

Baby, I've been running

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by [freakydeakymoonmagic](#)

Summary

Horror strikes him down where he stands, then. He sways, stumbles to put his back to the living room wall. Harry is woozy in disbelief, watching the two words slashed into his chest in livid red just like the scar on his forehead. ‘AVADA KEDAVRA.’

He knows those words, the first he can remember, his earliest memory. It feels like he hasn’t breathed in minutes. When he comes back to the moment, he finds that perhaps he hasn’t. Harry gasps for air like a fish does for water, and doesn’t find it. His back has slid down the wall somehow and his hands grip his head, hair clenched in fists.

Then he realizes he’s actually panting, a ringing in his ears, blocking out whatever it is people are saying to him. Hermione crouches in front of him where he can’t possibly miss her, palms settling gently on his knees.

“Harry,” she’s saying. “Harry, it’s going to be alright.”

How?

How can it ever possibly be alright again?

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In a world where the first words you ever speak to your soulmate appear once both soulmates have turned seventeen, Harry receives a bit of bad news.

OR

In which Harry fashions himself into a war bride.

Baby, I've been running

The words burn like fire set into the skin, carving letters that would change his life as they do all people as the clock strikes the moment of their seventeenth birthday, when they're the youngest soulmate. The very moment. Harry's excited, nervous, enlivened, although in some ways he has bigger fish to fry. The Order is ready to take flight from No. 4 Privet Drive, and, as he looks around the living room, he sees all his friends and chosen family grimace and place hands over their chests at the same time, all Polyjuiced, mirror reflections of his own face in discomfort. There's so little time, really it's the height of indulgence to unzip his jacket and yank his shirt down to see, at long last – but the collar of his ringer tee is too snug, too tight to manage it, he can't see properly. Desperate and sweating in excited nervousness, he pulls his shirt up to behold it.

Horror strikes him down where he stands, then. He sways, stumbles to put his back to the living room wall. Woozy in disbelief, he watches the two words slashed into his chest in livid red like the scar on his face, hoping they will miraculously change. 'AVADA KEDAVRA.'

He knows those words, the first he can remember, his earliest memory. A flash of green light, a woman screaming, then strangeness. It feels like he hasn't breathed in minutes. When he comes back to the moment, he finds that perhaps he hasn't. Harry gasps for air like a fish does for water, and doesn't find it. His back has slid down the wall somehow and his hands grip his hair, clenched in fists.

Then he realizes he's actually panting, a ringing in his ears, blocking out whatever it is people are saying to him. Hermione crouches in front of him where he can't possibly miss her, palms settling gently on his knees. It's his face that stares back at him, but he'd know the kind, clever look in her eyes anywhere.

"Harry," she's saying in her own voice. "Harry, it's going to be alright."

How?

How can it ever possibly be alright again?

And somewhere out there in the world, words are branding themselves into the skin of Voldemort's own chest. *Please, please let him not notice, let the words be "hello" or "Ahhhh!" from screaming.* That would keep things nice and vague, both perfectly normal first words for meeting a dark lord. There are a lot of candidates for things that might count as Harry's first words to him, as a baby crying, at eleven with a possessed professor, at twelve with a horcrux, at fourteen with the man reborn. None of them are good.

Soulmates are supposed to love each other. Take care of each other. Harry's never been properly taken care of in his life. And it looks like it's not about to start happening now. His vision is glassy and crowded out by unshed tears. The room seems quiet because all he can pay attention to is the rapid, faulty in-out in-out of his breath. Even Alastor Moody is staring at him with something akin to concern. *Pity?*

Whatever for? This is nothing new, fits seamlessly into the twisted, painful pattern of his life. Whatever the worst outcome might be, it's likely to be that. This is, indubitably, the worst of all possible outcomes.

But the protective magic is fading, he can feel that certain air about the house draining from the room. There's so little time.

Hermione's hands fall from his knees as Harry drags himself to standing, hand still on the wall to rebalance. He grasps blindly for the broom leaned up against the wall off to the side. With as deep of a breath as he can manage, he's marching to the door and flinging it open, staggering a little but it's the best he's got at the moment.

The night is warm and balmy as he climbs aboard his trusty broom and bids good riddance to his childhood home forever. Maybe calling it home is stretching things a bit. He can barely see where he's going for the tears, but knows they're to head west to reach the Tonks' house and all its magical protections. All other forms of transportation are traceable and under Ministry scrutiny; the plan was to sneak from point A to point B in the night before anyone's the wiser.

Order members scramble to catch up, Hagrid on the motorbike with Mundungus Fletcher in the side car, Hermione, Kingsley, Fleur, Tonks, Lupin, Moody, and the Weasley crew on assorted Thestrals and broomsticks. Hedwig wings around him, faster than any of them could ever hope to be, but swings back to follow them. The motorbike pulls even with Harry as he soars above the rooftops and leaves the dull orangey-yellow light of the streetlamps behind. Someone draws forward, sharing a broom with another Harry look-alike, and is shouting to the real Harry. The wind catches it, snatches it away. Something about talking about this later, things having a way of working out, probably something soothing. Something stupid. Lupin, perhaps. His soft voice just isn't designed for volume and honestly it wouldn't make much of a difference if it was. Harry's the numbest he's ever felt. And perhaps that's for the best. *My soulmate killed my parents.* They pierce the veil of cloud cover and all hell breaks loose.

Spell fire lights the sky around them like colorful lightning, Death Eaters dark zooming shapes lying in wait for but a moment before attacking as the Order charges westward through the sky. They've been had. Harry jerks to the side to avoid a stunner, then the other way to dodge a cutting hex. Casting a disarming spell of his own, his hit lands and one man's wand goes flying, broom diving down frantically to go and fetch it.

Harry tries to make his broom go faster by sheer willpower. It's good it doesn't work; it would distinguish him as an accomplished flyer and the point is to stay hidden with the others Polyjuiced to look like him, otherwise he truly has risked their lives for nothing. Hagrid and Mundungus on the motorbike and Mr. Weasley sharing a broom with Charlie keep pace with him; they all dodge and weave together to confuse the Death Eaters – three Harry's all in the same clothes moving interchangeably like a coin under three shifting cups. Then they split off to confuse the forces further. Glancing back, Harry sees three other Harry's copy the maneuver, scrambling together then fanning out. He has to jerk his broom down to dodge another curse zapping overhead, then barrel rolls to regain momentum and rejoin the herd. Another two Harry's each have their own broom to obscure the real Harry even further, manned by the stronger flyers of the group. So it's probably Ron or Tonks that's executing a

frankly beautiful evasion maneuver above him. Harry shoots a stunning spell at the pursuer, who falls out of the sky, another Death Eater diving to fetch them. His tears are chilled and wiped away by the wind and he can see just fine for aiming. They're actually making good headway, he sees as there's a break in cloud cover below, suburbs fading to countryside.

A great dark mass blooms below, blotting out the streetlights and headlights of cars. *Fuck!* Harry pulls higher, into the thick of the fray, tries blatantly to hide. He casts a spell or two, pretending like he doesn't see the inky being forming beneath the scrum as the whole lot of them head back into the clouds and back out again quickly, another disorienting cloud break. Harry dips and swerves around Order members and Death Eaters alike, trying to throw off the scent. He's a fucking coward. It doesn't matter anyway – Voldemort is materializing in the abyssal gloom, flying without aid of any kind, against all reason and rules. His eyes glow in the darkness and the air seems to crackle with magic, with potential. He seems massive, inevitable, looming, larger than life. As present as oxygen, as unavoidable as breathing. *Neither shall live while the other survives.* Harry doesn't want either of them to live. Hedwig glides overhead and it brings Harry a measure of reality: people will miss him if he's gone. And killing Voldemort may not solve the problems that allowed him to come into such power.

None of that seems to matter as Voldemort swerves toward Harry unerringly, no hesitation, piercing the midst of the scrum in an influx of black smoke. And Harry? Harry runs.

Jerking his broom vertically into the air, he zooms straight up as high as he can. If he were a braver person, it would be to lead the man away from potential casualties and perhaps this is how things will be rationalized later. But in the moment, he's just scared and wants to be away. Anywhere away. Voldemort pursues, higher and higher until the clouds are far beneath, until the broomstick hits its height limit and the air grows cold and empty. Together, they arc downward as Harry is forced to decline altitude to keep the broom in the air. Voldemort is right on his tail, he can feel it, they're close, too close, he needs to get *away*. Harry goes for every evasive maneuver in the book, dipping, diving, rolling, zigzagging. They spin around each other, Voldemort's smoking form winding closer and closer with each corkscrewing spiral. So Harry makes for the cloud cover below, back into the greying obscurity of it. It's not thick enough to really hide him, but does make him feel less exposed. The longer he can hold on, the nearer the protection of the Tonks' house will be. He has no idea where the Order and Death Eaters have gone, how far ahead or behind they might be, but as he's having the frantic thought, there's a wide gap in the clouds and he sees them below, flashes of light and darting shapes going back and forth.

At last, Voldemort resorts to his wand, strange and alarming that he hasn't until now. Perhaps he hoped to capture Harry rather than off him. There's no discerning the motivations or reasoning of an absolute madman. He draws even with Harry in a sudden surge of speed and casts blue magic at him, Harry instinctively slowing his broom practically to a halt to put space between them, between him and the spell. There isn't even time to cast a protection or disarming spell, no – his wand takes action for him. It lifts his arm with a mind of its own and golden light explodes forth, lighting up the sky like fireworks. It's unlike anything he's ever seen, two streams of magic battling for dominance until the gold overpowers the blue and blows Voldemort back in a massive burst of light, wand shattering as he falls out of the sky in an inky trail of black mist fading when his magic fails him without a wand. And suddenly

Harry is horrified again by what he's done. His soulmate, his one person. Falling and falling, possibly to his death. He's frozen there, in warring indecision and paralyzing fright. He begins to tilt his broom down on instinct, cast the strongest levitation charm he possibly can in hopes it will get there in time. It's not in him to kill someone, even accidentally, but especially not *his person*. But Voldemort's descent slows, one of the Death Eaters paused in the air casting some manner of spell to slow him, keep him in the air. Harry doesn't stick around to find out.

The other Harry's and Order members seem to be fleeing, casting protective spells to cover each other's backs as they surge onwards to make for the protected home, close now. Harry intentionally loses altitude as he flies west along with them, descending lower and accelerating faster until he passes into the clouds, then drops below them. There on the horizon, he spies the house and the rest of the group sees him overhead again. They all put on a new burst of speed, sensing safety close at hand. The protections wash over him as he enters the wards, a subtle tingle on the skin. Harry stays on his broom until he reaches the very porch of the house, an abrupt halt there to slip off the broom and stumble into the house, door unlocked, a witch and a wizard in the brightly lit foyer, presumably Mr. and Mrs. Tonks, who he doesn't even acknowledge as he crashes in through the first doorway he sees and slams the door shut behind him. He crumples to the floor, kneeling with his face in the palms of his hands. Harry feels water drip onto his hands before he even realizes he's crying again. Despair utterly consumes him. He's sobbing suddenly, body wracked by it, shoulder shuddering with the force of it. Pressing the heels of his hands into eyes harder, he tries to hold it in, suck it up, contain himself, but it's completely futile. Of all things, of all realities, disappointments, losses, failures, this is the worst thing that has ever happened to him.

Pain stabs at his heart, the physicality of heartache something he had felt before when Sirius died – acute, startling, brutal. And it feels like someone's died, too. His hope for love, kindness, a person who would treat him well and be his number one and be there for all those little moments he's had to spend alone or with others but not felt fully understood. Someone to love him unconditionally. He'll never have it. The dream has died.

The door creaks open and the light in the room comes on, tentative hands on his back, an arm around his shoulders. The door creaks quietly closed again. He will never come back from this. But Ron's still there for him, squeezing his arm and shaking him a little in silent support. Hermione's still there, hands on his back, a soothing presence. They want to tell him it's all going to be okay and they all know it's a patent lie. But at least they're still here.

Harry tries to slow down, his breathing, his crying, his shuddering, but it's hard. Maybe it has to happen. If he tries to hold this in, he might die. Detonate like a bomb.

Kill me now, he wants to joke. He knows it won't land. Harry would do anything to be able to calm down, because that would mean this isn't happening. But it is happening, and it is impossible to be calm. It takes a long time for him to even out his breathing a little more. He's been loud with his sobbing, he notices now, not holding anything in, total loss of control. God. His parents' murderer. God.

What evil did he commit in a past life to deserve this?

Hermione conjures a box of tissues and holds them out without comment. Silence is strange on her, touchy-feeliness on Ron even stranger. Harry's breathing is jagged but he takes time to mop up his face, blows through three tissues clearing out his stuffy nose. He discards them there on the floor and puts a hand to his forehead, lets out a distressed noise. Ron rattles his shoulders again in support, to bolster him. It works, a bit. "We're here, mate. We've got you."

"You are so loved, Harry, no matter what," Hermione murmurs, leaning her head on him from the side and snaking an arm around his back. "We care about you. Nothing will ever change that." The clothes are baggy on her now and too tight on Ron, transformed back into their regular selves. Only an hour or two has passed since he turned seventeen and it's already the worst year of his life.

"What does it say about me?" Harry chokes out at last. "I'm paired to a monster. *An absolute monster.*" *I must be a monster, too*, he doesn't say. He tries so, so hard not to start sobbing again, a pained sound issuing from deep inside his chest. He doesn't think it's reasonable to expect he'll ever stop crying. He won't ask it of himself.

"Harry, you get matched to people who balance you out sometimes, not necessarily people who're like you. You know this, think of Remus and Tonks. They're so different! And I cannot think of anyone," here she sniffs, eyes beginning to water. "I can't think of anyone as good, as wonderful and good-hearted to – to balance out –"

Here, none of them know what to say. Ron tries anyway, voice rough with emotion.

"Mate, you choose who to love. Well, sort of. You choose who you're *with*, not who you're soulmated to. You didn't choose this and you can't control it . . . you can only control what you do."

And he's touched, he really is, but it all sounds like placating bullshit right now. The wound's too fresh. Harry has to fight not to shove them off, push them away. He wants to be alone, and to never be alone, to burn up from the inside out. His body shudders with the effort of staying still and letting them provide comfort. Hermione takes it as him being at risk of sobbing again, pulls him a little closer. It's dim in the room, he can barely make out their expressions, but he knows the kind of concern that will be written all over their faces. He's glad not to see it; it might make him angry. Harry doesn't want to be angry; he wants to be sad. Sad is comfortable, sorrow is normal. Anger is going to scare him, that's how deep it's going to run. He wants to avoid it for as long as possible. If he gets angry, he may never be not angry again. Harry doesn't want to trash rooms or shout at people, he wants the stillness and completeness of wallowing in absolute devastation.

Harry wants time to be sad, more time to wallow with tragic abandon. There's no time, none at all. He's supposed to stand now, and plan with the others, and conspire for victory. And fight. And yet the fight just isn't in him.

It's quiet for a while as Harry gets his trembling under control and eases his breathing.

"Harry . . ." Hermione begins again. "Did you - what did you do, exactly? When you defeated him tonight? That spell?"

Voice shredded like his vocal cords have been dragged over gravel, Harry says, “Honest to god, Hermione, I don’t know. My wand had a mind of its own. I swear, it just responded to him casting at me without my say-so at all. I don’t even know what kind of spell that was,” and shakes his head. That said, it feels good to have anything else on the planet to talk about. “But – “ he adds.

“Yes?”

“I think I destroyed his wand. It exploded, I mean.” Ron’s appreciative of that, sounds like he wants to give him a high five but knows it’s not the time. “That’s good, mate, real good! Did us proud.”

“To be honest, I have no idea what happened with that. It was bizarre. I’m just glad I - ” Harry almost says *got away* but that’s too close to the raw truth of things. He grabs another tissue and blows his nose again to stall.

So, he thinks, *what do we do now?* Will Voldemort even want to kill him? He doesn’t know that they know about the horcruxes, there’s still an advantage there. And Dumbledore seemed sure Voldemort hadn’t designed any other failsafes. He could very well still be killable. But if he doesn’t want to kill Harry, is it still right to kill him? Where in the name of Merlin do they go from here?

“There’s something you should know. When we were fighting off the Death Eaters . . . “

“Yeah?”

“They weren’t using fatal curses. Fred is definitely going to need some patching up, Kingsley as well, but at the end of the day it was cutting hexes and stunning spells when it ought to have been killing curses. When you and Voldemort splintered off, they were definitely blocking us from following – sorry about that by the way, we tried everything to get to you but they were holding us back with double our numbers.”

“Why – why would they – “ Harry doesn’t finish and neither of them pick up the thread. They all know why. But then again, *do* they? Would being Lord Voldemort’s soulmate really have such an impact on how they’re fighting the war? And just after the discovery? Mere *minutes* after? Was it out of caution, so that in the chaos no one would accidentally off the real Harry with a poorly aimed spell? If they were uncertain of which was the real Harry and didn’t want to risk it? Or something else? He doesn’t know what to make of it. Moreover, he doesn’t *want* to know. He wants desperately to be left alone. Harry stands.

“I need to sleep.”

Ron and Hermione are slow to rise after him. “Okay, but Harry – “

“Please. Please, I need to think, or I need to not think. Just, a bed. Please,” he repeats, the sentence practically palindromic. His brain is whirling and he really wants to get back to numb, might get his wish if he plays his cards right.

“Alright,” Ron says and goes to the door to peek his head out. There’s a brief murmured conversation, Ron keeping the door mostly shut to block the sound from travelling perhaps. Harry doesn’t care, he’s exactly as fragile as they’re treating him right now. He wants to be led around by the hand and tucked in for the night. He wouldn’t even turn his nose up at a glass of warm milk. Laughing a little at the thought, Harry passes a hand over his face as Hermione watches him in uncharacteristic quiet alarm.

They’re not supposed to spend the night here, it’s just a temporary safe place on the way to the Burrow, but Harry doesn’t feel he can go a single step further. And yet getting to bed demands it of him. Ron leads him out of the room, not by the hand but by the shoulder.

Remus and George are right there by the door, coming closer but Ron shakes his head and Hermione hangs back to run interference. Arthur, Tonks, and Kingsley linger in the foyer, watching Harry carefully, concerned, or in consternation. Even Hedwig is perched on Kingsley’s shoulder looking a certain kind of cautious. He avoids their eyes and focuses on putting one foot in front of the other. The air in the room is heavy, too thick to breathe properly, and Harry needs to be somewhere else.

And when they enter a small, well-appointed bedroom just down the hall, Harry collapses into one of the twin beds fully dressed with sneakers on and hopes to dream of nothing at all.

He doesn’t get his wish.

Instead, he dreams briefly of a body covering his own and weighing him down. It’s good, comforting, exactly what he wants. Someone to keep both his feet on the ground so he doesn’t float away. There are hands on his face, on his sides, rounding the balls of his shoulders. Smooth lips touch his forehead, just a quick press. But. He feels loved. Secure. Harry wakes up crying.

It’s all he wants. At least he can have it in dreams. Waking is difficult, unwanted, necessary. There’s light spilling through the windows on Ron’s side of the room, his friend snoring like usual. That’s comforting, too. Hermione is sitting up beside him, head dipped in deference to sleep. Her arms are crossed and she’s got an open book in her lap. Harry slips off the bed, never got under the sheets in the first place and the only proof he was ever there is a body-shaped impression in the coverlet and on the pillow.

He cracks the door and listens, watches. The hallway is empty. Down it he steps quietly, until he hears familiar voices from a room off the foyer.

“ – changed everything. We need to rethink our strategy,” Kingsley is saying.

“The Dark Lord’s motivations seem to have changed. No killing curses? No kidnappings? You saw the spell he cast at Harry. It wasn’t green.” That’s undoubtedly Moody.

“I agree, Alastor, it means something we can’t afford to ignore.” Mr. Weasley.

“Then what do you propose we do? You-Know-Who won’t have even had time to plan around a shakeup like this, just like we haven’t.” Understatement. “So we can’t suppose to know what his plan might be if even he doesn’t know yet,” Tonks postulates.

“You can’t deny that whatever we plan for ourselves might reach the wrong ears, again. It’s clear as day someone told them where we would be.”

“Yes, if it weren’t for Harry blowing You-Know-Who out the sky like that, we’d have been goners . . .” That’s Mundungus.

Someone sighs heavily. “I hate to say this, but – we need to consider every option for ending the war before it really gets underway.” Bill sounds reluctant but resigned.

“And what on earth are you suggesting we consider?” Lupin’s ire, his defensiveness, is undeniable. He sounds angry. Harry’s never heard him sound like that before. He almost doesn’t want to hear what comes next.

“Well . . .” Bill begins but doesn’t seem to want to finish. “What my Bill is trying to say,” Fleur jumps in, “is that there is possibly a peaceful way to resolve things. Without any more battles or death or dying. And I should think it is fairly obvious.” Harry’s heart stops.

“Now I won’t hear of it! Or anything like it! ‘arry is not some, some *chess piece* you can play to get your way! He deserves better than that – that – !” Hagrid shouts.

“I’m not saying it’s ideal,” Bill defends. “I’m saying we need to acknowledge it’s one way of going about things. It could save lives. A lot of lives.”

“What about *Harry’s* life, you *bast’rd!*” There’s a scrape and squeal of a chair being knocked back and clattering to the floor.

“Hagrid, Hagrid! Calm down, let’s every one of us calm down,” Lupin eases.

“Bill, I love you and you’re great, but you’re barking mad if you think we’ll consider handing Harry over as some kind of *war bride* – “ one of the twins, speaking relatively calmly, gets cut off.

“It’s been done before,” Moody interjects, with some finality.

“A peace-weaver, they were called back in the day,” Kingsley reflects. “They worked rather well.”

“I’m sorry, why are we even having this conversation?” either one of the twins queries. “Obviously, we are not doing that.”

“My son is right, Alastor. Kingsley. Nothing could justify it. Nothing is worth that,” Arthur declares firmly. But he’s wrong. Something is. The lives of others, a lot of lives, are worth that. And it may be the only way to prevent all that death. Harry doesn’t want to live alongside a monster but he’d live with himself even less if he let innocent people get hurt for no reason.

“But,” Tonks says. “Supposing You-Know-Who does want his soulmate by his side . . . what’s to say he doesn’t get his cake and eat it, too?” Someone tries to interject, but she continues without pause. “He could get everything he wants without our having any say, if

we don't have, and I don't mean to be crass, Remus, but – if we don't have our bargaining chip. Just, y'know, theoretically, I mean.”

“Harry is NOT – “ Hagrid starts in again.

“Hagrid, please. Nymphadora, your point has been made. If we are to even contemplate this, Harry needs to be secured. Regardless of how we move forward, he needs to be secured. He's the only one who can defeat the Dark Lord and we need to ensure his safety if there is any hope to be had in all of this.”

“And how are we going to do that with a spy in our midst? How do you think the Death Eaters knew about our plans? How do you imagine we're going to keep his location secret?”

“There's always Grimmauld Place – “

“That's not a long-term solution. The Lestranges and Malfoys know exactly where it is and how it's protected. And we're all under the Fidelius not to discuss it, but Snape could use Legilimency to reveal it, or the Dark Lord could simply retrieve the information without Snape allowing it at all. There's too many holes in that defense for it to be an appropriate safehouse for Potter for any duration of time.”

“For that matter,” Bill begins slowly, as if expected to be shot down after the animosity of before. “We all know about most of the safehouses we have. And if we're compromised, they are, too.”

“We'll find somewhere to keep him safe,” Lupin reassures, “*regardless* of how we proceed with fighting the war.”

“But where – “

Harry's heard enough. He slips across the foyer to the broomsticks clustered by the front door, grabs his own before he can think too hard about what he's doing. Quietly, he opens the door, steps out, and closes it as carefully as he can. He's got his shrunken trunk in his pocket, his wand in the other, and considers the Thestrals lingering on the front lawn before opting for his broom.

He's mounting the broom and casting disillusionment spells and Notice-Me-Not charms even as he lifts off gently. Airborne, Harry rounds the house to point himself south. South is good.

The wind's tousling his hair like loving fingers and he's skyborne about the slowest he's gone before, reluctant to leave but knowing what must be done. Harry feels it when he leaves the protective barriers of the Tonks residence by the strange tingle over his skin. He's on his own now.

There's no one awaiting him outside the protections, no Death Eaters, no Dark Lord, nothing. They must not have realized the Order's destination, the Tonks home not well known and Andromeda totally estranged from her sisters. He'd heave a sigh of relief if he had any positive feeling left in him at all. Harry takes on more speed, faster and faster until the

broom's at its absolute limit. Curving his body over it to make himself more aerodynamic, he wishes it would go even faster.

The sun is low and early in the sky as he treks across the countryside, flying low to the ground. He avoids any houses or inhabited-looking areas. Passing by scant houses and powerlines and little clusters of trees, Harry admires the greenery, again instead of thinking too closely about what he's doing. As the fields of grass turn to fields of grain, Harry considers hiding out in a seemingly abandoned farm shed. The sun is directly overhead now, bearing down on him and the glare strong on a cloudless day. He doesn't have any food other than a few wizarding candies in the trunk. He's thirsty, too.

Searching for a road, Harry finds a winding little highway, lonely looking and with an air of country charm. He follows along the two-lane highway, trusting in the strength of his hiding spells, and after a while comes upon a petrol station with a single pump. Some tall bushes and trees provide cover for him to land and dispel the disillusionments. Harry transfigures a nearby rock into a mirror and levitates it to watch himself do his best to alter his appearance without anything coming out terribly lopsided. Wider nose, flatter face, blonde hair, Muggle jeans and a flannel shirt. No scar. He even changes the shape of his glasses – very, very carefully. It'll have to do.

Harry walks into the petrol station like he knows exactly where he's going. The cash register isn't manned, there's no one around. There aren't handbaskets either, so he gathers two armfuls of granola bars and beans and crisps and brings it all to the cash register. He goes back to grab two of the biggest water jugs he can find. It's as he's bringing back three bags of white bread and a fistful of jerky with two whole boxes of little cracker sandwiches tucked under each arm that a cashier ducks in from the back. He and Harry stare at each other in surprise. The grey bearded man looks down at Harry's haul on the counter doubtfully.

"Stocking up, are we?"

"Er, yeah. Really needed to make a grocery run."

"Sorry I weren't upfront, didn't hear a car coming round."

"Oh, no worries. I, er, biked here."

"Yeah? All this gonna fit then?"

"Um." Harry thinks for a moment. "I have a basket and a, um, attachment. A little cart hitched on the back."

"Oh. Well, alright then." The cashier starts ringing him up and when Harry sets down the boxes of little cracker sandwiches, makes no comment on the fact they're meant to be sold individually. He's probably seen stranger things. Harry goes back for multiple jars of peanut butter, jelly, and, in deference to his emotional needs, a giant bag of Skittles. Standing there in a moment of pause and non-reflection, he breaks the daze by snatching up some cookies as well.

There are no pots or pans or plates or flatware to buy here, so he'll have to make do with ready-to-eat foods and non-perishables.

He brings it all back to the counter where the cashier is bagging everything except the jugs of water. "More? My, yer pantry must be empty."

Harry hm's nervously and as the cashier is totaling the purchases, realizes his money is all in the trunk and all of it is in galleons. He refuses to Confound the nice man, but doesn't know what else to do. "Ah, I left my wallet in the bike basket, let me just run and fetch it!"

"Right," the man says, perplexed but focused on adding everything up with the seemingly uncooperative cash register, poking at the same key a few times. Harry ducks out the door and goes to the back of the station where he's hidden from the road. He pulls the trunk out of his pocket and spells it back to its original size. Unlatching and flipping it open, he hastily grabs his coin purse, then pauses. Perhaps underneath Dudley's old clothes . . . jeans, band t-shirt, another t-shirt. There! His old Muggle wallet. He looks inside and counts out the bills. There's seventy-six pounds, one quid, and twenty-nine pence in the little zipped coin pouch. Thank Merlin. He's taken way too long sorting this all out and knows it. Harry slams the trunk shut and shrinks it again, stuffing it into his pocket. Jogging around the side of the petrol station, he ducks back in and says, "Found it. Sorry for the wait."

"No problem, lad. Dull around here, just glad to have a customer."

"Right. What's it come out to?"

"That'll be eighty-one pounds and twelve pence."

"Oh," Harry comments and eyes his hoard. Reluctantly, he grabs a can of beans and a jar of jelly, returning them to shelves. "How about now? I only have seventy-six pounds."

"That looks about right to me, lad," the man says kindly. Harry hands him all the money has, pence included.

"Thanks," Harry says politely as he can while he's feeling twitchy. He grabs as many plastic shopping bags he can carry at once and ferries them back behind the bushes out back where he hid his broom. Upon making his second trip, the cashier bids him a friendly farewell.

"Thank ye for yer business!"

"Yes, have a nice day," Harry responds, juggling the massive containers of water and three heavy shopping bags. The door swings shut behind him and he thinks to himself – *that may be the last friendly face I see for a long time.*

Unshrinking the trunk again while crouched behind the bushes, Harry stuffs as many bags of food as he can inside while still managing to fit the two water jugs. The rest of the bags go on his broomstick settled in front of him with the handles looped around the length of it. He sticks the trunk back into his pocket and hastily boards his broom, disillusioning himself and casting another Notice-Me-Not. And away he flies, sorry to leave behind his final brush with civilization for who knows how long. Harry turns himself east, away from the little highway.

The land becomes steadily more crowded with trees and clouds dot the sky now. As he flies, it grows darker with the weather change. The clouds grow grey and overcast and gloomy and it starts to rain a misty drizzle. Harry doesn't mind; it actually suits his mood.

When the light rain persists, he considers landing and having a snack, but decides to keep flying until dark. Harry curves back south for another couple hours. He can't see the sun set properly, but it's obvious when night quickly descends. He'll need a place to bed down for the night. There's a forested area just over the hill and he lands there before the trees get too thick. Heading into the cover they provide, it takes him six tries to transfigure a rock and three fallen tree branches into something resembling shelter – it couldn't quite be called a tent, though the components of canvas and blocking out the falling rain are there. It's on the canvas stretched across the ground that he sits, huddled and clutching his broom, staring out into the night for a while, shopping bags littered about the small shelter. Then he decides that's silly and sets his broom aside, spells his trunk back to its proper size.

He pulls out two packs of cracker sandwiches with powdery cheese in the middle, a stick of jerky, and one of the jugs of water. Truly highlighting his lack of competence in transfiguration, it takes him even more attempts to turn a stick into a lopsided cup than it did to make the sad little shelter. Harry tips some water into it and chugs the first glass; once he starts drinking, he realizes how truly thirsty he is. Dining on his crackers and jerky, he has another two glasses and sets the jug out in the rain to replenish some of the water overnight. He dumps the rest of the shopping bags on top of the trunk to make room, too tired to shrink it again, barely managing the effort it takes to transfigure the discarded food wrappers into a pillow. Laid back on it and sighing deeply, only then does he pull out the galleon with the Protean charm.

COME BACK it reads. He closes his eyes wearily against new tears. *HARRY PLEASE* it might as well say. *WE NEED YOU*. No, they need him exactly where he is. In the wind. No one can find him if no one knows where he is, not even the spy in the Order. Not even Voldemort.

Harry's not running away, he tells himself. He's running towards a future he doesn't want for himself. Doesn't want to be with Voldemort, doesn't want to kill him either, never wanted to. If it was just fighting, that would be one thing. But there's only one way this war ends if it comes to violence. And he doesn't want it to. Tonks was right, he's their bargaining chip. Moody and Kingsley, too. It's worked before. But he has to stay hidden long enough for them to actually bargain, to show You-Know-Who he can't have it both ways. War and no Harry, if indeed that's what he wants, or Harry and no war. Harry? Harry doesn't like any of the options.

The Order needs at least enough time to figure out if Harry alive and well is what Voldemort really wants, needs enough time for Voldemort to figure that out for himself. He'll buy them that time, he thinks, ripping bicuspid teeth into the next stick of jerky he unwrapped, blatantly stress eating.

He'll do his best.

His dream that night is much like the last. Hands holding him close, body kept down on earth only with the help of another. His face is tucked into someone else's neck, warm and safe.

Everything is like that, cushioned and soft. Details comfortably blurred. It's restful in the best way. They even smell good. Dream Harry takes a deep lungful of it and is dragged further under, where he wants to stay.

It's hard to wake up again, painful. He's alone and there are birds tweeting all around. The food wrapper crinkles as he sits up and drags a hand through his hair. Harry has no idea how he's going to shower in the wilderness. He didn't think to buy soap at the store. Heaving a sigh, he leaves it as a tomorrow problem. The water jug refilled mostly in the night, which Harry takes as a positive. He screws the top back on and fits it inside the trunk. Harry eats cookies for breakfast because screw it. It's probably going to be highlight of the day, he thinks to himself as he disbands the shelter and folds up the canvas to stuff into the trunk, fit to bursting. The latch barely closes. Harry has to sit on top of the trunk to get it to shut.

The bulkier groceries ride upfront with him, hanging off the broom handle as Harry zigzags across empty countryside. England is beautiful in a way he's never appreciated before, never had the opportunity to. Maybe this can be the highlight of his day instead, sun shining on his face and sheep grazing the expansive fields. He barely sees another soul and he makes sure they definitely don't see him. Harry beds down in another forest, this time near a river where he can rinse off. It's unsatisfying without soap or shampoo, quite cold as well.

Harry lets himself check the charmed galleon again. This time, it reads *BURROW*. Well, it's nice to have a backup plan. At least he knows where to go if something in his plan spoils.

The days pass this way, flying and watching the earth scroll along beneath him and sleeping under the stars at night. He works his way through the crisps, half the cracker sandwiches, most of the jerky, and a bit of the beans. Many of his meals consist of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, but there's plenty of bread to go around. He's saving the big bag of Skittles for when he stops feeling so emotionally numb. The water, he replenishes with an Auguamenti every night.

Truth be told, he's grateful for the flying. Keeps his mind off things. Sometimes it's hard to stay out of residential areas and keep to the wilderness and farmland, but in general he does pretty well with it. Harry comes to appreciate the stars as well, his only company. The Protean charmed galleon sends him more brief messages at night, often a new address. He never responds. They're safehouses, most likely. Bad idea. The spy will know he's there, if everyone in the Order kept ahold of their charmed galleons. No, Harry gives everyone time to decide what they want. Death Eaters, time to scour the country for him and come up short. Voldemort, to prioritize having a soulmate versus total dominion – which is seriously fanciful thinking in Harry's opinion. The Order, a way to haggle for the freedom of them all. They all need time.

In the meantime, it's lonely. Harry has only his dreams for comfort and flying for entertainment. There's a few books in his trunk but he honestly doesn't bother. He should be hunting for horcruxes – he knows that. But what if Voldemort thinks to check on them? What if he finds Harry there? What if he knows when someone is touching them and can track can watch can possess can take control –

No. Harry won't risk it, he knows too little. Without Ron and Hermione there, he's barely able to suss out where the next one might be, anyway. There's the locket, but who knows

where the real one is? And there are other Founders items, but again he hasn't got a clue where to start and there's no one to put heads together with and brainstorm. Without his friends, he's got no chance. And by being with them, he would risk their one chance for preventing all-out war. No. Instead, he marks the days on an unused bit of parchment in his trunk. The tally is at eleven by the time the dreams start to change.

Usually everything is totally blurred and vague, but small details start creeping in. The texture of the palms on his cheeks. The grass and dying autumn leaf smell of this someone. The sound of raindrops hitting the window. They're in a bedroom. The skin he can touch is cool. The head of hair he reaches for is missing. There's a susurraton –

Harry resolves not to think on it. The dreams are the one good, steady thing in his life right now and he won't have it taken away from him, even if they are changing.

The tally is at twenty-three when the galleon reads *WHAT'S YOUR PLAN?* Harry smiles. Now they're asking the right questions. They've finally conceded he won't use the Order's safehouses and stopped sending him new addresses a couple days ago.

He points at the coin and manipulates the words to morph into *PEACEWEAVER*. The smile slides off his face, looking at it written there like that. He's writing his life away. The galleon remains unchanged for a long time after that. Harry can imagine the kind of wild, chairs-thrown argument happening over there, wherever they are. After a few hours, the coin starts to change rapidly, as if the group split up and they're all trying to message him in secret at the same time but there's no private way to do it. *NO*, then, *WHERE ARE YOU?*, then *WHY?*, *NO* again, and then *STAY HIDDEN*; he barely has time to read them before the words around the rim of the coin go blank and smooth. Harry can make a stab at who's saying what, but then, the answer may surprise him. Pursuing peace this way is the best possible option – and the worst one, in a way. For him, anyway. But he's choosing it and that matters. It's his decision. If he winds up in Voldemort's clutches, at least it will have been for something. Why not go for broke?

If Moody says stay hidden, then that's what he'll do.

He's nearly out of bread, that's how much PB&J he's been eating. Looks like he might have to resort to eating beans plain. Things still haven't gotten dire enough to break into the emotional support Skittles, but that's because he hasn't been thinking too hard on this whole soulmate business, he reflects as he leans back on his hands under a star-studded sky. Long pale grasses flutter in the wind all around him. It's a beautiful night. Harry wishes he had someone to share it with, but alone is okay, too. Just for tonight, on an evening so lovely even a lonesome creature such as himself can't find room for complaint. There're plusses to not thinking about it. He's been able to stay calm, for one. Make clear-headed decisions, also good. Stay more on the numb side of things, love it.

The negatives? Well, he can admit he's in denial. He has as much privacy than he's ever had in his life, and yet he is more reluctant than ever to take his shirt off for any amount of time. Harry tries so hard not to look down at them, the words that is. But in the mornings, he finds his hand rested over them and at night he can't help tracing them with a finger dragged over the fabric of his shirt. There's a small part of him, the smallest part really, that's glad he has

words at all. It's proof they both have souls, however divided and damaged and ripped to shreds.

Scourgify becomes his best friend when he's not near a lake or a pond or a river or the sea. Harry only allows himself to follow the coastline a couple times per week, then darting back into dry land on long, circuitous routes. Aiming to be as obnoxious as possible in his flight pattern, he often doubles back and tries to crisscross his trail at times, too. He knows travel by broomstick isn't traceable, but reports of strange movement and visual distortions in the air might be. For all he knows, Muggles might be tracking UFO sightings when really, it's Harry. He has no way of knowing. So he keeps to wildlands and the lonely parts of the country, winding back on himself and curving a path this way and that until he's quite sure he's in Scotland. It's not terribly clear whether he ever touched down in Cornwall, a few weeks back. He had seen the two coastlines converging as he flew down and realized he was travelling over a peninsula. That had made him feel pinned in and he turned around right there to retrace his steps, then headed north. Sometimes Harry follows the coastline and sometimes not, his vague memory of UK geography leading him to believe he was in Wales for most of it. He has to swerve out quite a ways to side-step two big cities that seem to overlap each other, going by the skyline and spread of suburban sprawl. Manchester? Liverpool? He's not sure.

But in reality, he never gets close enough to road signs to know and in the end landscapes don't differ nearly as much as people do. And he's seen pretty much no one. Passing cars, a farmer here and there, sometimes there are people scattered about the fields. But other than that? He can admit to himself he's doing a good job on this self-assigned task. As impulsive as the decision had been.

For once, it might have been the right one.

The thing is, though, that he's running out of food. Even the beans have been depleted and he's down to his last two granola bars. There's a few other odds and ends, but yeah. He'll need to do another food run.

All this being on the run business has made him appreciate how much faster Thestrals and Hypogriffs are than broomsticks. It's not totally to his disadvantage. Pursuers may be travelling too fast in their search, so that they pass right over him. Slow and steady wins the race. Plus, magical creatures would have been far more noticeable than a bloke on a broom. Even disillusioned, it would have been a risk. Also, hard to find enough meat for them. As a matter of fact, he misses meat, too.

He'll have to buy some deli meat or salami or something when he makes his next grocery run. The thought makes his mouth water. Maybe some pastries, too. And fruit! He never thought he'd miss fruit and vegetables like does, but here he is, thinking fondly of broccoli and salad.

The tally's at thirty-seven by the time he's scraping out the last of the peanut butter with a pocket knife and spreading it out thinly on the final surviving granola bar. He's been drinking a lot of water to substitute for real fullness and put off going back into civilization, the water a trick he learned very early with the Dursleys.

Harry knows he needs to go, but he's scared. He's spent all this time and effort avoiding being seen, getting caught, and he doesn't want it all to be for nothing. It's stressful enough he really does bust out the Skittles. They burst sugary sweet in his mouth and remind him of younger days, before magic, before Hogwarts. The rare time he would have just enough spare change scrounged up to buy a little candy. It tastes like a good day, like things looking up. He wants as much of the feeling as he can get. He eats a third of the bag and feels sick from it, barely flying that day as he waits for the stomachache to fade. Sitting and laying around most of the day in a glen, he has too much time to think, all that time spent not-thinking catching up to him. What does it mean to be a dark lord's soulmate? Does that make Harry a crazy murderer, too? Does it mean he'll balance him out – and what does balancing him out even mean? When Hermione had said it to both placate and educate him, he hadn't been listening with his listening ears. And what do the dreams mean? Are they sent to him or are they conjured from the depths of his own mind?

There's no question it's tapping into his deepest desires – to be cared for, to be held down, to be loved. The question is whether they're carefully designed to ease him into the idea of embracing his soulmate, like slowly raising the temperature to boil a frog in a pot without it realizing. They're getting more specific, too. A mouth pressed to his scar rather than true lips, fingers tracing the words on his chest the way Harry's own do before sleep finds him at night. Long, fine-boned hands on him, holding him close, something whispered in his ear he can never quite understand. It's wonderful and it scares him. It's nothing like the reality that faces him, that he's chosen.

If the dreams are Voldemort's doing, it's terribly sneaky of him. And it also might be his attempt to manipulate Harry into turning himself over without Voldemort having to sacrifice anything. Soften him up. Yes, that sounds quite like the boy he got to know from the diary. Sly. A snake in the grass, so to speak. Well, better this than to dream of being tortured or his friends being tortured or some vision of mass death and destruction. At least this way, he gets something he wants, too; the illusion of closeness, of care. The kind of comfort you can really only get from another person.

His back is killing him from sleeping on the ground, even with a transfigured sleeping roll. And flying in roughly the same position day in and day out. Harry would kill for a muscle relaxing potion. Somehow he doubts they'll have that at the supermarket.

The night he resolves to make a grocery run the next day, he spells the galleon to say *EVERYONE OK?*

The reply is quick and reads *ALL SAFE*.

Harry changes the words again. *PROGRESS?*

YES.

WHEN?

NEED MORE TIME.

CAN DO. Harry hesitates then, because anyone could be answering him. Anyone who has one of the charmed galleons and knows it's how they communicate. But . . . *SPY FOUND?*

FLETCHER. Damn! Harry wants to punch something. That disgusting rat, another Pettigrew-type then. What a faithless worm. He says it, too: *DAMN!*

BE SAFE, the coin reads, and perhaps that's best. Wouldn't do to give away too much information or communicate at any real length. It just felt good to talk to someone. *YOU TOO.*

The next issue, it turns out, is that he has no Muggle money left. After considering the problem carefully, he decides to transfigure sickles and knuts into pound notes of various value with charms for preservation and making the spell stick as strong as he can cast them. This way it'll feel less like he's cheating them. And he definitely doesn't want to steal. All told, he puts one hundred pounds into his disposal.

He wants to stock up enough for months just in case, as much as he hates what it implies that he might need to, but he couldn't possibly carry it all without a more potent expansion charm on the trunk. And Harry hasn't the first idea how to manipulate objects in such a delicate way. As it is, he's been on a journey of rigorous transfiguration learning, a lot of trial and error. McGonagall would be proud of his progress; the classroom never prepared him to rough it like this. He's been able to transfigure big rocks and logs into mattresses the past couple weeks, then revert them back like he'd never been there at all. Never would have been able to do that before.

It takes a while to fall asleep that night, worries wracking his mind. He doesn't want it all to be for nothing, and over something as simple as food. Harry will take every feasible precaution. Changing his appearance, walking into town disillusioned, finding the most isolated grocery store possible. Hide his broom out back, remove the disillusionment on himself, walk in the front door and back out in under ten minutes. Pay and leave, that's all he has to do. Just pay and leave. It's starting to get cooler at night, early September by his tally. That helps him drift off, a good sleeping temperature for someone acclimatized to a cupboard under the stairs that was either dangerously drafty or chokingly stuffy. Harry closes his eyes and prays for dreams.

He dresses in the most Muggle attire he owns: a muted logo t-shirt and faded jeans. All that's missing is one of those seashell necklaces. Charms give him a longer nose, eyes wider set, broader forehead, lower cheekbones, wavy light brown hair, a rounder chin, and no scar. Glasses are reshaped. He's careful to change his eye color this time, too. It'll do. He's already multiple shades tanner than he's been before from all the time outdoors with no sunscreen. Harry's unrecognizable.

Circling the smallest little village he can find from the air gives him some reassurance there isn't much to see or to be seen by. And there aren't but so many houses, what looks to be a little school and public buildings, and a few stores. The kind of town that has more graves than people. He's quite sure he's in Scotland now, going by the flag waving in front of the half-filled school parking lot. Harry lands in the wooded area behind the grocery store, distinguished by a sign with cartoon fruits on it. It's a walk from there, he landed pretty far away out of an abundance of caution. He leans his broom up against a tree and scratches the

village-facing side of the trunk once to mark the spot so he can find it again. It's difficult to walk on, leaving his means of escape behind. He does it anyway.

It takes hard work not to tiptoe out of the woods and around the building like a cautious cartoon character. He flinches when a vent on the side of the building gusts some exhaust. *Easy, Harry. Just pay and leave. That's all you have to do*, he reminds himself. Even his footsteps on the soft dirt path round the side of the grocery store sound too loud. *Breathe*.

Harry walks in, the little bell at the top of the store startling him. "Hi there!" a chipper shop girl greets him from behind the counter. "Not often we get strangers round these parts. What c'n I help ye with?"

"Oh nothing," Harry stutters a bit. "Just a bit of a grocery run."

"Right, right you are. Ye've come to the correct place! Please let me know if there's an'thing ye can't find." Her smile is blinding. It feels good just to see another face from this close, honestly.

The fluorescents are less welcoming. Harry grabs a trolley and gets to work. The instinct is to grab a cheap pot and pan and cooking tools, but he hasn't risked building a fire since day one. Too easy to find at night, when you're out in the empty countryside and there's no light for miles. Warming charms should be able to take care of him just fine for the next couple months, he decided when planning this grocery run. It's overwhelming to be faced with so many food choices, aisle after aisle bulked out with stuff. More non-perishables it'll have to be for him, but this time, oh this time . . . Harry picks up a truly massive bargain bag of apples first thing. Oranges, strawberries, carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes . . . Things he thinks will last at least a little while outside the cold embrace of commercial refrigeration. There are things he wants but has to put back because he knows they won't survive long enough to enjoy. Stasis charms can only do so much. He has hope now, that he won't be dying of scurvy any time too soon.

More crisps, nuts, dried fruit, granola, energy bar-type things, all kinds of things. Oh, but the meat. Harry darts over to the deli aisle and grabs up two packs of assorted sliced sandwich meat, pre-cooked chicken breast, and three long logs of salami, then impulsively grabs a fourth. Everything else here will go bad, he tells himself as he stares at a big pack of bacon longingly. He dumps all the meat into the trolley basket and wheels back to the front. Soap! He forgot soap! Abruptly, he turns the cart to hang a left and nab a package full of bars and some shampoo sitting next to it as well. Bread! He forgot bread, too! He grabs a few loaves the next aisle over. And cheese, the industrial kind that is worryingly difficult to spoil. Well, Harry's not worrying about it now. He's definitely forgetting some stuff – *this is why we bring a grocery list, Harry* – but it's definitely past the allotted ten minutes and will have to do.

He carts it all back to the wide-eyed shop girl at the front. "A bit of a grocery run, was it?"

"Yeah, you, er, you know how it is."

"Mm," she hums. "I certainly do." She starts ringing it all up. There's enough of it that it takes a while and Harry takes it upon himself to bag everything just to have something to do

and keep from tapping his foot the bags of food cluster around his feet when they run out of counterspace. Tapping the final few clackity keys, she announces, “That’s ninety-three pounds and seventy-three pence. Quite a party you must be throwing.” Harry just laughs nervously as he pretends to count out the bills and hand her ninety-five pounds. It pains him to wait for change, but he does it anyway. She hands him the coins and he dumps them into one of the grocery bags, already loading them into the trolley to wheel everything around to the back.

“Alright if I bring the trolley out to unload and bring it back?”

“O’ course!” the shop girl says brightly. “Take all the time ye need.”

“Thanks, er, thanks,” Harry repeats himself. The asphalt is a smooth ride but when he pushes the trolley over the dirt path, it puts up a bit of a fight. He pushes harder to get it to comply. They make it to the back of the store and Harry ferries groceries from the trolley into his enlarged trunk behind the tree line. The mission has been a success and he’s feeling quite satisfied with himself when –

BANG!

It comes from the road, the parking lot, too close, it must be Apparition, and in broad daylight, and right where Harry’s just been, and –

Harry’s got the trunk closed, latched, shrunken, and tucked away with the remaining bags looped around the broom handle in an instant. He abandons the shopping trolley and jets away, dodging tree trunks at ground level, the ultimate agility exercise. After several minutes of travelling this way, he eases down the speed enough notches to cast disillusionments and a Notice-Me-Not on himself and the broom. Then he carries on.

He spends the rest of the day speeding as far away from the store as he can manage, taking crooked and weaving paths but never circling back on himself. Making the ill-advised decision to keep flying after dark, Harry carries on for quite a ways, chasing the winds until his heart has slowed again, until the hair on the backs of his arms lies flat and he can think to himself, *Alright, now I can probably manage to sit still.*

It’s only as he lays down to sleep without even tent cover so he can keep company with the stars that he can admit to himself that it perhaps was a car engine backfiring that made such a loud bang and not in fact the whole of the Death Eater forces.

After all, how could they have found him? He took every possible precaution. He could spend the rest of his life this way and probably manage it. Magic is infinite. Harry could transfigure anything into money, anything into anything with enough material to work with and enough practice. Who’s to say he even needs to stay in the UK? He could keep running forever and no one could catch him, not even Lord Voldemort, not even the Order –

But he wants to be found, he reminds himself. In a way. He wants to come home, when home is where your people are. Harry doesn’t want to do this forever. But it’s stirring something inside to know that he could. He has that power. He has that option. That freedom.

That means something.

His dream that night is truly wonderful, blissful in that way that keeps him happy for hours into waking, happy enough he can't even cry about it. Bodies close, skin touching, sharing air. "Where are you?" the voice whispers. "I want to find you."

"With you," Harry answers, pulling this person closer, cradling a larger form in his arms. "Always with you."

"Harry . . ."

Then he wakes.

Again, it's sweet enough to keep him properly grieving the loss. He knows he'll have it again come nightfall.

Chicken breast, strawberries, and cheese for breakfast never tasted so good. He's going to feast like a king for weeks.

The new foods spice things up for a little while, but other than that, his life is monotonous. Flying during the day – damn it, he forgot to buy sunscreen again! – and dreaming wonderful dreams at night, he passes more weeks away. He spends all of it trundling around Scotland but avoiding the islands. There's little mental stimulation and he takes to wondering what his life will be like in the future. Being a peace-weaver or whatever. Probably chains and torture and never seeing his friends again. Wand snapped or taken away. Drinking sewage water and living off of bugs and dungeon mold for sustenance. But then, when Harry's being reasonable, why would Voldemort theoretically sacrifice waging war to have his soulmate just to treat him terribly?

Well, soulmate he may be, but he's still Harry Potter. And Voldemort *hates* Harry Potter. There's a bumpy road ahead. Good thing Harry's flying for now.

The galleon remains unchanged for multiple weeks, except for brief check ins.

ALL SAFE? ALL SAFE.

PROGRESS? NEED MORE TIME.

Someone in the Order initiates a few times as well.

STATUS? Harry has to think on that one. *GOOD.*

NEED SAFEHOUSE?

BAD IDEA, Harry answers quickly.

ROADBLOCK HIT, the galleon reads on the first truly chilly evening of the year. Harry applies multiple warming charms and it does the trick. For now.

He doesn't need more information than that to know exactly what he wants to say. *ASK HIM IF HE'S PREPARED* – and then the coin runs out of room. He waits a minute then changes it to *TO DO THIS FOREVER*. If Voldemort really wants lock it down, then . . .

BECAUSE I AM.

And then, two days later, at long last:

DATE SET.

-

WHEN?

ONE WEEK. 9.29.97.

Harry takes the deepest breath of his life. *WHERE?*

STONEHENGE. That – that –

Melodramatic bastard!

This is new levels of delusions of grandeur. He almost says no on principle, but that's not really in the cards. He has no idea what they've negotiated, what peace even looks like with a man like Lord Voldemort. Whether it's even possible, no matter what words they say or Vow. He'll just have to trust in their negotiating abilities.

UGH. Harry can't resist saying it. Even if just to give everyone a laugh. And it needs to be said. He leaves it there for a minute, enough to really marinate. *WHAT TIME?*

DUSK. This prompts yet another eye roll moment. Well, at least he'll know when to be there without casting a Tempus charm.

ANYTHING ELSE?

NO. Yes, it's definitely one of the Aurors in charge of the charmed galleons now. Probably confiscated most of the others – it explains the relative radio silence for the past couple months since he told him to stay hidden. *THANK YOU*, the words morph, then morph again. *YOU'RE A GOOD MAN.* That's definitely not Moody. No way. Probably Kingsley. Right? Either way, Harry snuffles a little, eyes watery for the first time in many weeks.

Nine weeks on the run. A low price to pay for such a steep reward, and yet such a sharp feeling of incoming loss. Well, it'll be alright. He'll make it alright.

Harry turns south, towards Salisbury. The land below him is so well-trod by now that it's all starting to look very familiar. The days are blustery, the wind blowing the wrong way, as if

trying to push him back, turn him around –

He forges onward.

The dreams stop. His nights are normal, regular, run-of-the-mill, sometimes dreaming normal little dreams and sometimes not. It's . . . he's grieving the loss. Gutting.

Only knowing that he'll be seeing his friends and family soon contents him. And at the same time, he prepares emotionally for everything to go wrong. And so very many things could. He resolves to approach as cautiously as possible, as early as possible to scope things out. Harry feels like dinner the night before will be his last meal, can't help it. The world is ending, in a way. The world as he knew it. Life as he knew it. By the end of the day tomorrow, he'll be a –

Married man.

He gulps. And doesn't sleep a wink.

The witching hour finds him restless, hours of lying there fruitlessly already under his belt. Harry packs up camp, throws on a sweater, and takes to the sky. There isn't far to go now, and he lands a long walk away from the landmark on purpose. Draping the invisibility cloak over himself and his broom, Harry slowly treks his way towards the darker spot on the horizon, until it's close close closer still, the starry sky lightening from deep blue to a mild purple.

He can see people – moving shapes, just there –

Harry silences his steps in the grass. Closer, he creeps, slower with each step. Is this really what he wants, really what he wants to do with his life? Is it really worth –

Then he spies that telltale bushy head of hair from the shape of the silhouette the bright moon is casting. Other familiar shapes can be seen as well. He picks up speed until he's nearly jogging, so excited after months away – but the tall strange stones come into better view. And there are other people there on the other half of the circle. So many people, so many dark cloaks. Wasn't the meeting time at dusk? Looks like everyone tried to get here early to scope things out. Just when he thought he'd be the first one there . . . His silent steps slow into a walk. This is it. Last chance to turn back. He steps forward anyway and lets the cloak drop. It doesn't take long for him to be noticed.

“Harry!” And then he's got a face full of that bushy hair, wiry arms wrapped around him tight. Harry catches Hermione, holds them both upright. Surely that must be Ron at his back, warm and close so he's hugged from both sides. Moody's there, Arthur too, every last Weasley save Percy, and there's Kingsley, Tonks, and Remus. He feels magical protections wash over him as he's tugged into the outer rim of the stone circle.

“ ‘llo,” Harry says. It's quiet on the other side of the Stonehenge. He doesn't want to look. Someone gives his shoulder a friendly shake and Hermione's whispering in his ear, “Harry, you don't have to do this, there are other ways – “

But there aren't, not without loss of life, or they would have broached the option by now. They've had months to think of a better plan and come up short. It's fine; Harry's made peace with this. He pulls away so she can see him shake his head silently, a hand on her shoulder. This is the best they are going to do. Her eyes sparkle with potential tears and he doesn't turn to look at Ron because he's pretty sure his friend is doing the same and that will set Harry off, too. He needs to be strong. Show no weakness. Moody's pulling him aside to quietly explain: "You'll do an Unbreakable Vow and a marriage ceremony in one, it's tradition. Here, Potter," here he attempts to hand Harry a thick sheaf of parchments, not well legible in the pre-dawn darkness. The agreement. Harry pushes them back.

"You all wrote it, right? Hermione did?"

"Yes, but with adjustments – "

"Then I don't need to read it. Not right now." Lower, Harry insists, "He could change his mind any minute."

"Fair enough," Mad-Eye says and begins to gesture to an unfamiliar man in the middle of the stone circle standing before two fallen stones. Hermione has to stop Harry before he walks forward, asking him to wait. "You can't get – it's your . . . You ought to be wearing proper robes." She taps her wand on his shoulder and his sweater and jeans and trainers transform into sharp, snug robes and boots. He nods at her, manages a small tip of the lips that melts off his face as he turns to face his future.

His future is scary, with red eyes and weird skin and no nose and arguably no soul. So he glowers at it with all his power, fueled by every last thing that's gone wrong in his life. He taps into the bottomless well of pure rage he's been so scared of up until now. Now? Now is when he needs it.

Harry strides forward to meet the officiant in the middle of the Stonehenge like a man going to war. Like a challenge. Voldemort meets it. He steps forward, intense, bearing down just by being there, the atmospheric presence of a tornado. A vision of death and destruction. Harry, one of wrath. Voldemort looks – Harry watches the officiant instead.

The officiant is unfamiliar, in red Ministry robes with a dimly glowing parchment hovering in the air. "Take hands," the man instructs rather fearlessly, as if he couldn't care much which way things go. Harry expects Voldemort to hesitate and sticks his hand out upon instruction to beat him to the punch. He's wrong; Voldemort doesn't hesitate, no, he takes Harry's right hand in his own and at the first touch – god, he knew it would be good, but still. Everyone knows there's a certain something special when it comes to a soulmate's touch, but this . . .

Harry raises his head from where it dropped weakly in response to the touch. The sky is dipping into varied shades spanning from indigo to lavender, brightness spilling from the east from behind the man's head. Voldemort's fingers fold tighter as fluid golden wire unspools from the wizard's wand and begins to twine around their joined hands.

"Do you, Lord Voldemort, vow to never obstruct any Ministry of Magic's election system, lawful integrity, or otherwise interfere with its legal functioning so long as you remain bound in matrimony to Harry James Potter?"

“I do.” His voice is strong, unhesitating, unflinching. Familiar enough, from altercations past. From all of Harry’s worst memories.

“Do you, Harry James Potter, vow to never physically harm, mutilate, or otherwise intentionally injure Lord Voldemort, so long as you remain bound in matrimony to one another?”

“I do,” Harry says, wondering what planet they’re on that he has agreed to this without hearing Voldemort agree to it first. The golden wire spools around their hands, overlapping and winding back on itself.

“Do you, Lord Voldemort, vow to never physically harm, mutilate, or otherwise intentionally injure Harry James Potter, so long as you remain bound in matrimony to one another?”

“I do.” Well, that’s reassuring.

“Do you, Harry James Potter, vow to never intentionally sabotage Lord Voldemort in his political aims, so long as they remain lawful within the parameters set forth by the Ministry of Magic?”

Harry hesitates, but, if Hermione and Moody say to go with it . . . and no one’s shouting that they object – “I do.” The wire winds thicker, more binding, up their wrists to their forearms.

“Do you, Lord Voldemort, vow to never abscond with or otherwise detain Harry James Potter? Do you vow to never withhold him access to his friends, family, and desired company so long as you both remain bound in matrimony to one another?”

“I do.” *Whew*, that was way better a deal than he was expecting out of this. No dungeons for him. At this point, he just wants to see what terms they’ll have put in next.

“Do you, Lord Voldemort, vow to never wage war in or on the United Kingdoms of Great Britain without Harry James Potter’s written consent and approval, written free of will and witnessed by a mutually agreed upon third party, presently selected to be Alastor Moody or another third party upon death or incapacitation of the current individual, so long you remain bound in matrimony to Harry James Potter?” *WOAH!* It’s actually *happening!*

“I do.” It’s beyond Harry’s understanding that anything could motivate Voldemort to agree to all these binding restrictions – upon pain of death, no less. This would make the messiest divorce of the century. Harry’s never getting divorced.

“The Unbreakable Vow is complete. I bind you in the eyes of the law and magic to be beholden to your word and one another.” The golden wire completes its journey around and around their hands and wrists and forearms, flashing brighter once with the final words and fading.

“Here follows the marriage ceremony. Do you, Harry James Potter, swear to be loyal, constant, and faithful to Lord Voldemort, so long as you both remain bound in matrimony to one another?”

“I do.” A weird one, but okay. Harry’s not clear on how literal these words are, or how magically binding. But if it’s a question of sleeping around, yeah, marriage is marriage. He’s not planning on endangering anyone else’s life like that.

“Do you, Lord Voldemort, swear to be loyal, constant, and faithful to Harry James Potter, so long as you both remain bound in matrimony to one another?”

“I do.”

“Do you, Harry James Potter, swear to support, honor, and care for Lord Voldemort’s needs?”

“I . . . do?”

“Do you, Lord Voldemort, swear to support, honor, and care for Harry James Potter’s needs?”

“I do.”

“Do you, Harry James Potter, swear to keep Lord Voldemort safe and guard his wellbeing as if it were your own?”

“. . . I do.” These vows are just getting weirder and weirder.

“Do you, Lord Voldemort, swear to keep Harry James Potter safe and guard his wellbeing as if it were your own?”

“I do.”

“Then by the power vested in me by the Ministry of Magic, I declare you lawfully wedded until death do you part, legal termination of matrimony, or vow do you break.” The officiant raises his wand and starry sparks rain down majestically over their heads.

The officiant rolls up the hovering, glowing parchment and takes a step back.

They’re still holding hands. Harry yanks his back and barely represses the instinct to wipe his hand on his robes.

It’s done.

Running all this time, only to lay a trap for himself and sit right in the middle of it. It should feel worse, like the end of the world again again again. But it isn’t. It’s the start of something great but terrible. Or terrible and great. Some combination therein.

He looks up at his soulmate, his husband, and fighting past the mute shock of the situation, the impossible to understand look on his face, biting says, “Well?”

Another challenge, and Voldemort takes the bait with little pause. He grasps Harry’s upper arm and raises his wand, presumably to side-along Apparate, but then Hermione calls out, “Wait!” again, frantically. “What about - ?” She lifts Harry’s broom and invisibility cloak helplessly.

“Don’t worry, ‘mione. You hold onto them. I’ll be seeing you soon,” Harry says kindly, when really he doesn’t feel sure of anything. He gets a brief look at the rest of the Order, just enough to see that everyone’s still accounted for, then the world gets ripped away as they’re tossed into one piece of material reality into another.

He’s headed home sweet home.

Honey, I'm home

Chapter Summary

“Husband,” they call each other and it’s both a taunt and a reminder.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading! Much appreciate (^ ’ ~ `)

They land in the grand foyer of a sun spilt house. Manor. Mansion? It’s big on the inside anyway, cream walls with white trimmings. Harry pulls his arm from Voldemort’s grip and wonders where they are. Surely this can’t be Malfoy Manor, from what he’s seen in his visions. In fact, it doesn’t even look to be the sort of place to even have dungeons. Then again, he thinks, referring back to handsome young Tom Riddle’s face, facades can hide a great deal. He wants to inspect everything to satisfy his curiosity, to find the trick.

He turns to face Voldemort instead. They eye each other cautiously for a moment before the corner of Voldemort’s mouth twitches, a strange movement. He holds out a hand, palm up.

Harry goggles at it, eyebrows pinching. Does Voldemort seriously expect him to take him up on the offer to touch, free of obligation and free of will? Absolutely not. Then again, that first touch was so – so . . .

It’s honestly all making Harry’s brain melt and while he would love to punch Voldemort in the face now given this fresh and tantalizing new opportunity, he doesn’t think it would be a great start to maintaining world peace. He takes a step back. “Where are we, exactly?” Harry asks frigidly instead of acknowledging the offer to touch.

“A new development. I suppose it should be called Potter Manor, now.” Voldemort’s voice nearly makes Harry shudder, there’s just something so insinuating about it, some quality it’s never had before. The wizard rounds the room, arms folded behind his back and Harry turns to keep him in his sight.

“You . . . bought a manor? And want to name it after me?” Harry’s confused.

“Dear Harry, I bought you a manor,” Voldemort says, voice dropping to a deeper tone, head tilting as he observes Harry closely. Something shivers through Harry. Everything about this is so fucking bizarre.

“Don’t call me that,” Harry snaps.

“Very well.” Instead of getting angry, Voldemort grows cold, drawing himself up to his full height. “Would you care for breakfast?”

Harry regards him with an open mixture of bewilderment and distrust. “Not particularly.” It’s the truth, too; his stomach is still churning with nerves. He wants to sleep, got exactly zero moments of sleep last night, but is still far too wired.

It is the height of the surreal to be standing here talking to Voldemort like they’re any other two people in the world.

He desires to leave the room and so he does. The vows said he can’t be confined, right?

“I’m going to explore the manor,” he bites out, not wanting to be so rude things fall apart on the very first day. Harry rounds the staircase before Voldemort can stop him and marches onward. The whole place is sunlit to high heaven.

Multiple drawing rooms on the first floor, a sunroom, two half baths, a study, and a room where Harry is surprised to find a pool table. He wasn’t aware wizards played pool. There’s likely a dining room off to the side of the foyer and plenty to explore upstairs, but he doesn’t want to risk bumping into Voldemort any sooner than he has to. Instead, he sneaks through the basement door on the backside of the foyer staircase to see what lies below the house. There, he finds expansive kitchens, which, impossibly, also have windows drenching the room in sunlight. Outside the windows, there are only rolling golden hills, long grasses waving in the warm wind. Three house elves are hard at work with food on the many stovetops and brooms sweeping and cloths scrubbing pots and pans clean. Tropple, Dippy, and Marsey, they say they are. “Very pleased to meet you,” Harry says and two of them instantly have eyes welling with tears. He knows better than to try to shake their hands but the instinct is still there. See, Aunt Petunia? He does have manners.

Harry actually does take them up on their offer of some scrambled eggs with toast and drizzled in a curry sauce. It’s incredible and he says so, sitting at the counter watching them all at work. Marsey assures him it’s their pleasure with dewy eyes again. Harry finishes his food and makes the token effort to wash his own dish but the motion is summarily rejected. He explores the rest of the lower level. One room stands empty and another has what looks like a bubbling spring in the middle of the room, glowing aquamarine in the otherwise dim light of the room. It casts strange ripples of light on the ceiling. Harry will make good use of this room, guaranteed. Attached is what looks to be a sauna, a small wooden box of a room with a bed of charcoal in the corner, which intimidates him and he will probably not make good use of.

The kitchens take up the majority of the floorspace and Harry retraces his steps to examine the basement level one more time, just to make sure he didn’t miss any secret doors to the inevitable dungeons below. Voldemort would never consent to spend time in a house without somewhere to put people who provoke his displeasure.

At last, Harry can no longer avoid the second floor and he climbs the stairs trepidatiously. Immediately at the front of the stairs, he finds grand white doors, clearly the master bedroom.

If he knows anything, *anything* about Voldemort, the man's already claimed it for himself. He inspects the other bedrooms instead. There are several, in different configurations but a similar color scheme of cream and white as much of the manor is.

Harry finds a room he quite likes, an L shape that appeals, almost having its own little living room with a nice round Persian rug and couch. This one, he'll sleep in this one.

With few belongings to unpack, Harry goes about testing the bed, which has a little bounce to it, which he likes. It wrinkles the soft bedspread a bit, the first in a long line of concessions to his new life. It just seems to symbolize a lot, that's all. He feels uncomfortable at the idea of unloading his trunk just yet, to not keep his things on him. His lifestyle has been pretty impermanent and on the run lately. It's strange to think this is where he'll live now. He doesn't see the point in arguing with Voldemort about buying him a house, especially one as grand as this. Perhaps he'll be able to bleed the man dry if this habit continues. Yes, Harry thinks, devious and malicious. That will be quite nice.

Eventually, though, he tires of his inspection of the room and ventures outside. It's a blooming beautiful day, sun rising in the sky and casting the tall grasses beyond the lawn in gold. There's no garden. Well, Harry can fix that.

A tomorrow activity. That will do. He's fading now, lack of sleep catching up to him. Harry tromps back upstairs to the L shaped bedroom and concedes to put his shrunken trunk on the nightstand next to his wand and slip off his robes. He transfigures them back into the sweater and jeans from before, a far defter hand at the craft than a few months ago. Slipping under the covers in his undershirt and boxers, Harry allows himself to slide into sleep.

He wakes at sunset and permits that perhaps it would be best to attend dinner. Just, in the name of world peace. And so on. Putting his sweater and jeans back on, Harry creeps down the stairs at first, then remembers this is allegedly *his* house and trods down instead, steps thumping. "Dippy," he calls and the house elf appears with a crack. "Could you serve dinner? Would that be alright?"

"Dinner is being already served, Master Potter."

"Oh," Harry says, surprised. "Just Harry, Dippy, remember?"

"As Master Harry says. Do you be needing anything else?"

"No, thank you." Dippy disappears with a crack at that and Harry is struck with sudden regret that he has sent away his only buffer between the Dark Lord and himself.

He enters the dining room with trepidation.

Voldemort is already there, reading documents of some kind at the head of the table. Allegedly, this is Harry's house. So really, that ought to be his seat. But honestly it's not where he wants to sit. No, Harry sits at the opposite end of the table, of a medium length with heaps of food piled and steaming under a crystal chandelier of reasonable size. Well, as reasonable as a crystal chandelier can be. Voldemort starts serving himself once Harry sits, so Harry does too.

It surprises him, that Voldemort doesn't try to talk to him again. Harry doesn't last ten minutes into the silence before he's compelled to ask: "How did the Order get in contact with you, exactly?"

Voldemort eyes him with something like slight approval. It's as if he was waiting for Harry to initiate. A ploy, as always, Harry thinks with some anger towards himself. Towards what, he doesn't know, but he damn sure doesn't trust it. "They gave me Mundungus Fletcher."

"Gave you?" Harry asks incredulously

"Left him at the gates of Malfoy Manor under the Imperius and instructed him to share their message. Their . . . offer. Your offer," Voldemort clarifies in that sibilant voice, gesturing with a hand, something hooded in his expression.

"I'll be honest, I wasn't betting it would actually work. I mean, I was but I didn't think . . . it seemed a bit far-fetched." Harry can admit it.

"You gambled well, Harry," Voldemort says softly. Warm. Harry stands, hands on the table. His dinner's half-finished.

"Right. I'm going to bed." He can't handle being in the room anymore. He can't – not with that look on Voldemort's face aimed at him. It's too fucking reality-bending.

"Good night, Harry," Voldemort says his name again and Harry needs to leave the room. So he does.

He hides in his room for a few hours, finally consenting to putting a few things of his own about the room. Some clothes in the wardrobe, a few knick knacks on the dresser. There's a small desk in the corner that folds into more of a cabinet shape when not in use. Harry unfolds it and finds parchments in the drawer. Inkpots and a couple quills. Yes, it would be wise to write.

"Marsey?"

With a crack, the house elf appears. "What can Marsey do for Master Harry?"

"Just Harry, remember? Look, I was wondering if there are any owls around. I didn't see an owlery, but I thought there might be one anyway, might've missed it."

"Yes, Master Harry, there is owls. We have two good ones. Would Master Harry be liking to send a letter?"

"Could you bring one here? Where are they kept?"

"There be an owlery on the roof for the birds." That's quite nice actually, so they can commune with nature a little more. "I can show Master Harry, I would be very happy to."

"Thanks Marsey, that would be great."

There is indeed a little owlery on the roof, a door tucked into an alcove leading up a short stair to it which Marsey shows him to before Disapparating. The night air is cool and soothing. Two brown owls hoot at him in curiosity sitting in the cage. It's an open-air part of the small structure, the other half sheltered in stone. Looks like that's how they sleep during the daytime, hiding in there. "Hello there," Harry greets. He opens the owlery door and lets one swoop onto his forearm. "Well, you're quite handsome."

The owl hoots at him again, warbling a little.

Harry ferries him down the stair to his bedroom and sets him on the top of the desk. He dips the nib in the inkpot, poises his hand over the strip of parchment, then pauses. Trying again, Harry puts quill to paper and writes, *All good, safe & sound. Will come to the Burrow the day after tomorrow. Please mail the terms of the Vow and contract when you can. See you soon.*

Does that sound too calm? As in, they won't believe him? Like someone else wrote it? Or is it stupid to use an owl when he could use the galleon? But then again . . . Harry is still of a mind that anyone could have access to one of the coins. Who's to say who might see the message? Then again, he's not on the run anymore. Ugh, he'll use both.

When he pulls the coin from his pants pocket, he sees a new message. Must have slept through it warming in his pocket. Deep sleep. To be fair, it's been a bit of a big day. *STATUS?*

Harry smiles. Moody again, the grouch. *ALL GOOD.*

There's a bit of a delay in getting a response.

When it comes, it reads *TRULY?* Hm, maybe that's Lupin then.

YES. NO PROBLEMS. Harry wouldn't know how else to put it, and he's certainly not about to write *HE BOUGHT ME A HOUSE.*

How embarrassing . . .

Harry ties the letter to the base of the owl's talons and sends him off through one of the big windows in the room. Come to think of it, the manor is filled with rooms with massive windows, probably why it's so sun drenched. He tries to read a bit and fails, falls asleep trying to parse that one out, still worn out from the stress of recent history-making events.

Rising with the sun, Harry takes his breakfast in the kitchen again before Voldemort can invite him to dine with him again. If he's even in the manor, that is. Harry doesn't see hide nor hair of him all day, which he himself spends on the side of the house, scoping out how he'd like to put a garden in. Something small, flowers with maybe some easy to grow fruits and vegetables. It occurs to him he's fixating, spending all day on something so trivial when he doesn't even know what part of the country he's in, what the state of affairs might be, what evils Voldemort might be up to. He thinks to ask one of the elves where they are later in the day. But this is making his mind quiet. For now, he focuses on the prospect of growing his own tomatoes.

The owl returns midday, with empty talons. No response but message received. Interesting. He ferries the fellow back up to the owlery and gets back to work.

He cuts lines in the dirt with magic, dividing up what areas he thinks will go best near each other, what size the sections need to be, and trying to catalog what plant will go where. Crouching down, he transfigures a nearby rock into a spade and starts churning the earth by hand.

At last, something he knows how to do. It takes hours, puts him at peace as the day drifts from sunny to overcast back to sunny again. His head is very quiet as he registers the warp in reality and crack of Apparition from the front of the manor. There are feet in the grass, treading slowly across the lawn. Harry keeps at his work, sees no need to acknowledge his . . . well, his soulmate. It's really quite rude of him, but the Vows only said he couldn't physically injure Voldemort on purpose, nothing about snubbing him. Harry maintains his resolve for longer than he expects to be able to, but at length, he can't help it. He turns around.

Voldemort's dark towering shape looms there. Harry realizes he's on his knees in front of him and it jolts something weird in his stomach, a strange lurch. He jumps to his feet hastily, tries to banish it. Voldemort looks at him with something in his eyes. Curiosity? Or is it cruel amusement? It doesn't bear thinking. Married to a sadist, what a joy.

"Where were you?" Harry asks and then hears himself. He sounds like a nagging housewife. "I mean, where did you go today?"

"A Dark Lord has many obligations, Harry. The status quo suddenly finds itself . . . greatly changed," Voldemort says with a roll of his wrist, conjuring a wet washcloth. He reaches for Harry's face but Harry jerks back. It's nerves and pride. But mostly bewilderment. "Er," he starts and doesn't know how to finish. No matter, Voldemort holds out the cloth. Harry takes it mostly out of confusion and wipes it across his cheek. It comes back smeared in dark dirt. "Oh."

He rubs at his face with it roughly, avoiding knocking around his glasses. It would be a strange day indeed to take them off around a wizard like Voldemort. It's when he's at his most vulnerable, practically blind. "Thanks," he says, trying to hand it back but Voldemort just banishes it with a flick of his hand. Harry . . . Harry begins to understand with all this effortless magic that it is fortunate indeed they've agreed to a ceasefire. He's glad not to be going up against someone who can use magic the way Voldemort can. Bending and breaking the rules as though they aren't there at all. Dumbledore never even taught Harry how to duel.

"Er," he starts again.

"Dinner?" Voldemort asks.

"Yeah, um, give me half an hour." Harry ditches his spade with a toss over the shoulder and heads into the house through a side door to one of the sitting rooms. He's tracking dirt all over the place and winces, offering a mental apology to the house elves.

The shower is delightful, hot water beating down on his back as he lets it pour over his bowed head, both hands braced on the wall. He stands that way for a while, then deigns to actually use cleaning products.

Throwing on clothes with still damp skin, he hops down the stairs and hustles into the dining room, uncertain of how much time has passed. Voldemort doesn't look angry, so it can't have been too long. Harry sits at the other end of the table quietly and they both serve food from the dishes in the center. It feels like the table's a little shorter lengthwise than it was last night, but that's Harry's mind playing tricks on him. It's silent except for their flatware glancing against the dishes, the thump of glasses set back down. He's trying to get Harry to talk again, but it won't work. And it doesn't work, right up until he hits the bread pudding portion of the meal and can't take it anymore. "I'm going out tomorrow."

Voldemort glances at him. "Oh?" No anger. No suspicion. Harry doesn't trust that a lick.

"Yes."

"And when shall you return, oh husband?" Voldemort asks it with a mocking edge – or is teasing? taunting? – but Harry blushes to the roots of his hair anyway.

"By nightfall," he mumbles to his plate. "After dinner." Mrs. Weasley will have kittens if he tries to get out of a traditional Weasley dinner after months away.

"Very well. I will away as well, in that case." He would have stuck around just because Harry was here?

"Right." Harry scrapes his fork against his dinner plate and wonders how bad of an idea it would be to out himself to be as ignorant of the political situation as he actually is. He's done all this on blind faith in the Order. Then again, Voldemort's answer might offer new information the Order might not have. "I, er, actually have a question."

Voldemort raises a brow to prompt him to continue.

"I was wondering what the political situation is out there, y'know. You said the status quo has, er, changed and I've been . . . living pretty remote."

"Yes," Voldemort says. There must be some kind of enchantment on his eyes, to do the strange things they're doing to Harry. "You were quite slippery, weren't you? An elusive catch for my Death Eaters."

"Well, not for lack of effort."

"All the same. Not many could evade detection as you managed, especially not with such a . . . memorable face."

"Is that why you agreed? To, er . . . "

"Yes, Harry. Lord Voldemort knew with some certainty that you may slip away again and again as you seem so wont to do over these past seventeen years. This way, I have you." *And I have you*, Harry thinks but doesn't say. There's something slightly crazed in his eyes,

familiar enough, but not with the violent glint Harry's used to. He couldn't quite say what it is now. It unnerves him. Voldemort was cruel and homicidal before, but at least he was relatively predictable. There are no such guarantees now.

"But what about the war? I was – surprised. By the terms," Harry diverts.

"You had no opportunity to read through the terms of your own Unbreakable Vow? Your own marriage contract?" Voldemort asks as though Harry has quietly lost his mind.

He shrugs. "I took it on faith." When Voldemort seems far from satisfied by that, he admits, "I had limited communication with the Order. Didn't want to slip up and get caught. So when I came to Stonehenge, that was the first time I saw them since my birthday. There wasn't a good way to hash out a whole, a whole contract and vows and negotiate things – plus, they'll have done a better job of it than I possibly could've."

This seems beyond Voldemort's ken, that Harry could put himself so wholly in the hands of others. The ultimate trust fall. It's worked out alright so far, hasn't it?

"Very foolish," is the final judgment.

"Well, it's worked out fine so far, hasn't it?" Harry snarks, defensive.

"Yes, I suppose as well as could be expected." Voldemort tilts his head and all of sudden, Harry finds himself nervous. "I daresay I'm looking forward to seeing where the path will lead." His mouth warps itself into a smile. It's unbelievably unnerving. A mass-murderer smiling is never a good thing, full stop.

"So, er," Harry redirects, desperate to get that look off Voldemort's face. "What happens to the Death Eaters now?"

What? He might as well gather useful information while he's here. It doesn't help a bit; if anything, the eerie smile on Voldemort's face grows even more indulgent. "They've received a full pardon from the Ministry upon agreement of ceasefire."

"For everything?!" Harry exclaims, nearly popping out of his chair.

"Why, yes," Voldemort says, something devious flashing out in his countenance.

"That's *bullshit!*" Harry shouts. "Murderers! Torturers! They're the *worst of the worst!* They don't deserve to be pardoned!"

"Why, Harry, it was in the treaty I signed with the Ministry conditional upon the marriage."

"When the hell did you sign that?!"

"The night before our ceremony, dear husband." Voldemort slants a sly look at him, clearly savoring Harry's distress. "Surely you knew?"

Harry's boiling over in rage. The Order didn't think to warn him at all that the Death Eaters would be pardoned? Or perhaps, perhaps they knew he would hesitate . . . his grudge too big.

But then, he did put it all in their hands to decide and coordinate and fashion peace as best they knew how. If these are the necessities of peace, of no more dying – but god, what a price.

He buries his face in hands and tries to calm back down. He's panting. The idea of those monsters walking around as free men –

It defies everything in him that knows justice. Harry knows he's shaking and needs to calm down, but he can't, he can't. He signed away his life, *sure*, but what about Neville? What about everyone who's lost someone? What about –

A cool hand rests on the bare back of his neck. His lungs suck air in and push it out again far too fast. He lifts his face from his hands to stare at Voldemort where he stands indomitable next to the chair. As Harry meets his eyes, Voldemort squeezes. Something liquid and hot squirms through Harry and it's distracting enough to slow his breath a little. *I fucked up*, he thinks to himself. And then, *No I didn't*. Just because he didn't get everything he planned for, that's sort of what he gets for consenting not to participate in any of the bargaining. Maybe this is the brightest of all paths, the most peaceful, and yet the most perverse.

Perverse sounds about right. Voldemort's hand still weighs heavy on his neck and, in fact, is squeezing again. For a long time. Harry's eyes squeeze shut of their own accord too and he focuses on the sensation of the touch, the buzzing in his veins instead of the buzzing in his ears. It grounds him. His breaths are still too fast but they deepen and deepen until they're something approaching normal. He sits back up from where he'd been curled over and the hand slides away, tragically.

Harry doesn't know what to say. He watches Voldemort with a parted mouth instead, who watches him back. Voldemort takes advantage of his stillness, the man can't help his villainous nature to take and steal and snare. His fingers take hold of Harry's chin, thumb rubbing at the corner of his mouth, too close, not close enough. Harry imagines what would happen if Voldemort took advantage even more, dipped his thumb inside, the whole thing, something for Harry to wrap around, focus on, fingerprint rubbing down on his tongue, feeling the micro sensations of it. His mouth's already open, he could do it –

Then he recalls that Voldemort is a mind reader. He jerks back and out of his chair, eying Voldemort up and down from the other side of it, ready to run out of the room. He'd known he would be living with a demon, but not – not that kind of demon.

Voldemort simply stands there, living sin. Just, Harry had thought. Not that kind of sin.

Harry backs out of the room, shaken. And isn't stopped. He jogs up the stairs shakily and slips into his room, locks the door, and when that doesn't seem to quite do it, casts some locking charms at it.

He spins on the ball of his foot and fairly collapses onto the couch. *My god*, he thinks and doesn't know what to think next. *My god*.

It goes without saying he sets out at dawn. He doesn't want to disturb anyone's sleep but he also can't be here another minute. This house is fucking with his head.

How are you, Harry? They're all going to ask. Freaking the fuck out.

What have you been up to over there? They'll query next. Gardening to pretend I don't exist.

Isn't it a bit creepy at Malfoy Manor? And he'll have to say, Oh no, he bought me my own home.

He hasn't done anything to you, has he? Oh, but he'll have to resist the temptation to tell the truth. Besides spare me a panic attack and try to tenderly wash my face? No. Unless you count making me feel very sexually confused.

It goes without saying, of course, that none of it can be said.

He Apparates from the front step to the Burrow, just a short jog away. It's barely light out, but he's so very ready to see them all. Harry knocks on the front door, but no one answers. Tentatively, he tries the door knob and it turns. He cracks the door open and peeks in. The living room is as messy as ever, books and magic-infused Muggle knickknacks stacked and piled higgledy piggledy everywhere. What's new are the dark sleeping lumps on the floor and couches and armchairs. Harry opens the door wider and it spills out more of the watery blue dawn light. No one wakes.

There's Lupin, neck craned at a truly terrible angle, and Tonks slumped onto his side. Fred and George are curled up on the floor like two halves of a very ginger heart. Don't they have their own rooms? Probably didn't want to miss out on a proper slumber party. Ginny's sleeping with her chin against her chest, arms folded like she tried hard to outlast sleep and failed. Hermione and Ron take up all the space on one of the couches from opposite ends but legs tangled together. Hagrid takes up all the space on the other, snoring something fierce. A grin lights Harry's face up like a Christmas tree, he can't even help it. There's something so very sweet about seeing them all here together like one big family, competing for who can snore the loudest and Hagrid outstripping them all by a mile. He sneaks into the kitchen, pours some water into a teacup, steals a bag of black tea, and casts a heating charm in lieu of using the kettle. It'll take a while to steep, but he has time.

Quietly, he sits at the kitchen table and watches them all in slumber, chin resting on his fist. He can't wipe the smile off his face for the life of him. It takes a long time for the first of them to wake, and then it's like a domino effect. Harry doesn't mind, he just re-steeps his tea leaves a couple times until the deep brown runs a light caramel.

“ ‘arry?” Lupin murmurs at last, squinting in his direction as he stirs, uncharacteristically ineloquent in his early morning daze. Tonks' arm falls across his midsection as if to keep him from moving, then the information registers and she pops her purple head up blearily. “Harry!”

“Morning,” he greets and resists the urge to toast them. Ron groans and Hermione screeches. Harry is struck by how adorable they all are; perhaps distance doesn't make the heart grow fonder, but it does give you perspective. Ginny's wrapping him up in a big hug which Harry stands to reciprocate and Fred is lumbering over to more fall against them than actively participate in the hug. George isn't even awake.

Mrs. Weasley comes thundering down the stairs, a woman on a mission. She sweeps him up and holds him tight; Ginny very sensibly stands aside. “Oh, *you*,” she says, and Harry can hear the tears in her voice. “Worrying me like that. Don’t you go doing it again!” Mrs. Weasley lets go of him enough to wag a finger at him, but for once it seems they both know that needs must.

“Sorry, Mrs. Weasley,” he says, giving her a small apologetic smile. He’s missed her intense maternal energy.

When Hagrid wakes, the noise level of the talking finally rising above the decibels of his snores, it’s a good deal more of that. “Runnin’ off like tha’! My ol’ heart can’t take it, ‘arry, nearly did me in. You got ter be more careful,” he says, out and out blubbering as he pulls Harry from side to side in his embrace. His beard is really scratchy.

“My bad,” Harry says, a bald-faced mischaracterization, but then, he *is* sorry for worrying him. But not sorry enough to change anything. He can’t stop smiling. He’s so happy to *see* them all. The rest of the Weasley horde comes down and it’s rinse-repeat. A wonderful rinse-repeat. It feels like Christmas morning. Except *he’s* the gift. It’s a magical feeling.

Mrs. Weasley bustles into the kitchen to start cooking bacon and that seems to signal everyone into taking seats around the dining table. They don’t even nearly fit and several chairs need to be conjured. Harry transfigures one for Hagrid out of a nearby pillow to sit right next to him. It’s not even lopsided and matches the others around the table closely. Hermione and Ron look at him in surprise. Harry shrugs. “Had a lot of practice out on the road.” She looks at him with a sheen of approval in her eyes. It’s striking how much she takes after McGonagall, truly. He tries to take another sip of his cooled and thinly-flavored tea, but Mrs. Weasley plucks it right out of his hands. “Here’s another cup, dear.” Cream and a pot of sugar cubes float down onto the table. Should Harry be doing this kind of stuff for Voldemort? The kinds of things Mrs. Weasley does? She cultivates such a warm home and Harry wants that, too. But then he can’t really see himself enjoying cooking, associates it with the expectation of subservient behavior at home from his time with the Dursleys. And at the end of the day, that’s kind of what the house elves are for. He’d hate to put them out of a job or worse, land them in a cruel home. Whatever Voldemort was thinking in securing three, Harry will never know. It just seems like excess for the purpose of excess.

“What are you thinking about, Harry?” Lupin asks softly. Everyone around the table leans a little closer and he sees Mrs. Weasley peek over her shoulder.

“Um, just. Y’know.” He waves a hand in a wishy-washy gesture.

“I don’t,” Lupin says gently, challenging as tentatively as he can.

“The, er, living situation,” Harry explains.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Ron grumbles, and squawks when Hermione elbows him sharply. Harry’s been on the receiving end; it’s truly not pleasant on the ribs.

“And how is . . . the living situation?” Lupin asks, echoing his language, apparently point man on coaxing Harry into sharing all about the surely horrid and torrid beginning of his

marriage.

“Fine. Y’know, quiet.”

“Quiet?” Lupin repeats doubtfully. Harry glances around the table and spies similar expressions.

“Well, it’s a bit remote. In Devon,” he offers, a tidbit Troppy had let him in on last night.

“What is?” Tonks asks.

“The manor. Er,” Harry answers, a bit tongue-tied.

“But Malfoy Manor’s in Wiltshire,” Ron interjects, a puzzled knot in his brow.

“He, er, may have bought . . . “

“Bought?”

“Me a house.”

“What?!”

“I know! I was just as confused as you! And he said to call it *Potter Manor!*” Harry exclaims, relieved to have a similarly disbelieving audience. Voldemort just keeps acting like all this is so bloody normal. It’s maddening.

“What in the name of Merlin’s saggy left - !”

“Right?” Harry whips around to emphasize his agreement with Ginny with an aggressive hand gesture.

“But he hasn’t,” Hagrid starts then stops, resting a massive hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Expected anything in return?”

Harry’s face fairly steams at the insinuation. “Uh, no.”

Many faces seem to clear, at that.

“And he hasn’t been hurting you?” Charlie asks cautiously, watching him carefully.

“No, it’s been pretty calm over there. Remember the vows? Like I said, it’s been quiet.”

“What have you been doing with your free time, dear?” Mrs. Weasley asks as she sets a still sizzling plate of eggs and bacon in the center of the table, right in front of Harry. It’s a pointed invitation and Harry complies, reaching for his share. He’s going to have to pace, because she’ll want him to put away at least a couple servings. Plates dance across the kitchen to slide into place in front of each person. It’s a quiet kind of magic, being here. Somewhere he fits, even with his jagged edges and their soft ones.

“Gardening,” he says absently, distracted by toast.

“Gardening?” Ginny queries.

“Yeah. You know, spruce the place up a bit. Not like I’ve got anything better to do.”

“Harry dear, have you thought about returning for your seventh year? Hermione and Ron were able to enroll yesterday and you’d be just in time not to miss – “

He cuts her off while she’s ahead. “Sorry Mrs. Weasley, but it would feel really weird to go back, in light of everything. It just . . . doesn’t make sense for me. As much as I’d like it to.”

Mrs. Weasley’s a persistent one, though. “Are you really sure – “

Hermione surprises them all by stepping in. “Actually, I think what Harry says makes a lot of sense. He wouldn’t have a moment of peace and there are some really heavy memories there for him. It’s just all – a bit fresh,” she concludes.

“Right,” Harry affirms, pretty uncomfortable but grateful for her words. Someone gets it. At least none of them had to say anything about ‘focusing on his marriage’ or whatever. Christ. Besides, it would feel beyond weird to try to pretend like things are back to the way they used to be and that’s what attending Hogwarts for an extra year would be doing. And a Hogwarts without Dumbledore . . . well, it’s difficult to imagine, let alone muster up the motivation to brave. “But I’m glad you guys are going back. It’ll – it’ll be good.” Ron doesn’t look like he buys it but Hermione is nodding.

“But Harry,” Fleur is saying, “what will you do?”

“That’s.” He runs a hand through his hair. “That’s a great question.”

George snaps his fingers. “Obviously, you’ll come and work for us!”

Harry blinks. He hadn’t realized that was an option. “You’d let me?”

“Our first and only investor?” Fred scoffs. “Are you kidding? We’ll be offended if you don’t say yes.”

“Well,” Harry responds. “I don’t know how I could really say no to that.” He feels a little smile pull at one corner of his mouth and doesn’t fight it.

“We’ll put you up front while we tinker in the back, perfecting our grand creations,” George says, painting a broad canvas with spread hands.

“Oh, I’m not sure I – “

“Don’t worry, the front’s easy to run – “

“ – As long as you like screaming children – “

“ – crying babies – “

“ – angry parents – “

“ – and cheapskate customers!”

“Sounds like a dream,” Harry says with equanimity. He won’t turn his nose up at a job, especially not one that lets him spend time with his friends. “I’ll take it.”

Everyone digs into their food a bit more, salt and pepper passed around and some jokes shared.

“You didn’t happen to get my owl, did you?”

“Yes, Harry,” Arthur says. “But it swooped right back out before we could write a reply. Must be trained to deliver but not receive. Some owls are taught to do that, for a wizard’s privacy.”

“Sounds about right,” Harry grouses. Paranoid bastard.

“Handsome bird though,” Bill adds.

“I thought so, too,” Harry says. “They both are.”

“Both?” Ginny asks.

“Yeah, there’s two. I’ll be needing to take Hedwig back with me as well, unless you all need her here.”

“No Harry, no need,” Arthur assures. “We’ll be just fine without, as lovely as she is.”

“It’ll be good to have a little more company there, besides the house elves,” Harry agrees.

“House elves? More than one?”

“Three,” Harry confirms.

“Good *lord!* Do you’ve any idea how much – “

“Yeah, er. I do. Bit much, if you ask me,” Harry answers sheepishly, scrubbing the back of his head. Mrs. Weasley reaches over him and forks more food onto his plate. He knows better than to argue, at this point.

There’s a knock at the door and Arthur stands to let Moody and Kingsley in. “Potter,” Moody greets. “Still alive, I see.”

Harry can’t help it; he laughs. Most of the Order is offended on his behalf, but honestly it just feels good someone said it. Kingsley smiles a bit, too. It feels good to laugh. “Yes, still kicking.” Harry kicks out a leg a bit to demonstrate.

“You did good, son,” Moody says quietly below the noise of a full house, come over to rest a hand on his shoulder. Harry is very, very touched. And not a little bit stunned. “May well have saved all our skins.” He pats once, then moves away.

“As Alastor says,” Kingsley speaks up. “We are not ungrateful towards your personal sacrifice.” He sets The Prophet down in front of Harry beside the plate. Harry doesn’t look at it. “Other people aren’t either.”

Harry flips the newspaper over without looking at the headline. It’s still front page content, but at least it’s upside down now. He’d really kind of hoped the war would just fade out quietly and things would go back to normal and no one would really care about why, but then that was dangerously optimistic thinking.

“It was kind of the thing to do. Anyone would have done it,” Harry answers automatically.

“Oh, I think that’s pretty far from the truth,” Bill weighs in. “In fact, that doesn’t seem accurate at all.”

“Well,” Harry says and then shrugs, waving a hand dismissively. “Oh Mrs. Weasley, I couldn’t possibly – “ he interjects as she tries to shovel even more food onto his plate.

“Nonsense. You need your strength after all that time on the run. Thin as a rail, you are.” That’s not expressly true, Harry’s not as thin as he has been in the past over those rough summers, but he takes her point. He picks up his fork with a quietly beleaguered sigh.

“What’s the plan for today, then?” Hermione asks.

They spend most of their time de-gnoming the garden and messing around with bludgers and drinking lemonade, then butterbeer as the sun dips lower in the sky. It’s a day full of laughter, dirt stains, and roughhousing. Harry rolls around in the grass trying to get his breath back from the exercise and laughing and thinks this bright spot is surely strong enough to never fade. Arthur has the garage open and soft music plays as he tweaks and tinkers and fiddles with his illegal Muggle technology. Hermione takes reading breaks, but not as many as she might have in years previous. Not when they all know how precious time is together in a way they couldn’t have really understood before. The younger Weasleys stay out tussling with gnomes and each other until the lights flick on in the house, a warm glow emitting and dulling the glare of stars just beginning to emerge.

Ginny, Fred, and George head in to hose off before dinner, Brunswick stew by the smell of it. And something garlicky. Harry, Ron, and Hermione lay on their backs and stargaze, heads together and limbs spread out in a sloppy wheel. They have the kind of tranquility that only comes with physical exhaustion, hair wild and faces lax in repose.

“What do you think marriage’ll be like?” Ron asks, bringing the silence to a necessary end.

“I dunno,” Harry says. “It’s incredibly weird so far.”

“Tell us everything, Harry. Please,” Hermione urges quietly. “We need to know you’ll be okay.”

“He just – “ Harry cuts himself off. It takes him a long time to pick up the thread again. They wait for him. “He’s acting so *strange* and *bizarre* and I don’t know how to deal with this, like – “

“Civility?” Hermione offers.

“Yeah,” Harry sighs gustily. “What even is that? Like, why is he being so – “

“Nice?” she suggests again.

“UGH!” Ron and Harry exclaim simultaneously. “As *if*! He’s incapable,” Ron asserts.

“Yeah, what Ron said.”

“Considering his age – “

“I’d really rather not,” Harry mutters. “Me neither,” Ron backs him up fervently.

“*Considering* his age,” Hermione starts again, irritated then softer as she continues, “he’s waited a long time for a soulmate. He probably thought he didn’t have one, which – well, that doesn’t really happen. You could probably imagine that this all has changed everything in terms of politics because it’s changed his own priorities. That’s what we gambled on, that somehow we live in a universe where he might sacrifice some of his options to have a chance at what he has now.”

“His priorities being?”

“Keeping Harry.”

“Yeah, instead of killing me. Great set of options there,” Harry mutters some more. He’s griping but fuck it, he’s allowed to complain.

“Right. He’s been obsessed with you for as long as you’ve been alive – this is just another face of it. So please, please be careful Harry. Voldemort is a master manipulator.”

“Like I don’t know.”

“I know you know, Harry, just please don’t forget.”

“Right.”

It’s quiet for a time.

“Mate,” Ron begins. “Yeah?” Harry says, more receptive to Ron who seems to have struggled wrap his head around the same things Harry has, whereas Hermione has been as quick to adapt as ever. “Do you feel like . . . you’ve lost something?”

“What’dyou mean?”

“I just always imagined my soulmate,” Ron gulps and then carries on, “to be a certain kind of person. Like, who you could trust and who’d be a lot like you and understand you.”

“I . . . “ Harry doesn’t know how honest he wants to be. But the lack of eye contact is helping. “I grieved a lot the last few months. I always thought my soulmate would be some

who'd be good to me – I mean, good for me. And now I know . . . that will never happen.”

“Harry, I don't want to sound crazy, but, you never know. This soulmate business has a way of turning people inside out. I mean, look what it's already done to national politics in a matter of months! Who's to say that, well – “

“Go on,” Harry goads, in awe of Hermione's audacity yet also somehow needing to hear the words. In admiration and disdain of her optimism. He sits up to look at her.

“Well – you never know. That's all,” she finishes, resolve justifiably weakened. She looks chastened and Harry gives her a sad smile.

“I know.”

Mrs. Weasley opens the front door then, orange-yellow light spilling in a long rectangle across the lawn and she calls them back in for dinner.

Harry stays late, basking in the social glow, the warmth of the home, holding his mug close next to the crackling hearth as he sits perched on the lip on the fireplace, the living room totally run out of seating. It's difficult to leave, to put his drink down, collect Hedwig and hug Mrs. Weasley goodbye. Ron starts to stand to hug him, too, but Harry knows that will start another domino effect and everyone looks so comfortable. He pushes Ron back into the chair before he can get up. He wishes he could stay. But this is part of the sacrifice he made and the clock is ticking down on the day and he has promises to keep.

He assures them he'll be back soon and owl to arrange it. Hermione and Ron are days away from shipping off to Hogwarts, already late to the party. In light of circumstances, though, he somehow imagines McGonagall will forgive it. He both dreads and loves the idea of visiting. Perhaps Hogsmeade will be a happy compromise.

“Don't forget about the shop!” George calls on his way to the door. “We expect you – “

“ – bright and early – “

“ – Monday morning – “

“ – don't be late – “

“ – or your ass is grass,” George finishes with Fred's help.

“Right,” Harry says. “See you then.” He'd Floo out, but a couple of people are looking drowsy and he doesn't want the noise to disturb their relaxation. Plus, what if calling out 'Potter Manor' doesn't work. Do they have to legally change the name for the Floo to function that way? A question for another day.

The Weasley parents see him out the door with loving pats on the back. He steps out into the brisk night air and tries not to think of the sweet moments he's leaving behind. Harry passes beyond the wards with his owl on his shoulder and Apparates . . . home.

Crickets chirp in the tall grasses surrounding the manor on all sides. The windows are lit and the house seems to emit an internal warmth Harry doesn't trust, like it's trying to emulate the Burrow and he refuses to trust it. Hesitatingly, he walks through the front door, resisting the urge to knock first. Hedwig stays with him; they've never been apart for nearly so long. It's quiet inside, lighting dimmed in deference to the rather late hour.

It's faint, but Harry thinks he hears the crackle of a fire down the corridor past the staircase. He fights with himself.

He doesn't want to face Voldemort, but he wants to hide even less. That would be letting him win. And Harry resolutely refuses to lose. He's pretty sure they both think the marriage was each their victory and the other man's loss. Harry's mission in life is now to prove himself right on that count.

Slowly, he walks down the hall to one of the sitting rooms, this one more on the plush leather and deep pile carpet side than the clean cream of most of the manor. And there his nemesis is, reading a massive tome with his fearsome snake familiar curled around him. He looks at Harry with his devil's eyes and Harry doesn't even know if he's even meaning to do it, but just the look in them is doing something to his head.

Nagini hisses at Voldemort, presumably for pausing in stroking her scales. He resumes and watches Harry without comment. Harry feels like an idiot for standing on the threshold as if a deer in the headlights when it was his idea to come in, in the first place. Striding in, he sits in the armchair across from the Dark Lord. Still Voldemort says nothing. Harry gazes into the fire trying to wait him out. Hedwig perches on the arm of the chair and hoots quietly. He lasts for longer than last time, watching the flames dance and flare and flicker. "I went to the Weasley's," he blurts absently after a time before he even realizes he's talking. It takes a lot in him not to clap a hand over his mouth.

Voldemort glances up, a vague air of approval about him once again, something dipping around the middle of his lips. It's not a smile. Harry doesn't understand this, but he doesn't trust the patterns he's noticing. Makes him wonder which ones he's missing, too. Scary thought.

"Something outdoors?" Voldemort asks knowingly, as alarmingly mild as he has been for days now.

"How did you –"

He gestures to his face. Goddamit, not again.

"Ugh," Harry grunts, pulling out his wand to conjure a wet washcloth before Voldemort can do it for him. It's not pleasantly warm the way his had been, nor as soft on the skin, but it'll do. He scrubs roughly at his face. It hadn't even occurred to him how bad of shape his clothes are in, too. They'd all had so much fun, there had been no room for self-consciousness or worrying how anyone looked.

"I myself conferred with my Death Eaters. There is much adaptation to be accomplished in the coming months."

“Oh?” Harry perks up at the information freely given.

“Peacetime presents its own challenges,” Voldemort advises.

“They’re not the world’s most peaceable bunch, are they?”

Voldemort considers him then as if he’s a horse that’s learned to talk. Perhaps he’s said something dumb enough to surprise even someone with the lowest opinion of him. “Quite.”

“I can’t exactly see the Lestranges adapting to the way normal people live. With jobs and neighbors and playing nice and all that. They’re kind of . . . like, wild? Thrill-seekers,” Harry tries out.

“Quite a commentary from a known thrill-seeker,” Voldemort murmurs.

“I’m not – that’s – “ Harry argues falteringly. What if he is?

“I recall some manner of business with a Hungarian Horntail.”

“I like Hippogriffs better,” Harry counters, but then that’s really proving the point. Subtle as it is, Voldemort’s expression says as much, something like humor glinting there.

In that vein, Quidditch might be another count against him. Also, the Horntail was Voldemort’s fault. Harry nearly says it too, but then, he doesn’t really want a fight. He wants to shower and go to bed. Something still keeps in his chair, something he doesn’t understand and maybe doesn’t want to, maybe never will.

The conversation lapses, then Voldemort queries, “And what will you do with your time tomorrow, husband?”

Harry doesn’t appreciate being mocked, so he’s frigid and sharp when he says, “Gardening, *husband*.”

But Voldemort isn’t offended, at least he doesn’t look it. No, he looks pleased again. Harry gets the feeling he’s fallen into yet another trap – another little silk strand deeper into the lattice of the spider’s web. A happy dark lord is bad news; his pleasure is malignant.

“And all the days to follow?”

Harry blinks, surprised by the question, enough that he actually answers substantively. “I’ll work at the Weasley’s joke shop.”

Any and all pleasure evaporates. “Surely, you must be joking.” Voldemort almost says it like a warning. That actually pleases Harry – this, this he knows how to do.

“Not a bit,” he says cheerfully. “I’ll be there Monday bright and early. Got to earn my keep, haven’t I?”

“Not in the least. A Dark Lord’s spouse is above such frivolous, ridiculous, unbecoming – “

“Are you saying I can’t, then?” Harry asks, very near grinning.

Voldemort’s mouth draws tight, a taut flat line. They both know that’s skirting dangerously close to refusing Harry access to friends, family, and desired company. To detaining him. Hedwig reshuffles her feathers a little, watching. Harry’s watching, too.

At last, it’s Voldemort who can’t speak his mind and it feels so good on this side of the turned table. A rush of mean satisfaction, which Harry has experienced so rarely in his life.

“Do as you wish,” Voldemort says, shuttered, walled up, and closed for business. He shuts his massive book and stands. The time it takes Nagini to wind down from his shoulders onto the floor, too heavy to be supported by a single man, is not time enough for Harry to process his sudden feeling of dislike for this.

With no further statement, his enemy takes his leave of him. Harry just wishes he understood why the room feels empty.

He wakes up sweating and shouting in the middle of the night, sheets clenched his shaking fists. The Veil again. Harry would give a lot for his nightmares to be a little more original, and at the same time regrets that his life has given them so much material to work with. No one comes to check on him and it takes hours to drift back off again. The room feels empty again.

Showering off the stale sweat in the morning, Harry takes breakfast alone in the dining room. Voldemort isn’t anywhere. Harry hides from that by spending all day outside, planting the seeds he ordered by owl. It’s easy to get confused about which are which and what’s supposed to go where, takes him way longer than it should to organize what will someday be a beautiful flower bed and some assorted vegetables. The rest will need to be procured further along in their developments. Harry does *not* trust himself with the care of magical plants, but a decent herbologist will sell more mundane plants as well. A task for after work at Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes, then. Might have to buy them over the course of the week, in order to carry it all. No way is he paying for delivery.

It’s only elbow-deep in dirt that he realizes he forgot to ask the Order about the Death Eater pardonings. Well, it happens. He’ll be sure not to next time.

But gardening can’t take up the whole day, there’s only so much time planting seeds and watering and casting nourishing spells can take up, Harry swiping a book on basic herbology from the study. He’d gone in to look for that type of book and for no other reason. None at all.

Good thing he’d found it quickly; the uses of the point-me spell are endless.

It’s an honest struggle to give up the last of the food in the trunk for the house elves to salvage it - the final concession to relinquishing total freedom. It solidifies his commitment to not running, to staying. To leash himself, or else. And then that’s done and he has more time on his hands. Harry wanders the fields of waving blonde grasses that encircle the manor, listening for little insects and birds. That gets boring, too. He decides to hose off and lumbers back into the house. Perhaps the hot spring in the basement will be nice. Yes, that will

certainly be a level up from the perfunctory shower he'd been imagining. Might take up more of the day, too. A sound idea.

Cooking and clanging sounds can be heard through the kitchen doors, the soft smells of food in the making, house elves in the thick of their work. Down the corridor, Harry slips into the dim, cave like room, bubbling spring waters lit from within casting mesmerizing patterns on the ceiling in an otherwise dark room. Hesitantly, Harry slips out of his trousers and outer layers, down to his pants. He doesn't like the idea of wandering around in part of an unfamiliar house nude.

There's a rough rocky rim around the hot spring and Harry steps over the lip of it into the water, submerging himself fully without dipping a toe in first in true Gryffindor fashion. He can't help the noise that winds its way out of him. *God*, that's good. The water's just the right side of too hot, the kind of too hot that will feel perfect in the next minute. Standing in the middle of the spring, it comes up to chest level. Harry crouches a bit just to let water wash over every part of him, steam clouding his glasses as it wafts heavily off the surface, hair curling at the ends. He lets his arms hang weightlessly until they float up the surface, moved gently around by the currents.

As his eyes adjust to the dimness of the room, he sees the sides of the spring are carved into a bench. He sits and sighs. He feels good. The subtle push and pulse of the water around him is soothing, the hot embrace of it calming muscle tension he didn't know he had. All that time sleeping on the ground has probably done a number on his back. With a little moment of inspiration, Harry stands from the carved bench and lifts off from the floor of the spring to float in the middle on his back.

He sighs again, deeper this time. Satisfaction has been rare in his life and there's something very indulgent about this that adds a layer of delight. It's so unnecessary! He could have accomplished the same task in a two-minute shower. But it wouldn't have been blissful like this. Closing his eyes, he lets himself breathe. Harry floats spread-eagle for a long time, until he's nearly lulled to sleep by the shifting waters, until he can feel a dream tangling at the edge of his senses, until the door opens and runny sunlight spills in.

Nearly making a squeaking sound, Harry folds his body inwards and darts to the side of the hot spring, as much to hide his soulmark as it is to hide the rest of him. Voldemort towers in the doorway, with the silhouette of a hooded executioner. He closes the door behind him and makes no comment to Harry, simply glances at him a moment as he makes for the sauna, fingers plucking at the buttons on his robe. Harry swiftly puts his back to him, face on fire. Couldn't have imagined doing that a few months ago. Couldn't have imagined any of this. Rustling sounds of clothing shifting on other clothing turns the tips of his ears a burning red and he grips the rocky ledge of the spring in nerves. A few quiet footsteps pad across the stone floor, then the rustle of a towel unfolding. A pause, then feet retracing steps to a door that swings open then shut. There's a gust of hot, steamy air, then silence. Harry braves a peek behind him.

Alone in the spring still, thank god, but Voldemort's in the sauna, as best as Harry can make out through the fogged little window on the door. A pale shape in a dark wooden room. His

robes hang on a hook by the door. Harry gulps. There's a little stand in the corner with folded towels, though, and one seems to be missing. That's . . . comforting.

Slowly, Harry's shoulders ease back down into the water as he turns to sit properly on the bench. When no further movement seems apparent, Harry tilts his head back against the ledge and watches the ripples of light and water and heat dance on the ceiling. Blue and merry and totally unbothered by human concerns. He wants to be like that, alive and flowing and untouched by all the strife of living. Totally distant, fully removed. Free. He won't get close to sleep again, not like this, and considering the risk of drowning that's perhaps for the best, but he's helpless to deny it's still relaxing. His body has fully acclimated to the heat, fingers and toes pruning, and he doesn't care a wit.

He stays there a long time admiring the play of the light on the ceiling, letting himself prune further until he's practically a raisin, and even still lingers longer. It's strange – they're separate but still spending time together, sort of. The nature of truce.

Voldemort's been in there a long time and Harry knows it's scorching inside. He peeks as surreptitiously as he can when he climbs out of the hot spring. There's still that pale shape propped upright inside he can discern through the fogged window, and that satisfies Harry's curiosity that probably no one's passed out in there. He snags a towel and dries himself as best he can. Wrapping the soft towel around his hips, he gathers his haphazardly discarded attire and sneaks out of the door with damp footprints left behind.

He still showers so he can use soap and pretends to occupy himself with perusing the bookshelves in the study until it's roughly dinnertime. Following the blissful smells into the dining room, he sits and waits. Harry isn't left waiting for so very long. Voldemort drifts into the room on feet as bare as ever. There's a strangely calm energy radiating from him, even more bizarrely even-keeled than is typical of the past few days. He takes his seat at the head of the table and begins to serve himself some of the offerings. Harry follows suit silently.

It's with no small amount of pride he's able to make it nearly all the way through dessert without caving to the silence. "I don't know how you lasted so long in that sauna."

Voldemort sets down his fork with a quiet clink on the dish. "I have long enjoyed hot climates. That has only heightened in this form." He tilts his head. "You similarly seemed to enjoy the hot spring."

Harry flushes for reasons he, in all honesty, doesn't fully understand. "Yeah, I, er, it's like a bath that never cools. Pretty great, actually."

"Yes, this manor was well designed to enjoy all the elements."

"How do you mean?"

"I'm given to understand the quantity of windows makes it pleasant in the snow and rain."

"I guess it would be nice to see all the weather without having to be out in it. Storms especially." Harry pauses. "There really are a lot of windows, aren't there? D'you've any idea why they designed it that way?"

“It's a great part of why I chose it. We haven't all had the opportunity to enjoy living quarters that make one feel unencumbered or unenclosed.”

Harry scratches his head at that one, trying to puzzle out what the hell Voldemort's talking about. “Meaning . . . ?”

Voldemort watches him with cursed eyes. “A life spent in surroundings that make us feel trapped is not a life that can be considered well-spent,” he says, speaking more slowly.

“Trapped . . . ?” Harry asks again, before something truly horrible occurs to him. It's just a thought, but even the suspicion is enough to make him feel vaguely nauseous. “What would make you think . . . ?” He doesn't finish, waiting to see how Voldemort will finish the sentence for him, tell him more information without Harry having to offer any. It doesn't work; Voldemort just stares at him with these knowing fucking eyes and makes Harry want to claw them out of his face with blunt nails. “You – you –”

Oh god, the cupboard. He knows about the cupboard under the stairs. Harry feels like the room is shrinking around him, a tightness in his chest making him feel like that's shrinking, too. It's hard work to keep breathing as normally as possible and failing anyway.

“You saw – “ All the money in the world couldn't make him finish that sentence. Voldemort says nothing, but seems about to rise and do that neck-grippy thing again, which Harry won't tolerate even if it seems a desirable alternative to this terrible end-of-the-world feeling. He doesn't even understand what it is Voldemort's been doing; all he knows is that he feels turned inside out a little more every time they're in the same room. “Don't, stay the hell over there! You'll tell me right now what you know, damn you – “ Harry gasps out the words, fighting to get enough air to fuel them. There isn't enough left over for an insult.

“I've seen the house you were raised in, Harry. Enough could be inferred,” Voldemort murmurs, and damn him he's calm when Harry's inches away from losing it. But those long hands are wrapped around the armrests, tight. There's an unhappy look on his face. All this lack of air is clearly making Harry hallucinate because the Dark Lord doesn't in fact appear to be gloating about Harry's miserable childhood circumstances. The dusty little cupboard with a cot in the corner. A piece of paper taped to the inside of the door, ‘Harry's Room’ written wobbly blue crayon, the m trailing off to the side of the page. The variety of locks on the outside of the upstairs bedroom, locking in instead of out. A cat flap in absence of any evidence of a pet in the home. Decorated with broken furniture and bars on the window. It all probably paints such a vibrant picture, vivid and cruel in its detail. Harry truly can't get enough air the more thinks about it. Shit, shit –

Voldemort draws his wand and Harry thinks, ‘Damn, what a pathetic way to go,’ before the lavender light hits him and his airway eases and seems to almost physically expand. The sudden influx of oxygen goes straight to his head. It has him slumping back in his chair, boneless and heaving breath after breath as his eyes close, overwhelmed by the relief. He slows his breathing as fast as he can, which isn't really a slow process at all. Harry knows he's being watched, observed, and doesn't have room to worry about it. He's finally getting his bearings back, feeling blood come back into his extremities and the clamminess on his skin.

“You don’t know anything,” Harry says, knowing it’s a bald-faced lie. Voldemort knows better than most, Harry himself knows enough to know that. But Voldemort doesn’t contradict him, no, instead he sits there like he wants to be here, like he cares at all. If anything was to be proof of the kind of manipulation Harry’s been suspecting, it’s that. Voldemort himself doesn’t know what Harry knows about him and in that way they are strangely on equal footing for once in this life.

Harry has the strangest urge to hug someone, something, anything. Be hugged, maybe. Voldemort says it’s undesirable to feel enclosed, but right now it’s all Harry wants and he knows he won’t get it. Maybe there’s a closet somewhere around here that Harry’s eyes skipped over. It would certainly make him feel less exposed in the short run. In the long run? Well, he can only imagine Voldemort would somehow know he resorted to that for comfort and that would be more exposing than anything else. He’d never had to do it at Hogwarts but then, if anything would stoke the need for comfort to that level, it would be difficult to outdo the present circumstances.

So, no. Harry just sits there desperately trying to stay calm mentally even as his body is physically soothed and unresisting to it.

“Alright,” he says, and doesn’t even really understand what he means in saying it. But Voldemort seems to take some kind of meaning out of it, keyed to some wavelength conscious Harry isn’t privy to, rising and crossing the length of the table to stand in front of him. Harry doesn’t really know what to do with that.

And Harry? Harry sits and waits, in the dark about what happens next. Voldemort lifts a hand to hold it open-palmed near Harry’s cheek. Eyes nearly bugging out their skull, Harry regards the wizard with utter flabbergast. He’s shocked enough, wanting enough, just this side of curious enough, to actually test out completing the gesture – leaning just that bit closer to touch skin to skin. Literally putting himself in Voldemort’s hands. His eyes flutter shut a moment at the brush of cheek to palm, then snap open again, some wild mixture of wanting to stay alert and not wanting to miss anything. It feels like an acute knowledge of history being written in the very moment; he can practically hear a quill scratching in the background.

Voldemort melts Harry right out of his mind with a sweep of his thumb over cheekbone. That’s all it takes. Hearing himself give a sharp little exhale, Harry looks up to watch Voldemort watch him, wondering what he sees when he looks up at him. There’s no pity in his face, but then, there wouldn’t be. For a variety of reasons. But the important thing is that it’s absent. Harry’s eyes feel strangely wet and achy.

He’s not crying. He’s not. But he might.

It occurs to him suddenly that he’s been spending a lot of his most recent days feeling things he doesn’t understand. It’s enough to make a fellow go mad, or at least feel it. Bowled over by emotions he isn’t even fully cognizant of, knowing things he doesn’t even know he knows. But Voldemort always seems to know. And that will be infuriating later; right now it just feels strangely reassuring – at least someone understands what’s happening. Harry’s too afraid to ask.

Taking a step closer, then another, Voldemort slots between Harry's legs spread in the seat the way is typical of males his age. He's always trying to correct the habit since Hermione complained of how much room male housemates take up on the bench and is distantly bemoaning his lack of progress now. Voldemort guides his face forward and Harry leans to accommodate it, shocked at his own compliance. It's only as his head is tilted to the side and the left side of his face comes into contact with Voldemort's middle that Harry begins to metabolize what's happening. Even then, it takes a hand in the back of his hair combing through and tugging a little, that thumb rubbing a little more over his cheek to realize this is comfort. Or, an attempt at it.

His enemy, *his husband*, is holding him close, not embraced but tucked close all the same. Unasked for, but prompted by Harry being upset. It occurs to him that they are living in a very strange reality indeed. The strangest, because Harry doesn't even want to push him away. He's supposed to do it, he knows he's supposed to at least *want* to, but fuck if he doesn't not.

He wonders how Voldemort even knows how to do this, to attempt to offer comfort. Perhaps he read an instruction manual. 'Care and Maintenance of Your Nemesis Turned Husband,' or perhaps 'Intimacy 101.' He huffs a laugh that even to his own ears sounds a little hysterical but finds himself pushing his face into Voldemort's midsection, smooshing it, needing this. His arms seem to wrap themselves around his waist of their own accord, pulling him closer. Harry exhales deeply.

It fucks with his head, that Voldemort smells good. Dark Lords have no business smelling good, none at all.

That vague dying autumn leaf smell is so familiar, but he can't quite place it. Something woodsmoke-like, very faint and on the edge of the senses, in a way that makes him press closer to try and figure it out. *Don't think about what you're doing, Harry. Just don't.*

The thing is, it was one thing to sacrifice himself to a life of misery, mutual hatred, and loneliness. It's quite another to actually enjoy it. Even as he's thinking it, his arms stay wound around his legal spouse and barely resist the urge to squeeze. He hasn't even lasted four days without more touch. There's a difference between it being offered and him asking for it, but still. He could have said no. He could have slapped Voldemort's hand away. He could very well have set the dining room on fire. And indeed, that would have seemed a more likely reaction not so very long ago.

It occurs to him this is the first physical touch they've had since the wedding ceremony and given how good it is, it's surprising either of them has lasted this long. Voldemort never seems affected by anything unless it elicits a rage or violent response. Harry'd been so caught up in mastering his own reaction then and now, he's never paid attention to how the other wizard's been impacted. He peeks upwards.

Voldemort has his head turned downwards and looks at Harry with an unreadable expression. His eyes glint in the candlelight and lamplight in a way thought ought to send a bad shiver down Harry's spine. That's not quite the reaction he's having. There's no malice there, no ill-intent evident. Harry's not stupid enough to fully assume that means it isn't there, but for now – just for now – what could it hurt to indulge?

A lot. It could hurt a *lot*.

Harry had imagined being trapped together until he died and left behind a partially-tamed Dark Lord, desire for world dominance cooled with time. That was the best case scenario. Voldemort, driven by that desire everyone has to be with their soulmate, by curiosity for how on earth the two of them could possibly fit together. And for him to, at length, be resigned to their mutual enmity when Harry refuses to bow and scrape to him. If the marriage failed, at least he bought Ron and Hermione time to continue the hunt for horcruxes with zero of Harry's involvement to honor the terms of the Vow. They're the brains of the operation, anyway.

Peace, at least for a time. That was his most realistic expectation, beyond the prevailing belief Voldemort wouldn't go for it at all. That perhaps he would redouble his efforts to murder Harry as some kind of proof of leaving all vestiges of humanity behind. A dark deity without peer among man. Or something like that.

This touch, this attempt at comfort, is the first thing to spark, however unwanted, the idea that perhaps things could be different.

Voldemort is fucking with his head, yes. Harry doesn't know how or why exactly, but he doesn't doubt it for a moment. Something like hope blooms tiny and fragile in his heart nevertheless and as deeply resentful as he is, he's helpless to deny it. Only time, he thinks, will tell what tempests and storms will water it or uproot it entirely.

Darling, I don't

Chapter Summary

The world knows what Harry Potter sacrificed to establish peace. But some days, it just doesn't feel like a sacrifice.

In which Harry is happy and everyone is deeply concerned.

It's required that Harry pulls back eventually, and when the hesitation to do it can no longer be excused, he does. His arms retract as he leans back in the chair. And has no clue what to say. He gives the carpet his full attention. Voldemort tilts his head back up with a palm on his jaw. "Perhaps you'd like to retire to bed? I'm given to understand the shops open rather early." *Yeah, you'd know that, wouldn't you?* Harry thinks and instead what comes out of his mouth is: "Yeah. But, alone. Obviously. Er." He talks himself into a corner and is rescued only by the fact of Voldemort's non-reactivity.

"Quite," he rejoins and steals one last stroke to Harry's cheek before withdrawing. It has Harry's entire face a steaming beet red in a flash, nonsensically embarrassed now that it's over rather than when all the touching was ongoing. Dangerous things happen in this dining room, in this chair. He needs to be careful. Harry clears his throat as Voldemort steps away, cooler air seeming to rush in to fill the vacancy. He knows it's time to sit up, stand, and take the stairs to his own privacy, but he sits there and watches Voldemort instead, almost helpless to it. He wants more, they both do, and they both know it. Harry's not too sure what's to be done about that, seeing as every fiber of pride in him rails against the idea.

Voldemort doesn't hurry him and Harry doesn't understand why he's telling Harry it's time to go when clearly neither of them want to. It occurs to him that he well and truly no longer gets this man. Dumbledore was the only one who could have claimed to really know him and now that he's dead and gone, the mantle fell to Harry to best know and understand Voldemort, in order to bring him down. And if not even Harry can claim to understand him now, there may truly be little hope for them all.

Even as he's thinking it, Harry hopes for Voldemort to turn selfish again, to be villainous, to take more. Initiate.

But deep down, he knows to just be grateful Voldemort isn't trying to make him talk about life with the Dursleys. When Harry thinks about it, he wasn't even trying to get him to talk about it before, exactly. He was just letting Harry know he knew. Harry wonders if he brought it up on purpose, some twisted power play. But then, Harry was the one to ask about the windows. It's impossible to trace the machinations of a mind like his soulmate's and Harry despairs of ever going back to the fighting of before – he feels as though Voldemort's gained all this insight into him and Harry's gained none in return. The man's a closed book.

Harry stands. “Well, in that case,” he says and takes a few steps backwards towards the doorway. It’s an inverse of their interaction just a few short days ago, Harry embarrassed at hoping Voldemort will follow him step for step and yes, there’s his wish granted. Voldemort tilts his head at him.

“I have work to do yet and will retire to the study.” Harry is moments away from offering to stay with him, from suggesting the sunroom instead so they can bathe in the starlight – but it’s bad lighting for reading and he really does need to get to bed early tonight. And those are just the most superficial reasons for why it’s a terrible idea.

“Alright, um, er,” Harry babbles as he walks backwards towards the stairs.

“Goodnight, Harry,” Voldemort says, but his name out there in the air tastes like it wants to be something else, like Voldemort’s waiting to call him something else. Harry feels like he’s waiting to be ready for it. He’s probably imagining all that stuff, too. Four days and it’s all completely unraveled. Or rebuilt? Either way, it’s all changed fast enough to have Harry’s head spinning.

“Right. Good-goodnight,” he stutters then scrambles up the stairs.

His heart races as he lies in bed waiting for sleep, staring at the ceiling. He doesn’t touch himself, doesn’t imagine anything, only allows himself to imagine imagining. What it could be like, what it would feel like . . . Touching himself places he’s never been touched before, not waiting, just doing it himself. That hand on the back of his neck again, squeezing, hot, and hot squeezing things elsewhere as well. He sleeps, but a number of hours are gobbled up with his brain stuck there.

He’s still missing the dreams like a lopped off limb but perhaps all the socialization of the past several days has soothed that particular burn. Before, the dreams and the galleon were his closest sources of human interaction. Maybe having more of it has made him depend on the dreams less. And as of late, his anxiety has been higher and sharper but so has the quality and quantity of comfort.

Breakfast is perfunctory, as is his morning shower. He dresses down in his typical jumper and jeans and knows the twins won’t care a lick, probably wearing the same. In fact, if they all wore their letter sweaters from Mrs. Weasley, they’d be in alphabetical order – F, G, H. The thought entertains him as he tiptoes out of the house and eases the front door closed, hoping not to disturb Voldemort’s rest. It’s a little after dawn that he apparates to Diagon Alley, across the street from the cheerful shop. The lights are on, other businesses that line the alley just beginning to open in the early morning hush, but the front door’s locked when he jiggles it and he circles around to the side where the backs of other stores all face each other. Harry knocks on the side entrance.

George pops his head out the door and honestly looks happy to see him. Harry won’t tire of that for a long, long time. “Harry! Top of the morning, do come in young man.” It’s just moments into the day and Harry’s already nearly laughing where before he went whole days without. Not just this summer, but the whole year before it, too. And a good deal of the year before that. His spur of the moment, hot-headed decision has solved so many problems,

spared so many lives potentially, and he ought to be just miserable because of the sacrifice but he's not. He's just not.

Not yet, anyway. There's time still.

Fred waves him over to a workbench where he's using a monocle to tinker with some pink and yellow powder and a toy train. Lord only knows what uses such a combination might have. Harry feels bad for the parents and teachers of Wizarding Britain already. Not enough to not participate in selling the products though. The store's chock full of delights and light-hearted menaces.

The lean and hunch of Fred's shoulders as he works reminds Harry nothing so much as Arthur when he fiddles with his modified Muggle contraptions. That keeps a small smile on Harry's face even as Fred says, "Morning, morning," then gets straight to business. It never ceases to amaze Harry how the business manages to tap into this serious side of the twins he hasn't witnessed in any other context. "We'll keep you organizing the stock for today, but tomorrow you're manning the front, don't think you're getting out of it." He wags his finger at Harry, monocle still perched over his eye, magnifying the right comically larger than the left.

"Wouldn't dream of it." Harry holds his hands up in surrender.

"The cash register takes some getting used to, anyway, so we'll help out for the first few weeks," George adds. And what an understatement that turns out to be. The fussy old thing has sticky keys, makes grumbling noises every time Harry hits the calculate button, and a nasty habit of trying to pinch his fingers between the keys when he has to redo an order. It seems to have its own personality, and not a nice one at that. By the time the bell above the door is ringing when Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes gets its first customer of the day, the cash register is steaming faintly, presumably in irritation with him.

The customer stops short at the sight of Harry, blinking wide eyes rapidly, pointing nonsensically and asking of George, "Is that - ?" Harry ducks quickly into the back and doesn't hear the rest.

Harry finds Fred still hard at work in the workroom, stooped over the messy table in the thick of what looks to be a delicate operation involving tweezers, a bit of cloth, the powder, and the miniature train. "Hey, I'm ready to learn about organizing everything when you are. Take your time . . . er, tinkering, I'll just be over there." Harry points a thumb over to a stool in the corner and Fred grunts in acknowledgement, atypically quiet in his concentration.

In the couple minutes it takes Fred to wrap up, Harry observes the rest of the work room. So many little inventions in the making, clusters of mysterious and unlikely items clustered together for each half-finished project. Balloons, toys, liquids, pastes, candies, even a small cauldron simmering at the other side of the room, to name a bit of what Harry spies. Harry can only guess at what the vision might be for some of the projects and perhaps the twins might be in a similar boat, following inventor's intuition rather than any dedicated muse. He rather likes that idea, that they're simply guided by instinct and free to make whatever their hands so desire rather than their heads. Harry wants to be like that, too. Perhaps this job will

teach him something valuable beyond spending time with his friends and keeping busy. It's not far-fetched, not at all.

At last, Fred's work concludes, satisfied by some unknown marker of progress. He lets out a pleased sigh. "Well alright then, let's talk inventory! Come, come."

Harry follows him into the storage room and is immediately arrested by the sight of absolute mayhem. Boxes exploding with colorful toys, food, and gadgets, spilling off the shelves and onto other piles of product towering high on the floor, nearly up to the hip. "Sweet Merlin – "

"I know, I know," Fred waves him off. "But we've had such demand for some of our products, we've only had time to catch up on producing them, not enough to actually organize it all. Dull work, that."

"Not to me," Harry says. "I'd be happy to."

"And a good thing, too, because that's your job for today. We need to whip this room into shipshape." Fred claps at the end to emphasize his point.

"Can do," Harry replies, rolling up his sleeves.

"Well, chop chop, he says! I like that, I like that quite a bit! Give us a shout if you need any help with anything, otherwise organize things however you like. Just about anything would be an improvement on this disaster. And I do mean give us a shout – the walls are quite thick," Fred adds helpfully and then is gone, disappeared into the workroom again to resume his work/art.

The storage room is narrow and cramped, but Harry's used to that. It's the manic spill and explosion of stuff everywhere in that characteristic Weasley fashion times ten. Their instinct to fill space is truly a thing of wonder. Harry doubts they even realize they're doing it. Perhaps they inherited the Burrow and kept having children to fill the rooms out of that same habit. It's certainly one explanation. But Harry would never complain of having too many Weasleys in his life. They bring him too much joy.

First things first, Harry sifts through enough things to get a sense of what's there. The disaster zone seems to consist mainly of traditional-looking toys that Harry knows have more nefarious features lying under the surface, candies and desserts of dubious nature, and items that are transparently tricks and traps.

He starts with the toys, wading through as many as he can find on the floor to line the nearest shelf case with them without organizing them by design just yet. Harry repeats the process with the food items and the tricks and traps until the floor is a good deal cleaner. A few boxes supported by the piles of junk – product, excuse him – tip over as he threatens the structural integrity of the mess, some accumulations of product appearing to be load-bearing. Proof of the thickness of the walls, no one comes to check even with the resultant crashing noises. When he feels he's made a sizable dent on the worst of it, Harry casts a tempus and realizes it's nearly lunch. He dips out of the storage room to check on the front.

There's a good deal more foot traffic than before, children zooming around the store and beleaguered adults content to let them run wild. He peeks around the curtain just long enough to catch George's attention and waves him back.

"You want lunch? I could go grab something from a place nearby – "

George chuckles, shaking his head fondly at Harry. "Silly goose, mum already made us sandwiches."

"Oh," Harry draws up short. "I'll just pop out briefly then, shouldn't take long at all."

Taking Harry by the shoulder and rattling him a little, George says, "Harry, Harry, Harry, of course she packed one for you. In fact, she might have packed you three. And some leftover pie. Perhaps some snacks as well, come to think of it."

Unbidden, Harry nearly finds his eyes welling. He has to blink it away rapidly, doesn't want to seem mentally unbalanced or anything. Heaven knows him acting erratically would get back to the whole of the Order and bring more worry circling around. It's just so good to be thought of, to be cared for, taken care of. Included, wholeheartedly, without reservation. Oh what a sandwich can do. Or three.

"Right, er, I'll check in the back. Thanks, Forge." Harry offers him a shy smile and heads back.

Fred is operating on a different invention and points Harry to the packed lunches off to the side of one of the work tables. He digs in and sits across from Fred watching him alternate between doing his delicate work and stirring the cauldron, careful not to get crumbs anywhere. There are, indeed, pie and snacks. Harry has to resist making a noise at the first bite of chocolatey pie, doesn't want to disturb Fred's process. He wonders if George is so focused as Fred is when he's in creation mode. Tomorrow will answer that question. Cleaning up after himself, Harry asks Fred if he might like to take a break for lunch. Fred grunts again, clearly not absorbing the information, too in the zone. Harry unwraps a sandwich for him and places it by his elbow. Without deviating gaze from the project, Fred blindly grabs the sandwich, takes a single bite, then sets it down and chews perfunctorily as his hands continue to work.

Harry shakes his head and reapplies himself to the task of exorcizing the storage room. Coming back in to the big mess is humbling – it looked like so much more progress had been made before when he'd been looking at it with different eyes. Well, only one way to fix that.

He sorts and divides and conquers for hours until his lower back complains at him and he stops briefly to grab some water. By the time George fetches him to head out for the day, the man pauses in his step as he takes in the change to the space.

The shelves that line three walls of the room are full of product, not yet organized by size, color, or type, but in the correct general category. That will be a tomorrow job. The boxes have been removed, only causing clutter in the tight space. There's hardly anything left on the floor, Harry picking up some of the final items at the back of the narrow little room. "My word, Harry," George says as he fans himself and pretends to swoon against the door jamb.

“We should have hired such a strapping young lad to do the heavy lifting a year ago if this is the result! Well done.”

Harry grins, pleased. “It was actually pretty nice, just getting everything in the right place, figuring out what goes with what. And thanks for letting me stick to the back today, I know the work room is where you really want to be.”

“Well, I won’t abandon you to the bloodthirsty masses just yet. You’ll have a few weeks to adjust and I can explain what everything does and how to pitch it to customers.”

“Sounds fine by me,” Harry replies, feeling nervous about interacting with people in a space where it’s expected and required that he not leave and also that he makes nice with them. What if they ask *personal questions*? What if reporters show up? Who’s stopping them? He hadn’t thought of that before.

Yet again, a tomorrow problem.

Harry bids adieu to George and Fred, who’s still engrossed in his creative process. Leaving out of the side door, he can’t resist the urge to disillusion himself and put on a notice-me-not charm. It’s much easier to slip down Diagon Alley to the herbologist’s. Harry sneaks through the mostly empty business and into the small nursery it boasts outback. Removing his charms is the work of a moment or two, then it’s on him to prioritize what plants he most wants to put in his garden first. He has a wooden crate three quarters of the way full with goods by the time the shopkeeper pops out back and takes notice of him. “What can I help you with, lad – oh!” the man says, frozen at the sight of him.

“Hi,” Harry greets and tries to look harmless. “I was just starting a new garden, needed to stock up. Can you recommend flowers that will last later into the cold months? And tomato plants that like a drier soil?”

The shopkeeper, a middle-aged man with a khaki apron smeared in dirt, flusters but rallies. “Well, yes. Yes I can.”

He keeps wringing his hands in his apron, but helps Harry select a few promising flower varieties and some tomato seeds gamely. They fill Harry’s crate to the brim, careful with cushioning charms not to smoosh any of the plants on the bottom. When they head to the front to settle up, Harry tries to hand the shopkeeper the galleons he tallied mentally as they accrued his purchases. The man pushes his hand back firmly. “Your money’s no good here, Harry Potter.”

His voice is more confident now, unmoving. Harry blinks at him. This is a first; well, the first in a long, long time. It reminds him of the first time he entered the Wizarding world, the way the Leaky Cauldron’s patrons had responded to him. “Please, I’ll be back tomorrow, I’d really like to just pay – “

“I’m afraid it’s non-negotiable, but I’d be glad for your continued business.” He looks Harry deep in the eyes, some fracture lines of healing pain and fear there, whether Harry’s imagining that or not, when he says, “Thank you. Just . . . *thank* you.”

He summarily shoos Harry out the door and closes it behind him. Harry's left blinking out front. But he hefts his crate in one arm so he can draw his wand with the other and apparate away before he can be further noticed in the bustling alley. Popping back into existence at the manor, Harry makes short work of laying down the crate by his designated garden space. He's just about to dig in and get to work when he realizes – dinner! He pops up like a hare out of the brush sniffing something perilous in the wind. Harry dashes around the side of the manor and into the dining room, unaccountably frantic. Voldemort's there as always, reading long parchments peacefully as though nothing is wrong.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry!” Harry exclaims as he bursts in. “I completely lost track of time, that's my bad, I didn't mean to leave you waiting!” They've never said dinner together is required, but it's the one time of the day Harry's always come to expect they will spend in the same room. The thing in their routine that makes the marriage feel real, feel upheld. The last thing Harry wants to do is derail the agreement, this fragile newfound mutual goodwill, and provoke Voldemort into dissolving the whole thing.

Voldemort sets down his documents. “Peace, Harry. Come here.” He pushes his chair away from the table to angle outwards. Harry's taking a tentative step forward before he even realizes what he's doing, then pauses. “Why?” he asks suspiciously, only to receive a gesture of the hand to come closer. He rips off the band aid and takes four steps to put him in front of the man, who draws his wand.

“Hey – !” Harry has time to shout before Voldemort shakes his head at him once and casts a nonverbal spell. It has the skin feel of a Scourgify. Harry closes his eyes and exhales through his nose in frustration. Fucking dirt all over him again, damn it. Though, this time is presumably more on his hands than his face. So embarrassing. Then Voldemort's reaching for him again, and Harry couldn't find it in him to complain about anything. He turns Harry's chin this way and that, inspecting. “There you are,” he says as if the dirt had been hiding him. “Handsome boy.” Immediately, Harry feels his face turn fire engine red as blood pools there in distress and perhaps, maybe, probably not - something else. His jaw hangs open and he reels back as if slapped.

The man just sits there, watching. Waiting for some surely bombastic reaction. “I – “

Dinner appears on the table as if Harry mentally willed an escape from having to respond to that, that, frankly appalling remark –

A hand presses on his chest, dragging downwards just enough to make Harry's heart leap hard into his throat, and then shoves him gently backwards. “Sit.”

Harry's stunned enough to comply, wandering absently over to his end of the table and mechanically portioning food onto his plate. He finds himself making small talk on autopilot. “How was your day?” He's jolted back to awareness by the banality of his own question, but there Voldemort is again, answering like this is all just fine.

“Rather productive. My Death Eaters are coming to heel regarding adjusting to more passive lifestyles, in order to transition our campaign.”

Feeling his mouth hanging open at all the freely offered information, Harry snaps it shut, then opens again to ask, “Transition to what?”

Voldemort practically smirks, a far more natural expression for him. “A ministerial campaign, of course.”

“A what?!” Harry nearly screeches.

“As I’m rather confident you heard me properly the first time, I won’t trouble either of us by repeating myself.” Unfortunately, Harry’s too blindsided to snark back.

“How can you even imagine people would vote for you of their own free will! They were practically dancing in the streets the night you died – “

“Fear is a powerful motivator, Harry. The most powerful of them all. Lord Voldemort doesn’t delude himself to imagine that would not be most voters’ primary motivation.”

“You’re dead wrong, Voldemort. People act out of hope, out of – of believing the world can be a better place. That we can do better, be better – “

“I do believe you’re confusing your own motivations for everyone else’s. In no way could the match to my soul be common or typical, and every piece of that truth is borne out in you.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” Harry says, helpless.

“Everything about you defies expectation and has done so since the day you were born. I would expect no less. It’s why I sought to destroy you from the first – try as I might to deny some elements of being an equal, time and again I have failed, and even my efforts to do so were in a way an acknowledgement,” Voldemort says, stone cold serious. Harry, defying every expectation he himself thought possible, is possibly even more alarmed by this turn in the discussion than the first. He rapidly redirects.

“No, wait, go back to the minister part – on what planet would you be fit for that role? You’re kidding yourself if you think you’ll ever be – ” Here, Harry cuts himself off. He was on cusp of saying very dangerous words indeed: *satisfied by that*.

The whole point of all this was to pacify the Dark Lord. Taunting him for aiming lower than world domination would be the height of stupidity. And Harry had nearly done it. He swallows and closes his eyes for a moment, regathering himself after the near miss. After a moment, he picks up the thread again. “Why would you want that?”

“In light of new . . . bounds on what means of change can be pursued, this is the most expedient route forward.”

Harry’s about to nod along, but then he remembers: “But how many years are there between each election? Didn’t we pick a new one just last year?”

Something rather pleased and devious crosses Voldemort’s face. “Seven. But we’ll have ways of fixing that.”

“I’m not sure I even want to know what you mean by that,” Harry mutters, speaking to his plate as he stabs a carrot and viciously saws it in half.

“All in good time, Harry,” Voldemort assures him and it most certainly has the opposite effect. Prod as Harry might, the wizard remains tightlipped on the subject for the remainder of dinner. He never seems irritated by it, no – in fact he seems amused, not unlike a cat toying with a mouse. And Harry hates thinking of himself as the mouse.

He stays up later than he should, gardening. It would be such a shame for the flowers and assorted plants to get smooshed or damaged by sitting all on top of each other too long.

Still no dreams that night, but it’s not gutting the way it might have been. Morning comes bright and brisk. He apparates to Diagon Alley and is about to head into the shop when a blurred distortion catches the corner of his eye from the mouth of a narrow alleyway. Harry is careful to inspect it more closely from his peripheral vision, rather than give away that he’s noticed. Yes, on closer consideration, it’s most certainly a disillusionment spell. He whips around and casts a body-binding curse as fast as he can.

There’s a thud, the sound a body hitting the ground makes. Harry jogs over and casts a finite incantatem on the disillusionment. It reveals a face Harry only knows from the profiles The Prophet had done on the Azkaban escapees: Rabastan Lestrage. He inhales sharply, shook by sudden rage and insecurity. Why on earth would Death Eaters be trying to kidnap him? Haven’t they moved far and away such moves, to the point where they’ve tumbled head first off the edge of the chessboard entirely?

Harry lifts his wand again and is stopped by a voice from behind. “Potter, wait – “

Whipping around again, Harry takes in the form of another Death Eater, body transforming from disillusioned to revealed. This one’s fully unfamiliar, older and grizzled. He’s not attacking and that’s something. He doesn’t defend himself when Harry spells ropes around his hands. “I don’t know what you were told or where the hell you get off, but you’re both coming with me,” Harry snaps. He grabs Lestrange’s stiff arm laid on the cobblestone alleyway and leans over to loop his arm around the other Death Eater’s leg to keep his wand hand free enough to swish and apparate. At this point he’s just motivated by red-washed rage.

They land in the foyer of Potter Manor and Harry jerks up to stand. “VOLDEMORT!” Harry barks. The master bedroom’s set at the head of the stairs, the man can hear him just fine. That theory’s substantiated when some moments later when Voldemort appears at the top of the stairs, deeply unamused. The grizzled Death Eater twitches once at the look of his face, a subtle but full body movement. Harry has no such compunctions, has already seen, experienced, and suffered from the worst of this man. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but – “

Voldemort’s thunderous expression eases slightly as he slowly descends the stairs. “There is no scheme afoot, Harry.”

“Then why on earth would you have Death Eaters sitting outside the shop, just lying in wait – “

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” Voldemort tuts, the repetition combined with the effect of his eyes bordering on hypnosis. “They are there for you, it’s true, but not steal you. To guard you.” Harry reels back. It takes a beat, but he rallies gamely.

“Where the hell do you get off – “ Harry says again.

“Your safety is paramount; as you can no doubt attest, my enemies are many and yet there is only one of you. As your Order sees fit to let you wander around without so much as a scrap of protection, it seems it falls on me to see to your safety.”

“I can handle myself just fine,” Harry grits out. He tilts his head in challenge. “Or did you require further demonstration?”

Voldemort’s jaw locks at that, a thunderous look coming over him in full. He casts what looks to be a silencing charm around just them two, and the spell takes on the appearance of a massive bubble. The man is nearly vibrating with anger at Harry’s disrespect. It probably doesn’t help that Harry’s done so in front of his followers. Whatever. They’ll probably still be slobbering all over themselves for the Dark Lord’s approval by day’s end.

“This is not a matter of negotiation. In fact, it’s a matter of fulfilling the marriage vows. ‘To guard your safety as if it were my own,’ was it?” Voldemort says, tipping rapidly from mandates into taunts. Yes, at long last: this is the Voldemort Harry knows.

“Are you very sure this doesn’t count as detaining me? Wouldn’t want to risk that,” Harry taunts in return, volleying back. He tsks, wholly empowered by finally having his footing after days and days of being left wrongfooted.

“Quite sure,” Voldemort assures him, dripping in poison. He probably, in all his warped perception of reality, thinks Harry ungrateful. Screw that. Harry’s his own man. And he’s also rather late for work. He squares his shoulders.

“We’ll be discussing this later, have no doubt about that. Watch yourself,” he warns, a general bid for caution. They need to keep the peace, but Harry still refuses to bow and scrape and consent to Voldemort’s every demand and imposition. It’s not even in him to defer like that. And no matter how critical this marriage is, standing up for himself is critical to keeping it alive in the long run. Otherwise, Harry’s at risk of holding in his anger again and again until he pops and the whole agreement goes up in flames for real. He knows himself: he has something of an anger management problem. This is the only sustainable way to cope with their differences.

Stepping outside the bubble silencing them, he apparates away with a loud crack and takes a moment in the alley to run his hands through his hair and regroup. But time’s running short and he has to jog over to the side entrance to the shop and let himself in.

“There he is!” Fred crows, out of his creative mode and into social engagement mode. It’s reassuring; his focus has been so intense yesterday Harry had worried a bit that something might be wrong. “Bit delayed, were you?”

“Yeah, er. Bit of trouble with the missus,” Harry tests out the joke, the first thing that comes to mind to put Fred at ease. He’s not wrong – his friend does a double take then fairly roars with laughter, knee slapping and everything.

“What’s all this commotion about? Do bugger off, I have a delicate operation going on over here!” George shakes his fist at them from the cluttered corner of the workshop, finally emerged from his task.

“Right, right,” Fred assents, holding his hands up in surrender much like Harry had the day before. It’s fascinating to see them switch roles from serious inventor to casual salesman and alternate between them. It’s a completely different side to them both, that serious straightfacedness, absent of punchline.

They unlock the front door, get the cash register and any disorganized product in order. Fred positions Harry behind the counter and tells him to sit there and look pretty. Harry chuckles a bit at that, but it reminds him unaccountably of that one moment last night and he loses a battle with an unattractive flush creeping up the side of his neck.

Fred walks him through what each of the little toys, traps, and snacks stashed around the cash register do. They’re the knickknacks, doodads, and final little temptations in the store, the things that are hardest to resist buying because they’re right there, nice and cheap, what’s one more small purchase anyway? “Diabolical,” Harry judges and Fred confirms it truly is with a proudly beaming grin.

The doorbell jingles with their first customer soon enough and Harry feels his blood pressure sky rocket. What if it’s someone who’ll react weirdly to his presence? Someone who feels intensely grateful, or grossed out, or angry about what he’s done? What if –

The lady just wants a paper airplane charmed to release sparkles into the air in a trail. Harry overhears Fred conversing with her. She wants it to spell out someone’s name and Fred shows her the little instruction tag on how to go about doing that. Harry’s learning even when he’s not selling just yet, simply absorbing it all. It really is a den of delights.

Then she comes to the cash register. Harry’s as frozen as she is. Her eyes fly wide, blinking rapidly, a stuttering jumble of words spilling out of her mouth – something along the lines of “Oh, I, er – “

Fred takes mercy on them both. He slides neatly behind the counter and tells her that’ll be one galleon and two sickles. He nudges her verbally and nudges Harry physically. Harry shakes himself out of it and types the total into the register, which thankfully does not pinch his fingers this time. The woman hands him the necessary coins and still blinks at him. “Um, thank you for your business,” Harry says, trying for polite and testing out a small smile. Immediately, she smiles back and says, “Yes, yes of course, thank you so much!” Reaching over for a handshake, her grip is firm and she pumps his hand, which he offers back on instinct, up and down rather vigorously. “So very good to meet you, please be well!”

“Right, yes, you too,” Harry responds, rather flustered. She leaves still glancing over her shoulder with a stunned smile.

“Well,” Fred says, clapping him on the shoulder bracingly. “That wasn’t so bad, now was it?”

“Er,” Harry answers back, bewildered by the whole interaction. “No, I suppose not.”

It doesn’t take them long to get customers two, three, and four. A little family, the son young enough to not yet be at Hogwarts. He zooms around the store windmilling his little arms and shouting in excitement.

Like the good man he is, Fred assists the parents while the child wears himself out. He finally comes to stop near the counter, brimming with excitement. He glances at Harry and double takes. As a small child, he has none of the tact one comes to expect of others and owing to that quality, Harry feels he should not be as surprised as he is to be pointed at as the boy shouts, “MUM! DAD! THAT’S HARRY POTTER!” Their necks nearly break as they turn to look at him. Harry waves awkwardly and says, “Hi.”

“Harry Potter . . . “ The father breathes as he comes to the counter. “As I live and breathe . . .”

“Uh, very – very nice to meet you.” Harry hasn’t had people react like this to him a long time, and even then, it never seemed to have this layer of – of veneration to it. It’s something different.

The man reaches to shake his hand, too, and Harry complies. “Anything I can help you with today, sir?”

“Sir, oh don’t call me sir! I should be calling you sir, sweet heavens.” He takes his hat off and fans himself with it a bit, looking a tad sweaty.

The little boy bumps into Harry’s leg, somehow snuck around the side of the counter, and he’s pointing again. “My aunt says you married You-Know-Who and saved us all because true love always saves the day! Is that true? Does it really work that way? Where’s your soul mark? Can I see it?”

Harry’s overwhelmed by the rapid-fire bombardment of questions, but as he takes a moment to steady himself and crouch down to the boy’s level, he finds he perhaps prefers it to all the circumlocution and obfuscation he has to look forward to with adults. Veiled comments, ‘things we don’t say in polite company,’ and so on. So down Harry crouches and smiles tentatively at the boy, trying to project warm confidence. “Yes, that’s how it works. Your aunt must be a smart woman. Soul marks aren’t for sharing, so I’m afraid I can’t show you. But perhaps a lollipop will do instead?”

Reaching around the side of the counter to the bowl of non-malicious sweets or ‘treats without tricks’ as Fred and George call them, Harry procures a lollipop and brandishes it to the child. The little man lights up with simple joy. “Thanks, Mr. Harry!” he shouts, snatching it out of his hand and staring admiringly at it now instead of doing so at Harry. “I hope a little candy this early in the day’s alright . . . ?” Harry asks, looking up at the parents.

They seem strangely stricken, the woman a little dewy eyed and the man has a complex mixture of emotions on his face. She’s the one to say, “Yes, yes, of course, we don’t mind at all.” She sniffs, turning her back on him partially. “Very nice to meet you, young man.”

Bizarre. Harry tries to clear out the weird mood in the shop and asks, "Is there anything else we can help you with?" Fred nods approvingly at his salesman-likeness. The father clears his throat and turns everyone's attention back to the spinning tops they'd been perusing before, although the boy's attention appears to still be split between that and the lollipop, which makes Harry smile. The family decides on an assortment of spinning tops and a couple extra items the boy grabs seemingly at random as he hop-skips to the register; his parents are powerless to say no. Harry rings them up and accepts payment. "Mr. Potter," the man says, shaking his hand again, this time looking rather sober. "Thank you. We really appreciate all you've done for us." He pauses, then simply adds: "Truly." The mother sniffs again. Apparently, that's their cue to leave.

"Come again!" Fred calls after them. He turns to Harry. "Well played, sir." There's something curious in his eyes, not in the sense that he's curious but more than Harry's curious about what it might be. The moment's dispelled when another round of customers enter. "Greetings folks! Step right up and behold the marvel of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes!" Fred proclaims with arms widespread. Harry shakes his head fondly and slots the coins into the correct locations in the cash register without incurring its wrath.

The day goes a lot like that. People enter, looking for magical delights and trinkets and traps. Fred helps them and at some point in the transaction they realize the Boy-Who-Lived-To-Marry-You-Know-Who is there and things kind of grind to a halt. Fred assures him it's actually a slower day, that Tuesdays are always like that, but Harry's already exhausted by the time he takes his first break and hides out in the workshop next to George elbow deep in his next project, a very demented looking jack in the box that has the look of a cursed magical object rather than a children's toy. People keep thanking him, getting wet in the eyes, shaking his hand, treating him at first with surprise, then awe, then immense gratitude, followed by something . . . unexpected. Unexpected but consistent. Is it sadness? Remorse? Something else? Guilt? He can't make sense of it. But he doesn't know how to ask.

He focuses on giving people the correct change instead.

It doesn't even occur to him to mention the Death Eater watchers on him to the Weasley twins until he's already exited the shop at the end of the day and spies the telltale ripple in the air of disillusionment across the street at the mouth of the alleyway, rain pinging off their forms. Harry sighs to himself, is too wiped out to consider going back to the herbologist to flesh out more of his garden beds. He simply takes the time to glare venomously at the two very subtle blobs across the street before he apparates to so-called Potter Manor.

Harry stomps into the house and leaves waterlogged boots by the door, turns around to pull them off. In the time it takes to do this, Voldemort has appeared in the foyer, likely having heard the door. Harry pulls up short at the sight of him, wanting to still be mad at being given a detail against his express wishes, but also glad to see the first person all day who hasn't looked at him like he's some kind of martyr – even the Weasleys. Even the Death Eaters, in a way. Like Harry isn't a person first and something else second.

Voldemort takes advantage of his hesitation, as is his nature. Moving slowly, he swoops in closer closer close, and this time Harry isn't ungrateful. He can't be, not when his head's being tilted back, cool hands guiding him, faces leaning closer, that hypnosis back in

Voldemort's eyes again and in full effect. What's gotten into him, Harry doesn't know and doesn't want to take the time to question it. Not when it feels so right, so safe, so sacred. They breathe each other's air for a spell. It's like one of the dreams come to life all of sudden; skin touching skin, closeness, unspeakable intimacy, the kind of wordlessness that only comes from being struck mute by being emotionally moved, by not needing words at all. Oh, what a simple touch can do. A hand fists tightly in the back of his hair and pulls his head back further.

It takes a lot in him not to swoon physically and sway forward. He should hate it, it should hurt – but he doesn't. It doesn't. It feels good. Unaccountably so. Lips glance against his, a small lingering press as Voldemort seems to breathe and drink him in with a deep inhale. His eyelids flutter. He's warmer there than anywhere else; the information is forever seared into Harry's brain. Harry's mouth parts of its own accord and Harry doesn't fight that, doesn't want to, doesn't want to want to. Voldemort pulls him closer still, fully ensnared. "Please," Harry whispers, the quietest word in the world. His mouth shapes it and vocal cords do little work to actually vocalize, but still. It's damning stuff. "Please . . ."

Voldemort rewards this. With aching slowness, he presses forward, kisses Harry like they've been doing it all their lives. With the kind of tenderness that has no place between the two people they really are, and certainly has no business coming from the wizard providing it. Their mouths move together not with cleverness but with something bizarrely gentle, incongruously giving. Voldemort is firm, lips telling Harry exactly where to go, so he doesn't have to worry about anything, getting it wrong, making a fool of himself. His tongue darts out to pet at Harry's lower lip and Harry gasps for air, windless all of a sudden. Tangled in him, the Dark Lord surges in, tongue languid but sure. Harry finds his hands fisted in the front of the man's dark robes, shaking lightly. Struck still and dumb by the intimacy, Harry leans into the grip on his hair tilting his head back to better receive what he's being given and does what little he can to reciprocate when he's feeling so fully lax and limp. A thumb draws down the line of his throat and for some reason, that's what does him in. He makes a broken noise he's absolutely positive he'll be wallowing in abject humiliation over later, another time, in a space of mind where he isn't rendered useless by quiet but never uncomplicated pleasure.

His husband draws back and all Harry can think is – *please no, don't go* – and he surges forward, wraps his arms around Voldemort's neck like a howler monkey clinging to a tree branch. He smushes his lips to Voldemort's and prays for the magic to come back, for him to be breathed to life again, needing it like air. It's of greatest surprise that the Dark Lord permits this and indulges him, truly devouring him mouth to mouth. Yes, in fact he's holding him tighter, clutching him closer, thrusting his tongue in again and again until he's practically fucking Harry's mouth. The hand in his hair draws tighter and Harry moans at the rough prickling stimulation on his scalp.

That seems to pull Voldemort away from him again, almost as if he waits for Harry to demonstrate sure signs that Voldemort will leave him wanting more if he parts from him at that particular moment. Sounds about right. Conniving bastard. Harry's reluctant to open his eyes again as they part, wanting to stay lost in the moment, fully absorbed and never to leave again, but knowing real life doesn't work that way, that he can't. So when it's time to open

his eyes, he does so with a glare. And whether it's for the Death Eater detail or the end of the kiss? Well, that's Harry's business and nobody else's.

Voldemort thumbs over the apple of his cheek, still holding him close and snug. The hand that gripped his hair flattens to cup his skull instead. "Come now, Harry . . ." And all Harry can think is, *honestly if you'd given it a few more minutes we would have been in danger of that*. "What's given you that look in your eye, fearsome creature?"

Going an immediate flashflood red at the pet name, Harry's shocked out of his glare and can't seem to remember what even had him miffed in the first place. It's not as bad as being called handsome boy but it certainly carries a similar flavor. "You – you –"

"I?" Voldemort asks, blatantly teasing. Or is it taunting? Does it matter? Harry's pride says yes.

"You still had them following me. The Death Eaters, I mean. I told you to call them off." Harry hardens a little as he reminds the both of them why he's displeased. Still, he's limp and relaxed Voldemort's hands, so much putty. How they can have this conversation in this pose is beyond him, but here they are.

"I thought it best to discuss the matter and err on the side caution for today, husband. Let's sit before the fire and do so." Again, his eyes border on hypnosis and Harry nearly shakes his head to make it wear off, but the last thing he wants to do is dislodge the hands on him. They leave anyway, Voldemort guiding him to one of the sitting rooms with a fireplace already lit and warming the room. He pulls him not towards the chairs closest to it but rather the couch so they're still close enough to touch. Harry knows this is his golden opportunity to put space between them, perk up and stand up for himself, pay attention and take charge. But Merlin help him, he doesn't want to. Letting Voldemort keep him by his side, knees touching, Harry listens to Voldemort's pitch and soaks in less of it than he does the small bit of contact.

"It is in your best interest and mine," Voldemort is saying, "that we keep you safe and guarded. No one else is providing that service, not the Ministry and not your *Order*, so it falls to me to see it done. I have no lack of people or resources to do this, and it is my pleasure to do it. Harry, indulge me in this."

Harry's still in the grip of pleasure, the appetite of his skin hunger only whetted by what little he's had tonight. It's a real task keeping his wits about him. But he's quiet as he contemplates this information, trying to logic it out while still foggy of mind. Seeming to take this as reticence, Voldemort adds, "There is no restriction on where you might go or when, simply you will have extra wands and eyes on your side should anything come to pass. You have nothing to lose, nothing at all."

"Nothing to lose . . ." Harry echoes, feeling empty-headed. "Yes, my sweet, nothing at all," Voldemort echoes back, pulling Harry's hand into his lap and tracing fingers over the back of it, following the faint blue rivers of barely-visible veins. A blatant manipulation if Harry ever saw one. That doesn't mean it doesn't work.

"Alright. But I change my mind and they're gone," Harry conditions. Voldemort doesn't even pretend to agree to it, just lifts Harry's hand and presses his warm, firm lips to the knuckles as

if to say 'your will be done' without actually promising anything at all.

It makes Harry feel very, very ready to neck on the couch all night. He can see it now: his mouth parting endlessly for Voldemort to feed him his tongue again, hands everywhere, holding him by the back of his neck, the man holding him down, pressing him into the soft couch with his own body weight, places he can't feasibly be in all at once . . . he's fantasizing about it and the man's still sitting right next to him. Harry belatedly remembers the Dark Lord's literally a mind reader. He's been basically eyefucking him, or at least eyefrenching him, for the last several moments.

Harry clears his throat awkwardly, avoiding eye contact. It's humbling, how little he wants to run out of the room again. Or set everything on fire. Cowed by his own changes. Alarmed, distantly, by his lack of alarm. This is his new normal. Perhaps it's best to adapt sooner rather than later. And even still, there's a part of him that wonders if he oughtn't fight it more, put up a good fight for the principle of the thing.

Voldemort seems to take uncharacteristic mercy on him and slip a hand behind Harry's neck. It wraps around and rests there, cool and pleasant in the warmth of the room. He pulls Harry closer that way, and Harry goes, down and down until his head is resting on Voldemort's shoulder. It is the height of the uncanny to find his legs curling up a bit to tuck closer without comment, without outrage, without fight. A sigh pulls itself from deep out of him, exhausted by all his thinking and emotions and the saga of living. He shuts his eyes.

A hand pets its way over his hair, smoothing it down surely to futile effect. Harry feels his mouth curve, a private amusement. In time, they'll come to learn these things about each other. He just wonders what he himself will learn next.

The fire crackles quietly in the dim room. Slipping deeper into a state of relaxation, Harry rests his eyes and body and tries not to worry about anything and somehow it actually works where it truly never has before. *Ba-dum, bad-dum, bad-dum* says the steady metronome of the heartbeat by his ear. *Okay*, Harry whispers back.

He wakes as his body hits cool sheets gently. A tall form stands over him in the pitch dark while layers of duvet and blanket pull over him. The shadow moves away and the door closes shut and Harry's helpless against the black backs of his eyelids. In the morning, he's shy about coming down for breakfast, embarrassed by his own willingness. Wet hair still dripping, he tiptoes through the foyer and peeks around the doorway. Voldemort is sitting there, placid as ever, a mild look on his face. It's still strange to see him so composed. So . . . calm. Harry slips over to his seat and both hopes and does not hope to be noticed. They dine quietly, and for once he's not biting back on his words in a futile effort to not bend to his soul mate's will. No, he's quiet because there isn't a word in his head that could suffer being spoken. Harry's in no rush to finish his meal but his plate cleans itself all the same. He's left sitting there with a fork in hand, feeling helpless. Voldemort meets his eyes calmly across the length of the dining table. There is, frighteningly, little Harry wants more than to go to him. To do what, he doesn't know. That's as far as his brain will let him go. So it's probably with an expression of yearning that he sits there, trying to tell himself to stand and go to work and pretend like things aren't what they patently are. He tells himself that until it works.

Fork dropping to the plate with a clink, Harry rises and makes his feet curve towards the doorway. He wants to be stopped, wants to be prevented, wants to be held. All is quiet behind him. Harry walks out the front door. It takes effort to apparate away.

The joke shop is as bright and cheery as ever even in the gloomy gray morning currently dawning. Harry glances between the disillusioned figures at the mouth of the alley across the street perfunctorily, just to let them know he knows they're there.

George is happy to see him and they set the store to rights to start the day, Fred grunting in vague acknowledgement. Before they unlock the front door, George hands him a thick ream of papers bound together. "Here," he says, "from Moody and Kingsley." It's the truce agreement. "There's a bunch of research we used to design the agreement there, too. That's actually most of it. The conditions of the truce were private, so nobody really knows what you two agreed to in the marriage vows or what Old Voldie agreed to with the Ministry the night before."

Harry doesn't know what to do with it, exactly. But it can't stay upfront. He hides it in the workroom in one of very few safe, clean corners. There'll be time to educate himself later, hopefully. George makes idle yet teasing conversation about Harry heading up to Hogsmeade over the weekend to see Ron and Hermione and possibly a few others. "Careful not to be mobbed," he says with a cheeky grin. Harry takes that under advisement and decides to pen Ron and Hermione a letter asking to meet in one of the upstairs rooms at the Three Broomsticks instead of in the general pub area. The day at the shop goes much like the last, which is to say it's emotionally draining. He's also still getting up to speed on what each product does, how it's operated, and so on. It just seems to get more crowded as the day goes on and Harry marvels that there haven't been any journalist sneak attacks or suspicious flying beetles.

Ducking out back is a necessity, just to take a breather. Blatantly abandoning George to the masses, Harry quickwalks through the hallway and workroom and slips out the back door to get some fresh air. He stumbles right into another man carrying a couple crates stacked above eye level. The crates go flying and Harry apologizes profusely – "Sorry, sorry!" – picking up the first fistfuls of spilled contents he can find. He tries to hand them back to the old man and finds himself looking into the milky, nearly galactic eyes of old Mr. Ollivander.

"Harry Potter," Ollivander says. "So we meet again. Great things, did I say? Well, no one can argue against it now. Great and powerful things . . ."

"Er, right, you had some good foresight there, sir. I'm sorry for bumping into you, let me just put this back –" Harry tries to put objects in his hands back in the spilled crate and go back for more to pick everything off of the alleyway, but Ollivander stops him. "Now wait here, Mr. Potter. Let me see . . ." He pulls Harry's hands forward and gazes marvelingly at the twigs, branches, and vials Harry holds. "Yes, it was no figment of the imagination, look at what you have here."

"Some wood and a few strings in vials?"

"Yes, but more importantly, you've matched dragon heartstring," he points to a few fiery golden red strands, "to a compatible branch of holly." Then he points to the wood Harry's

holding.

“Well yes, they were the first things I grabbed. That was just chance, sir.”

“And the unicorn hair you’re holding next to a twig of oak that clearly wants to bind with it?” Harry looks down at his hand in surprise. “. . . You probably bought all this stuff because you knew it’d go together. And that’s why it’s all in the same crate.” Harry pauses, confused.

“Right?”

“There are nearly a hundred ingredients for wandmaking in this box, Mr. Potter. You’ve picked four of the most compatible out of instinct. Yes, yes, I see it now . . . “

“See what?” Harry looks around himself like an idiot.

“You have the touch, young wizard.”

“The touch?”

“The instinct and natural talent to craft wands, sense their rightness, and bring the unity of the core and wood to life. To make magic possible.”

“Um,” Harry starts and then doesn’t know how to continue. “Thank you?”

“You must come and work for me, Mr. Potter,” Ollivander says on a downward inflection, not instruction so much as statement of important fact.

“I should?”

“You must. It would be a terrible waste of talent to do otherwise. I caution you that you may find any other work inherently unsatisfying to a certain degree.” *Well yes*, Harry thinks, *that rather sounds like every job*. Though, unbelievably, technically speaking, Harry was able to finish his formal education. He’s eligible to start a proper apprenticeship.

“But I already have a job, at the joke shop,” he waves a hand behind him to gesture to Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes.

“And a noble one at that,” Ollivander says, surprising Harry. “To make people laugh and bring them joy in troubling and turbulent times is no small matter. But to connect them to their magic, to bring them into the fold of the wizarding world and give them power . . . “

Harry can imagine it. Muggleborn kids on their first trip to Diagon Alley, bumbling nervously into the wand shop and having The Right Wand laid down into their hands for the first time. That incredible feeling that rushes into the whole room. Sort of like uniting soulmates, really. Ollivander’s painting quite a picture for him. Harry shakes his head to dispel the image.

“I can’t just leave Fred and George hanging,” Harry insists.

“In your own time, then, Mr. Potter.” Ollivander lifts his wand and directs all the floating ingredients back into their places in the crates. “I’ll be waiting.”

That *I'll be waiting* stays with Harry for the next few days. He doesn't tell anyone about his run in and Voldemort doesn't bring it up either. Harry wonders if that's because the Death Eaters didn't notice, thought it was of no consequence, or simply don't report Harry's movements – the last of which is highly unlikely.

It's all very frustrating, this situation. Pulls him in multiple directions at once. He wants to be with his soulmate even though he's already married and living with him. He wants to work and feel fulfilled even though he's already got a job and friends there who care about him. He's lonely and he's overwhelmed. He's starved for comfort and suddenly seems to have a glut of it. Harry's befuddled by the complexities of his situation. And the less he seems to rail against it or display feelings of upset or anger or sadness or defiance, the more other people seem to be bothered by it. Going by the customers, at least.

That night, he comes home and is sadly not ravished in the foyer – attacked, he meant. He's not attacked. Harry finds Voldemort in the study and he pushes through the hesitance he felt this morning, determined to no longer be cowed. Asking if the man's ready for dinner and getting an affirmative, Harry informs Marsey that dinner's to be served. He even finds himself chattering during the meal, about goings on at the shop, mostly. "You wouldn't believe the kinds of things the twins can invent," he informs Voldemort. "Truly useless stuff, I'm sure you'd say, but I swear some of their inventions are ingenious. Ought to be up for an award or something."

He's glad to be seeing them every day, he says. It's certainly good for him, socially stimulating and comforting to have friends so near. And it probably does the Weasley's good to lay eyes on him every day, he doesn't say. In fact, the whole Order is probably put at ease by it. In fact in fact, it really is rather tidy that him working at the joke shop allows them to keep such a close eye on him. Surely that's not why they suggested it in the first place. The twins would never consent to such underhanded tactics, they would just out and out say that's why they came up with the idea. Harry's sure of it.

Shamefully, he lingers by the stairs hoping for a goodnight kiss. Voldemort never seems to go straight to bed, always reading or writing or scheming or whatever. Always up to something and putting in the hours to actually do it. Voldemort must spy the hope in Harry's eyes, the warm spark there, the inability to voice deep desires ever rising closer to the surface. Harry's already lifting his arms to be held before Voldemort even meets him halfway, cradling him close. Heaving a deep sigh, Harry gets a deep lungful of the man's soothing subtle scent. He feels a mouth press on the side of his head, then a chin tuck over top of him. Something in the tenderness of what they're doing makes Harry blush. He drags his hands down Voldemort's back, trying to stimulate some change in the physicality, something less patently . . . intimate. This is so tender. It's like – like what people who love each other do. Just the thought makes Harry feel overwarm, flushed everywhere. He knows he'll never have that, that he can't. But he's emerging into a world where he's allowed to hope for something . . . close. And that's terrifying.

Hands roving tentatively over Voldemort's back, Harry pulls away and looks at Voldemort hopefully again. He probably looks like an ugly puppy begging pitifully to be pet, he thinks meanly towards himself. Dorky glasses, pasty skin, hair always a mess, gangly and

uncoordinated. Apparently, this is not the case – unless Voldemort has suddenly gained some capacity for pity, which in truth is the least likely of all possible explanations.

Voldemort humors him once again, doesn't even have to tilt Harry's head back for a kiss, Harry ready and eager and straining not to go on his tiptoes just to get there faster. Their lips come together, such as the Dark Lord has lips anyway. A quick breath darts into Harry's mouth, parted already. Hands drag up his body, back, shoulders, neck, to cup his jaw, pull his mouth open wider. Voldemort's tongue pushes inside languorously, slow enough, slick enough, to make a wet slick sound that sets Harry aflame. It feels like his whole body's been dipped in hot wax. Whenever Voldemort's touching him, his head goes quiet and his thoughts grow faint and his worries seem rather far away. And when he's touching him like this, like he owns him, like he's his to play with, to mold, to move and fashion and someday, one day, hopefully fuck – well, it sends Harry somewhere else. Somewhere quiet and shaky and good.

The slick sounds continue, loud in the stillness and warmth of the house. It sounds absolutely filthy, far lewder than the reality of what they're really doing. Harry mentally gives Voldemort carte blanc to do whatever he wants to his mouth as long as it keeps making him feel this way. Cupping him close, fingers tangling in his hair at the sides of his head and tugging lightly, Voldemort finally gives Harry what he's been waiting for all day and didn't know how to ask. It's a kindness, a mercy, a gift. And Harry's not ungrateful. The thought of dropping to his knees right there and showing him pops into his head. His filthy, naughty, absolutely abominable brain. But he wants to. God, he really thinks he wants to. He imagines it, the fullness in his mouth, the surely strange taste of him, choking on it. He wants to. Badly. Just the urgent thought of it has him sucking on Voldemort's tongue. Harry feels him hum, a seemingly pleased vibration, so Harry sucks again, pressing closer. Easing his hands from fists in the Dark Lord's black robe to smoothing flat over his shoulders. Seduction can go both ways. Harry's surprised he even has the thought, not even sure that's what he's doing exactly. Just that he wants more of whatever the hell it is they're doing right now. He's surprised he can even think straight right now.

And cruel as ever, Voldemort parts from him. Pulling his mouth away, then pressing a close-mouthed kiss there with finality, he presses another one to Harry's thunderbolt scar, then stays there. It's like he's breathing Harry in. They almost seem to sway a little, that or the room does.

Don't leave. Please. Not again. Harry can't even imagine saying the words out loud. He tries so very hard not to make a noise. It would surely come out pitiful.

Harry tucks his head down and pushes even closer, tucked into Voldemort's throat, hiding from the man, from his own emotions, by patently digging the hole deeper. It's wild, how quietly desperate he's feeling. Where on earth is it all coming from? Still Harry can't vocalize. He begs with his eyes instead, tilting his head back to face the Dark Lord, clutching him close.

"Ah, Harry," Voldemort sighs, very nearly verging on wistful. He pets Harry's wild hair back from his face. "Come and stay with me tonight."

It's like he's stuck a fork in an electrical socket, such is the zinging, goose flesh raising reaction that Harry has. The side of Voldemort's mouth quirks and he brushes Harry's hair

backwards once more, only for it to immediately spring back into place. “To sleep. Merely to sleep, darling boy.”

Nodding hard, Harry ducks his head and avoids Voldemort’s eyes, embarrassed now that he’s gotten both more and less than what he’d wanted. He wants to hide again, but doesn’t want to act like a child. It’s odd; he’s been chattering all night and suddenly he can’t find a single word in him. He drops a hand from Voldemort’s back to slip into the grip of the other man’s.

Apparently abandoning whatever it is he’d been working on in the study earlier, Voldemort leads him up the stairs by the hand.

Knowing they should part for Harry to change into pajamas, Harry still can’t manage it, can’t stomach the idea that Voldemort might rescind the offer. He himself tugs Voldemort past the turn towards his L-shaped room to walk dead-on for the master suite. The double doors make a soft brushing sound on the pillowy carpet, weirdly loud in Harry’s ears. Grand, resplendent in midnight blues, cream, and slight green and gold accents, the suite itself is a sight to behold. Cozy, unaccountably made even more so by the sight of Voldemort’s monster pet kipping on the four-poster bed. Her scales look cool and shiny in the buttery lighting of the bedroom and Harry has the questionable urge to stroke them. Voldemort heads for the wardrobe across the room and Harry’s stomach drops a little when he drops his hand to do it. God, he can’t even handle being on different sides of the room at this point. And how pathetic is that? Scrabbling and whining for his nemesis’ attention like his life depends on it. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

While Voldemort’s back is turned, Harry slips quickly out of his jeans and jumper, deciding to keep his socks on. He darts into bed quick as a flash and tries oh so carefully not to bump Nagini with his legs under the duvet. She gives a wordless hiss at the slight tilt of the mattress anyway and Harry makes the executive decision to stay at the far edge of the bed so as not to further disrupt her majesty. Voldemort’s already circling the bed, nearly as fast as Harry was. He seems to eye them with appreciation, but says nothing. No, he only tells Nagini to scoot over in Parseltongue, she’s plopped down right in the middle of the mattress. She grumbles but slowly complies, uncoiling and shifting to the side only to coil up again. Harry budes over, too, and Voldemort slips in behind him, scooping him close so their bodies fit together snug and warm and altogether too lovely to believe.

Harry wills down an inappropriate erection. Now is so unbelievably not the time. He’d do just about anything to not be kicked out of this bed.

Knees tucked into the depression of Harry’s, back to chest, Voldemort’s voice vibrates through to Harry’s body when he says, “Good night, Harry.” He picks up Harry’s hand, fits it into his own, lays it over Harry’s stomach. And Harry will forgive it. How could he possibly know all Harry’s masturbatory efforts start that way, hand waiting just there in anticipation of frantic activity? It’s almost like he’s going to guide Harry through doing that to himself. But his hand never moves, not even hardly in the night, and when they wake to watery gray pre-dawn light, Harry feels just as held as he has all night and never wants to be let go. It’s good, and warm, and almost everything Harry wants. He feels a puff of breath against his nape and shudders. There’s nothing sexual about it, Harry knows that, respects that. But the potential

alone, the nearness, the possibilities . . . the gardens of Harry's imagination have never been so lush and well-watered.

It's painful to part again for work, but needed. Healthy. Unavoidable, or at least ought not to be avoided. Harry follows Voldemort's lead when he climbs out of bed and slips out of the room and into his own to reluctantly change for the day ahead. The rustle of the sheets, the soft plod of bare feet on the carpet, they make it real. It's surreal to be picking up his clothes off of Voldemort's bedroom floor. What universe are they living in that this is happening and Harry is fine with it? At peace? Unalarmed? Harry eats his breakfast dutifully, quiet again. But when he stands to leave the manor, he doesn't fight the natural direction of his feet, stepping up to Voldemort's chair at the head of the table. Voldemort sets his fork down with a quiet clink on the fine bone china. Harry leans closer, pausing, waiting for a rebuff. He doesn't get one. Hesitatingly, he presses a modest kiss to Voldemort's cheek.

He pulls away enough to assess the man's reaction. Voldemort turns his head to press one to Harry's cheek, too. Linger. It makes him feel things. Lit up like a Christmas tree, warm glow and prickly skin feel and all. Harry steps back, strangely proud of his handiwork. He's made them both happy, in so little time and yet with so much emotional effort to actually go through with it. The payoff was good.

Smiling at Voldemort, Harry walks backwards to and through the doorway until the view is gone.

Work goes much like usual the next two days, the twins as hard at work as ever, customers always living up to the twins' estimation of them when they first pitched the idea of working there to Harry.

Harry sleeps in his own bed.

He isn't invited back into Voldemort's and doesn't invite himself either, terrified to be told no, to be denied, to feel shot down. Not worth the risk. Not yet.

And once he gets accustomed to certain privileges, it will be very difficult indeed to go back.

Rapidly now, he's easing into mealtime chatter, sometimes relaxed and sometimes nervous. Sometimes it feels like Voldemort can barely get a word in edgewise and doesn't care too, when it's the nervous stream of consciousness talk. And sometimes the more relaxed back and forth feels incongruously normal, unconscionably easy. Whatever game Voldemort was playing with silences before, he's clearly won. Harry won't argue with the results either.

Quidditch, gardening, care of magical creatures, defense spells, friends, past misadventures, his time on the road— he never seems to run out of things to say. And his husband seems receptive, participatory, even occasionally engaged. It's defiant of all expectation.

Inconceivably, he looks forward to being home more than being at the shop. Hogsmeade weekend sneaks up on him and he's almost sorry to see part of the evening gobbled up by it. Which truly boggles the mind.

That's not to say he's not looking forward to seeing his friends; far from it. Although, he can admit he despairs of the kind of questions and conversations they might want to initiate about his home life. How on earth is he supposed to explain the truth without seeming like a horrible person? This was supposed to be a sacrifice, a yet more tragic turn in a well-documented story of woe and intrigue. He wasn't supposed to *like* it.

But it's always good to see Ron and Hermione, always great. Maybe Neville will even drop by, too. Ginny as well, and perhaps Luna. It's a nice thought, comforting. He hasn't signed away all his friendships and human connection in one fell swoop. Things really aren't so bad after all.

He might owe Hermione an apology on that count.

This is the mindset he takes with him to Hogsmeade from Diagon Alley. Harry bids the twins farewell in the late afternoon, daylight fading earlier and earlier every day. The sun's just perched atop the rooftops of the stores lining the opposite side of the alley. He heads towards it, stopping at the mouth of the side street directly across from the joke shop. Glancing at one blurred blob and then the other standing there, Harry clears his throat and says in a low voice, "The Three Broomsticks."

Harry tugs his cloak of invisibility off his shoulder where he'd draped it and pulls it on, letting the hood conceal his face and body. With a crack, he's away from bustling Diagon Alley and immersed in bustling Hogsmeade village. Two cracks sound off beside him and Harry promptly ignores the mystery Death Eaters, quite happy to pretend they don't exist.

The Three Broomsticks appears to be doing a brisk business. Harry has to dodge and weave to avoid bumping into anyone, with mixed success. He heads for the staircase tucked behind the bar and climbs up, looking for room number four. The door is cracked open a few inches, and Harry can hear voices inside. Walking in and shutting the door behind him, he pulls off the cloak, which he'd rather been glad to have in the crisp cool of faded summer and twilight autumn. He's rather glad not to be roughing it now, having to contend with the growing chill. It's the small things.

Ron and Hermione call his name in happiness, smiles split across their faces. Rising from where they sit perched on the narrow bed, Ron pulls him into a warm hug and claps him on the back. "Bloody good to see you, mate. We've been worried about you."

"Really?" Harry asks, surprised and now in the habit of verbalizing his thoughts with immediacy. Hermione gives him an unimpressed look. Well, he supposes that rather makes sense. "No need to worry. Things are going well, actually."

"Really?" it's Ron's turn to ask incredulously as he sits back down. Harry stands in front of them, hands on his hips. It rather feels like giving an oral presentation in front of the class to a pair of disapproving teachers.

"Yes, really. We've been getting on, if you can believe it."

"Getting on?" Ron repeats again, unable to digest this news.

“Yes, Ron,” Harry retorts with irritation. “We’ve been getting on.” Getting what on, Harry doesn’t say. Hermione looks like she might suspect it of them anyway. But she doesn’t say anything to that effect, only, “That’s . . . good to hear, Harry. We weren’t sure, without more than a letter or two, of how things were really going. Other than what we’ve heard through the grapevine – I mean, other than what we’ve been able to intuit.”

Harry is getting irked by the extensive use of ‘we’ language. And what exactly ‘the grapevine’ consists of, he doesn’t care to know. “Right, well you’ve only sent a letter or two as well.” That came out a little more defensively than he meant for it to.

Hermione flushes red, a signal of impending trouble, not unlike a dog raising its hackles or an animal changing color in warning of a fight. Softening, Harry adds, “I know things are probably pretty busy, jumping into school so suddenly after everything.”

Abruptly, her eyes go gooey and she buries her head in her hands. Ron rubs her back a little, which –

Development. Interesting.

“No time to do the summer reading! No syllabi to sketch out a study schedule! No warning we’d need to pick our classes out at the drop of a hat! We spent the whole summer preparing the treaty and none preparing for school! None at all!” Hermione wails into her palms.

“It’s basically her worst nightmare,” Ron adds sympathetically.

“Other than skipping seventh year,” Harry rejoins and sits down next to her at last.

“I suppose that’s true,” Hermione allows, sniffing.

“Think of all the books you still get to read.”

“All the new spells you aren’t missing out on.”

“And best of all – “ Harry dangles the idea enticingly. Ron finishes the sentence for him. “ – N.E.W.T.s.”

Cracks a little smile, she huffs a laugh at them. “Alright, I see your point. Perhaps it isn’t so bad after all.” It feels very reassuring that they still have their old rhythm and flow. He may be changed by the things shaping his life now, but he hasn’t left anyone behind. Hasn’t left important pieces of himself behind. Not yet.

Harry sits back, satisfied by the concession. Leaning back on his hands, he contemplates a stain on the wooden planks lining the ceiling. Something creaks upstairs.

He asks after what classes they’ve decided on, and then it’s off to the races. Hermione answers for both them and lengthily so. It puts a fond grin on Harry’s face and for Ron hasn’t been starved of time with friends, Ron doesn’t seem wholly immune either. It’s good to slip back into their old norms. Just nodding along with whatever she says, neither of the boys fully absorbing the influx of information. “ – and McGonagall’s doing fabulously as Headmaster. It’s not the same of course, but she fits just like a puzzle piece.”

A solemn moment of silence befalls them and all three are helpless to it, even with the positive spin Hermione had put on it. It's impossible to believe Dumbledore is gone, even with months to process it. Harry says as much and Ron just shakes his head, saying he'll never believe it. Not really. "Some people are truly larger than life," Hermione reasons, as is her way. "It only makes sense we'd struggle to believe he's no longer in ours."

Harry carries the silence for another few moments, then contributes. "Death is but the next adventure, he used to say. Hope it's true."

"I'm sure it is. He deserves more adventure." It's impossible to believe his husband is ultimately the man responsible. How easy it is to forget all the evil he's wrought when his hands are on Harry, how easy it is to forget the world as a whole. He ought to be careful on that count. And on the other hand, perhaps he should ask for Snape's head on a platter as a wedding present. He hadn't seen him at the ceremony, hadn't had time or wherewithal or interest in anything but the mission of seeing it all through. And surely Voldemort must know better than to assign him as a guard for Harry. Impulsive, quick to anger, unpredictable Harry. It's not all insult, to know that he's something of a wildcard. Collapsing to lay out on the bed, the other two follow suit and it's a fun little mirror to the last time they were able to spend together.

Ron starts up conversation again, Hogwarts gossip. A blatant attempt to lift the mood, but then he never was one for subtlety. There's something to be said for it. Who's gotten their words, who's dating who, who's doing what after graduation. Hermione even has an intriguing detail or two to add, unexpectedly. Sensing the surprise in the room, she swats at both of them and says, "Well, I have ears too, don't I?"

When Harry asks after Hagrid, observes his absence from the ceremony, Ron replies "Well, we could hardly encourage Hagrid to come when it's so hard for him to keep a cool head - better for everyone really." Apparently his aspirations for pet ownership continue to be ever more ambitious and deadly.

Soaking in the information and the cadence and rhythm of their banter, Harry sinks further into the bed and just lets himself enjoy peer companionship. Voldemort may be his match, his soulmate, his lawfully wedded husband, but there are certain things he just isn't going to be interested in or know or care about. There are things Harry needs he can't get there, can't get from him. Would that he could. He finds himself thinking it and rapidly redirects. Scary thought. Scary he's thinking of the Dark Lord with anything approaching wistfulness while he lies next to his best friends, when he should be thrilled to have a night away. To get away.

His life is so strange.

Outside the window, the sun has fully set and it's pitch black. He forgot seventh years were allowed to stay out later. But not so late they'd miss curfew. Come to think of it, Harry practically has one of his own. Not that they've ever formalized anything like that, but dinner has come to be a sure thing. Breakfast now, too. Quality time. Shit, he hadn't mentioned the visit to Voldemort, who'll be expecting him home shortly. He pops up while Ron is mid-sentence. "Everything alright, Harry?" he checks in.

“Yeah, just better be heading back. You lot should be, too. Only just noticed the time.” Hermione casts a tempus succinctly and inhales. “Yes, you’re quite right. We’d best be on our way.”

“About the Death Eater pardonings - “ Harry starts, pausing with his hand on the door handle, thinking of it at the last minute.

Hermione sports a guilty wince, then says, “Right, about that - “

She’s cut off as Harry’s hand slips on the handle, opening the door just a hair. People burst inside in a wave, Neville and Ginny leading the charge. “Harry!” Neville cries. In an unexpectedly bold move, he hugs Harry then pulls back to hold him at arm’s length. “You’re looking well,” he observes with surprise. Ginny coughs discreetly, perhaps a word slipped in there Harry can’t quite make out. “I mean, it’s good to see you’re alright. What a relief,” Neville goes in for the save. Harry shrugs nonchalantly. “Glad to be alright.”

Luna taps him on the shoulder and this time it’s him who sweeps her up in a big hug. “Luna!” He sets her back down on her feet and she gives him an absent little smile. “How was your summer?”

“Considerably less exciting than yours,” Seamus inserts himself, perhaps unable to help himself.

“I’ll say,” Dean says. “Hear, hear!” What seems like the whole of the seventh year Gryffindor class crowds the room and Harry feels himself being clapped on the back by multiple hands from multiple directions. It’s disorienting to be addressed by different people at once and he doesn’t know quite what direction to look in. He doesn’t want to be rude, but it’s hard to focus on any one conversation. “Perhaps,” Hermione shouts above the din, then follows up at a more reasonable volume as the room calms, “it would be best not to crowd him.” She’s standing on the bed with authority to better call attention to herself. There are some Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs from Dumbledore’s Army slipped into the mix as well. Some are a few fifth and sixth years, and are absolutely not allowed to be out this late. Surely they aren’t risking getting in trouble just to see him?

It would be a giddy feeling for most, perhaps, to have so much positive attention focused on him at one time. But there aren’t many contexts in which Harry has enjoyed that, not without complicated feelings adjoined to it anyway. And while the attention is nice, honestly Harry just feels grateful to be able to see his friends and schoolmates again. By no means is it under normal circumstances, but he’ll take it anyway, overwhelming as it is.

“I’ve got to head out actually,” Harry informs the room, hooking a thumb over his shoulder. Collective sounds of disappointment and dismay resound, which is flattering, and Harry asks when the next Hogsmeade weekend will be. “Happy news there, actually,” Seamus says. “McGonagall’s made them more frequent, now they’ll be every month instead of two or three times a year.”

Damn, they’ll have to find a way to see each other more often. Harry doesn’t want to miss out on *everything* after all.

“Well, that’s something at least. I’ll definitely be around for the next one. We should all grab a butterbeer.”

“Or firewhiskey,” Ginny offers.

“I don’t think they’d serve us firewhiskey,” Harry says doubtfully.

“You’re Harry Potter – I’m pretty sure they’d serve you whatever you ask for,” someone says. Possibly Ernie MacMillan. Harry’s walking out as best as he can budge through the bodies, and Hermione and Ron are following when he glances back.

He makes it out in the hallway and down the stairs, where there are yet more people. They’re not here to see him, obviously, but once he’s there, everyone seems fascinated. Colin Creevey tries to catch Harry in a conversation about something or other, but Harry has to cut him off and explain that it’s time to go. “Sorry Collin,” Hermione says by his elbow. “But he’s got to go.” Ron and Hermione alone understand how important it is to maintain the status quo at home. “Yeah,” Harry says under his breath, leaning into Hermione and Ron’s space where no one else will quite be able to hear. “Can’t leave the missus waiting.” He tests the joke out again, now more confident in his results.

Hermione barks out a shrill startled bout of laughter, eyes wide. Ron? Ron places a weak hand over his chest and leans back as if scandalized. He can’t help but laugh in delighted shock either. Harry chuckles too, pleased at his own good humor about life, the universe, and everything. If you can’t laugh about it, what do you really have left?

He swings his cloak over one shoulder, two fingers hooked into it to keep it in place. Turning to walk out of the tavern, Harry spies a knot of Slytherins in the back corner of the place. They’re all watching him. He can feel his eyes turn icy and remote. Malfoy has a lot to answer for, sitting there and holding court and seemingly completely untouched by the grievous mistakes he’s made. But tonight’s not the night for it, if there will ever even be one. Married life has settled him neatly into the idea that justice is a false promise and peace takes precedence. But one can hope. Some day.

“So long,” Harry calls to his friends as he walks out.

“Don’t forget to write!” Hermione calls back.

“Don’t you forget either!” Harry calls back again and shuts the tavern door behind him.

He strides across the street to the opening between two businesses, where he can only guess the Death Eaters will be in the gathering gloom. There’s a slight blur he can make out, distorting the discarded pail behind the person. “I’m headed back to the manor,” Harry informs them. “Do not follow me.” It’s as much a recommendation for his peace of mind as it is a recommendation for them not to be skinned alive tonight. Harry’s pretty sure Voldemort doesn’t let anyone know where the manor is. That’s just the kind of paranoid bastard he is. Probably still using Malfoy Manor as headquarters just to keep the family on their toes after all their missteps. It’s enough to almost make Harry feel bad for them. Almost, but not quite. It’s the reason he was able to walk out of the Three Broomsticks without instigating an all-out brawl. As so very satisfying as that would have been.

As he apparates home and walks into the manor, he contemplates his schoolmates' lack of curiosity over the contents of the agreement, the treaty, the vows. Or perhaps lack of curiosity is a mischaracterization. The only known factor is their lack of questioning about it. How do they know not to ask about it?

It really might behoove Harry to actually pick a newspaper every once in a while.

"Voldemort? Sorry I'm home late," Harry calls out, not sure if his husband might be in the study or the dining room or one of the various sitting rooms. With no response, he ducks into the dining room, but it's empty and the table is clear of everything but the centerpiece.

Harry searches for him and it's not until sitting room number three that he strikes on success. Voldemort is reading again, though what information the document might hold that Voldemort doesn't already know is beyond Harry. The man's like a walking magical encyclopedia. "Hey," Harry greets and leans against the doorjamb. "Sorry I'm late. Have you had dinner yet?"

His soulmate finally deigns to look up from his reading. "Yes, Harry. I confess I was . . . surprised when you did not return home at the typical hour." Voldemort's using that dangerously soft tone of voice that spells dire danger, Harry recognizes it instantly from visions past. Inner circle meetings, mostly. Absolute bullshit. Harry finds himself reacting to it instinctively with aggression, stepping further into the room and balling his hands into fists. "I was seeing friends. Surely that's allowed," he pauses to make it seem like he's finished his sentence, then adds, "Oh wait, I'm allowed to do whatever I want with myself. You don't own me, you don't tell me where to go, and you don't punish me for coming home a little off schedule."

It surprises him, the strength of his response. The anger that blossoms out of nowhere. Well. Perhaps not nowhere. Voldemort sets his reading material aside. "I have never said anything to the contrary, husband."

"Sure, technically," Harry rants. "But you took that tone with me, I know what that meant, you don't *get* to be mad at me about having a life."

"Perhaps. But it would be prudent to have expectations set for one another," Voldemort murmurs, clearly gripping his calm as tightly as he can in the face of Harry's reactivity. Or is he? Harry can never tell. And that's *another* thing. "Rules."

"Fine. But if you make some, I get to make some, too," Harry grouses, feeling generally ill of will after a sudden crash to such a lovely ending.

Voldemort clearly can't help himself. "As long as you remain aware that these *people* are temporary," he adds softly. Not threatening. Not having to be. Just dangerous ideas in and of themselves. He says 'people' in a way no man in his right mind would be able to.

"What on earth is that supposed to mean?" Harry finds himself standing before an unreceptive audience with his hands on his hips for the second time in one night.

“Above all others, you can appreciate my relationship to death. Through possession and reincarnation, blood and bone and ash, you have seen that I have traveled beyond its bounds and carved out my own way of being.”

“Sure . . . “ Harry allows. “You can’t die.”

Conceding with a slight nod, Voldemort agrees. He tilts his head and steeples his hands. “I cannot die. I plan similar ends for you, only the means must be determined.”

Harry’s aghast. His arms fall limp at his side. “You want me to . . . “

“Join me in immortality, yes.” *Kill someone* is what Harry was going to say. Naturally, he is very very glad that he did not.

“I . . . “ What does one say to that proposition?

“Already, I have a wealth of promising research to find a solution since the traditional measures I believe you would find distasteful.” That’s one way of putting it. Jesus. *Murder.*

“It shall only take a little time to resolve the matter,” Voldemort assures himself. “You’re well-guarded in the meantime, within agreement of the vows.”

There is nothing to say to that, truly. Harry stands there and has no idea what to do. Or what he even thinks, really. A mad light enters the Dark Lord’s eyes. No, it glows where before it was dimmed. It undeniably was there all along and stupid, stupid Harry refused to see it.

“The moment I felt the words burn in me at midnight at the same time your words must be, our fates aligned where before they have always been at odds. Harry, you must see this. Would you leave your soulmate one half of a pair, for eternity?” Voldemort gestures to him with an open palm, as if offering his hand or beckoning Harry closer. Harry stumbles back, struck by the out-and-out manipulation and guilt-tactics at work. “I have made great sacrifices for you,” the Dark Lord continues and god Harry wants him to stop talking, just so desperately. “All for you. To have you. To bring you to heel. And I would see that investment through, in good faith as we both agreed.” There’s nothing to add to that, really there can’t be. Voldemort keeps going anyway. “I made those concessions under one understanding only – *this is all temporary*. You and I are made for eons; the world that surrounds us is built for mere decades. We will walk through ages with unchanging pace, continuing on and on until mankind ends as we know it and the death of the earth dooms us all, if even then.” Voldemort stands now, coming to him for once, cupping his cheeks where Harry stands frozen. “There is comfort in that, my dear. Great comfort.” Stroking his thumbs over the apples of Harry’s cheeks, Voldemort murmurs intimately: “This government you were so keen to save, these laws you were so desperate to preserve, these people you were so willing to give up your life for are all but a sentence or two in the book of history, within a vast library we shall build ourselves, with our hands and our will and our might.”

Soft fingers brush his face, in nauseating contrast to the emotions roiling through his gut. “You and I, Harry. It is only you and I.”

The terrifying spark in his eyes gleams brighter and Harry is so very helpless to look away, knows in his very bones this is a damnation in the making. “So when your eyes ask me why I would give up war and justice and cause for something as sentimental as a soulmate, I would ask you what else could possibly justify such a choice. And what madness would make a man hesitate to do it.”

Sweetheart, I'm sorry

Chapter Summary

A reckoning.

Chapter Notes

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

Harry spends the next day largely alone, for sanity-related reasons. In that he wants to retain his. He goes to bed alone, eats breakfast in the kitchen alone, goes back to the herbologist alone, and gardens most of the day, lollygagging as much as he can to take up as much time as possible. The idea of going inside is . . . he wants to avoid it. Avoid him.

Perhaps some people would be thrilled with the prospect of eternity with an immortal husband, one of the most powerful men in the world. Thrilled is not how Harry would describe himself.

Scared. Angry. That's how he would describe himself. Voldemort's still fucking barmy and *Harry somehow missed it*.

It doesn't, truly and sincerely, bear thinking what else exactly he's been missing. That look in his eye had said it all; words, too. He may be pacified now, docile for now – but that's just as temporary in his view as Harry's friendships and family and loved ones are. Voldemort, for some time now, at some point in his process of attaining and reinforcing his own immortality, learned to play on a completely different timetable. To a degree such that it's a different playing field. Before, he was in something of a hurry. The murdering, the torturing, the political corruption . . . that was all Voldemort being impatient. And he had no reason not to be, risked little in doing so. Attaining his aims of domination and rule and whatever nonsense got sidetracked by sudden discovery of a soulmate. Someone to while away eternity with, or however else Voldemort might think of him. If the Dark Lord is to be believed, this changed his priorities – also temporarily. On the schedule he's on now, they literally have all the time in the world to accomplish Voldemort's various and nefarious goals. And Harry? Harry's soon going to be in a position to have all the time in the world to change Voldemort's mind, if the Dark Lord gets his way.

Who on earth's idea was it to leave Harry alone with Voldemort, effectively responsible for him? For corralling him, taming him, evaluating him? Appeasing him? The Order should have been visiting every day or keeping a watch on the house or having Harry report on the man's movements every hour on the hour or *goddammit something!*

Harry can't be trusted. Not to be objective, not anymore. He's not responsible enough to be accountable for managing a man like Lord Voldemort. If anyone even is. He wants to call an

Order meeting. Now. Right now.

And tell them what? ‘Voldemort’s got a new evil plan.’

‘Oh? What’s his plan, then?’

‘He’s going to try to make me live forever.’

‘And that’s evil how?’

‘It means he’s just delaying his plans and we haven’t actually stopped anything at all!’

‘So you’re saying he’s still Voldemort and we should be worried he’ll go back to his old ways?’

‘Yes! Yes, that’s it exactly!’

‘Were you expecting anything different? Married the man a week ago, Harry.’

‘Well – I mean – I’m saying we need to be on our toes! He could hatch his plans any moment, the man clearly can’t be predicted. *That’s* my point!’

‘We’re already on our toes. We know most things haven’t changed. Giving this peace agreement the fairest shot means we’re not involving ourselves and neither are the Death Eaters. It’s down to you two to maintain the agreement and stay the course. It’s not fair to you of course, no one’s arguing that it is, but we put our trust in you to give it the best go possible. As the best of us. This is the best option we have. You saved us, Harry. You keep saving us every day.’ And then – no, god no, not again – ‘Thank you.’

Even thinking the words being said yet again, only mentally, makes Harry want to take a shower. Jesus Christ, he could go a lifetime without ever hearing them again. It’s a reminder of his sacrifice and how little it’s felt like one and good lord, what does that say about him?

The reason he’s alarmed by the conversation they had last night, Harry admits to himself as he packs soil around a leafy green little fellow, is that he well and truly forgot the kind of man Voldemort is. Precisely the way Voldemort probably wanted him to. In fact . . . Harry being alarmed right now is probably by design, too. To pace him, his realizations, his feelings, the build and break and rebuild of trust and openness and hope. It’s all by design, on that interminable timetable, right on fucking schedule. Harry throws his spade across the yard deep into the tall grasses circling the property and buries his head in dirty gloved hands. How’s he supposed to counter an immortal evil genius with designs on Harry that Harry doesn’t even necessarily oppose? What’s best for everyone else? Does that even take precedence anymore? How does Harry even prioritize without even knowing fully what’s at stake? He’s worrying about people, generations, that don’t even exist yet.

And yet the idea of just prioritizing himself is so foreign. He hasn’t had to do that since he first came to Hogwarts, back when his existence was dedicated to survival and that only in deference to the fact he had no one. No one to care for, to protect, and make sacrifices for. Now? He has the whole world to think about. The Wizarding one *and* the Muggle one.

No pressure.

It's not wholly inconceivable that what he wants might align with what needs to be done. Just highly highly improbable. The trick of it is, he doesn't know what either of those things are yet.

There hasn't been any violence since the ceremony. Maybe that can be a starting place. If violence resumes, if any of the terms of the marriage agreement or treaty are violated, Harry will know the status quo needs to change.

Knowing Voldemort, which Harry won't fully pretend to but will partially, he won't last long. Harry just needs to be patient.

Harry hides out in the open-air nook of the owlery on the roof until sunset. The birds hoot and coo at him sleepily, with rising awareness as the sun sips lower in the sky. Dinner cannot and should not be avoided. He makes himself go, equally as resentful of being there as he is of wanting to be there. Nearly dressed up compared to his usual attire, Harry wears a button down and doesn't even know why. Following the good smells into the dining room, he isn't left waiting long before his husband arrives. Voldemort seems to regard him neutrally, but Harry can just *sense* something smug there. Pleased. Satisfied. He doesn't know that Harry's onto him, about the emotional puppeteering, about the horcruxes, about the fact he hasn't changed a whit. *You aren't fooling me. I'm wise to your ways.*

It's enough to keep Harry in his chair, sipping his soup without quite glaring laser beams into the man's forehead. Still, the discontent lingers in the air. He's not sure Voldemort even fully understands why Harry's upset – perhaps he sees that Harry is reluctant about the idea of immortality and Harry also as much as said last night he doesn't like feeling punished for having his own social schedule. *Just because you've got no friends doesn't mean I don't have any either*; he thinks rather uncharitably. No, Harry's upset about the overall manipulation, how easily he let his judgment be clouded by his dick, by a fantasy version of a man who will always be bad news. He's angry with himself and Voldemort, too. For being gullible and for Voldemort being so very deft at tapping into that. What a pair they make.

Cutting into dessert and carving out a serving for himself, Harry finally initiates. He knows better than to expect otherwise by now. "So. You mentioned rules."

Voldemort glances up and considers him. "Indeed I did."

"What exactly did you have in mind?"

"Expectations of communication in advance, notice of change in plans, and maintenance of a regular schedule, such that we know when to expect one another at home and need not worry," he rattles off crisply.

". . . And it would go both ways?"

"But of course, Harry. I would expect that of myself that which I would request of you." Voldemort all but lays a hand on his chest in earnestness, practically. Harry resists an eye roll. It's all lies and bullshit. But what a show he puts on; Harry does have to give him that.

“Fine,” he says shortly. “What times should we schedule for? Breakfast by seven, dinner by nine?”

“That seems a fair estimate to me,” Voldemort replies, every pretense of reasonability.

“And if our plans change, we can communicate through the Death Eaters?”

“That is a viable option and the most expedient method, yes.” God, the Dark Lord is incapable of just saying ‘yeah.’ Harry’s married an encyclopedia. Or a thesaurus or whatever.

“But giving each other advance notice,” Harry warns, “it’s not about permission. It’s just about explaining so that we’re on the same page. I can sleep wherever I want, go wherever I want, with whoever I want.” By the end, it’s fairly obvious he’s reminding Voldemort as much he is himself.

Fingers tightening around his goblet, Voldemort concedes this. Clearly, he didn’t like the wording. But he’s completely unable to argue with it without risking violation of the vows. At every point in their new little arrangement, neither of them has wanted that.

“Good,” Harry says with a nod, stabbing into his dessert course. “That’s settled.”

He has wicked nightmares that night, shadowy hands grabbing at his limbs, people dying, screaming. It takes two full rinse throughs in the shower to feel all the sweat’s cleaned off. His heart feels so lonely. It’s stupidly appeased by not dining alone and not working alone and feeling watched and monitored vicariously through the Death Eaters. Harry knows his reactions aren’t serving his interests well, but the tides of his emotions are difficult to deny and even more so to challenge or pretend to believe he’s able to change.

The problem is that he benefits very little from him enjoying present circumstances or being trusting, and yet he also can’t win by being recalcitrant or withholding. The marriage is still too delicate. It is, simply put, a no-win scenario. And it’s rapidly becoming clearer he’s going to feel guilty and shitty and bad no matter what he does. He will feel equally crappy from getting fucked and liking it as he will from finding it less satisfying than he imagines. Or from feeling righteous by staying on his high horse, removed and judicious and level-headed. And in that sense, he’s fucked either way.

It’s a couple more quiet days at home and loud days at the joke shop. Fred and George continue to cycle rapidly between inventor and salesman, giving Harry whiplash. People at the store are so kind, so unsurprised to see him now, so thankful. It’s making Harry feel more and more claustrophobic, choking on all their hopes and expectations and preconceptions.

Bright and early on day three after The Immortality Discussion, the place is packed with people in the shop first thing, the new norm which has only been exacerbated by time over the course of the past week and a half. There’s children zooming around the room shouting and laughing, parents vying for attention – either from George to actually purchase things or from Harry to get whatever the fuck people get out of talking to him. A man in a bowler hat with a rolled-up newspaper tucked under his arm elbows his way to the front of the horde.

“Pity about your circumstances, Mr. Potter,” he practically has to shout over the din.

Harry has no idea how to say it's really not so bad, so he doesn't say anything at all, simply looking up at the man in genuine surprise. "I don't think any of us had any idea what you went through, otherwise you would have so much better cared for – yes, I daresay things would have been terribly different indeed!"

Harry freezes, deer in the headlights.

The man in the bowler hat leans closer, fresh morning newspaper tucked into his armpit crinkling with the movement. He can just make out a picture on the front, a very familiar set of stairs, and his blood runs cold. "I want you to know it wasn't right, Mr. Potter. Wasn't right at all. I'm very sorry those Muggles treated you the way they did – bad folk, Muggles, can't say we should have expected much better." Harry's barely taking in the information being spoken, body seeming far away. Everyone in proximity's looking at him. The shop is still bursting with noise and voices and sounds but it feels like they're at the eye of the storm.

" – can't believe they were able to get an *interview* with them, of all things. And what horrible things they had to say, truly so hateful towards magic it's a miracle at all they were willing to speak to a wizarding reporter – "

He can't breathe. Stumbling back, Harry doesn't even have wherewithal to speak, to excuse himself, to say anything at all. Brave? No. He turns tail and runs.

Staggering into the back of the shop completely without air, Harry tucks himself into the farthest corner of the stock room and slides down to the floor with his back to it. It feels like someone's taken a vacuum to all the oxygen in the room. He tries and tries and tries to breathe and he fucking *can't*. His head nods forward in distress, limp with weakness from deprivation; his lips are going numb. He wants to close his eyes, go to sleep, hide, get away, anything. But eyes glued open, nearly rocking in distress, Harry's locked in. His mouth hangs open in want of air, chest hitching minutely in preparation for breath without the reality of it. This is how Fred finds him.

Fred's mouth moves, shaping words, his lanky towering form coming closer in concern. Harry can't make out a word of it, pulse roaring in his ears. He can barely focus his eyes, let alone process new information. Leaning close, laying a grounding hand on Harry's shoulder, Fred's lips form the word '*breathe*.' It takes so much work to drag in even half a breath, Harry wants to give up and quit right there. His whole body rocks back a little bit with each hitching attempt at sucking air in and his chest is weighed down by a thousand pound stone, getting heavier by the minute. '*Breathe*,' Fred says again, crouched now directly in front of him. When did he move? How long has Harry been back here? Harry fights for air like he's fighting for his life, even though he doesn't want to, even though he'd rather give up. He drags in one half-decent breath and all it goes towards is a sobbing breath out. Like a switch has been flipped, his body goes from absence of air and rocking stillness to rapid in-out in-out paced only by frantic sobbing. Harry might be talking, he might not be. His face feels wet and he feels something drip from his jaw. He's rocking for real now. Fred leaves.

The warm glow of the stock room belies the nightmare happening inside. Harry's been there for years, dies of old age there. So ends the saga of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. That's how it feels anyway. With time, Harry cycles back into shallow, barely influxed breaths that make his chest stutter with absence of good oxygen. He's forgotten what it feels like to

breathe, almost. There are dark frames encroaching on his vision, growing wider and darker and closing in just like the walls are. A dark shadow appears in the doorway, too. Harry looks up, surely the most pitiful creature in existence.

It's Voldemort. Fred's standing behind him, very close to the door when it shuts in his face. Voldemort sweeps down the narrow little room, barely enough space to do it, and kneels down in front of Harry. Harry's already ducking his head in anticipation of the hand that comes for him, gripping the back of his neck just like he needs, just like his life depends on. And it doesn't let go. An arm wraps tightly around his back, a face pressed into the back of his head, a torso leaning on his legs folded up around him. It's bizarre, almost like a hallucination, to see the Dark Lord in the cheery colorful setting, surrounded by doodads and toys and candies and ephemera. Or imagine him there, anyway. All Harry can see is the darkness of his own lap and the shadows their bodies cast on the floorboards just there. He focuses on that. If Voldemort is speaking, Harry can't hear it. A hand slips from his back to his front, pressing purple magic against his breastbone. He can feel the rise and fall of Voldemort's own body breathing, feel his airway easing. It takes work and it takes time, but he tries to match that rise and fall. His breaths are slowing, deepening into providing true air. Once he can breathe a bit, he can think somewhat more clearly; exiting from sheer terror down into mere panic.

Being able, at length, to feel his face and limbs again is unpleasant. Cheeks sopping wet, fingers and toes tingling weirdly, Harry really rather wishes he had passed out instead. Once you're unconscious, it's someone else's problem.

He heaves a deep breath, his last before awareness of the actual source of his little episode slams back into him. The newspaper. The man. The picture. *The interview.*

Harry groans, feeling his face crumple where before it had been slack first in absence of oxygen, then in growing relief at its return. He hides in his hands. Voldemort says nothing, only holds him. It's not Harry's place or ability to hope for more; this is not what dark lords are built for. Presumably, Voldemort knows why they're hiding in a storage closet. Presumably, the world now knows why Harry might be hiding in such a place – for a variety of reasons. Presumably, Harry will have to live here now if he never wants to reckon with things no one has any business trying to reckon with on the outside. His body shudders at the thought of leaving.

Petting through his hair, then carding, Voldemort leans on him still, hand firmly in place on the back of his neck. Not in a million years would Harry have guessed he'd have the patience for this. Not in a million.

Out of nowhere, he's absolutely desperate to kiss him. Desperately grateful and desperately bereft. Harry turns his face up to out-and-out beg. As it turns out, he doesn't have to. Voldemort squeezes, Harry's neck is in his grip for real, and presses lips such as they are to Harry's cheek, to the corner of his mouth, then his mouth properly. Not even dragging it out, or making him wait, making him suffer. It's the kindest thing anyone's ever done for Harry. Throwing arms over the man's shoulders, Harry pulls him as close he can physically get and doesn't have to haul him far. Some product comes crashing down around them. He devours the mouth over his own, trying not to cry and mostly succeeding. *'An interview.'* Harry

moans in misery rather than pleasure at the thought and they seem to both pull away. Keeping Voldemort close, tugged fully between Harry's parted legs, his husband and enemy has a precarious balance over him. Harry holds him closer still and feels himself start to shake again as he begins to cry.

Voldemort rights them, sits properly and takes Harry with him. Harry hides in his neck, curled up in his lap as tight as he can be, a quivering ball of woe. "I never wanted anyone to know," he tries and fails to say, only some of the words coming out and stumblingly and croaked at that. *It shouldn't matter*, he wants to explain. *What's done is done. Everyone*, he pleads mentally, *Everyone, please just leave it alone*.

He can sense the storm brewing, knows it's going to be a shitstorm, and wants none of it. He's the one who had to actually go through his own childhood; he has no responsibility to help other people process and reckon with it. In what universe does that make sense? Even the world's shortest conversation about it would inevitably end in him trying to make others feel better about things. And if there is one thing Harry refuses to do, it's explain how what happened to him was okay. He knows it wasn't and has always, always acted like it was. In order to survive, in order to handle it, in order to stay safe and maintain the status quo and because no one else ever acted like it wasn't fine. Especially the adults. Even as a child, he knew the way he was raised and treated wasn't normal; the closest approximation he ever found in books or stories or movies or television was Cinderella, and, well, look at him now – up and married a lord.

So, it wasn't normal, but he had thought it was fine. The Weasley family showed him how wrong he was. And coming of age and moving away rather dramatically had led him very reasonably to believe he was leaving it all behind. 'I've seen the house you were raised in,' Voldemort had said. After the battle in the air on his birthday? Harry can imagine it, just barely, his inky spooky form stepping quietly through the suburban home where Harry spent his worst days and summers and years. And wonders who else might have followed him inside.

It doesn't bear thinking about, what the Dursley's might have had to say about him in an interview, wizarding reporter or not. What people might make of his . . . living quarters. All he can think is that they probably didn't even know enough to bring up the food or the labor or the hitting. Half the story is bad enough.

Well, Harry thinks. *At least they don't have everything*.

The thought calms him, soothing. They don't need to know everything, didn't really need to know anything actually, but Harry will have to deal with what knowledge the world does have now. Dealing with it, he decides, can also mean ignoring it with all his power.

That's allowed.

He's allowed.

Heaving a deep sigh helps halt his jagged little crying breaths. It's funny, he's noticing, how the more you have to focus on your breathing the worse of shape you're probably in.

Regarding Voldemort's face carefully, Harry still doesn't know what to say. His husband's hand squeezes on the back of his neck again, never let go in the first place, and Harry melts back into him, weak. He rests his head on the man's shoulder and heaves another sigh. They're cycling, calming down. Coming back from that ledge. What going over the ledge would look like, Harry never wants to find out. Smudging a kiss to the side of Voldemort's throat, Harry only feels grateful again. *You came for me*, he realizes and can't let go of it. *You did*.

Harry's no idiot. He knows who's to blame for his childhood and there are a number of key players. Voldemort for killing his parents. Dumbledore for leaving him with the Dursleys once they were gone. The Dursleys for treating him the way that they did. Remus for never seeking him out and discovering something was deeply wrong. Harry has, in retrospect, been let down by a lot of people in his life.

Honestly, Voldemort's really the only person he knows who had a childhood that was even close to his own experience. The only person who understands. And that makes Harry angry. He's not supposed to understand. He's supposed to be *evil*. He can't be the main cause and the main balm at the same time – that can't be allowed. Too confusing. Why is everything always so complicated?

Another groan sounds out of him, the last of them for now. He heaves a final deep sigh as well. "C – " Harry feels himself about to stutter, and has to stop himself, close his eyes briefly and try again. "Can we go?"

It's fucked up his first instinct is to ask for permission, but here they are.

And it's not like Voldemort's going to say no. It's a shock to the system to realize the man's lowered himself stay in the situation, in the setting they're in. That really doesn't help with the gratitude problem either. "Yes, my dear." Harry can feel the vibration of Voldemort's words echo out of his chest and into his own. It makes him want to leave even less, and yet also feel more able to. "We may."

Unfolding himself slowly, Harry stands. His legs feel wobbly, as expected, but his head doesn't spin and he's solid enough on his feet to make it home. Probably. Voldemort stands as well, so very strange to see him sitting on the floor, very against his nature. Like watching a dog sit down at the table and eat a bowl of cereal. Unnatural. But then, this arrangement, this marriage, has broken rather a lot of laws of nature, of being, of reality.

Voldemort opens the stockroom door and walks into the workshop, Harry following dutifully behind. He's numb enough not to completely cave to his humiliation, but it's still enough to keep his head bowed and eyes avoiding Fred's seeking his.

The contrasting relief and fear thickens the air in the room. "Harry," Fred asks cautiously, not approaching. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Harry croaks, even though it's extremely obvious he isn't. Fred is asking if he's safe, and Harry is. "Gonna head home." Fred doesn't ask why. Perhaps (inevitably) he has seen the front page news or George or someone else has filled him in, if he isn't asking. And Harry knows his voice is raw and the skin around his eyes will be red and rashy from crying. He

knows Fred has now seen him hysterical. He knows George is out front trying to get a handle on the crowd on his own, get product off the shelves and smooth things over at the same time, or some unhappy combination of those things. Without capacity to feel guilt for it, Harry simply acknowledges these facts and moves on.

They head out the side door to the alleyway. Voldemort grips Harry's upper arm and apparates them away.

And as they arrive at the front door of Potter Manor, take the stairs to the master bedroom, and crawl atop the covers together, Harry laying flat over his husband, crying silently again, breathing calm and heart broken, he marvels that he said he was going home and wonders when exactly that began to mean this bed when he's only been here once in all his life.

Perhaps some would find it cold that Voldemort summons reading material and keeps himself occupied while Harry is so upset. Not Harry. It makes him feel less guilty for taking up so much of the day. Nagini slithers onto the bed and settles near their heads, slipping quickly into daytime sleep.

Harry wishes he could sleep. He wishes he could sleep for a very very long time, until all the problems of today are faded and worn and have gathered several inches of dust. But it's not to be. He lays there and alternates between trying to gather his thoughts and trying not to think anything at all. A hand strokes down his back once, and that's enough to go mind empty again. At least for a little while. A few different owls peck at the window. He cannot even begin to muster the energy or interest to let them in. They can enjoy the hospitality of the owlery until that changes.

That'll be Ron and Hermione. Molly and Arthur. Remus as well. The other Order members will know to give him space, like the others do, but also actually have the emotional distance to do so. If Hermione and any of the Weasleys knew how to actually find this place, he has no doubt the manor would be flooded with them, even if it meant skiving off work and school. And he loves them, loves them loves them loves them, but the last thing he wants is to be crowded. To be observed and fussed over and feel he has to put others at ease. No, in this way Voldemort's cool demeanor and lack of emotional availability is soothing, a cold glass of water in a scorching desert. Their bodies are lax in repose, laid out and plastered together. Both a bit bony, it shouldn't be as comfortable as it is.

If Harry were a better person, he'd have responded to those owls hours ago. Eventually he finds the willpower to drag himself from the bed to actually do it. The standard Hogwarts barn owl he handles first, sitting at the small desk in the corner of the master bedroom. He only has it in him to read and reply to one letter at a time.

Hermione and Ron's is desperate, rapidly penned as evidenced by the messy blotches of ink where she lingered at the end of a few sentences and didn't bother with a second draft. It asks if he's alright, can they come see him, does he need anything, what can they do?

Gently, in a way he can't believe he has capacity to be, Harry explains he's alright and that there's nothing they need to do, though it would be nice to see them sooner than next month. He thanks them for their letter, says they should Floo call soon, and says he'll write back tomorrow again, too.

The next is from Molly. This he spends more time on; she needs a certain effusive touch to smooth feathers for. But his reply is of a similar vein: 'I'm alright. See? I'm writing you and look, the parchment isn't even tear-stained. Surely that's a promising sign.' Remus's takes the longest. Takes a delicate balance of raw honesty and careful counterweight of reassurance. Harry's exhausted by the end. They aren't doing it on purpose – they're trying to support him. But when he collapses back into bed, most of the way on top of his unaffected husband and irritated pet monster-snake, all he can feel is relief it's done with and that at last he's where he belongs for today.

For the first time in a very long time, he wants to read *The Prophet*. And for once in his marriage, he feels like Voldemort might not let him, if only to avoid further histrionics and distraction from his preliminary efforts towards a ministerial position. Come to think of it, he *still* hasn't been arsed to mention that little tidbit to the Order. But on the other hand . . . perhaps warning them of it may count as political sabotage because they might work in opposition, or at least Harry might be informing them out of a desire for them to interfere. So perhaps his negligence and his fumbling and forgetfulness is all for the best.

It's one of those rare times where he feels he was the right man for this job.

Harry sleeps in the master bed that night and stays in it for most of the next day, shock fading into wallowing. Helpless to his own surprise at first, then actively choosing to stew in it all. Understandably, of course. But still, it's very against his nature to straight up lay in bed all day. Hard to recall a time it's ever really happened beyond various misadventures that laid him up in the medical wing. Re-growing bones, and so on.

He doesn't look at any newspapers, though he wants to rather badly. He owls Ron and Hermione again, and then, in absence of anything better to do, owls Molly and Arthur and Remus again too. Harry isn't sure he can go back to the joke shop.

Too many people crowding in, having a fresh set of painfully inappropriate questions now that they have new material, new avenues of questioning and therefore torment. Firecalling the twins is a simple matter once he musters the energy and nerve to do it. Though not connected fully to the Floo network, the fireplace in one of the living rooms is good for calling if not for transportation. "Potter Manor," Fred says. "I knew exactly where to call, when you needed. How could we forget?"

And in that case, Harry's rather glad of his little moment at the Burrow when everyone was first rallying after all this marriage business. Where he'd whirled on Ginny and made a plea for anyone else to please substantiate that what was happening in this house was objectively mad. Now, it feels like the madness is outside, the things he can't handle. And the calm is inside? Everything's all turned inside out. "Will you be alright to run the shop without me? I don't want to leave you two in the lurch."

" 'Tis no problem at all, fair lad! Whenabouts shall ye return? You don't have to answer now, just thought we'd ask."

"Um." Here Harry fumbles. "I'm not really sure . . . I, er, actually had another opportunity pop up, so to speak. Not sure about that one either, to be honest. But if you need me, of course that comes first. Say the word."

“Oh Harry, Harry, Harry, we’ve been running the place on our own since the beginning and we’ll do just fine with it now. Although – “

“You’ve opened our eyes – “

“With your earnest hard work – “

“And limber yet muscular body – “

“To the idea that perhaps more help would be, well – “

“Helpful!”

Harry chuckles a bit at their antics but shakes his head disapprovingly. “If you say so.”

The good cheer falls straight off his face within moments of the firecall ending, energy drained and feeling he’s letting them down even though they’ve just said that he hasn’t. None of them said it, but they all know why Harry doesn’t want to come back. And that reason blows.

There is a certain extent, when you’ve been through things, to which you will never outrun them. They aren’t calluses on the feet or scars or anything like that. They’re in the marrow, in the bones, as intrinsic to your ability to run as they are to you having a body at all. And that fucking blows, too.

Voldemort is present, it must be said, for most of Harry’s time spent wallowing and wandering around the manor. Some business takes him away at times, but that’s only natural. The only unusual part is that he takes Nagini with him.

The mystery endures.

Nagini can also often be found around Hedwig, not cuddling or anything like it, but still. Spending time, keeping an eye on each other perhaps. It’s cute. Harry likes the idea that his owl won’t be feeling all cooped up the way she probably did a fair portion of the previous years he’s had her. He knows how that feels and he doesn’t want that for her, never has. At the same time, it would be a lie to say he doesn’t worry from time to time that Nagini won’t try to take a chomp out of her. Unlikely and yet there’s still a nonzero chance of it. He comforts himself that Nagini is more than intelligent enough to understand how much trouble she would be in if she tried for it.

In the meantime, Harry pursues his own comforts with all his newfound leisure time. Perhaps he’ll make a nice trophy husband if this business with Ollivander’s doesn’t pan out.

Logging some hours in the hot spring does him good. Harry prunes and prunes until he’s basically dried fruit, and still doesn’t leave. Midday some number of days into Harry’s impromptu sabbatical, Voldemort returns from unnamed business outside the manor and emerges into the room that holds the hot spring. The brightness of the light from the doorway is nearly blinding after so long in the cave like confines of the windowless stone space. Harry’s practically a melted puddle of goo at this point, suspended in the water, well-relaxed

by the absence of people or worry or responsibility. Well, perhaps saying he had no worries was going a bit far. *Less* worry.

For once, Harry doesn't find himself hiding his soulmark. He's calm, soaked in all the good salts from the water or whatever it is hot springs do to make you feel better, and honestly if there's anyone he shouldn't worry about seeing the mark, it's his husband. 'AVADA KEDAVRA.' A being incapable of remorse, he's hardly going to be upset by it. No, Harry thinks as he calmly turns his head floating in the water to Voldemort and simply observes. If anything, he expects to see dark satisfaction. A solidification of possession – the closest a man like him could get to seeking a sense of belonging in another. In truth, he doesn't know what he sees pass over his husband's face, only that it lingers and glows in the dimness, as reflective in its darkness as the bright ripples of cool blue waters.

Evening the score, Voldemort begins to pull off his robes as he walks over to the sauna and the hooks lining the wall, watching Harry still. His eyes, not the scar, not the soulmark. Why is that making Harry weirdly emotional?

Voldemort slips his final layer off his shoulders with grace, his form truly a likeness of humanity without quite the reality of it. Harry would perhaps have time to note what exact components give away the game, were the words carved into the skin of his chest not suddenly a feast for Harry's fascination. '*What sort of magic do you teach, Professor Quirrell?*' they read.

Harry falls from his floating position to stand with an abrupt splash. "How – ? You were possessing him, not *becoming* him!" *I demand a refund!* Harry thinks. "Those can't count as the first words, they were to Quirrell, not you!"

Truly, it should not look natural on him at all to shrug, but the light lift of Voldemort's shoulders seems as careless as can be. He seems pleased enough with the result, if not the means. "Magic," Harry grumbles, feeling that it's all rather unfair. He supposes both wizards perhaps had equal ownership over Quirrell's body and the universe interpreted things that way. Harry turns in irritation and embarrassment as Voldemort steps out of his last vestiges of modesty and knots a towel around his hips. "Come, Harry." Voldemort reaches out with an open palm, zero doubt or nerves or self-questioning in a single inch of him. How can he be so certain of everything all the time? How can he know what Harry's going to do when even Harry doesn't know it yet? But come Harry does.

Walking out of the spring absolutely dripping, he follows Voldemort into the hot wooden coffin that is the sauna and immediately wants to leave again. "Urgh," he gurgles a little, wordlessly expressing complaint. They sit on the single bench built into the wall, door swinging shut on silent hinges. It's dark in here and his glasses have instantly fogged, so it's a bit of a leap when Harry reaches out in hopes of catching Voldemort's hand. It lands on his thigh instead and then Harry is too frightened to move it. Kindly, his husband lifts his hand and knots it with his own, sparing him some truly crushing humiliation. In the steam and darkness of the space, Harry feels more than sees Voldemort reach over to ladle mystery liquid onto a grill with hot coals roasting in their own heat underneath. Immediately, steam hisses furiously and chokes the room, making it harder to breath. What little moisture is left in Harry's throat from the rapid temperature change seems to crackle.

‘Did you have to?’ Harry wants to ask, but somehow talking just doesn’t seem to suit the moment. The heat is overwhelming and he discovers that if he leans his head on Voldemort’s shoulder, it brings him a little lower and the air is just a slight bit cooler. Testing it, he leans lower and feels that tiny measure of relief again. Voldemort must surely be wondering what the hell he’s up to, but he must feel that same compulsion to preserve the silence, the peace, because he doesn’t say anything. Gulping and bolstering himself, Harry slides down to the floor of the sauna and experiences instant gratification. It’s several degrees cooler and leagues less humid down here. He heaves a sigh of relief and unthinkingly sways to the side and leans on the side of Voldemort’s leg in satisfaction. Sprawling out his legs, one bent and one outstretched, Harry lays his arm along the edge of the bench and relaxes for real. His eyes slip closed, lashes brushing the soft towel covering Voldemort’s knee, cheek pressing close to the outside of his thigh.

They stay there for a long time not talking and unlike when they do that at meals, in the sauna it feels only appropriate. It’s not a place for chitchat, not for him anyway. It’s not even for reflection, really. It’s for not-thinking. Not-being. Just blissful absence.

But it’s too hot to stay forever. Eventually, which in reality is probably not all that long at all, Harry has to leave to cool off. In fact, he takes a few breaks just to breathe off some of the hot dry air. Dunking back into the spring actually feels like cooling off at this point, which speaks volumes for the kind of heat they’re subjecting themselves to. The wooden planks that form the sauna seem to click and resettle at times, even when neither of them has moved. By the second time Harry returns from taking a breather, he’s sitting on the floor without compunction, laying his head on Voldemort’s knee. Maybe it’s a little weird, but he likes it down here. Easier to breathe, less stressful, no need for eye contact. There’s a lot to be said for it, honestly.

“Ollivander offered me a job,” Harry says out of absolutely nowhere, eyes closed, feeling boneless. Well, perhaps that’s why.

Voldemort brushes a hand through his hair. “Oh?”

“Yeah, said I have the gift or the touch or whatever. I’d be good at making wands, he means.”

“That is fortunate indeed, my dear. Work well-suited to your nature.”

“Hmm,” Harry hums when he means to ask what he means when he says ‘your nature.’ Perhaps they really are soulmates after all, because Voldemort actually understands and interprets this correctly, despite the improbability. “To focus your efforts on objects, on your own two hands, with people being an incidental part of your daily work. That would be better in alignment with your nature.”

“Oh,” Harry says, and doesn’t disagree. A finger traces of the shell of his ear and he shudders in sudden delight. Damn, if he gets turned on in here he’s hardly going to be able to hide it, dressed as he is in sopping wet pants. The finger traces again, back up the edge, then leaves him in peace. Merlin wept.

He turns his face in closer, resists the urge to rub his cheek against the looped fabric of the towel. Practically feeling his eyelashes singe in the atmosphere of the hot coffin of the sauna,

Harry comes to accept he cannot take too much more heat or he's going to get woozy. But he doesn't want to leave. It's nice down here. Plus, he'll have to leave Voldemort behind. And since Harry has come to accept the blindingly horrific truth that he would rather not do that, he is feeling a little torn.

It's a strange wish, too, that he could stay right where he is on the floor and yet kiss his wizard at the same time. Lean his head on his knee and lock their mouths together at the same time – an impossibility. Harry manages to resist looking up at the man with begging eyes. Even now, he does have some pride. But when he turns to explain he has to either leave or expire, his face apparently has it written all over anyway. Voldemort regards him with some amusement, sedate from the heat but not sluggish. Pursing Harry's jaw between his fingers, this time he doesn't turn his head this way and that, though it seems to be something of a lazy examination anyway. He perches Harry's chin on his knee and taps two fingers on Harry's bottom lip, well, Harry is helpless not to gasp that slight bit needed to slip them inside. Already, he's flushed from heat. Already, he's sweating in a good way. Already, there's a low thrum of satisfaction in his bones. But this has him flash-flooding red, flushed, sweating, rampant thoughts spiraling out, not even sure what he's thinking, only knowing the bare sketch of what this imitates. The fingers press down lightly on his tongue and Harry's chest hitches with the quietest moan, wrapping closely around them. He doesn't know why he likes it. He doesn't know why he wants more. But these are the facts and they are undeniable. Not when he's kneeling there with Voldemort's fingers in his mouth and wants to stay precisely where he is even if it means wooziness and dehydration and ultimately expiration.

Harry wants to suck and before he can even think *Don't you even dare*, he's already done it. Doing it. His eyes flutter shut then open in strange pleasure at the weight on his tongue, his mouth being filled, his knees on the floorboards. Voldemort looks nearly as pleased as Harry feels, leaned back against the wall without a care in the world, eyes steady on Harry, on the suction around his fingers, petting a hand down the back of Harry's head. The fingers almost seem to move of their own accord, driven by their own purposes and motivations. They pull back and thrust the slightest bit and Harry has to close his eyes. He wants more. Even just having this makes him want more than anyone can possibly ever give. He imagines more in his mouth, a habit he can't break of cooking up new fantasies even as old ones are coming to life, and wants to rip the towel off of Voldemort and take him down all in one go until he chokes on it and can't breathe anymore and dies that way.

Slightly violent, definitely dirty, and incorrigibly hot to him, these thoughts are. Harry keeps his eyes closed shut until they fade away so Voldemort can't see them. Forgetting them is helped by the thrust of his fingers, the rub of finger print on taste bud, the way Harry finds himself carefully keeping his teeth out of the way and rounds his lips to shape his mouth more like a hole.

He'd feel restricted if he weren't already stripped down to his pants.

Watching Voldemort carefully for every little reaction, Harry feasts on seeing the man pleased. He strokes his tongue along the fingers moving in his mouth and flutters his lashes completely unbidden, thrilled by his own behavior. Is it really him doing this, being okay with this, *delighting* in this? Is it really him scooting closer, laying a hand on Voldemort's thigh, unmoving but deadly?

Voldemort withdraws his fingers and drags them over Harry's lips again and again, wetting the area the way a cock or pussy might smear fluid around. Harry's mouth hangs open, desiring of fingers, of everything, anything. He doesn't get it. The little noise he makes when Voldemort's hand draws away will haunt his waking dreams. Holding out open hands, Voldemort invites Harry up.

Immediately, he's clamoring off the floor and into his husband's lap, cupping the man's face to kiss and kiss and kiss. Voldemort feeds him his tongue again and it's so much of what Harry wants, needs. Harry's burning alive, god it's hot in here, god he loves it. He finds himself moving over his lap, legs on either side, sitting properly. It puts them close in height, Voldemort still sprawled out and hands resting easy and relaxed on Harry's hips. Harry compensates for his energy level with enthusiasm at first, wanting to buck and rub off against the man, practically already giving him a glorified lap dance. But with extensive touch, with the ease and tranquility emanating from him, Harry settles down. Sucking on the tongue in his mouth, he moves more slowly as he tilts his head to go deeper.

They slow and slow as the reality of the heat of the room creeps back into Harry, makes his literal thirst far more obvious. He's feeling incredibly overheated and for once Voldemort's skin isn't cool to the touch enough to relieve it. Harry sits back and isn't sure if the tilt and lean of the room is him slumping or the manor shifting in place. Extraordinarily sweaty, in clear need of multiple gallons of water and want of an ice cold shower, still Harry doesn't move. He rests his forearms on Voldemort's shoulders and hangs his head. Why is this so difficult?

Hands stroke his sensitive sides, then cup his face. Voldemort pulls him close to press his mouth to Harry's scarred forehead and breathe him in. He holds Harry there for a moment. Releasing him, Voldemort says, like it's normal, like it's fine, like it isn't an arrow stabbing straight for his heart – "Sweet boy," and it's a punch to gut, a good one, a devastating one – "let us take our leave, lest the heat take you entirely." Harry's been called *boy* a great many times in his life, has been called many things in fact, positive, negative, venerating, hateful, and it has never never been like this. Harry hopes Voldemort knows what he's doing with his words because with them he holds more power than Harry could have ever possibly imagined. *Be careful with me*, Harry thinks and doesn't know how to say. Instead he hugs Voldemort close for a moment, too, and prays only for good things.

Wobbly and most certainly woozy, Harry stands on unsteady legs and stumbles out of the sauna to immediately dunk himself into the hot spring. Even that is still an improvement. He drags himself out of the water, towels himself off sloppily, follows Voldemort like a duckling up to the master bedroom and leaves thoughtless wet footprints in his wake, off in dreamland. His husband smiles at him, quietly but indulgent, and directs Harry to his own bathroom. Disappointed but satisfied with touch for now, Harry hugs him close one more time in revolt. Their chests brush and it sends a jolt straight through Harry's system, feeling his nipple brush against Voldemort's skin and Voldemort's brush against his. He's uniquely warm like this and Harry fights the urge to cradle him close and keep him. Their soulmarks are touching. They're only separating for a moment, hardly any time at all. Just long enough for a shower and a change of clothes. But it's hard again anyways. And as they part and wash and dress and reunite and dine and retire, Harry knows this is probably going to be a problem.

Chapter End Notes

Marking this fic as an unknown number of chapters gave me Big Anxiety, so I really appreciate people's understanding of moving around the chapter count - it was my happy medium. This story's gonna be in the ballpark of about another couple chapters. See you in the next one! (ノ● 7 ●)ノ*:・° ☆

Easy, Tiger

Chapter Summary

Things would go back to normal, if there were a normal to go back to.

Chapter Notes

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

Harry dreams of sex.

Dreaming in the way of daytime fantasy and less so at night. Sometimes as he lays there and waits for sleep to pull over him like a blanket, thinking about it then but not much in the land of true dreams.

He imagines what it would be like, what it *will* feel like, and hopes he's not overhyping things. It feels like prayer, like something soul-bound and on a matter of the spiritual. Surely sex can't mean all those things, and yet.

The kissing alone is driving him mad. Harry's embarrassed by his own reactions, his erections, his eagerness, his . . . obedience, for lack of a better word. God, he wishes there were other words.

The night before Harry plans to go to Ollivander's, he invites himself into Voldemort's bed, following him from the dining room to the study, picking a book at random and reading about magical species of frogs until the man retires. Then he follows Voldemort upstairs, doesn't ask and doesn't comment, only walks at his heels and peels away only to change into pajamas in his own bedroom.

It's a tentative knock that he gives to the double doors of the master suite. But he braves it all the same. He needs the comfort. Needs it, needs it.

Door slipping open, Voldemort looks pleased to see him. It's in the eyes. That's what Harry sees, anyway. He pulls Harry into the room, to the bed, under the covers and hugged close. Nagini hisses quietly, something or other about them being bothersome. Harry doesn't care. The sheets are cool and untouched, like Voldemort hadn't laid down yet, like he'd been waiting for Harry, like he'd wanted him here. It's imaginative, certainly, but it pleases Harry down to his bones. To be predicted, wanted. Understood. Words are secondary.

He slides into sleep at just the optimal temperature, held in just the way he'd hoped. And wonders idly if perhaps all this focus on physicality isn't just a distraction from how upset he is at basically everything else going on in his life. It's a well-timed speculation, in that it occurs just before sleep and he has plausible deniability for not remembering it in the morning.

Harry leaves the manor with a peck on Voldemort's cheek and one on his own, the most humiliatingly/hauntingly/damningly domestic thing they do besides, well, living together. The morning air is brisk, bluish in the burgeoning dawn light. This is when Diagon begins to awaken, as empty as it gets without truly being dead. Harry apparates to his usual spot and gives the stealthily hidden Death Eater guards the opportunity to follow him to the wand shop. It's another tentative knock, the one he gives the front door. He contemplates the window panes of the storefront for a while, the simple display of a few wands with lovingly crafted handles, and is just about to try and find a back entrance instead when Ollivander opens the front door and pops his head out.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," Ollivander says, completely unsurprised to see him without any prior warning but totally unsmug about it either. "I see you've made it here. Come in, come in," he ushers Harry within.

The shop is just as dim and dusty as he remembered it, lined with slim wand boxes floor to ceiling. Ollivander leads him past the counter and into the back. It feels like sacrilege, honestly. A peek behind the curtain.

In the back of the building, there's a surprisingly large workshop. Objects are paired together on every available surface, carefully organized in an unknown but clearly strict system. There's another crate of unsorted items on the floor.

With zero lead in, no discussion of terms of employment, or pay, or hours, the old man says, "Today, you'll be matching ingredients together to hone your natural sense for compatibility."

He points to a small table with the final remaining available surface area. "You'll make use of this table. Do not disturb the other ingredients in this room. I shall know if any have been moved," Ollivander warns in a mild tone that does far more to intimidate Harry than if he'd shouted it in his face, which Harry is far more used to. Harry gulps, then nods. With no further instruction, Ollivander turns and putters back out of the workshop.

Harry stares dumbly at the crate for a minute, then sighs. Literally and metaphorically rolling up his sleeves, he gets to work.

When he comes back to himself and looks down, the table is covered in wandmaking ingredients with only an inch or two separating paired objects. He ran out of room, he realizes, looking at the twig in his hand with surprise. Setting it back down in the half-empty crate, Harry admires the apparent progress.

It looks rather like the rest of the room, now. That pleases Harry, the successful emulation. He's usually bad at most things. This had come easily. And Harry either does things extremely well with intuition, or very poorly indeed, even in spite of effort. Which, to be fair, he rarely puts in too much of.

He goes to find the wandmaker. Ollivander's reorganizing boxes in the front, again by some completely unknown system. If Harry had to bet, it would be by wand core, then by length, then by wood. He's probably wrong though.

“I’m finished,” he announces quietly and Ollivander follows him into the back to inspect his work.

“Very nicely done, Mr. Potter. Very well done, indeed.” Harry tries not to be too pleased with himself. “That will be enough for today. Come back tomorrow and we’ll continue on to woodworking.” Tomorrow? Harry glances out the window and has to double-take at the angle of the sun. It’s midday, nearly afternoon.

“Thank you, sir. Um, about the job – “

“You’ll be my apprentice. Not a terribly well-paid position, as is tradition, but enough to suffice . . . “

“That’s fine by me,” Harry rushes to say. “What hours do I need to be here?”

“Whatever hours so please you. Only be sure to come when you most need to,” Ollivander says, cryptic as ever.

“Er, right. I’ll be back tomorrow morning then. And plan to work Monday to Friday or something along those lines and we’ll just keep the hours flexible, like you said. Um, thanks again, sir, I really appreciate you bringing me on.”

“Never mind that, Mr. Potter. You’re exactly where you need to be,” he says and promptly shoos Harry out the door. Harry hardly has time to slip on his cloak of invisibility in time to avoid becoming a spectacle on the busiest street in wizarding Britain at high noon.

Hopefully, his little Death Eater shadows aren’t panicking at him becoming completely undetectable. Or perhaps hopefully they are, he thinks with a sudden evil inspiration. He grins to himself.

Dipping into a little sandwich shop serving Diagon Alley’s hungriest and most on the go, Harry slips around the deli counter and snags a ham and cheese, leaving the correct coin on the counter with a hefty tip. He’s back out and on his way to the joke shop in a flash. Peeking in the front windows, it doesn’t look as busy as he remembers it being at this time of day, but then perhaps that’s just a matter of perspective. He sneaks to the back of the shop and through the unlocked side door. Fred’s hunched over his latest creation, muttering to himself, so absorbed in his project he doesn’t even notice Harry slipping inside.

“You’ve really got to start locking that door,” Harry says loudly, spooking Fred like a horse and causing a minor explosion of blue fumes as he loses his delicate hold of the invention.

Fred turns to look at him, face streaked in blue with his hair blown straight up. Harry can’t help a laugh and that really just sets them both off. George surely must be wondering what Fred’s howling in laughter about back here. “Your face – “ Harry starts and can’t gather composure enough to finish. Instead he pulls out his wand and transfigures a discarded pair of scissors into a mirror and holds it up to Fred.

“Oh sweet Merlin,” Fred says, gingerly touching fingers to the powdery blue streaks striping his face. “This is the best I’ve ever looked. I love it Harry, I simply love it.”

“Very dashing,” Harry agrees. “Artistic.”

“Yes, rather avant-garde.” Harry doesn’t know the word, so he doesn’t disagree. Instead, he holds up his sandwich and says, “Lunch?”

Fred smiles in accord and goes off to fetch Mrs. Weasley’s finest portable offerings. Over lunch, Fred catches Harry up on happenings with the store. “Think we’ll hire someone from our year to fill in, some of them still aren’t sure what their plan is. Speaking of, what was that oh so teasingly mentioned business opportunity that popped up?”

“Oh, er,” Harry starts. “I . . . guess I’m working for Ollivander?”

Fred startles, then looks pleased for him. “How on earth did you manage that, you ambitious young man?”

“Just sort of happened, really. We literally bumped into each other.”

“Huh,” Fred says and doesn’t add anything to it for a moment. Harry fills the brief silence. “Um, Fred, about the other day . . .” Harry doesn’t know how to finish.

“The other day?” Fred asks. “Oh, you mean the week before last. Yes.” He doesn’t ask any questions, something bizarrely tentative for one of the twins but sorely needed on Harry’s part.

“I forgot to ask,” Harry explains. “How you, er, how you knew to call –” He cuts himself off.

Fred looks at him carefully then, concern softly pinching his brow. “You were asking for him, Harry.”

“I . . . was?” If that’s true, Harry doesn’t remember it all. Frightening.

“Yeah, you were pretty upset. We were very worried for you. M’not trying to make you feel bad, just wanted to say that we all care about you and, well, we’re here for you. Whenever you need. Anything you need.” *You don’t need to turn to the likes of Him for comfort*, Harry hears unsaid and almost definitely imagined.

“Right. I mean, thank you. I’m doing better now,” Harry stumbles through, critically under experienced in discussing deeper emotions with a Weasley. He tries to shake off the shock of being told he said words he doesn’t even remember. “In fact, I think I might ask some of the blokes in Gryffindor to see if we can meet up at the Hog’s Head soon. Might have to ask McGonagall for permission, though.”

It’s difficult to resist a shudder at the potentially stern disapproval of the new Headmistress at asking some of the old crew out for a pint of butterbeer for something as frivolous as his own whimsy. But he’ll do it anyway, if it’ll put his friends and chosen family at ease. Plus, he really does want to see the guys. It’s also a pretty tidy way to avoid Hermione’s tearful need for reassurance when all Harry wants to do is pretend newspapers and the Dursleys and the first eleven years of his life don’t exist. “Want to come?”

“Better leave it to the younger generation,” Fred says, speaking on both him and George’s behalf. Even when pressed, he assures Harry he’s quite sure.

“Well then, would it be alright if I stopped by to share lunch every now and then, seeing as we work so close by?”

“Why Harry, we’ll be most cross with you if you dare not! Do come by whenever you please.” That’s twin-speak for ‘yes.’

“Great, I’ll be seeing you tomorrow then. So long, Gred,” Harry says, brushing the crumbs off the cheesecloth the sandwich came in and folding it to stick in his pocket.

“So long, Harry!” Fred calls as Harry heads out. He apparates home with a loud, satisfying crack.

After dinner, he pens a letter to McGonagall inquiring very politely if it might be possible to meet a few of the Gryffindor boys in Hogsmeade on Saturday evening, so as not to disturb goings on at the school. It feels incredibly self-important of him, but also he has to be realistic. He does not want to be crowded or stifled or bombarded. But he does want to see his friends. This is neatest solution to that quandary. He ends the letter by thanking her for considering his request and congratulates her on the new role, as sad of circumstances made it possible. Harry wishes her all the best, and means it.

He doesn’t even pretend to want to sleep in his own bed and is rewarded for it. Voldemort should be too cool to the touch to be pleasant to sleep next to, among many many other potential objections. But he’s not and it’s nice. Against everything, it’s nice.

Harry still doesn’t know what to do with that.

Kissing Voldemort goodnight is surreal, chaste, and god that’s even stranger.

The second day of the apprenticeship is equally low key, Ollivander showing him the ropes on fundamentals of working with wood, or ‘letting the wood shape itself’ as he put it. Whatever that means, Harry’s got no clue. He shares another lunch with George while Fred works the front, all rather pleasant and falling weirdly quick into normalcy.

Back at home, Harry finds himself seeking out his husband automatically, now very accustomed to a certain routine. It takes some searching to find him in the sunroom, writing and soaking in the rays of sunlight. “There you are,” Harry says, walking towards him, the armchair facing partially away.

There’s no other seating nearby, Harry realizes with a gulp, stomach swooping suddenly. He rounds the chair to face Voldemort, who looks at him with glittering eyes. “I see you’re busy,” Harry adds. “I can just keep you company. If you don’t mind.” And then he’s kneeling before he’s even fully decided not to be embarrassed and just go for it. He lazes with his back against the seat of the chair, elbow rested on Voldemort’s knee casually, possibly too casually, perhaps he’ll lose the arm. This isn’t the hot box of the sauna and there’s no excuse for the strangeness of the behavior, but the habit’s been formed and dammit Harry likes it. He

doesn't love that he likes it, but like it he does. After a moment of pause, long fingers card forwards through his hair to gently grip and tilt his head back against the cushion.

Harry glances back at Voldemort from this position, eyelashes fluttering as he adjusts to the odd perspective. The Dark Lord's already turning back to his writing. And it's in this moment that Harry wonders if perhaps the man doesn't sometimes think he's been manipulated, too.

Sadly for all, Harry doesn't possess that sort of talent.

For all that it's not a sauna, there is still an atmospheric difference down here. Things seem quieter, the sharp edges of his thoughts dulled and blurry. He hears something big rustle in the plant life populating the room. Nagini.

Leaving his head on the cushion, Harry closes his eyes to bright warm sunlight. Finger pads stroke lightly over his brow, lengths of hair still carded through, a heavy palm resting on top of his skull.

Perhaps he dozes a bit, he's not really sure. But his thoughts are light and fluid, pleasant enough. He wonders what Ron and Hermione are up to. Feels glad to be rid of potions and divination and history of magic. His lips quirk up as he imagines the squabbles they must be having about keeping to Hermione's study schedule, with Ron wanting to focus on Quidditch and Ginny encouraging it and Hermione focused on years into the future, what they'll do with their lives. His smile fades a bit as he comes to think on his own future. What will fill his days? He's really already living his future, skipped several steps ahead. Apprenticed. Home ownership. Married. All that's missing are some kids and a white picket fence. Christ.

Ron may have mentioned something along the lines of "You wouldn't believe how awkward it was waiting for you to get to Stonehenge that morning" under his breath at one point. The fact of being married so young as well, and under such strange circumstances. This must all be rather hard for others to wrap their heads around - Harry himself has had enough difficulty with that.

It's not like it's bad. If anything . . . well, it's not like it's bad. But it's so very strange to think he already knows what's next for him, when all his life as a wizard has been defined by immense unpredictability.

A finger sneaks down to trace the lines around his mouth, a question. One Harry doesn't answer. Instead, he shifts his arm higher and turns his face to Voldemort's leg to tuck himself close. He keeps his eyes closed, wanting to be further away from the thought that his future's already been decided – by necessity, by fate, by his own rash decisions. Harry rubs at his face and tries not to think about it.

Still stroking, Voldemort's hand turns its idle attention to the side of Harry's head, going lock by lock to tug and smooth his hair. Harry never wants to leave.

By the time Voldemort's finally setting down his writings, Harry's halfway to dreamland, in a lovely midway point between sleep and choosing what direction dreams may take, plotlines spiraling out in his mind without true endings. Many of them involve touch, which Harry has no qualms with. At the sound of the papers rustling, Harry sits up a little and turns on his

knees to look at him. Voldemort's eyes are still on his work, but Harry only has eyes for the man's lap. Something about facing forward towards the room on his knees feels calming, and something about facing away from it and towards Voldemort feels very, very different . . .

He feels a flush creeping up his neck already, but still can't look away. All the skin contact has been soothing today and now he's feeling all warmed up. Wanting more. He glances up at Voldemort's face, then back to his lap. It's not like he's hard or anything. But he could be. Harry could – Harry could do it. Make that happen. He could. He very well might. His hands slide up the smooth fabric of Voldemort's robes on the outside of his thighs. That grabs his attention alright.

Voldemort's eyes snap to his and the man fucking smirks. And Harry, damn him, isn't even put off by it. No, if anything – well.

Harry parts the black robes, one layer then another. One more. He can almost smell –

His mouth waters as his husband's cock is revealed after the final bit of fabric is pulled away. It's a quarter of the way to hardness, just beginning to flush, probably from all the friction and sudden attention. And the *smell*. Harry drags himself closer between Voldemort's legs which now sprawl. Voldemort leans his chin on his fist and simply observes.

Despite all his fantasies of doing this and having this done to him, Harry's not one hundred percent sure what happens next.

Apparently lacking any interest in guiding Harry through, Voldemort says nothing, does nothing, only watches, still with that self-satisfied look about him. Bastard. And yet Harry is wanting all the same. Wanting enough to pull closer, lean forward, and taste – just tongue to tip, just to get a sense for the flavor, and he's not expecting it. He knows it's supposed to taste foul, that boys aren't supposed to like doing this, that he should be demanding he receive and never expect to provide in return.

But . . .

It's fantastic. Strange, bitter, and musky, Harry buries himself even closer to take a longer lick to the plumping cock in front of him. And when that's not enough, he takes the head into his mouth and sucks, hard. Voldemort's chest rises and falls, but he makes no noise. Harry'll have to do better than that. And honestly? The soft skin in his mouth, shape of it, the flavor – it's bliss. He knows intellectually it's not supposed to be, but it is. There's no taste to acquire here; Harry already loves it.

Harry goes for gold and bobs his head down, as far as he can go. He promptly chokes and splutters and even that feels good. What the hell?

He does it again.

A moan sounds off above him and he wants that vibration in his chest, his mouth, his soul. It's the first of many pleased sounds that ring in his ears like wedding bells, cheerful and altogether lovely.

In no time at all, Harry's bobbing his head and taking the man's lengthening cock in his mouth like a champ. He sucks, twirls his tongue, keeps his teeth away, but most of his attention goes towards the marvelous slick friction in his mouth, the fullness. Voldemort's hand rests itself flat where his neck meets his skull and doesn't push or shove. Only has waiting potential to. It's motivation enough to purposefully choke himself on cock again, going down lower than he really ought to. God, why isn't it terrible? Why does something so humiliating have to feel so good? He can barely breathe but in sort of the best way.

Spit's dripping down, everything wet and messy. Harry's deepening his downstrokes of the head until every downward movement ends in his airway being blocked almost entirely. He feels his eyes water and tears begin to drip down his face, too. Breathing through his nose as best he can, Harry perseveres, not that it's some great hardship. He honestly can't even help himself anymore. It feels too good, even though it's uncomfortable as fuck, it's still amazing. He's powerless against the urge to ram Voldemort's cock down his throat as far as it will go. It takes time for him to notice the sounds coming out of his own mouth, strange whining and moaning things that worry and turn him on at the same time.

His glasses are half-fogged, so he could barely make out the expression on Voldemort's face if he tried and genuinely, he hasn't been moved to check because he's been so focused on the cock in front of him he really rather forgot all about the man attached to it for a minute there. All he knows is that his instinct is to move faster, harder. So he does, and inevitably there's an eruption. Streams of come spill forth, thankfully on an upstroke. Harry swallows it all down the best he can and find his head still bobbing senselessly, trying to choke himself again on softening cock that becomes harder and harder to fit down his throat. He keeps trying and hears himself in distress, doesn't know why he's feeling panicked and upset at the loss, mouthing at the cock to try and coax it back to hardness again on instinct, hands scrabbling on legs. It doesn't work and Harry wants to cry.

Hands lift his face away until the cock falls from Harry's mouth entirely and he registers himself making a terrible sound. Fingers shove into his mouth until it's full again and his cheek is laid on Voldemort's thigh, close to where he'd been before when he was getting the real thing. He can still smell the musky smell and the taste of him coats his tongue entirely. Harry bobs his head a little and sucks until the fingers move for him, shifting and out. Harry sighs and lets his eyes close, not that he could see all that much with his glasses partially fogged up. There's a hand gripping the back of his neck, too, grounding. He lets it all happen and now he doesn't have to do anything, just allow the fingers in his mouth to move as they please, which pleases him in turn.

He knows he needs to be embarrassed, that this is objectively strange, but it feels so right and he's too out of his head for actual embarrassment to register. Instead he just focuses on the gentle thrust of fingers, sucks, and basks in his own arousal. He did a good job. He did, didn't he?

A glance up at Voldemort tells him everything he needs to know. The Dark Lord looks almost unfamiliar, something different about his face. Harry can't place it. "Greedy boy," his husband calls him in low tones. "Why don't you go ahead and touch yourself?" It's not really a question. And Harry doesn't want it to be. He's realizing now he really doesn't want anything to be. He wants to be told what to do.

Harry presses the heel of his hand to his dick and hisses. The zipper has been hurting him and he hadn't even noticed. He unbuttons and unzips carefully, sighing through his nose in relief. Slipping himself out of his boxers, Harry strokes himself bizarrely gently for how turned on he is. Perhaps it's the lulling effect of the fingers moving in his mouth, of the satisfaction of a job well done. Of how beautiful everything seems to be when he's down here on his knees in front of a man who, against every impossibility, takes good care of him. Just the thought of it has him leaking precum. He makes searing eye contact with Voldemort as he begins to quake, the beginning rumbles of a fantastic finish. The air nearly seems to sizzle between them. It's with great tragedy that Harry can't help but close his eyes as he comes, fluid spilling over his fingers and making a mess. He moans long and hard, with feeling. Then wilts against Voldemort's leg, totally slumped over and exhausted. Lax and limp, he doesn't fight when the fingers leave his mouth, when Voldemort scoops him up and deposits Harry in his lap with minimal effort on Harry's part.

When lips press to his, to the side of his face, to his hair, and back again. Voldemort's tongue slips inside, searching. Harry meets it weakly, kissing back shyly not only from hesitation that Voldemort won't mind the taste but also from exhaustion. His mouth just got a workout. As Voldemort explores deeper, Harry responds with gathering strength. He lays both hands on the sides of Voldemort's face and strokes thumbs over the corners of his eyes, the little lines there. It makes something inside him melt, the tenderness, the closeness, the intimacy. He feels like he can hardly string a thought together, only feeling feelings, not thinking thoughts.

Floating, just like he'd always dreamed of.

And as Voldemort's tongue reluctantly withdraws, as he draws down the line of Harry's throat to suck a kiss there, the feeling only swells and lulls. His mouth parts on a moan as Voldemort digs teeth in. The sound is loud. And lewd. It nearly makes his cock twitch heroically, hearing himself like that.

God, that's good. Voldemort abuses the flesh there until Harry's quite sure the mark will never fade. He's really quite sure he'd prefer it didn't. Although, feeling at what height it's been made, he realizes he'll be wearing a turtleneck for more than a couple days. That puts a dopey smile on his face, too.

Hands on his soulmate's bare head, he soaks in all the skin contact like a dry sponge. If Voldemort's arms weren't circled around him, Harry would probably tilt over and be on the floor from how floppy and happy he feels. He presses his lips to Voldemort's head as the other man finishes making his deep mark, breathing him in the way he's always seeming to do to Harry. And he does smell good, which Harry recalls thinking he has no right to do. But right or wrong, it's true. Harry would be content to spend all day just like this.

Cool air and fabric brushes against Harry's most intimate area as Voldemort moves to withdraw from his throat. Harry realizes very suddenly that he's still exposed and rushes to tuck himself back into his pants and zip back up. Voldemort regards him indulgently. "Why so shy, my soulmate?" he queries, palm on Harry's cheek, brushing over the sensitive skin there. "What's mine is yours, is it not? To have and to hold," he squeezes the arm wrapped around Harry like an iron bar. A comforting iron bar, let it be said. "As long as we both shall

live,” Voldemort smiles in truth now, knows Harry’s in on the secret that according to him they’ll be living on an indefinite basis. Even in bizarre infatuation, Harry can recognize it’s an eerie sight.

“Right,” Harry says, with growing boldness. “So give me what I want . . . “ He can’t quite manage to finish, to say it.

“What might that be, brave boy?” Voldemort gazes at him with shining eyes, some internal, infernal light glowing from within. Harry is well and truly bedding down with the devil.

Harry still can’t manage it, so he kisses him again instead. *I want you inside of me*, he thinks. *Always. I’m always with you.*

Perhaps it’s not the day for it, Harry emotionally fatigued from his first foray into oral and them both well spent. But soon, he promises himself. Soon.

Voldemort obliges him with long, tongue-involved kisses, until Harry begins to flag. He climbs off the man’s lap at Voldemort’s prompting, whose legs must surely be asleep. But no, he stands without difficulty and his parted robes fall seamlessly back into place. Now that’s a trick.

Harry’s the wobbly one, which seems incredibly unfair. An owl taps at one of the circular windows to the sunroom that actually open. He wobbles over to it and lets one of the handsome brown owls in, with a letter tied to its leg stamped with the Hogwarts seal. McGonagall’s written back – and provided approval. *All my best wishes to you, Mr. Potter. Please let me know if there’s anything I can do to be of service.*

Christ.

Harry wonders if he can dine out on everyone’s pity and guilt for the rest of his allegedly long, long life.

Perhaps he can test it out with the boys. He writes to Ron after dinner, inviting the tighter knit circle – Neville, Dean, Seamus. Makes Harry appreciate how many of his friends are girls. Harry suggests the Hog’s Head on Sunday night. Perhaps around nine?

Ron writes back with tangible awe at Harry’s success with McGonagall. He confirms the four boys will attend and Harry answers McGonagall’s letter with the confirmed time and place and people so her students aren’t believed to be misplaced. The week zips by, Harry going to Ollivander’s when he wants to and not when he doesn’t. He flies around the lands surrounding the manor, coming to a true appreciation for how remote their location really is, just how far those tall pale grass fields stretch. He could scream in bed for hours and no one would hear him.

How he’s managing to make geography sexual he’ll never know, but bless him he’s doing it.

Getting to the Hog’s Head is as simple as the flick of a wand and Harry loops his little guards in, now used to the extra step in going about his day. Harry stayed late at Ollivander’s to while away the time, then the joke shop once the old wandmaker went home. It felt good to

finally wrap up his tidying of the stockroom, purely on a volunteer basis. Maybe he's still feeling an ounce guilty about leaving the twins in the lurch, no matter what they say.

He heads over early and collects a butterbeer from the magnetically blue-eyed barkeep, seating himself at a table in the middle of the run-down pub and content to wait. He doesn't have to for long, can hear the rowdy boys before he can see them.

Spilling through the door they come, calling his name warmly, happy faces. Harry lights up. He's pulled into a few friendly hugs, pat roughly on the back in that peculiar boyish way. They all sit and then it's off to the races. "Boy, Harry, when you cook up a way to skip seventh year, you really don't go halfway!"

Harry's helpless not to laugh at Seamus and light-heartedly quips, "Anything to get out of another year of Potions."

"I swear, Slughorn is even worse this year. Somehow even . . . sluggier," Ron pitches in.

"Didn't think it was possible to dislike the subject more than I already did, but every year just proves me wrong," Neville adds, shaking his head. "Least we get to specialize a little more."

The blue-eyed barkeep doesn't come to take their order and instead just brings them five firewhiskeys and leaves without comment. The Gryffindor boys call out their thank yous and the man just grunts with his back turned, going back to his polishing of the bar.

Harry asks after everyone's specialized classes, treading carefully around the potentially sensitive topic of future career plans. Dean blows that out of the water when he points around the circle and goes, "Auror? Auror?" It's three yeses out of five.

"Herbology for you then, Neville?" Harry asks. He takes a leisurely sip of his firewhiskey, then nearly spits it out again. He forgot how much he actually doesn't like it.

"What else?" Neville answers with a wry smile. "You know me."

"Have you considered the shop on Diagon Alley, by the broom store? Nice fellow running the place."

"I haven't, actually. Gran wants me to do something more prestigious and I've been so busy arguing with her about it, I haven't given much thought to the logistics. Thanks Harry, I'll check it out." Neville looks appreciative of the nudge and guidance.

"Well Harry," Seamus says, putting a small lurch in Harry's stomach, worried for what he might say. "I think the question of the hour is what in the hell you're going to do next. We're all dying to know."

Who all is included in 'we,' Harry doesn't care to know. "Actually, I've started working at Ollivander's . . ."

"No way!" Ron shouts, nearly pouncing out of his seat, then pipes down after a sharp glare from the old barkeep. Harry sips at the firewhiskey again, hating the taste but enjoying the soothing burn in his throat. "How did that not come up in the letters?!?"

“I don’t know Ron,” Harry answers sarcastically. “How did it not come up through the ‘grapevine’?” Ron colors and falls quiet. Harry only feels a little guilty.

Dean fills the quiet pause. “You’re apprenticed, then?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty interesting stuff. Not too many wandmakers out there, they could always use a few more.”

“No need to be humble, Harry,” Seams says, swaying into him and yep, a glance down shows two thirds of his firewhiskey’s already gone. “It’s that special Potter touch, no doubt about it.”

““Special Potter touch?”” Harry asks, at a loss.

“You know, that thing you always do where you’re incredibly mediocre at everything unless you’re surprisingly really really good at it.”

“. . . ‘Surprisingly?’”

Seamus shoves him.

That sets the tone for the night, good cheer, friendly pushing and shoving, drinks steadily consumed at an impressive pace. Harry finishes his glass and is well on his way through another, coming to mind the taste less now that he’s taking the time to sip at it.

“Gryffindor’s showing hasn’t been too bad this year,” Ron is saying, “but it’s not what it could be.” And how very amazing, to realize Harry hadn’t even considered the impact his absence would have on the house’s chances for the quidditch season, for the cup. And how very little he cares even now.

Dean and Seamus argue over the merits of the Ravenclaw beaters based on the latest match and Harry can see that tuned-out look in Neville’s eye. Never had been one much for sports, that one. He leans in and quietly asks, “Got your words yet, Neville?”

Neville looks down. “No, not just yet.” He sighs, then seems to rally. “But soon. I can feel it, you know? Sometimes you just . . . know.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.” They fall into contemplative silence. Ron is watching them. “And you, Ron?” He shakes his head, negative, then gazes thoughtfully into his glass.

Harry can sense his hope, his longing. These blokes have no idea what they’re missing and he knows better than to say it. They don’t have a clue what they’re in for, if the standard for having a soulmate is anything like what he’s experienced so far. Which, to be fair, it might not be. But Harry can hope. Everyone deserves what he has now. Everyone.

Dean already has his, Harry knows from prior gossip. But the words, as best the Gryffindor can recall, haven’t been spoken yet, so even that’s delayed. It seems so incredibly cruel for young people to have to wait. But it’s typical; it can take many years for soulmates to actually meet each other. Or words can happen so early and be so commonplace that it’s nigh on impossible to parse out who it might have been. There’s a big market for magical diaries to

keep track of every person you meet so you never forget a face, so to speak - or rather, a potential match. To record the first words exchanged. Harry'd never seen the point and clearly it's worked out fine for him. Always seemed a bit obsessive, honestly. If it happens, it happens.

"How, er . . . How is that going for you, by the way, Harry?" Seamus interjects awkwardly, scratching the back of his head as if he doesn't really want to ask but honest to god can't help himself.

Harry sits back, glass in hand. "Oh, you know." He waits, all eyes on him. "Smashingly." Harry lets himself grin like it's a joke, when really he's smiling because he's happy. The other boys don't laugh though, not properly. The next sip of firewhiskey goes down more smoothly than all those before it.

"Y'know Harry – " Neville starts, certainly about to muster the courage to say something about not having to keep the status quo if he doesn't want to, screw the consequences, and Dean looks like he's about to do something similar. Ron? Ron knows better.

"I'm not exactly a damsel in distress, guys. Don't you worry about me, I'll be fine. We know how to handle each other." Ron coughs rapidly in distress, pounding on his own chest with eyes bugging out. Normally Harry would worry about that, but the whiskey has him feeling liquid and lazing. He really can't be bothered to be bothered.

"Speaking of, I was sorry to hear about that article," Dean adds, damningly. "We had no idea, we never did – "

The look on Harry's face is almost as quick to cut him off as the words are. "I don't want to talk about that." It's said fast, firm, final. Harry barely recognizes his own voice, it's that cold.

All is silent for a moment, before the barkeep comes round to silently refill their glasses once again. Harry sits back again and sighs. "Tell me about some inter-house drama?"

And even though he's sure there can't possibly be more than they've already unloaded, there indeed proves to be yet more.

He's giggling himself silly into his however-manyieth glass of firewhiskey when a burst of cool air filters through the bar and his friends grow quiet and wan and seem to slowly shrink into their seats. The ambient sounds of the Hog's Head dim and dim until they're not there at all and the Gryffindor boys' eyes sit wide in their sockets. Harry looks over his shoulder in drunken confusion.

It's Voldemort, black hood drawn and towering behind him like a great looming Dementor. He holds out a pale spidery hand to Harry.

"Oh!" Harry exclaims. "Is it that time already?" He draws his wand to cast what surely must be the world's sloppiest tempus charm. 12:01 it reads. "Well damn. Sorry boys, got to go."

Harry fishes out a handful of coins from his money pouch without looking and foists them onto the table, some spinning on their sides. He clamors over the bench with an inebriated wobble, stabilizing himself with Voldemort's hand and waving goodbye to the other Gryffindors, who he will only later realize are still sitting frozen stock still in the deep, instinctive, animal fear that's only natural to being in the presence of a great predator.

"Later!" he calls out behind him.

Stumbling a little after Voldemort, he follows his wizard to the door and out into the sudden coolness of night. The briskness of the evening nearly stings his heated cheeks. Harry has only a moment to appreciate it before Voldemort's taking hold of his arm and apparating them home, where the temperature is several degrees warmer in the south.

Perhaps comparing his husband to a Dementor was apt, Harry thinks as he sways into his side before Voldemort can steer them inside the manor. Because he wouldn't mind a kiss. "I don't mind that you look like a Dementor with that hood on," Harry says, zero filter in his addled state. "Because I wouldn't mind a kiss."

Voldemort looks at him properly then, drawing the hood back to reveal his face. His expression indicates he feels Harry has quite lost his mind. Then it smooths itself out. "Firewhiskey, was it?"

Harry chuckles and drifts fingers over Voldemort's chest. "Maybe."

"It doesn't do to addle your mind in the presence of possible enemies, Harry."

"Enemies? What enemies? Everybody's my friend," Harry retorts. "I'm Harry bloody Potter, everybody *looooooves* me. Wants to be my friend. Don't even know me, Christ it's so creepy . . ." He ends on a hiccup.

"Refrain from invoking such filthy muggle expressions in my presence, dear husband," Voldemort instructs stiffly. Harry wants to point out they had the same early life influences in that regard, but physically bats the idea away. Too much work. Too much talking, not enough kissing. He leans hard on Voldemort in the hopes that it will inspire the man to become physically affectionate. "Hold me," he says rather shamelessly. The chest he's leaning on heavily lifts and falls deeply, with the depth of Voldemort's apparent irritation. Arms wrap snugly around him anyway.

Sighing in happiness, Harry closes his eyes.

"Are we to remain out in the cold all night, darling boy?" Voldemort asks, rather snippily in Harry's opinion – but in his current mindset it's very nearly cute.

"You'll keep me warm, won't you?" Harry says insouciantly, curling closer.

Voldemort doesn't answer, just leads him inside, tucked close like Harry had asked. What a good husband. Harry's done well for himself, in spite of everything. Handsome too, in his alien way. Funny, Harry'd always imagined himself with a wife in those rare moments where he'd dared to imagine he'd live to adulthood. Not anyone in particular, just a nice person. But

he hasn't married someone nice, no not at all. He can't bring himself to regret it. God, he's tried.

He leans heavier on Voldemort as they climb the stairs and he's practically fused to the man's side by the time they reach the top. Harry doesn't part from him even to change into pajamas, no, he simply holds Voldemort closer and wants very desperately to kiss him. Hopes very desperately to be kissed. Pulling the Dark Lord down low enough to manage it, they press together only for a moment of two before Voldemort pulls away. It's unusual for Harry to initiate but he's feeling particularly amorous - as well as endeared. A dangerous mix.

Tugged into the master bedroom, Harry permits a separation long enough to strip down to his pants. Voldemort barely has time to dress for bed - a sleeping robe nigh on indistinguishable from daytime wear - before Harry's back to gluing himself to his front. Harry looks up at him, made raw by the burn of copious amounts of alcohol. "Aren't you going to do it now?"

And at that, Voldemort pauses. He lifts a hand to card back the fringe from Harry's forehead. "Do what, darling boy?"

Harry barely hesitates, and barely flushes from the pet name, inured to it by frequent exposure. "You - you know . . ." He flounders, knowing how to finish and yet lacking the boldfaced courage required to say it.

A smirk slides across Voldemort's face, making him look younger and somehow eviller and more malevolent at the same time. He leans close enough that his breath gusts against Harry's ear and his voice registers as a pleasant burr, but still far enough for Harry to peer at him out of the corner of his eye.

"When I fuck you, dear husband, you will be in a state to remember every detail for the rest of our long, *long* lives." Then his cheek slides across Harry's in a strangely cat-like motion, something sensual in it. Not taunting, just touch for the sake of touch.

"I keep waiting," Harry admits, words spilling out unbidden from loosened lips. "I keep waiting for it, and wanting you, and I never know what to say or how to ask, but I want it. I want you so badly -"

Lips crush against his, a wave breaking on the shore. Teeth nip at him, tongue surging in, hands coming to cup him close as can be. It's heaven on bare skin, and hell in knowing that he won't get what he wants. A thumb strays, glancing just so over his nipple and Harry jolts, voice vocalizing a startled moan. Voldemort pulls away, only further confirming Harry's rile-him-up-then-leave-him-wanting theory.

"All in good time," he murmurs, pressing lips to Harry's once, twice more, then shoving Harry into bed. Nagini hisses in discontent at the way it rocks the mattress, mostly hidden under the thick throw at the foot of the bed. Voldemort placates her as he turns off the lamplight, tells her they'll be going to sleep shortly in the language of snakes. Harry can only just distinguish it from English, a slight *shhhh* about the edges of words. He rolls around until he's in the middle of the bed, with room for Nagini on one side near his feet and Voldemort all along him on the other. Glomping onto him, Harry presses as tight as he comfortably can and is soothed only by long fingers tracing over the 'AVADA KEDAVRA' carved into his

chest the way his used to every night spent alone under the stars. "When I was running from you," Harry murmurs. "I used to dream every night and think about the dreams all day. I'd touch my words while I waited to fall asleep and feel so lonely. I wasn't thinking of you," Harry glances up to impress his honesty upon him. "But I will now. I'll never not think of you; how could I? Whenever we're apart again, I won't be able to help myself."

Wrapping an arm around him, Voldemort brings him that much closer to whisper, "Harry Potter, you are a fool if you believe we will ever part again." He presses his lips to the lightning bolt scar. "And I don't suffer fools."

The words stay with Harry deep into the next morning. He's still pondering the idea of remaining permanently attached at the hip to his once-and-up-until-very-recently nemesis. Doesn't sound too healthy to him. But if he considers what he wants . . . well, he doesn't know what he wants. He's never had much space to consider these things, his focus always on trying to survive through the next semester. It keeps him nice and distracted until Ollivander boots Harry out for being too absent-minded even for his standards.

Deciding to make the best of it, Harry exits the wand shop to make for the little restaurant a few blocks down on the way to the Weasley's joke shop. It doesn't take him long to realize he's forgotten his invisibility cloak in the rush of complying with Ollivander's sudden expulsion of him from the store.

People stare, if they don't stop walking altogether. Harry's this close to making a run for it back Ollivander's, before he realizes that he can't hide away forever. He doesn't have to talk to anyone, or answer any questions he doesn't want to. A sandwich. He'll grab a sandwich and go to the joke shop and eat there and walk back like it's no big deal. Easy enough.

Making haste over to the restaurant and thanking Merlin it's only eleven and foot traffic isn't what it could be, Harry walks in and heads straight for the counter, no line to contend with either. The plump young woman behind the counter turns wide-eyed, almost as if frightened.

"Um," Harry starts cautiously. "Can I have a ham, cheese, and tomato?" He points to one such sandwich in the display.

The woman startles and fumbles all over herself, saying, "Yes, yes, of course - " Hastily, she wraps it in cheesecloth and ties it tight with butcher's twine. She places the package on the counter with a weird little bow.

When Harry reaches for his coin purse, she insists that he doesn't - "Please, Mr. Potter, we couldn't possibly accept - "

What looks to be her manager or perhaps the owner of the establishment darts his head out of a doorway to the back, summoned by her nervous spluttering. His eyes nearly pop out of his skull. That's Harry's cue to leave.

Dropping a few coins by the till in blatant disregard of her protests, Harry exits quickly without engaging further. He nearly jogs the next couple of blocks to the Weasley's.

It's a harried and windswept Harry that shuts the side door to the joke shop behind him.

“ ‘ello Harry,” George mutters without even turning around, in the grip of unrelenting creativity that demands output. It’s hard for either of the twins to pause a project once they start.

Harry sighs gustily in lieu of a hello and George is too far gone in his creative process to notice. Sitting across from him, Harry simply observes while he chomps down on his hard-won sandwich. Honestly, he’s afraid to leave. What if someone tries to approach him? Or ask . . . *things*?

That’s at least partially solved by a notice-me-not spell. Full disillusionment seems like overkill. When he used the cloak, he was falling back on habit to use it. But now that it’s not on him, it seems a bit childish to hide from everyone in the world that way. What was his plan, do it forever? Plus, what if it would put people at ease to see he’s still alive and well, knowing the truce agreement is still intact? Perhaps it would be best for everyone if he got over himself a little.

It’s a strong spell that casts on himself before exiting out into the overcast day again. A misty drizzle has set it, more of an atmosphere than a rainfall.

He seems only to be noticed by those determined to take notice of everything on the relatively busy thoroughfare. A few older, wizened wizards and witches - perhaps war veterans imbued with the same sense of alertness as Harry’s seen in Mad Eye. Making it back to the wand shop unscathed seems like a victory all on its own.

Victory is lacking that night, however, when Voldemort refuses to fuck him once again.

At this rate, Harry’s going to develop a complex.

Lunch the next day is a different affair, in that it never occurs. Mustering up the courage to go out again with only a notice-me-not around eleven when traffic seems to be lower, Harry steps out into the street braced for calamity. Nothing happens, he’s hardly even noticed beyond someone for whom the notice-me-not spell worked too well by bumping into his shoulder.

“Ow,” Harry says on reflex, rubbing the tender joint and rotating his arm a little. *Well, better get going. Clearly this isn’t going to be the catastrophe I thought it would* - he has time to think, walking a little ways before glancing further down the street.

Down Diagon Alley comes striding Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic, with a retinue of Aurors and secretaries. His eyes are searching, scanning - and alight quickly on Harry, lighting up with recognition.

All Harry can think is “*Do you, Harry James Potter, vow to never intentionally sabotage Lord Voldemort in his political aims, so long as they remain lawful within the parameters set forth by the Ministry of Magic?*”

Harry unfreezes himself and immediately about-faces to make for the wand shop before he can violate the Vow. Who even knows what he might accidentally babble to the Minister. Or worse, impulsively *decide* to say?

It doesn't bear imagining, and so Harry doesn't. Scurrying back into the shop, he shuts the door behind him and presses his back to it with a relieved sigh. "Back already?" Ollivander comments idly. "A rather quick lunch." It's unclear whether this is jocular or absent-minded in nature, so Harry chooses once again to opt out.

"It's nasty out, think I'll skip for today." And as he rededicates himself to practicing fusing ashwood to unicorn hair, he considers that perhaps it wasn't so rude of him to run away after all. Because as Minister of Magic, Scrimgeour will of course know the terms of Harry and Voldemort's agreement. Harry is not to interfere with political matters. So why . . . ?

Well, perhaps it's all a little above Harry's head at the end of the day. Who's to say the Minister didn't just need a new pair of shoes. Right?

Right.

"I saw the Minister today," is the first thing out of his mouth when he sees Voldemort that evening. Voldemort's eyes narrow and something strange passes over his face. He stands from his desk. "I saw him in the street. I think he was – well – I turned around and went back to the shop. Nothing happened," Harry adds, not frantically, but only just. Voldemort's rounding the desk slowly, locked on target. He comes to a stop close before Harry, lifting a hand. "We didn't talk or anything, I barely even saw him before I turned tail and left, I promise –"

The hand lands on his cheek gently. Fingers stroke there. Voldemort leans even closer. His voice has a quality to it Harry's heard in small doses before, but dialed up to eleven. "Good boy."

Something drops in Harry's gut, breath hitching, and he finds his hands raised halfway to clutching the front of Voldemort's robes before he's even realized he's doing it. He lets himself consciously complete the motion. "Oh. Er, right. Um, thanks."

Voldemort seems very nearly ready to laugh at him, Harry always being such an awkward fellow even when faced down with sudden deep desire. "Do you know what good boys get?" Voldemort murmurs.

Harry shakes his head, in awe at this rapid turn of events.

"They get what they so desire," Voldemort answers, darting in to glance lips against Harry's cheek, then stays there. "What is it that you want, Harry?"

Gulping loudly, Harry shakes his head. "You already know what I want," he says quietly, but still too loud in the stillness of the room, the isolation of their surroundings, then silence of wildlife outside. *I want you inside. I want you everywhere. I want you always.* Harry doesn't even know how to begin to say it. But the expectation is still there, for Harry to vocalize. To embarrass himself by saying it aloud, so it's seared into both their eardrums for eternity.

"I – " Harry swallows again, suddenly too much saliva in his mouth. He's imagining that taste again, that smell. The friction. It's making his mouth water. And even within that, he knows it's only a fraction of what he really wants. "I want you." Harry doesn't know how to

say it any better than that, in a way that he could actually manage saying aloud, and adds to it in the hopes it will be enough. He feels tears nearly dew in his eyes. “I want you all the time, any way you’ll have me. Any way I can have you. Please, please don’t make me wait anymore – “

Sinuously, Voldemort cups his head and kisses him soundly on the mouth, body shifting against Harry's in this indefinable way that speaks soundlessly of intention. Just about moaning in relief, he presses forward too, meets the challenge. Hands gripping his husband, Harry tries very valiantly to stay upright. Apparently, Voldemort doesn't seem to think that's necessary. Retracting, he places one, two, three grazes of the lips on Harry's own and says, "I thought you would never come. And yet here you are." An index finger drifts down Harry's face. "Right here."

He pulls away and spins abruptly, taking Harry by the hand. "Come." Up the stairs they go, Voldemort straight-backed and Harry wobbly-legged.

And with his head still spinning, disoriented by desire, Harry finds a moment to agree after all. Tonight stands a good chance of being a standout even in the course of their long, long lives.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter to go, folks - for real this time! Thanks for a great ride 🐾💕🌟

Yes, Dear

Chapter Summary

The greatest power you wield against Lord Voldemort is love; Dumbledore's said it a million times. Now? Harry's counting on it.

All things must come to an end, except those that don't.

Chapter Notes

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

The bedroom door whooshes shut behind them and Harry suddenly finds himself flooded with fear - no. That's not quite right. Nerves, it's nerves. What if it doesn't live up? What if he's no good in bed? What if it hurts? Worst case scenarios zip through his head in rapid succession.

"I can feel you . . . thinking," Voldemort murmurs. He glances at Harry out of the corner of his eye, circling. It's reminiscent of the first time they came to the manor, Harry standing unsure and Voldemort taking a turn about the room in the most predatory manner possible. Except this time, Harry's exactly where he means to be. Where he wants to be. And honestly the intimidation thing is kind of working for him, putting him back in territory where he knows what to do. He squares his shoulders. "Then make me stop."

Voldemort's head snaps towards him. "Why don't you undress then, sweet boy." He draws a finger along the line of Harry's jaw softly then drops it.

Harry finds himself a little bashful, even though he's slept in only his pants a couple times before. It's different being watched. Sweater first, then t-shirt. The room feels strangely chilly and he can feel himself break out in gooseflesh. He hurries to undo and whip off his trousers, but takes his time with his pants, not wanting to tease, not having even nearly the confidence required to do it. But in sudden awareness of the momentous occasion, this final peeled-back layer of vulnerability. His clothes are in a lumpy pile on the floor, toes sinking into plush carpet, and Harry's bare. He glances up shyly.

As if he were waiting for the cue, Voldemort takes Harry gently by the throat, surely feeling his pulse thundering there. He holds Harry in place that way, mouth pressing against Harry's and immediately comforting him. This is familiar territory by now. Kissing is easy, kissing is great.

It's just that last time, Harry was the one running the show. It was entirely his idea to blow his husband, his own initiative, his own act. This . . . in this, Harry knows he wants no power. And he's pretty sure Voldemort knows that, too. And if he's to get what he wants, it's basically going to be a trust fall. He knows they haven't been married long. Soulmates for

only a few months. That's not much time to adapt to the transition from mortal enemies to . . . well, lovers. But that's already what they are, Harry reminds himself. This is just another step along that road.

His palm is pleasant on the delicate skin of Harry's neck, fingers long enough to nearly reach around to the back. Harry's adam's apple bobs a little as he realizes the vulnerability of his position and he can feel it move against the man's hand. It's a strange turn on for sure, but here they are. Tongue delving into Harry's mouth, Voldemort seems to curl closer, holding him at the small of his back. The skin there jumps, Harry a great ball of nerves but excited. Every touch seems magnified, symbolic, laden with meaning. Fingers brush softly, stimulating, hair-raising in the best way. Harry's scalp is prickling in anticipation of further pleasure. He feels primed for it. Ready. Ready *now*.

He pulls back from the kiss, enough to catch his husband's attention and dart his eyes over to the bed meaningfully. Still unable to voice it.

Voldemort's hand drifts lower in response, an index finger tracing a gentle slow circle over the curve of Harry's arsecheek. Blood pools in opposite directions, shooting towards his face and pelvic region at the same time. It's enough to make his head spin, just a single insinuating touch. He fights for composure, something he doesn't expect to keep up all night. Hoping not too. But he'll hold on as long as he can and take it as a badge of honor. The hand on his throat squeezes softly, loving almost. Harry's eyelashes flutter.

His husband watches, rapt. Very few have likely survived this level of attention from him, of any kind.

"Kneel on the bed." A shudder works its way through him, that certain quality back in Voldemort's voice. Harry wants to bottle it by the gallon and chug it, glut himself on it.

The hand on his throat drops, trailing a soft caress down his front with the backs of the nails. They skip and skid over the carved skin of his soulmark. Harry's helpless against another full-body shudder, lip wobbling. He's nearly distressed at this degree of wanting, needing to be touched.

He steps away to walk forward and crawl onto the bed. It stands tall, at hip height. So when he kneels and Voldemort is quick to pull him backwards to rest against his chest, Harry's head rests against his shoulder. He'd thought Voldemort would wait, taunt him a little, test his reactions and let anticipation mount. Waltz about the room, make him stew in his nerves. Not so. A palm swipes down Harry's chest and abdomen proprietarily. He can feel the chest behind him rise and fall with a sigh. Something about this feels almost careful. Or maybe reckless.

Perhaps Harry's not the only eager one.

Voldemort's been waiting a long time.

A single finger trails lower, down the cradle of his hips to trace a barely-there line along his cock in early flush. Harry sucks in a breath at the feeling, practically a happy hiss. They both watch his hand move slowly. Voldemort runs fingers over his bollocks as well, making

Harry's chest heave. He trails lower still, until Harry can feel him stroking dryly at his hole. It makes his heart stutter and hearing Voldemort's voice in his ear really doesn't help. "This is where you want me, isn't it Harry?"

Nodding weakly is all he feels capable of, words run dry as the touch at the join of his body. Perhaps *this* is the little test he'd been expecting, made to wait and sit still while the man effectively pokes and prods at the most intimate areas a person can have. Voldemort applies a little more pressure and for a moment Harry worries he's going to do it dry, but then relaxes. He wouldn't do that.

He can almost imagine he's feeling Voldemort's pleasure at the loosening of his posture and tension. Harry spreads his knees wider, as wide as he can while kneeling up on the bed.

With a gesture, Voldemort commands the nightstand open and bids a bottle of oil into his grasp. Once again, Harry is glad they aren't on opposite sides anymore, or at least facing each other down at wandpoint. He's married a very powerful wizard.

Popping the cork, the hand fondling him retracts to receive a generous coat of oil. Harry eyes the glistening moisture dazedly, unable to believe he's actually about to get what he wants. And also strangely jealous. He wants those fingers in three places at once. And unless Voldemort spontaneously grows a third arm, it looks like that won't be on the agenda for the evening. "Don't worry, Harry," Voldemort whispers into his ear, the literal devil on his shoulder. His hand dips back below sight and into intense, delicate tactile sensation. Harry can feel the slick skin bypass his balls to probe at his hole again. He moans a little, feeling himself flutter. "I know you like fingers in your mouth." The pads of his free fingers float up Harry's body to linger at the corner of his parted mouth and it's a struggle not to dip his head to try and fetch them inside, a battle he both loses and wins. "I know you like me inside." Here, his finger down below presses *in* and Harry's heart stutters. It's really happening.

And Harry knows he's supposed to be weirded out by the sensation, to have to adapt and ease into it. But he does want him inside, however he can get him. So he sucks on what's in his mouth, hopes desperately, impossibly for Voldemort to reach down into his throat and choke him that way. And he lifts and shoves down on the finger breaching him, moving it deeper. Not by much, but enough to be symbolic of his intent.

Voldemort laughs. Really does, warmth infused and god it's a crying shame Harry can't see it happen. But he can imagine. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes, non-lips curved around straight teeth, cheeks pulled higher at the motion. He feels it echo out of his husband's chest into his, and that's enough, it has to be. Tears prick strangely at the corner of his eyes. This is everything he ever wanted. Not really *everything* everything, but in the important ways that he thought his dream was taken from him, this moment renders that fear false. Warm tracks of tears wend their sudden way down his cheeks. A very soft sob hitches in his chest, fingers muffling everything and keeping him safe and full. Then they leave. Harry's chin is jerked up and to the side. Everything about Voldemort's face reads, 'What?' He hadn't been expecting this, when he's probably predicted everything else Harry's reactions have had to offer. From the very beginning, perhaps. A strangely pleasing thought - to be understood and yet still able to surprise. That honestly just makes him more emotional. Someone *gets* him, *has* him.

“I’m just - “ Harry stops and then has to start again, broken up a little by another hitching breath. “I’m happy. Sorry.” Voldemort’s expression begins to reconfigure itself to something actually rather fond.

“Don’t apologize.” He thumbs Harry’s tears away only for them to be replaced with more spilling down. Even this is just more proof of it - his dream is alive. And here.

It’s just . . . hard to separate himself from that, steel himself against it. And while he would normally want to, to maintain composure and/or please Voldemort, right now it doesn’t feel worth it. No, he wants to be free, wholly himself, no longer questioning his thoughts or reactions or anything. So he lets himself cry and Voldemort lets him, too.

Perhaps he should be embarrassed to be crying in a sexual situation, but instead he feels safe. Able to.

Voldemort doesn’t seem bothered, so he won’t be either. He’s stroking Harry’s cheek, in fact. The lamps bathe them both in buttery yellow lighting, rendering everything soft-edged. Everything feels soft-edged, too.

“Eager boy . . . “

“I know, I’m sorry,” and Harry doesn’t even mean this apology, he just doesn’t know how else to communicate acknowledgement. “I just - I’m ready. And I - “

He doesn’t know how to finish, either.

Tipping his chin with a clean hand, Voldemort wipes more tears away and Harry has the sudden thought that if the fucking is as good as he hopes it’ll be, the gesture will be pointless because there’ll just be more tears. He smiles a little smile at the thought, feeling sweet rather than devious. Harry can feel the curve of his lips, feels alluring with it, feels more confident with it. He tilts his head and glances up at his husband through his lashes.

A mouth smothers over his own and Harry opens wide to accommodate the tongue in his mouth, the ardor of the movement. Palms smooth down and up his torso. He feels electrified by the skin on his own. The free contact. The roving feeling of pleasure circulating through his blood and singing. Lit from within, he lets himself make whatever noise he wants and if it manifests as a loud, longing moan, well. So be it.

There’s a slick hand passing back over his cock, brushing gently past. Fingers prod at his hole again and Harry spreads his thighs even wider on the bed to make himself as available as possible.

One slips inside and again, it’s an unusual feeling but he rides it out by trying to ride it. He bounces on his heels to drive it deeper, with success. He inhales sharply through his nose at the strange feeling and bounces again on instinct. Voldemort strokes his finger in and out, pressing at the insides of an area Harry has paid tremendously little attention to in the past. Suddenly, it finds itself center stage. His husband pulls away long enough to shush him and it’s only then he realizes he’s been making little noises, sounding somewhere between wanting and upset. Voldemort’s mouth on his own distracts him enough not to let him get too

self conscious. Excitement and nerves ignite and flash through his system. And if this is just fingers, just *one*, Harry can only hope and pray that penetration is enough to put him out of his mind entirely.

Voldemort squeezes another finger slowly inside. Harry's still working hard not to bounce on his heels to get more, take more, just so they can keep kissing. So when Voldemort pulls back again, his body takes that as a *carte blanche* to pump up and down on the fingers as hard as it can without dislodging them entirely. The slick, filthy sounds that makes in the absence of any other audible sounds in the room, or indeed, perhaps many square miles, lights Harry's ears afire. But he doesn't stop. Doesn't want to, not for anything. Voldemort's fingers begin to curl down and down until they hit on something - something white hot and searing that flashes behind Harry's eyes. He can hear himself shout. His hips falter but the fingers don't let up and arc cleverly upwards again, and hit on it unerringly. Harry makes a low punched-out noise like a wounded animal. He doesn't even sound like a person anymore, at least not a coherent one.

"Oh Harry . . . " Voldemort murmurs in his ear, fingers still moving slickly in and out, the noise of it loud in the stillness of the bedroom. "You'd let me do just about anything to you right now, wouldn't you?"

Harry nods mindlessly, then shakes his head to shake off the dazed confusion. Voldemort chuckles at him again, a rumble that reverberates from one chest to the other. A hand slides slyly down Harry's front, to tangle in his pubic hair. Curled fingers knock into that spot again Harry hadn't even known existed before tonight. It's like knocking on the door to a different dimension, he swears he can feel something amazing on the other side of it, like spying light under a door.

Hand traveling upwards, Voldemort strokes lovingly at his throat, pushing until Harry's head is rested back on his shoulder and fingers are curling around as far as they go. He squeezes softly.

Harry's blood buzzes with excitement. "H-harder." His own voice jolts him back into awareness of his position, of his own vulnerability. He expects Voldemort to get angry, remind him who's calling the shots or dole out some embarrassing punishment. But he's wrong yet again.

"As you wish," Voldemort whispers sibilant and strange. His hand tightens on Harry's throat, twice as hard just like the fingers down below pump in harder, pressing in on the walls. Harry's never been so hard in his life, for all that he can't seem to fully feel his body. Extremities seem far away. He can't remember the last time he used his hands, hanging limply at his side.

"Please," is all he can say. "*P-please.*" And perhaps it's pathetic of him to beg for scraps like this, but it doesn't feel like begging and this certainly doesn't feel like scraps. He imagines for but a moment what this scene would look like to an outside observer and then firmly blocks the thought out. Voldemort squeezes again and holds for several seconds longer, until Harry's toes are twitching and the tip of his nose grows strangely warm with absence of oxygen and he can't quite think at all anymore. It's like a reverse panic attack. This is quite possibly the best he's ever felt.

He pants on the come down as the hold loosens, lungs dragging in as much air as they can hold at a time. Fingers punch at his internal hotspot again and all his voice box can muster is a rough wheeze. His body twitches with it.

Voldemort hums behind him, a noise that, were Harry less insensate, would be infuriatingly composed. He clutches Harry's throat tight again, giving him less recovery time. Fingers race in and out of Harry's hole, well and truly fucking him now, and when seven seconds go by, eight, nine, Harry nearly comes. He feels himself right there on that ledge, teetering on one side and then just balancing out on the other. His throat is released. He sucks in air as quickly as he can, body taking the steering wheel and demanding relief. The curled fingers slow and Harry prepares for them to exit, for him to be allowed to cool down and be taken.

Then they ram back inside and knock hard on that holy place again, harder than all the times before. Voldemort chokes him in earnest. Harry can't get a sip of air, not until he comes. He knows this, knows this without being told, and the unspoken communication almost more than the dominance of it has him tumbling head over feet over that ledge. His mouth rounds on a silent, voiceless, breathless scream. His vision grows white and unfamiliar and the door parts for a brief, unbelievable moment.

And slams shut. His taught body falls completely limp and into Voldemort's hold like a puppet with its strings cut. He pants raggedly without concern for the world around him. He feels himself being tugged and turned and rearranged and has little care for it. Sparks of white still dance faintly in his vision and take time to clear entirely.

He's gazing at the ceiling, he realizes, then Voldemort's face comes into view. Harry reaches for him, curling arms around his bare shoulders. It's different, all-skin, and wonderful. He drags him down to rest front to front. The body above is still cooler than it should be and it's heaven on his overheated self. He presses an unabashed kiss to the side of his husband's head. Harry sighs in happiness. He's not entirely sure he's ever heard himself ever make quite that sound before. The subtle movement of Voldemort's shoulders suggests more quiet laughter and isn't it the strangest thing? This is the most he's ever heard him laugh and it's in bed. Harry feels like he's unlocked a higher level in a video game or something. It's okay if he's laughing at Harry rather than with; anything to keep this feeling going.

Harry moans happily as their bodies rub together. Voldemort gets a hand on his spent cock, the flesh there crying out in protest from oversensitivity. He moans again anyway, liking it. His body's past being able to tense in pleasure, too lax from orgasm outside the occasional twitch every time it remembers what it felt like to be completely dominated by someone else's whim. He tilts his head and searches for Voldemort's mouth hungrily until he finds it and seizes his opportunity to kiss the living daylights out of him with both hands. This time, it's his tongue prowling about, his jaw working with the force of his kiss. His legs wrap themselves around the hips above, arms wound around the man's shoulders, well and truly hanging off of him like a spidermonkey. Their lips part, a strand of saliva webbing between their mouths, and Harry's panting in ardor, thrilling in everything, basking in finally, finally getting the reward for all his patience. Or about to be, anyway. Something primal is awakening in him, something animal. He rubs upwards into Voldemort's hand, feeling raw and stripped of inhibition. The night is far from over, if Harry has anything to say about it. So when Voldemort sits up, Harry nearly shouts in protest. Any - *any* amount of distance is

intolerable. “Shhh sweet boy,” Voldemort says and manipulates Harry’s body to turn over until he’s flat on the mattress, Harry complying in spite of his instincts. He pulls Harry back and up onto his knees, face down and buried in the thick bedding.

Even as turned on and wild as he is, Harry still finds it in himself to be a bit embarrassed by the sheer exposure of the position, Voldemort pulling his legs wide again. He can feel lubricant cool around his hole. A fine-boned hand smooths down his spine to press his shoulders even deeper into the mattress. “You’ll be good for me, won’t you Harry?” Voldemort murmurs intimately. Harry feels himself being watched, skin pricking with it.

“I - always.”

Breath drawn through the nose is audible in the quiet of the manor. Harry reaches a hand back blindly to grasp for Voldemort’s hip, guide him closer, have something to hold. “I’ll always be good for you,” Harry repeats, voice muffled somewhat by the duvet, actually grateful not to have to look Voldemort in the eye as he says it. He means it, too much.

With a sudden yank of the hips, Voldemort drags him roughly closer, back on to his cock where it presses blunt and warm against Harry’s backside. He shoves Harry back down into the bedding again, by the shoulders.

Harry gasps in anticipation, a whine sitting somewhere high in his throat. *Please please please please please* - Somewhere along the line, he thinks he starts vocalizing the thought.

The head presses in, slow and sure and not stopping, not for a moment, not until it’s slid all the way home. Harry wants to *howl*.

He pants and groans with the foreign stretch but his body is already craving more, somehow, even when edging into very uncomfortable territory. Pulling forward and pushing back on it, Harry’s hips and voice act fully without him, emitting a high pitched fucked-out sound.

Voldemort doesn’t still him, no, instead he withdraws and fucks back inside with a slam. The sound Harry makes could be used against him in a court of law. He’s already drooling into the bedcovers, open-mouthed and panting. “H-har - “ is all he manages to get out between gasping breaths before Voldemort is slamming in and out, railing their bodies together as hard Harry could ever really ask for.

He’s shaking. The noises coming out of his mouth are wholly unfamiliar and it’s equally strange to hear his husband’s hurried, labored breath from exertion. Like the world gone sideways.

Cock moves deep inside him. A hand lands on the back of his neck and squeezes. Harry melts a little into the mattress at the comfort of it. Relaxing his muscles this way allows Voldemort to slide that much deeper and Harry wails at the touch of his cock to what is rapidly becoming clear is the most sensitive spot on his body. Voldemort hammers at it mercilessly, until Harry is yelping on every thrust. Balls slap at him roughly with every slide home and something about that is just so filthy it turns him on even more. *Fuck me*, he prays. *Fuck me harder. I don’t want to think anymore.*

His own cock feels fairly ready to fall off from being overburdened with repurposed blood yet again. He feels so good it almost stops being pleasant and starts being something else. Something wholly other. Foreign. The hand on his neck slides up to fist in the back of his hair and press the side of his face as far into the mattress as it will go. Something about it is, Harry feels, supposed to be degrading, subjugatory, but instead he just feels exhilarated.

The thrusts are getting rougher still and Harry can only be glad of being thoroughly fingered in advance to ease adjustment. And as the rough treatment sends him deeper and deeper below, he can only be glad of the air in his lungs, the cock inside him, the blood sizzling in his veins like liquid lava. The world narrows down to those things, the physical, the visceral, the undeniable here and now. Soft, sturdy fabric against his cheek, growing wetter with drool. Glasses digging into the side of his nose and temple where they both forgot to take them off. Slick, slapping noises as he's fucked with near ferocity. Cool night air singeing his scorching skin. Heady human smells blooming from the act of sex. Directly in his line of sight, the side table with its vase of flowers sits vigil against the wall, as mundane as can be in this impossible moment, almost proving the reality of what's happening in its mundanity. He can hardly believe in a world where everything is normal *and he gets to have this*.

Throat beginning to feel raw from whining and moaning and panting, Harry's helpless to stop it. He keens on another brutal thrust, sweat sliding down his body as it shakes and trembles. He can barely stay on his knees. The hand in his hair grips tighter.

Voldemort grinds circles into him and it almost feels like a reward, the pleasure punishing. Heat sits in the base of Harry's spine, leeching slowly upward.

The cock rutting into him becomes the only thing Harry cares about, thinks about, wants. He claws at the duvet like a wild animal. Another hand on his throat would be nice.

Instead, a hand jerks down to his front and grasps his desperately leaking cock in a cruel grip. Harry shouts brokenly, nearly a sob. "I - "

Pumping up and down and up and down, Harry feels his head spinning and the light in his eyes grow warm-toned, and the heat at the base of his spine surges suddenly to grip at his whole body. He shrieks, coming on Voldemort's cock as he pounds away at him and spilling come absolutely everywhere. This time his eyes are wide open as he stares at the wall in disbelief, claws futilely at the bedcover, cries. Kaleidoscope vision dazes and entrances him, body slowly sinking into a deeper relaxation than he previously thought possible. That is, until it becomes clear Voldemort intends to fuck him to completion, to satisfaction, to kingdom come.

His moan sounds more like a long cry. He wants Voldemort's cock in him forever, and he wants it out yesterday. The thrusts gather speed and strength, to the point where Harry's almost sure he can't take anymore, then Voldemort comes with a rough shout, something victorious in the sound. Harry finds he doesn't mind.

Cock still moves in him until it can't anymore. He can feel - *fluid* gushing down his thigh and shudders. Voldemort relinquishes the deathgrip on his hair to smooth down his spine again. Harry settles back into his skin with it, basking in the relaxed set of his bones. At long last, his mind is quiet. He closes his eyes and slumps until fallen fully flat.

Small sounds fill the room. Feet padding on the carpet. The faucet running in the bathroom. The slight tilt of the bed as his husband leaves and returns gently rocks his limp body.

Harry can feel himself being wiped clean, too totaled to blush or even blink at the action.

Arms resting by his head where they'd braced him during sex, he watches his fingers softly twitch. He's glitching, radio static in his head. He's still open-mouthed as his breathing calms and quiets, duvet wet under his cheek. Harry's too tired to even move away from the many, many wet spots on the bed. Hands run their course over his back, just simple touch then kneading the muscle a little. Even that fails to stir him. Voldemort turns him over. Harry puts in zero effort.

Slitting his eyes open, he passively observes his husband wiping the come and sweat and saliva off his body. The pillowy washcloth swipes gently at his cheek and Harry only has the faintest glimmer of a wondering why Voldemort doesn't just cast a scourgify instead of putting in all this effort. But the thought is far away, and nothing approaching a worry or an irritation. Lips press to his face, a thumb thumbing over his eyebrow. His glasses are lifted from his face and set on the nightstand. The lamp clicks off. Voldemort covers him like a blanket, then covers them with a blanket for real. Cocooned inside, Harry slides into deep sleep almost immediately. It's a tragedy he can't stay here, bask here, live here, but he's so tired he doesn't even register the transition, let alone go down fighting. He only knows he's cradled close, warm, safe.

Dawn lights the room in a soft bluish glow. An early night in spells an early morning out.

Harry can hardly believe the injustice of ever having to leave this bed, but there's time yet. He can't tell if Voldemort's asleep or awake or somewhere in that twilight land in between, and doesn't care. They're breathing together, sharing heat together. That's all he needs to know.

Neither dreams nor nightmares touched him last night - the thoughtlessness had been long lasting. He turns his cheek into the pillow, grinning to himself. Finally. *Finally*.

Apparently awake enough to move limbs with intention, Voldemort brushes a palm along Harry's torso. They'd moved quite a bit in their sleep, tangled tight. Fingers touch at his throat and from this angle, Harry can spy the slight tilt of Voldemort's mouth. It's enough to get him grinning again, hiding his face back in the pillow. His husband threads through his hair, combing what must surely be some wild tangles. They lay there in the gathering light of day, blue fading into brighter tones until daylight reigns supreme. The view outside promises beautiful weather, the clouds all blown away.

Eventually Harry groans, resistant to any change to his current situation but body growing inevitably restless after a certain duration of wakefulness. Voldemort squeezes the back of his neck in comfort. Harry sighs huffily, then does it again. Only then is he willing and able to push himself upright and climb out of bed.

This brings the soreness of his ass and more importantly lower back into stark relief and he takes a moment to recalibrate. He'd expected something like this and in truth it's part of his hesitation to part with the lovely little situation in bed.

Making his careful way over to the en suite bathroom, Harry revels in the cool air on his bare skin. He snaps the lights on and gasps and gapes at his reflection staring right back at him looking startled out of his wits. Deep, dark purple bruises in the clear shape of a palm and fingers sit stark on the thin skin of his throat. Harry is helpless against coming closer to the mirror to get a better look. Broken and offended blood vessels reaped their revenge against last night's activities, no doubt about it. The damage is higher than even a high collar or turtleneck or scarf could hope to hide. He's alarmed by that, he is, but not . . . wholly displeased. Another shocking discovery in itself. Last night happened and the evidence is right there, painted on his skin like watercolor. He reaches to touch, then hesitates, nearly afraid of smearing it. A hell of a souvenir.

Reluctantly, he drags himself away from the mirror to take care of himself. He showers off, hosing down any remaining residue from the night before. There's a souvenir he'd rather do without. The shower and the shock of the bruising and memories of it all invigorate him. It's impossible to wipe off this slow sloppy smile that plasters itself across his face.

He sweeps back into bed with a little bounce, applying himself to Voldemort's bare body with alacrity. Still a bit damp from the shower, but he gets no complaints. The wizard wraps an arm around Harry and speaks without opening his eyes. "Admiring your bruises?" Fingers trail delicately down his throat.

Harry blushes brilliantly when he thought himself rather past all that. In truth, he'd expected to be disappointed in feeling different in any significant way after having sex. That this was a misconception and trite little thing people talk about but doesn't actually happen. In this case, however, he's noticing feeling different indeed. Like a bright ball of energy is in his gut, feeling excited and anticipatory. He hides his face in Voldemort's neck and tells the truth, says, "Yes."

Voldemort hums, a deep vibration from below. Harry cuddles closer.

Basking in the warmth of the bed, he thinks of all the terms of affection Voldemort's used on him. *My dear, my sweet, my soulmate. My, my, my. Mine. Boy* somehow implies ownership, too. Possession. It's all true. All of it. He doesn't have to hope, not anymore. He has it already, what he wants.

It's torture, leaving bed. But eventually they must. Voldemort's not a man given to idle activity and Harry himself easily grows bored.

He'd insist on a repeat performance of last night, but can feel his body protest at the thought - it's only just learning how to adapt to this sort of thing. Harry watches Voldemort dress, smiling even at that simple act. He gets to watch the armor come on. He hands the man his wand, fetching it over from the nightstand, and Voldemort accepts it with a kiss. It's so strange to feel this lit up inside from simple things, and yet these days is it really that strange at all? In the bathroom, Harry watches in the mirror as the medicinal cream Voldemort smooths onto his throat quickly puts the hand-shaped bruising into fade. The stark purple shades into green, to yellow, to gone. He finds himself sorry to see them go and is long past being bewildered by it, perhaps more quietly baffled and curious. The cream has a distinctive sort of smell and stings the nostrils a little. Harry just wonders how Voldemort thought to

have it on hand. They leave an old and fading love bite over the collarbone undisturbed, by unspoken mutual preference. Christ, this nonverbal communication is nearly erotic to him.

Voldemort breaks it, voices the tragedy of having to heal the bruises so soon, in his own mild way. "A lovely shade for you, a good contrast for the eyes," he murmurs. Harry starts, realizing it's the first time Voldemort's mentioned them - it's usually what people who met his mother lead with. Though, 'met' is a very mild choice of word. "It's how we first tracked you, you know," the man adds, sly. "You forgot to change your eyes at that little waystation in Suffolk - a British witch or wizard would know the shade anywhere." Harry gulps and doesn't say anything. He never knew he cut it that close, that they'd managed to track him so far. Thank god it all turned out the way it did.

And indeed, their eyes are steady on each other from opposite ends of the dining table. Harry's not even sure what expression he's making or how much of the breakfast on his plate actually makes it into his stomach. He only knows he's happy and he doesn't care how goofy it looks on his face. When Nagini slithers idly into the room with Hedwig perched on her spine, that really doesn't help. Together in that pose, they look like nothing so much as the flag of Mexico. They've been keeping each other company even more lately, keeping his husband company, too. Harry doesn't know how much of his work keeps him at home, but he's always here by the time Harry ends his day.

And he's going to be working all day no doubt, and Harry can't possibly faff about on his knees next to him the whole time just out of sheer desire to be close. Even with all his objectively terrible decision making, he knows that's not healthy, not sensible.

So it's with great reluctance and self-discipline that he reels himself back from a lengthy, thorough kiss at the head of the table, ass nearly perched atop it. He wants to crawl into his husband's lap and never leave. Pressing what he tells himself will be a final kiss to Voldemort's lips, he's helpless against two more. Harry strokes his cheek with a roving thumb and lets the last little bit of contact fuel him for today. He leaves wordlessly, letting his eyes do all the talking. Voldemort's are similarly communicative, at least in Harry's book. Harry can feel the side of his mouth lift in quiet farewell.

Apparating to Ollivander's, Harry slips into the back of the shop amid bright daylight and a spotless sky.

"Ah, greetings Mr. Potter," old Ollivander says distractedly from the workshop and leads him seamlessly into the tasks of the day. The apprenticeship seems to be coming along smoothly, no hiccups so far or significant roadblocks. It doesn't hurt that the two of them get along rather well. Harry spends long, satisfying hours fusing wand cores to wood, practicing in an anticipation of the real thing. Ollivander takes over the process midway to ensure a usable final product so no ingredients are wasted.

At last, Harry pops his back as he stretches and lets out a content yawn. "Lunch time, I think," he mentions to Ollivander, who hums in vague acknowledgement and waves him away.

Even *that* makes Harry smile. It's with a pep in his step that he exits the front door and travels down Diagon Alley. Early afternoon light blazes overhead, warming the sun soaked

streets. So carefree is Harry that it takes him several moments to realize he's completely forgotten to notice-me-not himself, drawing many many eyes. And honestly, he's nearly past caring - what's the harm in it anyway? He exists, doesn't he? Why shouldn't he be able to take a damn stroll?

Well. Perhaps it might be best to ease into it a little more - presently he has no protection against bloodthirsty journalists, rabid fans, or the like. He draws his wand from under the sleeve of his jumper to cast the charm and that's when disaster strikes.

Spellfire rains down on him in a bright white arc like lightning. It's only years of having to defend life and limb from a very tender age that has Harry whipping out a protego shield in time.

Another burst of spell light jet towards him and he bodily dodges it. A Death Eater materializes near him casting defensive spells and snapping into a back-to-back position with Harry. He sees the other one ducked around the side of a building with a wand pressed to his forearm. People are screaming and running, spilled bags and things everywhere. It's pandemonium. Harry's got to be careful not to cast anything dangerous where it could accidentally hit a bystander.

Wizards in dark blue robes cluster around them in a rough circle, at least nine of them. Harry's quick to Stupefy one, then try for number two. There's a wizard in blue on a rooftop that the Death Eater at his back strikes with a nasty hex. Harry dodges whatever spells he's never heard of before, not sure if his shield spells will work for them. The second Death Eater takes down one of the attacking wizards from behind and engages in a lengthy exchange of spellwork before being cut down by another.

A plume of black mist diffuses in the middle of the street, accompanied by the loud unmistakeable crack of apparition. Voldemort appears from within, in full glory. Harry feels his heart nearly glow with relief.

Harry hears the Death Eater at his back collapse to the ground and whips around to guard himself where he's now exposed to sudden threat. Rapid exchanges of curses pass back and forth, many Harry's never heard of before. He just barely has the presence of mind to keep from dodging too much, lest something pass through to hit Voldemort instead. Harry spies an opening and disarms one of the wizards in blue with a well-placed expelliarmus. The circle around them is disbanding and moving into a less structured formation. Harry glances back at Voldemort in pride to see that he saw, and flashes him a wide smile, something wild and pure in it. He nearly wants to mime blowing on the tip of his wand like the smoking muzzle of a gun, he's feeling that much adrenalin and giddiness raging through his veins. He hears very familiar words echo in his ears, a hoarse shout of *AVADA KEDAVRA!*, and doesn't see the green spell light coming.

No. He only sees the fierce battle joy on Voldemort's face turn into a mask of horror as if time itself has slowed. A hand reaches for him. Between the space of one heartbeat and the next, Harry stands tall and full of life, then the spell light hits him and he's gone.

Harry's eyes flutter open, hearing back online in a sudden rush of sensory overload. A raw inhuman scream is filling the open air mid-vocalization, something bone-chilling and not of

this earth. The sound runs long, goes ragged, and breath surges into his chest like it's suddenly remembered how to do it. He can see furious spellfire arc overhead, black and green and blue, fire and water and lightning. Tilting his head on the gritty cobblestone path takes all the energy he can muster as everything falls quiet.

Voldemort stands beside him. He's hunched and heaving with breath and wand arm lifted. Something animal radiates from him. From his vantage point on the ground, Harry can only see collapsed wizards, blood on the street, no one left standing. The wand arm lifts higher. Voldemort is undeniably about to kill.

Lifting a weak hand, it's all Harry can do to reach for the hem of Voldemort's robes and tug lightly, barely there. Voldemort stills.

His fine head turns to gaze at Harry with something unnameable. Shock is there, certainly. Wonder, yes. But there's something more, something else, and Harry intends to spend the rest of his long life discovering what. Voldemort bends and folds in towards Harry as if a natural, inevitable phenomenon. He reaches the ground slowly, radiating disbelief. Voldemort holds out a hand to touch Harry's face but hesitates as if unsure it's really there. A mirage.

Harry tilts his head a little more and the corner of his mouth quirks.

"How . . . ?"

The word is whispered, reverent. Voldemort's eyes hold a worshipful light as if in the presence of god.

Energy's coming back to Harry's body, enough for him to lift a hand and cup Voldemort's own, bring it into contact with Harry's cheek. Harry's lips curve on a small smile. A pained and mournful moan sounds off from beyond their little bubble.

Voldemort whips his wand around to cast a nonverbal curse that has the receiving party falling suddenly silent.

When he turns back to Harry, Harry only shrugs lightly. He hasn't got a clue. He won't argue with the results - he's grateful to be alive. Realization surges over Voldemort's face, a cast of sudden knowledge clearly snapping through him. Whatever that realization might be, he doesn't share it or even have time to.

Pops resound around them, contingents of red-robed aurors ripping into existence. They secure the scene with wands trained on the wizards littering the street. Some regard Harry and Voldemort with hesitance and fear. With fascination for the Dark Lord's bared face. One breaks ranks and approaches and Harry recognizes suddenly that it's Kingsley. He tries to climb to his feet to greet him only to be held down by a heavy hand on his chest. Voldemort quells him with a look.

"He needs St. Mungo's," he orders without greeting.

"Already on the way," Kingsley assures as more pops of apparition fill the air. "Ah, here they are now. Over here!" he waves a hesitant cluster of mediwizards and witches over.

“What, ah, what seems to be the problem?” the bravest of them manages to ask intelligibly. Voldemort stands.

“Run every test you have on him. Leave nothing out.” It’s a command more than an answer, but nobody’s bold enough to challenge it. They snap to it. Harry’s floated onto a collapsible stretcher and he tries not to complain about it.

People are ducking their heads out of the shops and businesses, deeming the coast clear now that aurors and mediwizards have flooded the alley. Harry sees his hopes of having quietly survived the killing curse once again have been foiled in the way they look at him in awe and fear. He finds himself grateful when he’s zapped away to St. Mungo’s.

They float him into a private room and into a hospital bed reminiscent of those at the hospital wing at Hogwarts, but made of carved wood. It’s certainly cozier than a Muggle hospital room, that’s for sure. Harry’s made to lay in bed while all manner of tests, spells, and assessments are administered to him. Voldemort looms next to the bed, watching everything nearly unblinkingly. Spying the shake of the mediwizard and witches’ hands, Harry feels a bit guilty. It’s hardly optimal working conditions for them. And indeed he wonders when he and Voldemort became an ‘us’ and everyone else became a ‘them’.

Things get a bit embarrassing when he’s instructed to take off his shirt and caramel colored jumper. He has a sudden recollection that some might understandably have a reaction to his soulmark.

Reluctantly dragging the clothing over his head, Harry realizes he has more to be worried about still. They didn’t use the bruise cream on the love bite on his collarbone and even faded it stands out, obvious and difficult to miss. Harry averts his eyes from the cluster of mediwitches and wizards in the room. The soulmark is as livid and splashy as ever and Harry’s feeling suddenly insecure about it where lately he’s been feeling at peace. It’s hard not to cover it with a modest hand. There’s a pause in the air, collective intaken breath, then exhale as a witch comes closer to cast the next diagnostic. Her nose twitches, a thoughtful wrinkle forming in her brow. She sniffs the air even while casting. It takes a minute, but even so, recognition flashes in her eyes. She looks Harry’s torso over and then at his face carefully. The cream! The smell was so distinctive, clinging close to the skin. But there’s no way she’d recognize the smell . . . right?

The sad, worried look in her eye tells another story. Harry tries to smile at her in reassurance but he thinks it probably makes it worse. So embarrassing.

Diagnostic spells set his bones buzzing, make parts of his body selectively glow and his skin prick. St. Mungo’s staff are as good as their word and run what must conceivably be every test they have on him. It’s exhaustive but hardly exhausting; all Harry really has to do is sit there, lie down, move this limb or that, breathe normally and then deeply. They draw a little blood, a little saliva, and siphon off a little moisture from his eyes with a particularly delicately placed charm. The fluids are sent off to be processed in the potions and testing ward, to be mixed and tested and assessed. Harry’s really getting the star treatment.

Kingsley comes by with a couple of other aurors accompanying him and asks the mediwizards and witches for privacy to discuss an active case. Harry, it goes without saying,

is very quick to whip his shirt and jumper back on and smooth them down nervously, hoping they didn't see. "Are you well, Harry?" Kingsley asks gently, slowly coming closer in spite of the intimidating presence at this end of the room. Harry respects that, honestly. Beneath the veneer of cool professionalism, one of the aurors looks quietly ready to vomit from nerves and the other, about to piss himself. Voldemort's just standing there, an inky form absorbing the light and gravity in the room just by nature, but then again that's enough on its own.

"Yeah, I think all these tests are just a formality. You know," he says and isn't sure how exactly it is he was planning to finish that sentence. But Kingsley *does* know. He pulls out a recording quill and notepad. The quill scratches across the open page as they speak.

"We're investigating today's incident - I want you to tell me exactly what happened this morning and don't leave any detail out, even if it seems inconsequential."

Harry assents and starts - "Well, I left the wand shop where I'm apprenticed and - "

Kingsley cuts him off. "Further back please, from the start of the day. We think they may have been following you for some time and need all the information you can provide about how extensive their surveillance could be."

"Right, okay," Harry says and then steeps into a stark blush as he remembers how his day began. "Um, I woke up," *naked and well-fucked* his brain supplies. "Took a shower," *to wash off all the lingering sweat and come after staring at my banged up body for a while*. "Went back to bed for awhile," *lying next to my husband and cuddling shamelessly*. "Then I had some breakfast and left for the day."

"Where is your current residence?" Kingsley asks the question like it's off a script, something he's required to say. Standard procedure, perhaps.

"Um," Harry glances at Voldemort, silent against the wall by the bed with arms folded and a frown of dissatisfaction, rolling his wand between his fingers. "Perhaps it's best if I don't say."

"Very well," Kingsley accepts calmly, to the apparent surprise of his subordinates. It's a relief. "Have you noticed anything strange at home? Felt observed, noticed any suspicious changes or activity?"

"No." As if anyone would know where to find the place. Though, Harry supposes there must be a record of sale somewhere.

"What happened after you left for the day?"

"I apparated directly to the backdoor of Ollivander's and went inside. I didn't notice anything strange then either," he hurries to add, sensing the question coming.

"Alright, what then?"

“I worked for about four or so hours, really interesting stuff, fusing wand cores and wood - well, maybe that’s something to talk about another time,” Harry interrupts himself and laughs a little, scratching the back of his head and causing Kingsley to smile warmly at him. “I left for lunch at around 2 o’clock, I think. I forgot to cast a notice-me-not spell on myself again for the first time in a while, just slipped my mind,” *because I was so well-fucked and happy I didn’t even think of it.*

“No disillusionment? Or cloak of invisibility?”

“Seemed like overkill,” Harry shrugs helplessly. “Can’t live my whole life invisible.” Been there, done that.

“Alright Harry, what happened next? I want you to give us all the details you can.”

“Um, after a few moments I realized my mistake and pulled out my wand to cast something to hide me a little better, so I don’t have to talk to anyone or cause problems. That’s when the first spell came at me. It was white and - “ Harry recounts the attack in as much detail as he can.

“Someone cast a killing curse and then I got knocked out for a moment while the fighting continued. Voldemort,” here, the two accompanying aurors flinch at the open use of the name even while the Dark Lord himself is in the room. Harry could imagine some dark satisfaction at that in his husband. Or perhaps not. “Was the last one standing and then you all arrived to round everyone up.”

“Harry,” Kingsley calls gently. His eyes are soft. “Who did the killing curse hit? Where did the spell land?”

“Er . . . “ Harry trails off. “Not sure. I was kind of down for the count.”

It’s a blatant evasion. But also the truth. He hadn’t felt a thing. Somehow, he gets the feeling saying that would alarm people even more.

He died. Or rather, he *didn’t*. And he should be freaking out. Except he isn’t. In fact, it’s hardly seemed to change a thing -

The wedding vows.

He *died*. Or *paused*, anyway. Every clause was contingent on being married, and marriage was contingent on “until death do you part.”

Sweet mother of god.

“ - Harry?”

“I’m fine,” he says quickly. “Just been a crazy day.” His eyes dart to the side. Does Voldemort know? Does he realize? Is this where *everything fucking falls apart*?

Harry can't even begin to imagine fighting him now. It would break him.

"I can imagine," Kingsley replies, even as one of his coworkers snorts and then covers his mouth in horror.

"What do you think this was all about, Kingsley? Who were those wizards, what did they want?" Harry asks numbly, trying to play at acting normal.

Kingsley sighs heavily. "A few of them have certainly been talkative in the last couple of hours. Apparently there's a band of united dark wizards and witches across Europe and parts of Asia that took exception to the Dark Lord's pardoning. They believe he'll rise to power here and then try to overtake more than just the UK. This was, in their minds, allegedly a preemptive move. Defensive."

And beyond thinking *oh good, sounds like some of them survived*, all Harry can think of is the absolute fact that he cannot reply informatively to any of that. He can't chance outing Voldemort's plan for legal rise to power, or outing any details of the terms of the truce. And he's still numb in the face of his catastrophic realization. So obediently, in deference to these facts, he stays silent. The auror who snorted's eyebrows are climbing higher and higher on his face the longer the brief silence drags on.

"Why target me, though?" Harry asks at last. That's the part he doesn't get.

"Target one soulmate and you target the other. They were probably trying to draw him out and it certainly seems that it worked." Kingsley glances in Voldemort's direction, possibly curious if this will anger him. It doesn't. It's just true.

Just then, there's a pounding at the door and every wizard in the room tenses, hands drawn to wands. Then a head of red hair peeks around the edge of the opening door and Weasleys pile into the room, Hermione and Professor McGonagall and Neville among them.

He's quickly swarmed with the well-wishers where he's still seated. "Is that everything?" he queries to Kingsley over the noise of his friends and family asking if he's alright; Kingsley nods. "Just let us know if you notice any other unusual activity."

"I'll be sure to, thanks." Harry turns to the faces collected around his completely unnecessary hospital bed. All he can think to say is "Hi."

Flatteringly, McGonagall, Hermione, Neville, and the assorted Weasleys are bold enough with the need to see him that they seem to be doing all they can to pretend Voldemort isn't there. Neville does look pale as a ghost though, edging into green, and the stutter's back. Ron looks ready to faint. Mrs. Weasley calls Harry's name and throws her arms around him in a tight hug. "We nearly lost you! I don't know what we would have done with ourselves - Harry you are so important to us, so very important and -"

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley, that . . . really means a lot." *We nearly lost you.* No. No they didn't. In fact, has he ever been in mortal danger in his life, if a killing curse can't even off him? Has all that fear in life or death situations been for nothing?

Someone's saying something about him looking pale and is he sure he's really alright, which is fair enough because - because -

His face feels numb, a light ringing in his ears.

He doesn't turn to look at Voldemort, not once, terrified his eyes will give it all away. Does he realize he's free to do whatever he wishes? That Harry feels utterly helpless to stop him? That they're right back where they started, except now Harry is more powerless than ever, more *weak* to him than ever?

Harry fights off a panic attack easier than might be believed - he's so out of it, he can't quite muster the requisite panic. Everything they've built together is crumbling, right at the foundations.

But . . . Voldemort's not attacking anyone. He's not swooping out to murder the Minister and take his place. He's not organizing his Death Eaters or hatching an evil plot. He's not locking Harry in a dungeon and throwing away the key. Instead, he's here. Right here.

Mrs. Weasley and Hermione are competing for air time while most of the men in the room still look trepidatious. McGonagall's silent support is a balm. It takes a moment for Harry to gather the words to say, "I appreciate everyone coming, but I'm doing just fine," with a placating hand gesture. "Actually, could I get a minute alone? I want to - to talk to all of you, there's just something we need to discuss. It'll only take a minute."

And again, he has to marvel at 'alone' meaning 'just me and my husband.' Except . . . he's not his husband. The marriage has dissolved. There's no way it hasn't, even if it was on a technicality.

Everyone reluctantly trundles out of the room, Ron last out the door eyeing Voldemort distrustfully as if Harry hasn't spent the last several weeks living alone with him. It's almost cute.

Harry buries his head in his hands for a moment, then tilts his head to peek up at Voldemort. Yes, he most certainly knows. He comes to curl a hand around the back of Harry's head, righting its position. He thumbs at the corner of Harry's mouth, reminiscent of that touch all that time ago, the one that launched a thousand ships in his soul.

His eyes nearly begin to water with relief. "Marry me," he says.

"I had begun to believe you might never ask," Voldemort answers.

"How did I survive it again?" Harry asks plainly.

"That's a tale for another time - I have my suspicions. But I will consent to answer what questions you have, however not here."

Harry nods simply at that, agreed upon the fact that their privacy may be more limited than they think.

"What about the terms?" he queries, cautious.

“We’ll need to make adjustments. I have stipulations to add and a few to remove, but on the whole the agreement we’ve had has been favorable. Hasn’t it, Harry?” Harry doesn’t even flush with it, is too focused on higher needs and machinations.

“I . . . I’m not ungrateful,” he says, looking up at Voldemort searchingly. Offeringly.

“No,” Voldemort confirms. “No, indeed you’re not.” *Why aren’t you strong-arming me? Why aren’t you refusing an Unbreakable Vow? Why aren’t you fighting this? Why?*

But: Remember these people are temporary. It is only you and I, Harry. Only you and I.

He must still be willing to bide his time. Harry doesn’t know what he’d do if Voldemort pushed back on reinstating the old agreements, but it would certainly obstruct a relationship; or at least, the type of relationship they’ve had so far. So Voldemort will in all likelihood shape the Vows to reflect temporary conditions on his ability to pursue power and wait, patient as a spider. And in the interminable stretch of eternity, that won’t prove to be very long at all. He’ll take it. Harry fists a hand in the front of Voldemort’s robes and pulls him down to his level. The press of lips is immediately passionate, searching, and when they part it feels like a punch to the gut, but Harry doesn’t feel right taking more, not here where privacy isn’t guaranteed and his friends and family are literally waiting in the wings and there’s life-altering business to be conducted.

Harry’s still wary of asking too many questions, for fear of prompting a change of mind. But he has so very many.

“Thank you,” he says quietly. It’s for him. It’s all for him. Voldemort thinks he’s worth it. It boggles the mind in a way it never has before. Now they both actually *know* what they’re getting. And he wants to have it again, every day, presumably for a good long time! Insanity. He’s alright to grant the man some looser terms on ways to gain power, but he’ll defer to the Order’s best judgment on what protections and caveats are needed to retool the agreement properly, safely. Harry’s got no clue how Voldemort planned to slip the rules they’d set before. But it says a lot that Voldemort immediately went back to his murderous ways the moment Harry was gone. He needs Harry to keep in check, none of this works without him. Harry calls the others back into the room and a few more familiar faces have joined. Tonks, Remus, Moody. They’re stiff, unusually reserved and wary. Moody’s severe frown could fell a man. And it’s only natural.

A wonder it is, that Voldemort would consent to so many enemies in one room with him alone. Then again, he’s a spectacularly confident man. And who’s to say how many Death Eaters are ringing St. Mungo’s outside.

“We had some things to discuss with the Order, if that’s alright,” Harry informs them all. “But um, thanks everyone for coming by,” he finishes a bit awkwardly. Strangely, that element of it seems to make Neville emotional, nerves and fright giving way to something heartfelt.

“I’m just glad you’re alright, Harry. I’ll let the others know you’re safe and okay, we’ve all been on pins and needles today. Take care, and see you soon.” He makes his way out and that leaves the Order and Voldemort, with Harry caught somewhere weird in the middle.

“We need to renegotiate the Vow,” Harry announces with no ceremony. There’s a tense silence, then Hermione’s eyes sprout tears and her breath catches.

“So it’s true . . . ? You - you really did survive the killing curse again?”

“Yeah.” She makes a raw noise, leans down to hug him carefully like she’s afraid he’ll break like fine china. He tugs her into a firmer hug then lets go. “So we need to re-do the ceremony and he’d like to make some adjustments. *Small* adjustments.”

It’s important to emphasize that to everyone, warts and all as they are. He has no idea what changes Voldemort wants to make, but they’ll need to be relatively minor for it to fly. Most Order members look shaken by Harry’s gaze with death, or perhaps with nearly reigniting war. Moody just looks a dangerous combination of grim and pissed off.

“And what changes exactly are you thinkin’ to make?” he questions with grave suspicion, magic eye jerking and spinning wildly in the socket.

“This isn’t the best place to hash this out. Y’know, privacy and all that,” Harry fumbles in his reply, trying to follow Voldemort’s lead from before. “But we should meet as soon as possible. Tonight even. You can pick the place,” here Harry glances at Voldemort for approval and knows Moody would never risk walking into a potential trap if Voldemort chose where they’d meet. “We can meet as soon as my tests come back.” Harry has a sneaking feeling Voldemort wouldn’t allow them to leave St. Mungo’s without getting the results back so that every malady’s ruled out. “But this benefits everyone. We don’t have as much back and forth to bother with and now we know it’ll all be in, er, good faith. So, yeah.” That’s about the extent of the diplomacy he’s capable of, completely out of place in the role beyond failing to smooth over some of Ron and Hermione’s more prickly spats. McGonagall’s eyes shine with pride, even tinged with sadness as it is. It’s enough to have him sitting a little taller in his bed.

“We’ll need to get the Ministry involved, if the larger truce and pardonings are to hold,” Moody bites out.

“Very well.” Voldemort speaks at last, and multiple bodies in the room jump, startle. “Gather what representatives you may. What location do you suggest?” He still rolls his wand lightly between his fingers, opposite hand grasping the wandtip. Meditative or threatening, the world may never know.

As Moody identifies a discreet location outside Bristol, Harry wonders why they aren’t just meeting at the Ministry itself, then realizes that would probably cause a public panic. What other reason could they have for all gathering together than a dissolved agreement? Or something else equally terrifying, destabilizing. Not very secure either, and who knows what remaining members of that dark wizarding band might be lingering around, waiting for the next opportunity. He can spy Ron doing the same mental math.

Hermione and Lupin are still watching him with sharp, quiet sorrow and checking-over motions of the eye, as if to ensure he’s really alright. Fred and George are lounging at the back of the room, whispering together non-conspiratorially for once. Mr. Weasley has his hands stuffed in his trouser pockets, either in calm or to hide their shaking.

The room is packed full of people Harry cares for and it doesn't matter that there's a canyon wide and deep enough between them to house an ancient river.

It doesn't matter that there's peace without amity, prosperity without sufficient sacrifice. It doesn't. It's all going to be alright.

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The dusk air is cool and pleasant, the sky a faded palette of blues and whites. Tall strange stones encircle one another in the twilight moment, Stonehenge as majestic as ever.

It had taken less than a day and a half to finalize the new Vows, the Order eager to re-establish a former peace agreement and the Ministry in firm alignment with that view. Voldemort had been equanimitous, non-reactive to the point it only seemed to spike everyone's anxiety higher. Firm in his stance, blank in his bearing. It is, Harry has come to realize, the confidence of a great snake in the presence of lesser predators it can't be bothered to concern itself with. And it helped that every other person was walking on eggshells to avoid upsetting the delicate balance of peace. It's like ever since Harry was taken off the chessboard, Voldemort's been difficult to rile. Comfortable in the seat of his power. The heavy hand of prophecy lifted, or something like that. Once Harry was marked as an equal through the soulmark rather than the curse scar, enmity turned into avarice and Voldemort's succeeded in having it, having him, even at personal cost.

It had felt so strange, so right, to sit by his side for the negotiations instead of across the table for once. So very difficult not to kneel down, put a hand on Voldemort's leg, and just beg for him to concede every addendum. It wouldn't have worked, it's important Harry understand that, remember that - but the instinct in itself holds a power of its own.

Harry didn't die yesterday, and yet he didn't not from a technical standpoint. Voldemort's yet to explain that part, all their free time consumed by peace planning.

But if Voldemort can be patient, so can Harry. All in due course.

Harry can see an officiant in Ministry red at the center of the stone circle, with people clustered at the opposite sides, half in all black and half in typical wizarding wear. The circle still has its protections against violent acts, which no one had the opportunity to explain to Harry before, increasing the odds of the first ceremony not ending in mass murder. It's all just like before. But this time, Harry's calm, he's steadfast, he's ready. Running away is the last thing on his mind.

They approach from the south on quiet feet, crunching in dried pale grass. Harry takes Voldemort's hand and walks on.

Wind rustles the swaying grasses, a million blades brushing against a million million more. It calls to mind the infiniteness of the universe, the inviolability of nature; that even when

things die or species end or volcanoes erupt, life surges onwards, unstoppable.

Harry and Voldemort walk to Stonehenge and will follow through on the promises they have made to one another. And after, they will wander the evening plains in search of only the satisfaction of uncomplicated exploration, of quiet company. They will wander and discover and build and destroy, onwards, unstoppable, until the moon sinks and the sun rises and burns out, until the universe tilts on its side and folds in on itself, and walk on further still.

Chapter End Notes

To all who commented and kudosed and lurked, let me just say - thanks homies! See you
 later, alligators $\mathfrak{Q}(\cdot\omega\cdot)_/\cdot\circ\star_{+}\circ\cdot$

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