry’s grandmother’s recipe one time he’d been Italian.

Cindy in turn insisted Harry take the mountain bike collecting dust in her garage when Harry told her he was thinking of getting a bicycle to explore more of the area around their town. It had belonged to Jim and Harry eventually accepted her kind gift after she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

It became habit to have tea with Cindy after walking Quinn and Lucy and to help her out around the house as needed, and just like that, Harry had made a friend.

One sunny afternoon Harry transfigured a wheelchair for her and, using her car, took Cindy to York where they drank coffee and ate pastries in the sun and browsed a flea market. Harry picked up an acoustic guitar in good shape but needing new strings, and some bagpipes. Harry played both already, the guitar better than the pipes, since he'd been the lead guitarist in an 80s rock band in life number 6; an actual rockstar with a heroin addiction who liked to fuck anything that moved and unsurprisingly, eventually died of AIDS in his late thirties, but boy, did Harry know how to rock his guitar. Good times.

Harry spent many an afternoon sitting in his garden playing his bagpipes because he was more than a little rusty and the pipes were not an easy instrument to play by any means. He didn't have any direct neighbours to bother with the noise and after an initial response of 'what the fuck is that let's hide under some bushes until it goes away', Nora, Cora and Dora, his three little hens, weren't bothered by the music anymore.

The main reason Harry got into piping again was because Tom absolutely hated the sound of bagpipes, which...blasphemy! Tom had been fucking Scottish, more than once. Harry shook his head and continued playing, determined to one day get Tom to understand the beauty of the pipes. As far as Harry was concerned one hadn't lived until one had heard AC/DC's Thunderstruck performed by at least a dozen pipers.

One afternoon, Harry also took the computer Khan had given him in his office home with him and installed it on his desk upstairs. This way he could tinker at home with any new designs of products he could have Khan sell for them.

Harry also cleaned and oiled his new mountain bike and a few times a week he gave it his all on the trails around Little Hangleton. Harry didn't mean to sound like a boring old fart, but he knew from experience how important exercise was for both physical and mental health. Harry had spent one too many lifetimes battling depression and anxiety disorders and PTSD to ignore his mental health. So he tried to eat a reasonably healthy diet with plenty of fruit and veg, and he exercised regularly.

On the dead useful notice board at Tesco (and how Harry missed the internet and craigslist and ebay), Harry saw some single person camping supplies being offered and he snatched those up. He apparated to the Yorkshire Dales with his mountain bike in hand and spent the day biking around the national park with his camping gear hidden in a small backpack with an undetectable expansion charm. He then spent the night wild camping under a clear sky. Harry and Tom had always been active when they were physically able, and they'd camped all around the world. But seeing a black sky full of stars, the milky way stretching out, never got old.

By then almost four weeks had passed since Harry sent Pettigrew to Amelia Bones and he was more than done waiting. He had half a mind to march up to Amelia at the ministry and demand some answers, but he knew that would be foolish indeed.

Finally, one morning Harry, still in his pyjamas and with a pan of eggs and bacon sizzling behind him, pulled the Daily Prophet out of his mail box and found what he was looking for.

SIRIUS BLACK INNOCENT AND FREE
PETER PETTIGREW FOUND GUILTY OF MURDER

Fucking finally, Harry thought as he sat down to his breakfast and read through the article. It was pretty much as expected. Sirius never had a trial, blah, blah, blah, the ministry captured Pettigrew, blah, blah, blah, finally a trial for both, blah, blah, blah, veritaserum and insta-presto, Sirius was free and Pettigrew got life in Azkaban. Sirius was receiving care in St Mungo's and had already received friends and family, according to the article, which Harry guessed probably meant the Tonks' and Lupin.

Over the last few weeks Harry had given a lot of thought to Sirius and what to do about him. Harry knew his godfather would be devastated to learn that while he was finally free his godson was missing. Harry didn't want to add to Sirius' misery, since the man had suffered enough as it was. So Harry decided that he would tell Sirius the truth, and possibly Lupin as well if he was already in contact with his old friend. He would make them sign secrecy contracts before telling them a thing, naturally, and if things really went wrong he could always obliviate them, but Harry had good hopes they would accept Harry's unique situation. Eventually. There wasn't much they could do about it, at any rate. They couldn't force Harry to be a 10-year-old boy without almost 200 lifetimes worth of memories and Harry refused to pretend to be anything he wasn't for them. He was way too fucking old for that shit.

Harry waited a few more days until the Daily Prophet reported that Sirius had been released from the hospital and would receive further care at home. Now was the time to get in contact with him, before Dumbledore could get his claws in any deeper than he might have already done. But Harry had the perfect bait to lure Sirius with. He penned the man a letter.

'Sirius,

I can give you information about your godson Harry Potter. He is alive and well and safe. Meet me in front of the Three Broomsticks on noon this Thursday, alone or with Remus Lupin. Do not share this letter or the information within with anyone else save for Lupin. I will know if you have and I will not approach you and you'll never learn what happened to Harry.

A friend'

Yeah, Harry knew it sounded ominous and all, but he couldn't be bothered to try to make it a bit nicer. Sirius would come and Harry would explain, end of story. He'd applied a very nifty charm to the letter that was connected to a piece of paper in his office and would show Harry exactly who had read the letter and when. Tom had invented that charm at one point and it came in handy in situations like this. Harry's piece of paper showed that Sirius read the letter several times a day (poor guy!) and that he'd only shown the actual letter to Lupin twice. Of course, there was no saying if he hadn't simply shared the information verbally with anyone else, but Harry didn't think so. If he had, Dumbledore or Amelia would have demanded to see the letter for themselves, Harry was sure.

Thursday came around and Harry disillusioned himself and apparated to Hogsmeade an hour early. He stayed in the shadows opposite the Three Broomsticks and used subtle charms to check for any invisible people trying to sneak by but he found nothing. Ten minutes before noon Sirius and Lupin came walking up. Sirius still looked very thin and gaunt, yet still much healthier than when he'd escaped Azkaban in Harry's third year.

Harry pushed away from the wall he was leaning against and approached them. “Touch the rope. I’ll take you to Harry,” Harry whispered as he held out a piece of rope. Sirius did so immediately, but Lupin hesitated for a few seconds before he too touched the portkey. Harry activated it with a silent burst of magic and a few dizzying moments later they stood in the country lane just outside Harry’s cottage.

“Mind showing us your face,” Sirius demanded, while Lupin obviously looked around for any threats.

Remaining quiet, Harry pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and showed it to the two men.

‘Harry Potter lives in the Gaunt Cottage in Little Hangleton.’

Both Sirius and Lupin read it and looked up with wide eyes as they finally made out the cottage behind Harry. “This way,” Harry said, leading the way. The moment he stepped onto his property, he dropped his disillusionment charm and turned to face his godfather. He’d left his hair and eyes their natural colour, not the brown eyes and blond hair he used for his Jack Bird identity. He was still an adult, though.

“Who are you?” Lupin demanded, reaching for his wand.

Sirius’ mouth sank open as he took in Harry’s features, his messy hair, his familiar green eyes. “Harry? How?”

Smiling, Harry pulled Sirius into an embrace. “Hi, Godfather. Missed you.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

This chapter sees a lot of exposition, Harry talking about his past lives in detail. Let this be a blanket warning for lots of unpleasant subjects that are being discussed: death, drug and alcohol abuse, AIDS, suicide, general violence, etc. Read at your own risk.

Thanks to everyone for reading and commenting.

Come join me on tumblr: [maeglinvedi](#)

Chapter 4

Sirius broke the embrace off after a minute or so and gave Harry a very confused look.

“I’ll tell you everything, I promise, but not out here.” Harry gestured at the two men to follow him and he unlocked the front door and led them inside. “There are two secrecy contracts for you to sign on the dining table. Read them all you like. I’ll make some tea.”

“But, Harry – “ Sirius started with a helpless gesture towards Harry.

“Sign the contract and I’ll explain everything.” Harry gave him an honest smile and set about making tea while Sirius and Remus stood quietly at the dining table reading their contracts. They were pretty straightforward, making it so Sirius and Lupin would be unable to share any confidential information they learned that day with anyone in any form.

Harry got the kettle boiling and arranged a pile of pastries onto a plate. He’d been stress-baking ever since sending Sirius the letter and he had a whole assortment of homemade sausage rolls, pigs in a blanket and little steak and mushroom pies to show for it. There were also strawberry tarts for afters. Harry placed his tea service and the pastries on the dining table while Sirius and Lupin signed the contracts. He then poured them all a cup of tea and sat down, gesturing the two men to do the same.

“Thanks,” Harry said as he examined the contracts briefly to make sure they had activated.

“So you’re Harry,” Lupin started saying, looking very dubious about this revelation.

“Yep,” Harry said and gave Lupin a questioning look. “Hey, can I call you Remus? I just realized you’ve never actually given me permission to do so back in my first life.”

“Yes, of course,” Remus said, just as Sirius said, “First life?”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed. “Look, this is a long story and I ask that you hear me out and don’t lose your shit right away.”

“All right,” Sirius said slowly, reaching for a sausage roll and taking a big bite.

“During my first life, I was Harry Potter. I grew up with the Dursleys, went to Hogwarts, made friends, had to fight for my life at the end of every year because of Voldemort, but eventually I defeated the fucker when I was seventeen. I got married, had kids, grandkids, great-grandkids, worked as an Auror and eventually made it to Head of Magical Law Enforcement until my retirement. I died at 103 years old from a massive stroke. The next thing I knew I’m a completely different bloke, Jack Bird, a muggle at university and across from me is some bloke named Andrew who is in reality Tom Riddle.” Harry gave Sirius and Remus an expectant look but neither showed any recognition.

“Who’s Tom Riddle?” Sirius asked as he took another sausage roll after finishing his first one.

“Tom Marvolo Riddle,” Harry said with a rather fond smile. “He very dramatically turned that into an anagram when he was twelve or so. I am Lord Voldemort.”

“What?” Remus asked as Sirius coughed violently, some of his sausage roll going down the wrong way.

“Yep,” Harry said knowingly. “I was just as shocked. Turns out, we’d both been reincarnated with our memories of our previous life intact.”

“What did you do?” Remus asked while Sirius was wiping tears from his eyes while frantically clearing his throat. He reached for his cup and downed his tea.

“Very quietly freak out. There wasn’t anything else I could do. We were muggles, there was no wizarding world and I couldn’t very well go to the authorities and tell them this innocent bloke without a criminal record had been a magical Dark Lord in his previous life and could they please lock him up.” Harry snorted at the very idea. “They would have locked me up instead in a mental hospital.”

“Yes, that would have been difficult for any muggle to believe,” Remus conceded.

“Anyway, Tom didn’t do anything wrong. He was also quietly freaking out. As it turned out, he’d accidentally driven himself insane somewhere along the way of becoming Lord Voldemort and he suddenly had his sanity back and wasn’t at all impressed with how his first life had turned out eventually. Tom spent his second life teaching psychology at Edinburgh University. He never got married or had serious relationships, too busy getting in touch with his own fee-fees.”

Sirius had recovered and gave Harry a curious look. “What about you?”

“Worked in IT in London. Got married, got divorced, was obsessed with getting my old family back. I missed everyone so much and I had a really hard time accepting that I was now a whole new person and everyone I’d ever loved was suddenly gone.” Harry shrugged and

picked up a pig in a blanket, giving it a small nibble as he collected his thoughts. “I died in my late forties from lung cancer. I’d been a heavy smoker that life, so no surprises there.” He gave both Sirius and Remus a stern look. “Don’t smoke. It’s so bad for you and it’s so expensive and it makes you smell bad.”

Remus smiled while he shared a pointed look with Sirius.

“I only tried muggle cigarettes that one time, Moony,” Sirius said in a very defensive tone. “I didn’t care for them much.”

“Good,” Harry said, and he finished his pastry and sipped his tea before continuing his story. “Life number three I was a wizard again, still in Britain. The youngest of three Greengrass children, born in 1812.”

“How is that even possible?” Sirius demanded.

“No clue. But it happened and keeps happening. Anyway, that life I got a mastery in enchanting, lived as a bachelor in a cottage in Dorset, and spent all my free time studying the Deathly Hallows.”

“Why?” Remus asked, more than a little intrigued.

“Because in my first life I had accidentally collected all three of them and I was certain that I’d accidentally become the Master of Death and that this was causing my reincarnation problem.”

“But that’s not real,” Sirius said, eyes wide and disbelieving. “That’s just a story. I used to read Beedle the Bard to Reggie when he was a little kid, for Merlin’s sake.”

Harry shrugged and sipped his tea. “Yeah, that’s what I thought too, yet here I am.”

“What about Voldemort? Was he there, too?” Remus asked, managing to stay much calmer than Sirius, but also looking like he wasn’t sure what to think about that revelation.

“Yep. Tom was a half-blood and he became a Potions Master. We didn’t spend much time in the same circles except that he was also researching the Deathly Hallows and anything on reincarnation he could get his hands on, same as me. So we ran into each other from time to time but that was all.”

“So Voldemort never tried to repeat his behaviour as a Dark Lord?” Remus asked delicately.

“No, never,” Harry said firmly. He wanted them to understand this, that Tom had regretted what he’d done as Voldemort, and had never sought to replicate it. “He lived quietly, a bachelor like me.”

“And the next life?” Remus offered Harry a brief smile. “I’m guessing there is one.”

“Yes, and then some. Our next life we were Brazilian muggles and Tom was female for the first time.”

Sirius snorted in amusement.

Harry gave his godfather a narrow-eyed look that wasn't friendly in the slightest. "Is there something funny about what I just said?"

"Yeah, Voldemort as a girl," Sirius said with a snicker, completely oblivious to Harry's less than impressed reaction while Remus quietly shook his head.

"Is there something funny about being a girl?" Harry asked in a whisper, eyes blazing. He was so sick and tired of misogyny. "Is it somehow amusing to have a vagina instead of a penis?"

"What?" Sirius looked at Harry with wide eyes, finally cottoning on that he might have said something stupid. "No, that's not what I meant. Woman are fine. I like them a lot."

"Sirius, just stop talking," Remus said quietly while poking Sirius in the side with his elbow.

"Yeah, all right." Sirius looked down with a guilty expression.

"Souls are genderless," Harry explained, giving his godfather a break. It was only 1990 and Sirius had just spent a decade in prison. He couldn't expect miracles from the man when it came to feminism. "Everyone is reincarnated as both men and women, Tom and myself included. I quite like being a woman. Giving birth is amazing, though it hurts like hell. Having your period can get messy, but on the other hand, orgasms last longer."

"Huh," Sirius said with a thoughtful frown.

"Anyway, Tom became an activist that life, to save the rainforest from illegal deforestation and she was murdered before she was thirty by some logging company. And I became a bull rider."

"A what now?" Sirius asked, sitting up a little, curiosity piqued.

"It's a muggle rodeo sport. You have to sit on a bucking bull for eight seconds," Harry said with a wide grin.

"That sounds very dangerous," Remus said while Sirius looked interested.

"Oh yeah, it's been called the most dangerous eight seconds in sports," Harry said, his head and heart full of fond memories. "I've broken more bones than I can remember that life, but I did become world champion. Twice. I was fearless. I had nothing to lose." Harry's grin faltered until it disappeared entirely. "I was still obsessed with the family I had lost in my first life. Still clinging to that loss instead of focusing on what I had. I didn't care if I lived or died, so I took risks others wouldn't."

"Not the healthiest attitude," Remus commented.

"Oh, I know, and it's about to get worse," Harry said while refilling his tea cup. "I made good money, became a US citizen and retired to a ranch in Texas where I taught bull riding and bred bulls. Had a heart attack when I was in my sixties. Then I was a Brazilian muggle again

for some reason in life number five while Tom was a German reporter. I became a Formula 1 driver, three times world champion, was still fearless and stupid and crashed eventually in my thirties and died.” Harry frowned, remembering it very well. “Wasn’t my fault, though. The steering column broke. I turned left but the car went straight ahead right into a concrete barrier.”

“Merlin,” Sirius breathed while Remus looked down and pursed his lips.

“Now, life number six is when it all changed. I was still hurting and depressed and careless and had gotten to the point where I truly didn’t give a shit about anyone or anything. I was born in California, the good old USA. Still a male muggle. In high school my best friend suggested we start a band. I’d learned to play the guitar in number four and I didn’t have anything better to do so I agreed.” Harry snickered at Sirius’ incredulous look. “Anyway, we found a drummer and bass-player and we started playing small clubs around LA. Got picked up by a record company and became very, very big. I got hooked on alcohol, cocaine and eventually heroine.”

“Harry,” Remus said in disbelief while Sirius looked between them in confusion. “They’re very addictive muggle drugs,” Remus explained to his friend.

“Yeah, but it was the eighties so everyone did cocaine, seriously,” Harry said with a careless shrug. “But heroine, yeah, that’s something else entirely. The sweetest high you’ll ever get but addictive as shit. Anyway, I also fucked any groupie that would have me because why not?”

“Harry,” Remus said again, while Sirius perked up and said, “Really?”

“Dude, when you’re a rockstar you can get laid any time of the day, I shit you not.” Harry laughed at the look on Sirius’ face. “Of course, this was the eighties so AIDS had recently been invented. It’s this lethal muggle disease that’s spread through bodily fluids. I got infected. Meanwhile, Tom was a woman again and became a supermodel. Until that point Tom had avoided serious personal relationships as well, but this time she got pregnant from a brief affair with a married man. She decided to keep the baby and had a son. She also started her own cosmetics business, knowing a modelling career could only last so long, and became a successful business woman. All while I was dying of AIDS.”

Harry looked down at the table while he curled both hands around his tea cup. “I had the kind of life people only dream of. All the money and fame anyone could ever want. I had multiple houses, a yacht, we flew on a private plane during our tours, I had more sports cars and motorbikes than I knew what to do with. And I threw it all away, because I couldn’t stop feeling sorry for myself. Essentially.”

“But something must have changed eventually,” Remus said quietly.

“Yeah, while in the aids clinic I ended up sharing a room with this twenty-year-old kid named Lonnie. The kid was gay and had been fucking around, as you do when you’re young and horny, not judging here, but now his life was over and done with. He kept talking about his upcoming twenty-first birthday in two weeks’ time, how big of a party he was going to throw now that he could legally drink alcohol. He never made it to his birthday. I watched him die

of pneumonia, this kid that had been full of life when we first met and days later he was just gone, and I realized that I'd been acting like an enormous dickhead throughout all of this. I'd been given this opportunity, and I should just make the best of it instead of wallowing in misery over a family I'd lost lifetimes ago. In the meantime, I'd had other families. Parents and siblings and grandparents and such, that I'd all basically neglected in one way or another." Harry inhaled a deep breath, filled with sorrow and regret. "The one good thing I did in that life was leave my fortune to various AIDS charities. I left my parents and sister more than comfortable, but the majority of my wealth was put to good use after I kicked the bucket."

"You did the best you could," Remus offered, and Harry smiled for a moment.

"Sure. No one expects what happened to us or is prepared for it. Anyway, life number seven I vowed to start accepting my fate. And I did that by accepting death. I was female for the first time, in Barcelona, Spain, and I became a mortician, much to my parents' despair. I stayed single, bred and showed pedigree cats since I lived in an apartment, and became a reconstruction specialist when it came to my work. I could make any dead body look like new, really."

Sirius looked a little queasy at that idea and Harry grinned at him.

"Meanwhile, Tom, who'd had his own positive taste of creating a family in his previous life decided to try that again. He got married, had four kids, and became a two-Michelin-star chef. I also decided that this life I would reach out to Tom since we were in this together. Until then we'd only ever really interacted when we ran into each other and then only ever briefly. I thought perhaps we should compare stories or something. So I went to eat at his restaurant during a weekend trip to Madrid and asked to speak to the chef. Tom was not amused and basically told me not to bother him and that he wanted nothing to do with me."

"That's rich," Sirius said, looking offended on Harry's behalf.

"Nah, I got it," Harry said with a small shake of his head. "Tom was still catching up on how to be an actual human being and he just wanted to enjoy his family in peace. But I also knew he'd have to pay the price eventually."

"How so?" Remus asked with a puzzled look.

"Our next life, we were Swedish muggles. Male for me, and female for Tom. And Tom had just lost his family, his wife and children and grandchildren and he was having difficulty dealing with that loss. I tried to reach out to her but Tom still didn't want anything to do with me, blaming me for all the loss she was suffering. Tom became an alcoholic and died from fatty liver disease in her forties. She had no spouse or kids that time, just spent two decades working in her parents' awning business."

"And what about you?" Sirius asked, looking like he half-dreaded the answer.

"I became a police officer for the first, but not the last, time," Harry said, not without some pride. "And I also allowed myself to seek out a real relationship again. I chose a male partner,

since I still wasn't ready to have kids again, but I met a wonderful guy named Alexander, a lawyer. We were married for more than forty-five years."

"Wow, that's quite the while," Sirius breathed.

"Yeah, we had a good marriage. We had probably ten nieces and nephews between us that we got to spoil when they were kids, and later on we spent our holidays travelling the world together. We visited every continent at least once, save Antarctica. When we got older we enjoyed going on these luxurious train rides, like the Orient Express and such." Harry pursed his lips as bittersweet memories resurfaced. Just because he now loved Tom with all this heart and soul didn't mean that he suddenly no longer loved other people he'd shared lives with, and Alexander had been a fantastic husband. Funny and caring and driven. In some ways, Harry still missed him, no matter he only had eyes for Tom those days. And Harry knew Tom felt the same about some of his spouses he'd had before getting involved with Harry. They'd talked about it often enough.

Harry cleared his throat. "Our next lives were in feudal Japan, still muggles in the 1700s. We were samurai in neighbouring villages and I got married and had two kids, more so because it was expected of me as the oldest son of my parents, but I had a nice wife and wonderful kids. And then, for some reason I can no longer remember there was a battle between our areas, and I hacked and slashed my enemies until I got Tom before my sword. I had a clean shot of his neck but I didn't take it." Harry ignored the wide-eyed looks Sirius and Remus were giving him. "I couldn't just kill him for no real reason at all."

"He hadn't been Voldemort in a long time," Remus guessed.

"Exactly. He was just Tom, just a guy stuck in the same unending cycle as I was. Anyway, I spared Tom, but that distraction left me open to one of Tom's colleagues and I got hacked down and died. And that was that."

"Merlin," Sirius sighed, rubbing a hand across his face. "I can't get over how easy you talk about death."

"I didn't always," Harry quickly assured him. "But when you can't really die you start looking at things differently. Anyway, our next life we're both muggle girls, and we meet in high school, in the USA. And we finally start talking. First, because Tom wanted to thank me for sparing him...well, in his own way, mostly he scolded me for my reckless behaviour. But he also told me that he had honoured my sacrifice by financially taking care of my wife and children for as long as he lived, so that was nice."

"That was the least he could do," Sirius mumbled.

Harry grinned and shook his head. "He did the right thing by that society's standards. But now we'd started talking and we kept talking and we became genuine friends. Stayed in touch throughout college, I went to the east coast and Tom to the west coast, and we eventually both settled in Chicago, got jobs there, even were roommates for a year or so until Tom moved in with her boyfriend. And then she died in a car crash. Got hit by a drunk driver." Harry stared down at the table, unsure how Sirius and Remus would react to the next bit. "And I didn't have much to live for. I had a single mother who I had no contact with

because she was an abusive bitch. No siblings, no spouse. A mediocre job and a mountain of student debts. And I missed Tom like crazy and didn't want to have to live the rest of my life without him. So I slit my wrists and died, so I could start over with Tom again."

"Merlin, Harry!" Sirius looked like he wanted to jump up from his seat. Remus took that bit of news slightly better, staying calm though he did frown at Harry.

"I know. Suicide isn't something to speak lightly of, and to anyone else I'd say seek help if you have suicidal thoughts." Harry gave both men a pleading look, needing them to understand his unique position. "But at that point I knew I'd simply reincarnate again. And even if I didn't, I would have been fine with that."

"I suppose your situation is rather unique in that regard," Remus said softly with a small nod, while Sirius still looked like he wanted to grab Harry and not let go for a long time.

"Life number eleven we were wizards again, both male, in France. Tom was ten years older so we didn't meet until we were older, while I was already in my thirties and Tom decided to get into politics."

Sirius sat up a little. "Politics? Pureblood-propaganda-type politics?"

"Nope." Harry offered his godfather a teasing grin. "Politics that were very favourable to muggleborns and half-bloods. I was a muggleborn that life and Tom a half-blood, again. After attending Beauxbatons, Tom had gotten his masteries in curse-breaking and warding and worked in that field until he got fed up with the incompetence of the French ministry of magic and decided to try and change that. I'd become an Auror right out of Beauxbatons, so that's how we met."

Harry took his time pouring them all another cup of tea because he knew the next bit of news might really shock his two visitors to the point they might want to yell and scream at him. Harry honestly had no idea how they would react but he did know that tea always helped to calm the nerves.

"Both of us were more or less married to our jobs, didn't have any serious relationships. We picked up our friendship pretty much where we left off in our previous life, only this time, after a year or so, we started having sex as well. Friends with benefits and all that."

Remus' look was rather knowing, as if he already had expected it would come to this, but Sirius actually jumped up, just as Harry thought he might.

"Harry Potter!" Sirius placed both hands on the table and leaned closer to Harry. "Did you really sleep with the murderer of your parents?"

"Which ones?" Harry said pointedly while he quirked a daring eyebrow at Sirius. "I've had more than one set of parents, after all."

That seemed to deflate Sirius a little bit and after Remus gently tugged on his arm, Sirius sat down again. "Let's just let Harry tell the whole story," Remus suggested softly, and Sirius eventually nodded his consent even though he still looked rather constipated.

“Anyway, Tom became the Minister for Magic and I made it to Head Auror. This was also the first magical life where I actively started getting masteries, just for fun, to challenge myself. I got them in transfiguration and charms that time, and after I took a curse to my knee and had to retire from Auror service I spent the last decades of my life teaching transfiguration at Beauxbatons. After Tom retired from politics we did move into a cottage together and made our relationship official, not that anyone cared at that point. I died of dragon pox, and after that Tom killed himself because he didn’t see much use in him spending a few more years as a very frail old man simply waiting to die. That’s the first time he did so, but not the last.”

“I still can’t believe you just fucked the guy,” Sirius muttered, though there wasn’t much heat behind it anymore. It sounded more like he thought he should deliver some cursory objection, just because.

Harry frowned and he tried to recall what the next lives were. His earlier lives were always easier to remember because they’d had such an impact on who he was and who he had become and how his relationship with Tom had developed. It was later on that things just started to blur together.

“Let’s see. Life number twelve we were witches in ancient China. That was in the Yellow River valley, during the Xia dynasty. We both married husbands, as was expected in those days. Both fine wizards, and we started families. It was fascinating to see how the magical world worked that early in history. Tom and I both specialized in rituals that were used a lot in those days, and we taught local magical children, because there wasn’t any official school yet.”

“That must have been a bit of a culture shock,” Remus said with an amused smile.

“Oh yeah, but I’ve always found history fascinating, and so has Tom, so it really was an interesting life. Number thirteen we were muggles in the Soviet Union under Stalin. I was a young Jewish woman. My father was a doctor and my mother a physicist. Tom was one of the soldiers sent to imprison us and take us to a gulag. Instead he took us on the run, trying to get to any kind of border to leave the country, but Russia is fucking big and within the week we were caught and executed on the spot, all of us.”

Sirius’ mouth was hanging open while Remus looked suddenly a bit pale.

“Yeah, Stalin was a real piece of work. These kind of things were pretty fucking normal during the era he ruled the country,” Harry said with a shrug. They’d lived in Stalin-era Russia more than once and the second time had been even worse than the first one.

“Number fourteen we were muggles in Victorian era London and we ended up hunting monsters.”

“What?” Sirius asked, mouth dropping open again after he’d just managed to close it.

Harry snickered and sat up a little. This was a subject he loved sharing with people because it was just so much fun. “So, as you’ve probably guessed by now, there are any number of universes out there, with any number of earths. Some with magic like the wizarding world,

some with no magic at all, or some with different kinds of magic or powers, however you want to call it.”

“How many different types of magic have you encountered?” Remus asked eagerly, ever the scholarly type, but Harry waved his question away. They could discuss those kind of things later, after Harry was done with his story.

“What’s more, there is also an overlap between fiction and reality in different worlds. The monsters we hunted in life number 14 were fictional movie monsters we saw in movies in other worlds. One life, Tom and I were female demon hunters called vampire slayers. Yet some twenty lives later we lived in a world where vampire slayers were the subject of a very popular TV show. One life we were mutants, people with special powers, yet in quite a few other worlds mutants appear in fictional comic books.” Harry waited a moment, making sure he had their full attention. “And in life number eighteen, when we owned a pharmacy in Mauritania, Africa, I got quite the shock when one day I saw a book called ‘Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone’ sitting on a bookshelf in the local library.”

Both Sirius and Remus gaped at him with utterly blank stares.

“Yep, we’re fictional in some worlds. Muggles have written books about us and movies have been made, and one life, when Tom and I were theme park vloggers while we lived in Orlando, Florida, there was even a theme park called The Wizarding World of Harry Potter. Tom and I took great delight in making videos of fake Diagon Alley and fake Hogsmeade while drinking fake butterbeer while we actually were Harry Potter and Tom Riddle for real. It was pretty hilarious.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Remus finally managed to say. “That is quite extraordinary.”

“Yeah, I know,” Harry said while giving Remus a pleased smile. “Tom and I have a theory, that the more important an idea is in the collective minds of humans, the more often it’s repeated in different worlds. Things like Disney and Star Wars are so well known and well liked that we see them in just about every other world if we live in modern times. And lately, the Harry Potter books have joined that kind of collective popularity. Almost every modern world we live in now, as long as it doesn’t have a wizarding world for real, has the fictional Harry Potter books.”

“I’m a fictional character?” Sirius asked, looking simultaneously quite shocked yet oddly pleased.

“Yes, and you’re pretty popular too. The marauders always have plenty of fans,” Harry told him.

“You hear that, Moony?” Sirius nudged Remus with his elbows. “We have fans.”

“Remarkable,” Remus said in tone of voice as dry as the desert. “You’d think people would have better taste.”

“Pfft.” Sirius stuck up his nose. “I’ve always been plenty popular at Hogwarts.”

Remus shook his head and gestured at Harry. "I'd love to hear more about this but I also want to learn what else happened to you."

"All right," Harry said, gathering his thoughts while he sipped his tea. So far it was all going better than expected, he was pleased to note. "Anyway, number 14 in Victorian times. I was a rich widow and Tom was a American gunslinger with an estranged wife back in New York. My husband had been killed by vampires and that is what got me into monster hunting. I saved Tom from becoming vampire dinner after he'd just arrived in London. We teamed up and spent many years hunting the monsters hiding in the shadows until we got trapped in a burning building and died. Thankfully the smoke got us before the flames reached us, so it wasn't too bad." Harry finished his tea and continued, since he was almost at the point where he wanted to end his story. "Our next life, number fifteen, is when we first got married officially. We were a witch and wizard at Hogwarts in the eighties, but there was no Voldemort or Dumbledore or Harry Potter. And after we left school we married and had three children. I got my mastery in Ancient Runes and Warding and Tom got a mastery in Alchemy. That was a nice, quiet life in the wizarding world."

Sirius was back to rubbing his hands across his face in slight disbelief while Remus gave Harry a very contemplative look. "How many lives have you lived?" Remus asked him quietly, as if dreading the answer.

"Almost 200. I'm pretty sure this is number 194, but I might be off by a few either way."

Remus squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. "And how long would you say you've lived in each lifetime, on average?"

Harry considered that. He knew what Remus was getting at, since he and Tom had done the math themselves plenty of times. "Well, some lives we died young, and others we made it to 90 and a handful of times even to over 100. So, on average, perhaps 60 years old per lifetime."

"So 200 times 60 is 12000 years. You've lived for 12000 years." Remus looked like he wanted to cry when he stared at Harry.

"Fucking hell," Sirius whispered, the enormity of Harry's situation finally getting through to him.

"Yep, that sounds about right. Tom once did a detailed calculation of every life we lived, but that was at least two dozen lives ago." Harry gave them both a brave smile. "And for most of those lives, I've been married to Tom, or if we couldn't get married for whatever reason, we'd still share our lives in other ways. I've been a police officer more times than I can remember, a firefighter multiple times, have been part of all disciplines of the military in numerous countries. I've been a doctor in a fair few specialities, and I've been a veterinarian at least three times. I've won an Oscar, several Grammy's, the Pulitzer prize, and Tom and I were awarded a Nobel prize for Medicine for our work in finding a cure for Alzheimer's disease. Oh, and I got awarded a Medal of Honour. Twice. I play every instrument that has pretty much ever existed and I speak more languages than I can genuinely recall."

“Harry,” Remus said and it sounded like he wanted to pull Harry into a hug but wasn’t sure if that would be welcome.

“I’m used to it now. Yes, sometimes we get tired, sometimes we want things to end, but then some new, interesting life happens and we’re happy to still be alive to experience it. Most of it has been good. Yes, some lives were utter shit, but most have been pretty good and some have been really fucking amazing. It’s not bad, not really.” Harry tried to give Remus an encouraging smile. “We’ve been British and American a lot, but we’ve lived in so many different countries in so many different times. We’ve been part of every religion and every race and every culture. I could write countless books about what it’s been like to experience that, to see life through the eyes of different individuals all throughout the world.”

“Still, it sounds genuinely overwhelming,” Remus said, trying to visibly pull himself together. Sirius still sat staring at Harry quietly. “And now? What happens now?”

“Ah.” Harry released a deep sigh and sat up a little. “Normally, Tom and I get our memories back when we look into each other’s eyes. Or if one of us dies but is resuscitated. That is what happened this time. Dear cousin Dudley drowned me and I got my memories back. I wasn’t about to suffer through anymore of the Dursleys’ abuse so I left. Got myself set up here while I try to find Tom and put him back to rights.”

“Wait, Tom...or Voldemort...is still out there?” Remus asked with a frown while Sirius looked like he wanted to say something but kept quiet at the last minute.

“Yep. He’s still alive, after a fashion. He lost his body and he’s still fucknuts insane, but I know how to fix him. Give him his body and his sanity back,” Harry said, hoping the two men before him wouldn’t make a big deal out of that. No such luck.

“Wait, wait,” Sirius said, holding up his hand while he narrowed his eyes at Harry. “I get that you love the bloke and that you’ve shared a ton of lives, but he murdered James and Lily and countless others. Marlene, Gideon, Fabian, my brother Regulus. This means nothing to you?”

Harry considered what to say next. He didn’t want to sound callous, but to him those people meant very little when it came to choosing between them or Tom. “Sirius, I’ve had beloved parents in almost every life I’ve lived. I’ve had siblings and friends and children and grandchildren. And I’ve lost them all. I don’t see loss in the same way you do. Yes, I’m sorry James and Lily died, but I never knew them. I love the idea of them, but that’s all I can manage. And I know they’ve moved on, that their souls have been reincarnated and they’re living new lives out there. But Tom is still here, disembodied and hurting and needing help desperately.”

Sirius remained quiet as he stared at the tabletop.

“How are you making yourself look like this?” Remus asked, looking Harry up and down.

“Aging potions,” Harry said candidly. “I am physically only ten years old and it sucks to be an adult stuck in a child’s body, so I just take a dose of the potion every day.”

Remus nodded thoughtfully and then curved an eyebrow as he looked at Harry. “And you have no intention of informing Dumbledore about any of this? I can understand not wanting to inform the ministry, since they might lock you up in the Department of Mysteries for the rest of your life to study you, but Dumbledore seems very concerned about you.”

“Dumbledore can go fuck himself,” Harry said while giving Remus an even stare. “I suffered through my first life because of what that man did to me. And yes, I get it, he’s a general, he has to make sacrifices. I’ve been a general, with plenty of stars on my shoulder. I get it, I do, but that still doesn’t change how I feel about that man. Do you know how messed up I was in my first life because of how I grew up with the Dursleys, and because of all the shit I’d been through at Hogwarts?” Harry inhaled a sharp breath, trying to keep his temper down that wanted to rise and lash out now that these old hurts were resurfacing. “The first ten years of my marriage to Ginny Weasley were so fucked up that Ginny eventually took the kids and went to stay with her parents because she couldn’t take my raging temper and emotional unavailability anymore. If it wasn’t for Hermione, we would have ended up divorced, but thank fuck that Hermione found a squib who’d become a psychologist. I saw her twice a week for years. I credit that woman for saving my marriage and my sanity. That is why I don’t give a fuck about Dumbledore, because that is what that man condemned me to all in the name of the greater good.”

“I’m sorry you went through that,” Remus said with a thoughtful nod. “I suppose I can understand why you’d want to exclude Dumbledore from this. The first thing he told Sirius when he came to see him in St Mungo’s was that once you were found you’d have to return to the Dursleys immediately.”

“And I told him to fuck right off,” Sirius said with a defiant glare at Remus. “And Harry just about confirmed that all those rumours about how those muggles treated him are true.”

“Look, I’m bringing Tom back, not Voldemort. You have to understand that Voldemort is dead and gone. And I don’t plan on bringing Harry Potter back, not publicly. My new adult identity is Jack Bird, I have it all set up already.”

“Just let Harry’s fate stay a mystery,” Remus whispered.

“Yep, pretty much. There is no need for him to resurface, because the only people who I want to know the truth are you two.” Harry leaned back in his chair and stretched his neck. He was getting stiff from tensing up because of the subject matter. Recalling his life like that was an emotional rollercoaster for him.

“Sirius,” Harry said and his godfather looked at him with tired grey eyes. “I need your help. Regulus stole an artifact from Voldemort that I need to bring him back sane. I know where it is hidden at Grimmauld Place. Will you let me get it?”

Sirius seemed to think this over while he stared at Harry evenly.

“Oh, and just for the record, if you dare throw out any books or artifacts from Grimmauld Place without offering them to me first, I will change you into a fluffy bunny, Sirius Black. I had to sit through that nonsense in my first life, seeing perfectly good books being thrown

away because they contain dark magic. And don't even start on that, Remus. I am old and wise enough to know what I'm doing when it comes to magic like that."

Remus, who'd opened his mouth to say something, quickly closed it again.

"I want to say no," Sirius finally said, quite honestly. "Because I don't want the bastard that killed James and Lily to live in any way shape or form. But what if I say no, what will you do?"

"Honestly?" Harry glanced up at the ceiling while he thought that over quickly. "Either steal that artifact from you, or if that doesn't work, bring Tom back without it and hope for the best. There is a chance I might bring Voldemort back instead, in which case I'll have to kill him and I'll immediately kill myself after I do that because I'm not sticking around here without my soulmate. That is what I will do."

Sirius nodded, cheeks paling considerably. "Yeah, you can have it, whatever it is. Just make sure Voldemort stays gone. And you can have whatever books you want from Grimmauld Place. I plan on gutting the place and rebuilding it."

"Excellent plan. And thank you, Sirius. You've just made my life infinitely easier." Harry leaned back in his chair, utterly exhausted. "How about I stop by Grimmauld Place tomorrow, two in the afternoon-ish?"

"That's fine," Sirius said, eyes hooded and cheeks pale. Harry realized Sirius was still recovering from Azkaban and was probably exhausted as well. Harry glanced at the clock on his living room wall. They had been talking for hours. Yeah, Sirius was probably in need of some rest, same as Harry.

"Well then, I think it's best if I kick you both out now," Harry said, pushing his chair away from the table. "I'm pooped and Sirius looks like he's about to keel over as well."

The fact that Sirius had nothing to say to that, no smart remark to make, proved Harry's assessment more than anything.

"We will see you tomorrow. Take care, Harry. And thank you for telling us," Remus said as Harry opened the front door for them.

"Thanks for listening and not freaking out too much," Harry said, truly grateful. It always was nice to have people who knew the truth about their situation. A rarity, since in most lives there was no one to tell the truth to who would even slightly believe them.

The moment Sirius and Remus were gone, Harry flopped down on his couch, stretched out and closed his eyes. He was asleep in minutes.

Harry dreamed.

Tom flipped her long brown hair over her shoulder, stake gripped tightly in her fist. "We're hot chicks with superpowers, B. What's not to like about this life?"

Harry held her breath while Tom cut open the egg sac of their poecilotheria metallica, a bright-blue tarantula they were breeding for the first time; success...there were at least a hundred eggs with legs inside!

Harry held Tom's hand as they stood in front of their forge, where Tom worked as a blacksmith while Harry raised the kids, watching the royal procession pass them by with King Henry VIII at the helm; it was like seeing actual history being made before their eyes.

Harry watched as Tom removed her hijab, black hair spilling free, now that they were alone in their room. "I swear, babe, if any of our kids ever want to ride a motorcycle, I'll disown them. I just spent five hours trying to put some idiot's innards back together where they belonged and the fucker still died on my table right as I got ready to stitch him back up."

Harry had rarely felt so accomplished as when he and Tom, very slowly yet surely, reached the summit of Mount Everest; he'd also rarely felt as exhausted as he did then, and they still had to get down the damned mountain, at least back to camp four!

As Tom stood filming a man making Isaw at a little street food stall in Manila, Harry checked her phone for the hundredth time that day. "Babe. BABE! We hit one hundred thousand subscribers on our Youtube channel!"

Harry woke with a gasp and curled in on himself. Having spent so much time talking about their early lives only made Harry miss Tom more now that he was alone. It took Harry at least fifteen minutes to find enough energy to get up from the couch and find some dinner. It was already getting dark outside, which meant Harry had napped right through dinner time and it was almost time for bed.

Inspecting his cooling cabinet, Harry found some leftover mushroom soup he'd made earlier that week. He heated it up with a quick spell and ate it quietly, not even bothering to turn on the TV. Afterwards, he took a long shower and went to bed. He read the next chapter in the muggle novel he'd gotten from the library and by the end of it his eyes were drooping shut so he just called it an early night.

The next day, Harry felt better, though still a little brittle around the emotional edges. He spent a quiet morning at home in his potions lab, starting on an improved batch of Wolfsbane potion for Remus. Harry had vastly improved the original recipe for his Potions mastery at some point and he couldn't wait to have Remus try it. But it took a week to brew, so Harry had no time to waste to get it going, since the full moon was in ten days.

Harry put on his Jack Bird glamours, brown eyes, dirty blond hair, before he went to visit with his godfather. You never knew who you'd meet and Harry liked being cautious. He apparated straight to the doorstep of twelve Grimmauld Place, just like he'd done dozens of times in his first life, and knocked on the door.

Sirius answered it, also looking quite well-rested.

"Hi," Harry said as Sirius waved him in. "You're looking better."

Sirius snorted. "I went to bed pretty much right away after we came home and I slept until 8 this morning."

"Well, if you needed it and didn't have anywhere else to go..." Harry said with a brief grin. Then he looked around as he walked towards the drawing room. "Where's Kreacher?"

"Kreacher?" Sirius asked, clearly confused why Harry would ever want to ask after the elf. "I sent him to work for my grandfather. I don't like him, he hates me, and this way everybody's happy."

"Okay," Harry said, spotting the locket lying in the display cabinet in the corner of the drawing room. "Remind me to tell you later what Kreacher and Regulus actually did to get this thing." Harry smiled at Sirius, who stared at him with raised eyebrows. Opening the cabinet, Harry grabbed the golden chain and held it up to study the locket. He could feel it warm in his grip.

"Is that the artifact?" Sirius asked in astonishment, obviously not expecting it to be a random piece of jewellery that had been lying around his house.

"Yup, I'll be taking this off your hands," Harry said, slipping the chain around his neck and the locket behind his shirt. The gold felt warm against his bare skin.

There was a knock on the front door and Sirius went to answer it before Harry could say more. While waiting, Harry took out his wand and ran some diagnostic spells over the other artifacts in the cabinet, just for curiosity's sake. Harry had developed a real fondness for curse-breaking.

"Ah, good afternoon, Sirius," Dumbledore said loudly as Harry heard Sirius open the front door. "Might I intrude upon you for a brief visit? There are a few things I'd like to discuss."

Harry's mouth curled up into a sharp smile. Now things were becoming really interesting.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Harry slipped his wand back in his arm holster and stepped out of the drawing room, announcing this presence, as was the polite thing to do. And Harry had learned a long time ago that it didn't hurt anything to be polite, especially with people you didn't like. Kill 'em with kindness, and all that.

"I was wondering, my boy," Dumbledore said to a very unimpressed looking Sirius, "if we might make use of this house to search for your godson." It was then that Dumbledore noticed Harry standing in the doorway to the drawing room.

"Now there's a face I saw just the other day after I ate a chocolate frog," Harry said with a crooked grin and a relaxed pose as he leaned against the doorpost, laying on his American accent nice and thick. "Albus Dumbledore, as I live and breathe. Headmaster of Hogwarts, right?"

"Indeed," Dumbledore said with a slow nod. "Now you know my name, but I am still at a loss as to yours."

"Jack Bird, at your service," Harry said and touched his finger to his temple in a little salute.

"I didn't realize you'd been making new friends so soon already, my boy," Dumbledore said, unable to hide his curiosity as he gave Sirius a questioning look.

"Oh no," Harry answered for his godfather, since Sirius seemed at a loss of how to respond. "I only just met Mr Black here. But Remus and I go way back."

"Indeed?" Dumbledore looked from Harry to Sirius and back, blue eyes twinkling behind his glasses. Ugh, Harry had forgotten they did that.

"Indeed," Remus said as if on cue as he climbed the stairs up from the basement kitchen. "Jack and I have know each other for a while now."

"About two years," Harry added, to help Remus fill in their shared history on the fly.

"Belgium is where we met," Remus continued while he stopped beside Harry and gave him a warm smile.

Harry nodded amicably. It was easy enough to go along with that. "In that little bookstore in Rue de Magique, god, what's it called again?"

"Livres et la Vie," Remus filled in helpfully, as Harry knew he would. He couldn't imagine Remus travelling to any country and not visit any local bookstores.

"It's always nice to meet a fellow bibliophile," Harry finished with a huge grin. "And when Mr Black here was looking to get rid of some books Remus knew just who to owl."

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr Bird,” Dumbledore said jovially. “Am I to assume you attended Ilvermorny?”

Harry shook his head as though expressing deep regret. “Nah, wanted to, but my parents couldn’t afford it. Home-schooled myself, basically. Remus here only just convinced me to get my OWLs and NEWTs this December.”

Remus played along beautifully. Really, who knew he was such an accomplished actor? Harry sure as hell didn’t. “I’ve been telling Jack for years now that sitting for official exams will open up far more lucrative jobs for him in the future.”

“What fields are you looking to work in?” Dumbledore asked pleasantly enough.

“Oh, a little of this, a little of that,” Harry said with a careless shrug. “I’m pretty good at warding, curse-breaking, defence, that sort of thing.”

“Defence?” Dumbledore’s interest suddenly went through the roof and too late Harry realized he was probably looking for the next victim to convince to take the cursed Defence position at Hogwarts. Yeah, Harry had no time for that, but it did remind him he should probably return to Hogwarts and remove that silly curse. Tom had explained more than once how he’d applied it, so it shouldn’t be a problem for Harry to break it.

“I’ve done a little duelling, mostly for fun, sadly for very little profit,” Harry said with a chuckle, downplaying his talents for the time being. Once he got his Defence mastery sorted he was convinced Dumbledore would come seek him out again, but for the time being it was better if the headmaster lost interest.

“Ah.” Dumbledore nodded in understanding.

“Sirius was looking for help in getting rid of some cursed items as well,” Remus said while he briefly glanced at Harry as if to ask permission to add this to their made-up history. Harry gave him the barest of nods in reply. “And Jack is the best curse-breaker I know that won’t charge through the roof like Gringotts would.”

Harry snorted, knowing Gringotts did indeed charge ridiculous prices for their professional curse-breakers. Harry had worked for them in that capacity once upon a life. “Yep, I’m happy to help a friend. And I’ve got to say, from what I’ve seen so far, this house is full of interesting curses.”

“I’m happy to see you’re cleansing this space, my boy.” Dumbledore returned his attention to Sirius. “Now, as to my purpose here, as I asked you earlier, we need a place to call our own while we search for poor, lost Harry.”

“You want my house?” Sirius asked with a deep, dark frown.

“If we could use it…” Dumbledore started, but Sirius cut him off sharply.

“Understand one thing, Dumbledore, this is my house and you’re not getting it. I’m happy enough to host a meeting or two here, but that’s it. Remus and I have plans to gut the place

and redo to whole thing in the coming months.”

Dumbledore nodded sagely, as if he felt sorry for Sirius and his poor choices in wanting to keep his own fucking house to himself. “Very well, my boy. If we could hold a meeting here tomorrow night, say around seven? That would be splendid.”

“Fine,” Sirius said as he crossed his arms, clearly communicating he was just about done with the whole conversation.

“And Mr Bird, I’m sure Remus has told you about poor Harry’s fate. We can always use more talented wizards to help us in our search,” Dumbledore said while giving Harry an intensely questioning look.

“Sure, I’ll be here anyway to go through the books. Might as well see if I can help,” Harry said amicably enough, while inside he was cackling with hilarity. He was looking forward to see what Dumbledore and his order of sycophants were doing to get their hands on poor little Harry.

“Then that’s settled. I’ll see myself out, gentlemen. Until tomorrow.” And with that Dumbledore swept out the hallway and through the front door.

“Good riddance,” Sirius said with a dirty look at the closed front door.

“Yep,” Harry agreed. It had been odd to see Dumbledore again. While Dumbledore was still alive in Harry’s first life, Harry had still looked up to him as a mentor and leader in the war. He’d meant it with all his heart when he’d told Rufus Scrimgeour that one time that he was Dumbledore’s man through and through. In fact, all throughout his first life Harry had remained loyal to Dumbledore’s memory, even though he had started doubting a little after finding out about the man’s chequered past with Grindelwald.

It wasn’t until his following lives that Harry had realized what Dumbledore had done to him, and that it wasn’t okay in the slightest. Not to mention how Dumbledore had treated Tom in the orphanage. What kind of educator happily blamed the child for having an attachment disorder from growing up unloved and feared in a muggle orphanage during the great depression and later WWII.

“We only realized after we got up this morning,” Remus said, pulling Harry out of his rambling thoughts. “But it was you who sent Pettigrew to the ministry, wasn’t it?”

“Oh? Yeah, that was me,” Harry said with a slightly dismissive gesture of his hand. “I knew the rat was hiding as Percy Weasley’s pet around this time, so I picked him up when I had some business at Hogwarts anyway. In my first life, he became Ron Weasley’s pet, my best friend in Gryffindor.”

Sirius stared at him for a long moment before taking a huge step closer and pulling Harry into a tight hug. “Thank you,” Sirius said in a hoarse voice as Harry wrapped his arms around his godfather’s torso in return. “For getting me out of that hellhole.”

“My pleasure,” Harry said sincerely.

After they broke apart, Harry noticed Remus looking a little misty eyed at them both. Even after almost 200 lifetimes Harry still hadn't learned how to handle sincere gratitude like that so he awkwardly cleared his throat and frantically thought of a change of topic. He found it quickly enough when remembering that morning.

"Before I forget, don't buy him any Wolfsbane potion this month," Harry said to Sirius while gesturing at Remus.

"Er.." Sirius looked between them both in confusion. "I was thinking about ordering some. It's supposed to make the change easier for Moony."

Harry smiled to reassure his godfather. "Yes, it does." Harry turned to address Remus. "But I just started a batch of my improved Wolfsbane. It has far fewer side-effects, and it will much improve your recovery from the transformation, not just mentally, but physically as well. It'll be done in a week and you'll have enough to last six months to start with."

Remus swallowed and briefly glanced down at his shoes before grabbing hold of Harry's shoulder and pulling him in for a brief embrace. "Thank you," he whispered as he released Harry. "You don't have to go through all that trouble for me, but I'm also not idiotic enough to outright refuse that kind of help."

"You're welcome." Harry shuffled a shoe across the wooden floorboards, feeling all sorts of awkward. Yeah, him and gratitude still hadn't learned to get along even after all those years. "So, how about we look at some books?"

Remus chuckled and gestured towards the stairs. "The library is on the second floor. But I have a feeling you already know that."

"I honestly didn't remember where it was exactly. It has been a very long time since I've set foot in this house," Harry said as he followed Remus, while Sirius brought up the rear.

Inside the library Remus found some old rolls of blank parchment that he transfigured into crates. "I suggest we start by packing the books you'll want to keep, Sirius, since we have to empty the library anyway to remodel it. And then Harry can take what he wants of what's leftover."

"I'll take everything you don't want," Harry said at once. He hadn't been lying when he mentioned being a bit of a bibliophile. He hadn't been one in his first ten lives or so, but the more he learned, the more he appreciated books. Not the mention that Harry had been a writer in quite a few lives. Sometimes as a full-time novelist or script-writer, and other times as a lucrative part-time job writing romance novels to self-publish on the Kindle. That alone made it that Harry had a really tough time getting rid of books those days. He knew first-hand how much time it took to create them, no matter the book's subject.

"You can have anything that's even remotely dark. I'll keep the rest, so Moony won't complain too much about an empty library," Sirius said, waving his wand over a whole row of books to check for curses. Harry followed his example at the other end of the library.

And that's how the three of them spent the afternoon. Harry had brought his library ledger, so he could enter every new book he packed up in his own conjured boxes into his private library system. That way all he had to do was place his new books by subject on the appropriate shelves in his own small, but growing library at home.

There were quite a few really dark yet interesting titles, on rituals, dark creatures and their uses, poisons, artifacts, all the way up to necromancy. Harry and Tom had been necromancers once, when Harry had been a Russian wizard and had attended Durmstrang. Russia didn't have such strict laws against necromancy and both Tom and Harry had studied it as much as they could, mainly since by that life they'd already made a detailed study of pretty much every subject of light magic available.

And Harry had found, as long as you kept control of yourself and didn't use dark magic at the drop of a hat, especially not to permanently hurt others, there wasn't a problem studying it and using it from time to time. It didn't affect you negatively as long as you didn't over-indulge. Of course, if one was a sadistic individual who thrived on causing others pain and misery, as many of the more fanatical Death Eaters had been, one had the tendency to use more and more dark magic until it had done irreversible damage to one's body, mind and soul.

Harry had been throwing the imperius curse around like it was free candy in the first few days after he got his memories back and he was fine, because after he'd used it for what he needed done, he had stopped. Simple as that.

By the time dinner-time rolled around, and they were about half-way done with emptying the library, Harry offered to pick up some takeaway for dinner. He found an Indian restaurant just around the corner from Grimmauld place and got some chicken korai, lamb tikka masala and a tandoori mixed grill. He added some poori, chapati and papadoms, and on the way back hopped inside a corner store and picked up some bottles of Heineken.

They sat at the familiar, rustic table in the basement kitchen and decimated their Indian feast. Remus had an impressive appetite thanks to his lycanthropy and Sirius was still playing catch up after a decade of suffering malnutrition in Azkaban. And Harry enjoyed this new relationship he was building with the two men.

They'd always treated Harry with kindness and affection in his first life, but now they treated him like an adult. An equal. The way they talked was different than Harry remembered, and the subjects they discussed were far more mature than anything Harry had heard them talk about in life number one. And Harry was deeply grateful he'd decided to tell Sirius and Remus the truth. Now he had two new, adult friends. If he hadn't told them the truth, if he somehow had been stuck pretending to be a child around them, Harry knew he would have truly missed out on having this kind of meaningful relationship with them. Yep, the more Harry thought about it, the more he knew he'd made the right decision to open up to them.

After finishing every last scrap of food and all the beer, Harry went home, stuffed but content. He made himself a cup of rooibos tea and sat down at his dining table while he displayed all the horcruxes in front of him.

The diary. The ring. The locket. The cup. And the diadem.

Harry now had more of Tom's soul in his possession than what Tom the wraith was left with. What a strange idea. Nagini hadn't been made into a horcrux yet at this time, Harry knew, so he now had all the horcruxes he needed to bring Tom back whole and sane.

Problem was, he didn't have Tom. Or rather, the main piece that was Tom the wraith. And wraiths were really nothing more than souls that were anchored to this plane of existence and were therefore unable to move on. It could happen through an artifact like a horcrux, as a self-inflicted condition, or it could be achieved through some very black magic, to torture your enemies even beyond their death by never letting them find peace in the afterlife. Harry had studied such magic, but had never used it. There were limits, still, even for him, of what he was willing to put others through.

Tom, of course, was a soul unable to move on because he was an idiot who was too clever and arrogant for his own good and as an angsty teenager got his hands on a very incomplete summary on how to become immortal. That basically summed up Tom's poor life-choices.

So now, in order to bring Tom back with body and soul intact, Harry needed Tom. Harry knew what rituals he wanted to use, and he'd be able to perform those rituals without any problems. It was catching Tom that was the issue.

Souls were without substance. Or rather, they were without any substance known to man, muggle or wizard. There was no 'catching' them in the sense that one could lay out a trap and wait for it to spring. Unless it was self-inflicted, affecting souls with magic was very, very difficult. That was the reason why cursing another person's soul was such black magic, because it could only be accomplished by severely damaging your own soul in the process.

The easiest way to affect a soul was for it to inhabit a body, even if it only possessed one. Tom would be possessing Quirrell at some point in the future. Quirrell had only just taken a sabbatical year, after teaching muggle studies at Hogwarts for a while. Harry didn't know when exactly Quirrell had bumped into Tom the wraith, but from what Harry knew about possession and how Tom had manifested on Quirrell's body, their meeting couldn't have been very long before next summer. Which meant that if Harry decided to wait on Quirrell to bring Tom back, he'd be waiting for almost a year.

Harry himself could travel to Albania, of course, but then he'd have to find Tom, which might take months, and then he'd somehow have to convince a Tom who didn't know or trust him to come home with him. Yeah, knowing his soulmate, Tom was far too suspicious and paranoid to fall for that. And Harry couldn't control a wraith with magic.

So what Harry needed was a devoted follower of Tom to go find him, let himself be possessed by Tom and bring him back to Harry as soon as possible. Harry could then control the follower and perform the ritual.

And as soon as Harry gave it some serious thought, he knew exactly who to send to go fetch Tom the wraith.

That's why the next morning Harry found himself standing outside the Crouch farmhouse in Cornwall. Knowing how punctual Crouch Sr was, Harry assumed he'd already left for the ministry. That meant that Harry could just walk in, stun Winky and cast a new imperius curse

on Barty Jr, thereby breaking the one his father had on his son. And Barty Jr was such a fanatical Death Eater that Harry would barely have to give him a command before he'd run off to find his Lord.

Harry walked up the path as though he had important business there, with confident strides and head held high. He knocked on the door and the moment Winky opened it he stunned her with a silent spell. Then he tied her up quickly, since house-elf magic was known to be able to overcome wizarding magic faster than one might expect. Harry waved his wand around, silently summoning the invisibility cloak he knew Crouch Sr made Barty live under.

But there was no cloak. Harry all but ran from room to room, using every spell he knew to find hidden people, but he found no sign of life besides himself and Winky.

How curious.

In the end, Harry admitted defeat and went back to Winky. She was still tied up and watching him with wide, fearful eyes.

Harry offered her a friendly smile but it did little to calm her down, poor thing. "I mean you no harm. I am looking for Barty jr."

"The young Master is being in Azkaban," Winky whispered. "He's being there for many years now."

"Er..." Harry blinked, briefly wondering if he was just misremembering things. That did happen from time to time. But no, he knew his first life inside and out, since he'd not only lived it that one time, but he'd also read the books and seen the movies many times throughout other lives. Not to mention, occasionally Harry was known to indulge in writing the odd bit of fanfiction about himself, earning him many eyerolls from Tom, who then still insisted he beta-read Harry's work before publishing.

Harry knew, with absolute certainty, that Barty jr had been kept prisoner in his own home by his father up until he escaped right before Harry's fourth year.

But this wasn't Harry's original life, now was it? Apparently, this was one small detail that was different. Harry obliviated Winky and untied her, and he left before she even knew he was there at all.

"Barty Crouch jr?" Sirius asked when Harry brought it up that afternoon as they resumed their work in the Black library. "Yeah, he's still in Azkaban, same row as me, but a couple of cells down. Poor kid kept screaming and screaming for the first few weeks, and then he fell silent. Haven't heard anything from his direction for a couple of years now."

Harry nodded and released a deep, frustrated sigh.

"What did you want with him anyway?" Sirius asked as he dropped a few books on the newest fashion from the eighteenth century in one of his crates.

“I need to send a follower to go find Tom’s wraith, to bring him back here so I can put him back together,” Harry said while tapping his fingers against the cover of a book on minor curses.

“Send Lucius Malfoy,” Sirius suggested at once with a vicious smile. “Arrogant prick.”

Harry snorted with laughter at Sirius’ wicked expression. “Tempting, but as it turns out, Lucius is far less loyal than he makes it out to be. He’d probably fight the imperius curse every step of the way. No, I need someone fanatical.”

Remus didn’t even blink an eye at Harry’s mention of using one of the unforgivable curses. “Use Rosier.”

“Who?” Harry asked as he turned to look at Remus with a frown.

“Evan Rosier.”

“Huh.” Harry thought for a moment. “I’m pretty sure that’s a Death Eater that Moody killed in my first life.”

Remus actually laughed at that, but it wasn’t a very amused sound. “That might have been the better outcome. Here, Moody went to arrest Rosier without any solid evidence, just some circumstantial things. Rosier was hurt during the altercation, and afterwards sent the most vicious solicitors money can buy after the ministry while claiming he’d been put under the imperius curse by Anthony Wilkes, a proven Death Eater who had very conveniently been killed by Aurors just the week before.”

Sirius snorted, shaking his head. “They let scum like him free and they couldn’t even give me a fucking trial. And I worked as a fucking Auror.”

Harry felt a huge wave of sympathy for his godfather, but still focussed on Remus to hear the rest of the story.

“Rosier was declared innocent, was given a nice sum of gold as compensation for the injury Moody had given him, and he was given his job back at the Ministry while Moody was suspended from active duty for six months.” Remus shook his head as though he could barely believe the things he’d just said.

“Wow,” Harry said, impressed at the sheer levels of corruption inside the ministry it took to accomplish something like that. “Where is he now?”

“He’s high up in the department of transportation,” Remus said while turning back to the books he was sorting through. “That’s all I know.”

“Yeah, he sounds perfect.” Harry grinned, looking forward to hunting this Death Eater down.

Sirius looked like he wanted to say something but then thought better of it. “I was going to offer my help, but I’m guessing you don’t need it.”

“To catch one Death Eater? No,” Harry said, picking up a volume on the many uses of acromantula parts in potions. “But I appreciate the offer.”

They finished emptying the library by the end of the afternoon, after which Harry unpacked the dinner he’d cooked that morning and brought with him. Harry just loved cooking, especially for others, so he wasn’t passing up this chance. He’d made homemade falafels, pitas, houmous, and he’d picked up olives, feta and pickled cucumbers plus lettuce and sun-dried tomatoes. Remus had supplied the beer this time, a few cold bottles of Carlsberg.

They enjoyed the food and Harry suffered through an array of compliments, and just when they’d finished everything the doorbell rang, announcing their first visitors for the meeting.

As Harry helped Remus clear the table, Sirius went to answer the door, only to return with Arthur Weasley in tow.

“Molly’s watching Ron and Ginny,” Arthur said as he addressed Sirius. “But she’s helping with the search. She’s been worried sick about Harry.”

On the other side of the table, Harry tried not to stare too much, but fucking hell, Arthur looked so young. Seriously, Harry genuinely couldn’t remember ever seeing the man like this. In Harry’s memory, Arthur was a white-haired man, with wrinkles and a small potbelly. This was a man barely in his forties, or so he looked.

“Jack Bird,” Harry said when Arthur looked at him in confusion. “Friend of Remus, here to help.”

“Pleasure to meet you, young man,” Arthur said genially, and then the doorbell rang again, and Harry offered to help make tea and coffee.

As more and more visitors trickled in, Harry realized Dumbledore really had drummed up the entire Order of the Phoenix, or what was left of it after the first war with Voldemort.

Some people Harry recognized, but since he’d had so little contact with them, seeing them now did nothing to him. Like Emmeline Vance or Sturgis Podmore. But others, Harry had considered friends at least at some point in his first life, like Hagrid or McGonagall, and it was decidedly odd to see them again. On the one hand, it was great to see them healthy and happy and whole, as Harry well remembered attending both Hagrid’s and McGonagall’s funerals. He’d outlived them both. But on the other hand, Harry was so far removed from the man he’d been during his first life that it almost felt like those emotions he experienced at seeing them again weren’t really his own.

Finally, Dumbledore entered, followed by Moody and lastly, by Severus Snape.

Harry swallowed. The last time he’d seen Snape he’d been dying on the floor of the shrieking shack in a pool of his own blood. Harry had named his second son after the man, mostly at Ginny’s suggestion, because apparently Snape had done a lot to protect the students at Hogwarts from the worst of the Carrows’ terror during the year Voldemort was in power. He’d personally intervened when Amycus Carrow had it out for Ginny in particular and kept trying to get her alone.

And while Harry still firmly agreed with his initial assessment that Snape was an incredibly brave man for playing the role of spy for so many years and actively helping to bring Voldemort down, Harry was now a much older and wiser man. Not to mention, Harry had been a teacher himself a few times in different capacities. And Harry knew without a doubt that Snape sucked as an educator and shouldn't be allowed within half a mile of a classroom. How Snape treated students was abusive, plain and simple.

And thus Harry felt nice and conflicted about seeing Snape again. Snape, for his part, barely paid Harry any attention after a quick glance. Moody, on the other hand, stared at Harry for a minute or two. Harry was wearing the glamours to change his eye and hair colour, and he knew Moody would notice them thanks to his magical eye, but he'd be unable to see what Harry actually looked like. Harry wasn't worried. Lots of people wore glamours on their faces, mostly for reasons of vanity or just because they wanted to try a new look once in a while.

"Welcome, dear friends," Dumbledore said with a big gesture of his hands after everyone had found seats. "It is good to see you all again, even if it is for such disturbing reason. Harry Potter has disappeared from the care of his muggle family –"

"You mean he ran away," Harry interrupted Dumbledore, because he couldn't help himself. He'd always had trouble controlling his impulses, after all.

"Pardon?" Dumbledore said, looking a little taken aback someone had dared speak over him.

"I said, the boy ran away," Harry said with a pleasant enough smile. "After I heard from Remus what you all thought had happened, I did a little sleuthing myself this morning. Since I grew up in the muggle world, I've got no problem navigating it. Talked to a nurse named Fiona at the hospital Harry stayed at and she told me that Harry told her that his cousin was a violent bully who had drowned him at the pool. After that I had a security guard check the camera recordings of that night and you can clearly see Harry walk out of the hospital on his own. Just to make sure he hadn't returned home on his own accord I went to see the Dursleys and had a very informative chat with Petunia, Harry's aunt. Turns out, they were keeping the boy in a closet. Literally. While they had an extra bedroom available. So here is my educated guess. Harry Potter got sick and tired of the abuse, especially after he'd literally died at the hands of his loving family, and ran away."

Dead silence greeted him for about ten seconds and then everyone started talking at once, asking questions and throwing accusations around at everybody and everything. Harry sat back and reached for his cup of tea. Beside him, Remus looked at him with a single, quirked eyebrow while Sirius took great delight in shouting obscenities at Snape and Dumbledore. As Harry sipped his tea, he was genuinely sorry Molly wasn't there. He'd have loved to see her reaction to that particular truth bomb.

"Silence!" Dumbledore had to magically raise his voice to get everyone to settle down. "Mr Bird, thank you for your assessment of the situation so far. Yes, it is true that Harry's family have been perhaps a bit lacking in their care for the boy," several people started talking again at this so Dumbledore had to shush them before he could continue, "but they are his family and I am convinced that what happened between Harry and his cousin was an unfortunate accident. Now, Severus, you've been in touch with some of your Death Eater contacts?"

Snape nodded curtly. “While most appear to think getting their hands on the boy would be a good thing for a number of reason, I haven’t found anyone who appears to actually have the boy.”

Harry sighed and cleared his throat. “Harry has run away. He’s hiding somewhere in the muggle world, and the muggle world is an awfully big place. Besides, according to Petunia, she never told him about the wizarding world. Harry has no idea he even is a wizard and that there is a whole other world out there where people care for him and worry about him. As far as Harry knows, he’s all alone in the world.”

And the whole circus of raised voices and accusations started again. Harry hadn’t seen such quality entertainment in at least a few lifetimes. Hagrid even pulled out a tablecloth-sized handkerchief to dab at his teary eyes.

Just as Dumbledore had everyone somewhat calmed down again, Harry spoke up, just because he could. “Y’all should start looking in the muggle world. And be quick about it. Human traffickers are everywhere and they’re always on the lookout for small children to sell to sexual deviants.”

Aaaand there was round three of the shouting and chaos. McGonagall was laying into Dumbledore with all the ferocity of a pissed-off mother dragon while Moody was openly questioning whether Jack Bird was a Death Eater or not, come to tear the Order apart.

And Harry quietly finished his tea, absolutely sure Dumbledore would want nothing to do with him in the future, which suited Harry just fine.

The meeting went on like this, people talking over each other, demanding Dumbledore organize rescue missions to the muggle world. All entirely unrealistic, since most of the people gathered there had no clue what the muggle world really looked like, how big it really was, and how they should navigate it without sticking out like a sore thumb. Harry thought that of all the people gathered there, save for himself, perhaps only Remus, McGonagall and Snape could walk around the muggle world without drawing undue attention.

Harry well remembered that Arthur, for all that the man professed to love muggles, didn’t even know how to use muggle money or how the tube worked that one time he’d escorted Harry to the ministry before his fifth year.

Yeah, Harry wished the Order the best of luck searching for one little lost boy in the big muggle world. Especially since that little boy was sitting right there at the table with them and they didn’t have a clue.

Harry left for home as soon as the meeting ended, and whistled as he made a cup of chamomile tea to enjoy before bed. That had been brilliant and the little, abused boy that always lived inside Harry was jumping up and down in sheer joy at finally being able to throw his abuse back into the faces of some of his abusers.

Harry went to sleep with a smile on his face that night.

The next few days Harry spent between visits to Grimmauld Place, to help Sirius and Remus get rid of the many, many cursed items that could be found in the old house, and researching everything he could find about Evan Rosier. After three days, Harry knew enough to come up with a plan to capture the man. He only needed to immobilize him long enough to put him under the imperius and obliviate him.

Rosier was an accomplished duellist. Harry well remembered Moody telling him, Ron and Hermione the story of how he'd defeated Rosier in their duel, but only just. And that was a Rosier in his early twenties, against a much older and experienced Auror. Now Rosier was ten years older and ten years more experienced.

And if there was one thing Harry had learned from his times as a professional duellist during several magical lifetimes, it was that underestimating any opponent was the quickest way to end up defeated.

Harry may be much more experienced than Rosier, but his body was young underneath the aging potion. His magical core was young and much quicker to deplete than the core of an adult in his prime like Rosier was.

So, yeah, Harry had to make sure not to draw wands with Rosier. Thankfully, he knew several ways to capture people that avoided doing just that.

Harry got Rosier's address by chatting up a young man who worked at the department of transportation and who had helped Jack Bird get his apparition license. Harry 'accidentally' bumped into him at the Three Broomsticks and spent an hour drawing everything the man knew about Rosier out of him by bits and pieces before obliterating him.

Rosier, his wife and their young child lived in a well-warded house in Summerset. Rosier was the paranoid kind and since he basically ran the department of transportation he had his house connected directly to his office at the ministry. Every morning and every evening, Rosier used that direct floo connection. So there was no getting the jump on him outside his house or outside the ministry.

Harry didn't care. He simply broke into the ministry early in the morning, which was surprisingly easy. A very strong disillusionment charm, a few well-placed confundus charms and a little bit of ward breaking was all it took. Harry hid himself in Rosier's office and lay down a rune trap right in front of the fireplace. Since Rosier stepped right out of that fireplace he wouldn't be able to avoid it, not even if he noticed it. By then it would be too late. The rune trap functioned as a magical net of sorts, keeping the target immobilized for a minute or so. Harry waited patiently, leaning against the wall opposite the fireplace.

Just after nine the flames shot up and coloured green and Evan Rosier stepped out and right into the rune trap. His eyes widened but Harry hit him with the imperius curse before he could say a word. Rosier had a strong mind and fought the initial mental invasion. That was until Harry gave him the command to search for the Dark Lord and then Rosier was putty in his hands and willing to do anything for his long, lost leader. Harry gave him instructions on where he thought Voldemort might be hiding, that Rosier should quit his job and go look for him right now, and that when he'd found him and let him possess his body, to bring him to

Riddle Manor in Little Hangleton and to press the tip of his wand to the small runestone Harry gave him. That way Harry would know when Rosier and Tom had arrived.

Harry quickly obliviated Rosier and cancelled the rune trap. He was gone before Rosier came back to his senses.

As Harry walked Quinn and Lucy past Riddle Manor that afternoon he saw a figure amble through the garden and realized the old muggle caretaker still lived there. Harry took the dogs for a closer look and had a friendly little chat with the man. One imperius curse later and Frank Bryce was convinced it really was time to retire from his job as the caretaker of the old manor house. Frank contacted the council right away to apply for senior council housing. And Harry helped him along by using magic to convince a few people here and there to speed things along for old Frank. Within the week Frank had a lovely, modern flat in Greater Hangleton, full of the latest gadgets to make life easy for the elderly. And Harry could sleep well knowing he hadn't accidentally killed the old man by sending a muggle-hater like Rosier onto his path.

Harry kept the other runestone, the matching one to the stone he'd given Rosier, in his pocket at all times so he'd know when Rosier returned at once. Harry also got to work on Riddle Manor, placing a few subtle wards around it to keep curious muggles out, and he inscribed the place with runes to keep aggressive Dark Lord in. Then he set up the ritual circle he'd be using in the cellar. He also bought all the ingredients for the potion he'd need to brew and stored them in the cellar under preservation charms.

And then everything was prepared to put Tom back together and all Harry could do was wait and hope it wouldn't take Rosier months to find his soulmate.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I would apologize for the cliffhanger, but I'm not actually sorry.

Chapter 6

Harry wasn't the most patient person in the world, and he was well aware of this. Yet waiting for Rosier to find Tom the wraith required a generous amount of it, since Tom was hiding in a mountainous wilderness area and it might take Rosier weeks and weeks, if not months, to track Tom down. So in order to keep calm and not vibrate out of his skin in anticipation, during the next few weeks Harry made an effort to keep himself busy.

It was something he and Tom had learned over their many lifetimes anyway, that if you had all the time in the world, in multiple worlds even, the most important thing was to find meaningful ways to spend that time. It was also the reason the both of them had spent centuries, if not millennia at that point, learning many, many different skills. Everything from playing musical instruments to computer coding to DIY skills to arts and crafts and almost any kind of sport. They'd joined any number of clubs and organizations, from volunteering at animal shelters or soup kitchens for the homeless to spending all their weekends LARP-ing somewhere in nature with other likeminded individuals.

Not only did it save them a lot of money over many lifetimes, since they had a lot of skills and experience to do any sort of mundane task themselves instead of having to pay others to do it for them, but it also helped to stave off one of their worst enemies during their many, many lives: boredom.

And thus Harry took to foraging the many hedgerows around Little Hangleton during his walks with Quinn and Lucy. He brought home buckets of rosehips, which he turned into syrup, and elderberries, which he turned into wine. He found a veritable jackpot of nut trees growing in clusters around the cemetery on the hill and he collected piles of sweet chestnuts, hazelnuts and walnuts, and turned them into homemade granola with oatmeal and honey, and moist nut breads with raisins which he ate covered in butter for breakfast. Harry also found many edible mushrooms growing in fields and patches of forests. Harry had learned the skill of foraging for mushrooms all across the world during more than one life. And it was very much a skill one needed to learn. The dumbest thing anyone could do was go out foraging for wild mushrooms without knowing what they were doing.

You did not want to accidentally mistake a death cap for a horse mushroom. As the name implied, things wouldn't end well. An emergency liver transplantation was pretty much the best case scenario you could end up with. But Harry was confident enough in his skills that he brought home a whole smorgasbord of edible fungi; field mushrooms, wood ears, butter

boletes, chanterelles, hen of the woods and even some morels he found behind the churchyard, growing in some flowerbeds that were lined with woodchips.

Harry turned them into creamy mushroom soups and risottos, which he shared with Cindy, much to her delight, and with his now weekly dinner guests, Sirius and Remus.

Several times a week Harry popped over to Grimmauld Place, to help Sirius and Remus with curse-breaking and remodelling. They'd taken to tackling one room at a time. They would get rid of whatever cursed items were sitting in that room, strip it bare while Sirius decided which pieces of furniture and decorations he wanted to keep, and then completely redo the room itself, from wallpaper to carpets or floorboards. It was hard but satisfying work, which Harry was glad to help with. Sirius in turn looked visibly happier with every room they finished in the old house, that step by step stopped resembling a haunted mansion and instead became a comfortable and welcoming town house.

Once a week, on Friday nights, Sirius and Remus came over to Harry's home, so Harry could cook for them to his heart's content. Harry treated them to some of his favourite dishes, which were many and varied. Tamales with pork, one of Harry's favourite Mexican dishes, though finding the masa harina and dried corn husks in 1990 Britain took some work, but Harry finally tracked down a small Mexican speciality store in Suffolk and stocked up on all his Mexican favourites.

Harry made Vietnamese Pho from scratch, including the bone broth, since he knew with certainty if his Vietnamese grandmother from 150 lives ago realized he'd used bouillon cubes instead of homemade broth she'd somehow reach across the multiverse and smack him with her slipper.

Then there was mutton biryani and okonomiyaki and beef stroganoff, and Sirius and Remus (and Cindy, who always got the leftovers) ate until they were ready to burst, and Harry waved away any gratitude and simply went about planning the next meal.

After their Friday night dinner, Harry, Sirius and Remus had taken to playing cards together while enjoying a beer or two. Harry taught them a few muggle card games, including a Dutch card game called 'duizenden', which Harry and Tom over the years had taught to all their friends and families and had spent many, many hours playing. Sirius and Remus took to it right away and it quickly became a part of their Friday night routine.

Mid-October came around with surprisingly sunny weather, though the nights were cold and misty. Harry continued his walks with Quinn and Lucy. Quinn's owners, Mark and Bridget, had a healthy baby boy named Charlie, who took up all of Bridget's time, naturally, so she was happy for Harry to keep taking Quinn on long walks.

Cindy was making progress with regaining her mobility as her broken ankle had just about healed, though she still needed a cane to get around and couldn't walk very far yet, so Harry kept walking Lucy as well. Cindy was able to return to one of her passions, namely the local choir. And since Harry had let it slip he played more than one instrument, including the piano, Cindy persuaded him to join as their new pianist, since the previous one, old Harry Miller had died last year and they hadn't found a replacement yet.

The Little Hangleton Mixed Choir met once a week on Tuesday evenings at the community centre. Harry was offered the beaten up piano that had been there for decades to play on, and after he spent an afternoon tuning the crap out of it, it didn't even sound half-bad. Of course, Harry as a former concert pianist had played much, much better pianos but he could make do. The choir consisted of eleven middle-aged and elderly women, and Derrick Banks.

Derrick was without a doubt the most flamboyantly gay man still deeply hidden in the closet that Harry had seen in a long time, and Harry had been a catholic priest in the 1700s the life before last, so that was saying something. It was of course still only 1990 and most of the UK (and much of western Europe) was still suffering under a sort of unofficial Don't Ask Don't Tell policy when it came to homosexuality. What also didn't help matters was that Derrick, a 30-something man that unironically wore the kind of brightly coloured jumpers that should have stayed in the 80s, was the only child of Catherine Banks, founding member of the choir and widowed house-keeper of the local vicar, who spent a great deal of her time placing mountains of pressure on poor Derrick's shoulders to marry and give her lots of grandkids. Seriously, it was the first thing she said to Harry when they were introduced, with Derrick standing right beside her.

Sexuality was an interesting concept to someone like Harry. In truth, Harry's sexuality was Tom. Plain and simple. It didn't matter what his mind or body found attractive in their many, many lives, or what gender Tom was, Harry was attracted to him. Of course, Harry had been straight and gay and bi in different lives, though Harry firmly believed sexuality was a fluid thing and not just a box in which one was categorized. In his first life, Harry was sure he'd been mostly straight but perhaps just a little bit bi, enough that if the right guy had come along Harry would have happily entered a relationship with him.

Other lives Harry had been almost completely gay, finding very little sexual attraction in the opposite gender, but depending on the era they lived in Harry sometimes still ended up married to someone of the opposite gender because being openly gay would get you killed or ostracized.

Both Harry and Tom had lives where they'd been transgender, meaning their brain told them they were one gender, while whatever sat between their legs insisted the opposite was true. In Tom's case he'd been physically female while his mind insisted he was male. He'd never transitioned, since they lived in the Belgian Congo in the early 1900s and there was no such thing as transgenderism. That whole life had been a clusterfuck, with Tom losing a hand because Harry, his husband, had supposedly but not really not performed his job in the rubber plantation properly.

Yeah, that life had been short and brutal, ending with Harry and Tom leading a revolt amongst the workers against the colonizers in what was essentially a modern-day slave plantation. And for their trouble Harry and Tom were hanged. Thanks a bunch, Leopold.

For Harry, her mind had once told her she was female while there was definitely a cock and balls attached to her. Harry had lived and worked in the Ivory Coast as a young hotel receptionist, unsure if she was straight or gay or what, until she got her memories back when she met Tom, who was a British businessman staying in the hotel. Then Harry realized she was transgender, but she never transitioned, since she'd been a woman so often already at

that point that she didn't mind being a woman again who simply had male genitals. Harry moved to Britain with Tom, where they got married and Harry called herself genderfluid and started a beauty channel on YouTube which became a huge success and Harry could be as feminine as she wanted, playing with makeup and fashion while earning a nice living.

Anyway, Harry knew a thing or two about the struggles of being different in a society that placed all sorts of expectations on people. A fair number of Harry and Tom's children had been gay or bi or ace or trans or any of the other possibilities. Being human came with lots and lots of variation, and being made to deny those variations through societal pressure was painful and frustrating. So Harry decided to reach out to Derrick, to gently help him find self-acceptance. Derrick for his part seemed happy enough to make a new friend.

"Oh, but I'm not gay," Derrick declared as he sat behind the wheel of his car, driving them towards the Annual Autumn Flower and Garden Show in Scarborough.

Harry barely refrained from rolling his eyes while he wanted to say he'd sure never heard a straight man belt out 'Don't Cry For Me, Argentina' the way Derrick had during their last choir rehearsal. The choir was going through a bit of a prolonged Andrew Lloyd Webber phase, apparently.

"I am," Harry said instead, because sometimes you just had to be blunt. "Gay, that is. My boyfriend is stationed in Albania for now, but he should be coming back reasonably soon."

Derrick almost parked them around a big oak tree beside the two-lane road, but corrected the car at the last second.

"Please don't do that," Harry said as calmly as he could while his heart had spontaneously migrated to his throat. "I actually have things to live for currently."

"I'm so sorry," Derrick mumbled, white as a sheet. "So terribly sorry. I suppose I'm just not used to anyone being so..."

"Open?" Harry decided to guess. He realized that was probably a huge part of Derrick's problem. Derrick lived with his mother, still, and worked long hours running the local post office and barely had any friends of his own, spending most of his free time with his mother and her social contacts. Harry doubted Derrick had ever actually met an openly gay man before.

Well, what was that saying? Lead by example, and all that.

"Yes," Derrick whispered. "That."

"It's not always going to be like this," Harry said with conviction. "Society's already come a long way, but they'll be going a longer way still. I bet that in twenty years, give or take a few years, gays will be able to get married in a number of countries around the world, including this one."

"You're pulling my leg," Derrick said with an almost nervous chuckle.

“Nope.” Harry turned to Derrick with a cocky little grin. “Just think about it. Not that long ago they’d still lock you up in prison and give you electroshocks just for loving someone of your own gender. We’ve moved away from that already.”

“I suppose.” Derrick swallowed, eyes fixed on the road before them.

Harry’s grin slipped off his face. “Just, whatever you do, Derrick, wear a condom. You don’t want to die of AIDS, trust me.”

Derrick released a nervous chuckle. “I’m not gay so I won’t have to be worrying about that.”

“Of course you’re not,” Harry agreed with a smile. “But straight people can get AIDS, too, so just wrap it up, all right?”

They did enjoy the Flower and Garden Show very much and Harry picked up bulbs for some amazing tulips in spectacular colours. A red so deep it was almost black, striped blue and white ones, a purple and yellow combination and many more. He could plant those in his garden now and enjoy them come spring.

Harry spent a few afternoons getting his garden ready for winter. He built a small shed from all the scrap wood he still had laying around to properly store his mountain bike and garden tools instead of just propping them up against the side of the cottage like he’d been doing thus far. Thanks to magic some of Harry’s fastest growing crops were already mature enough to harvest. Radishes, lettuce, spinach and carrots all went into a nice, big salad he served with dinner the next time Sirius and Remus came over.

And it was Remus who put Harry onto another path to help him occupy himself while doing something useful.

Harry gifted Remus with his improved Wolfsbane potion and Remus in turn was almost brought to tears in sheer gratitude.

“This was the easiest transformation I’ve ever had,” Remus said, eyes shining as he sat across from Harry in the basement kitchen the day after the full moon. “Nothing hurts. I can barely believe it, but nothing hurts. I feel as though I haven’t transformed at all.”

“I’ll brew it for you again as soon as you run out of the batch I made for you now,” Harry easily promised him. He was happy to help his friend and he enjoyed brewing, so it was a win-win as far as Harry was concerned.

“Thank you,” Remus whispered, reaching for his cup of tea to take a sip. “When are you going to market it?”

“Huh?” Harry blinked at Remus. He honestly hadn’t even thought about selling it.

“Harry.” Remus stared at Harry over the rim of his teacup. “There are dozens of werewolves I know personally who would offer their left arm for this potion. Please tell me you’re going to sell it to the public.”

“It’s not that simple,” Harry said with a sigh. “You can’t just come up with a potion like this and try to sell it. There are procedures in place to safeguard the public when it comes to new potions.”

“So how did you sell it last time, when you invented it in whatever life?” Sirius asked, stirring sugar in a big mug of strong coffee.

“Last time I developed the potion as part of getting my Potions Mastery,” Harry explained while leaning back in his chair, stretching his legs. “And I had oversight the whole time from an established Potions Master and we tested the potion on a few volunteers for six months.”

Sirius waved his hand at Harry. “So do that again. It’s not like you don’t have the time.”

Grinning, Harry tilted his head and considered that suggestion. “Well, I suppose I can sign up for my Potions Mastery already. It will take almost a year to complete it anyway. I can save the rest of my masteries for later.”

“That’s the spirit,” Sirius said in a tone of voice that suggested he really wanted to roll his eyes but couldn’t be bothered.

“You’ve got one volunteer already.” Remus raised his finger in the air. “And I’m quite sure I can find you at least ten others before the week is over.”

“I’d appreciate that. I’ll write to the Guild of Potioneers to apply for a mastery.” Harry was already planning in his head how he was going to fake developing a potion that was already developed. He remembered most of the steps he’d taken in the life in which he’d actually developed it, so he could just write down those notes in his journal for his assigned Potions Master to peruse.

So the next day Harry wrote an application for his Potions Mastery and a proposal for the potion he wanted to develop. Harry didn’t have any OWLs and NEWTS yet, but he pointed out in his letter that he would be sitting them in December and that according to the rules he only needed an OWL and NEWT in potions to receive his Potions Mastery. He could start on said mastery without them.

It took two weeks, but eventually Harry got a reply with an approval for starting on his Potions Mastery with the development of an improved Wolfsbane potion, or as Harry liked to call it, Wolfsbane the sequel.

The Guild of Potioneers also assigned him a Potions Master to guide him.

“Snivellus?” Sirius said in sheer disbelief as soon as Harry showed him and Remus his acceptance letter. “They’ve assigned you Snivellus?”

“How old are you again?” Harry asked with a frown. “Can we just call the man by his name?”

“But...but...but...” Sirius looked from Harry to Remus and back, searching for something to say but the obvious shock turning him mute.

“It’s kind of ironic, I admit,” Remus said, taking the news much better than Sirius had. “But Severus is an excellent Potions Master, and I’m sure working with him won’t be a problem as long as you act professionally.”

“So no calling him vile nicknames my godfather and father came up with when they were eleven, got it,” Harry said, giving Sirius a very pointed look.

“But...” Sirius looked like he wanted to hug Harry in sympathy for having to work with his childhood nemesis.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Sirius, we’re not eleven anymore.” Then he frowned. “Okay, you’re not eleven anymore. I’m not eleven yet. But you get the point.”

That seemed to snap Sirius out of his state of shock and he snorted with laughter.

Harry met Snape at what appeared to be his childhood home in the city of Cokeworth. Snape had sent Harry a very brief invitation to meet him there on a Thursday evening to discuss Harry’s plans for the development of his new potion. Harry tucked the potions journal he’d started in his pocket and apparated to Cokeworth. In his first life he’d once visited it with Ginny, to see where his mother had grown up and to visit the graves of his maternal grandparents, who were both buried there, but other than that Harry had never set foot there.

Spinner’s end was a depressing street in a neighbourhood obviously stricken with poverty. From what Harry knew, the house had belonged to Snape’s parents and upon their deaths, Snape had inherited it. And since Snape lived at Hogwarts most of the year and the house was paid for, it made sense for him to hold onto it to use for those brief weeks he wasn’t living at the castle.

Or to invite guests over in a more private setting than a boarding school.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you properly, Master Snape,” Harry said, extending his hand after Snape had opened the door. “Jack Bird.”

“Indeed.” Snape shook his hand with a sardonic curve of his eyebrow. “Please do call me Severus.”

“I’m Jack.” Harry followed Severus into a tiny living room completely lined with books, some of which Harry recognized as very old magical texts. “That’s quite the collection.”

“Most of it was inherited from my grandparents,” Severus explained and waved his wand at the kitchen, summoning a prepared tea set. “Tea?”

“Yes, thank you.” Harry sat down on the threadbare sofa while Severus poured them both cups of strong, black tea. It allowed Harry a few moments to study Severus, since the only other time he’d seen the man so far had been during the Order Meeting of Chaos, and Harry had been distracted then and had barely had the time to consider his old potions professor. And for obvious reasons Harry hadn’t been invited to any further Order meetings, though Sirius and Remus assured him he wasn’t missing much, since the whole Order was still in

turmoil from what Harry had said, even during the next meeting and nothing got accomplished other than lots of arguing with occasional bouts of shouting.

Severus looked much younger than Harry remembered, but of course, to a child all adults look old. Now that Harry had a more nuanced understanding of aging, he realized Severus really did only look in his thirties, and that while the man would never win any beauty contests, he wasn't nearly as ugly as Harry once thought he was as a child.

Severus appeared a little unkempt, his eyebrows could do with some plucking, his teeth needed a good cleaning, and his greasy hair could do with a thorough shampooing, but Harry knew from experience that spending a lot of time around steaming cauldrons played havoc on anyone's hair, so perhaps Severus could be forgiven for that. Other than that, Snape had a prominent nose, but he wasn't what Harry would call ugly anymore. Distinguished, perhaps.

"I read your proposal for an improved Wolfsbane potion," Severus said as he handed Harry a cup of tea. "Intriguing idea, but I'm not sure using pennyworth will have the desired effect of lessening any physical pain."

"Hm." Harry pretended to think, while already knowing the pennyworth would work just fine. But he had to keep up appearances. "I want to try the pennyworth, see if it does anything, but as an alternative option I was thinking of using chickweed and stitchwort."

The corner of Severus' eyes twitched as his mind quickly calculated the possibilities of that working. Harry knew it wouldn't, since he'd tried it while developing the potion. "That might be worth a try, certainly," Severus finally said and sipped his tea.

Harry followed his example, blowing over the steaming cup before taking a fortifying sip.

"What is your full name?" Severus asked.

Before Harry could stop himself, he said, "Harry James Potter."

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: this chapter has an even bigger cliffhanger than the last one. Still not sorry.

Thanks for all your comments! They motivate me to write faster!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter 7

Several things happened at once.

Harry realized he was the world's, no, the multi-verse's biggest, most complacent fool. He should have known Severus would dose him with veritaserum the first chance he got. But in Harry's defence, he trusted Severus, knew the man was on their side, had even sworn a vow to keep Harry Potter safe.

Of course, Severus had no idea who Harry really was, and he had only seen Jack Bird, an unknown wizard, cause havoc during an Order meeting with very specific information about Harry Potter. Naturally Severus would want to learn everything he could about this potential enemy, and as a Potions Master who always kept veritaserum in stock he simply used the most efficient way to get answers. Harry could hardly even blame the guy. It's what Harry himself would have done if their roles had been reversed.

Oh, Tom must never find out about this. He would be laughing in Harry's face for centuries to come.

Harry dropped his teacup and threw himself to the floor, while Severus also dropped his cup and sprung up, wand appearing in his hand as if out of nowhere.

The angle Harry found himself in, squashed between the coffee table and the sofa, prevented him from drawing his wand quickly, but Harry didn't need a wand to perform simple defensive spells. He aimed his hand under the coffee table at Severus' foot and cast a silent lasso charm, pulling Severus' foot out from under him and causing him to topple over just as he was casting a disarming charm at Harry.

Without giving Severus a chance to catch his bearings, Harry cast a silent disarming charm at him and caught his wand. Slowly, Harry sat up, intent on obliterating Severus and calling it a night, and tomorrow he'd write to the Guild of Potioneers and ask for another supervising Master.

Severus, his black hair obscuring most of his face, barely sat up while aiming a hand at Harry's face, and the last thing Harry thought before a streak of red light hit him was 'oh crap, Snape knows wandless magic, too'.

Darkness greeted him and when Harry came to again he found himself propped up on the sofa, body completely tied up with magical ropes from shoulders to ankles. He could tell by the colour of his fringe that Severus had removed his glamours, and by the oily residue on his tongue that Severus had dripped at least five or more drops of veritaserum directly onto his tongue.

Forget centuries. Tom was going to laugh straight into Harry's face for millennia. What an utterly embarrassing situation to find himself in as a multi-life Auror and duelling champion.

Though, in Harry's defence, it had been at least ten lifetimes since he'd last been a witch or wizard so he was a little rusty, okay?

Severus stood leaning over Harry, studying his scar. "Your full name, again."

"Harry James Potter," Harry said dutifully, since there was no point trying to stop himself from answering. And no matter how many lives Harry had lived, he'd always identified himself as Harry Potter, the same way as Tom had always been Tom Riddle to him, and vice versa. Yes, Harry had inhabited almost 200 different bodies and carried almost 200 different names, but from the very beginning he'd been just Harry, and that had never really changed. In private, no matter who they were or where they lived, Harry and Tom still addressed each other by their original names, and usually brushed it off as an inside joke involving a dick when inevitably someone overheard them.

An antidote to veritaserum existed, but it was complicated, expensive and took three weeks to brew, so Harry never kept it in stock. Other than that, it had to be consumed no less than one hour before being exposed to veritaserum and only lasted for less than an hour, so it was pretty much useless.

Instead of focusing on countering veritaserum through an antidote, Harry and Tom had focused on learning how to talk and skirt the truth while under its influence. They'd spent many an afternoon trying to get the other to confess a certain silly secret while under the influence of the potion, turning it into something of a friendly competition, who could hold out longest and who got most creative with their answers and more.

Key was Occlumency, which Harry had mastered eventually, though it took quite a while during his second time as a wizard, when he'd been a Greengrass. His then parents provided talented tutors to teach their children to guard their minds and even Harry managed it after a year or two.

Now he threw up every Occlumency shield he had, compartmentalizing bits and pieces of his current life. The kneazle was out of the bag as far as his real identity went, but Harry was determined to keep his relationship with Tom from Severus. Harry doubted Severus would take kindly to the idea of him bringing Tom back, no matter he wasn't Voldemort. Severus held onto grudges like a bald eagle held onto their prey; once the talons had closed, the eagle was physically unable to open them until they landed. Harry doubted Severus would ever be

able to get over the murder of Lily enough to allow her murderer to walk free, no matter he was a redeemed and reformed man.

“I do believe you are telling the truth,” Severus said with a tilt of his head while crossing his arms as he stared at Harry. “Yet you are currently ten years old. How do you look like an adult?”

“Aging potion,” Harry said through gritted teeth, pretending to fight the potion much more than he actually was. Let Severus think Harry was trying to keep everything from him, while Harry slipped him the things he didn’t mind sharing while keeping Tom’s existence and their shared faith to himself.

“Hm.” Severus stepped around the coffee table and sat back down in his chair. “Supposedly you are ten years old, yet you act and talk like an adult. An aging potion doesn’t provide those skills. How old are you really?”

Harry swallowed, briefly squeezing his eyes shut. “Don’t know the exact number.”

“Your closest guess will do.”

“Around twelve thousand years,” Harry whispered.

Severus blinked, and then he blinked again, sitting very still as he stared at Harry. “Are you immortal?”

“In a sense,” Harry said, staring at his knees. He was, of course, still putting on an act. He didn’t mind Severus knowing these things, as long as he could keep the man from blabbing to Dumbledore. That was the only person, aside from anyone working at the ministry, that Harry really didn’t want to know the truth about him.

“Explain why you are immortal in a sense,” Severus said slowly, deliberately, sitting on the edge of his seat in clear anticipation of the answer.

“I reincarnate into new lives with my memories intact upon each of my deaths.” That was the truth, yet it left out a tremendous amount of detail, of course, just as Harry wanted it.

“Ah.” Severus remained quiet for a few minutes, clearly processing everything Harry just told him. “So you have lived many lives before?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“Around 200,” Harry said, finally looking up to meet Severus’ eyes. “And my mind is that of an adult and I got sick and tired of being stuck with abusive muggles, especially after my bully of a cousin drowned me.”

Severus nodded once to show he understood, and Harry was pleased he’d made it clear he hadn’t been lying during the Order Meeting of Chaos.

“Who else knows?” Severus asked, clever Slytherin that he was. If he couldn’t get all the details out of Harry, he now knew who else to interrogate.

“Sirius and Remus,” Harry was forced to admit, much to his real chagrin.

“Not Dumbledore,” Severus concluded while narrowing his eyes and giving Harry an almost challenging look. “And what will you do to keep me from telling the headmaster?”

Harry narrowed his eyes in return, pooling his magic there until he knew they must almost be glowing, “If you tell Dumbledore anything I’ve told you here tonight, be aware, Severus Tobias Snape, that I will hunt you down to the ends of this earth and I will throw you onto your stomach and take my sword and cut open your ribs on either side of your spine, splay them open and pull out your lungs with my bare hands and fan them out like wings, and you will die by the Blood Eagle, such as I have executed my enemies many times before when my name was Ragnar One-Hand.”

“Charming,” Severus said in a clear attempt to dismiss Harry’s very obvious threat, but Harry could tell by Severus’ pale face he knew that the threat was very real.

Harry was under the influence of veritaserum. Harry couldn’t lie.

“Understand this,” Harry added without any prompting. “I am not my father James, or my mother Lily. I am a person who has lived for millennia. I have been a sinner and a saint, a martyr and a murderer, and everything in between. And if need be, I will unmake you in the most painful way I know how.”

“Understood,” Severus whispered and swallowed, finally understanding that Harry wasn’t fucking around.

“Good. Now, how are we going to make sure you don’t go running off to the old man to tell him all my secrets? Because if we don’t settle this now, you might as well kill me right here, because the moment these ropes come off your ass is mine.” Harry pulled his lips up in the most vicious smile he was capable of.

Severus briefly looked down, the hands in his lap gaining the slightest tremor. Ah, Harry did always enjoy it when his opponents finally understood how fucked they really were. “I am willing to negotiate for a magical vow.”

“Acceptable,” Harry said at once. A magical vow was a strong vow, even stronger than a secrecy contract. “Name your terms.” That is what Harry liked about Slytherins. They were always so very pragmatic and reasonable in situations such as this one. A Gryffindor would have been feeling pressured to share the truth with Dumbledore, no matter the consequences. Gryffindors were fools. Case in point, Harry in his current, tied-up predicament.

“The improved Wolfsbane potion, does it work?” Severus asked with an arched eyebrow. It was nice to work with intelligent people. Harry was happy to see Severus really catching on to Harry’s situation.

“Yep. I developed it the first time I got my Potions Mastery. Remus has taken it already and urged me to market it again.”

“I want half of the exclusivity contract,” Severus said, dark eyes fixed on Harry.

Snorting, Harry shook his head. “Thirty percent.”

“Forty,” Severus countered at once.

“Deal.” Harry was pleased that Severus wanted something as simple as money. New potions were always marketed under exclusivity contracts that lasted twenty years. Meaning that during that time, every time someone sold that specific potion a percentage, usually ten, went to the inventor of that potion. The Guild of Potioneers kept track of all patents and earnings, and if a potion was popular and had global appeal, the earnings could be very sizable, even from just a single potion.

Harry remembered learning that in his first life his grandfather Fleamont Potter had invented the Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion and had quadrupled the family gold with it.

And even though an improved Wolfsbane had a small market, since there weren’t that many werewolves, it did have global appeal and every werewolf would buy it every month for the rest of their lives, so the earnings would be nice enough.

Harry didn’t mind sharing with Severus to buy his silence. Soon enough he’d have plenty of money coming in from the muggle world, after all.

Severus stood up and pulled out his wand. “I, Severus Tobias Snape, do magically swear that I will not share in any way, shape or form all that I have learned about Harry James Potter this evening without his explicit permission.” A brief glow of magic indicated the vow was activated.

Harry nodded. “Thank you. Now untie me, my arms are falling asleep.”

Slowly, carefully, Severus swished his wand at Harry and the ropes disappeared.

Harry raised his arms over his head for a moment, popping his shoulders, before rubbing his wrists. “I’ll owl you the contract for the potion first thing in the morning.”

“That is acceptable.” Severus rose from his seat the moment Harry got up from the couch. He offered Harry his wand back, handle first. “Are you ever planning on revealing your true identity to the public?”

“I’m not planning to,” Harry said carefully, aware he was still under the influence of the truth potion. “Dumbledore’s ultimate plan for Harry Potter is for him to die at the right time. He raised me like a pig for slaughter. A child soldier. A sacrificial lamb.” Harry tucked his wand away and gave Severus his most intense stare. “I want nothing to do with any of that.”

“What about the Dark Lord?”

Harry regarded Severus for a moment while choosing his words carefully. “Voldemort is not coming back if I have anything to say about it, and I do. I just don’t need any of your help to accomplish it. The prophecy is self-fulfilling. It means nothing in the end if the players refuse to play.”

Severus was unable to hide his surprise to hear Harry knew about the prophecy and he inhaled a sharp breath.

“Why are you still teaching?” Harry asked bluntly, because he had always wondered about that. “You hate it and you suck at it. You’d be brilliant as a potioneer if you could spend your time researching and developing new potions.”

For a moment Severus looked as if he wasn’t sure if he should be insulted or not. Finally, he sighed. “Because the headmaster has made it abundantly clear he wants me around for when the Dark Lord returns.”

“Yeah, if I was you I’d start planning a new career, because he’s not coming back.” Harry saluted Severus, tapping his finger against his temple. “I’ll come back soon and we’ll talk potions, when I’m not drugged to the gills. It’s been... entertaining.” And with that Harry turned around and stepped out of the front door, relishing the cold wind that blew in his face the moment he closed the door behind himself.

Well, that could have gone a whole lot worse, but it did teach Harry a very important lesson; stop being a complacent fool, pretty much.

But when your life simply started over again upon your death, what was there to fear, really? What was the worst Severus could do to him? Kill him? See the previous point. Yes, Harry would be disappointed if this life ended prematurely, but ultimately he’d shrug and move on in his next life, whatever that may be. And the wizarding world would be stuck with a Voldemort who would eventually make a return and start a war again.

When he got home, Harry made himself a cup of green tea, added some fresh mint from the garden and drank it slowly before heading to bed.

What a fucking day.

The next morning, after quickly writing up the contract and sending Pluto to deliver it to Severus, Harry decided he wanted comfort and since it was Friday and Sirius and Remus were coming to dinner, that meant comfort food. And there was one true and tried recipe that never disappointed in that department.

Harry apparated to London, to visit his favourite Italian grocery store, and picked up canned tomatoes, a good red wine, brisket, spare ribs and sausage, and parmesan cheese. Onions and basil he had in his garden. He also bought some real Italian spaghetti.

At home he combined everything in a pot and let it slow cook for a few hours, the whole house filling with the smell of Harry’s family ragu, and causing Harry a tsunami of nostalgia to all the lives he’d been Italian, from the time he’d been a pulmonologist in 1970s Naples and Tom had become the first female mayor of the city after she got bored once the kids

started school, to the time Harry and Tom had been genuine mob bosses in New York, known as Fat Tony and Big Paul respectively, and all the other lives as Italians in between.

As far as comfort food went, Italy really had everyone else beat, Harry was sure.

“Something smells amazing,” Remus said as Harry let him and Sirius in early that evening. They gathered around the dining table where Harry filled their plates with spaghetti, ragu and homemade garlic bread.

“This is incredible,” Sirius managed to say with his mouth still full.

Harry agreed and once he finished his plate he went for seconds, and his guests did the same. For dessert Harry had made tiramisu and that went down just as enthusiastically as the main course.

“Thank you,” Remus said, leaning back in his chair while rubbing a hand down his belly. “I swear, Harry, I have never eaten as well as I have since you showed up, not even at Hogwarts.”

Harry quickly waved their gratitude away while aiming his wand at the kettle to get it boiling, so he could use his French press to make them all some coffee.

“How did things go with Severus?” Remus asked, and immediately Sirius gave him the stink-eye, still not onboard with Harry socializing with his arch-nemesis.

“Fine,” Harry said vaguely, far too ashamed to say anything more. He quickly got up and spelled the dirty dishes to the sink where he got the water going to clean up.

Remus and Sirius exchanged a confused look, used to Harry being a little more talkative. “Just fine?” Remus finally asked.

“Yeah, he liked the potion and stuff.” Harry started scrubbing the plates by hand to distract himself and hopefully his guests. No such luck.

“Harry, what really happened?” Sirius asked, stepping up beside Harry, genuine concern in his voice.

Sighing, Harry turned towards his guests. “Okay, fucking Snape got the drop on me, and it’s fucking embarrassing, so no more talking!”

Remus’ mouth curled up into an enormous smile while Sirius looked stuck between wanting to grin and wanting to rage on Harry’s behalf.

“How?” Remus stood on Harry’s other side, arms crossed casually.

“Because I got complacent and Severus put veritaserum in the tea and he knows wandless magic, too, as it turns out.” Harry hung his head. “Whatever you do, you must never, ever tell Tom.”

Sirius finally snorted and bowed his head to hide his laughter. Remus had no such restrictions and simply threw his head back to laugh at Harry's misfortune.

"I assume Severus won't spill your secrets?" Remus finally asked after catching his breath.

"Nah, magical vow. He gets part of the earnings from the improved Wolfsbane potion."

"That greedy bastard," Sirius muttered, though he still looked thoroughly entertained by Harry's misfortune.

"Speaking of Tom," Remus said as he helped Harry with the dishes by spelling everything dry and levitating each piece to their spot in the cabinets. "We've been talking and we'd like to be there when you perform the ritual."

"Why?" Harry said, adding coffee and boiling water to his French press.

"Because doing a ritual like that is exhausting and physically you're only ten years old," Sirius said with a pointed look. "And what if you do accidentally bring Voldemort back? You'd be in no shape to face him."

"I won't do that," Harry insisted, getting mugs down and filling them with coffee.

"Just for our peace of mind, Harry," Remus gently insisted. "We won't interfere, promise, but if something does go wrong, at least you'll have backup."

Harry considered that as they returned to the dining table to drink their coffee. It might not be a bad idea to have some backup. His episode with Snape had once again proven to Harry that he wasn't infallible, and Rosier was an opponent to reckon with. Harry had plans and plots in place to see everything run smoothly, but what was that saying again? No plan survives first contact with the enemy. A piece of military wisdom Harry knew to be absolutely true, since he'd been in the military more times than he could remember.

"Yeah, all right," Harry finally said and sipped his coffee. He wasn't worried he'd bring Voldemort back now that he had all the horcruxes. But who knew what could happen or who might accidentally interrupt them or something else that might happen unexpectedly. "Just don't interfere unless you absolutely have to."

"We promise," Remus said as Sirius got the playing cards ready for their weekly game.

November started with rain and wind and Harry spent the rest of the weekend relaxing inside, puttering around his home, cleaning by hand. Harry found it therapeutic, sometimes, to just clean everything the muggle way. Having the greatest hits of Queen blaring in the background while giving the toilet bowl a good scrub allowed Harry to order his thoughts and work off some stress. It was a cheap, easy way to approximate a meditative state while getting useful stuff done.

On Monday, Harry dropped by Mahatma Khan's office where he got some good news. All patents were filed and Khan had found buyers for all products, which meant that the sign-up bonuses would appear in Harry's bank account any day now. It would still be some months

until all products were tested and taken into production to be sold to the public before the real money started coming in, but Harry was patient. He handed Khan a new design for an efficient water filter which could be produced fairly inexpensively and would be a big hit in developing nations with poor drinking water availability. Khan smiled and patted him on the back and picked up the phone at once to find a new buyer.

To celebrate Harry visited an electronics store and bought himself a brand new Nintendo Game Boy and a recently released Super Nintendo, and just about every single game he could get his hands on. Harry missed Halo and Fortnite and even Animal Crossing, but those games wouldn't be released for a long time, so he made do. And Super Mario World, Street Fighter II and Final Fantasy were fun games in their own right that Harry had enjoyed playing in other lives.

Not the mention the hours he could play Tetris on the Game Boy without getting bored. That shit was addictive.

Harry got a huge shock a week later while he was harvesting cabbages in his garden.

A very familiar and very unwelcome voice was speaking on the lane right outside Harry's cottage.

"I'm sure it's here somewhere," Dumbledore said. "You saw Ogden's memory, Alastor, it has to be here."

"I'm still not sure why you insisted on coming here," Moody muttered as he clunked after Dumbledore.

Harry froze for a moment until he remembered they couldn't see him and then he crept closer to his property line, making very sure not to cross it accidentally. He saw Dumbledore standing in the middle of the lane, looking back and forth, clearly hoping to spot Gaunt Cottage. Moody looked far less interested in the proceedings.

"The boy ran away, Albus," Moody said, arms crossed as he stared out across the field opposite Harry's home.

"We don't know that, not with absolute certainty," Dumbledore insisted and wow, was that man in denial, Harry thought with a snicker. "Voldemort may very well have found a way to lure Harry away from his family."

"By making his cousin drown him?" Moody asked while side-eying the old man. "Because let me tell you, that would piss me off, too. You can't blame the lad from getting fed up."

"We must keep looking for Harry, and Voldemort has his roots in this village."

"Are you sure the muggles didn't just tear it down? It looked like a shithole in Ogden's memory and that was decades ago." Moody sniffed and looked about ready to apparate the fuck out of there.

“Well, there is nothing here anymore, regardless how that came to be.” Dumbledore briefly turned to Moody. “Let’s try Voldemort’s father’s home.” And with that Dumbledore started walking down the lane in the direction of Riddle Manor.

Cold chills ran down Harry’s back. The ritual circle and potion ingredients in the cellar! Harry had cast a few simple notice-me-not charms on the cellar door, expecting to keep Rosier out for a few hours, not Moody and his fucking magical eye that could look through walls.

At once, Harry apparated straight inside the Manor house, waving his wand around frantically, transfiguring the whole staircase that led down into the cellar into solid walls to match the rest of the house. Then he transfigured the cellar door to match the walls around it so that in the end no one could tell that there had been a door in the first place. To top it off, Harry cast a very subtle, undetectable notice-me-not charm on the whole area around that piece of wall to hopefully keep Moody from looking too closely beyond the wall or floor. Then he apparated back home and hoped for the best. He briefly considered hiding out in the garden under a disillusionment charm or even in his Animagus form, but Moody and that fucking eye of his stopped him.

Pacing his garden, Harry once again called himself a gigantic, complacent, Gryffindor fool. He’d been so sure of his own superiority, since he had almost 200 lifetimes worth of knowledge and experience, plus he had lived the life of Harry Potter before and therefore knew things other people didn’t. And like a moron, he’d figured that would be enough to get him by without sticking to principles like ‘always hope for the best but prepare for the worst’. Tom always stuck to that, was always prepared for just about anything.

And here Harry was by himself for a few months and he just about bollocksed it all up because he couldn’t cut it without Tom holding his fucking hand.

In truth, Harry hated having his memories back by himself, with Tom still out there, clueless. It had happened in a few lives before, for both of them at different times. The first time, Harry, at the age of nineteen, had developed a sudden but severe soy allergy and had gone into anaphylactic shock in the university cafeteria leading to cardiac arrest and CPR and by the time he woke up in the hospital he had his memories back. It took him another three years until he met Tom and during that whole time Harry had been scared shitless he would never meet Tom ever again and end up having to live through this endless cycle of reincarnation alone.

Because, in the end, that was their biggest fear, for both of them.

If you put Harry and Tom in front of a boggart nowadays, they would see very similar things. Themselves, all alone without their soulmate, being forced to live life after life with no one by their side who knew them, understood their situation, loved them like none other ever could.

In short, losing his soulmate permanently was Harry’s biggest fear, and being stuck alone with all his memories came close enough to that fear that it made Harry careless, far more so than he’d usually be.

Well, nothing to be done about that now other than wait. Harry did so until after dark and then he snuck back to Riddle Manor hiding under his strongest disillusionment charm, only now realizing Dumbledore still had his invisibility cloak and he could have really used it right about then. He'd have to get Sirius to ask Dumbledore for it, under the guise of it being James' property and Sirius had more right to look after it than Dumbledore.

Harry used every detection spell he knew to check for people inside the house (there was no one there) and for curses and charms and other spells all around the property and the house itself. He found one simple alert spell on the front door, which would tell Dumbledore when someone opened it. Harry easily transferred the spell without triggering it to the door of a forgotten outbuilding in the back of the property. The transfigured wall to the cellar hadn't been touched, Harry concluded after checking it very thoroughly. Harry left the transfiguration in place, to keep Rosier from discovering the cellar.

Over the next week, Harry set about laying additional wards around his property and the surrounding countryside. Yes, the Fidelius charm was almost unbreakable, especially with Harry himself as the secret-keeper, but Harry had learned his lesson and he wasn't taking anymore chances. So he inscribed runes and wove wards that stretched out for almost half a mile and would alert Harry immediately to the presence of any magical person or being. The cottage itself became almost impregnable without the correct magical signature to enter it, and Harry slept better for it.

No more magical people or beings showed up in Little Hangleton and Harry went back to his routine of helping Sirius and Remus renovate Grimmauld Place, which by that time was almost unrecognizable and had transformed from a dark, gloomy mansion to a light, airy townhouse. Sirius was usually found whistling a happy tune as he walked around his property. Harry spent time with Cindy, attended choir practice and one Sunday afternoon took his Super Nintendo to Derrick's place to introduce him to Mario and his buddies.

And then, when November was halfway over, Harry woke up on a Thursday morning to a glowing runestone under his pillow.

Tom was home.

At once, Harry sent his Patronus to alert Sirius and Remus while his heart skipped a few frantic beats.

Showtime!

Waving his wand around like a lunatic, Harry magically changed out of his pyjamas and into some black robes, washed his face and brushed his teeth and then apparated to just outside Riddle Manor.

And then he apparated back home again because he'd forgotten the horcruxes.

Taking a few deep breaths, Harry stuffed all of Tom in his bag, slung it around his shoulder and apparated back to Riddle Manor. He wasn't worried about dealing with Rosier. He stuck with his earlier assessment of not crossing wands with the bloke, so he'd turned basically the whole of the manor into a giant rune trap.

Harry loved rune traps. He hadn't invented them but over several lifetimes he'd definitely perfected them, with Tom's help, of course.

Harry disillusioned himself and snuck to the front door where he'd hidden the activation rune hidden behind some overgrown azaleas. He pressed the rune, springing the trap and slammed open the front door, rushing inside while casting detection charms to locate his prey.

He found Rosier, with Tom hidden inside him, face first on the wooden floor of the drawing room, setting up what looked like a potion to create a homunculus. Well, they wouldn't be needing that, but Harry would salvage those ingredients later for his own use.

He disarmed Rosier, stripped him naked to get rid of any hidden portkeys and because he needed him without clothes for the ritual later anyway, and then wrapped him up in magical ropes much like Severus had wrapped him up some weeks earlier.

And no, Harry hadn't returned to Severus yet to talk potions. He was still far too embarrassed to face him again, but at least he was man enough to admit that. Then again, Severus hadn't contacted him either, and Harry wondered if he'd been a little bit too vivid with his description of the Blood Eagle and he'd had genuinely spooked Severus.

Just as Harry was done transfiguring the cellar door and staircase back to their original forms, Remus and Sirius hurried through the door.

"Couldn't that bastard have arrived at a more civilized time?" Sirius grumbled, hair still a mess, wool coat buttoned in the wrong places.

Harry grinned at him, far too excited to be getting his soulmate back. "The early bird gets the former Dark Lord!" And it wasn't a lie, since Harry was a bird, at least when he wanted to be.

"Do you need any help right now?" Remus said as they followed Harry and a floating Rosier down the stairs into the cellar.

"Just watch him while I prepare the potion." Harry cancelled the ropes, placed Rosier to the side of the ritual circle and transfigured shackles right out of the stone floor to keep him in place. Harry inhaled a deep breath, centred himself to keep his hands from trembling and got to work preparing the potion needed to complete the ritual.

"What are you going to do with this cunt?" Sirius asked, gesturing at a still unconscious Rosier while leaning against the opposite wall.

Harry briefly glanced over his shoulder while adding dried crocodile liver to his cauldron. "The ritual will transform his body into that of Tom's. In my first life, Wormtail cut off his own hand to add to the cauldron as a sacrifice of flesh of the servant. That is what Rosier is, a sacrifice, but by using him whole the outcome will be much better for Tom." Harry picked up the femur he'd dug up from Riddle Sr's grave and added that to his cauldron.

"Merlin," Sirius breathed, looking rather sorry he'd even asked.

“Is that necromancy?” Remus looked simultaneously disgusted yet incredibly curious.

“Yeah, it’s a form of necromancy, because we are adding a soul back to a body, which we are creating from another body. It’s fascinating stuff, really,” Harry rambled and then cut his own palm and let his blood drip inside a goblet until it was half-full. He quickly healed the wound and tipped the cup of blood into the potion.

“Your own blood?” Remus asked softly.

“In my first life, that was blood of the enemy. Now it’s blood of the soulmate, freely given. It will greatly improve Tom’s chances of coming out of this with his sanity intact.”

“Hooray,” Sirius said in a deadpan voice, but Harry choose to ignore him. He had limited time, since he wanted to finish before Rosier woke up. As long as Rosier was unconscious, Tom the wraith couldn’t do anything, and thanks to the magic of the rune trap Tom was literally trapped inside Rosier’s body. Once that magic wore off, Tom could in theory escape.

“Okay, this is done.” Harry levitated the huge cauldron to the centre of the ritual circle and started a fire under it so the potion continued bubbling. He inhaled a deep breath, and one by one levitated the horcruxes into the cauldron where they sank to the bottom. Finally, he vanished the shackles and levitated Rosier towards the cauldron, dropping him inside without much ceremony.

No words needed to be spoken, since the runes all around the ritual circles conveyed the intent of the ritual much stronger than spoken words ever could.

The body sank under the potion without a sound, and the liquid turned different colours, brown and red, rolling to a wild boil that spilled over the sides until the whole cauldron was covered in liquid. Steam and smoke rose, slowly filling the cellar.

“Is this supposed to happen?” Sirius asked, looking between Harry and the cauldron with a worried frown.

“Yeah, it’s looking good,” Harry called back, his heart almost bursting out of his chest in sheer excitement. Tom was coming back to him. Just a few more moments and he’d have Tom at his side again and he wouldn’t be alone anymore.

Finally, the runes around the circle lit up and the potion was sucked into itself where it started forming a figure while the metal of the cauldron slowly melted away until a man lay face down on the stone floor.

“Tom,” Harry breathed, eyes fixed on his soulmate while a lump sat in his throat. The man turned around and stared directly at Harry, brown eyes wide and confused. “Hey, babe!” Harry said with a huge grin.

“Who the fuck are you?” Tom asked as he sat on the stone floor, naked, and quickly scrambled away from Harry. “What have you done to me? Release me at once!”

Chapter End Notes

If you want to try Harry's family ragu, go to youtube and search for Family ragu with Gennaro Contaldo, on Jamie Oliver's channel. It's a simple recipe that I tried myself and it is DIVINE!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

No big cliffhanger this time, just a nice little teaser.

But be warned, all sorts of nasty things are discussed in this chapter. Nothing explicit, just talk about how depraved humanity can get pretty much. Consider yourself warned.

Also, some very mild sexual acts between two consenting adults, except that one is technically twelve thousand years old in a ten year old body that's now an adult body thanks to aging potions. Yeah, it's complicated.

Thank you all so much for reading and for your comments. Your response is amazing and slightly overwhelming. When I started this story, I had no idea how people would react to it, since it's such a weird concept, but I'm more than happy to see that so many of you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoy writing it.

Chapter 8

Harry broke.

Shaking from head to toe, Harry bowed his head and desperately tried to keep his mind together enough to figure out what had gone wrong.

This didn't make sense. He'd accounted for everything, even the horcrux still attached to him. That little sliver of soul shouldn't make a difference since they were connected through their shared souls. They were literally soulmates and had been for thousands and thousands of years. Harry had done the arithmancy and the ritual should have worked.

Harry's head swam and his heart pounded and his vision turned dark around the edges, and then there were strong hands raising his head up and lips pressing against his and Tom whispering, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, sweetheart. I played a prank."

"He did what now?" Sirius called from the other side of the room.

Tom's lips tasted tangy and bitter, a distinct flavour left over from the necromancy used in the ritual. "I realize now that my timing was wrong. I'm sorry, my darling, but I have this strange memory of you trolling me as a teenager about soulmate butt-wiping and I thought to troll you right back, but after our previous lives I was wrong to do so. Do forgive me, sweetheart." And all the while Tom kept pressing fluttering kisses to Harry's lips, cradling Harry's face in his hands.

“Fuck you,” Harry whispered around the tightness in his throat, his eyes watering to the point tears rolled down his cheeks. “Fuck you with a rusty spoon, Tom Marvolo Riddle. I killed them all.”

Tom smiled against Harry’s lips. “Did you now? I wondered as I was bleeding out if you’d do something Gryffindorish to get revenge.”

“Guilty as charged,” Harry said with a wet chuckle. “San Quentin was pretty deprecated by that point and during the decade I was there I’d thought up at least a dozen ways to escape, so it wasn’t very hard. Ed covered for me, and as a manhunt got organized to search for me, I got in touch with Limpy Pete, who’d been out for a year or two at that point, to get me some weapons. And then I broke into their compound, and I killed every single motherfucking man or woman I found there, except for three or so kids under ten. Everyone else was fair game, and I got that fucker Pablo as well and I made him suffer. He died the slowest of the lot. I counted 47 of them and I killed them all. After that I treated myself to a nice steak dinner and a pint of Ben & Jerry’s Chocolate Fudge Brownie, because let me tell you, prison food is absolute shit, and then I dropped a note in the mailbox of your precinct for your colleagues explaining what I’d done, and sat in my stolen car across the street and slit my wrists.” Harry leaned his forehead against Tom’s bare shoulder, suddenly as exhausted as he’d been when they’d climbed Mt Everest. “And then I woke up here as Harry Potter, ten years old, because my little shit of a cousin had drowned me. And I hate having my memories back by myself.”

“Given that your dogfathers are here, I’m assuming you at least told them part of the truth?” Tom whispered against Harry’s hair as he nuzzled the top of Harry’s ear, his arms slipping around Harry’s body to hold him close.

“What did he just call us?” Sirius demanded loudly.

“Yeah, I put them under a secrecy contract and I told them everything. It’s been good to just be myself at least around some people,” Harry said, slowly pulling away to look up at Tom’s handsome face. Even with Harry wearing his adult body, Tom was still almost a head taller. “It’s been... weird, being Harry Potter again.”

Tom nodded thoughtfully. “I’m sure it is. It’s embarrassing to be Tom Riddle again and realize I made all the same silly mistakes in my ridiculous quest for immortality again as I did in our first lives.”

Snorting, Harry shook his head. “I’m sure I also would have gone down the same path as I did before if dear Dudders hadn’t drowned me.” Harry snapped his mouth shut, looking up at Tom with wide eyes. “Holy crap. We could have been stuck without our memories, because you with your manky soul couldn’t remember through eye contact, and because of that I couldn’t either otherwise I would have remembered as a baby, and then Dumbledore would have turned me into his favourite sacrificial lamb again and you might have gotten lucky and killed me at some point, or I might have managed to kill you again.” Harry couldn’t hold back a bright smile. “Damn, I should send Dudley a fruit basket or something. Or a basket full of Big Macs, I’m sure he’d appreciate that better.”

“That is something to think about, what could have happened if you hadn’t gotten your memories back.” Tom looked like he wanted to say more but at that moment, Remus cleared

his throat. Both Tom and Harry turned to stare at him.

“Here.” Remus offered Tom some conjured black robes and only now did Harry realize Tom was still utterly naked. He sneaked a peek; nice! But then Tom quickly pulled the robes on and Harry would have to wait to examine Tom’s body in further detail until they were home.

“We couldn’t help but overhear you saying you’d killed 47 men and women, Harry,” Remus said in a hesitant voice, as if unsure if he should bring it up at all or just let sleeping killers lie.

Harry sighed, leaning his forehead against Tom’s chest, squeezing his arms a little tighter around Tom’s torso, needing to hold his soulmate close. He didn’t want to admit any of this to Remus and Sirius, what he’d been, what he’d done. It wasn’t as if Harry was wrecked with guilt or something silly like that, because he wasn’t. He’d killed plenty of people before, in plenty of lives. It’s just that what he’d done was in poor taste since he’d raped and tortured and murdered innocent women, and as someone who himself had been raped and tortured and murdered in at least a handful of lives, Harry knew what he’d put those innocent women through in their final moments of their lives and that bothered him.

“In our last life, Harry was a serial killer,” Tom said in a detached tone he usually saved for lecturing students. “We lived in San Francisco, and Harry murdered 19 women and was known as the Bay Area Butcher before we ran into each other and got our memories back. I was one of the homicide detectives assigned to the case.”

“Merlin’s mouldy balls,” Sirius whispered, face paling as he walked closer to them. “Harry, how?”

“I was mentally ill, pretty much,” Harry said in his own, very weak defence. “And the moment I got my memories back, I gave Tom the leash of my pitbull Ladybug, to look after her, and I went to go throw myself off the Golden Gate Bridge, but Tom talked me out of it, said I could do something good by turning myself in and letting the FBI and everyone study me to learn about serial killers and their motivations and shit.”

“I knew Harry would be unable to resist assisting in that, since during one life we were FBI agents working for the Behavioural Science Unit where we spent our time hunting serial killers, terrorists, serial rapists and more.” Tom swallowed audibly. “Not to mention during a different life we lost a teenaged daughter to a serial killer. For years we weren’t sure what had happened, other than she disappeared into thin air while spending a day with friends at the local lake. It wasn’t until years later, after the murderer had been caught, he fessed up to killing her and about thirty other young women. We went and watched that son of a bitch die when they executed the death penalty but it wasn’t enough.”

Everyone stayed quiet for a few moments, taking in everything Tom had just said. Harry leaned against Tom and rubbed his fingers together without realizing it. He’d always enjoyed the feeling of warm, sticky blood between his fingers.

“Harry got an attorney, turned himself in and cut a deal with the D.A. He pleaded guilty in exchange for life in prison without parole and that he’d always be allowed to provide data to anyone that wanted it. The FBI, several college professors and even the CIA that one time,

were all eager to talk to him. Even took him to have his brain scanned and more. We stayed in touch and wrote a book together about the case and about serial killers in general that became a huge success. Harry donated his cut to a charity that helped find missing persons. And about a decade later, as I was working a case involving a few murders linked to a local drug cartel, I got gunned down stepping out of my car in front of a post office.”

Harry had his eyes squeezed shut, unable to look at what Tom had dubbed his ‘dogfathers’. “Your colleague came to visit me in prison to tell me herself that you’d been killed. She also told me who she thought did it, even though they didn’t yet have any solid proof. So I went after the fuckers myself and took care of it.”

Harry inhaled a deep breath, still hearing all his victims beg and scream. “I couldn’t stop myself from killing those nineteen women. In some ways I understood it was wrong, but I couldn’t stop myself. I wasn’t able to look at those women as people. They were just things, objects, to use for my depraved fantasies.”

“We don’t get to choose the bodies we get reincarnated in,” Tom said, still in his lecturing tone. “And sometimes those bodies are faulty. We’ve both lived with plenty of physical disabilities, but we’ve also suffered from pretty much every mental disorders known to man between us, including the really bad stuff.” Tom stiffened in Harry’s embrace. “One lifetime, I was –” Tom’s voice cracked, and Harry knew he couldn’t articulate what he’d been, knew that the life Tom was referring to was the life he hated most, much more so even than the time he’d been the original Voldemort.

So Harry had to pull himself together and speak for him. “It was roughly eighty or so lives ago, when I was a young police officer in Surinam. We met in the parking lot of the local supermarket and the moment our eyes met Tom bent over and puked his guts out. Then he looked me in the eyes and said ‘I have over 20,000 images of child pornography on my computer at home and I’ve been making a plan to lure a child away from their parents. Give me your gun.’ And I gave it to him.” Harry briefly glanced down before squaring his shoulders to look straight at both Remus and Sirius’ pale faces. “And Tom put the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger. After he dropped to the ground, dead, and people started screaming around us, I picked up the gun and put it to my own temple. I knew I couldn’t explain what had happened to my superiors, and there were too many eyewitnesses to fabricate something, and by the time my colleagues found those images on Tom’s computer they’d probably find a way to charge me for it. So I sent a silent apology to my parents and siblings, who were all lovely people, and I pulled the trigger. In our next life we were farmers in the 1200’s in the Song Dynasty, modern day China, and Tom had schizophrenia. That was fun.”

“No, it wasn’t, but it was better than the monster I’d been before,” Tom said quietly, body still as a statue in Harry’s arms.

“I don’t know what to say,” Remus whispered, while Sirius scrubbed both hands up and down his face. “Getting reincarnated over and over again is so much more complicated than we can comprehend, I suppose. I am truly sorry this happened to you. Both of you.”

Harry waved his comment away and looked up to give Tom a lopsided grin. “I guess we should never tell them about that time we were Nazis.”

“Merlin, Harry!” Remus yelled, while Sirius glanced between them in confusion, probably not knowing what a Nazi even was.

“We were the world’s worst Nazis,” Tom said, body loosening again now that the worst of that conversation was over. “We ended up in front of a German firing squad for treason since we had supplied the allied forces with every scrap of useful information we could give them for years.”

“True enough,” Harry said with a huge grin. “We pretty much spent the whole war messing up anything we could for our Nazi brethren. We met while we were in the Hitler Jugend and after freaking the fuck out for a few days we came up with a plan to sabotage what we could and we joined the SS and since we spoke dozens of languages at that point, we made up all these fake Russian, French, Dutch, Italian, even Japanese contacts and used those fake spy connections to feed the Nazis all sorts of bullshit information about the allied forces while collecting real data to give to the Brits. That firing squad was worth it.”

“Certainly,” Tom agreed with a pleasant enough smile. “Getting shot in the heart is a small price to pay for actively fighting against fascism and genocide.”

“Do I even want to know what a Nazi is?” Sirius whispered to Remus.

“I’ll explain later,” Remus whispered back.

“Point is,” Harry said, feeling better now that the really bad stuff was out there. It was always good to get stuff off your shoulders and out in the open to help you deal with traumatizing events and to get the healing process started. They’d gotten to the point they could joke about being Nazis and that while in different lives both Harry and Tom had lost loved ones to the holocaust, not to mention the times they’d lived through WWII in different countries and suffered in different ways because of the war. “Point is, we don’t get to choose. We do our best to be good people, to live good lives, to love our families and friends, but we don’t get to choose and that means that sometimes we have to deal with some really, really horrible things. Humans can be amazing and altruistic, but they have such endless capacity to commit atrocities against each other. We’ve seen it all. The good, the bad and the truly horrific.”

“I’m beginning to understand that.” Remus nodded while Sirius looked down at his shoes before also nodding. “I know we haven’t really discussed this before, but if you want help finding a way to end this cycle of reincarnation, just let us know.”

“We’d help, Moony and me both.” Sirius gave Harry a look that promised a lot of things.

“You got me out of that hellhole, Harry. I owe you my life. Whatever you need, we’ll help.”

Harry and Tom exchanged a brief glance. “We need to discuss that in private,” Harry said, though he already knew the answer. He didn’t want their endless lives to end, for the simple reason that he didn’t want to lose Tom. If they stopped the cycle they would lose each other, simple as that. And for every really horrible life, they lived at least ten good ones and one or two amazing ones, so in the end they couldn’t complain. The good did outweigh the bad eventually.

“Of course,” Remus agreed easily. “Perhaps we should let you two get settled and we’ll see you tomorrow evening for dinner. If we’re still invited, of course.”

“Duh, of course you’re invited for our weekly dinner date.” Harry turned to look up at Tom. “Perhaps Tom can cook this time. He is a two-Michelin-star chef. You’d be in for a real treat.”

“I wouldn’t mind cooking a little something,” Tom offered, sounding like he hardly cared, but Harry knew Tom enjoyed cooking for company at least as much as Harry did.

“So we’ll see you tomorrow at the usual time. We’ll clean up here and then go home and have some breakfast. I’m starving.” Harry pulled out his wand, waved goodbye to his dogfathers (and the more he thought about it, the more he liked that term) and started wiping away any evidence of the ritual that had taken place there.

“I don’t suppose you’ve brought my wand?” Tom asked as he put what was left of the potions ingredients away in an empty crate.

“Bugger. It’s still in my nightstand at home.” Harry offered Tom a grin that was anything but apologetic.

“And where is home these days?” Tom picked up the crate and followed Harry up the stairs.

“Now that is a surprise.” Harry quickly added the potions ingredients in the drawing room to the crate in Tom’s arms. They’d lived with such limited means for so many lives that neither one of them wanted to waste anything that was usable, especially not expensive potions supplies. “I’ll apparate us.”

Tom obediently stood still while Harry grabbed hold of his shoulder and focused on the front garden of the cottage. A few dizzying moments later, they stood there.

Raising his eyebrows, Tom looked around in obvious bewilderment. “There’s nothing here.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Harry briefly pressed his face in his hand while he shook his head. “Harry Potter lives in Gaunt Cottage.”

“Ah!” Eyebrows raised higher still, Tom looked around again. “This is not Gaunt Cottage. I’ve seen that when I framed my uncle and it was a dump. I swear, darling, we had better accommodations that one time we were hunter-gatherers during the last ice-age.”

Harry twirled his wand around in his fingers. “All you need is magic.”

“I would have sworn this cesspool was beyond saving, even with magic, but it appears you proved me wrong. Unless the inside is still in shambles?”

“See for yourself.” Harry gestured towards the front door and levitated the crate out of Tom’s hands, giving him every opportunity to explore their new home without hindrance.

Tom stepped through the door, took one look around the room, and said, “No. Absolutely not.”

Surprised, and even a little hurt, Harry turned towards Tom to give him a piece of his mind until he realized what Tom was looking at, and then he doubled over and cackled.

Tom was staring in absolute horror at the bagpipes hanging on the wall above the TV. “The cottage is lovely, Harry, the interior design a bit eclectic perhaps, but it’s lovely, all of it, except that monstrosity on the wall. I will not have it in my home.”

Harry laughed harder, holding onto his stomach while he hurriedly levitated the crate of potions ingredients to the dining table so he wouldn’t drop them.

“Harry,” Tom said with such earnest eyes, Harry would probably believe anything he said. “Harry, cats in heat being spun around the room by their tails sound better than whatever comes out of that bag of horrors. It cannot stay.”

“You are the worst Scot that has ever existed,” Harry finally managed to say while gasping for breath.

Tom didn’t look very impressed. “I’m English and so are you.”

“Now, sure, but you’ve been Scottish plenty of times and you suck at it,” Harry pointed out happily. God, he’d missed bickering with his soulmate. “At this point, I’m embarrassed for you, Tom. You’re actually giving me second hand embarrassment with how much you suck at being Scottish.”

“Just because I have the ability to tell the difference between music and the wailing of lesser demons, doesn’t mean –“

The world would never know what Tom was going to say next, because Harry yanked his head down by the collar of his robes and crushed his lips against Tom’s. “Fuck, I’ve missed you,” he muttered before parting his lips and teasing his tongue inside Tom’s mouth. Tom slid his fingers through Harry’s hair, cupping the back of his head and tilting it to give him better access to plunder Harry’s mouth. Moving his lips lazily, with slow swipes of his tongue, Harry kissed his soulmate for what felt like an eternity, just revelling in the fact that they were together again.

When they finally pulled back, Tom said, “I do believe I’m asexual in this body.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Harry stepped back and threw both his hands in the air. “Are you kidding me? You look like this and I can’t persuade you to pound me into the mattress?”

“You’re being very intolerant,” Tom replied with a smug little grin. “And you know I always make sure you’re satisfied, darling.”

Which was true, Harry had to concede. Throughout their many lives they’d had varying libidos, anything from always feeling horny and able to have sex at least three times a day all the way to feeling no sexual attraction at all and being asexual with no real desire to have sex, and anything in between. But they did always find ways to compromise, to make it work for them both, and they both had learned early on that while exciting and fun and comforting, sex really wasn’t the most important part of a relationship.

“I need a shower,” Tom said by way of a peace offering. “Join me and I’ll wash your hair. Maybe even massage your shoulders.”

“You play dirty,” Harry muttered, but still grabbed Tom’s hand and dragged him towards the small bathroom. Harry loved having his hair washed and he was an absolute sucker for receiving a massage and Tom knew this, of course.

“I’m surprised you didn’t enlarge the room and install a nice big bathtub.” Tom, in turn, loved long, hot baths, preferably with Harry right there in the tub with him.

“I honestly hadn’t thought of it while it was just me. But if you want to remodel the bathroom, be my guest.” Harry yanked his robes off, followed quickly by his briefs, socks and shoes.

Tom unbuttoned his robes and stepped out of them. “Don’t mind if I do.”

The hot water quickly filled the small room with steam and Harry pushed the shower curtain back and gestured for Tom to go first. It really was a small, square shower stall and they barely fit in there together, but Harry didn’t mind that one bit. Having Tom so close, standing right behind him, wet skin sliding against wet skin as Harry handed him the shampoo bottle, was the best feeling in the world and the low level of chronic anxiety Harry had been feeling ever since waking up in this life was finally washed away now that his soulmate was with him again.

“I’m assuming you’ve started building our wealth already,” Tom said quietly while he poured a dollop of shampoo on Harry’s head and started massaging it in.

Harry groaned, tipping his head back while closing his eyes. “Yeah, got five designs to Mahatma Khan, four already sold. And I got most stuff out of the Room of Requirement.”

“I thought you might have, judging by the interior design of this place. I was sure I’d recognized some signature Hogwarts cabinetry.” Tom kept his promise and massaged his way down Harry’s neck to his shoulders and then slid his hands down Harry’s belly all the way to his cock. “Just relax, darling,” Tom whispered in Harry’s ear, before kissing the skin right under it, while closing his long fingers around Harry’s hardening cock. With slow, steady strokes Tom managed to chase all stray thoughts from Harry’s mind until nothing remained but feeling; Tom’s lips on his own, Tom’s tongue in his mouth, Tom’s hand on his cock, steadily working him closer and closer to the edge while warm water rained down on them both.

Harry came with a grunt that quickly became a groan, while Tom held him upright and let him ride out the waves while gently pulling on his cock until he was spent.

“Fuck, I needed that,” Harry breathed against Tom’s wet lips.

“I thought you might.”

Harry blinked his eyes open and stared into Tom’s brown ones, so warm and intense. “You’re really a handsome devil in this body, Jesus.”

“I haven’t even seen my reflection yet, though I assume by your doe eyes that I look like Tom Riddle again,” Tom said with a teasing smile.

Snorting, Harry pulled out of Tom’s embrace as much as the stall would let them. “I do not have doe eyes, but yes, you look like Tom Riddle in your late twenties or something.” Harry trailed his hand down Tom’s chest. “Want me to return the favour?”

“Might as well see if everything works,” Tom mumbled as he bent down to press his lips to Harry’s.

Everything did work as Harry stroked Tom’s very nice cock to hardness. He thought about offering to blow him but he could tell that while Tom enjoyed the feeling of being jerked off, he wasn’t all that into it. After all the times they’d had sex together, no matter their gender or their bodies, Harry knew how Tom reacted when he was really into sex, and this wasn’t it. Still, Harry guided him higher and higher until he finally tipped over the edge with a soft moan against Harry’s mouth.

“Yeah, you’re asexual,” Harry conceded after Tom blinked his eyes open and stared down at Harry in something close to an apology. “Hey, it happens. We’ll figure it out.”

“We always do,” Tom assured him with another kiss and then he reached for the soap and started washing Harry’s chest. “I always had a very low libido in my first life, but I was never sure if it was because of the horcruxes or if it was just the way I was.”

“Yeah, it could very well have been the horcruxes, since they messed you up so badly.” Harry reached for the shampoo and washed Tom’s black hair.

“Do you have any plans that I should know about?” Tom asked as Harry turned off the water and they got out of the shower stall to dry off.

Harry offered Tom his fluffiest towel while getting another one for himself. “Nothing that’s pressing. Harry Potter is officially missing and Dumbledore is going nuts looking for him. I’ve got Jack Bird established in both the muggle and wizarding world. Even signed up for OWLs and NEWTs in December.”

“Hm.” Tom ran the towel through his hair a few more times before hanging it over the towel rack to let dry. “This might be a good time to try something new with the Fidelius charm.”

“What?” Harry’s curiosity was piqued as he opened the little cabinet under the sink and got a new toothbrush for Tom to use.

Tom accepted the toothbrush with a small smile. “My looks are too recognizable for people like Dumbledore, and perhaps yours as well even as an adult if Harry Potter is still missing. Remember how we theorized that we could put ideas or knowledge other than something physical like a house or a person under the Fidelius?”

“Yeah?” Harry ran a brush through his hair, giving Tom an expectant look.

Tom waved the toothbrush at Harry after he put some toothpaste on it. "I want to try putting my identity under the Fidelius." And with that Tom started brushing his teeth.

"Huh." Harry stared at him in wonder, mind going wild with possibilities. He waited until Tom was done rinsing his mouth. "Your whole identity?"

"The part where Tom Riddle is Voldemort."

"Oh, that is clever," Harry said, leading Tom into the bedroom and opening the wardrobe. "I saved a few robes for you from my stash from Hogwarts. They should fit. Help yourself to my socks and underwear."

"These will do fine until I can get to Diagon Alley," Tom agreed, accepting plain black robes from Harry before rummaging through the dresser drawers in search of undergarments.

"Could we put my identity under a Fidelius as well?" Harry mused out loud while they both got dressed. "Or maybe not my identity, but my looks? I'm getting sick and tired of casting glamours all the time, and they're so easily broken by just about anyone."

"Yes, we should be able to do that. Put the fact that Harry Potter has black hair and green eyes under the Fidelius."

"Exactly." Before leaving the bedroom, Harry opened his nightstand and pulled out Tom's wand, handing it to him with a smile.

"Thank you, darling." Tom briefly closed his eyes as he welcomed the familiar magical feeling of holding his own wand.

Harry showed Tom the kitchen as he got out eggs and bacon and tomatoes from his own greenhouse. Tom put his wand to good use right away and got the kettle boiling and cups of tea made while Harry cooked them both breakfast. Or, seeing as it was just about noon, brunch.

"So we put the fact that Tom Riddle was ever Voldemort under the Fidelius, and that Harry Potter has black hair and green eyes," Harry summed up as they sat down to eat at the dining table. "That way we'll both be able to walk around in the wizarding world, looking like ourselves, without having to worry about Dumbledore and his flaming flamingos stalking us."

"Precisely," Tom said and took a bite of scrambled eggs and tomatoes.

Harry made short work of a rasher of bacon. "Wait." Sitting up, Harry looked at Tom with an expectant gaze. "If that works, we can put something else under the Fidelius."

"Such as?" Tom asked, sipping his tea.

One corner of Harry's mouth curled up. "The fact that Voldemort isn't dead. Dumbledore and a few members of the Order are the only ones who actively believe that right now. We take that away, and Dumbledore loses his reasons to ever bother us in the future."

Leaning back in his chair, Tom offered Harry a big, approving smile. “Clever man.”

Chapter 9

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“It’s been more than an hour since we arrived home,” Tom said as they carried their dirty dishes to the kitchen. “Yet the Polyjuice potion hasn’t worn off yet. How curious.”

“What?” Harry looked over his shoulders at Tom while getting the dishes going with a charm. “What Polyjuice potion?”

“Yours, obviously.” Tom leaned his hip against the kitchen counter, arms crossed as he offered Harry an amused smile. “You cannot possibly be my Harry.”

Harry blinked in confusion, wondering what the hell Tom was getting at but deciding to just play along. Knowing Tom, it was bound to be something interesting. “Well, you got me, pretending to be your soulmate and all. What gave me away?”

Tom swept an arm around the kitchen. “The distinct lack of dog. My soulmate would have at least three of the things barking around by now.”

Chuckling, Harry went back to charming the dishes dry. “Oh, I was tempted, babe, but since I had no clue what the future would bring and when it would bring it, I controlled my baser impulses.”

“Let me guess,” Tom said with a knowing curve of his brow. “You’re either volunteering at a local shelter at least once a week, or you’re walking a bunch of dogs for the neighbours. Or possibly both.”

“You don’t know that.” Harry levitated the last of the dishes inside the cabinet and turned to glare at Tom. “I’m feeling very attacked right now.”

“You’re entirely predictable, darling. So, which is it?”

“You don’t have to sound so smug. And it’s just two dogs for some neighbours who needed help.” Harry wasn’t pouting. He was not pouting at all.

“See, now I’m sure you’re my soulmate after all.” Tom stepped up to Harry and wound his arms around Harry’s waist, pulling him closer. Harry went willingly, pressing his face against Tom’s shoulder. “I’m glad we get to have a quiet life this time and we can be together without society keeping us apart,” Tom whispered against Harry’s ear.

They held each other, their arms tightening, just basking in the other standing so close. During their previous life, Harry’s life-sentence in prison had kept them apart, but the life before that they’d lived in 1700s Britain, both of them male. Harry had been given to the catholic church as a young boy to be educated as a priest, as was not uncommon in those days, especially with families who had more children that they could reasonably expect to feed. Harry had been the youngest son of 8 children in total. And Tom had been a teacher at

Eton College, working his way up to headmaster eventually. They met when Harry, as a young priest, started work in the catholic church of Windsor, just across the river Thames from the small town of Eton.

While they'd maintained a very close friendship that lifetime, for obvious reasons they hadn't been able to openly engage in any kind of intimate relationship. Other than some very quick hand or blowjobs during some stolen moments in either of their private quarters, their relationship had been mainly platonic, because it was suicide to try to change society at large.

Harry had learned over his many lifetimes, that while actively working to improve a society's morals and customs was all well and good, one couldn't enforce such changes before they were due without great cost and consequences. In other words, you had to make do with the customs and mores of the era you lived in, no matter how frustrating such things usually were.

At least during the life before that one they'd been married with four children while living in Bhutan. Harry was a man and worked as a hiking guide and interpreter, and Tom, a woman that time, ran the souvenir shop and small bed and breakfast they operated. They advertised their businesses on social media and Harry's hiking blog, and drew in a nice, international crowd who wanted to discover the wild, natural beauty of this small, mostly unknown country in the Himalayas. That had been a wonderful, quiet life where they'd built a loving family and did very well for themselves, at least by Bhutan standards.

But that was lifetimes ago.

At least now they could be together again without anyone interfering.

"I keep forgetting you're only ten years old, technically."

Harry pulled back to glare up at Tom. "Seriously?"

Tom shrugged in Harry's arms as best he could. "I said, technically. Don't worry, darling. I'm not demanding years of celibacy or something silly. It's just weird, is what I'm saying."

"Sure. But we've been kids before with our adult memories and whatever we did then together, up to and including murder, never bothered you."

"Sshh." Tom leaned down to press a soft kiss to Harry's stiff lips. "Forget I said anything. I was just remarking upon the fact."

"Fine. Already forgotten." Harry reluctantly pulled back from Tom's embrace. As nice as it was, they couldn't spend the whole afternoon holding each other when there was work to be done. "I've got the supplies for a few more Fidelius charms, so we can get those going right away."

"That's probably for the best, to get my connection to Voldemort protected at once," Tom agreed, and Harry led Tom upstairs where he showed him the potions room, and the office and library, where Tom immediately browsed the shelves, pulling down a few titles he hadn't

read yet (or had, but simply had forgotten that fact over the lifetimes. That happened regularly to them both). Harry got the supplies for the charms.

By that time it was pouring rain outside so they decided to apparate back to Riddle Manor and perform the charms there, since it gave them much more space than their cosy cottage.

“I’m not sure what to do with this house,” Tom said as they stood in the entrance hall and divvied up the supplies between them.

“We could renovate it and sell it, or renovate it and keep it and perhaps someday move in ourselves,” Harry offered, his arms full of candles and rune tools. “It is a nice house, just needs a lot of work.”

“That it does. I’m just not sure I’d ever want to live here, though.” And with that, Tom disappeared into the drawing room.

“Oh, right.” Honestly, Harry had already forgotten Tom had murdered his father and grandparents in the house at some point. Ah well, nothing needed to be decided anytime soon. Harry made his way to a small reception room to the right and got started on his Fidelius charm. He inscribed runes around the room, carefully placed the candles in a certain pattern and started chanting while performing a repeating pattern with his wand.

It took almost an hour, but then Harry was finished and if everything had gone to plan, Harry Potter’s distinct looks were now a carefully guarded secret.

“Babe?” Harry called across the hallway. “Are you done?”

“Just finished,” Tom called back.

“Okay, can you tell me what Harry Potter looks like?”

Silence was Harry’s only answer for a minute or so. “I know this,” Tom finally said. “Hang on. Harry Potter looks like...this is so frustrating. I know this.” Tom loudly cleared his throat. “Moving on. Harry, dear, what is Voldemort’s real name.”

“Well, that’s easy,” Harry said with an amused snort. “It’s...” And then Harry drew a blank. A complete and utter blank, while he would have been willing to bet everything he owned that he knew the answer to that question. He was sure of it!

Tom came strolling into the reception room while Harry was rubbing a frustrated hand across his face.

“Lord Voldemort’s real name and identity is Tom Marvolo Riddle,” Tom said with a little smirk and Harry snapped his head up and stared at Tom as his mouth dropped open.

“Oh my god, it worked!” Harry laughed, doing a little victory dance in place, swinging his hips and waving his arms over his head. “By the way, Harry Potter looks exactly like this,” Harry pointed a finger at his own grinning face. “Black hair, green eyes, distinct scar on his forehead.”

“Thank Merlin,” Tom sighed while he stared at Harry in wonder. “I genuinely couldn’t remember what you looked like and it was terribly unnerving.”

“Wicked. Two down, one more to go,” Harry said, immensely pleased so far their plan was working. It would make their lives so much easier. They cast the next Fidelius charm together, which sped up the process a little. By the end they were sure they’d hidden the fact that Voldemort was still alive.

“We’ll know for sure tomorrow, when Remus and Sirius come over for dinner. They are one hundred percent aware Voldemort is still alive, after all,” Harry said as they put the supplies away and made sure no trace remained of any magic they’d performed there. It wouldn’t do anyone any good if Dumbledore came snooping again and realized someone had been playing with the Fidelius charm in Voldemort’s ancestral home.

“Do you have any plans for dinner?” Tom asked after they apparated back to their cottage.

“I picked up some guanciale the other day for your return feast,” Harry said and at once had an armful of soulmate who pressed a hard kiss to his lips.

“Have I told you lately how happy I am you’re my soulmate?” Tom muttered against Harry’s lips. “Because I’m ecstatic, truly.”

“I’m getting that impression, yes,” Harry said with a chuckle. “I’ll make you carbonara, babe. Always.”

Guanciale was the cured pig’s cheek traditionally used in spaghetti carbonara, which was Tom’s favourite comfort food. He was very specific about using guanciale, as was traditional. The quickest way to offend Tom was to serve him carbonara made with pancetta. And if you wanted an enemy for life you served it to him using bacon. Harry shuddered to think what would happen if someone ever dared to give Tom carbonara with something like cream or other stuff that didn’t belong in the dish. Whatever happened, it wouldn’t be pretty.

“I need to pick up some wine, and some olive oil for a salad dressing,” Harry said and Tom immediately conjured an umbrella.

“Then how about you show me the local sights and the nearest supermarket. Then I’ll see what’s available for the dinner I’ll be cooking for my in-laws tomorrow.”

Harry quickly transfigured both their robes into black slacks and shirts and conjured a couple of wool coats. Hand-in-hand they walked down the country lane towards Little Hangleton centre while Tom kept them dry with the umbrella. Harry filled him in on everything that had happened so far, and told him about the people he’d met. Cindy and Derrick and the choir, and all his walks with Quinn and Lucy.

“We might as well get a car,” Tom suggested when they’d reached the Tesco after a brisk half hour walk. “If we’re socializing with muggles as much as you’ve been doing, having a car will be a boon.”

“Sure,” Harry easily agreed. “I should have enough in my muggle bank account for a nice second-hand car.”

Tom nodded thoughtfully. “We’ll get my identity established in the muggle and wizarding world tomorrow, and Saturday we can go look for a Toyota or Nissan or so.”

They did their grocery shopping with the practised ease of a couple who had been grocery shopping together many thousands of times before. They got everything they needed for dinner that day and the next, plus some supplies for easy weekend meals, some rolls and croissants for a luxurious breakfast in bed on Sunday, and plenty of wine and snacks to spoil themselves in the evening.

“Thank fuck for featherlight charms,” Harry whispered as they carried four heavy bags home. Thankfully it had stopped raining.

Halfway home, when they were surrounded by fields, Tom said, “Wait a moment.” He put down his bags, pulled out his wand, and summoned three hares out of the fields, one after the other. “I’m feeling like game for tomorrow,” Tom said by way of explanation as he quickly dispatched the hares with a couple of bludgeoning hexes.

“I’m pretty sure that’s poaching, what you just did,” Harry said and stuck out his tongue when Tom shot him a disbelieving look. Throughout their many lives, they had poached just about any kind of animal, as long as it was edible. When you lived in times before grocery stores were invented and you had limited means, you could either break the law or starve. And both Harry and Tom had no problem breaking the law when it served them.

Tom rolled his eyes and stuffed the dead hares in his grocery bag and walked on.

When they passed a cops of trees, Tom paused again and this time summoned two nice fat pheasants plus a handful of woodpigeons.

“A game stew?” Harry guessed and gave Tom his best pleading look. He loved game stew.

“Hm.” The fowl disappeared inside the bag as well, which Tom had magically expanded and they continued their journey back home.

At home, Tom hung the hares and birds from the rafters, since hanging them overnight would improve their flavour while Harry put away the groceries and got started on dinner. Tom lit a fire in the big fireplace, which crackled cosily in the background as Tom made a very simple chocolate mousse out of double cream and a chocolate bar, with a splash of vanilla and a pinch of sea salt and lots of whisking.

By that time it was almost dark outside, where the wind had picked up and was beating fat raindrops against the windows. Harry lit candles and lamps with a wave of his wand while Tom inspected Harry’s collection of second-hand VCR tapes he’d picked up at the flea market in York for next to nothing together with a VCR player.

“We haven’t seen this one in a while.” Tom held up the torn box of Back To The Future.

“Yeah, not for a few lifetimes at least,” Harry agreed as he filled two plates with the pasta carbonara and the simple salad from his garden he’d made. “Put it on, dinner’s ready.”

And so they sat together on the couch, enjoying their amazing dinner and dessert while revisiting the adventures of Marty and Doc Brown. Afterwards, Tom turned the TV to the BBC where they were delighted to come across an episode of ‘Allo ‘Allo!, a hilarious comedy set in France during WWII. Tom cracked open the wine while Harry got a wooden board made up with brie, Roquefort, reblochon and fromage frais, which he served with small slices of crusty French bread. More logs were added to the fire and Harry spread out a warm blanket across their legs and they indulged in alcohol and cheese while watching some good old-fashioned British television.

“I’ve missed this,” Harry said once he was stuffed and burrowed under the blanket, leaning against Tom. “I’ve missed you. I hate lives when we can’t be together.”

“I know, love.” Tom put down his near-empty glass of wine on the coffee table and wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulder, pulling him closer still. “But we always end up together again. We’ll always have moments like this one, which makes all the crap we have to put up with worth it.”

“Truer words were never spoken,” Harry agreed softly.

They went to bed around midnight, leaving the dishes for the next day. Once inside their bedroom, Tom pulled Harry closer to unbutton his shirt.

“You don’t have to,” Harry said quickly. He’d been asexual himself more than once and he knew that it could be uncomfortable to have sex when you really weren’t feeling like having it.

“I’m not forcing myself, darling. I’m enjoying making you feel good. Please let me,” Tom whispered and kissed Harry, distracting him enough to keep from protesting more.

They slid under the covers naked and they held each other close while they continued kissing and caressing and Tom slid his leg between Harry’s thighs and urged Harry to ride him, to rub his hard cock against Tom’s hot skin. They moved together, laying on their sides in a tight embrace, lips and tongues working tirelessly, just a single small light on the nightstand casting them in shadows. Eventually, Harry reached his orgasm and he buried his face in Tom’s neck, pumping his hips while he shot white strings of come between them. Tom reached down and pulled on his own cock a few times, quickly following Harry over the edge and coating his hand with his semen.

“Love you, babe,” Harry whispered against Tom’s skin, eyes already heavy. “Love you so fucking much. Never, ever losing you, ever.”

“I love you, too, darling.” Tom was thankfully still awake enough to clean up the mess they made with a swish of his wand. Then he turned off the light and crawled under the covers to cuddle with Harry, who was pretty much asleep at that point.

The next morning, Harry made breakfast because Tom was busy cleaning the hares and fowl and getting his game stew cooking slowly for the whole day. After they'd eaten and had a quick shower together without any shenanigans of the sexual kind, they headed towards Diagon Alley.

Their first stop was Gringotts, where Harry added Tom to his account as a full co-owner and they got both Galleons and pounds. Their next stop was Madam Malkin where Tom got a full wardrobe and Harry also picked up a few items, such as a nice, warm winter cloak. Now that they were a bit more financially established they could afford to spend a bit more on new items. After they shrunk their bags they apparated to the ministry to visit the department of education.

"I've taken my OWLs and NEWTs many years ago," Tom told Ellen Foster, the same witch who'd helped Harry some months before. "I've been abroad for many years, so I just wanted to check if they were still valid here."

"If you've taken your official OWLs and NEWTs, then yes, they will remain valid until your death," Ellen explained with a patient smile.

"I'm glad to hear that. I've also gained a few masteries during my time abroad, but I've yet to register them here, and I'm afraid I've lost my certificates during my many times moving across the world."

"You can simply request new certificates with the appropriate Guild and then register them here." Ellen nodded politely when Tom sincerely thanked her and they made their way to the department of transportation.

Tom got his apparition license since the one registered to him was about fifty years old and probably not even valid anymore. And this way he was building up his original identity again. They did the same in the muggle world, popping into the HM Revenue and Customs offices to get Tom established as a taxpaying citizen and then adding him to Harry's bank account, where they also checked to see how much they could spend on a car the next day.

Once they had all that done they had lunch in a little authentic pizzeria, since Tom absolutely loved real Italian pizza and it had been a few lifetimes since they had it. Harry loved it, too, easily as much as Tom, but he wasn't as picky about it as his soulmate. As far as Harry was concerned, there was no wrong way to make pizza. All ways were delicious. Tom begged to differ, very much so.

Thankfully the pizza they had was made with fresh buffalo mozzarella and cooked in a woodburning oven and was absolutely delicious. Their last stop was a Marks & Spencer's to pick up some muggle clothing and shoes for Tom and a few other items he needed, such as a razor and a wallet and other random things.

They made it back late afternoon and Tom immediately set to cooking for their guests, leaving Harry to put everything away. Harry took his time washing all the clothes with magic before hanging them in the wardrobe.

Right before their guests were set to arrive Tom got a fire in the fireplace going, instructed Harry to light candles, and disappeared into the bedroom to change. By the time Harry was done with the candles and had set the dinner table, Tom appeared again, wearing a wine-red cashmere jumper and black slacks and he looked so fucking hot it was ridiculous.

Harry ducked into the bedroom as well to put some of his nicer clothes on. In this case, a deep-green wool jumper, a white shirt underneath and his nicest blue jeans. Tom gave him an approving nod when Harry walked out of the bedroom.

“Are you nervous?” Tom asked him as he stood stirring the stew, after Harry had rearranged the cutlery on the dining table a few times.

“Dunno,” Harry said, forcing himself to sit down and stop fiddling. “Maybe. Yesterday Sirius was still mostly in shock to have much of a reaction. But now he’s had a full day to think about your reappearance and he might decide to not like it after all.”

“Actually, he’s already forgotten I’m Voldemort,” Tom pointed out while offering Harry a smug smile over his shoulder.

“Oh, right.” Harry blinked, and then tensed up wondering if they should even share that secret with Sirius and Remus.

A knock sounded on the door and Harry jumped up to let his dogfathers in.

Remus offered him two bottles of wine, one red and one white. “We weren’t sure what we were having, so we brought both.”

“Game stew.” Harry accepted the bottles. “Thanks. We’ll open the red wine right away. By the way, just so you know, Harry Potter looks exactly like me.”

Sirius, who just finished hanging up his coat on the coat rack beside the door, looked at Harry with wide eyes. “I cannot believe I’d forgotten that. How the hell did I forget that.”

“You’ve put your physical appearance under the Fidelius,” Remus concluded, looking both impressed and slightly worried.

“Yep.” Harry handed the bottles of wine to Tom, and decided to just get it over with. Sirius had already known the truth before, after all. “Would you say Voldemort is alive or dead?”

“He’s dead,” both Sirius and Remus said without hesitation, confirming that the Fidelius charm had worked perfectly for that secret as well.

“No, he’s not,” Tom, the secret-keeper for that secret called out to them.

Harry gave Sirius and Remus no chance to contemplate that bit of news. “Can you both tell me Voldemort’s real name?”

“Yes, that’s...” Remus frowned at Sirius, who looked equally baffled as he opened and closed his mouth a few times.

“Voldemort’s real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle,” Tom said quietly while he uncorked the wine bottle.

“You!” Sirius puffed up in obvious anger.

“You already knew this,” Harry pointed out while sharing an agreeable look with Remus.

“Yes, I did,” Sirius said, deflating at least a bit. “But then I forgot, and now I’m aware again and gah, this is annoying.”

“We do apologize for the inconvenience,” Tom said sincerely as he stepped up to the table and poured wine into the waiting glasses. “But we had to make a few adjustments to protect ourselves. Please, have a seat.”

They all sat down while Tom levitated the last of the dishes to the table. “We’re having a game stew with a red wine and black pepper sauce, nothing too elaborate, with a potato and celeriac puree and red cabbage braised with apples and red wine vinegar. A simple, hearty meal, perfect for the kind of weather we’ve been having.”

“Well, it smells incredible,” Remus said with a polite smile. Sirius still looked like he wasn’t sure how to behave around Tom.

They filled their plates and started eating and soon enough even Sirius was forced to say something positive about the man he seemed determined to dislike. “Yes, it’s good,” Sirius mumbled when Remus looked at him pointedly after complementing Tom’s culinary skills himself.

Harry snorted at their antics and simply enjoyed the fantastic meal. Both he and Tom were more than decent cooks, but they did both have their specialities, and Tom was really good with game of any kind, as the stew once again proved. “It’s delicious, babe,” Harry said in between bites. “Really outdone yourself.”

They made small-talk during their meal, about the things they’d been up to so far and that they were hoping to buy a car the next day. Remus was eager to hear more and told them so, but Sirius remained mostly quiet.

Tom had made peach cobbler for dessert, since it was simple to make and it was one of Harry’s favourite desserts.

“What are you planning to do now?” Remus asked Tom as they all enjoyed the cobbler. “Are you considering politics at all?”

“No,” Tom said, placing down his fork and reaching for his wineglass. “I’ve done politics, both muggle and magical, and I enjoyed it plenty, but that’s not what we’re aiming for at all in this life.”

“We just want to enjoy a quiet life, at least for a while,” Harry said as he finished his plate. “We had enough excitement last life to see us through this one.”

Remus nodded in understanding while Sirius frowned at them. “Just like that?” Sirius asked with a tilt of his head. “You tried to take over the world, killed a whole bunch of people, including Harry’s parents and my brother, and now you’re going to spend your days shagging my godson and cooking him fancy dinners?”

“Sirius,” Remus admonished him gently, but Sirius waved his objections away.

“It’s fine,” Tom assured Remus before turning to Sirius and giving him a long but calm look. “I understand that from your perspective it must seem all rather unbelievable. But I’m not the same man now as I was when I committed those acts. I deeply regret them, and the only explanation I can offer you is that I’d accidentally turned myself insane by making multiple horcruxes.”

“Multiple?” Remus gasped, his face paling at once.

“You didn’t tell them?” Tom looked at Harry in surprise.

“I think I forgot to fill in the details,” Harry said while thinking back to everything he’d shared with his dogfathers. He knew he’d mentioned artifacts, but he now realized he never explained the whole horcruxes thing to them. “Yeah, I forgot. Oops.”

“Some thing to forget,” Sirius said with a nervous chuckle. “If you made multiple horcruxes it does explain how you completely lost the plot, I suppose.”

“Also, just for the record, I did not kill your brother,” Tom said with an apologetic look. “He stole a horcrux but was killed by the defences around it.” Suddenly Tom started frowning in a way Harry knew he was plotting something. “Harry, darling, you do have the stone, correct?”

Harry didn’t have to think about what stone Tom was talking about. “Yeah, I got the ring and – “ Harry’s eyes widened as he realized the horcruxes, the physical containers, had dissolved in the process of making Tom a body. “I had it but then the ritual did away with it.”

“I doubt that,” Tom said with a small shake of his head. “The regular materials would have dissolved, certainly, but this was a Hallow.” Suddenly Tom raised his hand up and opened his fingers. In the palm of his hand rested the resurrection stone.

“Huh,” Harry said as he stared at the stone with wide eyes. “Did you just summon that? Cause that’s never happened before.”

“I suppose I did.” Tom kept quiet for a moment or two before addressing Sirius. “Anyway, as I was saying, your brother’s body should be preserved in the location he died in. With this stone we can summon his soul back, and with a little necromancy we can return your brother to you alive and as good as new.”

“What?” Sirius looked like he wanted to simultaneously punch Tom in the face and burst into tears.

“Of course!” Harry quickly went over everything Tom had just said and sat up in excitement. “That should work. We can bring Regulus back!”

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Lots happens in this chapter, including much plotting and planning for the future. There is a cliffhanger, but it is a small one, nothing to worry about.

Thanks so much for all your comments. They help keep me motivated and I really enjoy reading them.

Chapter 10

“Wait, wait,” Sirius said, waving his hand while his head was bowed, long black hair obscuring his face. “This is all a little bit...”

“Much?” Harry guessed while he looked at his godfather in concern. Sirius had been dealing with quite a few truth bombs of late, and his mind wasn’t what it used to be after spending about a decade surrounded by dementors.

“You do not have to decide anything right this moment,” Tom said while leaning back in his seat in a relaxed pose, arm hooked over the back of his chair, legs loosely crossed, looking very much like a counsellor trying to calm their upset patient. “The offer is simply on the table. You can take as much time as you need to consider it, and whatever you decide is acceptable to us.”

“All right,” Sirius whispered, face still hidden. “That’s...I’ll do that...”

“I appreciate the offer,” Remus said glancing from Sirius to Tom. “And Merlin knows Regulus died far too young and deserves a second chance as much as anyone, but why him? Why not James and Lily, who were equally too young to die?”

“Because we’ve got Regulus’ body whole and preserved,” Harry answered quickly, thinking he was the better option to address his dead parents than their actual murderer. “With my parents, we’ve got nothing except for some bones in a grave. That’s not enough to make a body out of.”

“In my own case, I had performed multiple rituals throughout my life to prepare for the eventuality I’d ever needed to recreate my body,” Tom added with all the patience in the world. “That’s why it was so advantageous that Harry used the whole of Rosier. That meant the whole of the Dark Mark got used in the ritual, which strengthened it considerably. The Dark Mark was one of the ways I’d anchored my body’s design to this mortal coil.”

“Ah.” Remus frowned and stared down at his hands.

Tom continued, clearly warming to the subject now. “We could, in theory, use recently deceased bodies and summon James and Lily’s souls and add those to the bodies and reanimate them that way...”

“No.” Harry shook his head frantically, cutting Tom off from saying more.

“I know, darling,” Tom said quietly, placing his hand on Harry’s forearm. “I would never do such a thing to your parents. I was merely educating our guests on the different routes one can take with necromancy.”

“Fine,” Harry sighed with a brief nod. “Educate away.”

With an amused snort, Tom turned back to Remus who did look at least somewhat interested in what Tom had to say. “As I was saying, putting deceased souls in new to them dead bodies is possible, but it isn’t advisable. Imagine waking up in a body that’s not your own. It’s very difficult for those souls to accept a new to them body and most reject them and simply pass on again, leaving a dead body behind.”

“I have to confess that I find this subject equal parts fascinating and horrifying,” Remus said with a slightly pained chuckle. “But you have adequately educated me, for which I thank you.”

Sirius finally looked up and stared at Harry with flinty eyes. “How the hell do you even know this stuff? This is seriously dark, Harry.”

“I know.” Harry was tempted to shrug but realized that wouldn’t be an appropriate response to such a severe question. “We’ve lived, as witches and wizards, in countries where these kind of subjects weren’t forbidden to study.”

“Or weren’t forbidden yet,” Tom added. “In the past, centuries ago, a lot of the subjects that are banned here now were still perfectly acceptable to practice.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed while looking between Remus and Sirius with a deep frown. “Take it from us, Hogwarts is shit when it comes to magical education.”

Both Remus and Sirius sat up, ready to defend their beloved school. “Now that’s a little harsh,” Remus said, while Sirius blurted, “Mate, that’s not fair.”

“I love Hogwarts,” Harry quickly said, holding up both hands to ward off further protests. “I truly love Hogwarts, all the times I’ve attended it. But I’ve attended all magical schools the wizarding world has to offer, save one, plus we’ve learned many different kinds of magic in other worlds, and I can say without a shadow of a doubt, that the education at Hogwarts is severely lacking.”

“In my time we had several electives that Dumbledore has done away with entirely,” Tom said before their guests could respond. “Healing, spell-crafting, warding, alchemy, enchanting, the list goes on. All available to 6th and 7th years, and some even to 3rd years and above.”

“Not to mention the lack of a general education.” Harry gave both his dogfathers an intent look. “In my first life, before my fifth year, Arthur Weasley took me on the muggle subway. I had to handle the muggle money, because Arthur couldn’t figure it out. The numbers are literally written on the bills and the coins. It’s not advanced arithmancy by any means, but a seven-year education at ‘the finest magical school in the world’ had not prepared Arthur to add five plus five.”

“At the very least Hogwarts should offer language classes, including English, and some basic maths and personal financing options for everyone. Not to mention a wizarding introductory class for muggleborns and an up-to-date muggle studies class mandatory to all students. It’s ridiculous that a large percentage of the wizarding world is utterly clueless how the vast majority of the humans on this planet actually live.” Tom leaned forward, placing both forearms on the table. “And that’s not even talking about the severe lack of support students receive from their Heads of House because they are expected to teach all students and perform Head duties on top of that, which is far too much for any one person.”

“Not to mention,” Harry added, looking equally as sombre as Tom, “that attending a boarding school is damaging to a child’s psyche. It’s called the boarding school syndrome, and the younger a child is, the more severe the behavioural consequences when they’re adults.”

“And eleven is very young to be sent away to basically fend for yourself amongst strangers without much adult supervision,” Tom said quietly.

“So what would you change?” Remus asked while Sirius stared at them stoically. “Children need a magical education and Hogwarts has been around for a long time.”

Tom responded at once. These were ideas that Harry and Tom had discussed through several lifetimes, after all. “Ages eleven to thirteen, so years one and two, children go home every day through the floo. They need a family setting, they need to see their main caretakers and interact with siblings and get some peace and quiet that their own home allows them. Years three and up all students go home Friday evening and return Sunday evening. For the same reasons.”

Nodding, Harry sat up a little bit, drawing everyone’s attention to him. “Yeah, and multiple professors per subject. Say one transfiguration professor for years one to four, and one for years five to seven. And one person cannot be a professor, Head of House and deputy-headmistress, like McGonagall now is.” Harry shook his head. “She’s a good professor, no question there, but she doesn’t have time to get anything done. During my years as a Gryffindor I can count on one hand the amount of times we’ve seen her in the common room. She should be checking in on her students every bloody day at least, spend time with them in the common room.”

Remus nodded thoughtfully, and when Sirius shot him a betrayed look, he said, “No, Sirius, they are right. I remember how utterly without guidance you and James were, especially as young children. At the time it all seemed like a grand adventure, but now I realize Hogwarts did you and James no favours when it came to teaching you acceptable behaviour.”

“We weren’t that bad,” Sirius said carelessly, looking between everyone, clearly expecting some back-up. “Really, we grew out of it in the end, whatever we did.”

“You violently bullied other students for reasons beyond their control, namely the house an old magical hat sorted them into, which ultimately led to you attempting to kill a fellow student through a werewolf proxy when you were fifteen,” Harry said as he stared at Sirius without much emotion. “Yes, you and James were that bad.”

Sirius bared his teeth at Harry. “Snivellus –“

“We’re not talking about Snape!” Harry smacked his flat hand on the wooden surface of the table. “We’re talking about you and how the messed-up system at Hogwarts allowed you and my father to spend your adolescence as unguided projectiles that frequently hurt others for shits and giggles. And that is the truth.”

Sirius’ frown deepened as he stared down at the table but he remained quiet.

“Harry,” Tom said, and when Harry glanced at him he realized Tom was wearing his plotting and planning frown again.

“No,” Harry said at once, because whatever it was, he didn’t want to hear it. “We’re having a quiet life, remember?”

“We could change all of it,” Tom said with the sweetest smile. “We could take over Hogwarts and change everything.”

Harry dropped his head, thumping his forehead against the tabletop. “So much for ‘let’s have a nice, quiet life’. We didn’t even last five minutes, for fuck’s sake.”

Tom’s hand was back on Harry’s forearm, rubbing comforting circles. “We could turn Hogwarts around in ways that’s never been done before, not by anyone. Truly turn it into the world’s greatest magical school.”

“Fuck,” Harry sighed with feeling, face still pressed to the table. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“What’s happening?” Sirius whispered in Remus’ direction.

Remus, for his part, looked entirely too amused by Harry’s predicament. “I’m quite sure Harry just realized this won’t be the nice, quiet life he was hoping it would be.”

“You’re teaching history, Remus, just so you know,” Harry said, finally raising his head. “Because Binns has to go. And Sirius, do something useful with yourself and get your transfiguration mastery already. You’d manage that in months if you actually put some effort into it.”

“I love you, darling,” Tom said with such a satisfied smile Harry was half-tempted to smack it off his face, that fucking fucker who was far too ambitious for his own good.

“Fine, let’s do that.” Harry sat up straight, his posture not unlike one of the many times he’d been an officer in the military and had to dispense orders to his subordinates. “I can teach younger year potions, Severus can take the older years, that leaves him time to play around with potions as I know he wants to. Sirius, you’ll take younger years transfiguration while McGonagall takes the older years and remains deputy headmistress. I’ll take over as Head of

Gryffindor. Remus, you've got history, and Tom, defence against the dark arts, younger years and Head of Slytherin. Severus could also take defence older years, he'd like that. Sirius, what was Regulus good at?"

"Er..." Sirius looked like he'd just seen his entire future flash before his eyes and wasn't sure if he liked any of it. "Reggie was good at spell-work, charms, the really finicky stuff."

"Excellent. So Regulus can take the younger years charms while Flitwick takes the older years and remains Head of Ravenclaw. How am I doing so far?"

"Great," Tom said at once with the kind of smile usually reserved for lovesick fools.

"All of this sounds interesting, to say the least," Remus said, eyes crinkled in clear amusement. "But you're forgetting that Dumbledore is in charge of Hogwarts at this time and I doubt he'd agree with any of this."

Harry shrugged. "We'll get rid of him, from the inside. Tom can apply for the defence position next year, and I'll convince Severus to take a sabbatical so I can take over potions."

"Darling," Tom said, still sounding far too sappy for a former Dark Lord. "You're forgetting that while Dumbledore will have forgotten the connection between Tom Riddle and Voldemort, he's always despised Tom Riddle all on his own. I doubt he'd hire me this time around."

Harry's smile stretched and turned utterly mischievous. "Oh, babe, how wrong you are. Dumbledore will think himself so terribly clever to hire you as next year's defence professor, knowing the curse everyone publicly denies even exists will do terrible things to you. It might even do away with you entirely, and wouldn't that cheer the old man up?"

"Oh, that is positively devious," Tom crooned and leaned over to brush his lips against Harry's.

"Ugh...could you not...stop touching my godson," Sirius muttered with an entirely constipated look.

"And once you're hired, you break the curse," Harry continued, gazing deeply into Tom's amused eyes. "And you're an amazing teacher, so the students' grades will be higher than they've been in years, even decades, so Dumbledore won't be able to get rid of you. Instead, we get rid of him."

"How?" Remus asked quietly, looking entirely caught up in Harry's plotting and planning.

"I've got some ideas. Let me think on that for a while longer." Harry sat back, crossed his arms, and looked each of the men around him in the eyes. "We've got well over six months to plan this in detail. But I do want to know now who is in or not."

"I'm in," Tom said, surprising no one.

"I am absolutely intrigued by all these plans of yours, plus I wouldn't mind having a nice, steady job teaching at Hogwarts." Remus closed his eyes briefly before nodding his head.

“All right, as long as you supply me with the improved Wolfsbane potion, I’m in.”

“Naturally,” Harry quickly assured him.

Sirius seemed a little more unsure of what to say. “I haven’t decided yet what to do about Reggie. But I guess I can get my transfiguration mastery. I have been getting a bit bored sitting around all day now that the house is done, and I sure as fuck am not returning to work for the ministry after how they treated me. So I’m in.”

“Awesome!” Harry summoned the bottle of wine and filled all of their glasses. “A toast, to a brighter future for Hogwarts and all of us as well!”

“Hear, hear,” Tom said, clinking his glass to Harry’s while everyone else did the same.

Harry sipped his wine, realizing that the more he thought about it, the more the idea of living and working at Hogwarts while improving the school did sound like an excellent way to spend this lifetime.

“So will you finally be contacting Severus again?” Remus asked after they’d all toasted their upcoming plans. Immediately, Sirius snickered into his wineglass, which wasn’t suspicious at all.

“Er...” Harry quickly glanced at Tom, who was giving Harry a very curious look. “Sure. We’ve got to discuss my mastery anyway.”

“Did you share the truth with Severus?” Tom asked pleasantly. Too pleasantly. The glint in his dark eyes definitely gave away he was aware he was missing something important.

“Parts of it,” Harry said vaguely and quickly changed the subject. “What sports do you think we should offer at Hogwarts? At Ilvermorny we always had broom racing and quadpot besides Quidditch.”

They spent another few hours reminiscing about their own Hogwarts years, with Tom and Harry sharing details of other wizarding school they’d attended while coming up with plots and plans for their takeover of Hogwarts. Or, as Harry liked to call it in his own mind, ‘The Mutiny of Hogwarts’, just to give it a bit of an adventurous flair.

Once Remus and Sirius had left, Tom dragged Harry into the bedroom and gave him a blowjob that made him go cross-eyed in the most pleasurable ways. Seeing Tom’s handsome face bobbing up and down on his hard cock did things to Harry. Lots of very exciting, horny things. And it wasn’t just that Tom was such a handsome devil that did the trick, no, it was because Tom once again looked like actual Tom Riddle, Harry’s former nemesis. Who knew having your dick sucked by your prophesized enemy was a kink?

Afterwards, when his brain had melted in his skull from sheer pleasurable overload, Harry did his very best to get his mind working again and offered Tom to return the favour.

“No, darling, there is no amount of pleasure you could give me with an orgasm such as the pleasure I have already received watching you handing out orders for our takeover of

Hogwarts.” And indeed, Tom did look like he’d just received the world’s ten best blowjobs ever, so Harry gave him a few kisses while cuddling against his side.

“Whenever my order-giving stops giving you pleasure let me know and I’ll suck your dick,” Harry mumbled against Tom’s chest. “Night, babe.”

Tom smiled against Harry’s forehead. “Good night, darling.”

The next morning, Tom treated Harry to an amazing breakfast of homemade biscuits and sausage gravy. It was one of Harry’s favourite American breakfasts and as he was digging into it he should have realized Tom was up to something. Not that Tom never cooked Harry’s favourites, he did so all the time, but this meal was perhaps a bit too elaborate for a Saturday morning when they were kind of in a hurry to go look for a car to buy.

“So, what did you tell Severus?” Tom finally asked as Harry was halfway through his plate. “And why?”

Ah. There it was. An interrogation disguised as a breakfast. A favourite tactic of Tom’s. Feed Harry his favourite food and ask him questions he didn’t want to answer. And yes, Harry was embarrassed to admit that occasionally it worked. But not this time! Instead of answering, Harry stuffed half a biscuit in his mouth, chewing obnoxiously with his mouth opened.

Tom wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Fine. Be that way. I’ll just deduce what happened, shall I?”

Harry swallowed audibly.

“Clearly this is a subject you do not wish to share with me, your loving soulmate, which indicates that you did something embarrassing,” Tom said, looking at Harry with a very reasonable smile, head tilted in mock-sympathy. “Because embarrassment is the only reason you keep things to yourself, darling. And knowing Severus the way I do, I’m going to conclude that during your visit discussing your Potions Mastery, you accepted a drink laced with veritaserum and accidentally spilled some beans.”

“That is...how can you...” Harry snapped his mouth shut, realizing he’d just giving himself away. Damn his Gryffindor impulsiveness.

“Sweetheart, I’m a profiler,” Tom said in a tone of voice that was both amused and apologetic. “Even if I didn’t know you for literally thousands of years, I would still see right through you.”

“I’m a profiler, too,” Harry muttered, taking a big sip of tea to wash his mouth clean of the flaky biscuit bits. “We were both FBI agents, Tom. But yes, Severus got the drop on me. It was embarrassing. I just confirmed I was Harry Potter and that I reincarnated with my memories intact. I left you out entirely.”

Tom nodded thoughtfully. “That was probably for the best. Severus wouldn’t be so eager to accept me as your dogfathers seem to have done.”

“Yep, that was my thinking as well.” And Harry went back to his breakfast and that seemed to be that as far as the interrogation went. Tom had got what he wanted and Harry had survived sharing an embarrassing situation with his soulmate.

After breakfast, Harry side-along apparated Tom to York, where there was a car dealership that had some interesting used models sitting in their lot. After half an hour of looking over each car and dodging pushy salespeople, Harry and Tom settled on a red 1988 Toyota Corolla, a nice mid-range car, nothing fancy, but reliable and comfortable to drive. Tom charmed the salesman that eventually pounced on them into knocking another 500 quid off the price, and after a brief look under the hood (Harry had been an official car mechanic in one life, and both Tom and Harry had always maintained their own vehicles over their many lives) and a nice little test drive, they got all the paperwork signed and planned to pick up the car later that week with cash in hand. That also gave Harry and Tom the opportunity to get their drivers licenses that Monday.

“We’ll just imperio the staff to let us take the driving test straight away,” Tom said reasonably. “And that will add another nice, official layer to our muggle identities.”

That afternoon, after a lunch of Harry’s creamy wild mushroom soup he had in the freezer cabinet and a quick, crusty soda bread Tom prepared with magic, Harry took Tom with him when he went to pick up Quinn and Lucy for a walk.

“Is this your man then?” Cindy asked, looking Tom over top to bottom and not seeming all that impressed. “You the bloke that left poor Jack here all heart-broken when you buggered off to Albania?”

“Guilty as charged,” Tom said, looking the picture of regret. “I know I don’t deserve him, but I am ever so grateful he took me back.”

“Aw, as long as you realize that, luv,” Cindy said with a small, tremulous smile. “Life’s too short to be giving up on the person you love.”

“Jack never mentioned what a wise friend he’d made,” Tom replied with a charming smile, and Cindy blushed, smacked him in the arm and ushered them off to walk her dog.

Unfortunately, they didn’t receive such a warm welcome when they went to pick up Quinn. Bridget seemed fine when Harry introduced Tom as his boyfriend, but Mark started looking all sorts of uncomfortable and finally stepped forwards, standing in front of Bridget who was holding their infant son Charlie.

“We appreciate you walking Quinn for us, but we won’t be needing your services anymore,” Mark said resolutely, though his hands trembled just a bit. “Thank you, goodbye.”

Bridget looked taken aback, and glared at her husband. There was a lot Harry wanted to say, but he wasn’t about to cause a scene in Mark’s own home so he smiled, patted Quinn on his head, took Tom’s hand and walked out the door with his head held high. On their way out they heard Mark mutter to his visibly upset wife, “We shouldn’t be letting that sort near Charlie, they could give him AIDS for all we know.”

“It is only 1990,” Harry said to Tom, trying to stay positive even though being rejected like that over your choice of spouse hurt. They knew that all too well, having lived through it too many times to count. And now they were only being rejected by a mere acquaintance. In other lives, both Harry and Tom had been rejected by parents, siblings and close friends for choosing to love a person of the same gender. “And I’ll miss Quinn. He’s a good dog.”

Tom slipped his arm around Harry’s shoulders and pulled him a little closer as they walked towards the fields around their town, Lucy happily darting along. “I’m sorry. You can’t win them all, darling.” Tom smiled down at Harry. “While students aren’t allowed dogs as familiars at Hogwarts, there are no such limitations for staff members.”

“You’re right!” Harry gazed at Tom with wide, hopeful eyes. “Hagrid’s got Fang around this time, and Dumbledore allows that, so he couldn’t stop another member of staff from having a dog.” Harry swallowed, his eyes inexplicably feeling a little wet all of a sudden, but damn, he’d missed his pitbull Ladybug when he’d been sentenced to life in prison in his previous life. He knew Tom had looked after her until she passed away from old age, but still. He missed having a dog so much.

“What I’m saying, sweetheart, is that we can pop over to Battersea after this walk if you want to,” Tom said with a gentle smile, and Harry threw both arms around Tom’s neck and kissed him for all he was worth until Lucy started pulling on her leash, impatient to continue walking.

“Should we get you a friend then?” Harry happily crooned at a panting Lucy as they walked on. Tom rolled his eyes but kept his arm firmly wrapped around Harry’s shoulders. After about an hour they dropped Lucy off at Cindy’s, politely declined her offer for tea but promising to visit with her next time, and then Harry all but dragged Tom with him to the first secluded spot he could find, a little shadowy corner behind someone’s overgrown hedge, and apparated them both outside Battersea Dogs and Cats Home in London.

After a quick chat with the friendly lady in the reception area they were encouraged to look at all the dogs in their kennels. There was lots of barking and lots of jumping at the glass and lots of little notes telling stories about the dogs up for adoption.

They took their time looking at each dog, and as always Harry was tempted to adopt about two dozen of them right there and then, but he knew that wasn’t really necessary. Battersea wasn’t a kill-shelter and all the dogs would find homes eventually, barring any serious illnesses or behavioural problems.

Harry remembered during one life, when they’d lived in the south of the U.S.A., the number of abandoned dogs being brought into their local shelter had been so high that any dog over 7 years old was automatically put down, simply because there were no kennels or funds available to hold them for the amount of time it took to adopt out a senior dog. Most prospective dog owners simply didn’t want an older dog, even if they might live for at least another five or six years. And so Harry and Tom had, after their children were grown and left the house, taken it upon themselves to rescue as many senior dogs as they could and give them a loving home for however long their lives would last. Some only lived for another few months before passing away, but at least in those months they’d known a soft bed and delicious treats and lots of love. But others lived for years and became beloved members of

the family. They usually had six or seven dogs in the house at the same time and they encouraged neighbours, friends and family to also adopt the older dogs to save their lives, which many ended up doing.

It was during that life that they'd had their oldest dog ever. Little Bart, a 12-year-old scruffy terrier mix missing half his teeth, came to live with them after his owner passed away and the shelter called them to come pick him up since he was scheduled to be euthanized later that day. They'd expected Little Bart to live for another year, maybe two, but that little dog surprised everyone by living for another decade to the very old age of 22 before passing away peacefully in his sleep.

They didn't have to worry about saving lives now, though, so they could pick a dog that suited their situation best.

There were a few potential matches. A six-year-old German shepherd that Harry zeroed in on at once, until he noticed the way the dog moved and realized the poor thing had bad elbows and hips. Both Harry and Tom had been veterinarians more than once and easily noticed such things.

"Hogwarts has a lot of stairs," Tom whispered in Harry's ear, also having noticed the dog's limited range of movement.

"Yeah, that wouldn't work," Harry admitted with a disappointed sigh.

Another option was a Labrador mix that seemed perfect until Harry read the little note on his kennel and realized the dog had serious socialization issues, having been kept only in a yard for all his life. Harry needed a social dog if he was taking it to Hogwarts, and a dog not used to loud noises and lots of people would easily become too stressed in a setting like a boarding school.

Then Harry spotted a beautiful little Staffordshire bull terrier. His first ever dog had been a German shepherd, but his second dog had been a staffie, and Harry had loved the breed ever since. The dog, white with a few black spots on her back, was only 9 months old and surrendered because she was too much to handle for the family with three small children. But she was well socialized and young enough to adapt to any new setting easily.

And Harry had trained many dogs in many types of jobs, everything from military or police K9's to his own dogs for competitive agility, flyball or obedience as a hobby during a few lives, so he was confident he could straighten out any behavioural issues.

"Hello there, pretty girl," Harry said to the dog, who sat on a pillow in the back of her kennel looking miserable at being locked up. But the moment she heard Harry talk to her, she wagged her tail.

Tom, knowing what that kind of sappy look on Harry's face meant, waved an attendant over.

"Oh, that's Isabella," the attendant said with a huge smile. "Such a sweet girl, a bit crazy, like all staffies, but loving as anything. We've been calling her Bella, she likes that."

Tom looked far too amused, but Harry shook his head. “Hell no. We know someone called Bella and she’s a bigger bitch than this dog. What about Izzy?”

“I’m sure she’ll get used to that soon enough,” the attendant said with a giggle. She opened the kennel for them and at once Harry had an armful of wriggling, licking, wagging dog and he looked up at Tom with a huge smile.

“We’ll take her,” Tom told the attendant.

After some paperwork and paying the adoption fee, not to mention getting the directions to the nearest pet shop, Harry and Tom walked outside with their newest family member by their side. Izzy was exuberant about walking with people and ecstatic at going outside and pulled on the leash like it was going out of style and Harry loved her so much his heart hurt. He let Izzy do whatever she wanted for the duration of the walk to the pet shop, just so he could see how she reacted to traffic and noises and kids running by and everything else.

Izzy was the kind of dog that loved everything about life and showed that by wanting to engage with everything and anything she saw. Her energy level was what Harry liked to call: batshit insane. She needed training and lots of it, but a dog like that with some training would be a fantastic companion up for any kind of adventure you could throw at her. Like living in a magical school in Scotland.

They found the pet shop and stocked up on everything they needed. A large crate, two soft beds, food and water bowls, lots of toys, a few bones for chewing and a big, black Kong. Harry loved Kong toys. They were made of durable rubber and could be filled with things like peanut butter and kibble and provided lots of fun to even the most destructive types of dogs. They picked up a large bag of dogfood and several types of dog treats and finally a sturdy leather collar and a couple of leashes in varying lengths.

Meanwhile, Izzy had discovered the hamsters and guinea pigs and all but pulled Harry’s arm off in her eagerness to get these amazing fluffy chew toys in her mouth. That was the moment Harry started her training, armed with lots of treats and a squeaky toy to get her attention.

“She’s not sleeping on our bed,” Tom said, pointing at the crate. “We’ll put the crate in the bedroom and she can sleep in there.”

Harry looked at Tom with a very fond yet exasperated smile. “Babe, you say that about every single fucking dog we get, and every single time the dog sleeps on the bed.”

Tom sighed. “It’s worth a try.”

After paying for everything, Harry cast a notice me not spell while Tom shrunk their purchases and put all of it in his coat pocket. Harry picked Izzy up and apparated them both back to their cottage. Izzy looked momentarily confused about her sudden change of scenery but resumed wagging her tail the moment Harry put her down in the yard.

The rest of the day was spent setting up everything for their new family member and playing with her, seeing what she liked. They took her for a stroll to Riddle Manor and back right

before dinnertime, and Tom prepared a quick meal of chips in the oven and some country-fried steak served with homemade pickles.

Harry sent his Patronus to Sirius and Remus, telling them he and Tom had added someone to their family and to come meet her, and ten minutes later there was banging on the door, leading to Izzy barking like mad and when Harry opened the door Remus walked in with an eyeroll, followed by Padfoot, who looked up at Harry with a wagging tail and his tongue lolling out of his mouth. He even winked before running off to meet Izzy, who seemed delighted to make a doggy friend. Much roughhousing was had around their small cottage while the humans sat at the dining table and enjoyed a cup of coffee and some leftover peach cobbler.

“Thank you,” Harry said later that evening as they were lying in bed, an exhausted Izzy tucked in against Harry’s side so he could stroke his hand down her head and back.

“You’re welcome,” Tom said as he turned off the lights. He lay down on his side, curled around Harry, and pressed a kiss to Harry’s cheek while giving Izzy a pat on her head.

The next day they started with taking Izzy for a nice walk and when they came home they had an elaborate breakfast of warm croissants and rolls from the oven. Afterwards, Harry busied himself with some dog training, some simple commands like sit, down, stay, while Tom got the stash of books he’d set aside for himself on Friday so he could do some reading on the couch. For lunch Tom made a simple soup of some of Harry’s butternut squashes that were ready for harvesting, some carrots and onions and some apples, all pureed together with lots of cream and just a pinch of cayenne pepper. They had the soup with some leftover rolls from breakfast and afterwards took a long walk around Little Hangleton with Izzy, who seemed overwhelmed with all the space and trees around her. Harry wasn’t confident enough yet to let her off leash, but he did continue her training throughout their walk, getting her to pay attention to him and to sit and stay on command for very short amounts of time.

Tom went back to his books and barely even reacted when Izzy jumped onto the couch and curled up next to him. Without looking up from the page he was reading, Tom reached over and scratched Izzy behind her ears. Harry sighed in sheer happiness taking in that idyllic scene before sitting down on Izzy’s other side and turning on the TV. He settled on watching some Antiques Roadshow, which was the perfect kind of program for a lazy Sunday afternoon.

“Darling,” Tom said after a while, looking up at Harry with a frown. “This book, where did you get it?”

Harry looked at title of the book Tom was holding up: ‘Tales of Death’. “I’m pretty sure I got that from Sirius. He gave me all the books from Grimmauld Place’s library he deemed too dark.

“Hm.” Tom placed the book in his lap and gave Harry a significant look. “This book mentions a ritual that can summon Death.”

“Death, as in the entity Death?” Harry asked, astonished.

“So it appears. What’s even more interesting, the ritual mentions needing the Deathly Hallows to do so.”

Harry swallowed. “All three?”

“Yes.” Tom held out his hand and frowned in concentration and a moment later the resurrection stone appeared in his palm.

“Yeah, we have one. I can ask Sirius to tell Dumbledore to give him my dad’s invisibility cloak, but Dumbledore still has the wand. Now, together I’m pretty sure we can take the old goat but –“ Harry shut his mouth with a snap because there, on Tom’s outstretched hand beside the resurrection stone appeared the Elder wand. “What? Tom, what?”

“Try it,” Tom said, mouth curving into an almost feral grin. “Focus on the cloak, you know that one best. Feel it in your mind’s eye.”

Harry inhaled a deep breath, held out his hand and focused his mind on his invisibility cloak, how it felt on his skin, how the fabric would flutter between his fingers, how it smelled even when pulled over his head, and then the cloak was there, sliding off his hand and pooling in his lap.

Swallowing, Harry glanced up at Tom. “So, you want to summon Death? We might finally get some answers.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

We're meeting Death this chapter and let me tell you, I've been wanting to write a scene like this for a long time, just to subvert some popular fandom tropes, and finally, in this story, it fit the plot. So know that the Death scene has been a long time in the making and I loved writing it. I sincerely hope you all will enjoy reading it.

Thanks so much for all your comments! They help to keep me writing.

Chapter 11

Tom licked his lips before pursing them. "I want answers, absolutely, but summoning Death seems like the kind of thing one should consider carefully."

"So we'll give it some thought," Harry agreed easily. He was used to being the impulsive one in their relationship. While the Sorting Hat had put Harry in all four Hogwarts houses at least once in different lives, at heart Harry was and would always remain a Gryffindor. And Gryffindors were not known for their ability to plan everything carefully. No, they preferred to simply go full steam ahead right away.

Tom, ambitious and clever that he was, had the calculating nature of a Slytherin, no matter where the Sorting Hat put him (which had been all Houses save for Hufflepuff. Yes, the hat had once put Tom into Gryffindor just for fun in a life where Harry and Tom met on the Hogwarts express and the hat took great delight in sorting an actual former descendent of Slytherin into Gryffindor. That version of the Sorting Hat had been a troll, since it stuck Harry in Ravenclaw that life and Harry was many things, but a Ravenclaw wasn't it). No matter the Hogwarts house Tom ended up in, he preferred to think things through, look at an option from all angles before making a decision.

"We'll let it sink in for a few days," Tom said while rubbing his hand across Harry's thigh in a comforting gesture. "Let me see what else this book has to say about Death as an entity."

And with that, Tom returned his focus to the book in his hands while Harry went back to looking at the telly where hopeful people were getting their household crap appraised, hoping to become rich overnight while assuring the whole world they weren't there for the money. Harry loved seeing the disappointed looks on people's faces when the expert told them their antique chamber pot they'd inherited from their nan was worth five quid and not the hundreds of thousands of pounds they were not so secretly hoping for.

Not that Harry was in a real position to judge, since in more than one life he and Tom had gotten their own crap appraised in whatever version of the Antiques Roadshow was available

in the country they lived in. Hey, you never knew what something was really worth, all right?

Harry heated up two portions of his goat curry from the freezer cabinet he'd been saving especially for Tom's return, and Tom gave him such a sappy look in gratitude, Harry was instantly disappointed smartphones with their built-in cameras weren't invented yet. Still, it was worth it to buy a regular camera, with film rolls and everything, to at least take some pictures of Izzy and of each other.

They took Izzy for a walk after dinner, though it was already dark at that point, but that didn't stop them from enjoying the countryside.

"I want answers," Harry said, Izzy's leash in one hand, Tom's hand in the other as they strolled in the direction of Riddle Manor. "But on the other hand I'm worried summoning Death might change what we've got going on."

"Exactly," Tom said, giving Harry's hand a soft squeeze in agreement. "It would be nice to know there is some purpose to all of this."

"Yep. Why us?" Harry quickly looked up at Tom. "Don't get me wrong, babe, I am beyond grateful that I get to do this with you."

"I know, I know," Tom was quick to assure Harry, offering him an agreeable smile. "Looking back on the lives we've lived together, on how far we've come as individuals and as a couple, I have no regrets."

"Would do it again in a heartbeat," Harry whispered. "All of it. Even the bad parts."

"It's the bad parts that give the good parts meaning," Tom said, voicing things they'd discussed and agreed on many, many lifetimes ago already.

They went to bed early since they had a busy day ahead.

Breakfast the next day was simple oatmeal porridge with some cream, brown sugar and a sliced banana. Izzy got a half-hour walk, followed by a Kong stuffed with her breakfast, which Harry gave to her in her crate. This way she wouldn't demolish their Hogwarts chic furniture while she was alone for the first time since getting her. A young dog like that got easily bored, after all.

They apparated to the DVSA and with some careful application of magic they could take their theory tests an hour later and they were booked to take their drivers test that afternoon. Both Tom and Harry passed their theory test easily enough. They'd been driving for thousands of years. It would be a right embarrassment if they didn't know the traffic rules by then, no matter what country they lived in.

Just after noon they popped back home for a lunch of an assortment of leftovers they had in the cooling cabinet and to give Izzy a walk and spend some time with her. Then in the afternoon they returned to the DVSA for their drivers tests and a few hours later they both had their official drivers licenses.

“Let’s visit a home-improvement store,” Tom suggested next. “I’d like to start remodelling the bathroom.”

And that is how they spent their next few days. Tom went all-in on the bathroom, tearing out all the old tiles and taps and everything else before expanding the room magically. He used a few muggle items like a matching tap and showerhead set and a huge corner tub with jacuzzi function that would easily fit them both. He also created a separate walk-in shower, and then he used magic to install everything.

Meanwhile, Harry got creative with their very small kitchen. It had been big enough for a bachelor, but now with Tom and his weird hobby of collecting any obscure kitchen gadget he could find, not to mention Izzy and her huge bags of dogfood, they needed more storage space. So he added a walk-in pantry by creating a magically expanded area between the cabinets and the backdoor. Inside the pantry he added tons of shelving and large bins to hold dogfood and treats. He also expanded the kitchen by adding an L-shape at the end, and thus increasing both counter and cabinet space. He transfigured wood to look exactly like the existing cabinetry and the end result was pretty neat, if Harry did say so himself. They now also had space enough to move around the kitchen side by side and cook together, which they enjoyed doing from time to time.

When Tom was done with the bathroom, they celebrated by soaking in the enormous tub together while sipping glasses of white wine and listening to Tchaikovsky’s nutcracker suite, a favourite of them both.

By then it was Wednesday and they went to pick up their car.

“I’ll drive,” Tom said, picking up the keys from the salesman’s desk before Harry could. “We all know what happened that one time you forgot to take a curve in the road.”

Harry released a frustrated groan. This was something Tom kept bringing up and up and up. “That wasn’t my fault. My steering column broke, okay? And I was a formula 1 driver, crashing is part of the fucking job.”

“Certainly, killing yourself on live TV in front of a worldwide audience seems like a really nice perk to have.” Tom’s grin was so fucking smug, that utter douche-canoë.

Still, Harry got in the passenger side and let Tom drive them home. They picked up Izzy, who seemed excited about going for a ride after Tom carefully covered the backseat in a few layers of old blankets to keep it clean, and then they drove to Cindy to show off both their car and their dog.

“Oh, what a sweetie,” Cindy crooned at a frantically wagging Izzy, totally ignoring their awesome car. “You’re a good girl, I can tell, let’s get you a biscuit.”

Lucy and Izzy had the same level of unending energy and were instant best friends as they all but flew around Cindy’s back garden, chasing after each other.

“You missed choir practice yesterday,” Cindy said with a curious look once they were all seated with tea in front of them.

“Oh, fuck,” Harry said and then clapped a hand over his mouth while staring at Cindy with wide eyes.

“Don’t censor yourself for me, luv,” Cindy said with a chuckle.

“We’ve been remodelling our bathroom and were finished last night. I’m afraid I might have distracted Jack a bit too much in our new bathtub,” Tom said while offering Cindy a teasing wink.

“Ah, I told them you were probably honeymooning,” Cindy replied with a bout of cackling laughter. “That’s all right, lads. We’ve all been young.”

“I’ll drag Tom along next week for practice, promise,” Harry said easily, knowing full-well Tom would hate having to sit through two hours of a bunch of older women, and Derrick, bellowing Andrew Lloyd Webber’s greatest hits.

“I’ll be there,” Tom agreed with a pleasant smile, meanwhile pressing his heel onto Harry’s foot behind the coffee table until Harry had to bite back a yelp.

“Let’s do it,” Tom said once they were seated in their car and on their way to Tesco to pick up a few groceries. “Let’s summon Death.”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed, stomach suddenly rolling with nervousness at the prospect of meeting the actual entity of Death. “I think we’re due some answers. Let’s do it tonight.”

Once they got home, Tom got the groceries to put away and Harry set about creating a small driveway beside their cottage where they could park their car. He cleared away some trees blocking entrance from the road, used that wood to create a nice, rustic gate that they could open and close with magic, and then transfigured lots of rocks he found while digging over the soil into pavers to create a smooth driveway where he parked their car.

Izzy was introduced to the chickens, which she really, really wanted to chase but wasn’t allowed, and to Pluto, who had taken to roosting outside once Izzy had joined their family. Izzy was a bit more intimidated by Pluto but still needed careful supervision lest she think he was a fluffy chew toy.

After a simple dinner of some pan-fried salmon with roasted potatoes and Brussel’s sprouts, Tom showed Harry the ritual as it was described in the book.

“Looks simple enough. Three Hallows, which we’ve got, a few runes and a circle, a little bit of chanting and voila, Death shall appear.” Harry licked his lips and looked up at Tom with wide eyes. “Is it weird that I’m nervous. And a bit scared. Or maybe even somewhat terrified?”

Tom shook his head. “Not at all. I’m feeling very similar. Up until now, no one has been a threat to our continued existence. Sure, people have killed us but we’ve always reincarnated and no one has been able to stop that. We’re about to meet the one being who, I’m sure, can put a stop to that.”

“Yeah, let’s at least try to not piss him off,” Harry agreed with a serious nod. “And let’s do the ritual in Riddle Manor. I don’t want that kind of magic where I have to eat and sleep.”

“Agreed.”

Izzy was put in her crate with a smoked pig’s ear and Harry and Tom apparated to Riddle Manor where it took them only ten minutes to set up the runes and ritual circle in the drawing room.

“Before we do this,” Harry said, and swallowed against the sudden tightness in his throat. “I love you, Tom. I love you in ways I didn’t even know you could love someone my first ten lives or so.”

“Sshh.” Tom pressed a soft kiss against Harry’s lips. “This isn’t the end, Harry. Don’t talk like it is. We’re getting information, that’s all. And I love you, too, darling, with everything I am and have ever been.”

“Let’s do this.” Harry draped the invisibility cloak around his shoulders, while Tom kept the resurrection stone in his hand. Together they curled their fingers around the elder wand and after a deep breath they recited the short Latin chant.

Nothing happened yet everything changed. A foreboding sense of dread filled the room, almost heavy enough to physically weigh down on them. The hairs on their arms and their necks and probably the rest of their bodies stood up in an instinctive response to the appearance of something undeniably dangerous.

It was there in the blink of an eye, yet it had no mass. It had a thousand eyes, yet none. It had a body, yet it was made of shadows.

It was like staring directly into a black hole, Harry’s inner astrophysicist supplied, knowing you had passed the event horizon and there was no escaping whatever came next and all you could see was the singularity, which was simply incomprehensible to the primitive human mind.

It was like nothing Harry could have ever imagined, not in his wildest dreams. It was... It. Was.

“An Eldritch horror,” Tom breathed beside Harry, tightening his hand around both the elder wand and Harry’s fingers.

And yes, that was the correct description, Harry agreed silently. It was something straight from Lovecraft, from the Cthulhu mythos. Something so alien, so *other*, that merely gazing upon it was enough to lose your sanity along with any sense of self you’d ever had.

A tear tolled down Harry’s cheek, though were it came from Harry had no idea.

You will not go insane. Others who gaze upon me will, but not you.

It didn’t have a voice, yet Harry and Tom understood what it was saying. Harry’s breathing fluttered while his knees trembled. Beside him, Tom sounded like he had trouble drawing in

any breath at all.

“Hello,” Harry finally managed to breathe, barely audible even to his own ears. “Death.”

Be at peace, my anchors. You have nothing to fear.

Harry wanted to burst out in uncontrollable giggles, because fear was all that there was left inside of him. His entire being was currently constructed out of it.

“Why do you call us anchors?” Tom asked, his voice quivering, and thank fuck Tom had enough sense left to actually ask a question instead of simply standing there frozen in utter terror.

Because you are mine. Death seemed to grow, his non-eyes blinking in and out of existence. Harry desperately wanted to take a step back but couldn’t move. **You want answers, have wanted them for a long time, but you are only now ready to receive them. You had to get here first.**

“So this was all some sort of test?” Tom asked, his voice gaining a tiny bit of volume, though Harry still felt him shiver beside him.

You had to live and you had to want to live still.

“We had to make it through all our lives and not give up,” Harry guessed out loud, startling from the sudden sound of his own voice.

You almost did. You almost gave up.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, remembering his first six lives. He really had.

But you made it in the end. You both did. Two souls tied as one.

“Why us?” Tom asked, his voice also gaining a bit of confidence again, though the overall feeling of sheer dread remained, suffocating the air around them, still making it hard to breathe.

There need to be two. One cannot live this long with their sanity intact. Two need to be similar but opposite to live this long together. You were chosen by the Hallows and you made it this far.

“What does being your anchors mean?” Harry asked, barely taking in anything Death was saying, his brain still in utter survival mode where the only thing mattered was to just keep breathing while his heart remained beating, nothing more.

I am all there is and all there will ever be. All life is mine, because without me there is none. There is no life without death and there is no death without life. My anchors allow me to live as the souls that I make. Without my anchors I lose sight of my souls and I might unmake them.

Harry got the distinct impression of an imploding earth, which what the fuck?

“We allow you to know what it’s like to be human so you will look after human souls instead of simply destroying them,” Tom said, drawing a surprised breath from Harry. That made sense somehow.

All life is mine but I myself cannot live those lives. I must have anchors to know the living.

“Are we the only ones in the entire multi-verse?” Harry asked, suddenly wondering if there were more people like them, stuck in endless cycles of reincarnation.

For humans, yes. There have been others, but they did not make it this far or they quit.

“So there are different anchors for all sentient species,” Tom concluded. “And quitting, what does that mean?”

When you grow too tired to live on, tell me and I will take the memories away.

“We don’t want that right now,” Harry said quickly, feeling that was a very important point to make. “Just maybe not give us such crap lives in the future?”

Harry got the distinct impression Death was amused by that request.

All lives must be lived, or the balance will be broken.

“Right,” Harry said dubiously, but Tom quickly came to the rescue.

“Humans display all manner of behaviour, resulting in lives both good and bad. Both are somehow important to you.”

There is no good or bad, only life, and life must be lived.

“Does that mean there are no consequences if we do something wrong in one life?” Like violently murder nineteen innocent women, Harry added silently.

Life must be lived. I care not how you live it.

“Huh.” Harry wasn’t sure if that was the best or the worst news he’d ever received.

The Hallows, they are yours to summon now that you have lived this far.

“In future lives as well? Even as muggles?” Tom asked, visibly perking up. While they’d lived many wonderful lives without magic, they did always miss it during their many lives as muggles.

You have now lived long enough to always have their power.

“Thank you,” Tom said sincerely, while Harry tried to give the Eldritch horror a grateful smile. He was pretty sure it came out as a horrified grimace but hey, he tried.

Now go and live for me. Call me when you grow too tired.

And with that Death disappeared in less than a second and the air visibly brightened around them, the heavy sense of horror lifting at once.

Harry and Tom stood stock still, staring at nothing for a few very long minutes, until Harry finally found his voice. “You know, I feel like Beedle the Bard has a lot to answer for with his cutesy little story about the three brothers meeting Death on a bridge and not immediately losing their minds and then greeting him like an old friend and what the fuck is that smell?”

“You shit your pants,” Tom said in a deadpan sort of voice.

“Oh my lord,” Harry glanced down, only now feeling warm goo dripping down the back of his thighs. “When was the last time I crapped myself? The life before last, during that sermon when I suddenly just lost control and had explosive diarrhoea all over the altar.”

“That was dysentery, darling.” Tom still had the elder wand in his hand and waved it around to vanish the mess in Harry’s jeans.

“Thanks,” Harry said with a relieved sigh. “And I’d take dysentery any day over that horror show. What the fuck even was that?”

“Everything,” Tom said and then frowned at his own jeans where a dark stain sat around his crotch. “And I pissed myself apparently.” A quick wave of the elder wand and Tom was clean again as well.

“Oh, I need a hug.” Harry stepped up to Tom and wrapped his arms around him in a tight embrace. Tom mimicked the gesture at once and they stood together for a long time. “You were right, though,” Harry eventually whispered against Tom’s chest. “That wasn’t just Death, that was everything. That was a physical manifestation of the multi-verse, of life itself.”

“We’ve been a part of every major religion on this planet, and plenty of minor ones as well, but nothing comes close to what is actually out there,” Tom said quietly. “That was beyond comprehension.”

“And we’re somehow chosen to be its anchors, to keep it from murdering all humans for fun or something,” Harry agreed, nuzzling Tom’s shoulder. “But no pressure.”

Chuckling, Tom pulled back and smiled down at Harry, his eyes hooded with obvious affection. “But we have answers now, darling. We were chosen because of our compatibility, we have a purpose and we can live our many lives exactly as we want to without any long-lasting consequences.”

“Yeah, that is nice to know, isn’t it.” Harry pulled away from Tom and slowly stretched his back and legs where he stood. “Still, let’s never do this again, ever.”

“Agreed.” Tom vanished the remains of the ritual circle with a swish of the elder wand.

As they walked out of the house, Harry looked back at it. “Do you also suddenly feel like we should torch this place? Apply a little fiendfyre or something?”

Tom nodded solemnly. "At the very least drop some napalm on it."

Izzy shrank away from them with a pitiful whine once they got home and Harry opened her crate.

"Let's take a quick shower, that should get rid of whatever horrible thing she's smelling on us," Tom suggested.

They ran the water as hot as they could stand it and scrubbed their skin until it felt raw and looked bright pink. Harry washed his hair twice and did the same when brushing his teeth. Finally he pulled on his comfiest pyjamas, an old-fashioned flannel shirt and pants combo.

Izzy gave him a tentative sniff and finally deemed him acceptable and wagged her tail to greet him. Harry let her outside in the yard for a quick wee and then urged her to curl up beside him on the couch.

"Let's take a short break tomorrow," Tom said as he sat down beside Harry, handing him a full glass of white wine. "I saw you have some camping gear in the shed. Let's drive down to Dartmoor tomorrow with Izzy. We'll pick up whatever gear we're missing on the way."

"Oh yeah, we need that," Harry said, his chest losing some of the tightness that had taken up residence ever since meeting an actual fucking Eldritch horror face to whatever the fuck that thing had.

The next morning, Harry sent Pluto off with a short letter to Sirius and Remus, informing them that they were going camping for a day or two and that their weekly dinner date would be held on Saturday instead of Friday. Then they packed the car with far too much crap, but they had undetectable expansion spells, so they could do whatever they liked. On the way south Tom stopped at a camping store and they bought another sleeping mat and bag and a few other items they could use, plus some MREs to eat.

"I do feel better," Harry said when they'd almost reached Devon. "I do feel like a weight has been lifted of our shoulders now that we know there is a purpose to all of this, even if it's a bloody weird purpose."

Tom glanced at Harry and smiled. "Yes. It's not just a random accident that we keep reincarnating. And whenever we truly tire of this existence we can end it."

"Yeah," Harry agreed quietly. "That's also a relief to know. But I'm not tired yet, not by a long shot."

"Me neither, darling."

Harry and Tom loved wild camping in any season, but Harry especially enjoyed doing so in the autumn. Dartmoor was a national park in southern Devon where wild camping was allowed. In many of their British lives Harry and Tom had spent time there camping, just to get away from everything for a few days, get some fresh air and recharge their metaphorical batteries.

Dartmoor was a wild place, with small plant growth and low hills known as tors, with plenty of streams and patches of woodland. The feral Dartmoor pony could be found there, plus lots of other wildlife. It was one of Harry's and Tom's favourite places in Britain.

They parked their car, got their gear sorted and backpacks on and then hiked out into the moors, Izzy bouncing at their side in excitement for this new adventure. They got some drizzle right before lunch time, but a little magic kept both themselves as well as Izzy nice and dry.

An hour before dark they found a secluded area between two tors near a large reservoir, with some trees to act as a windbreak, and they set up their tent. Harry let Izzy off-leash and while she took that as an opportunity to go eat some sheep droppings, she stayed close by. Dinner was instant spaghetti Bolognese, or whatever it was supposed to be, but it was warm and filling. Dessert was a KitKat bar each, followed by some M&M's, since they'd burned plenty of calories hiking all day. By then it was completely dark and the drizzle had turned into rain and they changed out of their clothes and zipped their sleeping bags together and cuddled inside, listening to the rain beat against the tent while Izzy curled up on her pillow beside Harry.

The next day was spent much like the previous one. Lots of hiking, taking in the wide open vistas, the endless skies. The rain had stopped, but a chill had set in. Still, magic kept them all comfortable. Harry breathed deeply as he stood on top of a tor, the wind whipping through his hair, cheeks tight with the cold.

"Life can be pretty amazing," Harry said as Tom came to stand beside him. "How lucky are we, that we get to live so many and remember it?"

"Very lucky," Tom agreed. "It makes you wonder what sort of people had this job before us."

"Right?" Harry looked at Tom with a grin. "And how many poor sods had to do this alone before Death figured out the loneliness drove them insane eventually and maybe he should try employing a couple next time."

Tom shuddered dramatically. "It does not bear thinking about. And to think in my first life I sincerely tried to find a way to become immortal so I could spend the rest of eternity by myself. What a fool I was."

"We've both been fools," Harry agreed, looking out over the wild landscape again. "I almost ruined this chance by wallowing in self-pity during my first six lives. What a waste that would have been."

"We made it this far, Harry." Tom cupped the back of Harry's neck and hauled him in for a kiss. "No matter what the world, the many worlds we've lived in have thrown at us, we've made it."

Harry returned the kiss, his chest filled with warmth at the realization his soulmate loved him as much as he did his soulmate, and that they had many, many lifetimes together still to look forward to.

When they were tucked into their sleeping bags later that night, Harry glanced at Tom. “Let’s have sauerkraut tomorrow. I haven’t had that in ages and it’s really weather for a sauerkraut casserole.”

“As you wish,” Tom whispered, earning him a snort from Harry and a comment about a bloke named Wesley and a pirate.

They headed home the next morning, after having instant porridge for breakfast and breaking up their camp. They stopped at a Sainsbury’s for some supplies for their weekly dinner date with the dogfathers.

“When’s Costco coming to the UK again?” Harry asked as he pushed their trolley around the supermarket.

“Quite sure that’s not for another few years at least,” Tom said as he inspected a few bags of potatoes.

“I miss Costco,” Harry sighed, leaning his forearms on the trolley handlebar. “How about Lidl? I love Lidl.”

Tom glanced at him before choosing a bag of taters and hauling it into the trolley. “Later than Costco even, if my memory serves me correctly. But think of it this way,” and Tom leaned closer to brush a kiss against Harry’s cheeks. “We’ve got lots of great things to look forward to this life, living through the 1990s.”

“The internet.” Harry nodded sagely and then noticed an elderly women glaring at them from the other side of the bananas. “Yes, we homos are getting aids all over your veggies,” Harry called loudly, much to Tom’s obvious discomfort.

“Do you mind,” Tom muttered at Harry. “I’m trying to shop without being kicked out, thank you.”

“Hey, I can do whatever I want, according to the Eldritch horror multi-verse thing.” Harry offered Tom a careless shrug. “I could kill everyone in this store and not face any consequences.”

“Except prison. Again,” Tom pointed out snootily while rolling his eyes at his soulmate’s antics.

The lady behind the bananas was staring at them both in horror, and Tom quickly put his hand on Harry’s back and guided him to the meat section in a hurry.

They weren’t kicked out and got to finish their shop and Izzy hadn’t eaten the upholstery when they returned to the car, but just left lots of wet nose prints on the windows. They arrived home just before noon and had a quick lunch of roast beef sandwiches, a favourite of them both. Then Tom got a simple casserole ready of minced beef in a gravy mix, sauerkraut and sauteed apple slices topped with homemade mashed potatoes. Filling comfort food perfect for the cold weather they were having. Harry meanwhile got all their camping gear clean and their clothes washed.

The moment Sirius and Remus stepped through the door that evening, Harry said, "If anyone ever suggests you should summon death, be afraid and run very, very fast in the opposite direction. Also, Beedle the Bard is a filthy liar."

Both Sirius and Remus stared at Harry in utter confusion before looking to Tom for answers.

Tom levitated the sauerkraut casserole to the dining table. "Perhaps this should wait until after dinner. We wouldn't want our guests to lose their appetites, darling."

"Sure." Harry waved his dogfathers to the table. "Just know that I literally crapped my trousers and it wasn't dysentery this time."

That did very little to get rid of any confusion, but Sirius visibly squared his shoulders and cleared his throat. "I'd love to hear that story, Harry, but in the meantime I've got some news."

Harry gestured at his godfather to continue while they all sat down around the table.

"I've thought about your offer a lot this past week," Sirius said carefully, obviously choosing his words with care. "And I do believe Reggie deserves a second chance. So yeah, if you can guarantee you're not bringing my brother back as an inferius or something nasty like that, I want you to bring Regulus back."

"Awesome," Harry said with a huge grin. "We didn't have any plans for tomorrow anyway, we can get Regulus sorted right away."

"After we deal with a lake filled with hundreds of inferi, yes," Tom added with a challenging look.

"Right." Harry blinked and sat back in his chair. "I'd forgotten about those."

Chapter 12

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They finished dinner without any unpleasant talk about Death or reanimated dead bodies. It wasn't until they were just about done with their raspberry vanilla parfaits for dessert that Remus asked after their most recent adventure.

"So am I to understand that you summoned Death?" Remus asked while he put down his spoon on his empty plate.

Harry ate his two last bites of his excellent dessert, another one of Tom's specialities, before he answered. "Yeah, we came across a simple ritual to summon Death in one of the books from Grimmauld Place, so thanks for that, Sirius." Harry gave his godfather a mock-glare, which Sirius answered with a confused frown while he finished his own dessert. "Anyway, we summoned Death to get some answers, turns out Death is an Eldritch horror who, if we're not mistaken, has created the entire multiverse and all life within it by themselves as a sort of experimental ant-farm because they needed a hobby or something."

Both Remus and Sirius gaped at Harry, eyes wide and disbelieving. "You're having us on," Remus finally managed to say.

"Nope." Harry leaned back in his seat, wiping his mouth with the napkin he kept across his lap. "It was the freakiest, scariest thing I've ever seen and I literally shit myself, so that is saying something." Harry carelessly gestured towards Tom. "Even Tom peed his pants, just to further illustrate the point."

"Yes, thank you, dear," Tom said with an eyeroll. "That's just what I want the whole world to know."

Harry snickered and gave Tom his sweetest smile for a brief moment before turning back to his dogfathers. "Anyway, it turns out there is a reason for our endless reincarnations. To get in touch with humans so they won't decide to willy nilly exterminate us all, Death needs human anchors to live as many different human lives as possible. And the Hallows picked us for reasons."

"Because we are compatible, but we still had a trial period, if you will. Because we wanted to keep living even after all this time, we now have the job permanently until we decide to quit." Tom waited patiently for Sirius or Remus to react, but they both seemed at an absolute loss as to what to say to that kind of news.

"Well," Remus finally managed. "I'm at least happy for you that there is a way out should you desire it."

"Yeah," Harry quickly agreed. "That was a relief to hear. Until that time, whenever it may be, we can pretty much do what we like with our lives, as long as we live them."

“Huh.” Sirius still seemed at a loss of what to say exactly, his gaze darting between Harry and Tom. “So it won’t mind you doing necromancy tomorrow when you bring Reggie back?”

“They didn’t mention any limitations of any kind, literally said they didn’t care about good or evil as we see it,” Harry explained with a shrug. “So we should be good.”

“We could use your help, though,” Tom said while giving the dogfathers a considering look. “There are hundreds of inferi that need to be dispatched as quickly as possible.”

“How?” Remus asked, sitting up a bit in his chair.

“Fire. I can control them enough to summon them one by one, but then we need to burn each of them individually. With four wands this will go far quicker than with two.” Tom looked down for a second, slowly folding his hands on the table, fingers interlaced. “I understand if you would find it too distasteful. They are the reanimated bodies of muggles and wizards and witches, all enemies of Voldemort at some point.”

“But they are dead, right?” Sirius asked quietly, looking as though he desperately wanted to hear confirmation of that.

“Their souls have passed on, yes,” Tom replied with an affirmative nod. “Their bodies have been reanimated with magic. In essence it’s no different to make a dead body move than to make a pineapple dance for your charms exam at Hogwarts.”

“All right,” Sirius said while giving Remus a questioning look. “I’ll help. Moony?”

“Sure.” Remus seemed to consider his next words carefully. “Even though their souls have already passed on, I do believe their bodies also deserve to be put to rest. I’ll help as well.”

“Thanks,” Harry said sincerely. “We really appreciate it. I hate zombies, and even though inferi aren’t really autonomous zombies like we had to fight in that one life where we faced a zombie apocalypse, I still dislike them immensely.”

“Zombie apocalypse?” Sirius looked as if he dreaded hearing the reply yet couldn’t resist asking anyway.

“Yeah,” Harry sighed, slowly shaking his head as he remembered the stank of decaying corpses walking around, trying to eat you. Once you smelled that, you never forgot it, not even dozens of lifetimes later. “That was an interesting life, to say the least.”

“Thankfully it seems that zombie apocalypses are quite rare across the multiverse,” Tom explained, nose wrinkled, looking as if he, too, remembered that particular smell. “It was a virus that mutated and brought recently deceased people back to life as soulless entities with an uncontrollable desire to consume flesh and thus spread the virus further.”

Sirius looked down and nodded once. “Yep, didn’t need to know that even existed.”

Chuckling, Harry got his wand out and swished it around to send their plates to the sink.

“Inferi are nothing like that, thankfully. We’ve experimented with them that one life where

we became necromancers. They're like puppets on a magical string, they won't do anything they're not told. Still, Remus made a good point that those bodies deserve to be put to rest."

"We'll be there," Sirius promised with a solemn look.

Later, after Sirius and Remus had left and Harry was snuggled up against Tom in their bed while the wind whipped rain against the bedroom window, Harry had trouble falling asleep. Izzy was snoring softly from her spot against Harry's back, but Harry was pretty sure Tom hadn't yet fallen asleep, since his breathing didn't sound quite deep enough yet.

"Babe?" Harry whispered in the darkness.

"Hm?"

"I was thinking." Harry rolled over on his back and snapped his fingers, turning on the lamp on the bedtable with a small amount of wandless magic. Tom blinked against the sudden light. "Remember, when we were slayers, and I died and Willow brought me back without asking you, and I woke up buried in a coffin six feet under and had to break my way out and I was supremely pissed off?"

"Yes, I remember." Tom rolled on his side to look at Harry. "You're suggesting we ask Regulus before we resurrect him?"

"I'm suggesting we ask Regulus before we resurrect him, yes," Harry said while nodding in urgency. "Being resurrected is very disorienting. Besides, it seems like the polite thing to do."

"All right." Tom held out his hand and within seconds the resurrection stone appeared in his palm. He closed his fingers around it and manoeuvred it around and around against his palm, three times, while frowning in concentration.

A silvery, shimmering figure of a young man with a strong resemblance to Sirius appeared at the foot of their bed, looking around in great confusion.

"Regulus," Tom said while sitting up in bed.

Harry followed Tom's example and also sat up while giving their dead guest a little wave.

"Reggie, nice to meet you."

"Potter?" Regulus asked, while looking at Harry with wide eyes. "No, you're not James, are you?"

"Nope, I'm his son, Harry Potter."

"Ah." Regulus stared at Harry for a few seconds before focusing on Tom. "You share a resemblance with the Dark Lord. Are you his son?"

Tom's lips curled up in a truly amused smile. "Nice bit of deduction, Regulus, but no, I am Tom Riddle. You knew me as Lord Voldemort."

Reggie stared at Tom and then very pointedly looked around the room as though taking in everything he saw. The cosy bed, the sleepy dog blinking her tired eyes at the sudden intrusion, the homemade wall-art, and the Potter son who was very clearly sharing a bed with Tom. “Pull the other one. Did my brother put you up to this? It wouldn’t surprise me if he thought pranking me even after I died would be hilarious.”

“Nope, but Sirius is aware we’re bringing you back tomorrow,” Harry said with a grin at Regulus’ antics. “He’s looking forward to amending some of his mistakes.”

“That sounds nothing like Sirius.” Regulus crossed his ghostly arms and gave Harry a very unimpressed look.

“Perhaps not the Sirius you knew,” Harry said while he arched an eyebrow and tilted his head. “But this Sirius has spent almost a decade in Azkaban for a crime he didn’t commit. His priorities have changed, to say the least.”

Regulus remained quiet for a few moments, taking all that in. Then he focussed back on Tom, still looking as though he didn’t believe Tom was Voldemort for even one second.

“When I marked you and asked you why you wanted the mark, you told me in confidence that you wished to distinguish yourself from your brother,” Tom said, calm as you please while giving Regulus a level look. “That you wanted the world to know once and for all that you were your own person who could make his own choices. But you discovered quickly enough that I’d driven myself insane by making a horcrux, which you stole with the help of your house-elf Kreacher, losing your life to the inferi in the process.”

Regulus’ eyes got wider and wider as he listened to Tom’s words and by the end he looked deathly pale, even for a ghost. “My Lord, I am –”

“No, please don’t call me that,” Tom said with a sharp gesture of his hand. “I made multiple horcruxes, which drove me utterly insane. You taking and trying to destroy one of them was a brave thing to do, because Voldemort as he existed needed to be stopped. Harry here,” and Tom glanced to the side with a warm smile, “managed it in the end and restored my sanity. I am no longer a Dark Lord, nor have I plans to become one in the future.”

“Regulus, we could use your help for our plan to improve Hogwarts. Remus and Sirius have also agreed to help us,” Harry explained patiently. “But you are under no obligation to join us. If you just want to live your life however you see fit, that’s fine as well after we bring you back. If you want us to bring you back, because that’s ultimately up to you.”

“I would be alive again?” Regulus asked quietly, sounding just a little wary, as if suspecting this might all be a trap of some sort. Well, he was a Slytherin, so it didn’t surprise Harry in the least that he possessed a healthy amount of suspicion bordering on paranoia. It’s what generally made Slytherins so good at surviving.

“Yes, you’d be alive and well, your own person,” Harry assured him. Izzy was by that point wide awake and belly crawled up the bed until she landed on Harry’s lap, licking at his face while wagging her tail.

“It all seems too good to be true,” Regulus said pensively. “Yet I know without a doubt you are speaking the truth. Why though? Why do this for me?”

“Your body has been preserved in the cave. It’s a series of spells I added in case anyone ever broke in. The inferi would drown them but the body would stay fresh so I could identify them once I checked up on my horcruxes,” Tom said matter-of-factly. “And since we possess the resurrection stone we can easily place your soul back in your body. I have killed so many people that didn’t deserve to die and there is nothing I can do about it now. Yet, in your case, at least I can give you a second chance.”

“If you don’t want it, that’s fine, too,” Harry quickly added, knowing that in the life he’d been resurrected he’d wanted to stay dead, initially. “Though Sirius would be disappointed, but I’m sure he’d accept your decision either way.”

“Sirius really wants to make amends?” Regulus asked dubiously.

“Yes,” Harry said with a solemn nod while petting Izzy across her head and back. She was snuggling and slowly falling asleep again.

“And you’d release me from your service?” Regulus looked at Tom as if he could hardly believe he’d dared ask such a question from the Dark Lord.

“At once. I am no longer a Dark Lord, and I no longer have servants.” Tom leaned back against his pillow, his eyes heavy with tiredness. “You can join our plan to improve Hogwarts if you wish, but you can also go your own way. You owe me nothing.”

“Very well,” Regulus said, shining a little brighter all of a sudden. “You may resurrect me.”

“All right, excellent, we’ll see you tomorrow.” Harry let himself fall back to the bed while Tom dropped the resurrection stone onto the nightstand. Regulus immediately faded away.

“Happy now?” Tom asked as he turned off the light and pulled Harry closer to him under the covers.

“Much. Thanks, babe,” Harry mumbled, eyes closed and ready for sleep.

“You’re welcome, darling.” Tom sighed and brushed his nose and mouth against the back of Harry’s head. “And I suppose it is nice to know we won’t have to deal with a vengeful Black who hates us for bringing him back to life without his consent.”

Harry hummed in reply before falling asleep shortly afterwards.

The next morning brought with it the first frost of the season. Harry took Izzy for a walk while Tom stayed behind to make breakfast. The fields around their home glittered in the early morning sun, every blade of grass coated in hoarfrost. Izzy seemed a little cold at first but quickly warmed up as she bounced alongside Harry for a brisk half-hour walk.

Tom had a stack of pancakes waiting for him when Harry got home, and for Izzy a bowl of kibble. Tom had made a simple warm sauce from frozen strawberries and raspberries with some sugar to pour over the pancakes and there was whipped cream to top if all off.

“You are my favourite soulmate,” Harry told him with a huge grin as he tucked into his delicious breakfast.

“We’ll need the energy today,” Tom said as he started on his own stack.

Just as they were done eating, a knock on the door announced Remus and Sirius. While Harry put Izzy in her crate with a Kong filled with liverwurst and an old slice of bread, Tom quickly spelled the dishes clean and after putting on their coats they were ready to go.

Tom apparated them to a rock in the middle of a very turbulent ocean. Sirius almost lost his balance and only Harry and Remus simultaneously grabbing the front of his coat saved him from taking an unexpected swim in freezing water. Tom waved his wand around, clearing some of the wards so they’d be able to apparate the rest of the way. Harry remembered in his first life he and Dumbledore had actually needed to swim that last bit because the wards stopped them from using any magical means for travel. Why Dumbledore hadn’t just conjured a small boat was anyone’s guess.

After the wards were taken down, Tom apparated them to the entrance of the cave, where Tom sliced his thumb and pressed it against the rock to allow them entrance.

“Love what you’ve done with the place,” Sirius muttered as they all followed Tom into the darkness of the gloomy, humid cave, filled with its quiet, black lake.

“Don’t touch the water,” Tom said with a pointed look over his shoulder. “Unless you want to get attacked by a few hundred inferi.”

“Been there, done that,” Harry mumbled with a chuckle. Man, that first time with Dumbledore had been the stuff of nightmares. Harry remembered how completely out of his league he’d felt back then, with Dumbledore incapacitated and Harry facing dozens of reanimated dead bodies coming to kill him. Then again, he’d been sixteen years old, so it wasn’t a surprise he’d been overwhelmed. Now the thought of dispatching inferi was distasteful, but no cause for alarm.

“I’m going to call forth the inferi one by one, four at a time, so we can each light one on fire. They are very susceptible to flames so the bodies should burn up quite quickly.” Tom raised his wand while Harry stood beside him, with Remus and Sirius positioned a few steps to their right.

“Will they fight us?” Remus asked while he and Sirius also got out their wands.

“No,” Tom said and summoned the first inferi.

They did scream, though, as Harry lit the emaciated, grey figure with hollow eyes and ropy, wet hair on fire.

“Merlin,” Sirius breathed, face pale and eyes wide, but he still managed to light the inferi that inched towards him on fire as well.

And that was how they spent the next few hours. One after another dead bodies crawled onto land, skin sagging off most of them, eyes sunken and lifeless as their limbs moved in jerks and spasms. The cave filled with screams as the air clogged with smoke. Harry charmed the air to ventilate out the cave and that cleared it so they could breathe without any issues. The inferi did burn quickly. After ten minutes or so nothing more than ashes and a few bone fragments remained.

Tom remained stoic for the entire time, his face a mask as he burned body after body he'd probably personally killed once upon a time. But Harry could see the uncertainty shining in his eyes, the bitter regret of what he'd become, again. They hadn't really talked about Tom's recent past in any detail since Harry brought him back, too busy as they were basking in their reunion, but Harry knew they probably should take some time soon to talk and to give Tom an opportunity to vent any pain or frustration Harry knew he must be feeling about having become Voldemort again during their second chance at their first life.

"Perhaps a break is in order." Remus lowered his wand before Tom could summon more bodies.

They'd been at it for at least three hours and Harry quickly calculated they needed at least three hours more.

"Very well," Tom said with a tired sigh. "I suspect we're at the halfway point."

"Thank fuck," Sirius muttered as he stretched his arms over his head. "Reggie had better appreciate this."

"He does," Harry said and briefly recounted the conversation they'd had with Regulus the previous night.

"Reggie didn't believe you were Voldemort?" Sirius asked with a huge grin.

"Well, the evidence such as it was presented did suggest I couldn't possibly be a Dark Lord set on destroying society as we know it," Tom said with obvious humour shining in his eyes. Harry was glad to see it, that the experience of confronting all his murder victims hadn't snuffed out Tom's general confidence just yet.

"It was proper of you to at least ask for his consent," Remus commented with a thoughtful frown. "It's something perhaps we should have realized was needed as soon as you suggested bringing him back."

Harry waved Remus' comment away. "These situations are so rare. I only realized it because once upon a time someone resurrected me without mine or Tom's consent and it pissed me off. Long story," Harry added upon seeing Remus and Sirius staring at him in slight disbelief.

"To make that long story very short," Tom said as Harry busied himself with conjuring four glasses and filling them with water before handing them out. All that fire and smoke made him parched. "Harry had done the Gryffindor thing and sacrificed himself to save the world —"

“Not just the world, the entire multiverse,” Harry muttered while sipping his water.

“Yes, the entire multiverse,” Tom conceded with a nod. “A friend of ours was quite a powerful witch who decided to resurrect Harry without asking me if Harry even wanted to be resurrected.”

“Which I didn’t because I understood enough about the magic in that world to know it would cause an enormous shift in the balance of that universe.” Harry shrugged while gazing out over the black lake. “Which it did. Gave us all sorts of trouble for years to come.”

“Our friend Willow meant well, but she always had trouble seeing potential consequences when it came to magic use,” Tom finished the explanation. “And if she’d asked me, I’d have told her to let Harry stay dead. I knew we’d see each other again in our next lives, but Willow didn’t know that.”

“They were still kids, our friends, so we never told them about us being reincarnated.” Harry refilled his glass with more water. “Only my mentor was told the truth after Tom and I met and we got our memories back.”

“So the magic in that world had very different consequences than the magic in our world?” Remus asked, appearing genuinely interested in that kind of subject. Not that it surprised Harry in the slightest. Remus had always been the scholarly type.

“It is that way across all worlds,” Tom said while holding out his empty glass for Harry to refill as well. “Most worlds don’t have magic, but the ones that do all have their own types of magic, their own rules and their own consequences. In the slayer world, the magic was ritual based, drawn from the environment more so than from within the witch themselves, and it was part of a universal balance that needed to be maintained.”

“Fascinating,” Remus said while Sirius rolled his eyes but still gave Remus a fond little smile.

“I’m happy to discuss this subject in more depth at a later time, but I’d prefer to continue with our unpleasant task now, so we can get it done as soon as possible,” Tom said and drained his glass of water before vanishing it with a swish of his wand.

They returned to their previous positions and got to work without further comment. It took another couple of hours before the last inferi were burned to ashes. The whole rocky bank before them was covered in a foot of ashes and bone fragments, and that was after Harry had cleaned the bank a time or two by blowing the dusty remains into the lake with a few gusts of magic.

“I’ll draw a quick circle, if you can get Reggie’s body,” Harry said, tired and wrung out emotionally from seeing so many bodies burn one after another. He just wanted to get everything done with. Remus and Sirius didn’t comment but seemed to be on the same page as Harry, just wanting it to all end as soon as possible.

Tom started waving his wand in the direction of the lake while Harry prepared a simple, necromantic circle by inscribing the rocks around them with runes in the form of a circle.

Thanks to the resurrection stone it didn't have to be an elaborate circle. He also pulled a few of the healing potions he'd brought out of his coat pocket and handed them to Remus.

"Reggie is still a victim of drowning, even after we get his body going again," Harry quickly explained when Sirius looked at him in confusion. "Giving him some potions will help his body heal."

"Of course," Remus agreed with a nod, holding onto the vials with obvious care.

A still body came sailing through the air above the lake, clothes disintegrating as it went until a mostly naked figure landed in the centre of the ritual circle. Harry shared a quick glance with Tom, but no words needed to be spoken. They'd partaken in so many rituals together, they knew in detail what needed done and who'd be doing it.

Harry swished his wand around while chanting a few necromantic spells to get the magic going to prepare the body for receiving the soul. The runes around the circle lit up and a strong wind blew around them out of nowhere. The magic felt cold and slightly creepy, but Harry had felt it numerous times before so it didn't bother him. Remus and Sirius both shivered, though.

Tom pulled out the resurrection stone and turned it over in the palm of his hand with his fingers like he'd done the previous night. Moments later the shimmering ghostly Regulus appeared in front of him, looking around with wide eyes until he spotted Sirius.

"Reggie," Sirius breathed, lips trembling and eyes shining.

"Don't call me that," Regulus said, though he sounded just as close to tears as Sirius did. "How often do I have to tell you that?"

Sirius wiped at his eyes. "One more time, apparently. Reggie."

Harry rolled his eyes. Siblings. Family really could be the greatest blessing or the worst curse, Harry knew only too well. He'd had fantastic parents and siblings during many lifetimes, but he'd also been stuck with a bunch of selfish, abusive pricks during a few lives, and everything in between. Still, the bonds between family, siblings in particular, was strong, that much Harry knew from experience.

"Regulus, please enter your body, so we can finish the ritual," Tom said, looking about as exasperated at the sibling interaction as Harry felt.

"Just dive into it?" Regulus asked him dubiously, which Tom answered with a firm nod. "Very well."

The moment Regulus' shimmering form disappeared inside the body, Harry resumed his chanting, walking around the circle in quick steps to seal the soul into the body. It greatly helped that this body had originally belonged to that soul and that Regulus wanted to be resurrected. If you performed necromancy when any of those things weren't the case it was a lot more difficult and time consuming to get it all done.

Tom joined Harry in the chants, also circling the body and waving his wand around in an intricate pattern to help seal the deal.

The body in the circle jerked once, twice and then sat up, eyes springing open while Regulus hacked up a flood of lake water that rushed out of his mouth.

“Pepper-up, now,” Harry instructed as he broke the circle and the four of them hurried towards a frantically coughing Regulus. Remus handed the appropriate potion to Harry, who quickly tipped it into Regulus’ mouth. Regulus swallowed most of it and his skin became noticeably warmer as the potion did its work until steam erupted from Regulus’ ears. “Now a standard healing potion.” Harry held out his hand and Remus pressed the correct vial into it at once. That too disappeared into Regulus’ mouth without much problems and his complexion improved over the next minute, from deathly pale to rosy cheeked.

“You couldn’t have brought me some robes?” Regulus asked in a whisper, voice cracking and creaking. Harry snickered and patted him on the shoulder as Sirius conjured robes for him.

Bright red robes with gold trim.

Regulus sighed and raised his head to give his older brother a tired look while Sirius spelled the robes onto him. Sirius, for his part, looked as happy as Harry had ever seen him in this life or his first. His grin was wide and his eyes bright and the next thing he did was fall on his knees beside Regulus and pull him into a bone-crushing hug, which Regulus barely managed to return with trembling arms.

No words were spoken, but Harry knew there would be plenty of time for that later. No matter their differences, they were brothers and that meant that most differences could be resolved if they both put some effort into it over the coming weeks and months.

Harry shared a pleased smile with both Remus and Tom while the brothers hugged it out in front of them. Tom discreetly waved his wand at Regulus, checking his blood pressure and lung capacity with a few silent spells. Both Tom and Harry had been healers during one of the lives they’d lived in the wizarding world. Regulus’ vitals indicated he was in good shape and would make a full recovery.

Eventually the brothers broke apart, both wiping at their eyes while ignoring the others’ gazes.

“I apologize for sounding callous right now,” Tom said as he pulled a rolled up piece of parchment from his coat pocket, together with a self-inking quill. “But we need you to sign this, Regulus. It’s a standard secrecy contract. Once you’ve signed it, Sirius and Remus have our permission to tell you about our lives in detail. Incidentally, Lord Voldemort’s real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle and Voldemort isn’t dead.”

“Also, this is what Harry Potter looks like,” Harry added while pointing at his own face. “And Harry Potter lives in Gaunt Cottage in Little Hangleton.”

“Fidelius charms,” Remus explained when Regulus looked from one person to the next in confusion. “They’ve now let you into their secrets. Sirius and I have also signed contracts

such as that one, and trust me, it's worth it to do so and learn the truth about them."

Regulus nodded in understanding but still took the time to read the contract as any sane Slytherin would while Sirius helpfully lit up his wand and aimed it at the contract for him, to chase away the darkness of the cave around them. Eventually, Regulus signed it and handed it back to Tom while giving him a look that made it clear he still had trouble believing Tom was Voldemort, or had been Voldemort at some point.

"Thank you," Tom said, tucking the signed contract away. He aimed his wand at the lake and a few moments later a single wand came flying towards them, which Tom caught easily before handing it to Regulus, who accepted it quietly with lightly shaking hands. "You're free to apparate out of here from the entrance to the cave. I imagine Regulus would like a shower and a warm meal before hearing any explanations."

"We'll do that," Remus said while gently reaching for Regulus' elbow and helping him to his feet on one side as Sirius took his other arm.

"Thanks for the help today," Harry told his dogfathers and then focused his gaze on Regulus, who appeared tired and drained, but alive, so mission accomplished and all that. "If you have any questions, Reggie, you know where to find us."

"Thank you," Regulus whispered, leaving heavily on both men holding him up.

"You're welcome," Harry replied with a sincere smile. It was nice finally meeting Regulus alive and well, after he'd played such a underrated, vital role in Harry's first life while Harry had known so little about him. "Now get some rest. We'll talk later."

Sirius and Remus called out their own goodbyes while helping a stumbling Regulus out of the cave. Harry and Tom watched them go, until the crack of apparition outside told them they were alone.

Rubbing both hands across his face, Harry turned to look at his soulmate. "Ugh, let's never do that again."

"Agreed. Let's go home." Tom briefly rubbed his hand across Harry's back while leading him out of the cave as well. "Regulus isn't the only one in need of a shower."

"Merlin, yes. And food. I'm starving." Harry let Tom apparate them both home, since he was magically exhausted. He might look like an adult, but his magical core was still only ten years old and had been worked to its limits that day.

"You shouldn't be using any magic at least for a few days," Tom said after they landed in their garden and Tom opened the front door with a tap of his wand. "Preferably for a week."

"Yeah, I've got magical exhaustion, I can tell that much," Harry said and then a smile lit up his face. "Where is my Izzy girl?"

A frantically wagging Izzy let out a small yip from her crate. This was the longest she'd been alone in their home so far, but she'd done well. Harry opened the door of the crate and

crouched down to give their ecstatic dog a few much needed cuddles and kisses. “Can you get us some fish and chips while I walk Izzy?” Harry asked as he looked up at Tom.

“Sure. I’ll take the car.” Tom apparently also needed to magically recover from their adventures that day.

Harry savoured the cold, fresh air after being stuck in that smoky cave all day as he walked Izzy for a good forty-five minutes around the countryside. The weather was dry and chilly and utterly perfect to help clear both Harry’s mind and lungs.

“I’ve put the food under a preservation charm,” a freshly showered Tom said the moment Harry stepped through the front door with Izzy. “Go have a shower and afterwards we’ll enjoy our dinner on the couch with a movie.”

Harry took his time under the warm spray to wash all the soot and dust and ashes from his body and hair, and after drying off he slipped on his pyjamas, even though it was barely dinner time. But after the day they’d had, he wanted to feel comfortable. Tom in the meantime had started a fire in the hearth and had given Izzy her dinner. Izzy curled up beside Harry on the couch while they ate fish and chips with their fingers as they enjoyed Harry’s VCR tape of Raiders of the Lost Ark. That movie never got old, no matter how many versions of it they’d seen throughout their many lives.

“I was thinking,” Tom said later, after the movie was done and they sat on the couch cuddled up together under a warm blanket. “Now Regulus also knows the truth and hopefully we can bring him in for our Hogwarts reforms.”

“Yeah, that would be ideal,” Harry agreed with a sigh.

“That leaves Severus as the only odd person out,” Tom continued while glancing down at Harry, who was leaning his head against Tom’s shoulder. “He knows part of the truth, but not all of it.”

“Because Severus will never forgive you,” Harry pointed out, knowing it to be true.

“Hm.” Tom absentmindedly rubbed his hand across the arm Harry had wrapped around his chest. “That is possibly an issue, yes. Severus is the most tenacious person I know when it comes to holding onto grudges.”

“And you killed my mum, his BFF or imagined soulmate or whatever.”

“And you believe Severus isn’t susceptible to hearing the truth from us?” Tom asked him with a curious look. “If we explain our true circumstances, he wouldn’t be able to accept that I’m not Voldemort and move on?”

Harry sat up, something dawning on him all of a sudden. He looked at Tom with wide eyes. “No, I don’t believe Severus will accept the truth from us. But there is someone we can have speak for us.”

Tom seemed both confused yet intrigued. “Who?”

Harry's grin was wide and devious. "My mum."

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Be sure to check out my new series of fics about some of Harry and Tom's lives they've lived so far, *Lives Lived* and *Lives Lost*. So far we've got Harry and Tom as mob bosses, as sorcerers at Kamar Taj (with surprise guest stars) and Harry and Tom facing a zombie apocalypse.

Thanks so much for reading, and for all your comments and support. They mean the world to me and always inspire me to write more.

Chapter 13

Tom threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, my darling, that is vicious, sickening your dead mother on poor Severus."

Harry turned a little on the couch and held out his hand. "Give me the stone, I'll summon her to catch her up and ask her if she wants to help us."

But instead of summoning the stone, as Harry thought he would, Tom released a deep sigh and lowered his head, and instantly Harry knew he'd pushed things too far.

"Can we not do that right now?" Tom asked, voice barely audible.

"I'm sorry, babe." Harry realized that they really should address a few elephants that were stationed around every room of their lives, and he knew just how to do it. "How about I let Izzy out for a wee and close up here, and you get undressed and wait for me in bed, face down."

Tom raised his head and gave Harry a very dubious look before something must have dawned on him. Tom was many things, but stupid wasn't one of them, and for a moment it looked like Tom might roll his eyes and dismiss Harry's offer, but in the end he relented and slowly got up from the couch. "Very well. Your wish is my command."

"Atta boy," Harry said with a chuckle. While Izzy got to roam the yard for a few minutes, Harry sent their cups and glasses flying to the sink with a spell, banked the fire in the hearth and put out all the candles and turned off all the lights. While giving himself a bathroom break, Harry picked up a bottle of baby oil from the cabinet under the sink and then entered the bedroom where he found Tom exactly as he'd instructed him. Tom had his arms folded under his head and looked at Harry with hooded eyes.

Harry didn't get naked, because what he was about to do had nothing to do with sex. This was an entirely different kind of intimacy.

You see, for all that Tom was a psychologist, and a psychiatrist, many times over, the man had a pathological inability to discuss his own mental issues. He'd gotten better at it over their many lives, no question there, but Tom was a perfectionist at heart and whenever he needed to address one of his own failures, the man clamped up tighter than a giant clam. Of course, for his own well-being it was imperative that he did talk about it, no matter how much he hesitated doing so. One thing that helped Tom to open up was to distract him with some type of physical stimulation, and it so happened that Harry was a licensed massage therapist, at least once upon a life.

"Just relax, babe." Harry sat down on top of Tom's bare ass, knees on either side of Tom's waist. Pouring a generous amount of baby oil on his palm, Harry rubbed his hands together to warm it up and then set to work on Tom's shoulders.

Harry took his time kneading the tight muscles he found there, working his way up to Tom's neck and down his spine. For the first ten minutes Harry didn't say a word, just helped Tom loosen up with sure, practised strokes of his hands.

Finally, Harry asked a quiet question. "That must have been hard, seeing all your victims today."

Tom sighed, the kind that signalled he really, really did not want to talk about it but knew it was in his own best interest if he did so anyway. "Yes. It was tough."

Harry hummed as he shifted a little so he could apply more pressure to a particularly stubborn knot right besides Tom's shoulder blade. "I imagine the thing that bothers you the most is the fact that you made all the same mistakes again this life, that turned you into Voldemort."

"You'd think that after almost 200 lifetimes I'd have learned how to not butcher my own soul and become a mass murderer," Tom grumbled, shifting his head to rest his chin on his wrist, staring straight ahead.

"But you didn't have your memories of all those lives," Harry pointed out reasonably. "You were born into the same body as in life number one, raised in the same circumstances and met with the same kind of prejudices while attending Hogwarts. How did you expect things to turn out differently?"

"Yes, I understand that in similar circumstances you get similar results," Tom said through gritted teeth, his shoulders tightening up right under Harry's hands.

"Then please don't take that result personally."

"How the fuck else should I take it?" Tom raised himself up a little, turning his head so he could glare at Harry, brown eyes blazing.

Ah, there was the anger. Good. Let Tom vent as much as he needed. Harry ignored the small outburst and studiously continued giving Tom a deep tissue massage. "What you should be focussing on isn't what you did with your life before you remembered, it's what you did with your life after you got your memories back. Because that is the real you."

Tom blinked and lowered his head again, exhaling a long, deep breath.

“Because the moment you got your memories back,” Harry continued, because this was something Tom needed to hear, probably more than once. “You ceased being Voldemort. You abandoned all plans for world domination and the culling of muggles and muggleborns. Instead you’re happily living a quiet, provincial life with your loving partner and a dog until you can genuinely improve this magical nation’s educational system.”

While Tom remained quiet, Harry worked his way to Tom’s lower back, softly kneading along his spine.

“I just feel so fucking embarrassed,” Tom finally whispered. It sounded like it cost him a great deal to admit that, so Harry briefly leaned over and placed a few kisses on Tom’s shoulder. “I’m deeply ashamed I became that monster again, and that I ruined so many lives. Again.”

“So tell people that, those that are in the know.” Harry smiled down at his soulmate, proud Tom had made a good effort to work through his own thoughts, no matter how distasteful he found them. “Get it off your chest as much as you can.”

“That would be for the best.” Tom turned his head again, this time offering Harry a small smile. “Thank you, darling.”

“You’re welcome, babe.” Harry continued his massage for at least ten more minutes, until he felt Tom’s breathing change under his hands. Tom had fallen asleep, and while trying not to wake him, Harry crawled off him and pulled the duvet over both of them. It didn’t take long before Harry fell asleep, exhausted as he was.

The next day, Harry felt like he was coming down with the flu, his whole body aching while he was tired to the bone. It seemed Harry suffered from a nasty case of magical exhaustion and Tom didn’t need to remind him not to use magic, even if that was exactly what Tom did, a number of times.

Harry and Tom took Izzy for a nice long walk and once back home, cooked a frittata for breakfast with eggs from their chickens and some leftover veggies and meat from the cooling cabinet. After they’d eaten they announced their plans for the coming days to each other.

Since Harry couldn’t do any magic and December was looming, Harry decided to split his time the upcoming week between reading through various textbooks to brush up his knowledge for his OWLs and NEWTs, and creating a pensieve from scratch. In life number 3, when Harry had been a Greengrass in the 19th century, he’d been a Master Enchanter and had learned how to make them, and in every subsequent life in which they’d been magical living in the wizarding world, Harry had made them a pensieve to use and pass down to their heirs upon their death.

Pensieves were dead useful things to have, yet horribly expensive to buy because they took ages to make and they had to be made by hand, without magic, for almost the entire process. A pensieve could help you work through difficult mental situations, or be used to share amusing memories with each other. Harry and Tom had also used their pensieves to revisit

cherished moments throughout their lives; when they got married, when their children were little, amazing holidays they'd taken, things like that. In many ways the pensieve became an immersive magical equivalent to home movies.

Harry took the car and drove to York to visit a crafts store, because he needed pure clay without any magical contaminants, and that was best bought in the muggle world. It was also far cheaper than anything you could get in Diagon Alley. While in the craft store, Harry decided to indulge in a few other items as well to provide them with things to do during the upcoming winter months. A few crochet hooks and suitable yarns, knitting needles and nice, thick yarn for a few scarves and jumpers, but also some watercolour paints and paper, together with some charcoal and pencils and a few sketchpads. While Harry preferred the watercolours, Tom could do amazing things with just charcoal.

On the way home, Harry stopped by a bakery to pick up some pastries for lunch, and a Tesco to get some supplies for dinner. Since he'd be busy that week Harry decided to make a big pot of beef stew, that would provide them hearty meals for at least three days. He got it going the moment he came home, quickly chopping onions, carrots, celery, mushrooms and potatoes by hand, and adding them to the pot after he browned the chunks of beef. He covered everything in some beef broth, put the lid on the pan and put the whole thing in a low oven to cook the rest of the day. It made the whole house smell absolutely divine.

Aside from a brief break home for lunch, Tom spent the day at the Ministry, going through their records.

"You're right that I need to focus on the person who I am right now," Tom said and gave Harry a soft kiss before taking off after breakfast. He came home that afternoon right before dinner loaded down with countless scrolls which he all stored in some hastily conjured filing cabinets in their office upstairs. Then Tom brought a few scrolls downstairs with him and armed with a muggle notepad, some ballpoint pens and a muggle calculator, Tom got to work reading through all of them.

"These are all the public records from the Board of Governors meetings ever since Dumbledore became headmaster," Tom explained while Harry looked at him with raised eyebrows. "I've also got all transcripts from all Wizengamot meetings that involved Hogwarts and its budget in some way."

"Wait, you're going over the budget?" Harry asked, as he sat beside Tom at the dining table, a few charms textbooks in front of him.

"Think about it," Tom said while pointing his pen at Harry. "Dumbledore has done away with numerous elective subjects and keeps the whole school chronically understaffed. Why? Is it because the man is an incompetent fool?"

"Nah," Harry quickly said. "You can call Dumbledore many things, but he's never been incompetent."

"Exactly." Tom gestured with his hands as if the answer was obvious. "So it must be something else. My guess? It's the budget."

“Huh.” Harry leaned back in his seat, truly baffled by that revelation. “You know, in all these years, that had never actually occurred to me, that it might not be Dumbledore himself screwing over Hogwarts deliberately.”

Tom patted the scrolls on the table in front of him. “Give me a few days and we shall find out.”

And that was how they spent their week. Harry read through textbooks for a few hours every day and spent the rest of the time modelling a pensieve out of clay. Once he got the shape exactly as he wanted it, the tedious work of inscribing hundreds and hundreds of teeny tiny runes inside and out began, which Harry did methodically by hand, no magic, and entirely from memory.

Meanwhile, Izzy got plenty of walks, and Tom and Harry also visited Cindy a time or two for tea and to pick up Lucy to take on walks with Izzy. And on Tuesday evening, Tom, bless his heart, even sat through two hours of Harry pounding away at ‘The Phantom of the Opera’ on the community centre’s creaky piano while the Little Hangleton Mixed Choir sang their enthusiastic hearts out, and all the while Tom sported a politely admiring smile. That man truly was a great actor. Derrick seemed particularly flustered around Tom, but whether that was because of Tom’s handsome looks or because Harry had announced Tom as his boyfriend without a hint of shame, Harry wasn’t sure. Perhaps it was a bit of both.

Thankfully, the Little Hangleton Mixed Choir seemed to take it in stride that their pianist was gay and Harry and Tom didn’t face any problems, just some gentle teasing since Tom had made Harry miss practice the week before.

The beef stew came out great and kept them fed until Thursday, when Tom made them some simple Colombian food. Arepas, pan fried corn cakes, with some arroz con coco, rice with coconut and raisins, served with some spicy local pork sausages and some stir-fried, seasoned onions and bell peppers.

“It’s been so long since we’d had Colombian food,” Harry said, and bit into an arepa with a moan.

“A few lives at least,” Tom agreed before spooning some rice into his mouth and closing his eyes in obvious pleasure.

“We should start a personal cookbook again,” Harry suggested when his plate was almost empty. Since they’d lived in so many different countries in so many different times, Harry and Tom had an absolute wealth of knowledge when it came to different cuisines. So many, in fact, that they regularly forgot about a lot of them if they didn’t write them down so they could page through a cookbook to look for ideas on what to eat.

“Sure,” Tom easily agreed. This wasn’t a new idea, after all. “Any ideas what to serve your dogfathers and Regulus tomorrow?” Sirius had sent them two letters throughout the week to update them on Regulus’ progress. Mostly, Reggie was recovering physically and mentally, familiarizing himself with all the years he’d missed, and coming to grips with Tom and Harry’s unique situation, which Sirius and Remus had told him about in detail.

“Oh!” Harry sat up and gave Tom a pleading look. “It’s the end of November. It’s Thanksgiving!”

Tom didn’t look very impressed. “We’re British, darling. We don’t do Thanksgiving.”

“I know, I know, but wouldn’t it be fun to offer our guests a traditional Thanksgiving dinner?” Harry’s smile was so close to pleading he kind of felt embarrassed about it.

“You just want stuffing,” Tom said, proving once and for all that yes, he really knew his soulmate inside and out.

“Yes, I do want stuffing. And roast turkey and cranberry sauce and gravy and – “

“Fine, we’ll cook a Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow. No need to sum up the entire menu,” Tom said while he shook his head. Harry grinned and leaned over to give him a heartfelt kiss. “But you’re in charge of the turkey,” Tom added quickly. “And you’d better make sure it won’t come out bone dry.”

“Nah,” Harry said, getting up and moving towards the kitchen with a little jiggle in his steps. “I’m gonna cover that baby in juicy bacon, from head to toe,” he said in a sing-song voice. Tom rolled his eyes and came over to help with the dishes.

When everything was put away and Harry made two cups of coffee for them and Tom served them each a portion of tres leches cake for dessert, they settled on the couch and Tom turned to look at Harry.

“Want to know what I’ve found out so far about the budget?”

“Of course.” Harry perked up and balanced his cake in his lap while he gave Tom an expectant look. “Is it the old goat’s fault or not?”

“Yes and no,” Tom said, which told Harry exactly nothing. “I’ve discovered a pattern ever since Dumbledore was made headmaster. Dumbledore, as expected, is entirely in favour of an extremely liberal policy at Hogwarts. Changing everything to accommodate the muggleborns, from holidays to classes. The conservative factions of the Wizengamot were very much against that, and through budget negotiations tried to reign Dumbledore in.”

“You do as we tell you or we cut your budget,” Harry guessed with an understanding nod.

“Pretty much, yes. And they didn’t even want to turn Hogwarts into a pureblood haven, they just wanted to curb Dumbledore’s more liberal changes. But Dumbledore refused to move an inch, stubborn old bastard that he is,” Tom explained with a roll of his eyes. “And now he barely has any budget left to work with.”

“And the Board of Governors isn’t involved in setting the budget, either. That’s all the Wizengamot on behalf of the Department of Education.” Yeah, Harry could see how that had all played out over the last fifty years. “Not to mention the recent war was probably a huge distraction as well, so people didn’t notice how much Hogwarts’ standards have fallen over the last few decades.”

“What it comes down to,” Tom said, face utterly serious as he narrowed his eyes at Harry. “Is that Hogwarts should have its own income stream so it’s no longer dependent on playing political games at the Wizengamot for its money.”

“Hey, you won’t hear me complain about removing Hogwarts from the Ministry’s rule,” Harry said quickly, a small shiver going through him. “I remember fucking Umbridge and her ministry approved curriculum only too well, torture quill included.”

Tom nodded, briefly looking like he wanted nothing more than to go out there and subject Umbridge to a cruciatus curse or two. Or three. Harry sympathised with that impulse. “Anyway. We are about to make a huge amount of money in the muggle world, which hopefully will add to our bank accounts for many years to come.”

“Oh. Oh!” Harry bounced in place for a moment out of sheer enthusiasm. “We can set up a trust for Hogwarts!”

Tom grinned, leaning back in the couch, obviously happy that Harry had reached the correct conclusion. “Exactly. We can set up a independent trust for Hogwarts, which will take the politics out of it and allow Hogwarts to hire enough staff to offer all the cancelled electives again and much more.”

“That is such a brilliant idea.” Harry leaned over and gave Tom a long, lingering kiss. “Have I mentioned lately that I love you? Because I do.”

“Love you, too. And glad you approve.” Before turning to his cake, Tom added, “We’ve got the rest of this schoolyear to figure out a new financial construction for Hogwarts.”

They enjoyed their excellent cake and coffee, and just as Harry was about to suggest turning on the telly, Tom held out his hand, resurrection stone resting on his palm. “Call your mum,” Tom said when Harry looked at him with wide eyes. “Explain things to her, and then we can set up an appointment with Severus if she agrees to help us.”

“Okay,” Harry said, taking the stone from Tom and suddenly feeling all sorts of shy and unsure. How bizarre. But this was his mum, his original mother, who had given her life for him and who Harry had only ever talked to very briefly in life-threatening situations. How was she going to react to the fact that Harry was shacking up with Tom Riddle, formerly Lord Voldemort, and had been for hundreds of lifetimes.

“Darling, it will be fine,” Tom whispered, noticing Harry’s reluctance. “She’ll listen and she’ll accept your explanation, I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed, gathered his Gryffindor courage and turned the stone around three times while picturing Lily Potter in his head.

“Harry?” the shimmering figure of Lily Potter said as she appeared before them, hovering over the coffee table. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” Harry said, and cleared his throat. “Hi, mum.”

“Hello, dear.” Lily looked around. “Where’s your dad?”

“Mum, I need your help with something concerning Snape,” Harry said by way of explanation. “So I thought we’d just need to see you for now.”

Lily’s face did a very complicated but funny thing. “Yeah, that’s probably for the best. What can I do for you?”

“Well, it’s like this.” And Harry tried to explain things about his endless cycle of rebirth and his soulmate in as few words as he could, but he still ended up talking in one go for at least half an hour while Lily hovered and listened. Once he was done, he swallowed a few times since his throat was utterly dry. Beside him, Tom raised his wand and summoned two glasses plus a bottle of orange soda from the kitchen. Neither of them were huge soda drinkers, since it was all just sugar water with lots of empty calories, but occasionally they treated themselves to a glass or two.

“Thanks,” Harry whispered as Tom handed him a glass of soda, and which Harry all but gulped down only for Tom to refill it at once.

Lily observed all of this quietly, but with a contemplative look on her face. “So you’re tied to Voldemort, who is no longer Voldemort, and you keep getting reincarnated, this life included, and now you want to fix Hogwarts and bring Severus in on that, but you need my help to convince him. Is that about what you told me?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it,” Harry said, relieved beyond anything that his mum was taking it all very calmly.

“All right. I’ll help you,” Lily said, just like that.

“Really?” Harry shared a brief, disbelieving look with Tom.

Lily’s smile was soft. “Harry, while I never expected you to live these extraordinary life cycles, I can tell you’re happy and that this man here takes good care of you. That is all I want for you, all I ever wanted for you. That you’d be happy with someone who treats you well.”

Harry nodded. He’d had plenty of kids of his own and he knew exactly what his mum was talking about. “Thanks. Here’s what I’d like for you to do when we summon you once we meet up with Snape.”

And Lily listened patiently to Harry’s plan, and then they said their goodbyes and Lily faded away as Harry returned the stone to Tom.

“See? It all went perfectly,” Tom said while gently nudging Harry with his elbow.

“She was so young.” Harry was still a bit in shock about that, how young his mother had looked. “They were barely more than kids when they had me.” Harry looked at Tom with wide eyes. “Do you think I was an accident?” Funny that in his first life he’d never wondered

about this, but now, much older and wiser, it was the first thing he considered when realizing how young his parents had been when they'd had him.

Tom gave Harry a knowing smile. "Sometimes certain potions can interfere with contraceptive charms..."

Chuckling, Harry leaned against him, his hand rubbing across Tom's thigh. "How can I forget." That's how they'd ended up with one more kid than planned in one of their lives as witches and wizards. Not that they'd minded adding another child to the family, but it had been a genuine surprise.

Harry cuddled against Tom for a short while, until his mind reminded him what he was planning to do the next day. He sat up at once. "We should go to bed early if we're cooking an entire Thanksgiving feast tomorrow. I'll have to get up at the crack of dawn if I'm to find a turkey and cranberries and stuff in 1990s Britain."

"And you'll need me to apparate you to specialty stores in London," Tom concluded without any hints from Harry. The man truly was a genius.

And that is what they did the next morning. First Harry wrote a letter to Snape, asking to meet with him Saturday, which was the next day and sent Pluto off with it. After a quick breakfast of some fried eggs on bread and a brief walk with the dog, Tom apparated them to London, where Harry visited a multitude of stores until he got all he needed for a genuine Thanksgiving bonanza.

While Tom refused to help with the turkey, he did get to work on a number of the side dishes, and since he could use magic, he got lots done while Harry tackled the turkey. Harry mixed salt, pepper, garlic, parsley and chives with butter, and then smeared that between the meat and the skin on the turkey breast, and some on the outside as well. He meticulously placed rasher after rasher of smoky bacon over the whole turkey before creating a delicious stuffing mix from cubed old bread, some breadcrumbs, onion, celery, sage and parsley, and a pound of pork sausage. He stuffed the turkey with that before putting the whole thing in a preheated oven and hoping for the best.

Then he got to work on the crust for the pumpkin pie.

"We've got plenty of tres leches cake left over," Tom pointed out, but Harry furiously shook his head.

"It will keep under a preservation charm. Thanksgiving needs pumpkin pie."

Tom looked at all the dishes he'd already prepared and gave Harry a questioning look. "You do realize we're only having three people over for dinner, right?"

Harry looked at the mashed potatoes, the cornbread, the green bean casserole, the creamed corn, the sweet potatoes, not to mention the 15 pound turkey in the oven, and the gravy and cranberry sauce that they'd yet to make, and the pumpkin pie he was working on. "Yeah, okay, we'll bring Cindy some leftovers as well."

Snorting, Tom shook his head. "I'm pretty sure we'll have leftovers for the whole of Little Hangleton."

"Well, that is a Thanksgiving tradition, isn't it?" Harry offered and went back to his pie. The smell of all the foods did bring back some really good memories from all the times they'd been American or Canadian and the many wonderful Thanksgiving dinners they'd shared with their loved ones.

By the time their guests were due to arrive the turkey was done and looked good, much to Harry's relief. Tom took Izzy for a walk while Harry finished the gravy, and together they lit some candles and set the table, with Tom conjuring a nice fall-themed centre piece and some matching napkins.

"Something smells really good," Remus said as Harry opened the door for their guests. Izzy greeted them all with much happy wagging, not caring in the least she'd never met Regulus before.

"We're having Thanksgiving!" Harry announced after their guests had pulled off their coats. "Since it's Thanksgiving week and we've been American and Canadian quite a few times, we thought we'd treat you to a traditional feast."

"That looks amazing," Remus said while he admired the turkey on the dining table.

"How many people are coming?" Sirius asked, taking in the many pans and plates filled with food. Regulus kept quiet, seemingly unsure yet how to respond to a ten-year-old acting like a grown-up and a former Dark Lord.

Tom rolled his eyes. "Don't even. We'll be eating leftovers for at least a week. Just so you know, you're taking leftovers home as well, whether you like it or not."

"Saves us from cooking," Sirius said with a shrug while they all sat down around the table.

Harry cut the turkey and gave everyone a few generous slices while they all passed the dishes around and filled their plates.

"Wow, I've missed this," Harry said after his first bite of turkey, gravy and mashed potatoes. "So wholesome." His proclamation was met by silence as everyone was enjoying the meal.

Halfway through, as Tom refilled their wineglasses, Regulus spoke up for the first time.

"This is excellent. Thank you for the invitation." Regulus paused briefly, resting his knife and fork on edge of his plate. "We plan on visiting my grandfather tomorrow, to announce my existence, however we're not sure how to spin it."

"Huh." Harry shared a quick look with Tom. Honestly, Harry hadn't even considered that when they decided to bring Regulus back.

Tom frowned and sipped his wine, clearly in thought. "The simplest explanation for your sudden reappearance is that you faked your own death since you refused to be recruited by the Dark Lord, and to spare your family from my wrath you pretended to be dead." Tom

gestured at Regulus' left arm. "I can remove the mark quite easily. It will hurt, but then no one can accuse you of having been a genuine Death Eater."

"That does seem like the easiest explanation," Remus said with an agreeable smile.

"And I finally returned because my brother was found to be innocent and released from Azkaban," Regulus said with a nod at Sirius. "If you can remove my mark, my Lord –"

"Tom. Just Tom, please."

"Right. Tom." Regulus looked as if he'd just said a very bad word but kept talking anyway. "If you remove my mark, I can announce my reappearance publicly."

That decided, they went back to their food and it wasn't until they got to the pumpkin pie that Tom brought up his findings about Hogwarts and told their guests about the budget cuts.

"So Dumbledore would rather be a stubborn old fart than make concessions and just compromise with his political opponents?" Regulus summed up what he'd just heard. "And meanwhile the education of every witch and wizard in this country suffers."

"That's pretty much it, yeah," Harry agreed, debating whether or not he should finish his pumpkin pie. He truly was stuffed and afraid he might burst if he ate just one bite more. "Hence why we're planning a Hogwarts mutiny."

"And what sort of direction would you take Hogwarts in?" Regulus asked politely. He seemed much more composed than Sirius had ever been, yet at the same time the way he occasionally smiled or quirked an eyebrow was very similar to his brother's expressions.

"We're aiming for a more middle of the road approach," Harry explained, finally putting down his fork and admitting defeat. "We'll welcome muggleborns and listen to their new ideas, but at the same time we'll preserve traditions and holidays."

"None of those things are mutually exclusive," Tom added as Regulus seemed to mull things over. "We can welcome muggleborns and still educate them in our ways of life."

"That does seem to be the most sensible approach," Regulus finally said. "I will keep a close eye on your endeavours and perhaps join you once the time is right."

"That works for us," Harry said with a huge smile while Sirius slapped his brother on the back with a huge grin.

Before their guests left, Tom got out his wand and Regulus bared his left arm, and a few, thankfully short, screams later, Regulus looked pale and sweaty yet utterly grateful to be rid of his Dark Mark for good. "Thank you," he whispered as he pulled his sleeve down again.

Tom cleared his throat. "And I am sorry that it ever came to all of that in the first place."

Regulus gazed at Tom with wide eyes and seemed utterly at a loss of what to say to that, as did everyone else, so to make things a little less awkward, Harry loudly announced that now was the time for their guests to take possession of some leftovers. Harry filled a few

containers with enough food to make three portions of a Thanksgiving dinner so his dogfathers and Reggie had enough for the next evening.

Right after their guests left and Harry and Tom faced the momentous task of cleaning all the dishes and putting the kitchen back to rights, an owl delivered a reply from Snape, telling them they were welcome to stop by at Spinner's End at seven that Saturday night.

Well, it seemed like Operation Freak Snape The Fuck Out was a go.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Thanks to you all for reading and commenting! Your support gives me joy and keeps me writing.

Chapter 14

All throughout Saturday, as they spent the day doing chores and other domestic things that needed doing, Harry felt increasingly nervous, though he had no idea why.

They walked Izzy for an hour, had leftovers from their Thanksgiving extravaganza for lunch, Tom cleaned the house with magic while Harry gave the kitchen a good cleaning with lots of elbow grease since he still wanted to limit his magic use after suffering magical exhaustion earlier that week, and they drove to Tesco to do their weekly grocery shop.

Tom had glanced at Harry with a raised eyebrow a few times throughout the day, noticing something was bugging Harry, but it wasn't until Harry snapped at poor Izzy when he almost tripped over her when he was sorting out leftovers for dinner that Tom had enough.

"Darling, that dog was standing there for a full minute before you decided to barge through her," Tom said while Harry inhaled a few deep breaths. "What is going on in your head right now?"

Harry heaved a deep, deep sigh and shook his head while he closed the container of leftover mashed potatoes back up. "I don't know," he said as he frowned and tried very hard to understand why he was feeling out of sorts. "I suppose it's about our visit to Snape this evening, but I have no idea why."

"Hm." Tom crossed his arms as he leaned against the kitchen counter so he could stare at Harry for a few long moments before finally replying. "Does it have anything to do with the fact that Severus outsmarted you the last time you two met?"

"I don't think so," Harry said, opening up the container of gravy. They had plenty of that left, too. "The closest guess I can make is that I had such an antagonistic relationship with Snape in my first life and none of that ever got resolved because he died at the end of the war, and now I'm suddenly supposed to work with him."

"You're feeling anger towards him for how he treated you in your first life?" Tom asked carefully, going into full therapist mode and probably not even realizing he was doing it.

"No," Harry denied at once. It had been almost 200 lifetimes since Snape had been one of his biggest childhood antagonists, so you'd think Harry had gotten over it already. During their

first meetings, Harry had no problems dealing with Snape, but then he'd been acting like Jack Bird. Now he was Harry Potter again, to Snape at least. "I don't know, I really don't." Harry looked at Tom with pleading eyes, willing him to understand that Harry didn't always know what was up in his own head, especially not after the traumatizing life he'd lived before their current one. Who knows how many mental issues he'd brought along with him from that life into his current one.

"Come here," Tom said with a soft smile, stepping up to Harry with his arms wide open. Harry didn't hesitate for more than a second before wrapping his arms around Tom in a tight hug, pressing his face against Tom's chest. "It's been an intense few months in this life, preceded by a difficult and violent life, which in turn was preceded by a life full of restrictions and loneliness. I feel it weighing on me, too, darling." Tom gazed down at Harry with his warm brown eyes full of emotion. "Let's go on a nice, long vacation after you finish your exams."

"Oh." Somehow, that suggestion made Harry's eyes tear up and his throat constrict. "Yeah. Somewhere nice. New Zealand?"

"Or Japan."

"Japan!" Harry felt his mood lift at once. They had lived in so many countries during their many lives and most of those lives had been happy enough, leaving them with positive experiences concerning whatever country they'd lived in. But some countries truly were nicer to live in than others, and over the years Harry and Tom had a short list of places they liked to visit simply because they'd had such good experiences living there. New Zealand was on that list, but so was modern day Japan.

Tom nuzzled Harry's temple. "We'll travel to Tokyo, gorge ourselves on all the great Japanese dishes for a few days before booking a ryokan with private onsen."

"That sounds so good." Harry briefly lifted his head up to look at Tom with a small frown. "But if we leave after my exams we'll miss Christmas here."

Tom shrugged, seemingly unconcerned about that development. "Since your dogfathers plan to join us for our Hogwarts takeover, we'll be spending Yule and Christmas with them for many years to come in the future. I think we can be selfish this once and do something for us."

"Yeah, that's true. And we can stay until your birthday," Harry suggested, with renewed enthusiasm. "And I'm sure Cindy won't mind looking after Izzy for a while, since she and Lucy get along so well."

"We'll take portkeys to Tokyo and book accommodations while we're there," Tom said and Harry nodded his agreement. Travelling by portkey was much quicker than sitting in an airplane for about a whole day, not to mention cheaper. And they spoke Japanese fluently, so they could sort out hotels while they were there without any issues. And since it was winter in Japan, there would be plenty of rooms available. The Japanese as a whole didn't celebrate Christmas the way most westerners did, and while the holiday would gain some popularity in

the future thanks to western movies and social media, in 1990 it was early days yet and Harry didn't believe December in Japan was especially popular with tourists at that point.

"We both really need a vacation," Tom said in conclusion and Harry smiled against his chest.

"We really do," Harry agreed quietly. "It's been an interesting few lives and once we actively start up our Hogwarts Mutiny plan we won't have much time for ourselves anymore."

Leaning his chin on Tom's chest, Harry gazed up at him with a loving smile. "So let's make an effort to spend the time we have left before launching our Hogwarts takeover on us."

"Agreed." Tom leaned down and gave Harry a soft but long kiss. "We've earned some time to ourselves."

Harry pulled out of the hug and turned back to the leftovers. "I'll just make up two plates for dinner, all right?" As Tom nodded in agreement, Harry did exactly that. He got two plates from the cupboard and filled them with all the leftovers. "You know, I do think it's something unresolved from my first life," Harry mused as he divided cranberry sauce between their plates. "It's been a long time, sure, but that doesn't change the fact that in my first life, Snape only ever treated me like utter crap. And now that Snape knows who I really am and we're going to try to bring him aboard the Hogwarts Mutiny plan, I subconsciously expect to be treated like crap again, I suppose."

"That does make sense," Tom said while he stepped around Harry to get cutlery out so he could set the table. "However, you're not a child anymore this time, and you wouldn't stand for that kind of abuse. Not to mention, Severus doesn't have the history with you that you have with him."

"Yep, that's true." Harry got his wand out and for the first time in days performed some simple magic to heat up the food on their plates. It worked fine and he didn't feel any discomfort or tiredness so it seemed his magical exhaustion had healed. "I just need to remind myself this is a fresh start and that we shouldn't have any problems working together as long as we both behave like adults."

"And if Severus truly doesn't want to behave himself we'll simply obliviate him and write him out of our plans," Tom said as he levitated their steaming plates to the dining table so they could enjoy their dinner.

Afterwards, they quickly did the dishes and freshened themselves up. Izzy was locked in her crate with a dried tripe stick and then Tom apparated them to Spinner's End while Harry stomped down on his stupid nerves. Everything would be fine, even if Snape wasn't feeling like cooperating.

"Mr Potter," Snape said quietly as he opened the door. "I didn't realize you'd be bringing a guest."

"I can explain," Harry said easily while his nerves settled inexplicably. Seeing Snape, and seeing that he was just a bloke, no different than the first two times Harry had met him in this life, somehow calmed him down. Tom probably was right and Harry's uneasy mood that day had been caused much more by the need for some quiet time than by Snape personally.

“I will be delighted to hear that explanation, I’m sure,” Snape muttered as he stepped back to let them in.

“Tom Riddle,” Tom said with a polite smile while his eyes gleamed with private amusement at the situation. Snape gave no reaction to the name, and he couldn’t have since the connection between Tom and Voldemort was hidden by a Fidelius charm. But Harry wasn’t sure if Snape had even known Voldemort’s real name at that point in time. Dumbledore, for whatever reason, had always been very stingy with that information towards his followers.

“Severus Snape. Do sit down.” Snape gestured at the threadbare furniture in his tiny sitting room. “Tea?”

“No, thank you,” Harry said with a chuckle. He may be a Gryffindor but even he wasn’t stupid enough to be caught by the same trap twice. At least usually. “First things first, this is what Harry Potter looks like.” And Harry pointed at his own face.

Snape blinked as he sank down in one of the armchairs while Harry and Tom occupied the sofa. “How extraordinary. I knew you were Harry Potter, yet before you just told me I wouldn’t have been able to describe you, even while you were standing in front of me.”

“Yeah, we’ve been having fun with the Fidelius Charm,” Harry said with a wide grin.

“Evidently.” Snape didn’t look disapproving, merely surprised. “It does go a long way in protecting your real identity.”

“Exactly.” Harry inhaled a deep breath and gave Snape a level look. “There are a few matters we’d like to discuss with you, but we ask that you remain calm and hear us out.”

“I can certainly endeavour to do that,” Snape replied with a nod while his eyes narrowed with an obvious amount of suspicion.

“Good, because Voldemort isn’t dead and his real name is Tom Riddle,” Tom said matter-of-factly, causing Harry to roll his eyes. Tom liked to pretend that Harry was the only one between them with a flair for the dramatics, but Harry knew differently.

Snape’s complexion changed rapidly in just a few short moments, going beyond pale to the colour of a fresh corpse quite quickly. Black eyes wide, Snape inhaled a shuddering breath and slid from his seat to kneel on the floor. “My Lord...”

“No,” Tom said at once, leaning forward in the couch and urging Snape up again with a gesture of his hand. “I’m not Voldemort and I’m not your Lord, not anymore.”

Snape looked positively confused, eyebrows going up and down while he carefully retook his seat. “I’m afraid I don’t understand, my...Mr Riddle.”

“It’s a long story, but I can give you the short version,” Harry said while he sat forward, balancing his forearms on his knees and staring at Snape. “In my first life, I was Harry Potter and I defeated Voldemort and lived my life until I died. I was then reincarnated as a muggle and got my memories of my previous life back the moment I met Tom, who had also been

reincarnated. This continued to happen for a total of almost 200 lives now. At first we mostly avoided each other, but eventually we became friends and then lovers until we finally got married for the first but not the last time and raised a family together.”

“As Voldemort I had driven myself insane quite by accident, but nowadays I’m much improved,” Tom said pleasantly, to an utterly flabbergasted Snape. Whatever Snape had been expecting of their explanation, it obviously wasn’t the confession of undying love between Voldemort and Harry Potter.

“The point we’re trying to make is that Voldemort is gone and not coming back. Tom has no ambition to take over the world or kill all muggleborns or anything like that,” Harry continued their story. So far Snape seemed to accept everything they said quietly, but then again, Snape was an excellent actor so who knew what was really going on in his head. “We were planning to live this life quietly, just enjoying each other’s company, but then we were reminded that Dumbledore has turned Hogwarts into a disgrace of a school and now we want to devote our time to taking over Hogwarts and improving just about everything about it.”

“And why are you telling me this?” Snape asked dubiously, still eyeing Tom like he might whip out his wand at any second and start throwing around a few cruciatus curses.

“Because we could use your help,” Harry said, getting straight to the point. “We’ve got Remus, Sirius and Regulus on board already.”

“Regulus?” Snape asked, narrowed eyes widening significantly. “Regulus Black?”

“Turns out he faked his own death and just now came out of the woodworks once he learned Sirius had been freed from Azkaban,” Harry explained but Snape’s eyes narrowed again until he looked deeply suspicious.

Snape looked at Tom. “What really happened to Regulus Black?”

Harry felt a little offended, but then again, he hadn’t put much effort into lying just now and he wasn’t a natural at it like Tom. And perhaps Harry should have remembered Snape was a teacher and had an amazing bullshit-meter from having to deal with lying kids day in and day out.

“Regulus got killed by some of my defences and it kept his body preserved. We simply summoned his soul back and necromanced him back together,” Tom said while giving Harry a quick, smug glance, the bastard.

Harry huffed but otherwise let it slide. “Reggie’s fine, we had him over for dinner last night with my dogfathers.”

“I shall simply take your word for it,” Snape said carefully while giving Harry a dubious look. “As for your plans for Hogwarts, I am at your command,” Snape added with a pointed look at Tom.

Yeah, that was exactly the kind of attitude they didn’t want, because that meant Snape was still performing in his role as spy and would betray them the first chance he got. Time to

bring out the big guns. Harry held out his hand, palm up and silently summoned the resurrection stone. It appeared in seconds and Harry quickly closed his fingers around it while thinking about his mother. A few quick spins later, Lily Potter appeared in Snape's tiny living room.

And if Snape had looked shocked before when learning who Tom really was, that had nothing on how utterly devastated he looked while he stared at Lily's ghostly appearance.

"My mum has a few things to say to you," Harry said, but never got the chance to say more because Tom grabbed him by the arm and pulled him up from the couch. "Hey," Harry said, but Tom ignored him as he pulled Harry along. Tom pushed against one of the bookcases, revealing it was a door that led to a tiny dining room, which he closed behind them with a resounding bang.

"I wanted to see what happened," Harry said with what he was sure was a spectacular pout, but he didn't care.

"If we're ever to win Severus' trust we should offer him total privacy for this confrontation to start with," Tom said while shaking his head at Harry's childish antics.

"Yeah, you're right," Harry conceded with a reluctant nod. Snape was the kind of man who would clam up and become utterly defensive if his vulnerabilities were exposed. Harry remembered how violent the man had reacted when he'd caught Harry snooping around in his pensieve during Harry's fifth year. Best to let him work it out without any peeping Toms. Or Harries.

"I miss my smartphone," Harry sighed after what must have been at least fifteen minutes of bored silence.

"You should have brought your Gameboy," Tom said with an amused chuckle while he leaned against the wall beside Harry.

Harry looked at him with wide eyes. "I really should have. Why didn't I think of that? Want to play rock, paper scissors?"

"No."

Putting on his cheekiest smile, Harry glanced at Tom and waggled his eyebrows. "Want to make out instead?"

"You certainly make it sound tempting, darling, but no, I do not want to make out right now." Tom's expression was blank but Harry could see the corners of his lips twitch just the barest amount so he knew Tom was amused and that's all that mattered.

"Oh, we can start planning our upcoming trip!" Harry perked up at that idea. He really was looking forward to a nice vacation with his soulmate. "It'll be winter in Japan when we get there, so we can do some snowboarding and we can visit that snow forest, what's it called again?"

“You mean the snow monsters?” Tom asked while glancing at Harry with a raised brow. “That’s Mount Zao, if I recall correctly.”

“Yeah, that’s the one. And it’s a volcano, so that makes it extra fun.” They’d both been volcanologists one life and Harry still loved volcanoes, especially ones he got to visit.

“We’ll add it to the list,” Tom replied with an agreeable smile.

“And we’ll need to find a place to eat sushi,” Harry sighed, mouth watering just thinking about all the amazing food waiting for them in Japan. “I want all the sushi. And convenience store onigiri. And fresh ramen. And Takoyaki. And –”

“Now I’m getting hungry,” Tom said with a chagrined look directed at Harry.

Snickering, Harry stuck his tongue out at Tom. He would have said something, too, but he never got the chance because his mother floated through the wall at that moment. “We’ve finished our conversation,” Lily said, looking happy and relieved about whatever they’d discussed. “He’s agreed to help you at Hogwarts.” Lily gave Harry an utterly grateful smile. “Thank you for giving me this chance. I hadn’t realized how much I needed to have this talk, at least as much as Severus.”

“You’re welcome,” Harry said, pleasantly surprised by his mother’s unexpected gratitude.

“Do call me again sometime, Harry,” Lily said, floating closer to him and gazing at him with a look filled with both sadness and love. “Call both me and your father, he’d love to meet you.”

“I will,” Harry promised quickly, realizing that he would like to talk to his parents sometime. And perhaps he could summon James and Lily for Sirius and Remus as well at least once, to give his dogfathers a chance to say goodbye and perhaps find some closure. “Thank you for your help.”

“You’re most welcome, sweetheart. Now, go back to Severus and send me on my way.”

And with one last smile aimed at his mother Harry did exactly that. Lily waved as she disappeared into nothing at all.

Tom pushed the door open and they stepped back into the tiny sitting room. Snape was standing with his back to them, in front of the opposite wall beside the window that was hidden behind heavy, brown curtains.

“I want it in writing,” Snape said, voice soft and a little hoarse. “I want it in a binding contract that you won’t repeat your actions as Voldemort and that you won’t turn Hogwarts into a Death Eater training camp.”

Tom looked thoughtful for a moment while Harry opened and closed his mouth a few times but in the end decided to let Tom take this one since it involved mostly him. “I can certainly set up a magical contract with such stipulations.” Tom reached inside his own robes and pulled out a magical contract he’d prepared earlier. “As long as you sign this one. I’m aware

Harry already had you sign a contract but that only pertained to his secrets since you were unaware of my continued existence at that time. This contract pertains to my situation. It's a standard contract to make sure you won't be able to share any of our secrets."

Snape held out a hand, his back still turned to them. Tom handed him the contract and waited patiently while Snape took his time reading the whole thing before running his wand over it, looking for any hidden spells.

"Sirius, Remus and Regulus have all signed that contract as well," Harry pointed out to make sure Snape knew they weren't singling him out in this.

"As one should expect," Snape mumbled while he summoned a quill to sign the contract. "I will contact Regulus to see what he has to say about the contents of a contract for you, Mr Riddle."

"Fair enough," Tom said with a bland smile and blank look and even Harry, who knew his soulmate inside and out, had trouble deciphering what Tom was thinking at that moment. "I will look forward to hearing your terms as soon as you are ready to share them."

Snape finally turned around, his eyes narrowed and red-rimmed. He all but slapped the signed contract against Tom's chest. "You'll be the first to hear, I can promise you that. Now get out."

Harry bit his lip so he wouldn't start laughing, but somehow seeing Snape gaining enough confidence to stand up to his former Dark Lord was funny as hell, especially because Snape seemed to expect Tom to lash out at everything he said and when that didn't happen and Tom kept his cool, Snape became more and more disbelieving, though he hid it very well.

"Thank you for your time. Do send us an owl when you're ready to negotiate," Tom said in an utterly unemotional voice while he opened the front door. "But be advised that Harry and I will be taking a holiday abroad for the second half of December."

"Noted," Snape whispered and then glared at them until they stepped through the door and shut it behind them.

Harry waited not so patiently until Tom apparated them to the Gaunt cottage and they walked into their own living room.

"That went better than expected, if I'm honest," Harry said while he freed a bouncing Izzy from her crate. "I'm surprised you went along with Snape's suggestion of a restricting contract, though."

Tom stood quietly in the middle of their living room, watching Harry greet and cuddle Izzy until he released a deep sigh and moved to the couch to sink down on it. "I believe it's the least I can do. I've utterly ruined Severus' and Regulus' lives at one point, not to mention the lives of countless others, many who were my followers and paid for that with their lives or their freedom."

“You’re not the man who did those things, Tom,” Harry felt compelled to point out, not wanting Tom to get buried beneath guilt for things he had done when he was genuinely insane. “Not anymore.”

“I know,” Tom said with a few sharp nods. “But I don’t mind making amends where ever they are welcomed. I feel that is the least that I can do.”

“Fair enough.” Harry got up from his crouch while Izzy danced around his legs, tongue lolling to the side. “Let’s go get some fresh air and then we’ll snuggle in bed.”

“That sounds like a splendid idea.”

Harry pulled Tom into a tight hug, pressed a firm kiss against his lips and then dragged him outside to walk Izzy. And later they did snuggle together under their comfy duvet while whispering about all the things they wanted to do on their upcoming holiday.

Over the next few days they started preparing for their holiday in earnest. Tom booked their portkeys while Harry talked to Cindy and got her to agree to take Izzy in for the duration of their vacation. Not that Cindy needed much convincing. She’d recovered completely from her broken ankle and looked forward to taking both dogs for walks now that she was able to do so again.

Harry also talked Sirius and Remus into looking after their chickens. They simply had to pop in once a day to feed and water them, and they could collect their eggs as payment. Thanks to the wards Harry had put up their chickens were safe from predators so they could free-range around the cottage as much as they wanted, even without anyone living in the cottage for a few weeks.

Before Harry even realized it, the time to take his OWLs and NEWTs had come. Harry apparated the Ministry early every morning for over two weeks, spending the entire day taking all his exams until early evening.

Thankfully Tom took care of all the domestic work that needed doing so that when Harry came home utterly exhausted, all he had to do was eat dinner that Tom had waiting for him, take Izzy for a walk so he could stretch his own legs after being cooped up inside an examination room all day, and then take a nice bath with Tom before falling into bed exhausted. And the next day he’d do it all over again.

“It’s bloody weird,” Harry complained halfway through week two. “I know all this stuff and the exams really aren’t difficult, but at the end of the day I still feel like my brain is dripping out of my ears.”

“The act of taking exams is exhausting, darling, no matter the subject matter. And you’re taking a total of sixteen exams back to back,” Tom said while he looked up from revising the preliminary contract Snape had sent him that day. Tom had read it and was working it over with a quill and lots of scratching out entire paragraphs and rewording just about every other sentence. Harry let him have his fun, especially because he could tell Tom genuinely enjoyed the process of negotiating with Snape and Regulus.

Just as Harry was suffering through his final days of NEWTs and was on his way to break for lunch in the ministry cafeteria, he ran into Dumbledore in the hallway right outside the examination offices.

“Mr Bird,” Dumbledore said with a genial smile. “I almost didn’t recognize you with dark hair.” Apparently enough time had passed that Dumbledore was willing to forgive Harry for causing the Order Meeting of Chaos. That, or Dumbledore sincerely needed Harry for something and was willing to overlook his past mistakes.

Harry shrugged and laid on his American accent. “I like trying out a new look every once in a while.” Ever since he’d put Harry Potter’s looks under the Fidelius charm Harry hadn’t bothered hiding his features under a glamour anymore. Nowadays he always displayed his own black hair and green eyes and he even stopped worrying about anyone seeing his scar, since no one would make the link between it and Harry Potter.

“Ah, to be young again and reinvent yourself whenever you feel like it,” Dumbledore said with an enormous amount of exaggerated melancholy. “Severus told me you’re progressing well in your Potions mastery. He even suggested you might be interested in teaching for a year while Severus takes his sabbatical next year to focus on some research.”

“Did he now?” Harry said with a charming grin. “I’ll take that as a compliment. And yeah, I am interested in teaching. Someone once told me it’s an excellent way to become more confident in your own skills by pointing out other people’s mistakes in theirs.”

“That sounds like some wise advice indeed,” Dumbledore agreed with a chuckle. “I hope you’ll apply for the position then, Mr Bird.”

“Sure, I’ll think about it.” Harry made to walk on but halted his steps at the last moment as if he just remembered something. “Oh, I might also know someone who’d be interested in taking the defence position. But I’d have to ask them first if he’d be up for it.”

Dumbledore straightened up a bit, genuinely interested. Harry knew that by that point in time Dumbledore really had trouble filling in the DADA position every single year, hence why Harry had been stuck with incompetent morons like Lockhart in his first life. Too many people seriously suspected the position to be cursed, even if Dumbledore had never publicly confirmed it. “Well, you should tell your friend we’re always looking to add qualified defence teachers to our staff.”

Qualified. Ha! Harry barely held back a snort of amusement at that idea, that any of the more recent defence teachers had actually been qualified. “I’ll be sure to tell him. Now I’ve got to run because I have my last exam this afternoon.”

“I do wish you the best of luck, Mr Bird.” And with that, Dumbledore turned away from him and resumed his trek to where ever he was going, and Harry did the same.

That evening he came home to homemade pizza, much to his surprise. But one look out the kitchen window revealed a small woodfired oven Tom had built beside the greenhouse, and he’d just fired it up for some delicious pizza.

“I love you,” Harry said with feeling as he sank down in the couch, utterly exhausted but ready for some delicious homemade comfort food. “I love you so fucking much and now give me pizza!”

Tom chuckled and offered Harry a slice on a plate while he sat down beside him, the TV on and playing some American sitcom that didn’t require many active thoughts to watch.

“I signed the contract and sent it back to Severus,” Tom said after they both finished a slice.

“Yeah? So you officially can’t even act like a Dark Lord anymore, even if you wanted to.” Harry reached for another slice while giving Tom a proud smile.

“Yes,” Tom said quietly, looking as if he could hardly believe he’d done such a thing. “It’s an oddly comforting thought, that in this life at least, I won’t be able to go back to that kind of behaviour.”

“Talking about Snape,” Harry said, holding up his slice of pizza to take a bite as soon as he was done talking. “He told Dumbledore about wanting to take a sabbatical next year just as we planned, and suggested me as a replacement. I ran into the old goat this afternoon and he seemed agreeable to that plan, so I’ll apply after I get my mastery. I also said I knew someone for the defence position.”

Tom’s smile turned into a sharp grin. “I could spontaneously tag along during your job interview to apply for the defence position, just so I can see the old man’s face when Tom Riddle applies for the position. Even without my connection to Voldemort he’s always despised me. I’m curious how he’d show that after all these years.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed with a snicker. “That’s bound to be entertaining.”

After they finished their pizza, Harry curled up against Tom on the couch, Izzy tucked against his other side, and he was asleep in minutes. Tom woke him up only to push him towards their bedroom when it was time for bed, while Tom let Izzy out. Harry barely managed to undress before crawling under the covers and falling asleep again. Sitting his OWLs and NEWTs back to back really was utterly exhausting.

Thankfully, they had a late portkey to catch to Japan the next evening to start their very well-earned and much-needed vacation.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

My unplanned hiatus was caused by the unexpected illness and death of my mother, and the subsequent work that went into dealing with everything around such an event. At the same time my own mental health took a nosedive, as can be expected after such a loss. I've slowly but surely crawled out of that deep, dark hole and I'm feeling better, though grief isn't something that's suddenly 'cured', rather it's a process of learning to live without the loved one you've lost.

I'm so very happy to get back writing, to have finally found the time for it again, because writing does always help me deal with lots of things, not to mention it usually offers a great distraction for when I need one.

I'm happy to offer up a new chapter of this story, and to ensure everyone that I'm working on updating my other stories as well. This story took an unplanned but welcome personal turn, for which I direct you to the footnotes if you want to understand more about my motivations for including this particular plot.

Anyway, it's good to be back, I hope you enjoy the new chapter, and I'm always eager to hear what you all think. Thank you for your patience and support.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter 15

Their portkey deposited them in a terminal off Majikusutorito, Japan's equivalent to Diagon Alley, at around six in the morning. Of course, Harry and Tom were still on UK time so for them it was evening. The first thing they did was book a room in the nearest magical hotel, ran by a husband and wife team who were delighted to discover that these two westerners spoke fluently Japanese. Once inside their room they got some sleep for a few hours to help them adjust and hopefully avoid a full-on jetlag.

Right before noon they got up and went out to sample some of the amazing street food. The smells wafting from the stalls around the magical street, the people around them, the language...it all translated to a feeling of coming home.

It wasn't the first time Harry had experienced this sensation, not in the slightest. During their many lives it often happened that visiting a certain place, or hearing people speak a certain language, gave them a warm sense of belonging out of the blue.

Harry released a deep sigh as he stood in the middle of the street trying to decide what to eat first.

“Takoyaki,” Tom said, answering Harry’s dilemma for him. Tom, too, looked like he’d just come home, his expression completely relaxed and open, his dark eyes full of gleaming happiness.

“Yeah, all right,” Harry agreed and dragged Tom with him to the nearest stall selling these delicious balls of fried batter, filled with a piece of octopus and more, and served covered in mayo and bonito fish flakes, amongst other things. They shared a six-piece serving between them, quietly moaning at the familiar flavour which they’d both not tasted for quite a few lives.

Next they split a generous serving of okonomiyaki between them. Harry had made this savoury pancake with lots of cabbage and thinly sliced pork and egg at home for his dogfathers once, but he’d lacked the Japanese mayo and the special sauce and bonito flakes, so while it had been tasty, it hadn’t exactly been the real thing. Now, though, they got to indulge in an authentic version of the dish.

They finished their impromptu lunch with some chicken yakitori, grilled over a charcoal fire, and for dessert they split three differently filled taiyaki between them; pastries with red bean paste, custard and chocolate.

“I’m stuffed,” Harry proclaimed after finishing the last of his Japanese pastry.

“So am I,” Tom agreed, wiping his mouth on a paper napkin. “I suggest we find a travel agent on the muggle side to arrange the rest of our trip.”

Walking from the magical street into muggle Tokyo was an experience. The magical side was, like Diagon Alley, rather quiet and peaceful compared to the bustling muggle city around it. Traffic everywhere, neon lights and large billboards, not to mention the sheer amount of people in the streets was many times that of the visitors in Majikusutorito.

“You know,” Tom said conversationally as they walked across the sidewalk in search of a travel agency. Being as tall as Tom was came in handy sometimes, since he could look over just about anyone around him to spot what they were looking for. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh no,” Harry said while he gave Tom a worried glance. Those were the kind of words that meant Tom had a plan for something or other. Whatever it was, Harry saw his peaceful next six months until starting their Hogwarts Mutiny plan in earnest go up in smoke.

“You’re going to love it,” Tom said with a wide grin, doing nothing to settle Harry’s gloomy outlook. “How about we introduce our solution to make electricity work around magic to the wizarding world at large?”

Harry slowed his pace a little as he thought about that. It wasn’t a bad idea, not at all, it was just that it would be time consuming and Harry wanted some time to himself, especially after his two weeks of wearing himself down to the bone taking his OWLs and NEWTs.

“Imagine what we could do at Hogwarts if we introduced computers in a few years,” Tom rattled on, clearly having given the subject some previous thought.

That suggestion made Harry reconsider turning down the idea outright. Harry had been a teacher too many times to dismiss the convenience of computers in teaching. Just the amount of time that could be saved grading by having students take tests on a pc was probably worth the trouble of setting up a little company now.

Tom gave him a knowing look and a winning smile. “We can start the business ourselves, approach muggleborns at first, and then turn it into a franchise while we’re teaching at Hogwarts.”

“Huh,” Harry said, frowning now as he resumed his walk, avoiding people left and right who’d been going around him as he all but stood still. “Okay, the franchise idea is an interesting possibility. We can train a few people how to hook up electricity around magic, and then earn a small percentage every time they install it at someone’s home.”

“Exactly.” Tom turned left and halted in front of a pedestrian crossing as traffic zoomed by. “And we don’t have much to do the coming months anyway. Might as well get this business going.”

“But I still want to take time for ourselves,” Harry insisted, knowing full-well Tom had the makings of a workaholic if someone didn’t reign him in. His soulmate always was too ambitious for his own good.

“Of course. For now we have over two weeks to do whatever we like.” Tom pointed towards a travel agency he’d spotted as they crossed the street. The young lady behind the desk in the travel agency helped them set up the perfect vacation. They booked a hotel for a few nights in Appi Kogen ski resort in the north of the main island so they could get some snowboarding in, and right after that stay they got a hotel for two days near Mount Zao so Harry could see the snow monsters the area was famous for. After that they managed to book a ryokan with a private onsen, which they only managed because someone else’s reservation fell through. Private onsens, baths made from the water of natural hot springs, were very popular and usually booked months in advance. And they managed to get that arrangement right around Tom’s birthday so they would be celebrating that in an amazing environment.

But first they still had four days in Tokyo. They spent the nights in their little magical hotel, since it wasn’t that expensive and the room was comfortable even if it wasn’t very luxurious. They spent their days sightseeing around Tokyo and eating a lot of amazing Japanese food. They even managed to get in a last-minute reservation at a renowned sushi restaurant with the help of a little magic, but breaking the law was worth it to enjoy some of the most amazing sushi they’d ever had in any life.

Snowboarding again for the first time in a long, long list of lives was a bit of a challenge. “How many lives has it been since we did this?” Harry asked as he wiped snow from his face after he’d crashed for the umpteenth time.

Tom, who was sitting nearby in the snow after his own tumble, snorted. “Too many, clearly.”

Chuckling, Harry grinned at his soulmate and pushed himself up again. “So it’s not exactly like riding a bicycle, because I had no trouble on my mountain bike even after not cycling for at least two lives.”

“I think it’s the muscle memory that we’re lacking,” Tom mused as he, too, got up again and resumed the correct position on his board. “We know the techniques in theory, but we’ve not yet done it enough in practice in these bodies.”

“Ah well,” Harry said with a shrug. “As long as we’re having fun.”

“Exactly.” Tom pushed off, slid down the snow and gave Harry a playful shove as he sailed past so Harry fell right back on his arse again.

“Oh, it is on!” Harry pushed himself back up as quickly as he could and took off after Tom, who was some ways ahead. Harry loudly cursed all the way down the mountain, and when Tom looked over his shoulder and gave Harry a shit-eating grin only to immediately tumble face-first in the snow, it quickly turned to cackling laughter, which made Harry lose his balance until he landed on his arse right next to Tom again, still howling with laughter.

That evening, after a day in the snow full of falling and full of laughter, they treated themselves to some amazing Akita beef. Everyone had heard of Kobe beef and a lot of people outside of Japan probably thought that was the only amazing beef Japan had to offer, but they’d be wrong. Just about every prefecture in Japan had their own signature Wagyu, or Japanese beef, and Akita beef was just as good, if not better, than Kobe beef.

It was worth the 500 pounds they paid for their extravagant A5 meal, the highest classification amongst Wagyu.

“This never gets old,” Harry said after he swallowed a bite of beef that melted like butter in his mouth. “Seriously, this beef alone is worth it to live through endless reincarnations. Just the prospect of eating this every few lives makes it all worthwhile.”

Tom didn’t say anything at all but just sat very still, eyes closed, as he savoured every bite.

As a rule, both Harry and Tom were pretty frugal in their day to day spending, having both grown up poor in their first lives. Somehow, that experience shaped both of their spending habits over their many lives when they weren’t multi-millionaires or billionaires. But occasionally, they liked to splurge on things like vacations and fancy meals.

As long as they could afford it, that was. Both Harry and Tom had a pathological aversion to consumer debt.

The ryokan they stayed in for the last part of their holiday had traditional rooms with tatami mats and futons instead of a regular bed. Futons were soft, pillow-like mats used for sleeping on tatami mats, and as Harry and Tom both knew, they were incredibly comfortable once you got used to sleeping on the floor.

“I’ve missed this,” Harry whispered as he crawled into their cosy bed after they’d pushed the futons together. The staff at the ryokan hadn’t so much as blinked at having two grown men share a single room, but they had made up the futons as separate beds.

“Hm,” Tom replied, but he sounded a bit distracted as he had for the last week or so. For Harry so far their holiday had been exactly what he needed. Since arriving in Japan, slowly

but surely, Harry had felt the constant anxiety and higher than usual levels of stress dissolve until he finally felt utterly relaxed for perhaps the first time since waking up in his current life.

Strangely though, Tom had become more and more distracted as their holiday progressed but by what Harry had no idea. Tom seemed to be having a good time and as far as Harry could tell Tom was genuinely enjoying himself but at the same time Harry noticed that clearly something was bothering him. They rarely kept secrets from each other so Harry knew sooner or later Tom would tell him what was on his mind but until that happened Harry couldn't help worry for his soulmate.

"Harry," Tom whispered just as Harry leaned over and turned off the little table lamp, leaving them in darkness save for the faint light streaming in through the window from a lantern hanging over the onsen outside.

"Yeah?" Harry burrowed under the duvet while turning on his side to face Tom.

"Have you noticed something... off about me?" Tom asked, voice barely more than a faint whisper.

Harry could think of several smart-ass things to say in response to such a question, but he held his tongue because he realized that Tom was opening up to him and now was not the time for teasing. "Other than that you seem more distracted than usual this last week, not really, no," Harry said honestly.

Tom heaved a sigh that seemed to come from somewhere very deep within himself and then all but blurted, "I'm quite sure I'm autistic."

"Huh," Harry said because that was all he was able to say while his mind processed what Tom had just said. "What gave it away?" he finally added.

Tom sighed again and rolled onto his back, eyes firmly fixed on the ceiling. "I can't stop analysing every conversation I have, including the ones with you, I notice myself copying a lot of your behaviour and language use, I become very irritable at the sound of certain noises or lots of people around me, whenever I talk to others I notice that my thoughts and speech is incredibly egocentric and while I'm loving this holiday I also can't wait to go home again so we can go back to our normal lives. Not to mention how my mind tries to latch onto one or two subjects without any room for anything else." Tom squeezed his eyes shut. "For my entire life I've known that I was acting, didn't just feel like it, but knew it with certainty, that the only way to deal with social situations was to put up an act."

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Harry said with a soft chuckle. "Congrats, babe, you're autistic. Once upon a time they'd probably have diagnosed you with Asperger's syndrome but nowadays they simply lump everything together as Autism Spectrum Disorder."

Tom glanced at Harry with an unimpressed curve of his eyebrows. "It's 1990, darling. They've barely expanded autism diagnostics enough to even include Asperger's at this point."

Harry waved his comments away. "You know what I mean, babe. You're on the spectrum, end of story. It does explain a lot though."

Beside him, Tom stiffened, eyes wide before his whole face scrunched up, expression crumbling while he curled up, arms coming up to cover his head while he rolled onto his side.

"Hey, it's okay," Harry said quickly, reaching over to place a gentle hand on Tom's shoulder.

"The orphanage," Tom ground out, voice tight, eyes squeezed shut. "The fucking orphanage."

"Yeah, I know," Harry whispered, carefully leaning a little closer, not wanting to overstimulate Tom while he was obviously already struggling with his emotions. "It explains so fucking much about how they treated you at the orphanage."

"I always thought it was because of my magic, why the other kids hated me."

"Being autistic and magical isn't a winning combination in a muggle orphanage," Harry muttered while softly stroking Tom's tense shoulder. Harry knew from bitter experience how difficult it could be to fit into the world around you when you were autistic. Both Tom and Harry had been autistic before, and they'd had autistic children and other family members. Tom was clearly high functioning and it wasn't the end of the world, but Harry well understood why Tom was reacting the way he did. When you'd struggled your entire life with fitting in, with feeling different and being excluded, with suffering from unexplained mental issues, finally receiving a diagnosis, even a self-diagnosed one, could provide an enormous discharge of relief and reassurance. Harry had been where Tom was now, and they'd seen the same phenomenon many times with a number of their children.

"You're going to be all right, love," Harry mumbled, just to let Tom know he wasn't alone as he worked through the realization that he wasn't crazy, that there had always been a reason for how he'd been in his childhood and for why other people had reacted to him the way they had. "It does explain a lot about how you were able to accomplish the things you did even when you were still a teenager. Discovering the Chamber of Secrets, finding Ravenclaw's diadem. You are practically superpowered, between having a genius-level IQ and the ability to focus on a special interest the way only autistic people can."

Tom finally seemed to relax a little under Harry's hand and Harry felt him chuckle without any sound. "It explains everything," Tom said, voice cracking as he rolled over so he could face Harry.

"I love you," Harry said, because it was important Tom knew that, didn't doubt Harry's feelings for him. After almost 200 lives together, Harry didn't think Tom would doubt that, but the mind could play strange tricks, especially when one was feeling vulnerable. "I love you exactly as you are, Tom Riddle."

"Love you, too," Tom replied, voice a little steadier.

"Do you want to get an official diagnosis?" Harry asked, because he knew it sometimes helped to have a diagnosis confirmed as a way to help with acceptance.

“Nah,” Tom said with a small shake of his head. “I’m ok simply knowing it. Besides, I doubt at this time there are many psychologists capable of diagnosing a grown man, especially a wizard.”

“Ah, yeah,” Harry agreed with a solemn nod. “It’s doubtful the rare squib that has studied psychology happens to be an expert on autism diagnoses in adults.”

“Exactly.”

“Do you want to share this news with anyone else?”

Tom blinked and seemed to consider that question for a few seconds. “I don’t see how that would benefit us. I seriously believe that would only confuse the people around us.”

“Probably true,” Harry agreed, and he resumed stroking his hand up and down Tom’s shoulder while they both basked in each other’s presence for a moment. Harry knew being openly autistic came with prejudices and misunderstandings, and lots of well-meaning people exclaiming things like, ‘but you don’t look autistic’, as though that was helpful in any way. So Tom deciding to keep it to himself was ok with Harry.

After some mental adjustments and giving himself some time to come to terms with it, Harry knew Tom would be all right. Autism was a disorder that didn’t have to hold you back in life. In fact, there were plenty of autistic people that claimed autism wasn’t a disability at all, but Harry didn’t fully agree with that. If you were high functioning, able to live independently, then autism wasn’t necessarily a disability, sure. But plenty of autistic people weren’t able to live independently, could barely even look after themselves, and for those it very much was a disability.

Harry remembered their son Mark very well. They’d been living in Germany where Tom was a man who worked in the family wine business, farming grapes on a few mountains around the small village where they lived. Harry was a woman who stayed at home with their three kids after their youngest son Mark was diagnosed with severe autism. It was only the seventies when Mark got diagnosed and not much was known yet about proper treatment or therapies aside from committing their child to a mental institution. Of course, Harry and Tom knew more about autism than the doctors around them, so they insisted that they keep Mark at home and try to treat him themselves as best they could. But Mark wasn’t verbal, never learned to read or write no matter how much they tried to teach him and the older he got the stronger he got, especially when he was overstimulated, which was frequently. Eventually even Tom started talking about perhaps finding a good long term care facility for their son, but Harry was having none of that. Until one day Mark, a tall teenager at that point, accidentally pushed Harry down the stairs during a fit of overstimulation and Harry lay at the bottom, leg fractured in multiple places while begging her son to give her the phone, but instead Mark simply wandered off to watch TV while Harry dragged herself across the living room floor to call for help.

Tom had put his foot down then, and they’d found Mark a place to live in an institution, and Harry had started an official organization and spent the rest of her life making sure autistic people like her son received the best of care and helpful therapies to make his life as productive and comfortable as possible.

So, yeah, perhaps to people like Tom autism wasn't really a disability once he'd figured out how to avoid its pitfalls, but for people like Mark it sure as fuck had been.

"You know, I'm not even sure anymore if I'm really asexual," Tom said suddenly.

Harry blinked, pulling himself back from his reminiscing about one of the many lives they'd lived. "Oh?"

Tom glanced at him with a crooked smile, seeming much more like himself again now that the big revelation was out of the way. "I'm definitely not as interested in sex as the average person, but I'm not entirely without sexual attraction either."

"That makes sense, though," Harry said with an agreeable smile. "Physical contact can be very overstimulating. I wasn't all that into sex either the last time I was autistic."

"Yeah, I remember. But the last time I was autistic there was nothing wrong with my libido." Tom shrugged and stretched himself out for a moment. "We can do some experimenting in the future, if you're up for it."

"Always," Harry quickly agreed with an enormous grin. He still had fantasies of Tom pounding him into the mattress. So far Tom occasionally gave him a hand or blowjob, and Harry took care of himself in the shower the rest of the time, and while that was plenty to keep him satisfied, Harry certainly wasn't going to complain about Tom exploring his own sexuality while using Harry.

Then Harry remembered their future plans and he sobered up from tantalizing thoughts of Tom and sex. "Do you think you'll be able to handle teaching at Hogwarts?"

"Hm." Tom frowned for a few seconds. "I think so, as long as I take plenty of time to recover in the evenings. I can handle crowds just fine as long as I don't overdo it." Tom's face did a very funny thing for a moment before he started chuckling, which quickly turned into full-blown laughter.

"What?" Harry asked, beyond curious what had set Tom off like that.

"When I was Voldemort, I was always far more likely to throw the cruciatus curse around during large gatherings," Tom said in between bouts of laughter.

"Oh my god," Harry said in amazement before he too succumbed to the hilarity of the situation. "Voldemort was suffering from autistic meltdowns and took it out on his followers via torture."

"We shouldn't be laughing about this," Tom said, barely getting the words out while laughing hysterically, eyes leaking tears, face turning red.

"We really shouldn't," Harry said, just as much out of breath from laughter. "But that doesn't change the fact that this is one of the funniest things I've ever heard."

"It really is." Tom wasn't able to say anymore as he curled up to hold onto his stomach as it took them both a good few moments to collect themselves.

As they lay gasping for breath, both on their backs staring at the ceiling, something occurred to Harry. “That time Dumbledore came to the orphanage...your reactions...for fuck’s sake, autism explains that perfectly.”

“Yeah, it does,” Tom agreed quietly.

Harry turned to look at Tom, anger brewing in the pit of his stomach. “I know it was the thirties and autism probably hadn’t been invented yet and all, but you’d think Dumbledore, as an educator, would have taken the time to realize maybe you simply had some mental differences instead of listening to that lush of a matron about how you were the devil incarnate.”

“Preaching to the choir, darling,” Tom said with a humourless chuckle.

“Yeah, I know.” Harry heaved a deep sigh. “Just, that man and his mistakes keep pissing me off.”

Tom placed a warm hand on Harry’s arm and rubbed a few comfortable circles. “It’s in the past. I mean, I’m quite happy to have some answers now about why my childhood was the way it was, but I do intent to focus on our future from now on.”

“All right. I’ll do the same.” Harry leaned over and pressed a soft kiss to Tom’s lips, which Tom returned with a quiet sigh. “Let’s get some sleep, because tomorrow’s your birthday.” Harry paused for a moment and then glanced at the alarm clock in the corner of the room, which told him it was well after midnight already. “Strike that, right now is your birthday.” Harry leaned over again to give a grinning Tom another kiss. “Happy birthday, babe. Love you lots.”

“Thank you. Sleep probably is a good idea, because I have plans for that onsen tomorrow.” Tom wrapped an arm around Harry and cuddled up to him while they both relaxed.

The next morning they started with a delicious private breakfast of many Japanese dishes, like miso soup, grilled salmon and tamagoyaki, the traditional square omelette. Right after finishing Tom and Harry put their private natural onsen to good use and spent over an hour in there, soaking in the hot water while around them snow fell to add to the wintry landscape.

“Wow,” Harry sighed, lifting his hand out of the hot water to catch some snowflakes.

“The ambiance is certainly perfect,” Tom agreed, looking slightly ridiculous with his body towel folded on top of his head, but such was the custom. Harry sported a towel hat of his own. “As is the water.”

Harry sank a little deeper in the water, steam rising around him. “Yeah, I haven’t felt this relaxed since starting this life, seriously.”

Tom gave him a considering look. “I know we’ve both been busy with setting up our current life and thus we haven’t really talked about it, but if you need to vent about our previous lives I’m right here.”

Harry blinked a few times while he glanced at Tom.

“I have noticed you’ve slipped into a mild depression, darling,” Tom said while offering Harry a soft but knowing smile.

“Yeah,” Harry sighed, shaking his head, almost dislodging his towel. “I had noticed that, too, but so far this holiday is working miracles.” Then he took a few moments to consider his previous life. “I don’t think it’s our previous life that’s been bothering me,” he finally said and then took another few minutes to gather his thoughts.

He wasn’t lying. While being a serial killer and spending over a decade in prison had been far from pleasant, it wasn’t the worst life he’d ever led. Several other lives competed for that title, all of them filled with different horrors, from slavery to cannibalism, but the less said about those things, the better. The point was, simply killing innocent people, while distasteful, wasn’t enough anymore to sent Harry into a fit of mental despair. He’d killed so many people for so many reasons in so many lives. For fuck’s sake, they’d been mob bosses and during that life they’d left a bloody trail throughout New York, all in the name of business.

No, while Harry would gladly forget about his previous life, he was sure it wasn’t what had been bothering him these past few months. “It’s not my last life, it’s the fact that I’m Harry Potter again, I think,” Harry finally said, still unsure how to give voice to his whirlwind of thoughts.

“How so?” Tom asked quietly.

“I don’t know.” Harry shrugged, water sloshing around him. “I think perhaps because I’m seeing first-hand right now how screwed up my first life actually was, how much that old fucking goat manipulated me and how I never even realized during that whole fucking life.”

“Ah.” Tom nodded briefly while giving Harry a small smile. “You perceive your first life as a failure and living it again confronts you with that sense of failure while you’d much rather forget it altogether.”

Harry was about to tell Tom to stop playing the psychologist when Tom said something utterly profound.

“Your first life wasn’t a failure, Harry. And neither was mine. Because it was those lives exactly as they were that led us to our current existence.”

“Huh.” Harry turned to look at Tom in absolute amazement. “How long ago did you figure that out?”

Tom’s smile became slightly cocky. “Since you gave me that therapeutic massage and reminded me that it wasn’t my fault I’d made all the same mistakes again. I was determined to figure out why our first lives turned out the way they did.”

“Because without all that crap happening we’d never have become soulmates reincarnating time and time again,” Harry said and released a strangled gasp. “Fuck, do you have any idea

how much that helps me, just looking at it like that?”

“Yeah, I’ve got some idea,” Tom said with a chuckle.

“Thank you.” Harry leaned over to give Tom a heartfelt kiss. “I really, really needed to hear that.”

“You’re welcome, darling.”

They spent the rest of the day celebrating Tom’s birthday with quiet conversation, more soaks in the onsen, and a lunch and dinner of kaiseki ryori, multi-course Japanese haute cuisine. They had decided long, long ago not to bother with presents for birthdays anymore, aside from simple things like a bottle of perfume or some new screwdrivers, to keep up appearances for their kids or family members. But after living so many lives together, buying each other constant gifts became rather tedious, so instead they focused on sharing nice experiences and good food on their birthdays, such as they were doing during their current holiday.

Two days after Tom’s birthday, they took a portkey home where Harry insisted they immediately pick up Izzy from Cindy’s house.

“She’s been such a good girl,” Cindy assured them while Harry sat on the floor, hugging and kissing an ecstatic Izzy while Tom offered Cindy a gift basket of a variety of Japanese teas and sweets. “Oh, you shouldn’t have,” Cindy exclaimed while offering them both a glowing smile while she examined all the delicacies.

After they arrived home, Harry sent a Patronus to his dogfathers to let them know they’d made it back safe and sound, and five minutes later Sirius’ Patronus, a huge dog much like his animagus form, announced that they’d be stopping by in an hour and they’d be bringing dinner with them.

Harry exchanged a glance with Tom, who shrugged in response and went to check their mailbox. He returned holding a stack of Daily Prophets, a couple of envelopes and a huge grin.

“It looks like your exam results are in.” Tom tossed one envelope towards Harry, who inexplicably developed a sudden case of nervous jitters right around his stomach.

“For fuck’s sake,” Harry muttered to himself as he ripped the envelope open. He’d taken more OWLs and NEWTs in more lives than he could possibly remember so it wasn’t as if he’d failed any. Still, his hand trembled slightly as he read over the letter quickly. It had been utterly exhausting to take all the exams back to back, so who knew if he’d messed something up somehow.

“Straight O’s,” Tom said proudly as he read the results over Harry’s shoulder. “Well done, darling.” Tom pressed a quick kiss to Harry’s cheek and went back to sorting through the rest of their mail.

Harry released a relieved sigh as he folded the letter and dropped it on the dinner table. "I can let the Guild of Potioneers know I've passed my Potions NEWT and I can receive my Mastery as soon as they approve of it."

Right at that moment, Izzy came running out of the bedroom with a red squeaky ball in her mouth. Harry remembered it being a favourite of hers as Izzy danced around the room, chewing the ball over and over again, producing an ear-piercing noise.

"Yeah, that ball has to go," Tom said with a pained grimace.

"Aww, it's her favourite." Harry looked from Tom to Izzy and back, realizing he couldn't expect Tom to put up with noises that hurt him, but at the same time he didn't want to deprive his dog of her favourite toy. "How about I toss the ball outside in the garden and it stays there from now on?"

"That works for me," Tom said and looked entirely relieved when Harry did just that. Izzy seemed slightly disappointed but before long she found a tennis ball, which she paraded around instead without producing enough noise to wake the dead in the nearby cemetery.

Right after they were done sorting through their dirty laundry, Harry's dogfathers arrived with Regulus in tow. Remus carried several plastic bags that all smelled like amazing Indian food. After Harry had treated his dogfathers to Indian takeout many months ago they'd asked Harry where that restaurant was located and since then they'd become regulars there, Harry knew.

"So how was the other side of the world?" Sirius asked, all but throwing himself in a chair at the dining table as Remus unpacked all the food while Tom got plates and cutlery. Regulus was crouching down so he could pet Izzy, who enthusiastically showed off her ball.

"Delicious," Harry said and then opened up the letter with his exam results so he could show off.

Both Remus and Sirius made appropriately impressed noises, but Regulus seemed a bit more stoic about Harry's grades. "How often have you sat the OWLs and NEWTs in all your lives?" Regulus asked with a knowing arch of his eyebrow.

"I honestly can't remember," Harry said with a cheeky grin while everyone sat down and started piling food on their plates.

Regulus rolled his eyes in response. He seemed to have loosened up a great deal since last Harry saw him, judging by his entire demeanour. "While you were enjoying your holiday, I've re-established myself as a living wizard," Regulus said in response to Harry's not very subtle stares. "My grandfather was easily enough convinced, the Ministry a little less so, but after a thorough interview with the DMLE I managed to convince the majority of them I'm not and never was a Death Eater and that I simply faked my death."

"That's good to hear," Tom said with a pleased smile while he tore apart some naan bread.

“Yes, our grandfather made sure Sirius knew to split our parents’ inheritance with me.”
Regulus looked between Harry and Tom with a sudden sharp glint in his grey eyes. “It was then that I found out that Sirius hadn’t simply stored away most of our family library, but that in fact he’d given it away to his godson.”

Harry’s heart skipped a few beats as he exchanged a worried glance with Tom, who looked equally as alarmed as Harry felt. Apparently their guests noticed their sudden dismay as well because Remus and Sirius started laughing while Regulus merely smiled at their misfortune.

“I won’t ask for the books back,” Regulus said eventually, much to Harry and Tom’s obvious relief. “Simply because I know how many of those books are highly illegal and I understand they are probably much safer here, hidden under a fidelius charm, than they are in whatever house I’ll move into eventually. Not everyone at the Ministry seemed convinced of my innocence, after all.” Regulus paused for a moment, eyes narrowing while he looked between Harry and Tom. “However, in return I expect the use of your library whenever I may need it.”

“Done,” Tom said at once, while Harry nodded vigorously. Hell, Regulus was welcome to move into their home and demand the master bedroom for himself if it meant they would get to keep all the books from the Black library, but thankfully Reggie made no such demands.

“Now that that’s settled,” Remus said, eyes shining with amusement. “What are your next plans?”

Harry looked to his soulmate. “Yeah, babe, what are our next plans?”

Chapter End Notes

When I started this story, I hadn't planned on making Tom autistic. But after a lifetime of mental health issues, including severe depression, anxiety disorders and PTSD, I've found out, through sheer chance, that I myself am most likely autistic. So far three different psychologists agree with me that in my case it explains everything and that I fit the bill of intelligent adult woman with high functioning autism perfectly. I'm waiting for an official autism screening to take place soon.

As I was educating myself on autism in adults after this mind-blowing revelation, I realized that Tom Riddle, who is never far from my mind, also rather fit an autism diagnosis really well. I'm not claiming that canon Tom Riddle is autistic, not at all, but rather that autism is one of the many things that would fit his character and could be used to explain a few things about him, and in this story I've chosen to run with that idea and see where that goes.

I hope that no one finds this offensive and that everyone understands my intentions in this are good, and that ultimately I'm using a fictional character to learn more about myself as I'm writing him. I am, as always, happy to hear your thoughts on this.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Yes, finally this story gets an update as well! It's been a while since I sat down and dove back into this world, and that's partially because I've been screened myself. Verdict: I'm autistic af and I've got ADHD coming out of my ears. I wanted to let all of that sink in before I tried to write a character with those disorders, just to make sure I got it right.

Thanks for reading and for sticking with this story. I really do appreciate your patience and I'm very eager to hear what you all think! Let me know!

Chapter 16

Tom got that look on his face again, the one that told Harry his soulmate was plotting the future of the entire world. At once Harry regretted giving Tom such an open-ended question about their plans.

"I'm glad you asked," Tom said while offering their guests a winning smile. "Harry and I are going to start a new business."

Harry was tempted to bury his face in his hands but managed to resist the urge and instead he vanished the empty containers with a flick of his wand, sent the dirty dishes to the sink with a quick charm and got up to make coffee while their guests gave Tom curious looks.

"What kind of business?" Remus asked, looking as if he wasn't sure if he even wanted to know the answer.

"Have none of you wondered yet how Harry and I have electricity working in what's essentially a magical dwelling?" Tom asked as he leaned back in his seat, satisfied he had everyone's undivided attention.

"I had wondered that," Regulus said quietly. "I don't know much about electricity, but I had noticed you're using some muggle electrical devices."

"At some point, when we were a Japanese witch and wizard, we were part of a team that discovered the solution to combine electricity and magic." Tom got up and gestured at Regulus to do the same. "Let me demonstrate how a television works."

And Regulus, though he looked a little wary about following Tom across the room, did join him and endured the in-depth demonstration Tom provided.

Harry shook his head and got the mugs ready. It was obvious now that Tom had autism, the way he latched onto a special interest like a crocodile latched onto a zebra's leg, and the way

he loved sharing them with anyone who would listen. But as Harry poured coffee he thought that perhaps Tom might have ADHD as well, considering how he switched from special interest to special interest at lightning-speed.

Perhaps Harry should be happy they'd learned long ago that they should stick with introducing technology that was appropriate for the times they lived in, otherwise Regulus might have gotten an in depth lecture on space-travel and life on a colonized Mars, with a bonus section on cyborg creation.

Harry and Tom had lived a few lives in the future, very exciting and interesting lives that exposed them to all sorts of amazing technology present-day society could only dream of. But those kinds of technology were useless when the rest of society wasn't ready for them yet.

The evolution of technology needed to follow a natural, predictable path, or it simply wouldn't work for the world at large, much to Harry's and Tom's disappointment because honestly, flying a spaceship around their solar system for a living was all kinds of awesome.

"Thanks," Sirius said as Harry put a cup of steaming coffee in front of him. Remus was paying too much attention to Tom's lecture to even notice the coffee. Harry sat back down and sipped his own mug while Tom answered all of Regulus' questions in elaborate details.

"You do realize," Remus pointed out when Tom and Regulus joined them at the dining table again, "That we have laws against enchanting Muggle items."

Regulus's eyebrows rose while Tom's eyes narrowed in a way that told Harry Tom wasn't about to give up on his idea, no matter what the law said.

Sighing, Harry sipped more coffee.

"Actually," Tom said, after having spent a few minutes thinking it all over, "the law says we aren't allowed to enchant Muggle items in ways they aren't meant to be used. For example, we're not allowed to take a Muggle motorcycle and charm it to fly." Tom gave Sirius a very pointed look, which Sirius replied to with a shit-eating grin.

"You can prove nothing," Sirius said while flipping Tom off. "I have no motorcycle in my possession."

"Hagrid still has it," Harry couldn't help but point out, because he was physically incapable of not causing trouble wherever he could. "He'd probably give it back to you if you asked him."

Sirius offered Harry two thumbs up while conveniently ignoring Tom's smug look.

"You do make a good point," Regulus pointed out, ignoring his brother's antics. "If you install electricity in a wizarding home, and you then buy a television to use, you're not breaking the misuse of Muggle artifacts laws."

“Exactly,” Tom said with a short bow of his head. “So we can safely proceed with our business.”

“And you were looking for people to partner with?” Regulus asked carefully, having just sat through Tom’s lecture on franchises. “I do find this kind of magic fascinating.”

“We’d be happy to have you aboard,” Tom said with a smile that showed far too many teeth, like a true salesman. Harry barely refrained from rolling his eyes.

“I’ll consider it,” Regulus said and that was thankfully the last that was said about Tom’s plans.

“I thought you were on board with this new business?” Tom asked Harry after their guests had left and they were getting ready for bed, both slipping into their pyjamas.

“I am,” Harry said and then couldn’t help but shake his head. “It’s just, I’m pretty sure you’ve got ADHD and it can be a little daunting to keep up with you sometimes.”

Tom, who’d just pulled on his pyjama pants, straightened with a disbelieving look on his face. “You really think...?” Tom narrowed his eyes and Harry could practically see his mind going a mile a minute as he analysed his own inner workings with his own expert knowledge on the subject of mental disorders.

“Ha,” Tom finally said with a firm nod. “I do believe you’re right. It explains so much.”

“Yep,” Harry agreed as he slipped under the duvet and gave Tom an incredibly fond look. “Like your inability to sit still for a few months, enjoying some quiet time, before we start our Hogwarts takeover plan.”

“I’m sorry, darling,” Tom whispered as he also got into bed.

“Oh no, babe,” Harry said immediately, turning on his side to look at his soulmate. “I don’t mind, you know that.” And Harry didn’t. They’d both lived so many lives while having all manner of mental disorders that it truly didn’t bother Harry. It just took a little adjusting once in a while.

“I might see about getting some Muggle medications,” Tom mused while he turned on his back and stared up at the ceiling. Izzy lay snuggled between them and Tom placed a hand on her back to stroke her short fur. “Then again, considering the time we’re living in, not much is on the market yet. I might develop a potion instead.”

That caught Harry’s attention, seeing as he was working on his Potions mastery just then. “I’ll happily help with that.”

Tom gave him a grateful smile in response right before Harry turned off the lights.

The next morning, after an excellent breakfast of Swedish pancakes with strawberry jam, with a fried egg and some crispy bacon on the side, Harry wrote to the Guild of Potioneers to inform them that he’d passed both his Potions OWL and NEWT, and that they could now officially consider him for a Mastery when they deemed it appropriate. Pluto had taken care

of himself without any problems during their holiday, and the owl seemed happy enough to have some mail to deliver again.

Over the next few days they kept themselves busy with some post-holiday cleaning and organizing, while Harry also took some time to put the finishing touches on the Pensieve that he'd been making. Once completed it got a place of honour in their upstairs office, where Harry happily shared his memory of the Order Meeting of Chaos with Tom, who laughed outright at seeing Harry play the whole order like a cheap fiddle.

Tom, in the meantime, wrote out a franchise agreement for their new business, which he decided to name 'The Magical Spark'. Then he placed an advertisement in the Daily Prophet, calling on all wizards and witches with knowledge of Muggles to contact him for a most profitable business opportunity with free training that offered young entrepreneurs the chance to become their own boss within a few short months.

"It sounds like you're shilling a MLM," Harry pointed out with a chuckle. "You're the magical equivalent of a Hun."

Tom's answering glare was utterly hilarious to Harry, especially because it took Tom a few moments to even come up with a reply. "I'm not trying to run a pyramid scheme, darling. I'm trying to create a genuine franchise opportunity."

"As you say," Harry said while grinning like a fool. He did so love to rile Tom up every now and again, even though accusing Tom of running a MLM might go a little too far. MLM stood for Multi-Level Marketing, and it referred to predatory businesses that were barely one step above an illegal pyramid scheme. While Harry and Tom had mostly avoided being sucked into those cult-like groups and losing hundreds, if not thousands of pounds, unfortunately they'd had plenty of family members and friends over their many lives who'd fallen victims to those kind of schemes and who'd lost far too much, even including their homes.

And once, when Tom's sister in one particular life lost thousands and thousands while trying to still essential oils, their life. Tom's sister ended up with major depression while she was forced to file for personal bankruptcy and ultimately committed suicide.

When the first reply to the advertisement came, it was a letter from a muggleborn who asked if the business was anything like Tupperware, because if that was the case she wasn't interested.

"Fine," Tom conceded with an incredibly sour look on his face while Harry cackled in the background. "I'll change the wording for the next advertisement."

On Tuesday they had tea with Cindy after they'd all walked their dogs together in the afternoon.

"We'll see you at choir practice tonight, right?" Cindy asked a slightly contrite Harry, who'd already forgotten he was the pianist for the Little Hangleton Mixed Choir after having enjoyed a four week holiday hiatus that the choir had every December.

“Of course,” Harry said with a smile while Tom pretended not to quietly laugh in Harry’s face. “I’ll be there.”

When they walked back to their own home later, Izzy bouncing by Harry’s side, Tom looked down at Harry with something that might have been an apologetic smile if it wasn’t for the clear amusement in his eyes.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to sit in on the choir again,” Tom said while Harry’s bullshit-meter went into high alert. “All that noise overstimulates me far too much. You wouldn’t want me to have a meltdown, now would you?”

“That is just...” Harry shook his head in clear exasperation. “You’re just abusing your disorder right now, aren’t you?”

Tom sniffed while looking away from Harry. “You’re being very ableist right now.”

“Oh fuck right off,” Harry muttered with a mock-glare directed at his soulmate, while Tom chuckled in response. Still, Harry dutifully played two hours of Andrew Lloyd Webber songs in the community centre that evening while Tom got to relax at home so his precious brain wouldn’t explode, even though Harry’s brain nearly did after the hundredth rendition of Jesus Christ Superstar.

During the rest of the week Tom received copies of his Masteries from the appropriate Guilds and filed them at the Ministry while Harry received a letter from the Guild of Potioneers to tell him to go-ahead with human trials with his improved Wolfsbane potion. Remus conveniently had a list ready with almost a dozen willing werewolves who were more than happy to receive Harry’s potion after hearing the rave reviews from Remus.

Life went on in a pleasant, quiet sort of way, which Harry very much appreciated. His mood had improved dramatically since his bout of mild depression in the autumn, and Harry wondered if he wasn’t simply suffering from seasonal mood changes. He’d have to keep an eye out what happened the next autumn.

Tom was also notably more relaxed, having figured himself out as Tom Riddle at last. Understanding why he did the things he did helped him come to terms with a few issues from his previous life as Voldemort, as well as his experiences in the orphanage.

Together they tentatively started creating a potion that might treat, or even cure, ADHD. Of course, creating a potion from scratch was a long and delicate process and for now Tom and Harry mostly exchanged ideas of where to even start on such a potion, often leading to spirited arguments about the addition of this ingredient or that.

In the first week of February, Tom booked a conference room at the Leaky Cauldron and invited the potential candidates for their new business for a meeting. Plenty of people had replied to Tom’s advertisements, but lots of them had passed on the opportunity once Tom sent them a small information package about what the business entailed exactly.

Four people showed up to their meeting. Two muggleborns, Jessica Beck and Madeline Vaughan, a half-blood named Niall Hammond, and Regulus Black.

“Why?” Harry asked in a whisper as he sidled close to Regulus while Tom explained a few practical things to the others.

Regulus sighed, a faint rosy hue appearing on his pale cheeks. “I’m...ever since I came back, I’m unsure what to do with my time. I didn’t have a job before...I left, and I don’t know what I want to do for work right now. I might join you at Hogwarts, but for now this seems like an interesting opportunity.”

“Fair enough,” Harry said while he gave Regulus a pat on the back. He understood more than most what it was like to feel lost in your own life.

“Besides,” Regulus added with a crooked grin that reminded Harry instantly of Sirius. “I do like the idea of shaking things up a little in our society. It has become far too stagnant.”

“You’ve come to the right people, then,” Harry said with a chuckle as they both joined the others.

Tom’s business plan was fairly simple. The candidates would sign a contract, promising three months of salaried work for the business after learning the trade before they’d be allowed to start their own franchise. This ensured they wouldn’t simply learn the secrets of hooking electricity up in magical houses, employ it in their own homes and then quit the business before ever earning Harry and Tom a single knut.

Harry and Tom had been burned one too many times in their many lives assuming people always meant well when you offered them a business opportunity, so they weren’t taking such chances anymore, simple as that.

All candidates signed the contract and three days later Tom and Harry started teaching them the tricks of the trade. This included a crash course in muggle chemistry and alchemy, but all candidates applied themselves rigorously and had great potential.

Right as their business got off the ground and they installed electricity in a few muggleborn homes, who were all very eager to be able to watch the telly again even while living in the middle of Hogsmeade or other magical areas, Harry received a letter from Snape.

Mr Bird,

Be advised that Headmaster Dumbledore has officially accepted my request for a sabbatical year and as such is in need for a Potions Master to take over my classes for the coming schoolyear. The headmaster plans to post an advertisement in the Daily Prophet within the next few days announcing this job opening.

While the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor at Hogwarts has become something of a joke with not a single qualified person applying for the past decade at least, the position of Potions Master at Hogwarts is far more sought-after and thus it would behoove you to send in an application before the masses do so.

Also, be advised that I have forwarded the favourable results of your first full moon test of the improved Wolfsbane potion to the Guild of Potioneers.

Sincerely,

*Severus Snape
Potions Master.*

Harry blinked as he looked up at Tom, who sat across from him at the dining table, finishing his breakfast of shakshuka and homemade toast. "Looks like we're going to have a meeting with the old goat sooner rather than later."

Tom quickly read over the letter after Harry handed it to him. "Send in your resume, darling. I'll simply tag along to the meeting. Best to take Dumbledore by surprise."

"He doesn't remember you're Voldemort," Harry pointed out, feeling a little dubious about Tom's conviction Dumbledore would treat him so poorly.

"You don't understand how much Dumbledore despised me already while I was simply Tom Riddle," Tom said with conviction, and Harry nodded in response, conceding that Tom knew more about that subject than Harry did.

And so, on a frosty morning in early March, Harry sent off his resume to Dumbledore, hoping the old man would be intrigued by Jack Bird enough that he'd hire him instead of waiting for a candidate who'd already received their Potions Mastery. Harry expected to get his Mastery within a few months, since the improved Wolfsbane potion was performing perfectly in the human trials, as Harry knew it would.

Thankfully, Harry received a reply the very next day written in Dumbledore's looping handwriting, inviting him to Hogwarts that afternoon.

"Are you nervous?" Tom asked as they both slipped into a more formal style of robes.

Harry shrugged as he stepped into the bathroom to slap on some cologne. "I don't know. A little, I guess." Harry frowned and glanced up at Tom as he stepped into his shoes. "Won't Dumbledore remember that time you applied for the Defence position and you ended up cursing it after Dumbledore all but kicked you out?"

"I doubt it, since Dumbledore already saw me as Voldemort then and he literally can't remember our connection. There's nothing to be worried about," Tom was quick to assure him. "And if we don't get the jobs for whatever reason we simply continue our business. Set it up across mainland Europe. And then we can apply for a teaching position at Hogwarts another year."

Harry considered that as he led Izzy into her crate with a smoked pig's ear. "You're right. We've really got nothing to lose. If we don't get hired we'll simply find something else to do."

"That's the spirit. Don't fall for the old man's head games. He needs us more than we need him." Tom grabbed Harry's elbow the moment they passed their wards and apparated them to Hogsmeade.

Walking up the long path to Hogwarts with Tom by his side was an invigorating experience for Harry. Here they were, once enemies, soulmates, older than dirt, devoted to each other in ways no other people could possibly hope to be, and most importantly, Dumbledore had no clue about any of this.

They had this in the bag.

The doors to the castle opened at Harry's slightest touch and Tom led the way to Dumbledore's office, just to keep up appearances with the portraits, seeing as Jack Bird had officially never set foot in Hogwarts, after all.

For Harry it was an interesting experience to be back at Hogwarts again. Of course, he and Tom had been students there multiple times over their many lives, but never while reliving their original life and that added to the excitement, at least for Harry. Though judging by Tom's gleaming eyes, he was probably feeling something similar.

"I have an appointment," Harry told the gargoyle, which obediently slid to the side. One quick ride up the moving steps and they were ready to meet with their shared adversary.

"Come in!" Dumbledore called after Harry knocked on the closed office door.

"Good afternoon, Headmaster," Harry said in a nice, thick American accent as he walked inside the office.

"Ah, Mr Bird," Dumbledore said with a smile while seated behind his massive desk. "I was wondering if you'd have trouble finding my office." Dumbledore's smile slipped off his face not too subtly when he saw who entered his office behind Harry. "But I see you brought an escort along."

"Yeah, I brought you a candidate for the Defence job, like we talked about back at the Ministry," Harry said with an easy smile as he stood in front of the desk. "This is my good friend Tom Riddle."

"Headmaster Dumbledore," Tom said with a genial smile and a polite nod.

"Oh, I remember Tom very well from his school days," Dumbledore said, his voice decidedly less warm than before.

"Do you?" Harry asked in faked ignorance. "I wasn't sure if you would, since he's grown up quite a bit from the time he was a student here."

"I am certain I would recognize Tom Riddle anywhere," Dumbledore said and finally gestured at the empty seats in front of his desk. "But since you are both here we might as well continue this meeting. Please have a seat."

Both Harry and Tom sank down in the waiting chairs while Dumbledore waved his wand around and conjured a tea set. After Harry and Tom accepted his offer for a cuppa, Dumbledore poured them all some tea while Harry made a show of looking around the office with wide eyes, as would be expected of someone who'd never set foot in there before.

“Thank you,” Harry said when the headmaster handed him a steaming cup. He didn’t think Dumbledore would spike his tea with Veritaserum, since Harry was a Potions Master in training and would most certainly recognize its effects. No, Dumbledore much preferred to spy on his guests using Legilimency, but both Harry and Tom were experts at Occlumency so they didn’t have much to worry about. “I’m starting to appreciate you Brits’ obsession with this beverage,” Harry said before taking a long sip. “It doesn’t hit the spot quite like coffee does, but it’s still a nice treat.”

“I’m glad you approve,” Dumbledore said, some of his composure returned as he gave Harry a bright little smile before sipping his own cup. Then his mask slipped a little again when he looked at Tom. “Why have you come here, Mr Riddle? Are you suddenly truly interested in teaching children?”

“I am,” Tom said in all honesty. He’d been a teacher many times, and Harry knew he always enjoyed that job. “I’m sure you recall I applied for the job many decades ago with Headmaster Dippet, who told me I needed more life experience before becoming a professor at this fine institution. I have done exactly that, travelled the world, learned many things great and small, and spent much time in different cultures, including the Muggle world.” Tom pulled a scroll from the inner pocket of his robes and placed it on the desk in front of Dumbledore. “Here is my resume. I genuinely believe I can offer the students of Hogwarts much more than any other teacher can.”

“Hm.” Dumbledore took the time to unroll the scroll and peruse it in detail. “It is an impressive list of accomplishments, there is no doubt about that.” Dumbledore gave Tom a piercing look. “And I haven’t heard anything of you in a long time, which is explained by your many years of travelling abroad.” Dumbledore sighed, leaning back in his seat. “But I also remember you as a student, Tom, and we both know you were involved in certain damaging behaviours amongst your peers.”

“I am not that child anymore, Headmaster.” Tom sat forwards a little, hands folded on top of his thighs, looking the picture of a remorseful man. Harry admired his acting skills. “I agree my childhood was troubled, as was my adolescence. But I have become a reliable, productive adult.” Tom gave Dumbledore a disarming smile while briefly ducking his head. “I daresay you would have heard of me one way or the other over the past few decades if I hadn’t.”

Dumbledore nodded a few times before turning his attention to Harry, who in return sat up in his chair and gave Dumbledore a fearless grin. “Mr Bird, Severus has nothing but good things to say about you, including his expectation that you should receive your Potions Mastery within a few months.”

“I certainly hope so,” Harry said with a firm nod. “The trials are going great and Remus can’t stop praising the potion to high heaven to any werewolf he knows.”

“I am sincerely glad to hear that,” Dumbledore folded his hands on his desk while offering Harry a grateful look. “Werewolves suffer more than most in our society, alas, so it genuinely warms my heart that you have found a way to help them.”

Harry well remembered that Dumbledore had always had a lot to say about werewolf rights, but that in his first life Dumbledore had done surprisingly little about it, except allow that one

werewolf to get an education at Hogwarts that one time. Thankfully years and years of practice allowed Harry to keep his expression relaxed without showing any of the annoyance he felt.

“I am willing to give you a chance as the new Potions Master of Hogwarts, Mr Bird,” Dumbledore said and then he looked at Tom and it was clear from his frigid expression he wasn’t going to extend a similar offer to him.

“If I may,” Tom said in an obvious last ditch attempt to salvage the situation. “Rumour has it that the Defence post is cursed.” Tom quickly held up a hand when Dumbledore opened his mouth to reply. “I am not here to argue the truth of this. I am here, however, to offer my services as a certified Curse-Breaker whose special interest is to unravel intricate, one-of-a-kind curses. Give me the job, at least for a year, and I might very well be able to help you with your employment problem permanently.”

Dumbledore sat back in his chair with a thoughtful frown, running a hand down his beard. “I well remember how talented you were at everything you put your mind to, Tom. And your resume is a testament that those talents are still there, even after all this time.” Inhaling a deep breath, as if what he was about to say was just a little bit painful, Dumbledore said, “Very well, Tom. I can offer you the position for a year. Just be advised that I will be keeping a very close eye on you while you’re in my castle.”

“I would expect nothing less,” Tom said with a nod in gratitude.

“Yeah, awesome. I’m looking forward to living in a genuine castle,” Harry said with a huge grin. “Never in my life thought that would ever happen.”

Dumbledore chuckled while they all got up from their seats. “Minerva will send you the relevant information for all new staff members, including the contracts, which you can owl back to her once you’ve signed them. You are welcome to come and explore the castle at any time, Mr Bird.”

“I will, believe me.” Harry did look forward to staying at Hogwarts again. No matter what all had happened in the past, he’d always genuinely loved the castle.

After a few polite farewells, Harry and Tom rode the moving stairs down and didn’t linger in the castle. Once they crossed through the gates of Hogwarts, Harry turned to Tom, feeling safe enough to talk out loud again.

“Holy fuck, Dumbledore was really hoping that fucking curse would do you in, right?”

Tom snorted while placing a hand on Harry’s back, steering him in the direction of Hogsmeade. “That, or he’s hoping I’ll actually manage to break the curse. Employing me for a year would be a cheap price to pay to be rid of it once and for all.” Tom looked down at Harry with raised eyebrows. “Dinner at the Three Broomsticks?”

“Oh yeah,” Harry said at once. “Let’s find out if their toad in the hole is as good here as it is in other worlds.”

It was, as it turned out, and they enjoyed a fine dinner with a few pints of ale to wash it all down. When they finally made it home, a letter awaited them in the mailbox.

“Who’s it from?” Harry asked as he greeted a wriggling Izzy with a few cuddles.

“The Wizengamot,” Tom said slowly as he read over the letter. “They’re summoning us to a meeting tomorrow, to explain why we’ve been breaking the misuse of Muggle artifacts laws.”

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I know I've been giving some of my other stories lots of loving this past month, but I haven't forgotten about this one! I'm planning to update all of my stories over the coming weeks at least a few times as life allows, so we'll finally get to Hogwarts in the next two or three chapters.

Thank you so much for sticking with this story. I'm amazed how much attention this story has gotten over the past year, since I started writing it, and I'm very happy to see so many people enjoying it. Let me know what you think!

Chapter 17

Tom sent his Patronus off to alert Regulus of a potential problem and to invite him over to discuss strategies. Harry always had to smile when he saw the huge, shimmering lion that erupted from Tom's wand. Not the animal most people would associate with Tom Riddle, formerly known as Lord Voldemort, but Tom's Patronus had changed into a lion during their eleventh life, when they'd been wizards in France and had first started an intimate relationship together. Harry knew this was the moment Tom had started loving Harry, because before that Tom's Patronus had been a basilisk.

Ironically, their eleventh life was also when Harry's Patronus had changed, from a stag which had served Harry well up until that point, into a raven, which was Tom's Animagus form. It was funny how that worked, Harry always thought. Over their many lives lots of things changed about them, from their bodies to their intelligence and their natural talents, but both their Patronus animals and their Animagus forms always remained the same. They were, Harry was now utterly sure, tied to their souls and not their bodies, no matter who they were in whichever life they lived.

Regulus showed up just as Harry came back from a quick stroll to let Izzy do her business, and because they were too curious for their own good, Sirius and Remus had decided to tag along.

Tom showed them the letter while Harry made coffee and found some leftover German crumb cake in the cooling cabinet which he managed to slice up in just enough portions to serve them all.

"They're dragging you in front of the Wizengamot?" Sirius asked in astonishment. "Are they already putting you on trial for this?"

"It says it's an inquest," Regulus pointed out.

“Knowing the ministry, they might try to turn the inquest into a trial on the spot,” Harry said while he placed cups of coffee on the dining table while everyone took a seat.

“You might want to contact a solicitor,” Remus said with a worried frown. “Merlin knows that might be the only thing keeping the ministry from doing something rash and stupid.”

“I doubt it will come to that,” Tom said in a surprisingly reassuring tone. “Obviously the ministry has no idea what we’re doing in our new business, and once we explain we aren’t actually breaking any laws I’m sure they’ll leave us alone.”

Sirius released a dubious snort while he added two lumps of sugar to his coffee. “Sure, because the ministry never makes any mistakes when it comes to throwing people behind bars.”

“Point taken,” Tom managed to concede with a small nod.

“Babe, let’s just stop by Diagon Alley first thing tomorrow and hire a solicitor,” Harry said with a stern look as he placed slices of cake in front of everyone. “I know you get off on lording your superiority over all the idiots at the ministry, but having some legal backup won’t hurt a thing. And it’s not as though we can’t afford it.”

“Yes, fine,” Tom said with a haughty sniff while everyone else chuckled. “We’ll pay a visit to Brown and Spears. Regulus, I’d like you to join us as well, even if you’re technically an employee. Having a member of a prominent pureblood family there to endorse our business will probably help as well.”

“Of course,” Regulus said with an amused smile. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Harry sat down at the table and offered everyone a huge grin. “We might as well turn this into a party. You’re looking at the new Potions and Defence professors.”

“Dumbledore hired you both?” Sirius asked with a surprised laugh, as though he couldn’t quite believe they’d managed to convince Dumbledore so quickly.

Tom told their friends about the meeting they had. “He made no secret he had no desire to hire me until I pointed out I could break the curse for him,” Tom said after he’d told the whole story. “We’re quite sure the old man sincerely hopes the curse will do me in.”

“He’s going to be in for a surprise then when you actually break it,” Remus said in between bites of his cake.

“When do you want us at Hogwarts then?” Sirius asked with a frown.

“The next year,” Harry explained. “This coming year we’re going to get rid of Binns first. I’ll probably just exorcise him when no one is looking,” Harry mused which earned him a sharp laugh from Regulus and a worried chuckle from Remus. “Then we’ll propose the Hogwarts fund we’re setting up.”

“Which reminds me. We should officially be setting that up soon, darling,” Tom quickly added as he stared at Harry.

Waving off Tom's comment, Harry went on with explaining their plans. "Then we'll start to oust Dumbledore bit by bit, propose the Hogwarts fund to the Board of Governors to wean them off the ministry's financial tit, and point out that McGonagall has far too many jobs and needs help. That's when Remus and Sirius can come in to help teach history and transfiguration."

"I've signed up for my transfiguration mastery," Sirius said with a self-satisfied look. "But it's good to know I've got well over a year to finish it."

"Yeah, no hurry just yet," Harry said and took a huge bite of his cake. The German crumb cake was a favourite of them both. A combination of a soft spongy bottom, a sweet layer of apricot jam and a crumb topping. It was fairly quick and easy to make, and they regularly made it during most of their lives, as long as the ingredients were available.

After their coffee and cake were gone, Tom opened a bottle of wine and they spent another hour or two chatting with their friends, just catching up and sharing some gossip. Apparently Fudge, newly elected as the Minister for Magic, had said something rude about the goblins in an interview and the goblins were now threatening to increase the cost of banking, which had everyone up in arms while Fudge tried to simultaneously offer an apology while also denying he'd done anything wrong in the first place.

Tom ate all of it up as if it was the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted, political junkie that he was, while Harry was sincerely happy neither one of them had decided to go into politics that life.

Later, as they both crawled into bed and Harry leaned over to press a kiss to Tom's lips, Harry noticed Tom's pinched look, a testament that he was secretly worried about the upcoming Wizengamot meeting even if he worked very hard to hide those feelings.

"We'll be alright," Harry whispered while pressing another kiss to Tom's lips. "Even if the Wizengamot shuts our business down, we'll still be fine. We don't depend on the income."

Tom turned his head to glare at Harry.

"I know, I know," Harry said quickly, though unable to hide the amused chuckle that escaped him at seeing Tom look so utterly offended. "The Magical Spark is your baby right now and you want nothing to happen to it."

"Well, I wouldn't call it a baby exactly," Tom muttered while he stared up at the ceiling. "I just don't want all of our efforts to go to waste."

"We'll be fine, is what I'm trying to say," Harry said, still filled with a warm sense of fondness at Tom's reactions. "We'll do our very best to keep the business going, of course."

"As long as we're in agreement on that," Tom said, narrowing his eyes a little when he noticed Harry's huge grin. "It will be a game changer for the wizarding world, to introduce electricity, you know that."

“I know, babe.” Harry waved his hand and shut off the lights before snuggling closer to Tom and burying his face against Tom’s shoulder while Izzy stretched out against his back. “Love you lots.”

“Love you, too, darling,” Tom answered in a whisper and briefly brushed his lips across Harry’s hair before turning on his side.

The next morning they had a quick breakfast of some oatmeal with dried fruits and a few strong cups of coffee, and Harry took Izzy for a quick stroll up and down the country lane while Tom made sure their best robes were clean and wrinkle free. They quickly got changed and apparated to Diagon Alley where they were glad to see that the office of Brown and Spears was already open even if it wasn’t even nine yet.

Eamonn Brown was a middle-aged man with short blond hair and grey eyes, who invited them inside his office the moment Tom mentioned they were summoned before the Wizengamot later that morning. Harry thought perhaps the man was related to Lavender Brown, an uncle or cousin or something like that. Tom was able to explain their needs in a few sentences and Eamonn Brown decided to represent them almost at once, much to Harry’s relief.

Harry had no doubt Tom could run circles around all the members of the Wizengamot, especially when it came to intelligence, but as they well knew, the Wizengamot didn’t always play by all the rules and having an official solicitor by their sides would make it much more difficult for Fudge or Dumbledore or anyone else to simply do whatever they wanted instead of keeping to the appropriate laws.

Regulus met them in the Ministry atrium, together with Sirius and Remus who were planning to watch the whole thing from the visitor seats, and together they made their way to the courtroom, well in time for the proceedings to begin.

Fudge was one of the first ones inside the courtroom, already there as Harry, Tom and the rest entered.

“It might be Fudge himself who has instigated this inquest, as a way to distract from his fuckup with the goblins,” Tom whispered in Harry’s ear.

Harry nodded quickly. “Exactly what I was thinking,” he whispered back with a knowing look. It would be something Fudge would do. Raise a stink about a totally unrelated subject in the hopes people would conveniently forget it was Fudge’s fault it now cost a few galleons more per year to keep a vault at Gringotts.

Urgh. Harry despised politicians like that.

Someone who he despised even more showed up a minute later. Dressed in her brightest pink cardigan, Dolores Umbridge joined Fudge behind the bench.

Harry narrowed his eyes. He’d caught a glimpse of her months ago during one of his trips to the ministry when he was still setting up his identity as Jack Bird, but seeing her now, with

her sickening smile as she stared down at them in triumph as though the ministry had already won their case, reminded Harry how much he truly hated that woman.

It may be almost 200 lifetimes ago that dear Dolores had forced Harry to write lines in his own blood, but to Harry it might as well have been yesterday. Harry was not a vengeful person, and he was happy enough to leave most people be these days, no matter who they were or what they did. He really was far too old to get worked up about every single person who pissed him off.

But there were always exceptions, and Dolores Umbridge was just such a person who Harry would gladly strangle to death with his own two hands before pissing on her shallow grave.

“She has to go,” Harry said in barely a whisper as he leaned closer to Tom.

Tom’s lips quirked up in a mischievous smile. “We’ll think of something, darling.”

The Wizengamot filled up with members and a few visitors while Tom went over a few more details with Eamonn Brown.

Finally, Dumbledore appeared, looking perfectly neutral as he called everyone to order so the official inquest could begin.

“We are here to determine if the business known as The Magical Spark has in fact broken the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts laws,” Dumbledore said, gazing steadily around the room. “By providing electricity to magical homes so muggle devices may be used around magic.”

Eamonn Brown stepped forward. “Chief Warlock, my clients have not broken the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts laws.” Eamonn took a moment to turn around and look all around the Wizengamot, making sure he had everyone’s attention. “You said it yourself. My clients, through their business The Magical Spark, provide electricity in magical homes. None of this includes charming muggle devices in ways they weren’t meant to be used, which is what the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts laws are there for to prevent.”

“Hem, hem.”

Harry carefully kept his expression blank while a shudder ran down his spine. He hated that sound.

Dolores Umbridge’s smile turned almost simpering as she leaned over the bench a little to stare down at Eamonn. “But the act of providing electicks to magical homes is in itself a way of charming a muggle resource. Wizards have no use for electicks after all.”

Eamonn Brown didn’t look at all impressed by that interruption. “Madam Umbridge, while your opinion on whether or not wizards have use for electricity or not is no doubt fascinating, it has nothing to do with the actual laws my clients are accused of breaking. They do not charm muggle devices in ways they are not intended to use. Their service allows wizards to use a television in their homes, but the television itself isn’t charmed at all. If the television would one day fall into the hands of a muggle again, the muggle wouldn’t even notice the television had once been used in a magical home.”

Fudge cleared his throat, looking more than a little chagrined, though why Harry wasn't entirely sure. Perhaps because Tom and Harry had dared to bring along a solicitor who was doing a very good job of winning them the case. "We have our own expert to testify on these matters," Fudge said in a booming voice while a familiar man appeared behind him. "Arthur Weasley, head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office."

Arthur Weasley looked a little gobsmacked to be there as he shuffled to the witness stand and looked around the whole Wizengamot with wide eyes. Then he noticed Dolores Umbridge and he paled significantly, a detail that Harry noticed at once. So dear Dolores had put the fear of unemployment or worse in Arthur, meaning that the poor man would probably testify against them, even if Arthur would know very well they weren't breaking any laws.

Harry took a few steps to the right so he could whisper into Eamonn's ear. "Go easy on him if you can, but if you need something to take him down with, know that Arthur Weasley possesses a muggle car, a Ford Anglia, he's charmed to fly."

Harry loved Arthur, he really did, but he refused to give Fudge and Umbridge the opportunity to ruin their business that they'd worked so hard for and which, as Tom had rightly pointed out a time or two, would provide genuine improvements in the wizarding world in the years to come.

"Please tell the Wizengamot how the accused are breaking the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts laws," Fudge said to a visibly nervous Arthur.

"Er...well... One could say that enchanting electricks is misusing a muggle artefact, even if it's not a real artefact in the first place," Arthur said in a stuttering voice, wringing his hands in front of him.

"Mr Weasley," Eamonn said as he stepped forward and looked up at Arthur with a pleasant smile. "How do you know the electricity itself is enchanted? Are you familiar with the exact procedures my clients use in their business?"

Arthur blinked a few times while biting his lip. "I assumed they enchanted it," he finally admitted in a quiet voice. "How else would they get it to work?"

Eamonn turned to look at Tom, Harry and Regulus. "Do you enchant the electricity itself?"

"No," Tom said in a resolute voice.

Harry actually laughed at that idea. "Trying to enchant electricity is a great way to end up in an early grave."

"It is a rather preposterous idea," Regulus even agreed. "And it makes me question Mr Weasley's authority on muggle subjects if he doesn't even know something so basic." This caused quite a bit of murmuring amongst the Wizengamot members, that apparently pureblooded Regulus Black understood this topic better than Arthur Weasley, self-professed expert on all things muggle.

Arthur's cheeks turned a bright red which clashed horribly with his hair. Harry felt sorry for him, to see his former father-in-law put on the spot like that, but he didn't let the sympathy he felt for the man stop him from defending their business.

Tom took a step forward and looked around the Wizengamot with a carefully constructed expression that conveyed plenty of charm and sympathy. "The Magical Spark doesn't break any laws. We do not enchant muggle artefacts, no matter what anyone with far less knowledge about muggles than us may claim." Tom paused for a moment, smile turning a little distant, even a little melancholic. "I understand it can be hard to accept changes in our magical society. The idea of electricity working alongside magic can be a daunting one. Will it take away from magic, you may perhaps wonder? I can tell you here and now that it doesn't. What it does do is create job opportunities. People to install electricity in magical homes, people to sell the muggle devices to wizards and witches, and even people to adjust the wards around places like Diagon Alley. Allowing electricity to work in magical places reduces the need for the strongest of wards and thus actually reduces the chance of discovery by muggles in the long run. Muggles will no longer be wondering why there are blank spots in Britain when it comes to their electricity network."

Tom was a natural at speaking in public and swaying crowds and after his little speech, Harry noticed plenty of Wizengamot members with contemplative looks upon their faces.

Fudge made a few more blustering comments, but it was clear he had no more solid arguments against The Magical Spark's business model, and Arthur Weasley was dismissed from the stand soon after, looking more than a little relieved to get out of there.

"We will call for votes now," Dumbledore finally said, raising both his hands to get everyone's attention. "Raise your wands if you believe The Magical Spark breaks the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts laws by providing electricity in magical homes."

Quite a few people raised their wands, most of them purebloods who probably barely had an idea what electricity even was and wouldn't understand its usefulness without a month-long course on what electricity was even capable of. But most of the half-bloods and all the muggleborns kept their wands down and Dumbledore counted the results.

"As voted for by the members of the Wizengamot, The Magical Spark does not break the Misuse of Magical Artefacts laws by providing electricity in magical homes." Dumbledore banged his hammer a few times. "Hereby the Wizengamot is dismissed for today. Thank you all for attending and I wish you a safe trip home."

Harry gave Tom a beaming smile. Tom himself looked utterly satisfied, his expression filled with confidence as though he never doubted they'd win the case.

"Thanks," Harry said to Eamonn.

"Wait until after I send you my invoice to thank me," Eamonn said with obvious humour, though he, too, looked incredibly satisfied with the result.

They met Sirius and Remus right outside the courtroom where Sirius pulled first Harry and then Regulus into a tight hug. Then he looked at Tom and merely nodded at him.

“Congratulations,” Remus said with a wide smile. “They never really had a case against you, did they?”

“Let’s go celebrate with a nice lunch,” Sirius suggested. “My treat.”

Before they reached the elevators they were intercepted by none other than Rita Skeeter, who gave them all a positively predatory look.

“Perhaps an interview about your unexpected victory?” Rita suggested in a buttery voice while sidling closer to Tom.

“Alas, Madam, we don’t have time today, but please do write me to set up a meeting for tomorrow. I’ll gladly grant you an interview,” Tom replied with a wide-eyed, regretful look.

“I will owl you right away, Mr Riddle,” Rita said, eyes narrowing in satisfaction as though she was a spider that had just caught a particularly juicy fly. Harry wasn’t worried, though. If anyone could handle Rita Skeeter, it was Tom, who’d probably enjoy playing word games with her all day long.

They left the ministry without any more interruptions and ended up in Fantastic Alley, an offshoot from Diagon Alley where they celebrated their success in a little bistro named The Golden Goose where they enjoyed some fresh tomato soup and delicious fish and chips.

Once they got home, Tom pulled Harry into a tight hug before Harry could even free Izzy from her crate. Harry simply returned the hug, holding his soulmate tightly, basking in their victory. Tom needed more comfort than usual apparently and didn’t break their hug until some five minutes later, an eternity for someone like Tom who usually only enjoyed very brief moments of physical contact before his brain became overstimulated.

“That fucker,” Harry said with feeling a short while later as they walked through the countryside with Izzy, getting some fresh air after their stressful morning. “Fudge was trying to use us to fix his own mess.”

Tom gave Harry an incredibly fond look, as though Harry’s brief bout of anger was the most adorable thing he’d seen in a long time. “What else would you expect of the man? Fudge has only ever been the kind of politician who’d do anything to save his own skin.”

Harry well remembered Fudge’s sheer denial over Voldemort being back in their first life, even going so far as setting Umbridge on Hogwarts to keep the slightest of rumours from getting out and gaining traction.

“Let’s go on a short trip,” Tom suggested while they walked across one of the many narrow paths nestled in between mature hedgerows around Little Hangleton. “Perhaps some long distance walk.”

Harry perked up at that idea. They’d always enjoyed going on hikes, and long distance walking was a wonderful way to decompress while being active. “Let’s do Hadrian’s wall.”

“That sounds perfect,” Tom agreed at once.

And so while Tom went off the next day to have a nice little chat with Rita Skeeter at The Leaky Cauldron about their business, which would offer lots of free advertising, Harry spent the day packing for their short holiday. Izzy was now old enough that a week of daily walking wasn't a problem for her, energetic thing that she was.

They already had plenty of camping supplies, so Harry only had to shop for plenty of easy to carry snacks and MREs, meals-ready-to-eat. He also bought them both lightweight but decent raincoats, and he briefly popped by the apothecary in Diagon Alley to stock up on a few potions, like a salve for blisters and one for sprains, just in case they were needed.

By the time Tom came back with a winning smile and tales of how he'd wrapped Rita around his finger in no time, Harry had everything prepared and they were ready to walk Hadrian's wall the next day. Sirius and Remus were once again put in charge of looking after their chickens, which they didn't mind at all because they earned lots of fresh eggs that way.

The next morning, after a good, solid breakfast of fried eggs and bacon, Harry, Tom and Izzy apparated to Wallsend, Newcastle upon Tyne on the east coast where they'd start their week-long, 84 mile walk along the Hadrian's Wall Path all the way to Bowness-on-Solway on the west coast.

Naturally, it being England, it rained, but thanks to their raincoats and some subtly applied charms they weren't bothered by that in the slightest.

Hadrian's wall had once been a defensive fortification of the Roman province of Britannia, and its construction had begun in AD 122 during the reign of the Roman emperor Hadrian. Nowadays not much of the wall was left, its rocks having been used to build homes around the area many centuries ago already, but there were still a few remnants of the wall left in some areas. The route of where the wall had once stood was a beautiful one that crossed rolling green hills, moorland and a few lovely market towns and even some cities.

All in all it was a popular route to walk, and Harry and Tom had walked it many times already in quite a few previous lives, but it never did grow old.

Izzy was elated to be walking for miles and miles and didn't seem tired until they stopped at a small campsite at the end of the first day, when she all but collapsed on her pillow and slept until morning. Harry and Tom felt much the same way, to be fair, and only enjoyed a quick meal of spaghetti out of a bag before they, too, turned in for the night. Charms kept them all comfortable during the chilly night of early March and by the time they woke up in the morning they were recovered enough for another day of walking just under 20 miles.

"Say what you will about England," Tom said as they stood on the top of a hill that overlooked a landscape full of rolling green hills with a small river running through it. "It remains an absolutely beautiful country."

"Yep," Harry agreed easily. They'd lived in so many different countries, with so much natural diversity. Everything from deserts to rainforests. But somehow the simple green countryside of England was something special and always felt a little bit more like home than most other places on earth did. They had always considered themselves English at least a little bit, since

that was their original nationality, no matter what country they were born in during every new life.

Thankfully, after a rainy start they enjoyed dry weather during the rest of their trip, even getting some lovely sunshine one afternoon on their fourth day.

They decided to have a break when they reached the Sycamore Gap Tree, a large, lonely sycamore tree that grew in a dramatic gap between two rough hills. It was one of the more famous landmarks along the wall path.

Harry and Tom sat down below the tree while Izzy slobbered up a small bowl of water. As they snacked on a bag of M&Ms and a thermos of hot tea, Tom looked at Harry. "I'm assuming you're keeping your identity as Jack Bird."

Harry blinked for a moment and swallowed his mouthful of chocolate. "Yeah, I think so. Harry Potter is still a minor, and I have no desire to dust him off for the next seven years at least. And by the time Harry Potter is a legal adult, I'll have lived as Jack for almost a decade. No use going back to Harry Potter then."

Tom nodded in agreement.

"Why do you ask?" Harry wanted to know, because Tom had such a serious expression on his face that Harry wondered what was going on in his mind.

"I just wanted to be sure I'd be marrying the right man," Tom said right before his lips quirked up in a wicked little smile. "Marry me, darling."

"What?" Harry asked, feeling absolutely flummoxed.

"You heard me," Tom said with a warm chuckle. "Marry me."

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

This chapter we've got some serious wedding preparations. Next chapter we'll have the wedding and we should also be skipping some time and heading towards Hogwarts. Well, that's the plan, at least. But I never know what new idea might pop up to add to the plot.

Thanks for reading, and for sticking with this story for so long. I'm so happy with the amazing response this story has gotten over time. Let me know what you think! Your comments keep me coming back to this story to write more and more.

Chapter 18

"Nice proposal," was the first thing Harry said once he regained his voice. He looked around pointedly at the landscape, the huge sycamore tree behind them, and Izzy panting as she stretched out before them on the grass. "I give it an 8 out of 10. Did you plan this or was it a spontaneous thing?" Harry knew that Tom usually liked to plan every little thing, but in this life he did have ADHD so who knew what spontaneous stuff popped up in his mind every now and then.

Tom's answering grin was utterly without shame. "I was planning to propose but I hadn't thought of an exact way to pop the question just yet." He gestured around them to also draw attention to their amazing surroundings. "But sitting here with you seemed like a good moment. Now I'd like your answer, please, darling."

Harry briefly shook his head but he couldn't stop a grin from spreading across his face. "I should just say no one of these days, just to fuck with you."

Tom snorted and gave Harry a knowing look. "Who are you trying to fool here? You always want to marry me. Especially now after we haven't been able to get married for two lives in a row. Still waiting for your reply."

"Yes, of course I'll marry you, you arrogant bastard." Harry leaned over and pressed a long, hard kiss to Tom's lips, which turned out a bit uncomfortable because Tom couldn't stop smirking throughout the whole thing.

"I propose we get married on the spring equinox," Harry said once he drew back.

Tom frowned for a moment and then gave a thoughtful nod. "March 20th. Yeah, that would work."

“The start of spring seems like a good date for a wedding,” Harry mused while he leaned against Tom. They had been married so often, to other people but mostly to each other, that a wedding didn’t really excite them as much anymore as it might other couples.

In fact, Harry and Tom had decided many, many lives ago that they would always have small weddings that didn’t cost more than the average luxury car. An exception to that were the lives when they were filthy rich and they could just hire a small army of wedding planners to organize everything for them, spare no expense. Another exception was when they were born into cultures where small weddings were absolutely unacceptable. Harry made that mistake once when they were Indian, when he suggested to his Hindu parents that perhaps they didn’t need a three day wedding. He’d come to regret that almost immediately, when his entire extended family, every fucking aunt and uncle and cousin and second cousin had reached out to him one after the other to yell at him for daring to suggest he not have a traditional wedding. Harry had quickly let his family know that the three day wedding was taking place, now please everybody stop calling.

So, yeah, occasionally they still threw a great wedding extravaganza, but mostly they were more than happy to organize a small event. Just an intimate gathering with their closest friends and family, a quick ceremony and a nice meal together with perhaps some music and drinks afterwards. The wedding venue didn’t have to be huge, and might even be held at a family member’s house if there was enough space available. As for pictures, Harry and Tom always preferred to find a nice bit of nature nearby to have some beautiful pictures taken. And that was it, really. It needn’t be more complicated than that in their opinion.

This way they saved a lot of money that they usually preferred to spend on buying a house or saving for a new car or something like that.

If there was one word that both Harry and Tom despised with a burning passion, it was the word ‘destination wedding’. Over the years they’d had their fair share of family members and friends who believed that they needed to spend many, many thousands on a wedding in the Bahamas or Jamaica or something equally tropical. The problems always arose when they expected their family to join them there, at their own cost, of course.

That was one thing Harry and Tom always refused. They’d become quite cynical in their old age, and whenever they were inevitably asked why they refused to come to the wedding, especially when it was for a close relative like a sibling or for a best friend, they were always happy to answer truthfully. “We refuse to come because your marriage has a 60% chance of failing, and we don’t feel like dishing out 3000 quid for something that’s probably doomed anyway. We’d much rather take that money and use it for a holiday we’d actually enjoy. But we hope you have a nice wedding anyway!”

Yeah, they’d lost some friendships that way, but they both reasoned that if people were insane enough to expect those around them to shell out thousands for their special day, these people weren’t good friends material anyway.

Because of all this, Harry and Tom had their entire wedding planned in about an hour as they continued their walk along the wall path.

“We’ll have the ceremony at the Ministry, and afterwards we can have a small reception at our cottage,” Harry said as he walked beside his official fiancé.

“We can order a small wedding cake, perhaps a two-tier,” Tom suggested.

“Sure. And I don’t mind cooking a few things that we could serve up buffet style,” Harry suggested with a bright smile, happy that they were on the same page, even though he expected no less.

“How about some Asian themed foods that are easy to eat? Some dumplings, eggrolls, steamed buns,” Tom said with a thoughtful frown.

Damn, now Harry was getting hungry thinking about all that delicious food. “That’s a great idea. We can make a big pan of fried rice to go along with it. That should feed everybody well enough.”

“Who are we inviting?” Tom looked down at Harry and returned his smile with one of his own. “Sirius, Remus, Regulus.”

Harry thought about that for a moment. “Perhaps Snape as well. I am officially his apprentice. And Regulus spends lots of time with him these days. Sirius complains about it often enough.”

“Sure, Severus can come. How about Jessica, Madeline and Niall, our employees?”

Harry nodded quickly. “Oh yeah, we’ll invite those as well. I’ll ask Sirius to be my best man. Who will you ask?”

Tom considered that for a moment. “Probably Regulus. We get along well nowadays, and he is also linked to us through our business.”

“And you like him and consider him a friend,” Harry added with a teasing grin.

Tom rolled his eyes but he didn’t deny it, so Harry took that as a win. And that was all it took to plan their wedding, so they quickly changed the subject and talked about other things.

As they continued their walking holiday, something bothered Harry though he couldn’t figure out what it was. Everything was fine, they had a wonderful time walking the wall path, the weather was quite nice for the time of year, and yet something caused Harry some low levels of stress but no matter how much he examined his own thoughts, he couldn’t find the cause.

How strange.

They reached Bowness-on-Solway on their seventh day of walking, and they were tired but also happy to have completed the walk yet again. It still remained one of their favourite long-distance walks.

They apparated home in the late afternoon, and after they both quickly showered Harry sorted out their dirty laundry while Tom popped into town to pick up some fish and chips for dinner. They’d earned a greasy meal. Tom also stopped by the Tesco and got some ice-cream for

dessert, and they ate on the couch while watching their VCR tape of Die Hard. They went to bed pretty much as soon as the movie had ended, quite exhausted after walking for a week.

It wasn't until the next day that whatever tension Harry had felt building inside of himself exploded. It happened as he sorted through their small walk-in pantry and noticed that the cooling charms he'd put on a few shelves, to store things like carrots and potatoes, had worn off and now their potatoes were sprouting.

"Fucking charms failed," Harry snarled as he hauled the potatoes out of the pantry and threw them down on the counter with much more force than was necessary.

Tom, who was washing up their breakfast plates, looked at Harry with one eyebrow curved. "Didn't you anchor the charms with runes when you expanded that pantry?"

Harry felt like his brain was about to explode. "Well, obviously fucking not!" More potatoes landed on the counter with dull thuds. "But since you seem to know so much about how to properly store root crops and how to build a pantry, you can do it next time!"

Tom very slowly and carefully dried off the plates, put them away and then he turned to look at a fuming Harry while he crossed his arms and leaned his hip against the counter. "What is really going on, Harry?"

"What do you mean?" Harry held up a potato that had three stalks growing from it while he glared at Tom. "The fucking potatoes are ruined."

Tom looked like he might want to roll his eyes, but he refrained. "I doubt you care this much about potatoes that you're picking a fight with me just because we have to use them up this week." Before Harry could snarl in reply, Tom gave Harry an utterly sympathetic smile. "Darling, talk to me. What is really going on?"

The fire in Harry's head was doused by Tom's obvious compassion, and he slumped his shoulders before giving a listless shrug. "I don't know. Just something's bugging me and I don't know what."

"Since when have you been feeling this way?" Tom asked, effortlessly slipping into psychotherapist mode.

Harry wanted to snarl at him for that as well, but he honestly didn't have the energy to do so. Instead he shrugged again and plucked a few stalks off the potatoes.

"If I might make a suggestion," Tom said carefully. "I've noticed some tension ever since I proposed."

Harry opened his mouth to argue, because he did want to marry Tom so it couldn't be the proposal.

But Tom quickly held up a hand. "I know you want to marry me, darling. I don't doubt that. But something about our upcoming wedding has you on edge. So let's figure out what it is."

Harry frowned, realizing Tom probably was right. “I do want to marry you, babe. You know I do. But there’s something...fuck, I don’t know.”

Tom gave him a knowing little smile. “All right, let’s try this. If there was one thing, anything no matter how strange, that you could change about our wedding, what would it be?”

Harry blinked a few times as the answer immediately popped into his mind without him even knowing where it came from. “I’d marry you as Harry Potter.”

“And there it is.” Tom stepped up to Harry and wrapped him into a tight, warm hug. “That’s what’s bugging you.”

Harry buried his face against Tom’s shoulder and released a deep sigh. “Yeah, I guess, though I’m not sure why.”

“Work through that thought, darling, don’t just give up immediately.” Oh yeah, Tom really was in psychotherapist mode, wasn’t he?

Harry snorted, that tense anger finally replaced with fond amusement. “Yeah, fine. I think I want to marry you as Harry Potter, because this is the first time we’re officially Tom and Harry again.”

“Okay,” Tom agreed quietly, cheek pressed against the top of Harry’s head as he held him close. “What else?”

“I don’t know...I guess I want to do our lives over again, and marrying you as Jack Bird feels like we’re not doing that perhaps?” Harry frowned, trying to make sense of the mess of thoughts in his head. “No, that’s not it. Perhaps I want to marry you as myself because in our first lives we were enemies and tried killing each other. If I married you as myself it would mean that we’ve really changed our lives.”

“Ah yes,” Tom said with a quiet chuckle. “Because almost 200 lives spent as friends and lovers hasn’t yet driven that point home, that we’re no longer the same people we were in our first lives.”

Harry playfully slapped a hand against Tom’s shoulder. “Yeah, yeah, I know. But we’re trying to figure out my feelings so I had to mention it.” Harry got another idea and now he couldn’t hold back a laugh. “And I kinda also want to marry you as Harry Potter because it would be the ultimate fuck you to people like Dumbledore, who still expect us to be enemies.”

Tom stepped back a little so he could look down at Harry and return his grin. “Now that’s a reason I can get behind.” Then Tom’s grin morphed into a warm smile and he pressed a lingering kiss to Harry’s lips. “How about we have our own little private ceremony after the official wedding. We can then marry as Harry and Tom.”

“Oh.” Harry had to swallow against a sudden lump in his throat, but for some reason that idea made him choke up a little. “Yeah, that would be nice. Let’s do that.”

“All right.” Tom gave Harry another kiss. “Just for the record then. Do you, Harry James Potter, want to marry me, Tom Marvolo Riddle?”

“Yes,” Harry whispered before pulling down Tom for a good snog. He did feel much better now that they’d figured out what had been bothering him. The human mind really was a funny thing, that it could make such a fuss over a small thought like that.

“We might be eating a lot of veggie mash this week,” Harry said later as he sorted through the potatoes, now without all of the burning anger. “I’ve still got some kale and savoy cabbages in the garden.”

“I’ll pop by the farm shop to pick up some sausages,” Tom suggested, to which Harry replied with an eager nod. They’d recently discovered a lovely little farm shop a town or two over, which made the most amazing sausages from their own heritage breed, free-range pigs. They’d used any culinary excuse in the book to fry up some of those sausages with every meal.

With that crisis averted, Harry and Tom planned on telling their friends about their upcoming wedding. Harry told Regulus to bring Severus with him for their usual Friday night dinner with the dogfathers, which would be a good test to see if Sirius and Severus could even spend a few hours in the same room together without curses flying. Harry had to meet Regulus and Severus on the country lane, to tell Severus the secret of the location of their home, but after that Severus entered the cottage without a problem.

Sirius gave him the stink eye but didn’t say anything, not even when Snape narrowed his eyes in return and offered Sirius a venomous glare.

“We’re having goulash,” Harry announced while everyone sat down around the dining table and Tom filled everyone’s wineglasses. “The recipe’s from my Hungarian grandmother. Served over boiled potatoes, as was traditional for her.” And because they were still using up all those sprouted potatoes, but Harry didn’t mention that.

“We’ve got some news,” Harry said as everyone was about finished with the meal. He shared a quick smile with Tom and then decided to just go for it. “We’re getting married on March 20th and you’re all invited.”

“That’s next week,” Remus said while he looked at them with wide eyes.

“The spring equinox,” Regulus said with a thoughtful nod. “An excellent date for a wedding.”

Harry beamed at him. “Yeah, that’s what we thought.”

“Congratulations,” Severus said with a rather stiff nod. He looked a bit dubious about the news, but Harry could hardly blame him for that. Technically, Harry was ten years old still, and he’d just announced he was marrying a 65 year old man. Yeah, Harry could understand some people might think the whole thing more than a little weird.

Sirius was staring down at the table with a heavy frown. "I know this was inevitable," he whispered, still not meeting anyone's eyes. "And I understand you're not going to look for another relationship while this bloke's around, Harry." Sirius finally looked up and Harry was shocked to see his grey eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "But I can't help but feel so fucking sad that James' name is going to be lost and the Potters will die out."

"They could adopt children," Remus suggested, but it sounded rather doubtful.

"We're not planning to have children this life," Tom replied delicately. "We'll be too busy at Hogwarts to raise a family."

"I get that," Sirius mumbled while he briefly clenched his jaws. "But I can't help how I feel."

"Oh!" Harry sat up and gave Tom an urgent look. "The stone!" Almost before Harry could focus his thoughts properly, the resurrection stone was lying in the palm of his hand. Harry turned it over three times while he thought about James and Lily Potter and two shimmering figures appeared behind him.

Sirius' eyes widened while his mouth sank open, a few tears falling down his cheeks.

"James? Is that really you?"

"Hello, Padfoot, Moony," James said with an enormous grin before he looked down at his son. "Hello, Harry. Your mother's been telling me all sorts of interesting stories about you."

Harry gazed up at the face that was so much like his own, and he wondered what sort of father James Potter would have made if he'd lived long enough to raise Harry himself. Harry couldn't help it. He'd had so many different fathers over his many lifetimes. Very caring, involved fathers, very distant, absent fathers, abusive fathers and fathers that literally put their own lives on the line for their kids. Harry had seen it all at that point, as had Tom.

Before Harry could say something to his father, though, Sirius broke down and buried his face in his trembling hands. "James, I'm so fucking sorry. I never should have changed secret-keepers. I never should have let them take Harry away. I fucked it all up and I'm so sorry." Sirius pushed his chair back abruptly, jumped up and ran out of the cottage. Remus was hot on his heels, as was James.

"Let them talk it out," Lily said with a reassuring smile when Harry stared after his dogfathers, wondering if he should interfere or not. "How have you been, Harry?"

"Quite good," Harry said, giving the closed front door one final curious look before smiling up at his mother. "We're getting married!"

"Oh, I'm so happy for you." Lily looked like she wanted to hug Harry for a moment before she realized she was incorporeal and that made it impossible. "When and where are you having the wedding?"

"The spring equinox," Harry replied eagerly, very relieved at least his mother seemed happy to see him marry Tom. "And we'll have the ceremony at the ministry and a small reception right here."

“Are all your guests going to be aware of your real identity?” Severus asked while he reached for his glass of wine. He gave it a long sip as he offered Harry a narrow-eyed look. “Since this house is under the Fidelius and you told me that Harry Potter lives in Gaunt cottage to be able to see your home.”

“Oh crap,” Harry said, looking at Tom in alarm.

Tom, ever the planner, was already going through alternative options, judging by his frown. “We could have the reception at Riddle Mansion. That’s still a public location.”

“Then we could have the ceremony there as well,” Harry said, immediately warming up to that idea.

Regulus made an agreeable noise. “It would be much more personable than having it at the ministry.”

“The mansion needs fixing up, though,” Tom pointed out, but he also seemed happy enough with this turn of events.

Harry waved his comment away. “We’ve got a week. And we only need to restore and decorate a couple of rooms in the mansion, not the whole thing. At least not right away.”

“Well then,” Tom said with a fond little smile aimed at Harry. “It seems we’ll be quite busy for the coming week.”

They chatted a bit more about the wedding, and Lily shared some details about her wedding to James. Harry was happy to see that Severus seemed at peace with Lily’s presence. Apparently speaking to Lily in private all those months ago had offered Severus a sense of closure. Hopefully James could offer Sirius and Remus the same thing.

When Sirius, Remus and James finally returned, Sirius did look more at ease and he was full of laughter and a sense of obvious nostalgia as he ribbed James, who gave as good as he got. Remus, too, appeared peaceful and content.

Since Harry had made the goulash, Tom had taken care of a traditional Hungarian dessert named Gerbeaud cake. It was made with a shortcrust pastry layered with almond jam and walnut filling, topped with dark chocolate frosting. They all enjoyed a portion with a cup of coffee as Harry filled his dogfathers in on their updated wedding plans.

“I’m happy for you, Harry,” James said, smiling down at his son. “I’m not saying you marrying Voldemort isn’t strange, because it is. But I suppose you living so many lives with the man does change things. A lot.”

“That is does. Thank you for supporting me in this,” Harry said, feeling quite emotional now that his parents had given him their blessing. “It means a lot.”

“Call us again sometime, so we can catch up,” James said while Lily floated closer to him. Harry nodded, suddenly unable to speak, and he turned the stone and sent his parents back to the beyond.

Their guests left half an hour later, and Harry was beyond happy that Sirius and Severus had been able to sit at one table and share a meal. There had been plenty of glares and even a few sneers, but no one got cursed, so Harry declared the whole thing a huge success.

The next morning, after a quick breakfast of toast and some fried eggs, Harry and Tom took Izzy for a walk to Riddle Mansion, to take stock of what needed to be fixed to make the place suitable to host a small wedding. The first thing they did when they reached Tom's ancestral home was put up a few privacy charms and muggle repelling wards.

"I wish we could invite Cindy and the folks from the choir to the wedding," Harry said, voice full of regret.

Tom gave him a brief, one-armed hug. "I know, darling, but we really cannot afford to break the Statute of Secrecy over this. And we cannot pretend it's a muggle wedding, either, since same-sex marriages in the UK are still at least 20 years away."

"I know," Harry sighed, and then he chuckled. "Though this way we at least escape a private choir performance of Andrew Lloyd Webber's greatest hits at our wedding, so there's that."

"Always look on the bright side of life, darling," Tom agreed with a laugh, and at once Harry couldn't help but hum that blasted song. Great, now he had that stuck in his head while they wandered around the mansion deciding what to update first.

They decided on the hallway, for obvious reasons, and on a reception room and a dining room, plus the downstairs bathroom. They really didn't need more than that with the small number of guests they were expecting.

The next week was rather hectic, to say the least. Tom arranged for an official from the ministry to lead the ceremony, and he managed to find a bakery who could create a small wedding cake on such short notice. Harry created simple wedding invitations from parchment that he sent off to their small number of guests, he ordered two sets of tailored robes from Twilfitt and Tattings, and he bought all the ingredients they needed to cook the food for their guests. He also stocked up on plenty of booze.

While they were stripping old paint off parts of the entrance, Tom asked out of the blue. "What did you want to do for rings?"

"Oh crap, we need rings," Harry said, having completely forgotten that. He gave Tom a wide-eyed look, feeling a sense of mild panic erupt in his chest.

"We'll pop by the jewellery store in Diagon Alley tomorrow morning," Tom said quickly, probably noticing Harry's impending breakdown at having to organize a wedding, however small, in a week.

"Yeah, all right," Harry said with a relieved sigh. One small crisis averted.

They quickly settled on simple, gold bands, nothing fancy or complicated. At home they charmed them with all sorts of interesting spells. One of them was a charm that would prevent others from removing the rings from their fingers. Which was a good thing, because

on the inside of the rings they inscribed their names. Their real names, Tom and Harry respectively.

“Izzy can be the ring bearer,” Harry decided while looking at their dog with a huge smile, and Izzy wagged her tail frantically, but then again, she always did that when Harry addressed her directly.

While they were refinishing all the wood floors in Riddle Mansion, on day 4 of their week-long redecorating marathon, Tom said, “So what are we going to do about pictures?”

“Fucking hell,” Harry said, that sense of mild panic that had plagued him for days now finally turning into a full-blown sense of dread. “We don’t even have a camera yet.”

“We have been meaning to get one. Diagon Alley?” Tom grabbed Harry’s arm and without further ado apparated them both to go and buy a brand-new camera. It wasn’t as if they couldn’t afford it. They had been getting the first pay-outs from some of their muggle inventions, so they truly weren’t hurting for money.

“Oh no,” Remus said, when Harry stopped by Grimmauld Place that evening to beg Remus to be their photographer. “I wish I could help you, Harry, but I am not at all familiar with cameras and taking wedding pictures is something best left to a professional, in my opinion. Why don’t you just hire a photographer?”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, his breathing coming in short gasps as he felt on the verge of hyperventilating. “Sure, we’ll do that.”

Thankfully, Tom managed to contact a semi-retired photographer who could accommodate them on such short notice. The man didn’t have to do a full day of shooting. All they wanted was a few pictures of the ceremony, a few with their guests, and a couple of nice ones out in the countryside they could put in a frame and display in their home somewhere.

They managed to spruce up Riddle Mansion enough that it would serve just fine for their wedding, as long as no one went snooping beyond the designated rooms and realized what a dump the rest of the mansion truly was. They’d painted and restored all the wooden floors. They’d fixed windows and furniture. They’d placed new candles throughout the whole thing. And they’d cleaned every little nook and cranny until the rooms looked like they hadn’t sat empty for decades.

The day before the wedding Harry and Tom spent cooking. Harry had rarely been so grateful to have magic to help the process along. Folding dumplings with magic went a lot quicker than doing it by hand. Harry fondly remembered one of his Chinese grandmothers, who was able to fill and fold dumplings almost faster than the eye could see completely by hand. Harry wasn’t nearly as good at that, and never had been, so he happily used his wand instead.

They set up all the food and drinks, and the wedding cake Tom had picked up, in Riddle Mansion and put up stasis charms to keep everything fresh and ready for the big day.

“It’s silly that I’m nervous, isn’t it?” Harry said later, as they lay in bed together. “We’ve been through this so many times, you’d think we’d be used to it.”

Tom chuckled and turned on his side, wrapping his arm around Harry's waist. "We've been married more than a hundred times already, and we'll be married at least a hundred times more, darling. There's no need to worry."

Harry stared up into darkness with wide eyes. "Are we forgetting something? Babe, I'm sure we're forgetting something."

"Everything's fine, Harry," Tom mumbled as he buried his face in Harry's neck. "We've got everything taken care of."

"Shoes!" Harry shouted the next afternoon as they both got ready. They'd just had lunch, since the ceremony wouldn't be until 2 in the afternoon, and now they were putting on their fancy robes. "Tom, we've got brand-new robes but we completely forgot to buy new shoes!" Harry felt like crying, which was ridiculous. He was a grown-ass man, older than dirt. He was not going to break down over one silly mistake on their wedding day. He refused to be that type of person.

"We both have nice, black shoes," Tom pointed out, ever the voice of reason. Tom dug out their dress shoes from the bottom of the wardrobe and gave them a quick polish with a charm until they shone and looked like new. "Here, they will do fine."

"Yeah, all right," Harry agreed and then heaved a deep, relieved sigh. Everything was ready. Harry grinned up at Tom and reached for his hand. "Babe, let's get hitched."

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

This chapter we've got Tom and Harry's wedding. Lots of feelings and domestic bliss and Tom ruining Harry's quiet life with more crazy plans. In other words, business as usual.

Thanks so much for reading and for sticking with this story. It's such a self-indulgent story in many ways, one I wasn't sure many people would even enjoy. So I am genuinely surprised by the warm reception it got, and by all the people still reading it. Thank you and let me know what you think! Comments keep me inspired to keep writing.

Chapter 19

It was interesting, Harry mused while he and Tom stood holding hands in front of the ministry official, that even after being married for so many times in previous lives, it was still quite an emotional affair. Binding your lives together legally, and as was the current case magically, was always a truly memorable moment.

Harry knew he and Tom had been married together well over a hundred times at that point, but that didn't change the fact that their current wedding might as well have been their first one, considering how choked up Harry felt.

Or perhaps that had something to do with the fact that they were finally their original selves again, living a completely different version of their original lives. Whatever the reason, Harry had to swallow more than a few times to keep himself together. And while Tom's expression remained carefully relaxed, Harry could also see plenty of emotions shining in his eyes.

The ministry official, a short, plump woman with curly, grey hair named Delia Hatfield, kept the ceremony short but entertaining. She had a lovely sense of humour that allowed for a few well-timed jokes to break some of the tension.

The ceremony was being held in Riddle Mansion's largest reception room, where Tom and Harry stood in front of the fireplace while their few guests sat on chairs facing them. The rest of the furniture had been moved aside for the occasion.

The photographer Tom had arranged, an older man with a messy head of white hair named Willard Woodley, took plenty of pictures during the ceremony.

"I pronounce you husband and husband," Delia said with a beaming smile. "You may now kiss."

Harry's could barely hold back a huge grin while Tom leaned down and pressed their lips together while Willard snapped a few more shots.

Remus volunteered to serve tea and coffee to everyone in the sitting room while Sirius rearranged the furniture so they could sit more comfortably instead of having everyone face the fireplace. Harry and Tom sliced into their small wedding cake, which was an absolutely delicious Schwarzwaelder Kirsch, a German chocolate and cherry creation, and which went down so well that most guests had a second slice, Harry and Tom included.

Afterwards, Willard took Tom and Harry outside for a few official wedding pictures around Little Hangleton, one of which Harry was determined to have framed and put up on their wall for the rest of their lives, as they always did.

Back at the mansion, Sirius approached them with a small wrapped present while he gestured at Remus and Regulus to join him. "Our gift," Sirius said with a genuine smile. Harry had been very relieved to see that Sirius' meeting with James the previous week had done wonders for his godfather's mood, and now Sirius seemed at peace with Harry marrying Tom.

"You shouldn't have," Harry said automatically, even though he knew very well guests would bring gifts to a wedding. It's just that he and Tom had everything their hearts desired as far as Harry was concerned and he genuinely didn't expect people to get them stuff, not even for a wedding.

Sirius snorted and waved Harry's mild objections away. "You're my godson, Harry. You're family, so of course you get a gift." Sirius all but shoved the box into Harry's hands. "It's from me, Remus and Reggie. Now open it."

Fondly shaking his head, Harry ripped away the blue paper to reveal a small, leather box. Harry opened the box to find a set of housekeys inside. Confused, Harry looked up at a grinning Sirius.

"It's a muggle cottage on the Isle of Skye, in Scotland," Sirius explained with obvious enthusiasm. "Since you two like wandering in the wilds so much, we figured you'd enjoy a vacation home of your own."

"Sirius," Harry breathed, voice choked up at the very generous and thoughtful gift.

"It truly wasn't necessary," Tom chimed in when Harry found himself at a loss of words. "But we appreciate it very much. Thank you."

"It needs some work," Sirius was quick to explain with an apologetic shrug. "It's at least a couple of hundred years old and it's not been renovated in a hundred years, probably. But you two seem to enjoy that sort of thing, so we figured you wouldn't mind."

"It's quite remote, no immediate neighbours," Remus added while Harry carefully took the keys out of the box to examine them since he still felt a little overwhelmed. "The box is a portkey, which will take you there when you're ready."

“It seems like a perfect place to spend our honeymoon,” Tom said with a warm smile as he placed his arms around Harry’s shoulder.

“That’s what we forgot!” Harry stared at Tom in dismay. “I told you we were forgetting something. The honeymoon, that’s what.”

“Well, it’s a moot point now,” Tom said with a chuckle. “We’ll leave tomorrow.”

“Yes, let’s do that.” Harry gave first Tom and then Sirius and the rest a smile filled with gratitude. “Thank you. This is very generous, and we’ll enjoy it without a doubt.”

“You’re welcome.” Sirius’s smile morphed into a crooked grin. “And once you’ve got it fixed up, we can borrow it for a holiday whenever you’re not using it.”

Harry laughed outright at Sirius’ devious plan, but he never objected to it because he realized how lucky he was to have his godfather in his life, considering how little time he’d gotten to spend with Sirius in his first life.

Severus offered them a gift as well. Harry opened the small, velvet pouch to find a vial inside. When he held it up to the light, both he and Tom inhaled shocked breaths once they realized what was inside.

“Phoenix tears,” Harry said in disbelief while he stared at Severus with wide eyes.

“A kingly gift,” Tom agreed quietly. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Severus said with a small smirk. “You’ll be making me plenty of money soon enough, Mr Bird, once your improved Wolfsbane hits the market.”

“Oh yeah,” Harry said with a laugh. He’d almost forgotten that potion was close to being approved and he’d promised Severus a nice percentage of sales in return for his silence and cooperation concerning Harry’s true identity.

“I suspect the Guild will approve the potion after the next full moon,” Severus said smoothly while Harry carefully tucked the vial away. “And I’m sure your Mastery will follow soon after that.”

“I certainly hope so,” Harry agreed.

Their employees Jessica, Madeline and Niall got them two gift cards for a magical spa day, which Harry absolutely loved. He thanked them profusely since he’d learned over their many lifetimes that it was important to pamper yourself occasionally.

After the coffee and cake, Tom went around offering everyone some alcoholic beverage of their choice and before long their guests were enjoying beer, wine and whiskey, with Harry gratefully sipping a glass of sweet, white wine. Willard took a few more pictures of everyone mingling before he called it a day, politely declining Tom’s offer to stay for dinner. Willard promised them to have their pictures ready in a week, so that gave them something to look forward to.

Harry chatted with Sirius and Remus for a while. When Remus excused himself to use the bathroom, Harry stepped a little closer to Sirius, unable to hold back the emotions he'd been feeling all day.

"Thank you," Harry whispered with an utterly sincere smile. "For accepting this. And me."

Sirius blinked a few times while he took a sip of his whiskey. Then he glanced at Harry with a confused frown. "You're welcome. Though you owe me no gratitude, Harry. I haven't forgotten what you did for me, getting me out of that hellhole."

Ah, yeah, Harry had all but rescued his godfather from Azkaban. He'd almost forgotten that, since so much had happened ever since Harry got his memories back over the summer. "Well, you owe me no gratitude for that," Harry quickly assured his godfather. "I'm just glad I finally had a chance to really get to know you."

Sirius sipped his glass again while he stared at Harry in contemplative silence.

"I mean," Harry explained himself in a rushed voice, "That in my first life I looked at you as some extended version of my parents, but I never really had the time to get to know you as a person. I'm just really happy that's changed, and that you're my friend."

"Harry," Sirius breathed before grabbing Harry into a tight hug, slapping his back a few times. "You're nothing like I thought you'd grow up to be," Sirius said once they pulled apart. "But I'm more than happy to call you family."

"Thanks," Harry whispered. Remus joined them again and they changed the subject to Harry's tentative plans for their new holiday cottage.

The food they'd prepared went over very well once they led everyone into the dining room where the spread was waiting in a buffet style. People came back for seconds, and in Sirius' case, thirds, so Harry assumed they all enjoyed their culinary efforts.

Afterwards, they all shared a few more drinks but none of their guests stayed past nine, since a few of them had work in the morning.

Tom cast stasis charms over all the dirty plates and glasses. "Clean up can wait." Tom led an amused Harry to the fireplace and stood in front of him.

"We're not done quiet yet," Tom whispered while he reached for Harry's hands. "Harry Potter, will you be my husband?"

Harry grinned while he felt his cheeks flush. That must be the wine, he decided. "Yes, of course. Tom Riddle, will you be my husband?"

"Yes, every life." Tom gave Harry a long, soft kiss which made Harry's toes curl and his stomach swoop. It also was the perfect finale to their wedding day, a confirmation who they really were and what their marriage really meant.

The prophecy was broken, once and for all, now that the Dark Lord and his vanquisher were bound together in love and commitment.

“I’m happy,” Harry said once they broke their kiss. “I just realized. I’m genuinely happy.” Harry pressed his forehead against Tom’s shoulder. “And I’m so, so glad we let Harry Potter officially disappear so we can avoid all the drama that comes with the Boy Who Lived.”

“I agree,” Tom whispered, brushing his lips against Harry’s hair. “We can be ourselves now, even if we have to hide a few things. Your real identity would have brought nothing but unwanted attention.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed while he leaned against Tom for a few moments more. It had been a perfect little wedding, as far as he was concerned, and he was happy to be married to Tom again, even if it was under an alias. “Where’s Izzy?” Harry asked, suddenly realizing he hadn’t seen their dog in a while.

They found Izzy hovering the dining room, sniffing the floors intently and devouring every little crumb of food she could find. Izzy had done very well during the whole day. She’d sat with Sirius until it was time for the rings, which Harry had tied to her collar with a colourful ribbon. After the ceremony she’d spent most of her time asking for pets from whoever was willing to give her attention before curling up in a leather chair in a corner for a much needed nap.

Harry and Tom walked back to their home hand in hand, to give Izzy a chance to stretch her legs before turning in for the night. Once they got home, Tom all but dragged Harry into the bedroom.

“Let me give you my gift for our wedding, darling,” Tom said while he started unbuttoning Harry’s robes. “I promised you a while ago I’d give fucking you a try, and there is no better time than now.”

Harry gave Tom a very dubious look. “Wait,” Harry said, gently grabbing Tom’s hands with his own and holding them in place. Tom was a very good actor, but Harry knew his soulmate better than he knew himself. And Tom didn’t exactly look like he was enjoying the proceedings. His expression was rather pinched, while he squinted his eyes. “How overstimulated are you right now? Be honest.”

Tom looked down, lips pursed into a tight line. “I’m fine.”

“Tom.”

Releasing a deep, deep sigh, Tom glanced up at Harry, looking more than a little devastated. “I want to do this for you, darling. This is our wedding night.”

“Oh, okay,” Harry said with a healthy dose of sarcasm. “Because that is just so sexy. Really, that gets me off like nothing else. My asexual husband forcing himself to have sex with me while he’s completely overstimulated after a very long and stressful day.”

Tom gave Harry a look, one that was full of disbelief and exasperation and even a little hurt.

Harry gave Tom a look right back, not at all willing to let anything hurt Tom, not even Tom himself. “How about we take a bath to relax, so your brain can process all it needs to process

right now.”

“Fine,” Tom whispered, sounding a bit defeated.

Harry was having none of that. “I don’t care about sex right now.” He held up a hand when Tom looked ready to protest. “Would I love it if you pounded me into the mattress? Of course I would. But not having sex doesn’t make me love you any less, Tom. Not having sex doesn’t take away from my happiness, I promise.”

“I know,” Tom conceded as they entered the bathroom. Tom got the taps going with a few flicks of his wand, filling the large bathtub with lots of bubbling water that smelled like sandalwood.

Harry understood how frustrated Tom must feel. Harry had been in Tom’s shoes in previous lives, where he’d wanted to sexually please Tom more than anything but his body just wasn’t into it at all. And even though Tom had always assured Harry it didn’t matter, a small part of Harry had always felt like a failure for not being able to give Tom something he’d truly enjoy.

“Sex really isn’t that important,” Harry said once they were both relaxing in the tub, sitting on opposite sides, the hot water engulfing them completely up to their chins, steam rising around them. “It’s wonderful and a lot of fun to have, sure, but there are plenty of other wonderful things to do in life that will bring us joy.”

“I know,” Tom said, though he didn’t sound very convinced.

“Sure you do,” Harry replied with an amused chuckle. “Let’s make a deal. If you really want to, we’ll give fucking a try, but it can’t be on a day your brain is about to explode from overstimulation, babe.”

Tom chuckled and gestured for Harry to come lie against him, which Harry eagerly did, back to Tom’s chest. “It’s a deal. I do feel exhausted, I admit. But I can still give you this.”

And before Harry could protest, Tom wrapped his fingers around Harry’s cock, which took an immediate interest in the situation by becoming rock hard in record time. Harry let himself relax against Tom’s chest while Tom reached down and fondled Harry’s balls with his free hand.

It didn’t take very long for Harry to reach his climax because even though Tom wasn’t all that interested in sexual gratification for himself, he still knew exactly what got Harry off.

“That was nice,” Harry sighed, nuzzling Tom’s jaw while he relaxed against his brand new husband. “Do you want me to do something for you? I could wash your hair, give you a massage, something like that.”

“Thank you, but no. I am rather overstimulated right now.” Tom released a regretful sigh. “But I’ll gladly take you up on your offer for a massage later this week.”

“Deal,” Harry said, beyond happy they’d come up with a compromise that suited them both. If there was one thing Harry had learned over the years about relationships, with Tom and with others, it was the importance of being able to compromise. Thankfully, Harry and Tom were so attuned to each other that things like that were second nature for them.

Some might assume that being stuck with the same person lifetime after lifetime would be boring, but to Harry the opposite was true. Having his soulmate with him throughout every life gave him an enormous sense of belonging. Having Tom there every step of the way throughout whatever crazy life they led offered Harry a sense of peace and calmness. Their many lives were quite unpredictable. They never knew what sort of mess they’d end up in next. Having Tom right there with him made all those lives worth living, nothing more and nothing less.

Tom was Harry’s rock in the very stormy sea that was endless reincarnation, and Harry knew Tom felt the same way about him. That sense of familiarity they had was a welcome anchor to keep them sane no matter what insanity they faced around them.

They spent another twenty minutes in the hot water, simply soaking together while they whispered about their plans for the upcoming week. After they got out of the bathtub they dried off with a quick spell and slipped naked under the covers of their bed while Harry turned off the lights.

“Love you lots,” Harry whispered as Tom pulled him closer to snuggle. “Husband.”

“I love you, too, husband,” Tom whispered back.

Harry chuckled. “I swear, we get sappier and sappier the older we get.”

“We can be as sappy as we want,” Tom pointed out, and Harry could hear the grin in his voice. “There is no one who can tell us what we can or cannot be in our old age.”

Harry smiled for a moment until several emotions overcame him again. It had just been that kind of day, hadn’t it? “I don’t know what we did to deserve any of this, babe, but I am genuinely thankful I get to live all our lives with you. It’s been tough at times, very tough, but I wouldn’t have missed any of it for the world.”

“Yes,” Tom sighed, holding Harry just a little bit closer, Harry’s back pressed to Tom’s chest. “Sometimes I think back at myself as a child in the orphanage, and a teenager at Hogwarts, and how much that child and that young man despised the idea of a loving family. How utterly convinced they were that love was a weakness best avoided. And then I call my younger self an utter fool because some of the best moments in all our lives were those spent with you and our loving families. And then I realize how lucky I am that I got to learn that lesson after all. That I wasn’t lost to the void, my soul in pieces, alone and unloved.”

Harry swallowed against a sudden tightness in his throat. “You’re so loved, Tom. All around the multiverse there are so many people who love you and me, and who we loved in return. Never doubt that.”

Tom cleared his throat, voice sounding a little thick in the darkness around them. “I know, darling. I’ve learned my lesson, don’t worry. We are so incredibly lucky.”

Just then a flash of lightning illuminated the world behind their curtains, soon followed by a loud clap of thunder. Harry smiled into the darkness and burrowed deeper under the covers. There was something so deliciously cosy about lying in your warm, safe bed with your soulmate while outside a storm raged.

“Let’s do that again in an upcoming life as soon as we’re able,” Tom said, sounding much recovered from their sudden round of sentimental confessions.

“Do what?” Harry asked, confused.

“Chase storms.”

“Oh!” Harry was tempted to jump up in sheer enthusiasm, but he was far too comfortable snuggled against Tom as he was, so he stayed put. “Yeah! Let’s do that. How many lives has it been?”

“Hm. I believe it was life number 127 when we were meteorologists,” Tom mumbled. “So about seventy or so lives ago.”

“That long,” Harry said in minor disbelief. It always amazed him how much time had passed for them once he started looking back at some of their lives in more detail. “That was one of our better lives, though, wasn’t it?”

“It certainly was. Let’s do it again,” Tom said with conviction and Harry could only agree with him. They’d been a husband and wife team of meteorologists at the University of Oklahoma where they researched, amongst other things, how supercell thunderstorms dropped tornadoes. This meant that every tornado season they spent a few months on the road in their modified truck, getting close to tornadoes so they could take any manner of measurements to figure out how tornadoes formed.

It had been an adrenaline-filled life with lots of science and lots of fast driving across very narrow country roads to stay out of a tornado’s direct path while still getting close enough to get what they needed. They’d even been part of a TV show about storm chasers for almost ten seasons, which had been a ton of fun.

Harry fell asleep without even realizing it and his dreams that night were filled with storms and twisters and Tom right there by his side as they had a front row seat to some of nature’s most impressive displays of power.

The next morning they woke up slowly with a few cuddles and kisses and Harry was filled with a new sense of peace that everything was going exactly as it should be going. Tom made them crepes for breakfast, a few the traditional way with lemon juice and sugar, and a few with Nutella because it was just plain good. Harry kept their cups of tea filled while they enjoyed their quiet morning.

They took Izzy for a stroll to Riddle Mansion where they cleaned everything up with magic. Tom washed all the plates and glasses and banished them back to their home while Harry packed up the leftover food to take with them. They wouldn't have to worry about cooking lunch or dinner for a few days while they were at their new holiday cottage.

Once they got home again, Harry made to pack some luggage for their impromptu honeymoon, but Tom stopped him. "Let's see what the cottage looks like first. We can apparate back here easily enough the first few days while we fix up the place first."

"That's probably a good idea," Harry agreed after some thought. They weren't in any hurry to have a vacation. They'd walked Hadrian's wall not even two weeks earlier, after all. "I'll pack some food for the day, and then we can sleep here tonight."

The portkey took them to a small cottage on the southern coast of the Isle of Skye. Before them was Loch Brittle and behind them were some of the small mountains that were found in that part of the island. It was a rough and rugged landscape, with not a tree in sight, but Harry loved it at once.

"Beautiful," Tom said quietly as they walked around the cottage and took in the landscape while Izzy ran around in sheer delight at all the open space. The cottage itself was quite small, but they could easily expand it with magic. It was structurally sound but inside it was in dire need of some upgrades. There was no electricity, no running water, and no way of heating the place aside from a single, small fireplace.

"Whatever muggle lived here must have really liked the off-grid lifestyle," Harry said with a laugh as they walked around the small living room. The ceilings were so low in places that Tom had to duck his head a few times to keep from banging it.

"I don't think it was a lifestyle choice but rather necessity," Tom said as he stared out the kitchen window to the small water well in the garden.

"I suppose. Getting muggle utilities this far out in the wild would be a difficult endeavour," Harry agreed, taking out his wand to start scrubbing the place clean. It wasn't that dirty, aside from the dust one might find in any place that has sat empty for a while.

"Let's make our own furniture," Tom suggested as they discussed what to do with some of the worn out furniture pieces that were left behind in the living room and bedroom. "Let's just get some wood and transfigure whatever we like."

"Excellent idea," Harry agreed easily enough. They'd enjoyed creating furniture, with or without magic, in more than one lifetime. Sometimes as a way to earn money and sometimes as simply a hobby. Harry loved their eclectic Hogwarts chic interior in Gaunt cottage, but the idea of creating a home from scratch was also very appealing.

While Tom applied the necessary runes around the rooms to expand them, Harry moved all the furniture outside for the time being. They'd find a way to use all that wood. Perhaps for some garden furniture for the upcoming summer months.

They had a lunch of leftover dumplings and eggrolls with a thermos of steaming tea, and afterwards they continued their work until all rooms were expanded.

“I’ll leave the bathroom to you if you leave the kitchen to me,” Harry said with a daring curve of his eyebrow.

“Agreed.” Tom grinned in return, and Harry knew at once that the bathtub Tom was going to install in their new cottage would be even bigger than the one they had at home. “How about we add a sauna?” Tom asked with a slightly manic gleam in his eyes.

“Whatever you want,” Harry agreed with a knowing chuckle. No matter where or when they lived, few things made Tom as happy as having luxurious bathing facilities. Their new cottage had a similar layout as their home, but thanks to magic they could add whatever they wanted and it would fit. “I do feel rather spoiled,” Harry remarked as he drew out some quick plans for the kitchen on a piece of paper he conjured. “Without much effort or cost we now own three homes. That seems a bit extravagant, don’t you think?”

Tom laughed outright at that. “It does seem a bit much. We’ve certainly made do with far less in some lives.”

Seeing as they’d been actually homeless more than once, that was most certainly true.

“I suggest we fix up the rest of Riddle Mansion after we’re done with our holiday home,” Harry said right as they got ready to call it a day. “We can use Riddle Mansion for any visitations from people who we don’t want to share the secret to our home with.”

“Not a bad idea,” Tom agreed, picking up a wriggling Izzy to apparate them both. “But first we create ourselves a second home.”

Once back home, Tom got out the leftover fried rice to make dinner for them while Harry inspected their mailbox. He found several cards inside, much to his surprise. Sure, they’d had a wedding but all the people they knew had been there, so who on earth was sending them cards?

The first one was from Theodorus Nott, sending them best wishes for their wedding.

The second one was from Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, also sending them best wishes for their wedding.

“What the fuck,” Harry muttered as he stared at the cards in his hands in utter confusion. “Tom! Why are Death Eaters sending us best wishes for our wedding?”

Harry handed the cards to his husband, and Harry always got a little kick whenever he was able to call Tom his official spouse again.

“Ah,” Tom said, apparently knowing more than Harry did as he briefly examined the cards. “The Fidelius makes sure no one remembers the connection between Tom Riddle and Voldemort, but that doesn’t mean that no one remembers Tom Riddle.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” Harry said, an immediate sense of relief washing over him. For a moment there he’d been worried they’d have to start dealing with Death Eaters again and Harry had no desire for that kind of drama in his life.

“The Prophet always publishes wedding announcements,” Tom explained while he finished dishing up their dinner. “Theodorus was my classmate, and the Malfoys will have heard of me from Abraxas.” They sat down at the dining table to enjoy their fried rice. Three bites in, Tom said, “I’ve been thinking.”

“Tom, come on!” Harry said, throwing down his fork while he leaned back in his seat and gave his husband a disbelieving look. “We’ve got plenty on our plates right now, all the way up until we go to Hogwarts. Whatever crazy plan is cooking in your brain right now can stay there.”

Tom did not look repentant at all, the fucker. “It’s nothing that will cost us a lot of time, I promise, darling.”

Harry rolled his eyes because he’d heard those kind of excuses about a thousand times before.

“Harry, listen,” Tom said, leaning forward and giving Harry an intent look. “We’re planning to transfer Hogwarts’ funding to an independent trust in the future.”

“I am aware,” Harry said with a defeated sigh. Honestly, he loved Tom with all his heart but his husband could be so fucking exhausting from time to time.

“Well, we need support for such a plan,” Tom said in an utterly reasonable tone, as though he wasn’t slowly ruining Harry’s entire existence. “And Theodorus and Lucius are on the Board of Governors.”

“Oh no,” Harry said, shaking his head over and over again. “No, no, no. Please tell me you’re not planning to bring Death Eaters into our lives.”

Tom didn’t say anything for a few long moments, which was answer enough as it was.

“We’re not contacting them as Death Eaters, I promise, darling. Those days are behind me, and they certainly don’t know who I truly am thanks to the Fidelius. But we do need support for our Hogwarts reform plans, even you can’t deny that.”

Problem was, Harry couldn’t deny that. They had tentative plans for their Hogwarts Mutiny, but a lot of it was very vague as of yet. Something along the lines of make a Hogwarts trust and somehow magically hope everyone will go along with implementing it without any opposition.

Fuck, Tom really did have a good point, didn’t he? They did need support and approaching influential purebloods who’d first made contact with them was a rather good plan.

But why did it have to be the Malfoys? Harry had never liked them in his first life, and he doubted he’d get along with them now no matter how much they needed them. Tom gave Harry a knowing look, as though he knew exactly what Harry was thinking.

“It’s our best option for changing Hogwarts,” Tom pointed out quietly.

Harry picked up his fork again with a loud sigh. “I know. Go ahead and contact them. Just don’t expect me not to curse them at least a little bit.”

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

We're making it to Hogwarts this chapter! Well, to be fair, we make it to the Hogwarts Express, but that totally counts. In other words, we're moving along in leaps and bounds this chapter, since that was necessary to stop the story from becoming bogged down.

I do really enjoy writing this story. This Tom and Harry are so in tune with each other that they're an absolute joy to write. I hope you'll all enjoy reading it, too.

Thanks for your patience and your support. Please do let me know what you think. Your comments always inspire me to keep writing.

Chapter 20

It took them three days to get the cottage on the Isle of Skye to a state where they could comfortably stay there for a longer period of time. Tom installed a luxurious bathroom with walk-in shower, a ridiculously large tub and even a small sauna that could comfortably seat two people. Harry created a small but functional kitchen with a large farmhouse sink and a cooking island.

To some it might seem like a strange way to spend your honeymoon, but both Tom and Harry genuinely loved creating things, especially a new home. Sirius had certainly been right when he'd mentioned just that when gifting them the cottage.

They'd dubbed their new vacation home Brittle Cottage, since it stood right on Loch Brittle, which was an inlet that opened up to the Atlantic ocean. Harry couldn't help but deeply inhale the salty air every time he stepped foot outside.

They created most of their own furniture from scrap wood they bought from a lumber yard. They both had Transfiguration masteries so turning planks and logs into chairs and tables wasn't a problem at all. For their interior decoration they apparated around Scotland and visited many second-hand stores.

Both of them loved to hunt for second-hand treasures, and in more than one life they'd made their living that way, by reselling whatever valuable items they found in second-hand shops and flea markets.

Harry loved collecting second-hand porcelain with over-the-top floral patterns. It didn't have to match, it just had to be in the same farmhouse chic style. Tom on the other hand had an obsession with kitchen gadgets and bought every hand-cranked mixer and potato ricer he could find. Before long they had their cottage decorated in a way that made them both instantly feel at home.

The only new thing they bought was a mattress to go on their transfigured cherry bedframe. They had learned long ago never to buy a second-hand mattress unless you were willing to go through the enormous shitshow that was trying to get rid of a bedbug infestation.

Bedbugs were tiny little demons that sucked human blood. Once you got them, it was incredibly difficult to get rid of them, taking huge amounts of time and even bigger amounts of money. Just the mention of the word *bedbug* usually sent shivers of revulsion through both Harry and Tom. They despised the little demons to such an extent that during one life, when Harry had a degree in chemistry, they'd developed a pheromone trap to catch the notoriously hard to trap bedbugs. It had made them a generous fortune that life since the traps sold well all over the world.

"I've been thinking," Harry said as they lay in their brand-new bed the first night they slept at Brittle Cottage.

"Hm?" Tom was burrowed under the new comforter, eyes closed.

"We should sell our bedbug pheromone trap to Mahatma Khan."

Tom blinked his eyes open and then frowned. "I think it's still a bit too early for that."

Harry gave Tom a questioning look. "What do you mean?"

"DDT almost wiped bedbugs out, as you know," Tom explained and Harry made an agreeable sound. "Their numbers are still very low as of yet. Their comeback won't be until the turn of the century."

"Yeah, all right," Harry said slowly. "But I suggest we market our traps just before then. That way we might even prevent their comeback entirely, if people and businesses have an easy, affordable way to get rid of the little demons."

"That is an excellent idea." Tom leaned over and pressed a kiss to Harry's lips. "Now stop talking about bedbugs or I'll have nightmares."

Snickering, Harry pulled the comforter a little higher over his shoulder. "Don't worry, babe. We've cleaned everything we brought in here thoroughly. We should be fine."

Tom shuddered in response and muttered a few choice curse words. Harry sympathized.

The rest of their honeymoon was spent exploring the countryside around Brittle Cottage and endless walks along the shore with Izzy.

"It'll be nice to come here," Tom said as they stood on the stony beach, the water licking at their shoes. "During our holidays away from Hogwarts."

"Yep," Harry agreed and threw a ball as far into the waves as he could. Izzy launched herself straight into the water, not at all perturbed by the cold temperatures of late March. "This will be a great place to recharge our batteries in between herding magical children all year long."

Thursday, just a few days after they returned home, Remus ended up on their doorstep unannounced.

“Remus,” Harry said, staring at the man with wide eyes as he opened the front door. “Come on in.”

Tom, who was sitting at the dining table writing a few letters to Theodorus Nott and the Malfoys to set up some appointments, also looked up in surprise. They never got unexpected visitors and that was just the way Tom liked it. Harry knew from personal experience that autistic people usually did not do well with unexpected visitors. Case in point: Tom rudely cleared his throat and went back to writing, his shoulders a little stiffer than usual.

“Sorry to just stop by,” Remus said, smart enough to pick up that something was amiss, though perhaps not exactly what.

“It’s fine,” Harry quickly said. “What can we do for you?”

“I’ve registered for my History Mastery,” Remus said as Harry gestured for him to sit down on the couch while Harry occupied the armchair. Harry did not offer any refreshments since he could see from the corner of his eye that Tom was really not happy with the intrusion.

“That’s awesome,” Harry said with an encouraging smile.

“I’ve been reading through the current textbooks that are used in Hogwarts and they’re horrendously out of date. Not to mention just plain boring.” Remus gave Harry an uncertain look. “So I’ve decided to write my own.”

“Great idea.” Harry leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hoping Remus would get to the point soon. The scritch of Tom’s quill on his stationary were getting louder and louder.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but could I use your holiday cottage for a week or so, to really get started on writing?” Remus chuckled, his expression fond. “Sirius keeps distracting me back at Grimmauld Place.”

“Of course!” Harry said at once. “Stay for two weeks, it’s no problem.” Harry genuinely didn’t mind sharing Brittle Cottage with his friends, especially since it would ultimately benefit their Hogwarts Mutiny.

“Thanks,” Remus said with a few nods, still seeming terribly unsure.

“If you introduce bedbugs into our second home I will gut you with a blunt knife!” Tom called across the room.

“Honestly,” Harry said with a sigh while Remus looked between them with wide eyes.

“Don’t mind him, he’s having a bad day.” That was all Harry was willing to say because the rest of the story was not his to tell. “Stop thinking like a Muggle, babe. Wizards have magic to deal with those little demons.”

Tom muttered a few curse words in response.

“We can apparate there now and I’ll add you to the wards.” Harry quickly got up and gestured at Remus to do the same.

It took Harry only fifteen minutes to adjust the wards and to give Remus a quick tour of the place. Remus was in awe of how much work they’d managed to do in such little time but Harry waved away his compliments.

“Sorry,” Tom said the second Harry stepped through the door again.

“Don’t even think of apologizing.” Harry wanted to approach Tom and give him a big, long hug, but he could tell by Tom’s squinting eyes that he was already rather overstimulated and didn’t need more sensory overload just then. Instead Harry walked into the kitchen to make a fresh pot of tea. “I remember how much I despised people just stopping by without an appointment the last time I was autistic, babe. You do not have to say a thing.”

“I know,” Tom whispered and then released a strangled sigh. “It’s just so fucking frustrating that small things like that cause me so much problems.”

“That’s the autism paradox, as I like to call it,” Harry said with a warm chuckle while he placed a fresh cup of tea in front of Tom. “Your mind is capable of great things through its ability to focus like no one else’s. But if an unexpected visitor shows up the world might just as well be ending.”

Shaking his head, Tom managed a short laugh. “I remember our first life, as Voldemort, how much I despised Death Eaters just dropping by. There was a reason I was so generous with the Cruciatus Curse.”

“That still cracks me up,” Harry admitted with a few guilty snickers. “Voldemort dealing with sensory overload by way of the Unforgivables.”

Tom sipped his tea and gave Harry a grateful smile. “Thanks, darling.”

“You’re welcome.” Harry gestured to the stairs. “Since you’ve got your little Death Eater socialization program going, I thought I’d take a crack at an ADHD potion. Alone,” Harry added quickly when Tom perked up. Thus far all they’d done when trying to create such a potion together was bicker and argue but they’d not gotten anywhere.

After giving Harry a few scrutinous looks, Tom relented and offered Harry a resigned nod. “Fine. Go make me a potion that will tame my mind. After I finish these letters I’m going to start on introducing The Magical Spark abroad. Get that setup before we’re expected at Hogwarts. Ireland first, then France, Germany, probably all Scandinavian countries.”

“Excellent idea. Have fun.” And with that Harry went upstairs to start his own project. He got out a new notebook and sat down at his potions station while he gave the creation of such a potion some dedicated thought. Quickly Harry realized that they’d gone about creating this potion the completely wrong way. Why on earth would they want to create it from scratch when Harry could simply modify an existing potion to work for ADHD induced inattentiveness.

What Tom needed most of all, Harry knew from bitter experience, was a way to keep his mind focussed instead of his thoughts resembling something of a mental pinball machine.

And there were plenty of potions out there that could serve as a basis on which Harry could build.

Over the next few weeks Harry started brewing every potion he knew that had something to do with concentration, focus and memory retention. He carefully wrote out the recipes, compared them and then started experimenting with adding new ingredients.

In the end Harry combined Baruffio's Brain Elixir with a Memory Potion and added a touch of Draught of Peace. What resulted was a stable potion that didn't contain any known toxins so it was safe to consume on a daily basis or as needed. Harry dubbed it his Concentration Concoction.

"Lunch with Theodorus was wonderful," Tom said as he arrived home later that afternoon. The Malfoys had declined to meet with Tom, apparently having no desire to socialize with an old classmate of Lucius' father. But Theodorus Nott had answered Tom's letter with a suggestion to meet for lunch somewhere. "He was curious how I looked so young, of course," Tom continued while Harry put the kettle on, Izzy dancing around Tom's feet in joy. "But he seemed satisfied with my answer that I'd experimented with a whole array of charms that gave me a permanent youthful appearance." That was the story Tom had come up with to explain his looks, since on paper he was a 65-year-old man. He just didn't look it, even taking into account that wizard usually aged slower than muggles. Tom looked not a day older than 30 at the most, and even that was pushing it.

"I'm glad it went well," Harry said, pouring them both a cup of tea before joining Tom at the dining table.

"I told him we'd be starting as Hogwarts professors soon and that we planned to change a few things." Tom sipped his tea and released a satisfied sigh. "Theodorus was most interested to hear that, especially when I mentioned a potential Hogwarts fund that's independent from the Ministry."

"I bet Nott and others are as frustrated with Hogwarts' dwindling budget year after year as we are."

"Exactly. Theodorus is well aware why the budget keeps shrinking and the whole Board of Governors is angry that Dumbledore won't just compromise with the Wizengamot on at least some issues." Tom sipped his cup again while Harry felt a huge wave of satisfaction washing over himself. That meant that they had a good chance to get the Board of Governors on their side when it came to their plans for Hogwarts. "How was your afternoon?" Tom asked with a curious look.

By way of answering, Harry reached inside his jeans pocket, pulled out the vial and placed it in front of Tom. "I present to you my Concentration Concoction."

"You finished it!" Tom gave Harry an admiring look and a bright smile before he picked up the vial, studying the potion within from all angles. "What did you use?"

“Not telling,” Harry said in a singsong voice. “I want you to be completely unaware of any ingredients because I need you to be able to tell me honestly how the potions works and what any potential side-effects are.”

“Yes, fine,” Tom sighed, thankfully understanding that if he knew the ingredients his observations of the potion’s functionality would be biased. “Should I take it now?”

“I suggest tomorrow morning,” Harry said and he got up to start cooking dinner.

The next morning, after they finished their breakfast of a simple bowl of oatmeal with baked apples and cinnamon, Tom opened the vial, gave Harry a cheeky wink, and downed the potion. He sat for a while, clearly trying to see if he felt any side-effects.

Harry quietly watched him while he finished his cup of tea. Eventually, after almost half an hour, Harry asked, “How do you feel?”

Tom’s eyes widened while his pupils dilated just a bit. “Like I have a lot of energy to burn. A *lot*.”

Harry sighed. That might be a good thing or a bad thing, but it was too early to tell. “We were planning to renovate the rest of Riddle Mansion, weren’t we? Might as well start right now.”

“Let’s,” Tom said with a slightly manic laugh.

They decided to walk to the mansion to give Izzy a chance to stretch her legs, and all the while Tom seemed ready to burst out of his skin with energy. “We need to update all the bathrooms, I’ll take care of that, and polish all the wooden floors upstairs, I can do that, too, and renewing wallpaper, we’ll have to buy that first.”

“Let’s start with the bathrooms, babe,” Harry said in a feeble attempt to reign Tom in a little. He shouldn’t even have bothered because for the rest of the day Tom was an absolute whirlwind of fixing and decorating his ancestral home. He accomplished at least thrice as much as Harry and by the time they got home he was clearly exhausted.

Harry pulled some homemade Bolognese sauce from the freezer and boiled some spaghetti for a quick but delicious meal. Tom ate it without saying a word, his shoulders sagging.

“Go to bed, babe,” Harry suggested after they finished a Greek yoghurt parfait with strawberries.

“Might as well,” Tom muttered, slowly pushing his chair back. “I’m exhausted.”

Harry waved him towards their bedroom and got started on the dishes. Afterwards he made himself a cup of coffee and turned on the telly to see if something good was on. Just as Izzy curled up half on top of him in the Lazy Boy, Tom called from the bedroom.

“Harry! I can’t fucking sleep!”

Harry found Tom lying on his back in bed, eyes wide open as he stared at the ceiling.

“What the fuck is in that potion, Harry?” Tom said with a frustrated whine. “My body is exhausted but my mind won’t shut down. I need sleep but my mind is wide awake.”

“All right, I’ll make some adjustments.” Harry aimed his wand up the stairs and summoned a Sleeping Draught. “Here, drink this. I’ll have a new version for you tomorrow.” Thankfully the potion worked and Tom was asleep in minutes. Sighing, Harry slumped up the stairs to put together a new version of his Concentration Concoction.

Tom was well rested the next morning and took Harry’s latest version without complaint. They went back to Riddle Mansion to continue their remodelling, but this time Tom only did twice as much as Harry, so that already was an improvement. He also wasn’t quite as exhausted during dinner that night and enjoyed the creamy potato and leek soup with freshly baked rolls that Harry had pulled from the freezer. Tom even managed to fall asleep at the same time as Harry did.

Harry woke up to the sound of pots clanging. He blinked bleary eyes as he looked around the room until he saw light streaming in from the living room. He glanced at his alarm clock on his nightstand. It was five o’clock.

What the fuck?

“Tom?” Harry called in a raspy voice. “What the fuck, Tom?”

Tom appeared in the doorway, giving Harry an apologetic smile. “I woke up at three, couldn’t go back to sleep, and I spent two hours tossing in bed before I decided to just get up. Your potion needs more adjustments.”

“Duly noted. I’ll add some valerian.” Harry fell back against his pillow. “Now could you please use a fucking silencing charm? Some of us have no trouble sleeping.”

“You were never a morning person,” Tom said as though he had just delivered a grave insult. Harry didn’t care. He just wanted more sleep.

The first thing Harry did when he got up was go upstairs to his potions lab and brew yet another version of his Concentration Concoction, now with added valerian.

Tom drank it, still did twice as much as Harry during their renovations of Riddle Mansion, and then fell asleep while they were having afternoon tea in the reception room.

“Okay, so maybe that was a bit too much valerian,” Harry said with a chuckle as he shook Tom awake.

Harry adjusted the potion again, and when Tom took it next, there was no more insomnia or falling asleep in strange places.

“This stuff is great!” Tom said before giving Harry a sound kiss. They were almost done with Riddle Mansion, much to both their pride and joy. “You should market this. It would benefit anyone with concentration problems.”

“I’ll send it to the Potions Gild.” And pretty much as soon as Harry had said those words a letter from the Potions Gild appeared in their mailbox, informing Harry that his improved Wolfsbane potion had been officially approved by the Gild and was ready for market, and that they had decided to award Harry his mastery in Potions.

“Congratulations, darling,” Tom whispered before giving Harry a strong hug. “I’m proud of you.”

“It’s not like I haven’t had a Potions mastery before,” Harry mumbled against Tom’s shoulder.

“Doesn’t matter,” Tom insisted quickly. “You still put in the work, and you created a potion that was able to focus even my mind.”

The ceremony was held at the Gild building in Fantastic Alley. It housed many of the biggest Gilds that awarded masteries for subjects such as Charms, Transfiguration and of course, Potions. Tom, Sirius, Remus, Regulus and Severus attended. Severus was officially Harry’s Master, so naturally he’d be there. Severus also sported a smug little smile throughout the short ceremony, because Harry’s improved Wolfsbane was ready for market and that meant Severus would get a nice cut of the profits, as agreed months before. Harry truly didn’t mind since he and Tom weren’t exactly lacking in gold.

The Gild official held a little speech and presented Harry with his Master’s certificate, which Harry gratefully accepted. They celebrated Harry’s Mastery with lunch at the Golden Goose, where they enjoyed a huge platter of different samosas and pakoras, together with some pints of ale.

Since they were now well into April, Harry got started on planting their vegetable garden. They would have the whole summer to grow and harvest fresh veg before they needed to go to Hogwarts come September. Any veg left in the garden beyond that point Sirius and Remus could harvest for themselves, since Tom and Harry would obviously be eating very well at Hogwarts, courtesy of the house-elves there. Tom helped him with digging over the beds, adding manure where needed, and planting all the tiny seeds that could go into the ground in April.

Any other, more temperature sensitive seeds they got started in flats in the greenhouse. Harry truly enjoyed puttering around in the garden, especially with Tom by his side. And since the Concentration Concoction was working wonders on Tom he also didn’t mind doing some menial labour in the garden for a few hours every day.

April turned to May and Tom got busy with expanding The Magical Spark. He hired people in Ireland and Harry helped to train them. After that they found a few muggleborns in France and trained those as well. May became June once they expanded to the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany and in July they tackled the whole of Scandinavia. Regulus was promoted to the Senior Manager of The Magical Spark, and he’d be able to keep the expansion going once Tom and Harry moved to Hogwarts.

“We need a break,” Harry said because they’d been training people non-stop over the past few months, or so it felt.

“Let’s spend a week at Brittle Cottage,” Tom easily agreed, which they did.

The first evening they were there, Tom gave Harry a wrapped package.

Harry accepted it with a frown and an uncertain smile. “It’s not my birthday for another couple of weeks, babe. You’re a bit early.”

“It’s not your birthday present,” Tom replied with a chuckle. “Just a little something to show you my appreciation for your help in expanding The Magical Spark across mainland Europe.”

Ripping the paper away, Harry’s mouth dropped open for a moment before he gave Tom a wicked grin. “Please tell me you’ll be using this on me.”

“That was the plan, yes,” Tom said with a sly little smile.

Tom had given Harry a nice, thick dildo, and Harry all but flew into the bedroom where he found a full bottle of lube already sitting on his bedside table.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” Harry kept chanting while Tom sucked his cock and fucked him with that dildo. Harry came harder than he had yet to in their current life. “Please tell me you’ll do that again,” Harry panted as they lay together afterwards.

“Gladly,” Tom whispered, pressing a kiss to the side of Harry’s head. “I’m not much interested in sex myself, but seeing you consumed by pleasure like that is just fucking beautiful.”

“I love you,” Harry felt compelled to point out again. He then patted the bed beside him and Izzy, who’d been sitting in a corner giving them worried looks, happily jumped up on the bed to go to sleep.

A week before Harry’s birthday, after they’d just gotten back from their holiday at Brittle Cottage, Sirius showed up on their doorstep without warning.

“They’re together,” Sirius said with a huge scowl on his face as Harry opened the door. “They’re fucking together.”

Behind them, Tom released a frustrated sigh at having to deal with an unexpected visitor again. The previous one was only 4 months ago, after all, Harry thought with a private laugh.

“Who are you talking about?” Harry asked.

Sirius made a wild gesture in obvious frustration. “Reggie and Snape! They’re fucking, Harry!”

“All right, let’s go get a pint,” Harry said, pulling the door shut behind him and waving at Sirius to follow him. He grabbed his godfather’s wrist and apparated them to a dark corner near Little Hangleton’s pub, which was called the Hare & Hounds.

“Two pints of Guinness,” Harry ordered from the bar while Sirius found a seat at a table in the corner.

“Okay, so Reggie and Severus are fucking,” Harry said once he was seated. He sipped his Guinness while Sirius did the same.

“It’s not right,” Sirius grumbled, grey eyes blazing with anger. “Reggie’s young and handsome and rich. He could get anyone. Why the fuck is his hooking up with *Snivellus*?”

“Don’t call him that,” Harry said automatically because he had no patience for vile nicknames, not from anyone. “And my guess is shared experiences.”

“What?” Sirius took a long gulp of his pint. “This stuff is great.”

“Reggie and Severus were both Death Eaters. They’ve got shared experiences that they can’t get anywhere else.” Harry shrugged and then gave Sirius a pointed look. “Frankly, Sirius, it’s none of your business who Regulus hooks up with. How serious is their relationship?”

It was a testament to Sirius’ honest anger that he didn’t make a joke about his own name. “Looks to be pretty serious. They’ve been spending more and more time together ever since Reggie got back, really.”

“So why are you really upset?” Harry quirked an eyebrow at his godfather. “You’re not in Hogwarts anymore and Severus is not the enemy.”

“I know, I know.” Sirius’ shoulders slumped while he released a long, tired sigh. “It’s just... it feels like I only just got Reggie back and now he’s running off with Snape of all people.”

Harry chuckled at Sirius’ affronted look. Sirius just couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to fuck Severus, least of all his very own brother. It was probably best that Harry never reveal that one of the favourite slash pairings he enjoyed writing whenever he wrote Harry Potter fanfiction in previous lives was Sirius/Severus. So much sarcasm and so much bickering, Harry just loved it. To be fair, Harry had an enormous weakness for the enemies to lovers trope, for obvious reasons.

“Reggie’s not going anywhere, mate,” Harry pointed out. “He’ll always be your little brother, no matter how often he fucks Severus.”

Sirius made a face as if his Guinness suddenly smelled like rotten eggs. “Can you imagine? Fucking Severus? Ugh.”

“Not really no,” Harry lied through his teeth. He’d written about it often enough, after all. “But Regulus is pretty hot, to be honest. I wouldn’t kick him out of bed.” This was said with an enormous grin.

Sirius barked a laugh before reaching over the table and giving Harry a playful slap on the side of his head. “Harry, for fuck’s sake. I don’t need that information!”

They finished three more pints of Guinness while they talked about everything and anything, and Harry had to admit that this was really nice, just spending an afternoon in the pub with

his godfather and friend. "They serve an all day breakfast here," Harry said when by the end of the afternoon both their stomachs were growling. "A full English. It's so good."

"We need that," Sirius agreed at once and after their meals were served he genuinely looked like he might burst into tears. "You weren't lying, Harry. This is a magnificent plate of food."

By the time Harry got back home he was mildly drunk and pleasantly stuffed. "Hi, babe!"

Tom gave him an amused look. "Have fun with the mutt?"

"You sound like Severus," Harry said with a bit of a slur before giving Tom a kiss.

"And you smell like a pub," Tom pointed out, though he couldn't hold back a smile.

"Bingo!" Harry said with a laugh. "I had fun, though. Was good to spend some time with Sirius."

"That's all that matters," Tom agreed before giving Harry a more intent look. "After your birthday, we should probably start on writing up some lesson plans."

"Crap," Harry said, almost tripping as he tried to sit down at the dining table. "That's right. If we're teachers we'll need to teach!"

Shaking his head, Tom went to make Harry a strong cup of coffee.

For Harry's birthday they went wild camping in the Scottish Highlands for a midweek. Izzy loved running up and down the hills through the heather. They really lucked out with the weather and it remained sunny and warm as they walked across the rugged landscape.

Right after that, Harry and Tom got started on their lesson plans. They'd both taught before so they had a good idea how to structure their classes and how much they could expect their student to learn in any given hour, so it wasn't too difficult a task but it still took time. They ate very well from their garden and shared their bounty of fresh vegetables with Sirius, Remus and Regulus. Cindy and most of the folks of the choir had their own vegetable gardens. It was a popular thing to do in Little Hangleton, to grow your own veg, and there even was an annual competition to see who'd grown the biggest potato and the longest pole bean and more. Harry was tempted to enter some of their own vegetables, but they hadn't really been trying to grow anything for competition so they didn't bother in the end. They did go to the competition itself, which was held in the community centre, and they cheered on Cindy as she won a prize for her colourful gerberas.

When Harry attended his last evening with the Little Hangleton Mixed Choir as their pianist before he was off to Hogwarts, he got a bit of a surprise. Everyone was gathered around a table, including Tom, that traitor. On the table stood a large cake with *Thanks, Jack* written in icing, with many candles burning around the words.

"You shouldn't have," Harry mumbled, feeling strangely emotional to be saying goodbye to the Choir. He wasn't going to miss Andrew Lloyd Webber's greatest hits, but he would definitely miss the people he'd come to call friends during the past year.

“It’s been more than a year,” Harry said as he and Tom walked home after their impromptu celebration with the choir. “I only just now realized, but it’s been more than a year since I woke up in this life.” He glanced up at Tom and bumped their arms together. “It’s been good, hasn’t it?”

“The best,” Tom said and he truly sounded like he meant that.

“I’m not riding on the Hogwarts Express,” Tom said in the third week of August. “I’ve thought about it, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to overstimulate myself like that on our very first day.”

“You know, I can look into a potion for sensory overload,” Harry offered at once. He was disappointed Tom wouldn’t be riding the train with him, because a part of Harry wanted to share that wonderful feeling of nostalgia with him, but he understood why Tom declined.

“Your Concentration Concoction works wonders, so please do,” Tom said with a pleased smile.

They had one staff meeting at Hogwarts where they were introduced to all the returning staff by Dumbledore, who didn’t display any open hostility to Tom but treated him just like Harry.

“Congratulations on your marriage this spring. I assumed you’ll be sharing quarters,” McGonagall said with a tight little smile. “You’ll be sleeping in the quarters adjacent to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, since Severus asked for his rooms not to be disturbed. He’s expected to come back next year.”

“That works for us,” Harry assured her with a smile.

The rest of the meeting was not very interesting. Harry and Tom had been teachers so often at so many different schools, magical and muggle, that they knew the kind of practical information that was exchanged during such meetings pretty much by heart.

The last week of August they spent getting their affairs in order. Regulus received Tom’s last minute instructions for The Magical Spark, though that was hardly necessary because Regulus understood all aspects of the business perfectly at that point.

They gave their chickens, coop and all, to Cindy, who loved the idea of having a few little chooks of her own.

“I’m going to miss you two,” Cindy said, giving them both firm hugs before looking at them with a tremulous smile. “You’d best come visit me during your holidays, you hear me?”

“It’s a promise,” Harry said, sad to say goodbye to his first friend in this version of their original world. “We’ll come see you around Christmas.” They had told her and everyone else in Little Hangleton they’d gotten jobs at a prestigious boarding school, which everyone accepted without question.

Right before they were ready to leave Harry got a letter from the Potions Gild informing him that his Concentration Concoction had been approved and was ready for market. Harry

immediately wrote a few letters to various potions producers to license the recipe to them, which would earn them a nice little bit of gold in the wizarding world and which would establish Harry's name, or rather Jack Bird's name, as a talented potioneer.

"See you at dinner tonight," Tom said early in the morning on September first.

Harry's stomach was full of nervous jitters. He was going to Hogwarts! Of course, he'd attended Hogwarts many times in the past as different people, but now he was going to see his old loved ones again. He honestly couldn't wait to see Ron and Hermione and Neville and Ginny and Hagrid and... well, everyone, really.

"See you tonight." Harry kissed Tom, long and hard, and then picked up his bag which held a few books, a thermos of tea and a packed lunch. "Be a good girl, I'll see you later, too," Harry muttered while pressing a kiss to Izzy's fuzzy head. And then he was ready. With a spring in his step, Harry left the cottage and apparated to King's Cross, platform nine and $\frac{3}{4}$.

The Hogwarts Express looked as beautiful as Harry remembered it from each of his lives he'd been a British Wizard. Steam billowed while all around him parents said goodbye to their anxious and excited children. Harry couldn't hold back a huge grin as he weaved through the people and hopped on board of the train. He slowly walked down the corridor, peeking inside the compartments and seeing so many familiar faces.

Lavender Brown, Terry Boot, Blaise Zabini, Seamus Finnegan, Cedric Diggory... That last one made Harry swallow, but just for a moment. There was no Voldemort this life so Cedric would live a long and happy life this time, Harry was sure of it. Eventually Harry saw Neville Longbottom sitting in a compartment with a girl Harry didn't recognize.

The compartment door was open so Harry stepped inside the compartment and addressed Neville. "Hello, might I join you? The train is filling up fast."

"Are you a professor? What do you teach?" the girl asked eagerly and at once Harry recognized that demanding tone.

That girl was Hermione. And when Harry gave her a good look, he did recognize her, though she looked quite different from the Hermione Granger he'd known in his first life.

Because this Hermione was black.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

We're at Hogwarts, finally! Barely, but we made it!

The first few weeks at Hogwarts will be written in a bit more detail, but after that we'll see some time jumps. I'm not going to write all seven years in daily details but we'll see the most important and entertaining moments of Harry and Tom's Hogwarts Mutiny. In other words, this story will at some point come to an end. It won't be an epic tale that goes on for a million words. I can already reveal there will be a sequel, and it will be Harry and Tom's next life, and yes, it will be set in the MCU and they will reunite with Loki in that life. But we're not there yet.

Thanks for your support and for your patience. Let me know what you think! Your comments give me life.

Chapter 21

Harry managed to keep it together, thankfully, but his mind was racing with a lot of questions. "I'm Jack Bird," Harry said as he sank down on the seats beside Neville. "And I'm your Potions professor for the year."

Even though the life they were living as themselves again was very similar to their first one, there had always been small changes. A waterpark in Surrey that hadn't existed before. Barty Crouch Jr still imprisoned in Azkaban. Evan Rosier still alive until Harry used him up to resurrect Tom. And probably many more things that Harry and Tom hadn't noticed yet.

Harry couldn't help but wonder what was different about Hermione's family tree, but of course he wasn't going to ask because ultimately it didn't matter.

"Potions? Really? I've read the whole book already and it seemed a little wishy washy at first but the more I read the more I started seeing the patterns of how the different ingredients work together," Hermione rambled as she looked at Harry with wide, adoring eyes.

This Hermione was still obviously the Hermione he knew and loved and that was all Harry needed to know.

"Yeah," Harry agreed with a warm smile. "Brewing is much like cooking. The more you do it, the better you become and the more the recipes start making sense."

"I'm just glad Snape isn't there anymore," Neville whispered, looking like he wasn't sure if he was allowed to speak at all. "He isn't, right? Because I heard some horrible things about him from a second cousin."

“Professor Snape is taking a sabbatical this year so you don’t have to worry about him.” Harry couldn’t hold back a chuckle at Neville’s instantly relieved expression. “Snape may have a bit of an unpleasant personality, but he takes his potions very seriously and he’s one of the most gifted Potions Masters I know. He was my Master when I was working towards my own Mastery,” Harry said when it looked like Hermione might burst with all the questions she had for him.

“So which Houses are you hoping to get sorted into?” Harry asked, to change the subject. And to perhaps give one of his old friends a nudge in a different direction.

“Gryffindor!” Hermione all but yelled. “I heard it’s the best House.”

“You’d be wrong,” Harry said at once, though he softened his words with a small smile. “All Hogwarts Houses are great. Let me guess. Minerva McGonagall, the Head of Gryffindor House, came to deliver your letter and she told you her House was the best.”

Hermione frowned, looking like she wasn’t quite sure where Harry was going with this.

“Now imagine for a second if Professor Flitwick, the Head of Ravenclaw House had delivered your letter instead,” Harry continued while Hermione’s face did a few interesting things as she understood the point Harry was making.

“Then I would be sitting here saying Ravenclaw was the best House,” Hermione finished for Harry with a triumphant look. “Oh, that makes so much sense.”

“Now I can tell from just talking with you for a few minutes that you are a very intelligent girl who loves to read,” Harry said. Hermione ducked her head at hearing those compliments. “These are qualities that won’t be appreciated in Gryffindor House. In fact, those qualities would make you into a bit of an outcast in that House. But Ravenclaw would welcome someone with those qualities with open arms.”

“Would they bully me?” Hermione asked in a very small voice. “In Gryffindor?”

Harry’s expression became utterly serious. “They’re not allowed to, but they still might do that. But I can guarantee you they won’t appreciate you.”

Chewing on her lip, Hermione gave a few thoughtful nods.

There was a reason Harry was pushing this Hermione towards Ravenclaw. In his first life, once they were all adults and well out of Hogwarts, he and Hermione had often talked about the choices they’d made at school. Hermione had said she never regretted arguing with the Sorting Hat to place her in Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw, as the Hat had initially wanted to do, but that she’d always wondered what would have happened if she had chosen Ravenclaw.

Hermione’s life would be different. For one, Harry doubted she and Ron would end up together. Now, Harry loved both Hermione and Ron with all his heart, but even he had noticed as the years went on that Ron and Hermione weren’t all that well suited for each other. Ron had far too little sympathy that an extraordinary mind like Hermione’s needed

constant stimulation, and Hermione had far too little patience that ordinary people like Ron needed much more time to accomplish tasks Hermione could do in a heartbeat.

Hermione had even commented on this a few times as they got older, when their kids were already grown. During more than one evening spent sharing a bottle of wine Hermione had confessed that while she loved Ron she did feel like she'd settled when she married him. He was the easy, comfortable choice, and right after the war that's what Hermione had craved. But as she grew older, her needs changed and she often lamented that she felt she could have had a different life, much better suited to her hungry mind, if she'd simply waited and given herself a chance to heal immediately after the war before committing to a relationship with anyone.

Harry had admitted during those evenings that he felt exactly the same about Ginny. Yes, Harry loved his wife, got along great with her, but Harry was well aware that he'd married her so he could simultaneously marry her family as well.

It wasn't that either Hermione or Harry had been unhappy in their relationships. It wasn't quite that bad. It was more the idea that something better may have been waiting for them if they hadn't settled so quickly for the easiest candidate to share their lives with.

And right then and there, Harry wanted this Hermione to get the chance she'd always regretted not taking in his first life.

"How about you?" Harry turned towards Neville while he raised his eyebrows.

"Gran wants me in Gryffindor but I'll probably end up in Hufflepuff," Neville said, his shoulders slumping while he stared at his shoes.

"Gryffindor and Hufflepuff are both fine Houses," Harry said at once. "They would both be proud to have you, I'm sure."

Neville stared at Harry in disbelief, but Harry knew that Neville was a true Gryffindor at heart and would go straight to the House of the Lions. Neville had defied Voldemort to his face when everyone else stood back. That kind of bravery was rare, but Neville had plenty of it, even if he didn't yet know it.

"Say, what are your names?" Harry asked, since he realized they hadn't even introduced themselves.

"Hermione Granger."

"Neville Longbottom."

"Nice to meet you, Hermione and Neville," Harry said, beaming at his two old friends. He truly loved seeing them again, even as tiny eleven-year-olds, and his chest hadn't stopped glowing since he'd boarded the train.

Slowly, the Hogwarts Express pulled away from the station and all three of them sat up a little in excitement.

“What house were you in, Professor Bird?” Hermione asked with a curious look.

Harry almost wanted to tell her to call him Jack, but that would be inappropriate. He was their professor now, after all. “I didn’t attend Hogwarts. I was raised in the United States, and no,” Harry quickly added at seeing Hermione’s eager look, “I didn’t attend Ilvermorny either, unfortunately. I was home-schooled, so this is all as new for me as it’s for you.”

Hermione asked Harry a ton of questions over the next hour which Harry didn’t mind answering. Neville seemed content to just sit back and listen, though he occasionally asked a question as well. Soon after that they saw Ron walking past their window, pausing for a moment to look inside.

Ron had confessed, once they were in Auror training together, that he’d definitely wanted to meet Harry Potter on the train and that he was secretly chuffed when he saw Harry Potter sitting in a compartment by himself. They’d both had a good laugh about it, because Ron had not been subtle in his fanboying as an eleven-year-old. Harry teased him about wanting to see his scar for a few weeks after that conversation, randomly lifting up his fringe whenever Ron was around and telling him to take a good look.

Honestly, Harry couldn’t blame Ron for his behaviour as a child and Ron had snapped out of that phase soon enough anyway.

Leaning over, Harry slid the door open, much to Ron’s obvious surprise. “Can we help you?”

“Er...” Ron looked at Harry with wide eyes, clearly not expecting to meet an adult on the Hogwarts Express. “I was looking for Harry Potter.”

“He’s probably not on the train,” Harry said with a shrug, though he was inwardly very amused by Ron’s reddening face. “But we’re a friendly bunch so you’re welcome to join us.”

“What do you mean, Professor?” Hermione said, sitting up while giving Harry a look full of disbelief. “I read all about Harry Potter and he should be joining us this year at Hogwarts.”

“He’s missing,” Neville whispered.

“Yeah,” Ron said, shuffling inside the compartment before he even seemed to know what he was doing. “My dad works at the Ministry, in a different department, but even he and his colleague were brought in to help with the search.”

“What happened?” Hermione demanded while Ron sat down beside her.

“No one knows,” Ron said mysteriously, which apparently drove Hermione up the wall if her gnawing her lip in frustration was any indication.

“I heard he ran away,” Harry supplied, because it wouldn’t hurt anything if these kids knew the truth. “He lived with his muggle family but they treated him very badly, so he just ran away.” Harry leaned forwards a little. “I even heard that Harry Potter didn’t even know he was a wizard.”

Shocked gasps were heard around the compartment as Ron, Hermione and Neville all looked at each other with wide eyes. Harry's chest glowed even more and he couldn't hold back a very happy smile at seeing his former best friends sitting together again. Ah, such lovely nostalgia.

"Has anyone seen Harry Potter?" Draco Malfoy yanked the compartment door open and gave everyone a haughty look. When he spotted the adult in the corner he plastered on a polite little smile. "I heard he was on the train."

"I'm afraid you heard wrong," Harry said while Ron was puffing up and up, ready to throw down if he needed to. Harry wasn't about to let that happen. "I doubt very much Harry Potter will attend classes with you this year."

"Oh." The disappointment was clear on Draco's pale face. "Are you a professor?"

"Professor Jack Bird," Harry said pleasantly. "I'll be teaching Potions this year."

"Potions?" Draco's eyes widened almost comically while he inhaled a sharp breath. "What happened to Professor Snape?"

"He is taking a sabbatical this year."

"And who will be our Head of House then?" Draco all but demanded.

"I'm not sure," Harry said with a bit of a challenging look. "Seeing as you don't have a house yet, do you?"

Draco huffed, gave Harry an annoyed look, and slammed the compartment door shut.

"He wasn't very nice, was he?" Hermione said to no one in particular.

"His whole family is a rotten bunch," Ron said with a disgusted look on his face. "He's going straight to Slytherin, mark my words. They're nothing but bad eggs."

"Merlin was a Slytherin," Harry said conversationally, and once again shocked gasps were heard around the compartment.

"Is that true?" Hermione asked, sitting so far towards the edge of her seat that she was in real danger of falling off if the train gave a sudden jerk.

"Yep," Harry said with a grin. "Slytherin House is no more evil than any other House." When Ron looked ready to argue, Harry said, "Slytherin House stands for ambition and cunningness, amongst other things. Those are not evil traits."

"Maybe so," Ron countered with a mulish look on his face. "But there wasn't a follower of You Know Who who wasn't in Slytherin."

"Peter Pettigrew was in Gryffindor," Harry said with a bit of a triumphant look.

"Right," Ron muttered with a mild scowl. "I'd forgotten about him."

“Most people do,” Harry said patiently. “It’s much easier to blindly hate a whole group of people than it is to realize that each and every one of us has the capacity to do horrible things. Most of us choose not to, of course, but each of us has that potential.”

“That makes sense,” Hermione said while Neville nodded in agreement.

“Were you a Slytherin?” Ron asked with narrowed eyes as he glared at Harry in suspicion.

“Nope, I never went to Hogwarts. But I’m married to a Slytherin. In fact, my husband is a descendant of Salazar Slytherin himself. He even speaks parseltongue.”

“That’s an evil trait!” Ron all but shouted.

Hermione had widened her eyes at hearing that Harry was married to a man, but she quickly forgot about that fact and turned in her seat to glare at Ron. “Professor Bird is a very kind man. I doubt very much he would be married to someone evil.”

“You’d better get over your prejudice against Slytherins,” Harry said with a pointed look at Ron. “Because my husband, Professor Tom Riddle, will be teaching you Defence Against the Dark Arts this year.”

Ron got a very complicated look on his face, as though he was instantly constipated yet also came very close to crapping his trousers.

Hermione gave Harry a look full of solidarity. “Well, I cannot wait to meet Professor Riddle. I’m sure he’ll be a great teacher.”

“He is a very good teacher,” Harry said with a warm smile. “And I think you’ll like him, Hermione. He’s easily as smart as you are.”

Since there would be no more Voldemort, Harry had decided at some point during the summer that he was going to challenge the House prejudice that was still so rampant at Hogwarts. Ron was a good example of that, but so was Draco in his own right. Harry was determined to challenge all of their ideas at every opportunity he could and to make them understand that there were good and bad sides to each of the Hogwarts Houses, but that ultimately everyone was a human being in the end.

“Oh no,” Neville cried out of the blue. “Trevor’s escaped!”

“Who’s Trevor?” Ron asked in confusion.

“My toad. He must have slipped out of the door.” Neville looked genuinely upset, his eyes even filling with a few unshed tears.

“Not to worry.” Harry got up, pulled out his wand, opened the door a crack and said, “Accio Trevor the toad.” Within seconds a toad came flying towards him and Harry caught it easily before handing him to a very relieved Neville.

“Do any of you two have pets?” Harry asked as he sat down again, tucking his wand away.

“My parents offered to buy me an owl or a cat,” Hermione said in a prim voice. “But I told them I’d much rather use that money to buy more books.”

“Spoken like a true Ravenclaw,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“Do you have pets, Professor?” Neville asked quietly while he held onto Trevor for dear life.

“We do. We have an owl named Pluto and a dog named Izzy. She’s a Staffordshire Bull Terrier.”

“A dog?” Neville looked like Harry had just confessed he kept a Hungarian Horntail as a pet.

“She’s a sweetheart, I promise,” Harry quickly assured the kids. “You’ll be seeing plenty of her around Hogwarts.” Harry looked at Ron. “And you?”

Ron shook his head, face the picture of misery. “I was going to get my brother Percy’s pet rat Scabbers while he got a new owl, but then it turned out Scabbers was a Death Eater so now I’ve got no pet.”

“What?” Hermione shrieked.

And with that Ron launched into the exciting yet horrifying story of how Percy found out he’d been sleeping with a Death Eater named Peter Pettigrew for a few years.

When the trolley stopped by an hour later, Harry treated all his old friends to some pumpkin pasties and chocolate frogs. He really enjoyed spending time with them again after so many years, but at the same time he became more and more sure he’d made the right decision to not return as an eleven-year-old Harry Potter.

As much as Harry loved Hermione and Ron and Neville, these were *children*. Spending a few hours with them was fine, pleasant even. But Harry couldn’t imagine having to spend every waking moment with them while pretending to be eleven himself. No, Harry was now absolutely sure disappearing Harry Potter had been the right thing to do.

Being an adult having to pretend to be a child was a fucking nightmare, to be honest. Harry and Tom had been forced to do it quite a few times in all manner of lives whenever they met when they were still quite young and they both hated it. Harry was sure that if he’d had to do it this life, it would have ruined his memories of his old friends because he would have grown far too frustrated being around their child versions all the time.

No, this was a great solution. Harry was going to be their professor, and once they were older and closer to adulthood Harry might try to strike up a genuine friendship with them at some point. But until that time he’d keep a professional distance, as was expected of him anyway. Still, seeing them sitting there, arguing about chocolate frog cards, was a blessing and a joy Harry hadn’t thought he’d ever receive again after almost 200 lives.

“Why are you riding on the train, but your husband isn’t?” Hermione asked as they neared their destination. “If you don’t mind me asking,” she added quickly when Harry quirked an eyebrow at her.

“Because my husband has ridden this train often enough in his own school days,” Harry replied easily. “But I had never been on it, so I wanted to see what it was like. Thank you very much to all three of you for making my journey to Hogwarts so enjoyable.”

“You’re welcome,” Hermione said sincerely while Ron and Neville muttered similar things. Harry was ready to let his young friends go again, let them find their own way at Hogwarts from now on, though he imagined that they might form some sort of friendship amongst themselves anyway since they’d spent a whole day chatting on the train.

When they arrived at the station, Harry let his young friends off first and told them to look for the tallest man they’d ever seen. Harry loved Hogwarts and the nostalgia of riding the train, but he wasn’t crazy enough to step inside those rickety boats with a bunch of nervous eleven-year-olds. He’d take the carriages instead. As Harry stepped off the train, he spotted an identical set of redheads in front of the crowds, walking towards the carriages.

A lump formed in Harry’s throat. It was so good to see Fred alive again. George had never been the same again after losing his twin, and frankly, neither had Molly after she lost one of her sons. Seeing the twins niggled at Harry’s mind that there was something he needed to remember about them. Something rather important.

Harry walked quietly towards the carriages and it wasn’t until he saw Fred and George step into a carriage a long way ahead of him that Harry remembered what it was.

The Marauder’s Map!

Holy fuck, the twins had the Marauder’s Map. And the map never lied. It would most certainly show Harry’s real name instead of Jack Bird.

A hot flash of panic gripped Harry’s entire body but he pushed it down at once. Now was not the time to lose it. He could easily break into Gryffindor Tower and steal the map from the twins, he was sure. And if the twins found out before Harry could get the map, he could simply obliviate them.

There was no reason to panic. At least, that is what Harry kept telling himself as he rode in a carriage with a bunch of fourth year Hufflepuffs, all very friendly when he introduced himself as their new potions professor. Apparently they were clearly relieved to know they wouldn’t have to put up with Snape for a whole year.

Tom was already seated at the Head Table when Harry walked inside the Great Hall. Harry gave him a beaming smile while heading straight to him.

“Hi!” Harry said down in the empty seat Tom had been saving for him, right next to Professor Flitwick.

“How was the Hogwarts Express?” Tom asked with an amused smile at Harry’s obvious enthusiasm.

“Amazing. What a fun way to go to school,” Harry said honestly. “I spent my time with a few first-years. A very friendly bunch.”

“Ah, Professor Bird,” Flitwick said while he turned in his seat to address Harry. “Your husband was just telling me you’ve invented a Concentration Concoction that helps him a great deal.”

“I did, yes. It will be marketed soon. I’ll hopefully sign a contract for it this week,” Harry said, curious where Flitwick was going with this.

“That is excellent news.” Flitwick gave him a bright smile. “A lot of my Ravenclaws have trouble concentrating, especially around exams. Too much stress.”

“Then the Concentration Concoction should help them,” Harry said while wondering if perhaps Ravenclaw House attracted a higher percentage of neurodiverse students than other Houses.

“I will inform my students of its existence during our first House Meeting,” Flitwick said just as McGonagall led the first years in.

The sorting went much as Harry remembered it, save for two things. When Hermione sat down on the little stool, the Sorting Hat only needed a few seconds to shout, “Ravenclaw!” And when Harry Potter’s name was called, no one walked up to the front, much to everyone’s obvious disappointment. Harry made a show of sharing a concerned look with Tom while they could both see the humour shining in the others’ eyes.

Eating dinner in the Great Hall again, even at the Head Table, wasn’t that much of a novelty, though Harry and Tom still enjoyed it plenty. Even though this was the first time they were Harry and Tom since their first life, they had been plenty of other people attending Hogwarts, and they’d even been professors at Hogwarts more than once before. Still, it was good to taste the Hogwarts house-elves’ cooking again.

From their position at the Head Table, Tom and Harry could hear wisps of conversation from the Slytherin, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables. Most students were discussing theories of what might have happened to Harry Potter. Some theories were clearly more realistic than others. A few Ravenclaws were convinced Harry had been sent to Beauxbatons or Ilvermorny for schooling to protect him from the followers of Voldemort who had gotten away. That wasn’t a bad theory at all, even if Harry was sitting right there listening to it.

A few Hufflepuffs were convinced poor Harry Potter was dead and the Ministry was covering it up by pretending he’d simply disappeared into thin air. Also a reasonably realistic theory.

And at the Slytherin table the consensus seemed to be that Harry Potter was in fact attending Hogwarts disguised as some random muggleborn, to protect him from some evil plot to see him dead. Harry was impressed how close those snakes came to the truth, even if they got the disguise and motivations wrong. Tom also looked proud of his House, but disguised it very well.

“I’m going to have so much fun with that theory,” Harry whispered to Tom, suddenly struck by inspiration. “I think I’m going to misspeak during one of my classes and accidentally call Justin Finch Fletchley or Dean Thomas ‘Harry Potter’.”

Tom gave Harry a very unimpressed look. “Be careful with that. You might very well ruin some kid’s whole first year.”

Harry gave that some thought and finally nodded. “Yeah, okay, if the wrong people find out they might haul the kid in for questioning at the Ministry or something. Still, it would have been hilarious.”

“That’s certainly true.”

Glancing to the side and making sure that Flitwick was distracted, Harry pulled his wand out under the table and cast a discreet privacy charm.

“The Marauder’s Map,” Harry whispered urgently, giving Tom a significant look. “I completely forgot about that bloody thing.”

“Ah.” Tom glanced towards the Gryffindor table, keeping his face set in a blank mask. “I assume the Weasley twins still have it.”

“Yeah, as far as I know.” Harry heaved a very frustrated sigh. “And the map never lies.”

“So obliviate them when they confront you.” Tom frowned a little. “Unless you think they’ll take to Dumbledore to show him?”

That sent another hot flash of panic through Harry, until he realized the twins were true Gryffindors and they’d never plan that far ahead. “Nah, they’d simply come and investigate on their own.”

“Exactly. Now stop worrying and enjoy being at Hogwarts again.” Right as Tom said that their dishes disappeared and instead their tables were suddenly filled with all manner of desserts.

“What an excellent idea.” With a huge grin, Harry served himself a slice of treacle tart, one of apple pie and a small bowl of trifle. Tom rolled his eyes, yet also had two slices of apple pie because the Hogwarts house-elves sure knew how to bake.

Dumbledore took them by surprise during his speech after the tables were empty of all food. “All students should avoid the third floor corridor if they don’t want to die a most painful death.”

Harry shared a wide-eyed look with Tom. “For fuck’s sake,” Harry muttered, thankful their privacy spell was still up. “Harry Potter isn’t even here and there’s been no sign of Voldemort and he’s still setting up that ridiculous obstacle course?”

“How about we sabotage it?” Tom suggested with a wicked little smirk and Harry had to work very hard not to cackle in delight at that idea.

“Yes. Let’s.” Harry had a million ideas already how they could sabotage Dumbledore’s disturbing goals for that year.

After that all students left for their beds and Harry and Tom did the same. “Our quarters are quite nice,” Tom told him as they walked towards the 3rd floor where the Defence classroom was and also their rooms. “I left Izzy in her crate with a smoked pig’s ear.”

“I’ll take her for a quick walk,” Harry said just as they reached the door to their quarters. They were fairly close to the corridor Dumbledore had just warned the students about. That wasn’t a bad thing, Harry decided. This way they could keep an eye on it and chase off any curious students.

Izzy was elated to see them and Harry picked up her leash even though he didn’t attach it to her collar. Let Izzy run around for now. If he met a huge throng of students he could always leash her.

“We have a storage closet right there that we could enlarge and charm to look like the outside, with some grass and trees,” Tom said as he sat down on the bench in their small hallway to take off his shoes. “That way we don’t have to walk through the whole castle late at night just to take Izzy for a wee.”

“Good idea. Also great during inclement weather.” Harry leaned over and gave Tom a long, lingering kiss. “Missed you today,” Harry whispered while Izzy stood in front of the door, wagging her tail impatiently.

“Pfft.” Tom sounded exasperated but he couldn’t hide his smile. “It’s probably healthy for us to spend some time apart. We’ve become far too co-dependent in our old age.”

“That is certainly true.” Harry opened the door to release the Kraken, also known as a very enthusiastic Izzy, who bounced out into the hallway and turned around in a few circles while she waited for Harry.

The trek through the dark castle was accompanied by strong feelings of belonging and of coming home. No matter how many times Harry had attended the school and had even lived there to teach, Hogwarts would always have a very special place in his heart. Izzy seemed to enjoy running through the empty corridors and down the stone staircases until they reached the entrance hall. Harry easily pushed the door open and Izzy all but flew out into the darkness.

Harry took her for a small walk around the lawns and part of the castle, for no more than 15 minutes, so Izzy could do her business and stretch her legs before turning in for the night. Just as Harry opened the heavy doors again to get back inside, two familiar figures stepped into his path from either side of the door.

Fred was holding the Marauder’s Map opened in his hands. He glanced at it and then at Harry, and back again. George soon did the same as he stepped up to his brother.

“Well, well, well,” Fred said while his mouth quirked up in a grin.

“If it isn’t Professor Potter,” George added with an equally wide grin.

“That was quick,” Harry said with a sigh and reached for his wand.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

We've got the first day at Hogwarts, with a few small surprises for Harry and Tom. Izzy makes a new friend, Harry meets an old one, and Harry and Tom learn an important lesson from Sprout of all people.

Thank you for your patience and for your support. It means the world to me. Let me know what you think! Your comments always keep me writing.

Chapter 22

“Wait, wait,” Fred said in a hurried voice while he stared at the wand in Harry’s hand with wide, panicked eyes.

George raised both of his hands in a gesture of surrender while he, too, paled drastically. “We won’t tell anyone, we swear.”

Harry’s smile was full of melancholia. “I know,” Harry said in a soothing voice, still keeping his wand aimed at the twins. And he did know that Fred and George, once they’d given their word, wouldn’t betray him. But these were a bunch of thirteen-year-olds, with no Occlumency shields to speak of.

“We can help you,” Fred rattled on, voice taking on a decidedly desperate edge. “We’re clever and resourceful.”

“It would probably help you to keep yourself hidden if you have two accomplices in the student population,” George added, his wide eyes pleading.

Harry considered that for a few seconds. Truth was, though, that Harry had no need for a bunch of kids to help him in any sort of way. He and Tom had their future planned out and so far there had been no real obstacles in their paths. A few minor hiccups, but nothing they couldn’t handle by themselves. And if something big did happen that required more help, they could ask Sirius, Remus, Regulus and even Severus to come to their aid. Actual adult wizards, not a bunch of kids barely in their teens.

Harry’s silence must have offered the twins some reassurance because they slowly relaxed a little and gave Harry curious looks. “Was it a time-travel accident?” George guessed.

“You act far too much like an adult for it to just be an aging potion,” Fred mused.

“Sorry, chaps,” Harry said and immediately followed that up with two obliviates before the twins even knew what hit them. He altered their memories so they believed they never had

the Marauder's Map that day, and that they might have lost it on the Hogwarts Express. He also made it so they believed they were caught sneaking out after curfew by their new Potions professor.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for being out after curfew," Harry said and with that he plucked the map out of Fred's hands, stepped around the twins and resumed his walk back to their quarters, Izzy bounding after him. By the time Harry had the map tucked away in his pocket, the twins shook their heads and looked around in slight confusion before heading back inside the castle to make their way to Gryffindor Tower.

Harry didn't enjoy obliterating his friends, but he would enjoy being discovered by people other than the twins even less, so he did what he had to do. And the twins would be fine in the long run. Over his many lives Harry had become incredibly pragmatic like that, even if some might think his methods problematic and heartless.

Tom was already in his pyjamas when Harry entered their quarters. "Look what I've got!" Harry pulled the map out of his pocket and waved it in Tom's face.

"That was quick." Tom snatched it out of his hands while Harry went to get changed himself.

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good," Tom muttered as he tapped his wand against the map while he joined Harry in the bedroom. Izzy sniffed around the room a bit, still getting used to their new surroundings, but eventually she settled on her pillow in the corner of the room.

"This is a very intricate piece of magic," Tom said while he ran his wand over the map time and again as he studied the corridors that had appeared on the paper.

"Isn't it?" Harry smiled at Tom over his shoulder while he put some toothpaste on his toothbrush. "You're welcome to examine it as long as you don't break it."

"I'll be careful, I promise." Tom sank down on his side of the bed, his mind fully occupied with figuring out exactly how the map worked. Harry had expected this, because in previous lives whenever Harry mentioned the Marauder's Map, Tom had been unable to hide his fascination, and even his admiration that a bunch of Hogwarts students, Gryffindors at that, had developed such a unique piece of magic.

"Babe," Harry whispered with a grin as he crawled under the covers. "Let's get some sleep. We've got a long day tomorrow and the map isn't going anywhere."

"Hm." Tom didn't look up, just sat perfectly still as he cast diagnostic charm after diagnostic charm.

"Tom," Harry said directly into Tom's ear as he leaned over to him. "Long day of teaching tomorrow. Sleep now."

"Yes, yes," Tom snapped and then released a frustrated sigh, finally folding the map up. Harry knew very well how annoying and frustrating it was to pull yourself away from something interesting when your brain desperately wanted to go into full hyper fixation mode when you had a neurodiverse mind.

“I love you,” Harry said quietly as Tom burrowed under the covers beside him. Harry turned off the lights with a wave of his hand.

“Love you, too.” Tom released a deep sigh, though this one was filled with exhaustion instead of frustrations. “It is nice to be back at Hogwarts, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Harry said honestly as he closed his eyes, unable to hold back a genuine smile. “It really is.”

Because no matter how many lives they’d lived around the entire globe, Hogwarts would always be home to them both.

Their first day of teaching at Hogwarts was hectic and it all took some getting used to again, even if they’d been teachers plenty of times before. Harry knew that once they found their rhythm again they’d be fine teaching every day, but it was something that they needed to adjust themselves to for a week or so.

Breakfast in the Great Hall was loud, the students all full of energy for their first day of classes in the new school year. Harry quietly observed the students while Tom browsed the Daily Prophet as they both enjoyed a simple meal of scrambled eggs and buttered toast, with a few slices of crispy bacon. Hermione, seated at the Ravenclaw table, gave Harry a bright smile and a cheerful wave. Harry nodded back to her and he really hoped she’d find her place in Ravenclaw house quickly. At any rate he planned to keep a close eye on his old friends, to make sure they’d be all right. The twins seemed perfectly fine as they sat chatting with Lee Jordan at the Gryffindor table. Harry was happy to see that Ron and Neville were sitting together and were having a conversation.

Those two could be good for each other, Harry mused. Ron and his brashness might counteract some of Neville’s shyness, while Neville had a good head on his shoulders that might reign in some of Ron’s impulsiveness. Whatever the case, Harry hoped those two would become real friends.

Harry’s first class was a fifth year Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw class, which was a nice way to start the year. These were all students that already knew the basics and needed to pass their OWLs and most were really motivated to do so.

“We’ll be working with partners of the opposite house this year,” Harry said after he’d taken roll call. He and Tom had decided to implement this rule in both of their classes, to force students to interact with others outside of their own House. “Find a new partner, please.”

There were a few moments of chaos as students got up and moved around and looked for willing partners but after a few minutes everyone was seated again.

“Thank you. I’m Professor Jack Bird and I’ll be your Potions Professor for this year,” Harry said as he stood in front of the class. “I’m going to do my very best to teach you all that you need to know to pass your OWLs this year.”

A brightly smiling Hufflepuff lad named something Beacons raised his hand into the air and Harry gave him a quick nod. “Are you going to teach us the whole year?”

“I am,” Harry said with another nod. This was met with lots of excited whispers and victorious cries.

“No more Snape?” Another Hufflepuff asked, looking like she hardly believed this news.

“Well, he might return next year,” Harry pointed out, since they had plans to have Snape come back to teach the older years. “But this year you’re stuck with me.”

Harry actually got a round of applause for that, which he fully sympathized with. He, too, would have reacted like that if a new teacher had replaced Snape when Harry was still a Hogwarts student in his first life.

“Thank you for that warm welcome,” Harry said with a chuckle and then called the room to order again. “Today we’re going to be brewing a Fire Protection Potion. Now, can anyone tell me the three pitfalls to look out for during the brewing process of this particular potion?”

Harry’s next class was a double third year Gryffindor and Slytherin class, and the Gryffindors reacted much the same at Harry’s reassurance that he would be teaching them for the entire year. The Slytherins mostly looked a bit lost, unsure about their new position in the academic pecking order now that their only champion was gone.

Both the Gryffindor and Slytherins students gave Harry disbelieving looks, though, when he told them to find partners of the opposite house. They did do it, albeit grudgingly, and then they all glared at their new partners until Harry called them to order again.

Harry shook his head and went on with his lesson. Their reactions were exactly the reason Harry and Tom had decided to implement that new rule because it was absurd that students of the same school despised each other so much because of something a magical hat had said about them when they were all eleven years old.

Lunch was next and Harry was happy to see that Tom looked quite relaxed as he joined Harry at the head table. No tight shoulders or squinty eyes that always indicated that Tom was suffering from sensory overload while trying to hide it.

“How were your classes so far?” Tom asked him as he served himself a bowl of minestrone soup together with a slice of pork pie.

Harry got some soup as well. “Pretty good. I even got applause from some Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws,” Harry said with a chuckle.

Tom snorted and shook his head. “I imagine you’re going to be very popular just for the fact that the students don’t have to suffer under Severus for a whole schoolyear.” Tom glanced at Harry with a wicked little smirk. “I did get some fourth year Slytherins openly betting if I would make it to the end of the year or not.”

Harry quickly ate a spoonful of soup so he wouldn’t burst out in laughter. Obviously, Tom was going to break the curse, but the students didn’t know that. When Harry had asked Tom how he was going to break the curse, he’d explained that all he needed to do was teach for a year. The curse was designed to make sure no teacher would last more than a single

schoolyear until Tom himself was hired for the position and then it would dissolve on its own. So that wasn't going to take any special effort on Tom's part, though he would probably pretend to 'break' it at some point near the end of the schoolyear for appearance's sake.

Afternoon classes were much the same as the morning classes, and Harry enjoyed himself more and more with each class he taught. He had always genuinely enjoyed teaching and it was nice to do so again. It had been quite a few lives since he'd been able to do that. Well, if you didn't count helping fellow inmates pass their GEDs while he was serving several life sentences in prison in his previous life. That hadn't been an official teaching position at any rate, but it did serve to illustrate that Harry ended up teaching others in all sorts of capacities in all sorts of lives. It simply came naturally to him, no matter the setting.

After his last class, Harry hurried to their quarters to pick up Izzy, who'd been alone for the day up until that point. She was ecstatic to see him, bouncing around wagging her tail off while Harry got her leash. This time he kept her on the leash as he made his way out of the castle and that was a good thing because there were plenty of students about in the halls. Some of them looked at Izzy in alarm, not used to such an enthusiastic dog, but others immediately crouched down to give her a few pets, which Izzy happily received.

The sun was shining and the weather was mild as Harry and Izzy stepped out of the castle. Harry unclipped her leash and let Izzy run and sniff as much as she wanted. He strolled in the direction of Hagrid's hut, figuring he might as well introduce Izzy to the only other canine resident of Hogwarts.

Hagrid was puttering around in his vegetable plot, Fang laying in the sun near Hagrid's hut. Fang perked his head up when he noticed Izzy and let out a deep, booming bark that made Hagrid look up in surprise.

"Mine's friendly!" Harry called as Izzy ran towards Fang at breakneck speed, happy to have found a new doggy friend. Fang got up and seemed happy enough to meet Izzy, so Harry let them introduce themselves to each other while he strolled towards Hagrid.

"Yeh got a dog," Hagrid said with a huge smile. "Not many new teachers ever bring a dog. It's mostly cats or owls."

Harry shrugged. "We already had her when we applied for our positions here so we brought her along. She loves attention so I'm sure she won't mind living in a castle full of kids."

Hagrid laughed at that and gazed at the playing dogs with a fond expression. "Aye, Fang likes the kids, too, but most are a bit scared of a big dog like that."

"He seems like a sweetheart," Harry said, knowing he was scoring some really valuable points with Hagrid for complimenting his dog like that. Hagrid indeed beamed at Harry in response. "I've always loved big dogs. Had a few growing up."

"Aye," Hagrid agreed. "I've had me share of big dogs as well o'er the years. But none bigger than Fluffy."

And that was exactly what Harry had wanted to learn. Fluffy existed in this life and Hagrid had possession of him, and Harry could now safely assumed that Fluffy was being used to guard the trapdoor in the third floor corridor. Which was great, because Harry had plans for Fluffy.

“Fluffy?” Harry asked with casual interest, still staring at the dogs chasing each other across the lawn.

“Won ‘im off a Greek chap in the pub,” Hagrid happily divulged, as usual unable to keep his mouth shut when people showed an interest in him and his critters. “A Cerberus is rare, even if yer in the trade.”

“A Cerberus?” Harry asked, feigning surprise and then a bit of worry as he frowned up at Hagrid. “Aren’t those dangerous?”

“Nah, yeh just need to be firm but gentle with ‘m.” Hagrid waved towards the castle. “Dumbledore was all too happy to use him to guard the you know what.”

“Oh yes,” Harry agreed at once. “A Cerberus would be very useful to guard anything, really. But won’t he get lonely, locked inside the castle like that?”

Hagrid shrugged as Izzy and Fang came racing by, both holding onto the same large stick. “I take care of ‘im twice a day. There’s nowhere else I can keep ‘m.” Hagrid’s shoulders hunched a bit as he glanced over his shoulder at the Forbidden Forest. “I tried keeping Fluffy in there, but the centaurs weren’t happy to have ‘im and threatened to kill poor Fluffy.”

Harry nodded in understanding, privately thinking Dumbledore was a giant dick for using Hagrid and Fluffy like that. Instead of transfiguring some sort of expanded enclosure for Fluffy where Hagrid could safely keep the monster, Dumbledore all but blackmailed Hagrid in using the Cerberus for his own plans at Hogwarts, resulting in the enormous dog spending all his time in a tiny room where he could barely turn around. And Hagrid had no choice but to go along with it or else he’d lose his new pet.

Changing the subject for now, Harry asked Hagrid some questions about the Forbidden Forest and Hagrid happily chattered away while their dogs exhausted themselves. By the time Harry made his way back to the castle, Izzy looked most satisfied, her tongue lolling out of the side of her mouth as she panted heavily. Harry was glad to have found a way for her to burn some energy, because he didn’t like her having to stay in their rooms for so long every day.

Tom was in the staff room already when Harry entered. “I hope you don’t mind me bringing our dog in here,” Harry asked as he saw McGonagall sitting near the window with a cup of tea in her hand. “She’s quite well behaved, and she just played with Fang for half an hour so I expect she’ll go to sleep.”

“It’s fine, Mr Bird,” McGonagall assured him. “As long as she doesn’t cause any trouble.”

Harry sat down across from Tom, who was talking to Sprout. Izzy briefly greeted Tom but then quickly found a spot on the carpet for a nice little nap. Tom looked a bit tired, but

nothing that worried Harry. In fact, all teachers there looked a bit tired after their first day back at teaching.

“How was your day?” Flitwick asked while Harry served himself a cup of tea from the elaborate tea set on the table.

“It went really well,” Harry said, taking a long sip of his cup.

“No surprises?”

“Aside from how much the Slytherins and Gryffindors seem to despise each other for no reason, no, everything was as expected.” Harry gave Flitwick a measured look, wondering if he perhaps could influence other teachers to start actively promoting socialization between different Houses as well. “I find it utterly ridiculous that children are taught to distrust others just because of where they’re told to sleep by an enchanted piece of headwear.”

Flitwick chortled at hearing that, almost dropping his cup of tea while he shook with laughter. “That is certainly one way to look at House rivalry. It promotes healthy, academic competition, I find.”

“I’ve ordered all my students to work with a partner from another House,” Harry said while giving Flitwick an unimpressed look. “Hopefully getting to know each other will help them learn to appreciate students from different Houses.”

“I’ve done the same,” Tom said, joining their conversation while giving Flitwick a pointed glance. “I well remember how students were actively discouraged from making friends outside of their own House during my days at Hogwarts. I do believe that’s detrimental to a student’s development and their future, because these childish rivalries last well into adulthood for most.”

Flitwick looked a whole lot less amused by the whole thing now that an actual former student of Hogwarts had uttered the same critique instead of simply an American who understood nothing of British boarding schools.

Sprout gave Tom an undeniably fond look. “Oh, you two are not the first new teachers to think they can force students to interact in those kind of ways.” She laughed, though there was no malice behind it, only honest amusement. “I know it’s well-intentioned of you both, but I also know it won’t change anything in the end. Hogwarts has been this way since its very founding and a couple of inspired new teachers aren’t going to change that.”

Sipping his tea, Harry sat back in his chair and exchanged a worried look with Tom. Sprout was the last person who Harry would think to say something like that, but the fact that she was aware of the problems, yet seemed resigned to accept them instead of trying to change them didn’t sit well with Harry.

Perhaps the problem was simply the process of Sorting students in the first place. In all lives that Harry and Tom had attended Hogwarts there had been rivalry between the Houses, whether or not there was a Dark Lord terrorizing the population and influencing people’s beliefs on things like pureblood supremacy.

Neither one of them mentioned anything as they walked from the staff room to the Great Hall for dinner, aware there were far too many eyes and ears all around the castle. Harry dropped Izzy off at their quarters, giving her some dinner of her own before joining Tom at the head table. Tom cast a spell on his own head, one Harry didn't recognize.

"It'll hopefully block some of the noise," Tom whispered to him when Harry looked at him with raised eyebrows. "I find that bothers me the most here in the hall. Classes are fine so far, because I do most of the talking."

"Where did you find that spell?" Harry asked, wondering if it was something Tom had known all along or if he'd somehow found time to visit the library in the last 24 hours.

"I just put it together myself today," Tom said as though it was the most normal thing in the world, to create a whole new spell in between a full day of teaching classes. "It's a very simple little charm, really nothing to it. It cancels out loud background noises, but not conversation directed at me."

Harry slowly blinked and shook his head, astonished Tom could create a charm like that in no time at all without even realizing what an extraordinary feat it truly was. "I hope it helps," Harry finally said, because there was nothing else to say, really.

"I'm sure it will," Tom said before turning his attention to the food in front of them.

The elves had prepared them a traditional shepherd's pie with rice pudding for afters, and Harry enjoyed the hearty meal while observing the students. He could hear many happy students at all tables sharing the exciting news that their new Potions Professor wasn't at all a bastard like Snape and was in fact a pretty good teacher so far. Students were also enthusiastic about Tom's classes, but they seemed a bit more subdued in their joy since they all worried he might actually get killed during the schoolyear, so they were trying very hard not to get too attached.

Casting a quick privacy charm under the table, Harry leaned closer to Tom. "That stupid curse on the Defence position might actually be one of the more vicious things Voldemort has ever done, and that's saying something." Not only had that fucking curse killed or maimed a whole bunch of potentially good teachers, especially at first, before only desperate or naïve fools applied for the position anymore. But it had also completely devastated the defence abilities of a few generations of students.

"I am aware," Tom said in a monotone voice, not meeting Harry's eyes. "I am going to rectify what I can."

"I know," Harry said quickly. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, babe. I just only now thought about it, that's all."

Tom managed a small smile and nodded his head, returning to his rice pudding. "I've been aware of this since our second life, when I got my complete soul back and I spent a lot of time taking inventory of my previous life and all the absolute crap I pulled."

“Now you finally have a chance to make that right.” Harry gave Tom’s thigh a few comfortable rubs under the table. “Knowing you and your teaching abilities, the Defence OWLs and NEWTs will have the highest scores in decades this year, I’m sure of it.”

“I certainly won’t accept anything less,” Tom said with a determined glint in his eyes. The poor students of Hogwarts had no idea what they were in for, Harry mused with an amused little smile.

Once they were back in their quarters, Harry turned to Tom, unsure if what he was about to say would be welcome or not. “It’s the sorting itself, babe, that’s the problem. As long as you tell every child that steps through these doors that they belong with one specific group of people, but not three others, you’re going to have rivalry instead of unity.”

Tom blinked as he slowly sank down on the couch. “Are you seriously suggesting we do away with sorting students entirely?” It was clear from Tom’s narrowed gaze that he was having none of that. “We’ve taught at Hogwarts before, darling, and you’ve never suggested something so drastic in the past.”

“I know,” Harry said with a vague shrug, unsure what he was even trying to say. “It’s just that we’re actively trying to improve Hogwarts in this life, right? We’ve never really done that before.” That was true enough. In past lives they were always happy to go along with life at Hogwarts as it was, warts and all.

“The sorting of students has been a part of Hogwarts since its very founding,” Tom muttered, still looking as though Harry had just suggested he create a couple of horcruxes again. “To just do away with that entirely is unthinkable.”

“Maybe. We don’t have to decide anything right now. Let’s just give it some thought.” Harry sure as fuck didn’t yet know what he even wanted to do with this whole dilemma. He definitely needed time to consider all the possibilities.

“Yes, let’s.” Tom looked as though he needed absolutely no time since he’d already made up his mind about the importance of such ancient traditions at Hogwarts. Harry realized there and then he better come up with some amazing arguments to ever change Tom’s mind about this at some point in the future.

Since they had no homework to grade they had the evening off to relax. Both Tom and Harry refused to assign students homework over the holidays, and they also refused to grade any work Snape or anyone else had demanded the students do over the summer. They thought it absurd that students were expected to still do schoolwork during those weeks they were supposed to have time off from school to recover from the entire schoolyear. To them it felt very much like an employer calling their employee on their free weekend and demanding they do some work anyway, and Tom and Harry refused to participate in such unsavoury practices, with students or with employees.

Tom continued to examine the Marauder’s Map some more, taking copious amounts of notes and testing various spells and charms on blank pieces of parchment. Harry, in the meantime, got to work on their small storage closet in the entry hallway. He expanded it with a few charms and then transfigured and conjured until the floor was covered in grass, with a few

trees that dotted the landscape. The walls and ceiling mirrored the sky outside, much like the ceiling in the Great Hall did. It was now a perfect spot for Izzy to do her business and have some exercise when they didn't have enough time to cross the entire castle to let the dog go outside.

"I'm still going to take Izzy out for a walk," Harry called into the living room after he was done. "Stretch my legs a bit before turning in."

"Hm," was all the reply Tom gave, still entirely absorbed by the map, much to Harry's amusement. Leaving his husband to his hyper fixation, Harry leashed Izzy and headed out into the castle. It was almost curfew, so there were few students around. Outside they were met with a chilly wind that made it clear that autumn was on its way, no matter how mild the days still were in early September.

On their way back, Harry figured that he might as well take a little look at the forbidden third floor corridor, which was literally around the corner from their living quarters. There were no wards on the door that Harry could tell, nothing that would register who entered and exited the door. There was only a simple locking charm that any first-year could open without too much trouble, as Harry knew well enough.

Sighing, Harry opened the door and peered inside, keeping Izzy behind himself. Izzy sniffed the air and then cringed away from whatever she smelled, whining softly as she crawled backwards, away from the door.

"I'll just be a moment, sweetie," Harry assured his dog as he aimed his wand at the dozing Cerberus. He'd quite forgotten how huge that thing really was. He used a very obscure spell from the time they were wizards in the 1500s in what was nowadays known as the Congo in Africa. The local population used simple but effective charms to deal with dangerous magical predators. The magic of this spell was specifically designed to work on creatures who could repel most regular magic cast on them.

With a grin, Harry cast the spell and shrank Fluffy down to the size of a cocker spaniel.

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Harry meets Hagrid's new pet and he comes up with a brilliant idea to promote unity between Hogwarts' students. Oh, and he gets to teach the first year Gryffindor/Slytherin class, which amuses him far more than it should.

Chapter Notes

No, this story hasn't been forgotten, don't worry.

The idea that Harry comes up with in this chapter is something I've come up with many years ago. It just seemed like so much fun to do for students at a magical school. Sadly, I'd never been able to use it in a story until now, when it finally seems to have found a good home. I hope you'll like the idea as much as I do.

Thank you so much for reading and for your patience and support. I know this story is very dear to so many of you, so please know that I'll never abandon it. Updates may be slow from time to time but they'll always appear again.

Please let me know what you think. Nothing keeps me as motivated as all of your comments do.

Harry was still laughing when he entered their quarters, Izzy right behind him. She made a beeline towards Tom to greet him.

Tom absently patted Izzy's back a few times while he looked up at Harry with a curious look on his face. "Care to share?"

Inhaling a deep breath, Harry dropped himself onto the couch beside Tom. "Remember that time we were wizards in Africa during the 1500s?" When Tom nodded, Harry added, "I used one of the local shrinking spells on Fluffy. She's now barely bigger than Izzy."

That got exactly the reaction that Harry had hoped it would. Tom threw his head back and laughed for a good minute before giving Harry an undeniably fond smile. "Very inspired, darling. No one here will be able to break that spell, at least not anytime soon."

"Yep, that's why I chose it." Harry bent down to unlace his shoes before kicking them off. He placed his feet on the coffee table and leaned back into the couch with a satisfied sigh. "Now

to determine what to do with the Devils Snare.”

“Isn’t there a potion that instantly kills it?” Tom asked, his attention already going back to the Marauder’s Map still in his hands.

“Yeah, an extra-strength weedkiller. But I don’t want to kill it, I just want to render it useless.” Harry frowned as he considered option after option. “It might be possible to simply transfigure it into something harmless.”

“But then Dumbledore would most certainly be able to undo the transfiguration,” Tom said at once, making a very good point.

Harry sighed in obvious disappointment. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll give it some thought.”

“I’ve figured out how the map works.” Tom gave Harry a bit of a triumphant look before his expression turned contemplative again. “Well, I have figured out that it draws all the information on it directly from Hogwarts’ wards. The layout of the castle and the position of every person inside of it. I’ve yet to discover how a bunch of teenagers managed to actually tap into the wards and transfer all that information for decades to come.”

“You could just owl Remus or Sirius and ask them,” Harry suggested, though he was sure Tom had no intention of doing such a thing anytime soon.

And as expected, Tom gave Harry an affronted look. “Now where is the fun in that?”

Chuckling, Harry got up, pressed a kiss to the top of Tom’s head and went to make them both some tea in the small kitchenette. Tom was very much the kind of person that insisted that the journey was equally as important, if not more important, as the destination, and he used that in pretty much all facets of his life.

They sipped their tea side by side on the couch, Tom still absorbed by the map while Harry let his thoughts wander towards Dumbledore’s ridiculous obstacle course and how he could sabotage each of the tasks.

“How about I go and enlarge our bathtub so we can have a bit of a soak before turning in,” Harry suggested as their tea was finished.

Tom visibly perked up at that, a small smile appearing on his otherwise tired face. There were few things in life that could relax Tom as much as a soak on some warm water could. So Harry went to quickly remodel their standard bathroom into something that would provide plenty of bathing space for two adult wizards.

Hogwarts did always have amazing bubble bath available, made by the elves, and Harry selected one that smelled like a combination of tropical flowers and coconut. By the time Harry had stripped off his clothes, Tom appeared in the doorway, lured in by the sweet scent and the sound of running water. They settled in the enlarged tub with Harry leaning back against Tom’s chest while the water lapped at their chins.

Tom released a deep sigh that seemed to rise up from the Slytherin dungeons, several floors down.

“Remind me to brew a new batch of aging potion,” Harry mumbled, because now that his body was relaxing after a long day full of new impressions, his mind finally had time to recall important things that needed doing. “I’ve only got two weeks’ worth left.”

Harry could feel Tom’s body stiffen against his back, Tom’s arms tightening around him just a bit. “When’s the last time you’ve spent a day without taking the potion?” Tom asked carefully.

“Er...not since I started taking it,” Harry said after a moment of thought. “Why?”

“So a full year then.” Tom leaned forwards a bit so he could press his cheek to Harry’s temple in a gesture of affection. “It might be a good idea to stop taking the potion for at least a day, to give your body a chance to catch up with the growth of the past year.”

Harry blinked as he slowly realized what Tom was trying to say. Because Harry took the aging potion every day, his body was being kept artificially aged up into an adult form. But Harry’s actual body had also grown, from being a ten-year-old body to a eleven-year-old body. It just hadn’t had a chance yet to actually do the growing. “That’s an excellent suggestion,” Harry finally said. “I’ll do it during one of the weekends coming up, just pretend to be under the weather for twenty-four hours and stay in our rooms.”

“That might be for the best.” Tom pressed several soft kisses to Harry’s temple and cheeks. “Want me to give you a hand to help you relax?”

Harry’s cock instantly hardened and Harry quickly nodded his head. “I won’t say no to that, babe.”

While Harry let his eyes fall shut and leaned his entire weight against his husband, Tom closed his fingers around Harry’s hard cock and stroked him to orgasm in barely any time at all. After he came with a soft grunt, Harry’s entire body was so relaxed he was genuinely worried that Tom might have accidentally vanished all his bones, just like that time Lockhart had done in his second year.

“Come on, let’s go to bed.” Tom helped Harry out of the tub and dried them both off with a few spells. They slipped naked beneath the soft sheets and Harry didn’t even notice Tom turn off the lights since he was asleep in seconds.

The next morning Harry was more than a little amused to see neither Dumbledore or Hagrid in the Great Hall for breakfast. Harry wished he could see the look on Dumbledore’s face when he tried to undo the spell on Fluffy and failed miserably.

Classes went very much the same as the previous day and kept Harry plenty busy. Before he knew it the day was over already and he was free to get Izzy from their quarters and take her for a walk outside. Harry hurried his steps when he saw Hagrid pattering around outside his hut because he couldn’t wait to hear what had happened to poor little Fluffy.

“Afternoon, Hagrid,” Harry called out while Izzy raced ahead of him to greet Fang with a few sharp barks.

“Afternoon, Professor Bird,” Hagrid called back, and Harry was glad to see he wasn’t looking too heartbroken.

“It’s Jack, please.” Harry gave Hagrid a bright smile as he joined him near his vegetable patch. “How was your day?”

Izzy and Fang engaged in a game of chase around Hagrid’s hut, which triggered a series of barks to erupt from inside the home. Hagrid looked at Harry with wide eyes. “You’ll never guess what happened to Fluffy!”

“Your Cerberus?”

“Aye. Come look.” Hagrid took a few enormous steps and Harry had to all but run to keep up. Hagrid opened the door to his hut, revealing the shrunken Cerberus who gave them a whole array of suspicious looks with his three pairs of eyes. “Someone or somethin’ made ‘im tiny.”

“He’s adorable,” Harry said with a very amused grin when Fluffy the tiny Cerberus started barking. This of course drew the attention of Fang and Izzy, who wormed and butted their way through Harry and Hagrid’s legs and entered the hut with wagging tails. Fluffy wasn’t sure what to make of the other canines at first, but Fang and Izzy’s perseverance in making a new friend eventually paid off and Fluffy started wagging his small tail while giving the two dogs cautious sniffs.

“Looks like you’ve got yourself a new pet that actually fits in your home,” Harry said, being genuinely happy to see Fluffy making friends and having a comfortable place to stay. Vicious magical beast or not, no creature deserved to be locked up in a dark, windowless room for a year without any stimulation or enrichment.

“Aye, Dumbledore said I can keep him here fer now, while he tries ter find a cure,” Hagrid said, eyes bright with joy as he stared at the scene before him. Izzy was trying to entice Fluffy’s right head to play with the ball she’d found, while Fang was busy licking the eyes of Fluffy’s left head. Fluffy’s middle head seemed entirely confused about what was going on as it looked from one dog to the other and back.

“Want to let them outside so they can all play?” Harry suggested, thinking a bit of sunshine would do Fluffy some good.

“Nah, best not. Fluffy’s not the best at coming when called.” Hagrid released a sad little sigh.

“I can cast an invisible leash on him, so he can’t go further away from your home than thirty feet or so. That way he can still play.” Harry took out his wand and when Hagrid nodded his agreement, he cast the spell on Fluffy.

After that the three dogs spent half an hour roughhousing outside, with Fluffy growing more and more confident on how to act like a dog.

Harry glanced at Hagrid and noticed that he looked full of genuine joy at seeing his two dogs playing happily in the sun. "Let's hope Dumbledore won't find a cure anytime soon," Harry whispered and he gave Hagrid a conspiratorial wink.

"Aye, let's hope so." Hagrid patted Harry on the shoulder, almost knocking him clean over.

Tom was already in the staffroom when Harry entered with an exhausted Izzy in tow.

"Hagrid seems to have acquired a new pet," Harry said in a friendly tone as he sat down opposite Tom and beside Flitwick. "An adorable three-headed dog. I never knew they came that small."

McGonagall made a noise as though she was stuck in her Animagus form and someone had just stepped on her tail. "What did you just say, Professor Bird?"

"Hagrid's got a new three-headed dog in his hut. It's very cute, played nicely with Izzy and Fang." Harry was barely able to keep back the cackles that wanted to escape him at the sight of McGonagall's and Flitwick's incredulous expressions. Tom seemed to have a similar problem and he quickly hid his mouth behind his cup of tea as he took a few vigorous sips.

"As long as it's not chasing students across the lawn I suppose it's fine for the poor thing to stay in Hagrid's home," Sprout said in her usual genial tone while giving McGonagall a pointed look.

"How was your second day of teaching?" Flitwick asked as he turned in his seat to look at Harry. "Have you managed to do away with House prejudice yet?" The last part was said with a wink and a teasing smile, so Harry didn't take it as an attempt at an insult, though Tom seemed to rather resent that remark if his dark frown was any indication.

"Not yet, but I have good hopes," Harry replied in a cheerful tone. He really was still determined to find a way to unite the students of Hogwarts to a common cause. Because that was what was needed to break through the House walls, Harry was certain. He just hadn't figured out yet how exactly to go about that.

Let Flitwick and the others make fun of him as much as they liked. It wasn't going to stop Harry from changing Hogwarts for the better, no matter how long it might take.

They spent another half hour making amicable conversation before it was time for dinner. Harry quickly dropped Izzy off in their quarters before they made their way down to the Great Hall where they were treated to an array of roasted vegetables and stewed mutton.

"Today I had my first sixth and seventh year classes," Tom said while they both tucked into their hearty meal. "They were ever so surprised when I told them they'll be learning the Patronus charm before the end of the year."

Harry chuckled and gave Tom a fond look. He knew how much Tom enjoyed casting a Patronus, since it was one of the few spells he'd never mastered in his first life. By the time he'd tried to learn the spell in his seventh year at Hogwarts as Tom Riddle, he'd already split his soul twice. And a spell like the Patronus took power straight from a person's soul.

Without a complete soul, Tom had never been able to cast more than a bit of mist in his first life.

It wasn't until their third life, when they'd been wizards again in the 1800s, that Tom had mastered the Patronus for himself, much to his own satisfaction. In every life after that whenever Tom had been a teacher, he made it a point to teach his students the Patronus charm, just because he could.

"Good," Harry said as he turned back to his meal. "I never understood why it wasn't part of Hogwarts' regular curriculum. It's not even that hard to learn if you put some effort into it. The whole DA managed it in our fifth year, and not everyone of them were exceptionally powerful or intelligent."

"Preaching to the choir, darling," Tom muttered before spearing a roast potato with his fork. "Don't worry, from now on it will be a part of the upper classes' spellwork."

They spent their evening much like the previous one, relaxing in their quarters while Tom studied the map some more and Harry pondered the enigma that was the Hogwarts House system. After a few cups of tea Harry took Izzy for a quick walk and on the way back he checked the room previously occupied by Fluffy. It was empty, so Dumbledore hadn't yet sentenced another poor critter to a year without sunlight and enrichment. No matter what Dumbledore might eventually house in that room, Harry would make sure he rescued it.

When Harry got back to their rooms, Tom had already filled the bathtub with hot water and bubbles that smelled like a pine forest after the rain. They relaxed together in the tub for a good half hour before turning in for the night.

But this time sleep would not come as easily for Harry. Beside him, Tom's breathing evened out but Harry tossed and turned for a while, his mind refusing to rest before it came up with a way to unite the students of Hogwarts.

Problem was that there was very little to do in an organized way at the school. There was Quidditch, which only allowed seven students from each house to regularly spend time training for it. Even for spectators it was only an event that occurred six times a year. And of course, Quidditch only added to the House divide by urging students to support their own House and no one else.

Aside from Quidditch there were a few extracurricular groups, like a choir and a gobstones club. But none of those particularly promoted unity amongst the students either.

What Hogwarts needed was something that would divide students into groups made up of all Houses, and then urged them to work together to work together towards a common goal.

At once an utterly brilliant idea popped into Harry's mind and he sat up in bed with a gasp.

This was the answer to their problems! This was what Hogwarts needed!

"Babe." Harry smacked his arm to the side to get Tom's attention. "Babe!"

“What the fuck?” Tom blinked bleary eyes open in the darkness. “Harry, this had better be important. I’d just fallen sleep.”

“I’ve got the answer.” Harry quickly turned on the light on his nightstand with a wave of his hand so Tom could see his triumphant grin. “The Great Hogwarts Quest.”

“The what now?” Tom looked like he very much wanted to hit Harry with a few very creative curses.

“The Great Hogwarts Quest!” Harry sat up a bit more and leaned over towards Tom. “We divide students up in groups made up of all Houses. Then throughout the year we organize challenges all around the castle and the grounds. Something of a cross between Dumbledore’s ridiculous obstacle course and the TriWizard Tournament, but without any of the really dangerous bits. And the groups play for points and there will be winners at the end of the year.”

“That’s brilliant,” Tom said a deadpan sort of voice, firmly closing his eyes again. “Now go the fuck to sleep, Harry. We’ll talk in the morning.”

“Aww.” Harry gave his husband a hopeless look and then lowered himself to the mattress again with a sigh. Tom was probably right that they should get some sleep because they had an early enough wakeup call the next day. Harry closed his eyes and let his imagination go wild, coming up with all sorts of challenges for the students, things that would tickle their sense of adventure while simultaneously teaching them magic they needed to know for their OWLs and NEWTs. Eventually Harry fell asleep, his dreams full of bizarre magical tasks students needed to solve.

“Now what was that you were blathering about last night?” Tom asked the next morning as they got ready for the day. A good night’s rest had done wonders for the man and he no longer looked like he wished for Harry to succumb to some very dark magic.

“The Great Hogwarts Quest!” Harry all but shouted, still full of a sense of urgency now that he was sure he’d come up with the perfect way to promote student unity. “Each group is made up of at least two students of each House. We divide the students by year. First and second. Third, fourth and fifth. And sixth and seventh. They all get their own, age appropriate tasks.”

Tom nodded as he pulled on his trousers and gave Harry an impatient look to keep talking.

“Then at set intervals, perhaps every first Sunday of the month or something, we organize tasks and challenges the groups have to perform around the castle and the grounds.” At seeing Tom’s dubious frown, Harry quickly said, “It doesn’t have to cost much at all. We can rope the rest of the teachers into helping set things up and acting as referees. Any monetary costs we can pay for.”

“It is a good idea,” Tom conceded as he buttoned his white shirt. “We’ll have to figure out tasks that are both challenging and educational. Dumbledore can hardly object to something that will both entertain the students as well as help them learn magic.”

“I would think so. But let’s convince the other teachers first before going to Dumbledore.” Harry was sure that Dumbledore would find things to object to, if only because Tom Riddle was involved in them. So far Dumbledore had left them alone and didn’t seem to be keeping a particular close eye on them, but Harry hadn’t forgotten the way Dumbledore had looked at Tom when they’d applied for their teaching positions.

“Not just the teachers,” Tom said with a sly little smirk. “We start dropping hints amongst the students. Make it so that Dumbledore cannot refuse it lest he desires a rebellion amongst the children of Hogwarts.”

“I do love the way you think.” Harry stepped up to Tom and gave him a long, hard kiss. “We’ll start sharing bits and pieces with the students right away.”

“I’ll mention to my students that certain spells they should be learning will be vital for competing in the Great Hogwarts Quest,” Tom said, his smile full of mischief. He really seemed to be completely onboard now with Harry’s brilliant idea, much to Harry’s relief and joy.

Harry chuckled. “I’ll do the same with some of the potions.”

But when Harry looked over his schedule for the day once he entered his classroom he realized that he had another, more pressing problem.

His first class that day was the combined Gryffindor and Slytherin first year’s class. So far Harry had let the students themselves pick their partners for the year, as long as they were from a different House. But this particular class had a few volatile elements that needed careful handling, such as Draco and Ron. So Harry quickly jotted down all the names from the students on a scrap of paper and then divided them into groups. With both Harry and Hermione missing from that year, the Slytherins had three more students in their year, but Harry dealt with that issue by creating a few groups with three students in it.

“Good morning,” Harry said with a bright smile as he opened his classroom door to see a whole bunch of eleven-year-olds scowling at each other, Draco and Ron clearly in the middle of slinging various insults around. “Inside, students.”

There were plenty of muttered curse words and students elbowing and shouldering each other out of the way as they all tried to squeeze through the doorway at once.

Harry sighed and reminded himself that these were all children and that most of them would eventually grow out of it. For the most part. Draco Malfoy would always remain a whiny bitch, though, Harry knew from bitter experience.

Everyone found seats with a large divide between the Slytherins and Gryffindors. Harry grinned at them and reached for his scrap of paper. “I’ve taken the liberty to create students pairs and groups for the remaining schoolyear. When I call your names you will find seats together. Lavender Brown, Daphne Greengrass and Millicent Bulstrode.”

There was some quiet outrage about poor Lavender being stuck with some slimy snakes, but Harry carefully ignored that. “Parvati Patil, Tracey Davis and Pansy Parkinson.”

More quiet outrage, with Ron's cheeks flushing when he apparently realized they were really meant to be working with Slytherins that year.

Harry kept his expression politely amused, though he really wanted to laugh out loud, especially when he saw Draco's pinched look and pale cheeks. "Dean Thomas, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle." Harry hated throwing Dean under the bus like that by giving him the least talented students in the classroom. But from what Harry remembered, Dean was quite good at potions and he had a level head on his shoulders. He'd be patient enough to deal with Crabbe and Goyle without letting them waltz all over himself.

Seamus looked genuinely worried for Dean's safety as his best friend sat down at a table with the two boys who were both a head taller than him.

"Neville Longbottom and Blaise Zabini." Harry figured that Zabini couldn't object to Neville too much, since he was a pureblood. And Zabini was the quiet sort, not easily ruffled, so he'd be able to deal with Neville's nerves if they ever played up during brewing.

"Ron Weasley and Theodore Nott." Ron had been a bit of a problem to find a good Slytherin partner for, since Ron was still very full of prejudice against the entire House. But Theodore Nott was a quiet boy, very unobtrusive, kept to himself but still quite intelligent. Ron wouldn't be able to find much at fault with him, hopefully.

"And finally, Seamus Finnegan and Draco Malfoy." Harry figured that Seamus was the perfect kid to put up with Draco's antics. Seamus wasn't nearly as easily riled up as Ron might be, but at the same time Seamus also wouldn't put up with any of Draco's more undesirable bullshit.

"Good, now that you've all found your seats I'm going to explain the rules of this class." Harry gave every student in the room a stern look.

"Wait until my father hears about this," Draco snarled as he stared at Seamus in disgust.

"And that will be five points from Slytherin, for disrupting the class, Mr Malfoy," Harry said while looking at Draco with a challenge in his eyes, silently telling him not to do that again lest he lose more points. "When I'm talking, you all need to be quiet. Potions is a volatile subject, where small mistakes can lead to big explosions, with lost limbs or even death as a result."

Several students paled and swallowed heavily as they stared at Harry with worried eyes.

"As long as you follow the instructions and pay attention to what I tell you, you should be safe," Harry added quickly so no one would suffer a panic attack. "Because of the genuine danger, I am very harsh with my punishments. All tables are spelled to keep foreign objects out of your cauldrons. If I ever catch any of you trying to throw something in another person's cauldron, you'll be out of my class for the rest of your Hogwarts career." Harry rested his gaze on Draco for a few moments to make sure the boy knew Harry meant every word he'd just said.

“Potions are incredibly useful. They help us heal and learn and make us feel better when we need it.” Harry leaned forward a little and lowered his voice. “And they will come up during the Great Hogwarts Quest this year,” he added in a loud whisper while giving the students a smile full of fun promises.

“What’s the Great Hogwarts Quest?” Draco demanded, grey eyes narrowing to slits.

Harry briefly clapped his hands over his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut as though he’d just said something he shouldn’t. “That’s supposed to be a surprise for you students. Can I trust you not to mention it to anyone else yet?”

All students gave him dutiful nods, which meant that they’d all be gossiping about it during lunch. Children were not good at keeping secrets, especially when told to keep quiet about it by an adult.

Harry licked his lips and gazed out over the classroom with a satisfied smile. Step one of creating the Great Hogwarts Quest was done.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

A slightly shorter chapter this time, but I figured it was better to update now than to draw it out even more.

Thanks so much for your patience and your support for this story. Please let me know what you think. Your comments keep me inspired to write more.

Throughout the rest of the week it became clear that Harry and Tom's plan to drop deliberate hints about the Great Hogwarts Quest was working. More and more curious whispers could be heard around the Great Hall about something the staff was obviously trying to keep a secret. Harry and Tom shared many knowing smiles during their meals but otherwise pretended to be just as oblivious as all the rest of the adults.

It stood out to Harry that Dumbledore wasn't present for most of their meals. The headmaster showed up for breakfast a few times, but they rarely saw him for lunch or dinner. Harry didn't remember this to be the case during the first week in his original life as Harry Potter.

"He's probably spending all his time looking for poor little lost Harry Potter," Tom whispered to him during dinner on Thursday. "Up until this week the old goat still had high hopes of you turning up for your sorting. But when that didn't happen, he had to admit that he's well and truly lost you. I imagine the Ministry isn't exactly pleased with his conduct either, since he placed you with those muggles in the first place."

"Yeah," Harry said with no small amount of satisfaction. It amused him to no end that Dumbledore was running around like a headless chicken, desperately trying to find Harry Potter. All while Harry was happily teaching Potions at Hogwarts. "I sincerely hope the Ministry gives him hell for losing their precious Boy Who Lived."

Tom toasted him with his cup of tea and went back to his lambchop.

Throughout their many lives they had learned long ago that whenever they started a new life, it was necessary to let go of all aspects of their old lives. They needed to start every life with a clean slate to make their endless cycle of reincarnation work without losing their minds. They couldn't dwell on previous lives or on the loved ones they inevitably lost with each transition to a new life.

And yet, this time around Harry caught himself thinking back to his original life as Harry Potter far more than he probably should. Being back at Hogwarts in a world where Harry Potter should be attending brought back a lot of memories that Harry couldn't hope to ignore. Seeing Ron and Hermione on a daily basis also didn't help, probably.

There were many moments throughout the first week when Harry remembered his original first week. How happy he'd been to be away from the Dursleys. How overwhelmed he'd felt at suddenly being a person everybody recognized. And how delighted he'd been that he finally had a friend all of his own.

Harry also fondly recalled all the times he and Ron got lost trying to navigate the huge magical castle with its ever-changing staircases and its disappearing doors. Yeah, no matter that Harry actively tried to steer his thoughts in different directions, he still spent most of that first week walking around the castle full of warm feelings of nostalgia.

It was therefore, perhaps, that Harry didn't immediately remember a rather pressing matter now that he and Tom were back at Hogwarts. It wasn't until Thursday evening, after they'd retired to their own quarters after dinner that Harry suddenly recalled something they desperately needed to take care of.

Tom sat opposite him at their dining table while they were both grading the first pieces of homework they'd received. Grading was without question the most tedious part of being a teacher, but no matter how boring it was, it still needed to be done.

"The basilisk!" Harry yelled, as he finally remembered the urgent matter they needed to talk about. "Tom, we have to take care of the basilisk!"

Tom blinked large, brown eyes at Harry. "What do you mean, take care of?"

Now it was Harry's turn to stare at his soulmate in disbelief. "You know...take care of...get rid of it...permanently."

Tom inhaled a sharp, offended breath. "Why on earth do you want to get rid of her? She's not bothering anybody at this time."

Of course, Harry should have known that Tom wouldn't want to do away with Salazar Slytherin's murder serpent. Throughout their many lives, Tom had often enough commented that while he understood that Harry had killed the basilisk in self-defence, Tom still thought it a huge loss that the poor beast had met her end like that. In other words, Tom had never been happy with the basilisk's unfortunate end and now refused to see reason.

"Tom," Harry said slowly and carefully. Tom narrowed his eyes, his whole face portraying nothing but stropiness. "Tom, darling, we cannot let a basilisk live under a school of children. It's not safe."

"She is hibernating," Tom said in a snooty tone, as though Harry had recently become brain damaged and was since unable to understand even basic concepts. "She is not hurting anyone."

"She is a basilisk whose gaze could kills dozens if not hundreds of students if she were to escape the Chamber of Secrets at a time when all students are gathered in the Great Hall," Harry said, trying not to let his growing anger colour his own voice.

Tom leaned a little closer across the table, his sharp gaze never leaving Harry's. "The only two people in the entire world who even know where the Chamber of Secrets is are both sitting in this room. Do you have plans to open the Chamber, Harry? Because I assure you, I do not."

Sighing, Harry shook his head. "I get what you're saying, but the risk is just too great to keep such a beast sleeping under a school."

"I am not going to let you murder Salazar Slytherin's basilisk when she's not posing a threat to anyone," Tom said through gritted teeth. Yeah, he really was getting worked up and the last thing Harry wanted was to end up in a full blown fight with his husband.

Since they knew each other so well and since they had lived so many lives together, Harry and Tom rarely fought. They could bicker with the best of them about all sorts of menial things. What they were going to have for dinner or what movie they were going to watch, things like that. But they hardly ever argued about truly important things, because they almost always agreed on such matters. Any conflict that dealt with things like finances or child-rearing never had the chance to become full-blown fights, because Harry and Tom were pretty much always functioning on compatible wavelengths and could work out most arguments by simply talking about it.

But Harry could easily see that this was a subject that they were not going to be seeing eye to eye on anytime soon. "We don't have to decide anything tonight," Harry finally said in a desperate attempt to keep the peace for now. "Let's just both think about possible solutions to this problem."

Tom pushed his chair back, the legs scraping roughly against the stone floor as he got up. "I'm taking a bath. Alone." And with that, Tom marched out of the living room and disappeared into their bedroom to get undressed.

Sighing, Harry leaned back in his chair. Tom was so good at camouflaging, that even Harry, who knew more about autism than most, often forgot that Tom was in fact autistic. And therefore Tom needed time to process changes, especially when those changes happened unexpectantly. Like Harry suggesting out of the blue that they go and murder an animal Tom had fond feelings for.

Yeah, in hindsight Harry had to admit that he could have handled this differently. No matter. What was done, was done and they could only move forward from there on out. Harry hoped that given enough time to process everything, Tom might come up with a solution that would work for them both. Or perhaps Harry would have a moment of inspiration.

Harry just knew that something needed to be done. Because there was no way that Harry was going to let a fucking basilisk continue living underneath a school, no matter how much Tom liked that murder serpent.

After finishing his grading, Harry took Izzy for a long walk across the Hogwarts grounds. The sun was setting but that didn't stop Harry from walking around the entire lake, much to Izzy's obvious delight. Harry had found over their many lives that simply taking a nice, long

walk was a great way to get rid of excess tension and stress. It also always helped to clear his mind of any frustrations he might feel towards his soulmate.

Because no matter that they knew each other inside and out and loved spending time together more often than not, even Harry and Tom sometimes needed a moment to themselves. Tom found soaking in hot water a great way to deal with any frustrations, but Harry usually chose going for a walk if their surroundings allowed it.

By the time Harry returned to the castle, it was completely dark and it was already past curfew. Harry caught a couple of Slytherins sneaking around and he sent them back to the dungeons with a stern warning. Harry usually didn't immediately take points just because a couple of students were sneaking out in the evening. Harry remembered how often he had snuck around the castle in every life he'd attended Hogwarts, so he wasn't going to be a hypocrite now.

Tom was already in bed when Harry entered their quarters. Izzy went to get a long drink in the kitchen while Harry stood in the door opening of their bedroom. "Sorry I dropped that bombshell on you earlier," Harry said quietly.

Lowering the book he was reading, Tom gave Harry a level look and a small nod. "I just needed some time to calm down. We're fine, Harry."

"Sensory overload?" Harry guessed as he stepped into the bedroom.

"Yeah," Tom said with a sigh. He snapped the book shut and slid it onto the bedside table. "I suppose the whole week of teaching is also catching up with me."

"You're autistic, babe," Harry said as he sank down onto the edge of the bed to take off his socks. "You don't need an explanation for why you were overstimulated. It's just part of the package."

"I know," Tom said, his lips twitching up into a small smile. "It's just frustrating when my brain suddenly decides it's had enough for little reason."

"Yeah," Harry said, remembering his own frustrations whenever he suddenly went into a meltdown almost out of the blue the last time he was autistic. "But you caught it early and you allowed yourself the time to process everything. So you're doing great, babe!"

"Thanks, darling." Tom flipped the covers back so Harry could easily crawl under them. "Just one more day of teaching and then we have two days off. We can spend the weekend brewing and taking it easy."

"Exactly." Harry wanted desperately to snuggle up to Tom, but seeing as how Tom was already overstimulated, that was probably not a good idea. So Harry burrowed under the blankets and gave Tom a warm smile. "Love you lots. Goodnight."

"Love you, too." Tom turned off the lights just as Izzy jumped on to the foot of their bed.

During breakfast the next morning, Tom seemed mostly recovered and acted like his usual self. Harry knew that eventually, when he was ready, Tom would bring up the topic of the basilisk again on his own. Until that time, Harry simply resorted to being as patient as he could.

A barn owl dropped off a letter for Harry. It turned out to be from Sirius, who invited them to come to Grimmauld Place that evening for drinks.

“Are you up for that?” Harry asked quietly as he showed the short letter to Tom.

Tom nodded. “Probably, yes. And if it proves too much, I can always excuse myself a bit early.”

That morning, Harry had Hermione in his classroom for the first time. When he told the class to find partners of the opposite House, Hermione ended up paired with Susan Bones. As Harry gave his usual introductory speech and lectured the class on the first potion they were going to be brewing, it became clear that Hermione was just as enthusiastic about learning potions in this life as she’d been in Harry’s original. Every few minutes or so, Hermione’s hand would shoot up as she gave Harry pleading looks to let her ask whatever question just popped into her mind.

It also became obvious quickly that most other students didn’t appreciate Hermione’s constant interruptions or her endless need to draw attention to herself. Susan Bones, who’d seemed happy enough to partner with Hermione at the start of the lesson, soon looked like she sincerely regretted her decision.

After the class was over, Harry told Hermione to stay behind. “How was your first week, Hermione?” Harry asked, deciding to make a bit of small talk first before tackling the more serious issues. He didn’t want to scare Hermione off, or completely obliterate her self-esteem by immediately focussing on the negative.

“It’s been great!” Hermione bounced on the balls of her feet. “Learning magic is even more amazing than I thought it would be.”

“That’s good to hear,” Harry said with a fond little smile. “And how are you finding Ravenclaw? Made any friends yet?”

Hermione’s face fell a bit while he suddenly focused her attention on the floor. “It’s fine. Not everyone’s friendly, but I’m used to that from my old school.”

Harry wanted desperately to sigh, but he refrained. “Might I be absolutely honest with you, Hermione?”

“Please do,” Hermione said, though she looked a bit like she dreaded whatever Harry would say next.

“You’re a very bright and eager student, and I’m absolutely sure you’re going to become a great witch,” Harry said honestly. The Hermione he knew from his first life had been an

amazing adult who'd worked effortlessly for the betterment of their society. "But I'm afraid that your eagerness is also putting off some of your fellow students."

Hermione frowned as she stared up at Harry. "How so?"

"Well, you kept raising your hand today to ask questions that were usually answered during a later part of my lecture," Harry said delicately, giving Hermione a reassuring smile. "This interrupted the whole class and made it hard for the other students to concentrate."

"Oh." Hermione's bottom lip trembled for a moment.

"Would I be correct to guess that you've been equally as eager in your other classes?" Harry gave Hermione a knowing smile, since he already knew the answer.

"Yeah," Hermione sighed and then gave Harry a confused look. "But are we not meant to participate in class then? At my old school part of your grade came from your level of participation in class."

Well, that explained a lot. "Participation is also important at Hogwarts. This means answering questions when asked, or raising your hand once or twice per class. You were rather excessive in your participation, Hermione, and I do believe that's the reason that other students find it difficult to befriend you. When you constantly try to answer all the questions and when you interrupt the class many times in a row, you take away the opportunity for others to participate."

"Oh." Hermione's eyes widened, as though she suddenly had an epiphany. "So if I only participate once or twice per class, it won't hurt my grade?"

"It won't, I promise you." Harry leaned back against his desk. "Set yourself a limit. You're allowed to answer one question per class and ask one question of your own. If you have more questions that aren't answered in the class, write them down and look up the answer in the library later." Harry knew only too well how much Hermione enjoyed looking things up, so he knew she wouldn't mind such a solution.

Hermione beamed at him. "I can do that. That's no problem at all."

"There you go." Harry considered what to say next for a moment. "And perhaps it's also a good idea to offer your housemates an explanation and an apology for your interruptions in class. Explain that you thought you were supposed to participate as often as you did." Hopefully at least some of the other first year Ravenclaws would be willing to give Hermione a second chance after they realized Hermione had just been a bit too eager in her excitement to learn magic. Harry would hate for Hermione to not make any friends at all, seeing as there was no child Harry to befriend her. And since Ron was in Gryffindor and seemed to have made fast friends with Neville, Harry also doubted they would reach out to Hermione anytime soon, especially since there would be no troll to bring them together that year.

Hermione gave Harry a solemn nod. "I'll do that. Thanks, Professor."

“You’re welcome.” Harry walked Hermione to the classroom door. “I’m not your Head of House, but you are more than welcome to come to me if you have any problems.”

“I’ll do that.” Hermione gave him a wave before darting out of the classroom.

Yeah, Harry figured as he looked after Hermione. Looking after his old friends was the least he could do.

Right after classes ended that afternoon, the teachers of Hogwarts had their weekly staff meeting in the staff lounge. Dumbledore was already there waiting for them as everyone filed into the room.

“Welcome to our first staff meeting,” Dumbledore said, voice full of warmth, though Harry spotted rather dark circles under the headmaster’s eyes. It seemed the old man hadn’t been getting enough sleep for at least a couple of days.

Everyone found seats around the long table Dumbledore had conjured. Usually the lounge was full of comfortable armchairs and small coffee tables for the staff to relax in.

“Have you learned anything about poor Harry Potter yet, Albus?” Sprout asked as soon as everyone was seated.

“I’m afraid not,” Dumbledore said, his genial smile slipping right off his face. Lots of the people around them immediately started whispering about what could have possibly happened to poor Harry Potter. “The Ministry insists on leading the official investigation, which means that not much is being done aside from wading through endless bureaucracy.”

Harry quickly bit his lip so he wouldn’t snap at Dumbledore that of course the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was going to lead the investigation of a missing child, and not the old wizard who’d illegally placed the child with unsuitable guardians in the first place.

Tom quickly poured Harry a much needed cup of tea and then served himself one as well.

McGonagall quickly steered the conversation towards the actual agenda of their staff meeting. Harry was very gratified to see that McGonagall was still giving Dumbledore incredibly sour looks whenever Harry Potter’s name came up. It seemed that Harry’s old Head of House still hadn’t forgiven the headmaster for losing the boy in the first place.

The next half hour was familiar territory for Harry and Tom. They’d both been teachers so often that they were well acquainted with the mild complaints, the amusing anecdotes and the worried comments about some troubled student or another that were usually shared during a staff meeting.

Eventually Flitwick mentioned the rumours that had been flying around the students. “Albus, are you aware that there are students expecting some sort of official competition this year? Some of my Ravenclaws mentioned it just last night.”

Dumbledore blinked in obvious confusion. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’ve heard something similar,” Sprout said with a wide smile. “My Hufflepuffs are really looking forward to a change of pace at school this year.”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about,” Dumbledore said, looking between all the teachers with wide eyes.

“Ah,” Harry said with his most charming smile. “This might be my fault. I told a couple of students about this idea I had for a new and exciting way for them to learn magic.”

McGonagall pinched her lips, as though the idea of something new and exciting personally offended her.

Thankfully, Flitwick was at least curious enough to want to know more. “What did you tell them, Professor Bird?”

“I told them about my idea for the Great Hogwarts Quest,” Harry said with a wide smile. “A friendly competition in which students are paired in age appropriate groups and are expected to solve magical questions and puzzles and challenges, all designed to help them learn their regular curriculum.”

“I think it’s a splendid idea,” Tom said, to no one’s surprise. Everyone expected him to support his own husband, of course. “It wouldn’t cost the school anything and we’d only need the help of a few teachers for a few hours on the Quest weekends.”

“I must admit, I’m intrigued,” Flitwick said while Sprout nodded in agreement.

“What sort of challenges are we talking about here?” Pomfrey asked with a worried frown. She was probably envisioning a long line of injured students that she’d have to take care of after every Quest.

“Nothing dangerous,” Harry said quickly, to put everyone’s minds at ease. “Solving simple arithmancy problems, drawing a specific runic circle, identifying a certain potion that’s needed to continue with the journey, that sort of thing.”

“It would be very effective way to help students learn,” Sinistra said with a thoughtful frown. She’d taken over as Head of Slytherin, now that Snape was on his sabbatical, so Harry was glad to have her support. “It wouldn’t hurt to give it a try. If it proves problematic, we can always put an end to it.”

“And it would be a much needed extracurricular activity,” Tom said with a pointed look at Dumbledore. “I couldn’t help but notice that due to all the budget cuts of the past decades, almost all extracurricular activities have disappeared from Hogwarts. It really puts us behind other magical schools in the world.” Tom certainly wasn’t lying about that. Thanks to Dumbledore’s insistence to go against everything and anything the Wizengamot suggested about Hogwarts, the school had suffered a loss of budget as never before seen in its long history.

“Yes, well, that is a discussion for another day,” Dumbledore quickly said, obviously not wanting to air his dirty laundry in front of his entire staff. “I suppose we can give this

challenge a try, as long as there are enough members of staff willing to help.”

“Tom and I will set everything up,” Harry said quickly, beyond excited that his plan seemed to be working. “All we need is some help during the Quest itself, to make sure students don’t cheat or try to sabotage other teams, things like that.”

“I certainly won’t mind helping,” Flitwick said genially. Sprout immediately volunteered as well, as did a few other teachers. Enough that the Great Hogwarts Quest was definitely a go.

“I will announced it during dinner tomorrow night, if that’s all right,” Harry said and he got no objections to that, much to his pleasure. He shared a victorious smile with Tom before Dumbledore called the meeting to order so Hooch could complain about the quality of the school’s brooms, which gave Harry an idea.

Right after dinner, the moment they entered their quarters, Harry all but threw himself in a chair at the dining table and summoned his stationary set. “I need all the names of rich families who have children at Hogwarts,” Harry said as he dipped his quill into his inkbottle.

“Whatever for?” Tom asked as he patted a sulking Izzy on her head, comforting her since Harry had completely ignored her, the poor thing.

“I’m going to ask for donations for new school brooms,” Harry said, scribbling a draft of a letter he could send to all the families. “The current brooms are so ridiculously old and worn that they are genuinely unsafe to use.”

“That is an excellent idea,” Tom said, sitting down opposite Harry to write a list of families to ask for donations. “We can also ask families who don’t currently have children here. Everyone in the wizarding world loves Hogwarts, after all.” Tom got a shrewd look on his face. “We might even have Rita Skeeter write a little piece for the paper about the appalling state of Hogwarts’ student brooms. That would rake in the donations, no doubt.”

Harry wanted to refuse working with Skeeter on principle, but he also recognized that Skeeter could serve an important use. Tom had already met her for an interview once, so he knew what to expect of her. Besides, Harry had no doubt that Tom could easily manipulate Skeeter to do what they wanted. “Yeah, all right,” Harry finally said with a defeated sigh. “You go meet with Skeeter to express your genuine concerns for the safety of the students.”

Tom’s smirk was quite smug indeed as he quickly wrote a letter to ask Skeeter for a meeting. “I’ll tell her I can get her some photographs of the worst of the brooms, that will help sell the article.”

They couldn’t finish their newest project since they had a hot date with Harry’s dogfathers. They walked across the grounds towards the gates and then apparated to Grimmauld Place’s doorstep.

Sirius opened the door with a wide smile. “Come in, come in!”

“We need you to fork over some gold to help buy new student brooms,” Harry said the moment he stepped over the threshold.

Tom rolled his eyes as he followed Harry inside. “Good evening, Sirius. Nice to see you again. How have you been?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry said, giving Tom a poke in the side with his elbow. “Sirius is family. We can forego all the pleasantries when something important has come up.”

“Those brooms are hardly an important matter,” Tom said with a snort, causing both Harry and Sirius to stare at him in disbelief.

“Just say how much you need, Harry,” Sirius said quickly, narrowing his eyes at Tom, seemingly deeply offended that anyone could suggest flying wasn’t important in any way.

Harry, in the meantime, realized exactly what Tom had just done and he gave his husband an admiring smile. The wizarding world really was lucky that Tom had decided to become a school teacher instead of a Dark Lord this time around, or they wouldn’t have stood a chance against Tom’s uncanny ability to manipulate anyone he wanted to.

End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed it. Let me know what you think.

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