

1942: A Rhapsody in Riddle

by eldritch

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Warning: Contains content mentioning child abuse that might be triggering. Contains scenes detailing caning and crossdressing.

"My condolences for your loss, Abraxas," Slughorn told me quietly.

He had summoned me to his office before the start-of-term feast. His eyes were soft and worried as he took in my form. I knew I looked a pale shadow of the boy who had left Hogwarts at the end of last term. It had been a long summer. There had been the funeral. Then I had to meet my father's solicitors, business-associates, politicians and relatives. The Malfoy wealth and influence was coveted by all and sundry. With the death of my father, only I remained to bear the name of Malfoy and I was underage. This was a clarion call for our greedy relatives to try and dig their paws into the spoils. Fortunately, my mother's father, Nicholas Montaigne, had come to my rescue and steered me through the difficult days. Estranged though Father and Grandfather had been, Father had been sensible enough to appoint the latter executor of his will.

"Thank you for attending the funeral, Sir," I told Slughorn.

He waved a fleshy hand and said earnestly, "It was the least I could do, my boy! I was worried about you. I heard the Frenchman has taken responsibility."

The Frenchman. That is how Grandfather was known in our society. He was the untitled Frenchman whose daughter had seduced confirmed bachelor Hyperion Malfoy. Grandfather begged to differ, though, and had always maintained that my father had been a cradle-robber. With my mother's death in childbirth, the strained relations between Father and Grandfather had given way to complete estrangement. In fact, I had not seen Grandfather even once before Father's funeral.

"Grandfather has generously agreed to stay in Wiltshire until I come of age," I said. "I am grateful to him."

Slughorn sniffed.

I was grateful. Though Nicholas Montaigne loathed everything that bore the Malfoy name, he had agreed to safeguard the estate from the jaws of the greedy sharks until I became an adult.

"You are not wearing your Prefect badge," Slughorn said, changing the topic.

"It is in my trunk," I said. I had forgotten all about it. Last year, I had been on tenterhooks if I would be made a Prefect. There had been fierce competition. But after the summer, I found that I no longer cared for these trifles. "I will pin it on before the feast, Sir."

"See that you do," Slughorn said. "Now off with you. We don't want you to be late for the feast, not on your very first day as a Prefect."

I offered a wan smile and took my leave of Slughorn. Students were hurrying towards the Great Hall for the feast. I nodded to one or two boys who were in my year and quickly directed my path towards our Common Room.

"Malfoy!"

Walburga Black. I smiled at her. It would not do to act high-and-mighty with her, particularly given the fact that I might have to rely on her family for something or the other in the near future.

"Your trunk has been sent to your room," she said. I nodded. There was a gleam of amusement in her black eyes. Why? It must be something to do with the room. Had I been shunted into Pollux Black's old room? Pollux Black had made it thoroughly uninhabitable after his stint of two years, what with his practice of brewing unmentionables in there.

"The third down the corridor, Malfoy," Avery called out from his comfortable seat by the fire.

I was relieved. That was not Pollux's room. I nodded to Avery, smiled at Walburga and turned my steps towards the boys' dormitories.

To my surprise, the third door down the hall was locked from inside. Who had dared trespass in Malfoy territory? I knocked sharply.

The door opened a crack and I fought the urge to pinch my nose as I saw the familiar features of Tom Riddle. What was the upstart doing here?

"It is you," he murmured. "Come in, then."

"What are you doing here?" I asked, pushing past him and resisting the urge to groan when I saw two beds. "Avery told me that this is my room."

"They were one room short, what with Pollux Black's activities rendering his old room out of commission," Riddle said mildly. "Since the Prefects of sixth-year and seventh year refused to go halves, we are here." He waved a long-fingered hand to encompass our situation.

I hated Tom Riddle. *Upstart*. A Half-blood sorted into Slytherin who had then proceeded to wind the teachers about his little finger with his brilliance and charm. I had not thought he would be made a Prefect, not with the emphasis we placed on the purity of blood. But it seemed that he had achieved the impossible.

"We should hurry," he said. "The feast is about to start soon."

Surely he did not imagine that I, Abraxas Malfoy, would tag along with him to the welcome feast? He was waiting, though, and tapping his fingers against the door in impatience. It was time to set right his perspective.

"I will not lower myself to the company of a Half-blood," I said sternly.

His fingers stopped their tapping on the door frame. I stood my ground calmly. He nodded and left the room.

I waited until the sound of his shoes had receded before sighing and rubbing my temples in vexation. I would have to chase him out of the room soon. It was intolerable! How dared Slughorn assume that I had no compunction in sharing the room with someone like Riddle? It would do no good to appeal to Slughorn now. The man was too lazy to involve himself in such a dispute. After the feast I would find Avery, Lestrangle and a few others and hatch a plan to get Riddle out of here. He could return to the common dormitory and I would have the room to myself.

Riddle did not return to the room after the feast. I was not surprised. The whole House knew of his predilection for wandering the Castle past bedtime. I unpacked my trunk and arranged everything to my satisfaction. Across me, Riddle's side of the room was bare. No books. He would probably use his charm on Slughorn and obtain a set of school books from the professor. There was only the school-provided furniture and a shabby trunk. Not surprising, given his status as a scholarship student. I gave his trunk a disdainful glance. No Half-blood penniless orphan in Slytherin would return to school after the first year, seeing how much of a misfit he or she became in this House without fortune or influence. It defied logic why Riddle continued.

When I woke in the morning, Riddle was absent. I did my ablutions, dressed and made my way to the Common Room. Despite the early hour, many were present there, no doubt to catch up on summer gossip before the classes started.

"So?" Walburga teased me.

"He is missing," I remarked. "Be that as it may, I will have him evacuated soon. The very idea of breathing the same air as him is detestable, you realise."

"He is here to stay," Druella Rosier commented wryly. "He was not scared away by Crabbe or his cronies when he was a first-year. I doubt you will have better fortune in getting rid of him."

"You underestimate me," I told Druella.

"We shall see," Walburga said. "Wagers have been placed, Malfoy."

My House-mates would place a wager even on a dying man. So besotted were we with the pastime of gambling. Slughorn blamed Lysandra Yaxley for spreading this vice amongst us. She had supposedly imbibed it from her sojourn in Russia. The woman could play a mean game of Wizarding Roulette.

Now that wagers had been placed on the aftermath, I was honour-bound to chase Riddle from the room. In any case, this venture would lift my spirits after the awful summer I had been through.

Transfiguration was intolerable. On one hand, there was Albus Dumbledore, determinedly biased against Slytherins. It was a shame, since I truly liked both his teaching style and the subject, and tried to perform well in his classes. Given his bias, my efforts were in vain. The other factor that made Transfiguration a horror was Tom Riddle. For some reason, there was barely suppressed enmity between the orphan and the Head of Gryffindor. Riddle would finish the assignment eons before the rest of us. Dumbledore would suspect him of cheating and ask him to redo the assignment under Dumbledore's supervision. This would irk Riddle's pride; for a penniless orphan, Riddle had considerable pride. The cold war for the day would then begin. Slytherin never escaped Transfiguration without a considerable deduction of points. If not for the fact that Riddle consistently made up for this with his other classes and had been instrumental in bringing us the House Cup the past four years, he would not find life in this House bearable.

"Welcome back!" Dumbledore greeted us as he entered the room in a profusion of purple and gold robes. I was sure that his garish clothing would give me a headache by the end of the double-period.

His blue eyes narrowed slightly when he saw Riddle in the first row. He quickly moved his gaze to his beloved Gryffindors who occupied the rows further away from the teacher's desk.

"Why don't we try something new today?" Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Can anyone tell me what Human Transfiguration is?"

Riddle raised his hand. I had to admire his tenacity. Despite knowing from four years' worth of experience that Dumbledore would never call on him to answer, Riddle persisted in raising his hand for every question during the class.

"Let us see, let us see," Dumbledore murmured, his eyes refusing to acknowledge Riddle's gesture. "Ah! Charlus!"

Charlus Potter blinked. Likely he had been busy ogling Dorea Black who had become quite curvy over the summer.

"Human Transfiguration?" Dumbledore prodded.

"It changes humans into things?" Charlus guessed, his eyes still on the swell of Dorea's bosom.

"Excellent, my boy!" Dumbledore said enthusiastically. "Ten points to Gryffindor!"

The Slytherins groaned as one. That set the tune for the rest of the lesson. Dumbledore explained the concept of Human Transfiguration, asked Septimus Weasley to step forward, transfigured the boy into a bright red toffee, took off the spell and awarded fifty points to Gryffindor for unflinching courage.

"Now, why don't you try? In pairs, please! Concentrate on every detail of what your Transfiguration spell must realise. I don't expect any of you to succeed, of course, but I hope you will realise the amount of detail required to realise a correct Transfiguration."

I succeeded in giving Walburga a horn. She gave me platypus legs. Still, we were better off than Augusta Longbottom, whose lower body had been replaced by a melting block of ice, courtesy of Septimus Weasley.

"That must be very uncomfortable, Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore murmured as he waved his wand and set me back to rights. "Miss Black, would you rather keep the horn? I assure you that it enhances your considerable beauty."

"I would rather not have a pink horn," Walburga said through gritted teeth. "Really, Abraxas, what were you thinking?"

Dumbledore chuckled, made the horn disappear and left me to bear the brunt of Walburga's wrath.

"He has done it!" Druella exclaimed. "Professor Dumbledore, Tom has done it!"

Dumbledore's gaze narrowed as he turned to face his most trying student. Riddle had a bright green toffee on the outstretched palm of his left hand. The Professor waved his wand once. Riddle's eyes widened and he hastily made to drop the toffee, but he was too late and the bulk of Goyle fell upon his slender form. Dumbledore smiled, the Gryffindors roared in laughter and even a few of the Slytherins could not help chuckling at the sight of Tom Riddle squashed underneath the ponderous weight of Goyle. I did not laugh, silently despairing that my favourite subject would be so tainted by this bitter rivalry between Riddle and Dumbledore.

"Are you all right, Tom?" Dumbledore asked, all concern and benevolence. "Mr. Goyle, would you kindly remove yourself? Your friend seems to be rather unhappy there."

"Riddle, are you unhappy underneath Goyle, eh?" Charlus Potter asked, chortling.

"You needn't be. It suits you," Septimus Weasley assured Riddle, who was trying not to wince as Goyle's weight shifted.

"That is quite enough!" Dumbledore chided them. If that had been any other Slytherin, all of us would have rushed to defend one of our own against the Gryffindors. But this was Riddle. We would not defend the Half-blood. We never had, in all these years. He did not require it too, it seemed, given how unaffected he was by taunting and bullying.

Goyle had finally risen. Dumbledore offered Riddle a helping hand. The boy refused with a haughty shake of his head and rose to his feet, dusting his worn robes with care.

"Very well! Why don't you write an essay on the Ethics of Human Transfiguration for the next class?" Dumbledore asked us. "No plagiarism, please. Tom, I will be most displeased if you disobey."

Riddle loathed writing essays. He bartered his considerable skills at practical magic for getting his essays written by others.

"As you wish, Sir," Riddle said impassively. He would probably try to come up with a new way to cheat. Dumbledore would catch him red-handed. Slytherin would lose points. Ah, the joys of having Riddle in the House!

"Steal his wand," I told Druella, as we entered the Great Hall for lunch. "Transfigure something else to look like it and substitute that. He won't suspect you."

"Is it a good idea?" Avery asked me. "That boy is trouble. If our seniors couldn't scare some sense into his dainty head..."

"Are you backing out?" I queried sharply. "We need to present a solid front, Avery. He takes unallowable liberties."

"Just steal his wand in Potions, Druella. You can put it in the Potions classroom and he will think that he left it there after the last lesson of the day. He will be defenceless without his wand," Walburga said thoughtfully. "Abraxas, when he comes to your room tonight, give him a good scare. Let that be the end of it. There is no need for ganging up on him. We don't want infighting now. The boy earns points. He has won the House Cup for us the past four years. Let us just make sure that he is scared enough to shift to the common fifth-year dormitory."

"I agree with Walburga," Lestrangle muttered. "Just give him a scare he isn't likely to forget, Malfoy. Take him down a peg and leave it at that."

Druella gave me a nod after Potions. She had stolen the wand, then. I hurried to my room. Riddle might take himself off to the library after lessons and turn up only after dinner. However, given that his robes had been drenched in rat's entrails during Potions after Walburga's unfortunate clumsiness, he was likely to return and grab a change of clothes. He despised dirty clothing.

I was of a mind to rifle through his trunk, but decided not to after I detected the considerable warding charms he had used. Paranoia, your name is Riddle.

Take him down a peg, Lestrangle had said. What would take Riddle down a peg? Routine taunts or bullying did not upset him. Something different was called for. He so prided himself on his control over his body, didn't he? Haughtiness shone bright in his eyes every time someone remarked on his fluidness. It would be physical punishment for him. Our Prefects often administered it to the younger students, particularly in cases where there was a marked lack of parental influence.

The door opened and Riddle walked in. He looked surprised to find me here, warranted in that I was usually fond of spending my evenings with others in the Common Room. With a spell, I locked the door behind him.

"I am off to the library," he remarked. "You can lock the door after I leave."

He would not let slip the fact that he was deprived of wand. Cunning of him, but futile.

"You are not leaving," I told him seriously.

"What is this about, Malfoy?" he asked impatiently, looking not a jot intimidated. He retrieved a clean shirt and a pair of trousers from his trunk. Turning his back to me, he began undressing, throwing his dirty clothes into the basket that house-elves would later collect. "If you are unhappy with the rooming situation, go to Slughorn. I am none too pleased about it myself."

Dorea Black was not the only one whose body had changed over the summer. Riddle's scrawny body, always the subject of taunting in the shower-rooms, had now become all clean, sharp lines. His fingers skittered like pale spiders over his torso as he ran a damp cloth over his body to remove the day's sweat before he changed clothes. He had gained height over the summer, and now was nearly as tall as I was, and his slender physique looked less emaciated. I had to pry my eyes away from the sharp angles of his vertebrae and the smooth length of his legs. For a moment, I was both resentful and thankful that his greying, threadbare small-clothes obscured the rest of him.

He seemed to realise that I was staring, for he paused his ministrations with the damp cloth.

"You really should invest in a new set of small-clothes," I taunted.

"One wonders how I survived till now without your generous wardrobe-advice," he remarked, and his voice was so condescending that I told myself it justified what I did next.

I waved my wand and muttered an incantation that saw him tumbling onto the bed, with conjured ropes holding tight his wrists and rendering him helpless. He could kick but it would be inelegant and he loathed inelegance. His wrists strained against the ropes, testing their strength and his breaths became short, sharp pants as he realised his impuissance. His spine stiffened and he raised his head, reminding me eerily of the young, unbroken colts in my father's stables. Turning his face half-about to meet my gaze with his grey eyes, he demanded with all the imperiousness of an emperor, "What now, Malfoy?"

I took in the sight of him. His long, slim hands were stretched taut by the binding ropes to the bedposts. To preserve his posture, he had spread his legs to balance his unsupported torso. That had brought to my notice the swell of his arse that strained against his worn small-clothes and the sharp, clean lines of his legs. I pressed the tip of my wand to the small of his back and he stiffened a fraction more.

"You are playing with fire, Malfoy," he hissed, his grey eyes flashing a fury that had until now been directed only at Dumbledore.

Perhaps I was. The group of seventh-year thugs who had tried to bully Riddle when we had been first-years had all been expelled from Hogwarts for cheating during the N.E.W.T examinations. But Riddle was helpless now, and at my mercy.

I did the Vanishing charm to do away with his small-clothes and he averted his gaze from mine. But I could see his features in half-profile, against the low, banked fire in our room. A statue of silent defiance he remained even as I used Transfiguration to change his pillow into a cane. He tried his utmost to hold his posture as the caning proceeded, refusing to let me revel in his pain. I continued, bearing down with more force, concentrating on the glistening sweat dripping down his spine, the collapsing and expanding of his ribs and the tensed length of his legs as he strove to keep himself still. The lethargy that had possessed me after my father's death fled away now, as I poured my will into breaking Riddle's composure. And his composure fell, when the cane traversed a path that had already endured its sting; his firm jaw fell slack as he cursed colourfully. The word shocked me, and reminded me all the more of his tainted blood and Muggle upbringing. Hatred rose in me once again. How could a Half-blood orphan be so intelligent and charming and handsome? It was unfair. It was not right. It was against the order of things. I struck harder and his head drooped to his chest, exposing the soft skin at the nape of his neck. I paused, devouring with my eyes the wreck I had made of his perfection. Sharp red welts marred his skin and sweat covered every inch of his torso. His knees were curved inward, perilously near to letting him slump in an ungraceful heap. A few strikes more, and he would be on his knees, howling in pain. My father had dismissed my Nanny when he had heard me howling after she had taken a hairbrush to me. He had taken me in his arms then and gently wiped the snot and tears off my face, kissed my forehead and promised me that nobody would hurt me like that ever again. What would he have said if he had seen me now? I dropped the cane.

I walked forward and gripped his smooth jaw, turning his face towards me. His eyes held hatred and pain, tears ran down his cheeks and he was still panting. He had learnt his lesson, I hoped. Perhaps he would be less high-and-mighty now, more mindful of his place here and cooperate with us instead of antagonising us.

"I will release you now," I told him quietly. Fear flared in his eyes then. It took me a long moment to identify the emotion as fear, but when I did, I inhaled sharply. Of its own accord, my right hand made a reassuring circle on his lower back. If anything, the fear in his eyes increased many-fold.

"Don't touch me there," he whispered in between his harsh breathing. His voice was low and pained as he continued, "I will vacate the room. Don't fuck me."

By Merlin, what had I done?

"Legilimens!" I whispered, using the spell my father had taught me last year to plumb his disordered thoughts. Under normal circumstances, I doubted that anyone could delve into Riddle's mind, given his extraordinary control. But he was shaken badly now and frightened too, and his defences were all but nonexistent as I sought answers in his mind.

A sacristy, a priest and a young boy.

"You are unnatural, Tom. A freak. Now you want to attend that school for freaks. Magic is unnatural. It is against the Scripture. If I tell Mrs. Cole, she will forbid you from attending. She is a good Christian. I will keep your secret, only if you do exactly what I say."

Pain and fear and hungering for knowledge despite everything endured.

I screamed in pain as my flesh burned, even as I saw the priest's abuse of the young boy in exchange for knowledge. I was thrown out of Riddle's mind by a blistering pain then, and I staggered backwards, trying to make sense of my pain.

The bastard had set me on fire. How had he done that? I fell to my knees and clawed at my wand that had fallen earlier. Taking a deep breath, I sought to calm down and brought my wand to douse the fire my robes had caught. A hiss of pain escaped me as the water struck my burned flesh.

Silence followed that. Riddle was gazing at the wall before him, refusing to acknowledge my presence. I was trying to make sense of what I had found in his thoughts. I could not entirely understand the implications. I had not, in my wildest nightmare, imagined that such things could happen. Dear Merlin! Remorse struck me as hard as I had struck Riddle earlier. The boy had been abused by someone in a position of authority. He was unable to distinguish physical punishment from abuse.

I ought to release him from the bindings and apologise to him. He would probably make a oath of vengeance, dress himself silently and leave the room. I was reminded of my father once again, though, and of how he had comforted me in my pain. I Summoned a pot of salve and walked to Riddle's side. Dipping my hands in the pot, I began rubbing the cold balm over his welts. He hissed and lost his footing, slumping forward onto the bed with his face squashed in the coverlet. I untied his arms without using magic, taking care to rub the circulation back into his wrists. Then I proceeded to apply the balm over his thighs. He flinched and tried to twist away from my hands. How would I tell him that I did not mean to harm him like that despicable man had done?

I patted his sharp shoulder-blades awkwardly and said in my softest tones, "I only wanted to scare you so that you would behave."

"You had no right," he whispered harshly. "You had *no* right. You will pay for this."

"Shh," I hushed him, trying to overlook the cold, matter-of-fact tone he had used while saying those words. I found the cloth he had been using earlier and dipped it in the basin he kept by his bed. Then I gently raised his tear-stained face and wiped it clean. His hands came to bat my ministrations away and clumsily he pulled his legs onto the bed. With a dark glare, he crawled to the other side of the bed, away from me, with his back against the wall. Raising his knees, he placed his chin on them.

He had started shivering. I stoked the fire in our room higher and crossed my hands behind my back. I could not bear to look at him. I wanted his posture and haughtiness

to return. I wanted him restored to his usual calm. A frightened Riddle I found myself incapable of dealing with.

What I had seen in his thoughts haunted me. If he vacated the room, if he returned to the common dormitory, if anyone else with a grudge against him decided to punish him in this manner, what would happen? What if someone else saw him in this state? He craved knowledge. He had put up with taunts and bullying from students of all Houses for the sake of obtaining an education. If anyone else knew his dark secret, they would have him broken. No. I had nearly done that, unaware though I had been of what he had sacrificed to attend this school.

Slowly, I said, "You can stay here."

"I won't be your toy, Malfoy," he said quietly. His voice, raspy and broken, was a far cry from his usual mellifluous tones.

Toy. Was that what he had been to that priest? Why did Riddle crave knowledge so badly, that he had considered his pain a worthy coin for Athena's boon?

"You won't be my toy," I told him. "You aren't going to be anyone's toy, Riddle. You are too tenacious for that."

He peered at me suspiciously.

"You set me on fire, you bastard," I reminded him. Wandless magic. Directed, intentional wandless magic. Riddle was powerful, so much more than the bookworms who scored high on the N.E.W.Ts.

"I could have done it earlier," he murmured, a gleam of mischief lighting his eyes. "Much earlier."

"Why didn't you, then?" I demanded, truly curious to know why he had endured the humiliation and the pain.

"You did not steal my wand. You consider yourself above such pettiness. That means you had accomplices." He shrugged. "If the entire House is against me, sooner or later I will fall into the mob's hands. It seemed a better option to let you win now than letting myself fall apart like this before the entire House at some later point."

So this is why the Hat had put the bastard in Slytherin. Clever wretch.

He made to rise from the bed, then, and winced in pain. Remorse caught me again and I hurried over to help.

"I am not proficient at Healing spells at all, but perhaps I could borrow a potion from Slughorn's stores?" I suggested, cringing as I saw the purpling welts. My hatred against the world, which had set in after my father's death, had dissipated rapidly after seeing the horror in Riddle's thoughts, leaving behind only helplessness and regret.

"As you saw, this is not the first time," he murmured, closing his eyes and frowning. The welts disappeared. He touched the burnt skin of my arm and healed it. Magic, dark and brilliant and smothering, hung heavy in the air. Drunk on the raw display of his power, I shook my head in awe and dropped to sit beside him on the bed.

He shot me a suspicious glance.

"I ought to Oblivate you," he muttered. "You know too much."

"You won't," I told him. "You need me to tell the rest of them that you have been taken down a peg. Otherwise you will be in more trouble than it is worth."

"I could always use a well-placed Imperio," he said absently.

I stiffened. He caught the movement and laughed; a high cold sound that did not reassure me at all.

"I won't," he said quietly. "It would be too risky."

Riddle must be submerged in Dark Arts, then, to speak so lightly of an Unforgivable Curse. I thought over his words carefully. Using the Imperius Curse was fraught with risks. However he could perform a selective Obliviation, to ensure that I forgot his dark secret while remaining aware that I had taken him down a peg. He had chosen not to. That meant he did not want me to forget.

"Who was the monster?" I asked him softly.

He rose from the bed and began to dress, applying his usual meticulous care to his attire. When I began to think that I would receive no answer, he said, "Father Sebastian. He is a Squib. He hates me for having magic. He knew that I had magic long before I received the letter from Hogwarts. I... I used to want to impress him."

How long had he suffered at the hands of that monster? Did he still return to that man during the summers?

"I must be going," he said. "I must finish that essay for Dumbledore."

"I will do it for you if you finish my Divination homework," I offered.

His eyes widened and his mouth curved in a reluctant grin as he said, "There is a reason why I chose to drop Divination, you know, apart from my aversion to essays. That subject is claptrap."

"I have often wondered how you manage to score in History of Magic, what with your laziness to write essays."

"I cannot give away my trade secrets," he said, giving me a puckish smile. At that moment, I was so relieved to see the upstart Tom Riddle back. It suited him.

That night marked the beginning of a change in our interactions. If we were Gryffindors, we would have started playing Exploding Snap together. If we were Hufflepuffs, we would have started doing homework together. If we were Ravenclaws, we might have debated Arithmancy theories together. We were Slytherins, though. We barely spoke to each other, but there were changes.

One night, I was woken up by Riddle staggering into the room. He made for his trunk, searched blindly in the dim light of the banked fire, cried in victory and moved to the jug of water he kept by the water. I rose, concerned, as he squeezed something into the water was that a lemon? - and drank the contents of the jug. When I realised that water had sloshed down the front of his shirt in his clumsiness, I conjured a light at the tip of his wand and hurried to his side.

"It is nothing," he said. "I was tired."

"Tired?"

"Hmm, yes, go back to sleep. I am returning to the library."

I brought the light closer to his drawn, waxen features. I had not seen Riddle at the dinner table in three days.

"When did you last eat?" I asked him, suddenly realising the cause of his exhaustion.

"Eat?" he queried. "Malfoy, you are not making sense. Go back to sleep."

As the term picked up pace, I was busy with my Quidditch practice and returned only late in the evening. The team would summon house-elves and ask them to bring food.

Slughorn turned a blind eye to this as long as we kept the noise down. If Riddle and I were off patrol, I would retire to our room and drop a package of food on his bed before turning in. He kept odd hours, but leaving food on his bed ensured that he would at least eat a bite or two when he came in. If it was a patrol day for us, I would not eat with the team. I would head to the library and wait for Riddle to appear from wherever he had headed off to that evening. He would come sharp at nine. We would set off on patrol. At the end of it, I would drag him to the kitchens and we would eat there.

Small changes. Riddle was an unsociable creature. He would charm one and all if it suited him, but never for the purpose of companionship.

"When is your first match?" he asked, on one of the rare occasions when we were both in the room.

I paused writing my essay for Slughorn and peered at him. He was lying on his back and practising his aim on a swarm of butterflies he had conjured for the very purpose. Sick bastard. He turned to face me then and I could not help a smile at the sight of dark curls falling over his forehead. So mussed and untidy, unlike the usual severe parting of his hair.

"You might want to trim your hair unless you have decided to take my advice and let it grow long."

"I am not fond of long hair," he said. There was a wealth of meaning obscured in those words and I closed my eyes so that he might be spared the sympathy in them.

"The first match is this Friday," I told him. "Are you coming?"

"I don't attend matches," he said. "The cacophony would drive me mad."

"Do you know to fly?" I asked doubtfully. I didn't remember him at the mandatory flying session in our first year. Knowing him, he must have sneaked away somehow.

"Not on a broomstick," he admitted.

What other way was there to fly? A carpet, perhaps?

"There is a handy charm to block your hearing," I said. "Not necessarily a Ministry-approved spell, but it works."

He made a noncommittal noise.

"If you hex Septimus Weasley for me, I will teach you flying."

"If you can tie me down and cane me purple, you are more than capable of hexing Weasley," he murmured.

I overlooked the reference to that awful night and said calmly, "I want you to hex Weasley because you never get caught."

"McGonagall likes Dumbledore," he remarked.

I wrinkled my nose and said sharply, "I could have lived without that piece of information, Riddle!"

"Misery loves company and all that," he said, laughing.

Well, that was usually the nature of Riddle's contribution to our interactions. He had a keen eye and would often notice the most improper infatuations our fellow-students had. He revelled in tormenting me with the information. I was yet to recover from Riddle's remark last week that Cassandra Black stalked Slughorn.

Small changes. We did not call each other by our first names. We did not greet each other or study together. We did not sit together in classes.

He did come to the first match. It was against Hufflepuff. He sat between Andrea Zabini and Cygnus Black, with a green Slytherin scarf tightly wound about his ears. He spent more time conjuring bees and sending them to attack Dumbledore than watching the match. I nearly lost the Snitch laughing at his antics. I breathed a silent prayer of gratitude when I closed my hands about the golden ball. Lestrangle would have pounded me into carrion fodder if I had lost the Snitch.

"How is our Half-blood genius?" Walburga asked one morning as I dropped into the seat beside her for Transfiguration. "I was returning with Orion from the Astronomy Tower yesterday and saw Riddle talking with the Grey Lady. He is a strange one."

"I barely see him in the room," I said truthfully. "He is always out and about."

"What does he do?"

"Who knows? Avery says he might be brewing absinthe in the Forest."

"If you have finished exchanging pleasantries with Miss Black, Mr. Malfoy, might I have your attention?" Dumbledore ordered.

We fell quiet and settled in to enjoy our ringside view of the biweekly Dumbledore and Riddle show.

The Halloween ball was the most important social occasion in the student calendar. Students of fifth-year or higher could participate in the ball. The others were sent to their dormitories after the feast.

In the week leading up to the ball, the gossip mills were rife with speculation.

"Did you hear that Charlus Potter asked Dorea Black to the ball? She turned him down, of course. The gall of him!" I exclaimed as I entered the room and found Riddle diligently copying Avery's Runes essay.

"Ball?"

"The Halloween ball, Riddle!" I groaned. "You forgot, did you? Tell me you have proper dress robes?"

He looked up from the essay and said, "So that is why Alastor Moody was trailing McGonagall with a rose. I wondered."

"I am going to ask Walburga to be my date," I said. "I might have a set of spare dress robes in here. If you can alter them to your measurements, you may have them."

"Find a date for me, while you are at it," he said absently. "I will put in an appearance for namesake."

"It is Halloween, Riddle. Everybody will be there. The library will be closed."

"The forest," he murmured. "Have an illegal potion to brew. The temperature conditions will be ideal that night."

"Dumbledore will be there at the ball," I warned him. "Druella Rosier calls him your stalker."

"Not too far off the mark," he said wryly. "If he is there, I may not be able to sneak out. Well, teach me to dance, will you? I will make sure that your Quidditch team wins the next match against Gryffindor."

"Our Quidditch team," I reminded him.

"Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes, of course!" I said emphatically. How could I turn down the opportunity to rub Potter's nose in the dirt? I had no doubt that Riddle excelled at match-fixing.

Fifteen minutes later, I began to regret my decision. Not that Riddle was destined to be a clumsy dancer, of course. His natural grace lent itself to arts like dancing and fencing. However, I had not reckoned how having him in my arms and swaying in accord to the music would affect my senses.

"It is not too difficult," he remarked, as I dipped him as the music fell swiftly before rising again.

He had been tensed at first, when I had placed his palm on my shoulder. His discomfort had increased when my hand rested on his waist. I had to distract him with tales of Dumbledore's unfairness against the Slytherins in order to get him to relax. Then I had spelled the music to start and he had eased into the symphony with the true ardour of a music aficionado. Once absorbed by the music, he had dropped his usual mask of blandness, letting the pleasure he derived from the euphony play across his features. It was a strangely alluring sight, what with his dark eyes softening into limpidity and his lips twisted into an easy curve of pleasure. The heat of his body greeted my palms through the thin fabric of his clothes.

Strangely, many Ravenclaw girls asked Riddle to be their date for the ball. Perhaps they were drawn in by his eccentricities. And he did spend time speaking with their House ghost. It was just as well that I had asked Lucretia Black to be his date. The girl was Orion's sister and so was a part of Walburga's social circle which comprised of the elite of our House.

"Don't be surprised if he sneaks off in the middle of the ball," I told Lucretia. "He does that all the time."

"Does he even know how to dance? He is a Half-blood," she said disdainfully. "I am lowering my standards only because Walburga asked."

"He can dance decently well," I assured her, trying not to think of how transformed Riddle had been by music's influence.

"Stay back after class, Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said, the eve before the ball.

He wanted to know if Riddle was intimidating me. After all, I had just lost my father and was likely to be an easy victim for the unscrupulous and greedy, both of which he considered Riddle to be.

"No, Sir," I said. "Riddle lives in the library and returns to our House only to sleep. You might as well as provide him a cot in the library and be done with it."

"Are you aware of his trips to the Forbidden Forest, Mr. Malfoy?" Dumbledore asked me, his eyes trying to ascertain the veracity of my words.

It would not do to lie to him. So I said plainly, "I have not seen him going into the Forest, but I have heard rumours that he brews absinthe in there."

"Has Mr. Riddle tried to elicit sympathy from you by bringing up his circumstances at the orphanage?"

"I am not aware of Riddle's living arrangements," I said truthfully. "I only know that he has been brought up by Muggles, Sir."

He peered at me over his half-moon glasses. Then he nodded and said, "You may leave, Mr. Malfoy."

I decided not to mention this conversation to Riddle. It would be folly to stoke higher his enmity with Dumbledore.

I spent that night in the Common Room, chatting with Avery and Lestrange about the arrangements for the ball that was to take place the next day. Riddle was nowhere to be seen, and I dearly hoped that he had not decided to brew his illegal potion this night, as I suspected Dumbledore was watching him more closely than he realised.

The candles in the room, along the wall closest to the entrance, guttered.

"Wind?" Lestrange asked curiously. "Here?"

Indeed, a wind in the dungeons? Before I could answer, though, the candles were extinguished by a spell spoken by a male voice. I reached for my wand, but a shouted chorus of Expelliarmus spells disarmed us.

"Who is there?" Lestrange demanded. "We will call Professor Slughorn."

A chorus of male laughter. A door banged shut and there were screams from the girls' dormitories.

"Heavens!" Avery exclaimed. By the low light of the fire in our hearth, I could see the terror upon his features.

"What are you waiting for?" I barked, running towards the girls' dormitories. The screams continued in earnest, frightening me. I was reminded of what I had seen in Riddle's thoughts and I pounded my fists on the door leading to the girls' rooms.

"Open! Open the door, you cowards!"

"Abraxas! Abraxas, help us!"

It was Druella's voice.

Avery cursed and made his way back to the Common Room, shouting at us that he would be back with Slughorn. A well-placed Stunning spell saw him falling to the floor, frozen in his expression of fear. How many of them were here? Had they Stunned all the boys in the dormitories before coming in here?

"Open the door, you bastards!" Lestrange was yelling.

The candles guttered back to life in the narrow corridor. Riddle stood at the end of corridor, presumably having made his way here after hearing the screams. Curses and jinxes were flying at him from our invisible invaders, but his shield held firm and true.

"Let go of me!"

Dorea Black.

"Riddle, do something!" I exclaimed. A Stunning spell made its way towards me from the other end of the corridor, but Riddle deflected it easily. He frowned and waved his wand once, muttering something about Invisibility spells and cloaks. Sure enough, we could see three masked miscreants made visible by Riddle's spell.

Lestrange tackled down one and I punched another. Riddle lazily Stunned the third.

"Don't break his limbs, Abraxas," Lestrange warned, seeing the force behind my punches. I fought to restrain myself. I had been so frightened. Riddle had already blasted

open the door and repeated his spell to render visible our attackers. Walburga cried out in relief and rushed to his side. I hastily followed Lestrangle into the girls' dormitories and stared in shock at the sight of the twenty or so masked figures that were present.

"You can drop your wands and get out of here or I can practise my spellcasting," Riddle said quietly.

"Get stuffed, Riddle," muttered a familiar voice. It was the masked figure standing next to a dishevelled looking Dorea Black who was in tears.

"Potter!" I exclaimed. "How dare you!"

Potter cast a Stunning spell at me, but I was safe behind Riddle's shield.

"What is going on here?"

Slughorn. Finally. And he was followed by Dumbledore.

Lestrangle, being the senior, began, "The Gryffindors attacked us in our Common Room, Sir. They were invisible. They put out the candles and stunned the boys before coming here. Then they got in and locked the door behind them. They took our wands too, Sir. We were frightened for the girls. They were screaming. Avery went for help, but he was Stunned. Luckily, Riddle came in then and sorted it out."

"Mr. Potter, what do you have to say?" Dumbledore asked.

"It was a prank, Sir," Potter said quickly. I hissed and made to intervene, but Dumbledore shook his head at me.

"A prank?" Slughorn asked, not a jot convinced.

"Yes, Sir," one of Potter's minions replied. "Dorea Black turned down Charlus for the ball. So we thought, why don't we play a prank on the Slytherins, since they think they are above us all?"

"Yes, Sir," Potter nodded vigorously. "We meant no harm. Then Riddle came in and started threatening us."

"He said he would practise spellcasting on us." Alastor Moody, wasn't it? I glared at him. He was the one closest to Druella. She looked shaken and pale, poor girl.

"Mr. Riddle," Dumbledore addressed my room-mate. "Did you threaten them?"

From there, it went downhill. Despite Riddle's terse explanations and the arguments Lestrangle and I made in his favour, Dumbledore was stubbornly biased against Riddle. Slughorn had walked past us and was now comforting poor Dorea who had had the fright of her life.

"It was just a prank, Miss Black," Dumbledore was telling Walburga. "The day we lose our ability to laugh at ourselves would be a sad day indeed! Now, Gryffindors, please leave these rooms and assemble at my office. We will discuss the appropriateness of pranks. Young ladies, why don't you see to retiring? There is a ball tomorrow and I want you all to be present there at your loveliest! Your dashing young gentlemen were so chivalrous in coming to your rescue and you owe them all dances."

With that, Dumbledore took his leave. Slughorn was left to awkwardly console the girls. Riddle exhaled and said tiredly, "Malfoy, Lestrangle, we had best see to freeing the rest of the boys from the Stunning spells. There were bodies everywhere along the path from the entrance."

So we did that. None of the boys we revived were lacking in murderous inclinations right then.

"I am so sorry," Slughorn told the girls repeatedly. "You may rest assured that I will bring this to the Headmaster's notice."

After he had brought them a measure of consolation, he walked into the Common Room where we were assembled.

"You know that the Headmaster will likely side with Dumbledore," he said wearily. "I am so sorry, my boys, but I must ask you not to lash out against the perpetrators of today's atrocity in any obvious manner."

Poor Slughorn. He did his best to protect and defend us, but it was never enough. He simply did not have the charm or will of Albus Dumbledore.

"We will not let this pass without revenge, Sir," Riddle promised him, confidence resounding in every word spoken in his quiet, calm tone. "We will not be caught."

"Tom, Tom, be careful, my boy," Slughorn murmured, a wan smile on his face. "Dumbledore does not like you at all. One misstep will bring you grief."

"He will not be caught," Lestrangle spoke up.

"Yes," Avery agreed.

One by one, the boys pledged loyalty to Riddle that night. Slughorn called us his darling boys and wished us well. Years later, I would laugh whenever I read the fictitious accounts written by the historians about the birth of the Death Eaters. It happened like this, you see, and there had been no virgin sacrifices or orgies or chanting involved.

After that, we retired to our rooms and turned in for the night, weary and sad.

"We were fortunate that you came in when you did," I told Riddle as I changed into my night-clothes.

"You are responsible," he said sleepily, climbing into his bed, clothes and all. He must have been quite exhausted. He had been outside the night before. "I only came early in the hope that you might have something for me to eat."

Riddle was much sought-after at the ball next day. I watched in amusement as he stoically danced with every girl in our House above fifth-year. The dark brown robes he had borrowed from me became him well. The Slytherin girls had arrayed themselves in their finest clothing and jewellery, perhaps to prove that they had not been affected by the previous night's terror. But their unusual clinginess to their wands, and to their ball partners, gave the game away.

"He is ours, Half-blood or not," Walburga told me as we danced. "He fought for us, when it really mattered."

Riddle did not charm his way into Slytherin hearts. We did not trust him at all. We hated him. He was the oddball in our House. Until the eve of that ball. Then his courage and duelling skills enshrined him firmly in our hearts. Once given, our loyalty remained given for generations. And that is what happened.

When I met Riddle at the refreshments table later, he said, "I owe you two Quidditch matches, Malfoy. Your dancing lessons have been exceedingly useful today."

"One match, Riddle," I said brightly, the spiked punch affecting my words and gestures. I squarely blamed the punch for what I said next, "And a dance."

He stopped sipping his drink and stared at me.

"A dance, Riddle."

"How?" he asked, sounding stupefied.

What a rare condition for him! I chortled, he looked shocked and I murmured, "You are very good at Transfiguration, aren't you?"

"Yes," he granted. "What does that have to do with a dance?"

"You will make a fine woman," I advised him. "The last dance, I want it."

His expression was an equal mixture of horror and amusement.

"*What* have the Ravenclaws spiked the punch with?" he asked.

"Conspiracies, gentlemen?"

It was Dumbledore. Riddle narrowed his eyes at the Professor and told me, "As you wish." He then grabbed a glass of the punch and returned to Lucretia Black.

"Well, Mr. Malfoy?" Dumbledore asked.

"Nothing. Nothing at all, Sir." I grinned, shaking my head like a lunatic. Dumbledore looked worried.

As was usual, most of the students had retired to cosy alcoves or deserted corridors by the beginning of the penultimate dance. Only a few stragglers and the staff remained.

"I believe I promised you a dance, Malfoy."

I turned to face him. He was standing obscured from the crowd in the alcove behind me. I gasped as I saw the picture he made. He had lengthened his hair and it fell in a silky wave of curls down his back. His eyes were limpid and there was a hint of colour on his sharp cheekbones. I dropped my gaze. He was wearing a dark green bodice. The fabric clung tight on his upper body, until his waist, and then green skirts flared down the length of his legs, making him look more slender than he was. He did not look feminine at all, as I had feared he might. On the contrary, with his jutting collarbones, flat chest, tapering torso and slender wrists, he looked rather like the Grecian statues which adorned my father's study.

He cleared his throat, drawing my attention to the unadorned, pale length of his neck. Taking a deep breath, I Summoned something precious all the way from my trunk. He frowned as I cradled the object for a moment before slipping it about his neck. The emeralds shone bright and brilliant against the white expanse of his skin.

"My mother's," I explained. "I have always had it with me." My father had gifted it to her. After her death, he had placed it in the chest of drawers in my nursery, not wanting to look upon it again. I had wanted to gift it to my wife.

He frowned, but then nodded silently.

"You are brilliant at Transfiguration," I remarked.

"I Transfigured only the robes," he said dryly. "Surely you did not expect me to conjure breasts and a vagina? The anatomical details are rather beyond my grasp."

He was crude only when he was uncomfortable. So I said, "You are handsome. Long hair suits you, you know."

"Do you want me to come to the dance floor like this?" he asked solemnly. "You are drunk, you know. You will regret it tomorrow."

"What of you?" I enquired. "Are you also drunk?"

"Drunk on success, perhaps," he remarked. "I had a breakthrough in my research today morning."

"Let us go to our room," I told him.

"You owe me for this," he said quietly, as we made our way through the dungeon corridors to our Common Room. I was unable to keep my eyes off my mother's jewels on his neck. He cut a striking picture.

"Abraxas!"

Slughorn. I suppressed a groan and hurried to the Professor's side. He was looking wide-eyed at Riddle, who was now leaning against the wall in a languid manner.

"Sir?"

"Nothing at all, my boy," he laughed. "For a moment, I thought... Never mind, Abraxas! Hurry back to your date. Goodnight."

"He will never let us live this down," I told Riddle. He shrugged.

"He will *never* let us live this down," I groaned again. "It is just as well that my father is dead."

"Do shut up, Malfoy," Riddle muttered. "I am the one dressed like a tuppence streetwalker, in case you have forgotten. If you are so concerned about your reputation, you can buy his silence with the green fairy."

"The green fairy?" I asked, worried. "You have been brewing that in the forest? Dumbledore suspects you, you know. And, Riddle, what is a tuppence streetwalker?"

"Best you don't know. And no, I don't brew liqueur," he said absently, opening the door to our room and chivvying me in. He closed the door behind us, locked it for good measure and said, "The Ravenclaw sixth-years brew it."

I wanted to ask him what he was brewing in the forest. Then I decided not to. He was such a handsome picture with his Transfigured silks and my mother's necklace that it would be a sacrilege to spoil the ambience with petty questioning.

"I am going to undo the spell," he told me. "Best remove the necklace."

I obliged, letting my fingers touch his warm skin more than was necessary before removing the necklace. He bore that with good grace. If this was what successful research did to his temperament, I devoutly hoped that he had more breakthroughs in the future. He undid the spell on his clothes. They reverted back to the dress robes I had lent him. He removed them and put on his night shirt. Then he trimmed his hair back to its normal length. I sighed in disappointment.

"The fire is not lit," he complained. "No logs too."

"The house-elves must have forgotten," I said drowsily.

"I don't like to be cold," he said. "I am off to the Common Room. There is a roaring fire there."

"No," I said sharply, quite put out by the idea that he was leaving. He had attired himself in woman's clothing for my amusement, hadn't he? I knew Riddle had ulterior motives for anything he did, including this folly of mine he had indulged, but he had done it all the same.

"Come here," I told him. He did not oblige me. I grunted in displeasure, rose to a sitting position, caught his wrist, and pulled him atop me. I dragged my cosy nest of blankets above us and patted his shoulder saying, "There you are."

"I will incinerate you if you put your hands below my waist," he warned, before shifting away to lie beside me.

Morning found me nursing a headache and grinning at the sight of one sleeping Riddle in my bed, with his head nestled in the curve of my shoulder. I decided to put a respectable distance between us, lest the paranoid wretch incinerate me when he woke up.

"Mr. Malfoy, I want you to stay back after class."

Dumbledore considered it an integral part of his week to interrogate me on what I knew of Riddle's latest activities.

"Since your father is no longer with us and since you are at an age where guidance is often helpful, I thought I might offer my support at this trying period in your life," he said quietly.

He meant it too, I realised. What was he referring to? The estate was being managed by my grandfather. That awful night when I had decided to punish Riddle had broken me from my grip of lethargy, hatred and grief. I mourned my father, but I also looked forward to my future where I could be my own man.

"I am referring to your relationship with Riddle," Dumbledore elaborated. "It is not easy to embark on such a relationship whatever the circumstances or times are."

I looked at him, astounded. What was he trying to imply?

"I am not sure of today's terminology," he murmured apologetically. "Queerness? Inversion?"

I suppressed my laugh only because he seemed so earnest. I did respect the man, despite his bias for Gryffindor. So I took a deep breath and said, "I can state with confidence that Riddle is not queer, Sir." In fact, he seemed set to be one of those ascetic types whose lives revolved around research and work. I understood why he was so, since I knew of what had happened to him. It was a wonder that he was not insane, or perhaps he was simply feigning sanity. With Riddle, one never knew. Dumbledore was still looking at me expectantly. So I told him, "As for myself, I am bound by law and legacy to marry and sire an heir to the estate. I *cannot* be queer."

He nodded at that and said gently, "I wish you were spared that burden, Mr. Malfoy."

I did not wish to be spared that burden. I had been brought up by my father to be proud of my legacy, and I was.

"I am relieved to see that you are faring well, my boy," Slughorn told me as we did the inventory of his stores.

The Potions professors before Slughorn had given detentions to students to get things like this done. Slughorn did not need to give us detentions. He only needed to ask and there were always volunteers. He was lazy and pompous, but he also cared for us as well as he could. For most of us, with uncaring or dead parents, Slughorn was the only source of paternal affection. My grandfather had not written to me even once. Nor had I felt compelled to write to him. It was inevitable that I would turn to Slughorn to take my father's place in my life.

"Rooming with Riddle has been more than enough to keep my mind off things, Sir," I told him quietly.

"You are getting along with him," he allowed. "He is a strange boy, isn't he? But a precious one, all the same."

He might have been the first to call Riddle precious.

"Must he return to his orphanage this year?" I asked impulsively. "Only, the manor is empty and I wouldn't mind having him there."

"Dippet insists that the boy return to his caretakers," Slughorn told me gently, his eyes shrewd and perceptive as he took in my consternation.

Riddle spoke of mighty brethren united under one mark. He spoke of snakes and Slytherin, and of loyalty and revenge. Dark and blazing were his words as he charmed his audience in the Common Room. His madness drew us in and his passion warmed our sad, cold hearts.

"We will win!" he exclaimed.

We believed him. Some of us were motivated by visions of revenge, some by promises of greatness and some by disillusionment with the world. However, there was one boy in that throng who was motivated only by the damaged insanity that was Riddle.

"Morsmordre!"

Green and radiant shone the skull and the serpent against the dark ceiling of our common room. We declared war on all those who had wronged us, on all those who had refused to give us a chance, and our courage soared high as we united under that green mark conjured by our beloved broken bastard boy, wands gripped tight in our hands, shivering in our pyjamas, at the stroke of midnight on the ninth of November, 1942.

"It is a beautiful night," Riddle said. He was looking at the yellow orb of the full moon atop the dark treeline of the forest. I was looking at him, marvelling at how unhealthy pallor in daylight became marble splendour in the night. "Ideal for exploring the Forest."

"It is a beautiful night for flying," I said firmly. "You must learn, Riddle. It will come in handy."

"I don't need a broom to fly."

This was him at his most petulant. I suppressed a grin.

"Come here," I said sternly. "I will be in enough trouble with Lestrangle, as it is, for pleading sickness and absenting myself from Quidditch practice today."

"You ditched practice for this," he said cautiously, peering at me with his too bright eyes.

Grandfather had found a bride for me. She was from Beauxbatons. I would marry her in four years. I shook off that thread of thought and threw my leg over my broomstick. Father had gifted it on my last birthday. It had been specially made for me by the Bulgarian master broom-maker, Ginchev.

"I want to learn to ride a bicycle," he said distractedly as he let me position him before me on the broomstick. I brought my thighs to encase his and enveloped his waist with my hands before gripping the lovingly polished handle.

"I am not sure that I like how it feels between the legs. It will chafe, won't it? Is horse-riding like this? There are barely any riders to be seen in the city now. Have you seen a motorcar? The horns keep me awake all night. No, it is the bomb-sirens that do. I hate the war."

He was in one of his talkative moods, spurred by some success in his research. Occasionally, I wondered if I ought to try and persuade him to reduce his obsession with the Dark Arts. I could not find the will to do it, not when I understood that the Dark Arts were his sole source of solace.

I took a deep breath and launched us into the air. The cool evening breeze ruffled our robes. His hair was still bristly at the ends after the trim he had given it at Halloween. The stubble irritated the smooth skin of my face. He had fallen silent and his hands were wound tight about the handle in an unconscious mimicry of my grip. Slowly, I eased away my hands and the broom jerked a bit. His hands gripped the handle tighter and magic smothered the air as he willed the broom to stay calm.

"Oh," he whispered.

"Indeed," I said teasingly. "Do you still wish that you had gone scouting in the Forest?"

He laughed then; that high, cold laughter which still unsettled me despite my exposure to it on a constant basis.

"Hold tight," he murmured, and the broom careened into a vertical fall.

"Riddle, you bloody maniac!" I cursed, as our legs grazed the top branches of the trees before he could steer us horizontal again. He laughed and lifted his left hand from the handle. He waved it once and music filled the air. With his right hand, he directed the broom and with his left hand, he began conducting an invisible orchestra. I gripped his waist tight - there would be bruises, I knew - and he began flying the broom in accord with the music.

It began solemnly, with divided cellos and strings intoning a quiet, even mournful hymn against the yellow moon above the vast darkness of the forest. Then followed an exultant central passage, evocative of a savage conflict, and I gripped Riddle's waist for dear life as we swooped and swirled.

His mind touched my thoughts and I obeyed his injunction to take charge of the broom. With both hands free, he directed a mighty crescendo and I let the music dictate our path. We were breathless and laughing when the music touched a sparkling peak using the utmost power of brass and percussion, at which point the cannons added their voices to the rhapsody.

"Slower," he whispered.

I obeyed, and we were swept away by a long cadenza that paved the way for the turning of the tide, wherein the full orchestra, brass band and pealing church bells rang in solemn triumph.

We glided then, languidly over the treeline, our chests fluttering in a mad staccato from the thrill of our exertions. I could taste Riddle's sweat, from where my lips met the nape of his neck. I could feel his shivering as the adrenaline receded.

"You mad bastard, what was that?"

"My modified version of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture," he murmured. "It was written for a great victory."

"So what do you call your variation of it?" I asked.

"It hasn't a name," he said. "It is the first time I have played it aloud. Usually, I let this play in my mind during History of Magic."

So he improvised Muggle music in his mind to stave off boredom. I sighed. He was the most abnormal creature I had seen, and the most attractive.

"Malfoy?"

"1942: A Rhapsody in Riddle. There, I have named it."

He chuckled.

I directed the broomstick back to the ground. We stumbled to our feet when we alighted, uncoordinated and clumsy after our airborne adventure.

"Do get back inside, Riddle!" a stern female voice called from the Entrance Hall as we crept in furtively.

"McGonagall," I hissed. She was trying to glare at the pair of us, though her eyes held no anger.

"That was beautiful," she said frankly. "Never heard anything like that in my life."

Riddle stilled. While his mask of blandness dropped only for an instant, it was enough for me to take notice. With more warmth in his voice than I had thought possible for him, he said, "Thank you, Miss McGonagall."

"What is it called?" she asked curiously.

Riddle looked at me with eyes bright and mad and earnest.

Softly, I answered, "1942: A Rhapsody in Riddle."

Riddle plays Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture which was written to immortalise the liberation of Russia from Napoleon's Grand Army.