

An Innocent Tea

by spiderwort

Young Tom Riddle follows his dream of immortality into an old woman's apartment...

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Chapter 1 of 1

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He'll probably be late—young Serpent. That's what they called them in my day. We were all Badgers and Lions and Serpents and Eagles. It was so much easier back then—more innocent somehow...

The old woman smoothed the fabric of the tapestry by the hearth. The fading colors looked duller still to her rheumy eyes. It showed the final stage of a unicorn hunt, the poor creature surrounded, bleeding, desperate. Muggles could be so cruel, even in their artwork.

"Hullo, Professor Merrythought. I hope you don't mind that I'm early."

She turned to the shadow framed in the doorway.

"Not at all, Riddle. Have a seat, won't you?" The elderly professor rang a little silver bell on the table. A house-elf appeared immediately with a tray laden with a teapot that could have served dozens, eggshell-thin cups and saucers, and a two-tiered plate of dainties.

They sat and he offered to serve them both. She knew her aim with the spout would be chancy, so she gave in graciously.

He poured and passed silently, leaving her to strike up the conversation. This she did, and they talked of the mundane—school matters, his hopes for the future, her own plans for retirement—savoring the spicy Darjeeling, the rich tartlets, the buttery scones.

She knew him well: tall and slender and naturally elegant, though with the occasional hint of crudeness as befit his youth and sex. Tom Riddle had pulled himself up from a very shaky childhood in the slums of Muggle London to become the apple of every teacher's eye and a shoo-in for Head Boy when his time came.

Now he was surveying her sitting room with the same avid curiosity he brought to her classes.

"What are those, if I might enquire, Professor?" He was gesturing at the north window.

She tittered into her napkin. No student guest had ever noted her collection of dried herbs. Trust Tom, the most perspicacious and sensitive mageling she'd ever taught, to be drawn to the things closest to her own heart.

"My mother was a breweress," she replied. "She had the most wonderful garden. Those are some of her favorite plants—feverfew, henbane, spiderwort, columbine from the colonies—I lacquered a few of them to remember her by." She sighed. "But you cannot preserve the vital force in wax or amber, can you, my boy?"

She had meant this last as trivial rhetoric, a hackneyed saw the old toss at the young to blunt their reckless enthusiasm, so she was taken aback at the warmth of his response.

"But it is possible, isn't it?" he blurted eagerly. "To prolong life, I mean. Magic can do just about anything, can't it, Professor?"

Her heart went out to him suddenly, this earnest young man, undoubtedly considering a career in the Healing Arts or some such selfless profession. She wanted to reassure him but knew she could not.

"I have taught Magical Defence for many years, child, and except for the Philosopher's Stone, which many believe to be little more than an old hag's tale, there is no way to lengthen one's days in the mortal plane indefinitely."

"What about unicorn blood?" he offered, gesturing at the tapestry.

She was not surprised at his knowledge of that ancient panacea. As long as she had known him, whatever topic she would set a class, Tom Riddle had been painstakingly thorough in his research. "That is an extreme measure and, in my mother's day at least, was banned as an ingredient in potion-making."

"For the love of the majestic beasts, I suppose."

"No, because unicorn blood is so potent an agent, it is a rare witch or wizard who can survive its effects."

"Is there nothing else? No other way?" His dark eyes seemed to bore into her clouded ones. She felt a supreme force of need emanating from him, tugging at her mental barriers, as at her heartstrings. *He must have family, she thought, someone who is gravely ill, perhaps dying.*

She drew in her lips. There was no way she would allow the dread word 'horcrux' to escape them. "No," she murmured, "none."