

his own research about forms of magic not commonly taught in school. And, as his housemaster, I was often the one he came to with questions on such things.”

Harry held his breath, not daring to interrupt in case it knocked Slughorn back into his shell. “One day, after one of my little suppers... Tom asked me about a rather obscure piece of magic he’d read about in a book. Dark, dark magic. Magic I was horrified he’d even *heard* of.”

Immediately, Harry knew what that was. “Horcruxes,” he whispered, and Slughorn flinched.

“You know about them, then?” he asked, voice wavering. Harry nodded. “I suppose you’d have to, considering...” The Potions Master shook his head. “Albus is a very persuasive man, you know. He wormed it out of me that I’d told Tom about them. Of course, I told him I’d shut Tom down and sent him packing!” He chuckled bitterly. “My greatest shame, Harry, is that one conversation with a fifteen year-old boy. Had I truly done what I told Albus I’d done, perhaps the world would not be where it is today!”

“He would’ve found the information elsewhere, sir,” Harry said gently. “People like him always do.”

Slughorn looked up, attempting a weak smile. “Kind of you to say so, my boy. And perhaps true. But perhaps not.” He sighed. “Nothing I can do about it now, though, is there?”

“So... what happened, when Tom Riddle asked about horcruxes?”

“Truly, Harry, I thought his questions were all academic,” Slughorn whispered. “Boys his age, of his ability — it’s not unusual for them to be drawn to the darker side of magic. Particularly the Slytherins. Ambition does not always follow morality, I’m sure you understand. But Tom was a good lad — I never... I didn’t think. Even after he graduated, when the whispers started rising... I truly thought he had dismissed that type of magic when I warned him away from it.”

The old professor shook his head mournfully. “It wasn’t until the night your parents were killed that I even thought of the possibilities. I spent years telling myself to stop worrying, stop assuming the worst. I almost believed it, too. And then he came back.”

When Slughorn met Harry’s gaze, it was with haunted, watery eyes. “This may not surprise you, Harry, considering what you must know by now. But when Tom Riddle asked me about horcruxes, he was not satisfied with the idea of only creating one.”

Harry’s breath hitched, but not from shock. “How many?” he pressed, hoping against hope that he would finally have a confirmation, an answer. Some relief. “How many did he want to make?”

“Tom was fascinated with Arithmancy,” Slughorn said, and it would have sounded like an entirely different conversation had Harry not known where it was leading, his heart in his mouth. “The way numbers could change the flow of magic. And by then, he knew that seven was the most magically powerful number...” The man trailed off, voice shaking too much to speak the rest aloud. Harry leaned in closer.