

Impressions

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Impressions

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Summary

Years pass, and Harry Potter grows up thinking that he doesn't have a soulmate. After all, he's never seen anyone else with a scar spread so obvious across half their face.

But life just couldn't be that easy.

A belated birthday gift for Luxis, from the Chaos Wives.

Notes

Atlanta

Surprise! I did say you were getting a birthday gift! I just neglected to mention it's a joint birthday gift!

We really hope you enjoy it <3

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

Harry Potter wonders sometimes whether he really is a freak.

It's what Aunt and Uncle say, after all. They ought to know – or at least, the world seems to think that they ought to know. They are adults and Harry is a child. Every other adult always seems to think that adults always know better; or they believe each other over children. (Over Harry, especially.) Therefore, if they say something, then shouldn't they mean it? Have a reason for saying it?

For instance, they're having a lesson on soul marks, because one of the girls in Harry's class had abruptly started bleeding, a thick cut that went across her upper arm and shoulder and wept through her blouse. Harry had been both upset and fascinated – he'd never seen anyone else do anything freakish before! – until it became clear that Mrs. Bennett knew what was going on. The girl had been marched quickly to the nurse, and now, they were all being told about soulmates.

It's not something that Harry has ever heard about before, and he thinks it's much more interesting than maths. He listens carefully and attentively.

The souls of soulmates, Mrs. Bennett says with more words, are so entwined that it is almost as if their bodies, too, believe that they were once one. When you are injured, your soulmate receives your injury, reduced a bit by the nevertheless real distance between you. Sometimes a new scar can appear that you have no recollection of getting. Sometimes you too can bleed, if the wound on your soulmate is grievous enough. And, of course, Mrs. Bennett goes on, as if imparting some deep secret, soulmates always have all the same scars.

Harry wonders about that. Touches the scarred-in lightning bolt spears that grace nearly the entire right side of his face as Mrs. Bennett talks, and catches a few of the other children throwing considering glances at him. He, he thinks with a strange swell of hope, will never have to squint and wonder and compare tiny paper-cut slivers, the way some of the others already are. He will always know immediately, the moment he sees anyone, that they are not his soulmate.

But then, with such surety, the opposite is also true. Harry, without any doubt at all, will *know*.

He wanders into the library during recess, looking for books about soulmates. He reads. He learns about all the different types of soulmates when he looks at books for older kids than he, carefully figuring out the new words with slow intensity. Mrs. Bennett made it sound like soulmates were always going to be your own age, and Harry hadn't been too excited about it, really, because other kids never liked him. He was too weird.

But that wasn't all a soulmate could be. Soulmates didn't need to be people you married, or even your own age. Soulmates could be any gender – men with men, women with women, men with women. There are stories, Harry finds, of soulmates with large age differences. Stories of adults who finally found their younger soulmate, who acted as mentors and sometimes even guardians.

He looks that word up, just to make sure he understands it correctly.

After his week in the library Harry is full of hope, fuller than he had ever expected to be. He might have a soulmate. Maybe his soulmate is his age. But maybe, Harry thinks late at night when all the Dursleys are asleep, maybe his soulmate is older than him. Maybe his soulmate is a grown-up with a job and a house. Maybe, Harry thinks – dares to try and believe – maybe his soulmate will find him and take him away, and care about him, and pat his head. Maybe he'll have a real bed and three meals a day and maybe, just maybe, his soulmate will give him a hug. Harry's never had one, and they look nice.

He carefully checks himself every day for any new scars, any sign of his soulmate's existence. At first he tries to do it by showering even more quickly, when he is allowed to shower – then, miraculously, Aunt Petunia gives him the gift of extra time, so he can look. “Because otherwise you won't shower in favor of looking, and you'll smell,” she tells him, sniffing down at him as if he's a rat. Harry is beaming too hard to be bothered.

Yet, as months pass, and then a whole year, and then another – Harry has to accept that he can't see any sign of a soulmate.

It doesn't make sense to him. Everyone gets papercuts. Everyone gets hangnails. Everyone gets thin silver scars from their soulmate's papercuts, everyone has had a single drop of blood abruptly ooze up from their cuticle when their soulmate cuts a hangnail off too aggressively.

Everyone, it seems, except Harry.

Years later, Harry is a wizard, and he hopes that he never sees one of his peers with his lightning scar – hopes that he just doesn't have a soulmate, after all, because he doesn't know how he'd be able to bear the betrayal of that childhood dream of an older soulmate coming to save him. Better, Harry thinks, to have no soulmate, than to have a child his age who could never have done anything.

Life goes on and he goes with it.

Voldemort is back.

Harry can feel the truth of this in his bones even before the smoke begins to clear. This doesn't stop him from hoping, praying, wishing that it weren't true.

Wormtail is sobbing on the ground. The smoke is now so thick that he can barely see the cauldron, and he finds himself viciously hoping that the strange creature that had called itself ‘Voldemort’ is drowning.

The smoke begins to clear after what feels like a lifetime of waiting – a lifetime of dread building in his chest and panic threatening to choke him. At first all he can see is the outline

of a tall, skeletally thin man who rises from the cauldron with a grace that Harry resents. Red eyes blink open, the color piercing through the lingering fog and snapping to meet Harry's own eyes. His heart has lodged itself in his throat.

The smoke finishes clearing and he feels his heart drop, thinks he may be sick around the gag still in his mouth. Voldemort is back, yet somehow that isn't the worst part.

(Why couldn't that be the worst part?)

The worst part is staring back at him in the fractal lines creeping their way over Voldemort's face. Those lines a mirror image of the lines that Harry sees reflected back to him in the mirror everyday, lines that creep from the middle of his forehead to the corner of his right eye and stretch their way over his cheek. Now a replica of these lines creates stark contrast on the bone white color of Voldemort's new body.

Soulmates.

The word whispers through Harry's mind and he shoves it away. This is a trick. This is a cruel trick, nothing but a nightmare Voldemort had created to fuck with Harry, mess with his head and make him uncertain. It is not real, can not be real.

Voldemort hasn't taken his eyes off of Harry since rising through the smoke. He steps from the cauldron easily, not once looking away. Not once giving Harry a chance to look away from the damning lines on his face.

"Robe me, Wormtail," he hisses, voice lisping its way closer to parseltongue than English.

Pettigrew rushes to do so, still sobbing even as he obeys. Harry finds himself distracted for a moment wondering how Voldemort had the patience to deal with Wormtail long enough to bring himself back. It would have been better for them all if he had just murdered him in frustration before the coward could manage to bring him back.

"Harry Potter," Voldemort hisses, voice still low. "Here I have you, at my mercy."

He musters all the anger he can into the glare he shoots at Voldemort, and wishes that the force of his anger alone were enough to murder the bastard where he stands. How dare he. How *dare* he.

"Soon, those who are still loyal to me shall arrive, and then they will all see how easily you die," says the Dark Lord, walking close enough that Harry can see every single excruciating line on his face. Can see all the ways in which the scars match. "They shall see how it was only luck that you escaped death all those years ago," he murmurs, reaching out a finger and tracing it down Harry's cheek.

Harry grits his teeth, expecting pain, but nothing happens – nothing, other than Voldemort staring at him with narrowed eyes. Other than the cool feeling of his finger against Harry's cheek. Other than Harry's skin trying to crawl off of his bones from the force of his panic. His stomach sinks at the implications and he finds himself wishing that he were in pain. He wishes, desperately, for anything other than what he's been given.

Voldemort tilts his head and stares at Harry for a moment. He keeps his finger pressed firmly against Harry's cheek as if he expects him to start writhing in pain at any moment. When still nothing changes, he places the flat of his palm against his other cheek, as if increased contact will change something, will make the pain appear. And nothing happens, except that Harry is forced to hang there and let Voldemort cup his face in a mockery of a caress.

"Interesting," he finally murmurs, looking at his own hands in fascination. "Interesting, but unimportant. Wormtail, your arm," he demands, turning away from Harry.

Wormtail holds his mangled wrist out with a sob. "Thank you master. Thank you, thank you –"

"Your other arm, Wormtail," the Dark Lord says, dark humor coating his words.

Wormtail lets out another sob, but holds his left arm out. Voldemort crouches down, pushes up the sleeve with a disgusted curl of his lip and stares down at the Dark Mark on Wormtail's skin.

"Let us see how many remain loyal and how many need to be reminded of what loyalty to me means," he says, pressing his wand against the mark. Wormtail gives another scream of pain, as if his other hand is also being cut off.

He stands and begins pacing back and forth in front of the gravestone that Harry is still tied to. The scar on his face stands out painfully, and slowly, in that way that so many of Harry's revelations come, realization is beginning to creep in. Voldemort is making no move to conceal the mark. Is making no move to hide something that is a glaring weakness.

There are not many things about Voldemort that Harry can say for certain but he knows that he hates showing weakness. Tom Riddle had snarled down at him even as he flickered out of existence. There is no way or reason why Voldemort would let his Death Eaters know that his soulmate is the Boy-Who-Lived – which means, inevitably, that he doesn't know.

A spike of panic shoots through Harry's chest like lightning at the idea of anyone else knowing. He doesn't want to know this himself, he absolutely does not want anyone else knowing about it. He shrieks around the gag, strains forward. Perhaps he can say something, can get Voldemort to cover it up. It would mean acknowledging it out loud but if that is what it takes to keep the secret safe then that's what he'll do.

Voldemort stops pacing to look at him, surprise flitting across his face briefly. After all, Harry hasn't made a noise since the Dark Lord stepped out of the cauldron and now suddenly he is shrieking. But he has to make Voldemort understand, has to do it quickly before anyone else shows up.

"Have you finally realized that your death is drawing close?" Voldemort asks, amusement in his voice. "It will do you no good to beg and I do not care to hear it. I believe we'll leave that gag in for a bit longer."

Harry shuts up abruptly and shoots an incredulous look at Voldemort. He doesn't want to hear Harry beg but he's fine listening to Wormtail sob and beg? He sends another pointed look

down at Wormtail and thinks he almost sees a grimace on Voldemort's face. If Wormtail weren't so absorbed in his own pain and his own cowardice he could warn Voldemort himself.

Voldemort is still pacing back and forth, eyes distant, when the first pop rings through the graveyard. More and more shadowy figures begin appearing, all garbed in the same black robe and bone white mask. Harry finds himself looking between the masks and Voldemort and wondering how similar he looks now to when he had tried to murder Harry as a child. Was the bone white color of the masks on purpose, or some twisted coincidence? Is it Fate laughing at them even now?

The figures arrange themselves in a circle around Voldemort and the gravestone that Harry is tied to. They're all fidgeting, nerves high, which it makes it easy to notice when they finally see Voldemort's face. He watches one of the ones farthest from him freeze and then watches as one by one they all stop moving, standing stock still like statues.

Voldemort does not seem to find this odd. He likely thinks their fear is his God-given right, and not them all noticing the scar that cuts across his face. Wormtail is *still* sobbing. It's a wonder that Voldemort hasn't just disposed of him already, because at this point even Harry would love to.

Voldemort talks at length about duty and betrayal. About loyalty and about how dare they stand here, proud and whole, while they had left him to float through the world untethered. Harry stops listening after a point, more interested in trying to pick out any telling features that he can use when he gets back. Because he is going to get back. He is going to survive this. He is going to take Cedric's body back. He is going to make sure that this grief lodged in his chest never has to make a home in Ron or Hermione. And when he gets back, he's going to tell Dumbledore everything and drag as many of these bastards down with him as he can.

Voldemort turns towards him suddenly and he snaps back to attention.

"You will be given a chance to duel, Harry Potter, so that I can show everyone here that your escape from death was purely chance."

Harry finds himself dropped to the ground suddenly and stumbles, knees hitting the dirt, palms scraping across the ground. He pulls the foul tasting rag out of his mouth immediately and lurches to his feet, looking up just in time to see Voldemort glancing down at his own palms, expression baffled.

"Congratulations. Now they all know," Harry spits, the words falling out of him immediately. How dare he.

Voldemort freezes, eyes narrowed and looks around at the Death Eaters. "Now they know what?" he hisses out, tone low and threatening.

"You should have looked in a mirror before you called them. Or picked a less pathetic follower to bring you back," Harry spits.

He hears Peter whimper in fear and takes vicious delight in the worry that he briefly sees in Voldemort's eyes. Voldemort doesn't summon a mirror. He doesn't make any attempt to look at his own face but Harry knows. He's at least worried. A few Death Eaters shift uncomfortably, although Wormtail is the only one stupid enough to keep whimpering.

Later, when Ron and Hermione ask him what happened, what *really* happened, he thinks about telling them. Thinks about maybe letting them shoulder some of the weight this secret carries with it. But he imagines for a split second the disgust in Ron's eyes and the pity in Hermione's and shoves the secret back down and resolves not to think of it. He channels all of his pain and anger into Cedric's death and pretends he doesn't see their worried eyes.

This will not be the thing that he loses them over. Not this.

Voldemort would never be worth that. Could never be worth it.

The summer of 1995 is spent in a daze.

He is not. Harry is not. They are not. There is nothing between them. Harry is not Voldemort's soulmate. Voldemort is not Harry's soulmate. It isn't allowed – things cannot be this way. Harry Potter cannot be the soulmate to the Dark Lord Voldemort, because the world would not be that cruel. Because soulmates are supposed to *help you*, not attempt to *murder you* –

Harry sees Voldemort's lightning-scarred face every night in his dreams, and keeps telling himself it does not matter, because it's just a coincidence.

At least it's easy to pretend that his distress is entirely due to Voldemort's return, and not also due to the monstrous reality of it all. He tells nobody of this truth – the truth about how much of a freak Harry Potter really is – because he is selfish, and he still can't bear to lose his friends.

The Ministry does not believe Voldemort is back.

The Ministry does not believe that Voldemort is back with such a vengeance that they send a pink, simpering demon to hold in the rumors right at the source – Hogwarts itself. Harry

barely listens or pays attention, unable to find it in himself to care much. He shouldn't even be here, with his monster of a soulmate. But, he's fine. He's *fine*. Stop *asking* him.

He doesn't want to talk about it. Doesn't want to think about it, either, but it takes up his thoughts all the same. Did Harry always have this silvery papercut scar across the knuckle of his left thumb, or is this new – Voldemort's latest present? Did Harry ever give himself this papercut? Once he knew all his scars minutely, a detailed map that allowed him to immediately know whether or not something was out of place (not that it ever was). But around the time the wizarding world came knocking, Harry had stopped paying attention, and now he does not know.

He *hates* not knowing. His skin is only his. He does not want to sublet any part of it to a monster like Voldemort.

He wonders, when Umbridge finally finds something worth a detention beneath the masks of Harry's denial and self-loathing, whether or not Voldemort will feel this quill in his skin.

Some two weeks later, a Slytherin student approaches him. Harry watches her warily, trying to understand who she is, and finding that he has no idea. She is not in his year, and Malfoy is always so distracting.

At least, normally, Malfoy is distracting. For some reason the gloating blonde has been scarce for most of October thus far, and Harry can't properly fathom a reason why.

Not that it matters.

The brown-haired girl gives him a cautious wave. Harry looks at her without bothering to remove his expression of exceedingly suspicious bewilderment.

"Hello," she says, after halting a respectful enough distance away that she couldn't – say – reach out and grab him. Harry can't reach out to grab her, either, so he supposes this is a mutually beneficial thing.

"I don't think I know you," he says flatly. "What d'you want?"

"My name is Natalia," she says, voice just as flat and twice as cold. "Fleming. Listen, Potter, I just wanted to ask you a question."

"If it includes a slur, I'm hexing you."

"Fair enough," she mutters. "I'll be frank with you. Some people in Slytherin are very concerned about these detentions Umbridge is handing out like candy. What is going on?"

"Oh, just typical Defense professor shite," Harry snorts. He's not sure why he's telling this to a Slytherin, but it feels like a safer option, strangely, than venting to Ron and Hermione. He

can already feel the pain of continued discussions and taking-aparts that comes with telling them things, and the needling, and the worry, and the *are you sure you're alrights*. No, he bloody well isn't alright – but it's not for the reason they think!

Well, not all of it.

“I'm afraid I'm unaware of what you consider typical Defense professor shite,” the girl says, and Harry surprises himself by actually laughing.

Wow. He hasn't laughed in a really long time, he thinks.

“Attempted torture and murder,” Harry says, when he finally catches his breath. “Sometimes successful torture. You know. The usual. Quills that write in blood are new, but I guess I can't complain, right?” he scoffs, suddenly feeling vindictive enough to showcase his muggle-esque heritage to this girl who is undoubtedly a pureblood. “After all, *magic* can do *so many* incredible things.”

“The quill writes in blood?” the girl repeats, stock still. “It takes the blood from you?”

“Pretty much.” Harry glares at her. “I know she seems to love Slytherins, but to be honest, none of our Defense professors really keep themselves on the line of sane. So, you should tell your firsties especially not to get on her bad side.”

“She does this to first years.”

“Any years she can find an excuse or reason to.”

The girl's jaw works furiously at nothing for a long moment. Then, she turns and marches off, and Harry wonders if it was something he said. For another week he wonders whether anything will come of his conversation with Natalia Fleming, the Slytherin girl of unknown year, but nobody ever mentions it, and it seems that even if Malfoy heard, he is choosing not to say anything. Harry presumes, because of this inaction, that Malfoy didn't hear anything.

The chaos, if it can properly be called that, only becomes apparent to Harry in the aftermath.

One day, they arrive to class to find no sign of the cardigan-wearing toad in the Defense classroom. After a solid half hour of nervous waiting, the Gryffindors and Slytherins come to one of those silent understandings which occur between long-standing enemies who are, for once, suddenly united in one opinion. Everyone quickly and efficiently packs their bags back up, movements oddly quiet, and exits the room for better and brighter things.

Umbridge is back at dinner looking murderous. Harry winces, already imagining how badly the next Defense class is going to go.

But in two days, when they finally arrive at the second Defense class of the week, Umbridge is again absent. This time, they only wait fifteen minutes, everyone exchanging bewildered and silent glances, before shoving their things away and dashing for safety somewhere else.

This time, Umbridge is not at lunch.

She isn't at dinner either.

That night, Harry has a dream.

"Harry Potter," is the first thing he hears, a half-lisped snarl that winds into his ears and coils in his chest with no obvious physical source. His body feels light, like it is floating into all different directions without his input, even as he tries to panic enough to push through the muck of sleep and into the daylight of awareness. But still, Voldemort's voice continues. "Are you a masochist?"

"Uh?" Harry says. Uncertainly, he reaches out with his feet, and touches ground. He feels angled still, as if he's going to fall, but the ground is under him – it's just that the entire world is tilted. Images flicker and shift around them – the Gryffindor common room, the Slytherin common room, the gymnasium from Harry's primary school, a ruined stone building overgrown with vines that Harry does not recognize. There is a black curtain behind Voldemort with a curious, flickering red light shining through it.

The Dark Lord is still scaled and snakelike. Harry supposes that maybe he could call it elegance, if he wanted to examine the man long enough to find that elegance, but he doesn't really want to. Human faces aren't supposed to be that flat in profile – human skin isn't supposed to be covered with thousands of fine, tiny little silvery scales that flash in the light.

The lightning scar, where it crashes across Voldemort's face, twists these scales away from their neat glide across his skin. The sight of it makes Harry's stomach turn, and he wants to vomit, scream, cry all at the same time.

"Go away," he says instead.

The Dark Lord's head snaps back to Harry. Red eyes narrow.

"I do not even have words for you," he sneers. "Have you no common sense at all? So she was gunning explicitly for you, but that is when you stop *going* to detentions and *hide*."

"What?" Harry says. "What are you talking about?"

Then it clicks.

"You're upset about – Umbridge?" he says, just to make it real for himself. "That's pretty vain of you, don't you think?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, boo-hoo, a scar! How terrible! It's not like I'm the bloody Dark Lord or anything and can't possibly just deal with it!"

“If you believe for a single second that I am allowing ‘*I must not tell lies*’ to be *bled* into my hand roughly thrice a week, Potter, then that Killing curse seriously damaged you.” The Dark Lord draws himself up to his full height and snarls. “Besides, *you* were the originator. You had it worse than I did. You can’t mean to tell me you’re *unhappy* I took care of it for you?”

Another piece of this strange puzzle clicks into place in the back of Harry’s mind. “You’re the reason she vanished?” Then, right on the heels of that, a certainty. “You murdered her.”

“Of course I murdered her,” Voldemort scoffs. “This isn’t the children’s ball pit, Harry. Those who harm me, no matter how indirectly and ignorantly so, *die*.”

“You had all the Slytherins spying on me?! That’s why that girl walked up to me!”

Voldemort tilts his head smoothly to the side. “My, a girl?”

“Some Slytherin girl I’d never noticed before,” Harry scowls. “You mean she was working for *you*?”

“I expect her parents work for me,” Voldemort smirks coldly, “and that she in turn was working for her parents, whomever she is. It all evens out in the end, does it not, Harry?”

“I hate you,” Harry says. It’s unnecessary, but he says it anyway.

“Have no fear, child. I feel not much more than disdain for you, either.”

It doesn’t matter, Harry tells himself. You always knew Voldemort hated you, and you always knew Voldemort was a monster. That he would not change just for a scar is nothing new. This is expected. It isn’t real anyway, because they can’t, and they *aren’t*.

He still feels as if something old and childish inside of him has snapped. Still jolts himself awake before the tears can really well up. Still sits up to the feeling that somebody has reached into his ribs and scooped out all his organs and strangled his heart.

That morning, the paper is screaming about the ‘Ministry Abuse Scandal’ of Umbridge being allowed to use her particular methods on children. Umbridge’s disappearance is not even presumed murder, yet, but fugitivity. Harry reads the article in a daze, and doesn’t bother to mention that Voldemort has told him better.

Despite the unease still lingering under his skin and the dreams that Voldemort keeps sending him, fifth year ends up being a relatively calm school year.

The teacher that replaces Umbridge is a lady who calls herself Madam Fleming. She carries herself the same way that Malfoy’s mother does. She’s definitely a pureblood judging by how all of the Slytherins respect her, and Harry waits for something terrible to happen, and for another professor to try and murder him before the year is up.

Nothing happens. She expects them to respect her, expects them to learn and to turn in their homework. She isn't unfair, like Snape, and she actually teaches them, unlike Umbridge. She doesn't even show any favoritism towards the purebloods despite the fact that she is one.

The year carries on and Harry finds himself clutching this fragile hope close to his chest that maybe, maybe this year won't end in blood and heartbreak.

And then he wakes up with Sirius's screams ringing in his ears and wonders why he thought the year would ever end differently.

The prophecy gleams strangely in the dim light of the Ministry. Ron's face is pale as he stares down at the orb, both hands carefully wrapped around it.

"Are you sure we don't want to hear it?" he asks, looking up at Harry.

"We can decide if we want to hear it later," Hermione hisses, looking like a disgruntled cat. "We need to leave."

"She's right, let's go. Just hold on to it."

Ron nods, grabs his wand back out of his pocket and motions for them to move. Hermione whips around and starts heading for the door, eyes darting everywhere. Harry can see her fingers twitching around her wand. He knows it must be killing her to be down here and not be able to look at everything.

The Ministry is eerily quiet. Harry can hear every breath he takes, can hear his heart beating in his ears and the quiet slap of their feet against the floor. He keeps waiting for the penny to drop and for someone, anyone, to show up. They'd gotten in so easily, and now they're halfway to the atrium and everything is still going fine. Everything is going according to plan.

Nothing ever goes according to plan for them.

They're halfway through the atrium, nearly to the fountain that Hermione eyes darkly every time she passes. They're so close and then Voldemort casually steps out from behind the fountain, lips curled in a smirk and wand tapping a rhythm against his thigh.

"I'm sorry, did you think that I was just going to let you leave with that?" he asks, nodding towards the prophecy still clutched tight in Ron's hand.

There's a long moment where nothing happens. Harry isn't sure if he remembers to breathe. The scar is gone – or at least, it's not visible anymore. He had been almost entirely sure that Voldemort would glamour it away but there had still been that small chance, that very small chance and he had been so scared. So scared that Ron and Hermione would see it and just walk away.

“Get ready. Follow the plan,” Hermione mutters under her breath, eyes never leaving Voldemort. He can see her tense up even more from the corner of his eye and fights down the urge to completely ignore the plan and just throw himself at Voldemort, right between the bastard and his friends, right now.

He doesn't need a soulmate. Not when he has Ron and Hermione.

Hermione dashes to the right suddenly, shooting off a violently purple curse as she goes. Voldemort's face contorts and then Ron is dashing left, shooting off a leg locker, prophecy clutched tight to his chest. Harry stands planted and mutters *Expelliarmus* every time Voldemort is distracted.

He's distracted quite a lot. Hermione is shooting off spell after spell in a vicious cycle. She almost sounds like she's reciting flash cards in various different orders and Harry wouldn't be surprised to find that she had made flashcards just for this. The spells are tripping off her tongue so quickly that he almost can't distinguish them from one another. It's a minor miracle that her wand movements are keeping up.

Ron is repeatedly shooting off leg lockers and *Stupefies* while dodging the spells that Voldemort keeps throwing at him. Harry stands planted. He'd hated this plan initially, hated the idea of standing planted while his friends make themselves targets, but he's beginning to understand it.

Voldemort is furiously defending himself from the barrage of spells that Hermione is releasing. He's sidestepping Ron's spells easily, but is still having to watch for them as they come. Harry is just standing there shooting off a single spell, but Voldemort's eyes are still flashing over to him regularly. He's barely doing anything yet he's still managing to be a distraction.

Voldemort is furious, expression pinched, fingers tight around his wand. He's clearly trying to not break the prophecy that Ron is still clutching, which is providing Ron a certain level of safety. He hisses out spells in a voice so low that Harry can barely hear him anymore. He wonders if the Dark Lord is mad enough to have slipped entirely into parseltongue yet.

Three things happen then, in quick succession.

One of Hermione's curses slice across Voldemort's cheek, causing him to hiss in pain. Ron freezes – from where he stands he has a perfect view of Voldemort's right cheek. Voldemort makes eye contact with Harry and Harry feels his blood turn to ice.

Harry doesn't know what kind of curses Hermione was throwing but whichever that one was, it has cut straight through the glamour and left the scar on full display for the world to see. For them to see. Seeing those lines slash their way across the monster's face is just as startling the second time, just as sickening as it was the first time.

“You didn't tell them,” Voldemort murmurs suddenly, breaking the tense air that had covered them. Glee infuses each word, and Harry thinks he might be sick right then. He doesn't dare look over at Hermione or Ron, doesn't want to see the disgust on their faces, the betrayal.

“You must be fucking joking,” Hermione snaps suddenly. “Harry James Potter, we are going to have a very long talk later,” she promises, voice dark. He chances a glance, only to find her still glaring holes into the side of Voldemort’s head.

Okay, okay. That’s not too bad. He can handle that. He similarly chances a glance over at Ron and feels his stomach drop. Ron is staring between the two of them, eyes wild and horrified.

“ARE YOU BOTH FUCKING CRAZY?” Ron screams suddenly. Voldemort blinks in shock, turning to look at Ron.

“Excuse me? How dare...” Voldemort starts. Offense coats his every word but Ron cuts him off before he can even finish.

“ARE YOU TWO REALLY TRYING TO FUCKING KILL EACH OTHER WHEN IT COULD LITERALLY NOT BE MORE OBVIOUS THAT YOU’RE SOULMATES?” he shouts. “DO YOU WANT TO FUCKING DIE?”

Voldemort flinches back as if Ron’s hit him, but Ron ignores him and keeps screaming. Exhaustion suddenly takes Harry’s entire body from him, and he sinks down onto the edge of the fountain. This is not how he pictured any of this going. Hermione is barely even paying attention to Ron even though he’s still yelling about soulmates and death and destiny. She’s throwing speculative glances between Harry and Voldemort that he really doesn’t like. Voldemort for his part is just standing there, eyes distant and wand dangling from his fingers.

He supposes he shouldn’t be surprised when Hermione snaps out her wand and mutters *Expelliarmus*. Shouldn’t be surprised when Voldemort doesn’t even move and just keeps standing there, eyes distant. Shouldn’t be surprised when Ron pauses to take a breath, looks at the three of them not really paying attention, and flings the prophecy to the ground.

The delicate crystal shatters as soon as it hits the ground. Voldemort lurches forward, hand half outstretched, but it’s too late. Harry can distantly hear a female voice floating through the atrium but it’s drowned out under Ron screaming again.

This time Voldemort pays attention, eyes sharp and head tilted. Ron keeps screaming, face red, fists balled up at his side. He’s leaning forward, screaming directly at Voldemort at this point, clearly accepting the idea that Hermione and Harry are not listening to anything he says. Hermione is still staring at Voldemort, face scrunched in thought. Harry’s beginning to think that them hating him would be easier. Ron is screaming, Hermione is plotting. This means nothing good for him. Nothing that he’s going to like.

Ron finally pauses for a breath, voice beginning to sound rather hoarse.

“Are you quite done?” Voldemort asks, voice pleasant, head still carefully tilted. “Or would you like to continue being repetitive and boring?”

“Did I get the point through your fucking head?” Ron snarls, eyes vicious.

Voldemort hums quietly and then snaps his fingers. His wand shoots out of Hermione’s hands before she can do more than grasp at air, and they all tense.

“It’s been interesting,” he says flatly. Then he turns in a black swirl of cloak and robe and walks off to the floo before any of them can bother to say anything in response. Yet he pauses, one foot in the floo, and turns to look back at Harry, eyes narrowed in thought.

Harry stares back, heart beating wildly. Voldemort tilts his head, blinks slowly, and then is gone in a flash of green.

“Let’s go before the aurors show up,” Hermione says, voice flat. “We’ll talk when we get back.”

Ron shuts his mouth where he’d been getting ready to say something. Rolls his shoulders, looks down at the glass shards littering the ground.

“I just yelled at You-Know-Who,” he says. “I screamed down the Dark Lord.”

“For fuck’s sake, Ronald. If you screamed him down I think you can find it in yourself to use his name,” Hermione snaps. “Can we please leave now?”

They both turn to look at Harry, faces expectant. He stares back, feeling cold and tired. This is going to change everything and he doesn’t think he’s ready for it. Hermione sighs and comes to sit next to him.

“Everything will be fine,” she says softly, slipping her hand into his. “We’ll figure it out just like we figure everything else out, together.”

He nods, breathes in deeply and meets Ron’s eyes.

“Come on mate. Don’t let that old bastard get you down,” Ron says jokingly, cracking a smile at him, even as his eyes trace over Harry looking for injuries.

Harry pauses, stares. “Oh bloody hell,” he says, horror creeping over him. “He’s *old*.”

They stare at him for a second and then burst into laughter. The cackling follows him all the way back to Hogwarts and he lets it warm him up, lets it fill him up with hope.

They’ll get through this together. Just like they always do.

“Are you sure he’ll be here?” Harry whispers to Hermione when she finally slows down. The coffee shop she’s picked doesn’t seem that different to Harry than any other coffee shop he’s seen in his life – not that he’s seen all that many. But Hermione seems certain of her choices.

Her answer to him is only a decisive nod, until Harry nudges her again, anxious.

“Obviously I can’t know with absolute certainty that he’s here,” she says firmly. “But he did send me an uncursed reply. We should at least go inside and give him the chance to show up,

if he isn't already there."

"I don't see why I should have to wait around for him," Harry mutters. "He always seems to come to *me*."

"You can't want him at the *Dursley's* house, though, Harry?"

It's not a judgemental statement, which Harry is grateful for but all the same, he still shudders. He can't imagine that at all – he thinks he'd rather hate it. He isn't certain that Petunia or Vernon know anything about Harry's soulmate situation. If he thinks about it carefully, he supposes that Aunt Petunia, at least, must suspect something amiss from all the childhood years of smooth skin. Then again, maybe that would be asking more attention from her than she will ever be willing to give.

He certainly hasn't told them about an alleged soulmate (for all that the lightning bolt scar is too bold to ignore, though he really has tried). A little voice in the back of Harry's head tells him that, even if he somehow took away the 'Dark Lord' part, and the 'murdered my parents' part (murdered Aunt Petunia's *sister*, a part of Harry suddenly realizes with a strangeness of perspective that he's never had before), the part where his soulmate is another *man* would not go over very well.

He doesn't even want to think about the age difference between them. He's still pointedly not thinking about it.

"Maybe he's not here yet," Ron is saying, almost reasonably, as they enter. Harry creeps in with his spine slouched and hopes nobody notices him. "Being a Dark Lord's gotta make a bloke busy, innit?"

Yeah, busy with murder, Harry is about to mutter. But then he looks around the coffee shop's interior, and quite against Harry's will, Voldemort's presence leaps directly to Harry's attention.

His stomach makes a curious swooping motion, and for a moment Harry forgets how to breathe.

It's definitely Voldemort, of course. He has an air about him that makes him automatically sharper and more dangerous than other people who he shares physical space with. Harry feels rather capable of detecting that air, changed appearance or not. Voldemort is no longer a snake-like man with scales, a flattened and slit-like nose, and a bald and hairless head. He isn't unusually, inhumanly thin. He has thick, healthy looking black hair, normal human skin the color of cream, and a real nose rising from his face. He isn't thin like some monster. He has shoulders, noticeable enough even under his shirt and waistcoat, and muscles to go with them.

His eyes are still red. Harry supposes that some sort of spell must be preventing the muggles from noticing it, and panicking.

Unable to speak, he finds himself frantically nudging Hermione. Voldemort is looking at him – he's noticed them. He isn't leaping up or drawing a wand, though, which Harry finds

somewhat reassuring. He's merely gesturing them over. Harry doesn't know what to do, and gladly goes along with Hermione pulling them off to the other side of the shop to huddle and mutter frantically.

"Is that him, Harry?" is the first thing Hermione says.

"Er," Harry says. It comes out strangled. "Yeah," he manages. "Yeah. 'S him."

"When'd he get hair?" Ron mutters.

"Focus, Ronald," Hermione snaps, and ignores Ron's utterly scandalized look. "Look. This is good. It's probably not a glamour, or there would be more consternation about his eye color – glammers don't play nicely with notice-me-not wards," she explains, to Harry and Ron's bewildered looks. "So, either he fixed his – previous appearance – or his previous appearance was a glamour all along. Either way, the fact is that he had to specifically decide to look different for this meeting. That's good. That means this is still non-aggressive. *Do not*," she glares at Harry, "say anything pointlessly aggressive just to be annoying."

"I don't do that," Harry protests.

Hermione only gives him a withering look. "Can you grab me a vanilla latte and an almond croissant?" she says instead, sending Ron and Harry towards the counter as if they were a unit. "I'm going to go talk to him before you two can do something stupid."

Harry orders a hot chocolate for himself, because he doesn't really like coffee, and the same for Ron, who's never had coffee. Ron gets a cinnamon roll and immediately turns starry-eyed when he bites into it. Harry doesn't get anything to eat, because his stomach is churning. The hot chocolate is a nice treat that Harry wouldn't normally get in summer, but even that feels like he's asking quite a lot of his body. He doesn't dare attempt solids.

They begin the walk to the back table and Harry finds himself relieved to see that Hermione isn't dead. She's sitting next to Voldemort at the table, but she's fine. Certainly not dead.

Hermione catches Harry's eye extremely aggressively as he and Ron approach. "Harry," she says. "This is Mr. Thomas Gaunt."

What's that supposed to mean?

"I know his name," Harry says sulkily, "and it's not that –"

Ron nudges Harry harshly in the side. Somehow, Hermione is managing to make her own glare look just as malevolent as the one Voldemort is leveling against him.

"It's polite to use the name that you're requested to use when negotiating," Hermione says.

"Why should I –"

"Potter, sit down before I lose my patience and curse you all."

Harry sits, seething and hating every moment of this. He doesn't like to sit still as if nothing is happening – for isn't something happening? Voldemort is right here, sneering at him as if he's somehow superior, and Harry can't leap up and curse him. It's a travesty.

"Very well," Voldemort finally says, after an exceedingly awkward silence. "You requested this meeting, and so here I am. Speak."

"*Hermione* requested it," Harry mutters mutinously. Of course he, Harry, had said yes back at Hogwarts, but now that he's actually here he doesn't want to admit that he did. He feels like that denial would make all of this easier to deal with.

Hermione is glaring at him. Harry really doesn't like that very much. Not that it's ever stopped her.

He sighs, and tries to focus. Forces himself to think. Voldemort doesn't matter to Harry, but Harry cares about his friends, and Harry's friends care about Harry.

"I want you to stop trying to murder me," he says. "And also not to kill my friends. And also to explain why you killed my parents and tried to kill me."

There. Done talking. Harry sits back and crosses his arms.

Voldemort is regarding him coolly over the top of his coffee cup.

"What do I receive for informing you of these facts?"

"Don't I deserve to *know*?" Harry cries.

Voldemort blinks. "... You mean to say you don't?"

"No! Why would I – "

"Dumbledore did not tell you about the prophecy?"

Now it's Harry's turn to blink. "... Do you mean the one from the Ministry?"

"Mm," Voldemort hums through a sip of coffee. "Yes. That one. Dumbledore knows of it, and I find it strange he has not told you."

Hermione is staring intently towards Voldemort as he continues to speak. "I am aware only of the first few lines, but they go like so: *The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.*"

Harry feels sick. Hermione is flexing her fingers around her napkin as if desperate to write notes, and only just refraining – why? Because she thinks Voldemort would object too strenuously? Or only because she has no writing utensil? "Why do you only know the first few lines?" Hermione asks instead.

"Because Severus was caught and thrown from the pub before he could listen any further," Voldemort replies mildly, as if this isn't just the most outrageous and damning thing that

Harry had ever heard him say, and as if he has not just upturned Harry's entire sense of reality.

"*Snape?*" Ron hisses, putting into words what Harry knows he and Hermione must only be feeling. "Hermione, I fucking told you, I bloody well *told* you – "

"We can talk about Snape later, Ronald!" Hermione snaps. It's really a snap, Harry notes – her teeth just barely held back from fully bared.

"Before you ask further questions, yes, he did immediately tell me," Voldemort says. "However, he did not know that it meant *you* until – "

He stops talking. A strange noise escapes his chest. On anyone but Voldemort, Harry would call it a gasp of shock.

"Of course," he murmurs, staring into the distance. "Of *course*."

"What's of course?" Harry says. He makes a valiant attempt to prevent a whine from creeping into his voice, but he's pretty sure he did not succeed.

"The prophecy. The power you allegedly have," Voldemort says. His finger traces the rim of his coffee cup, though his gaze is fixed on Harry. "It is because we are soulmates. That is why you have the power to vanquish me, potentially."

Harry flinches back at the mention of the word. He wishes he had better control of himself. "So what?" he says.

"It's because soulmates die if the other is killed!" Ron bursts out.

Voldemort sends him a poisonous look. "Quite."

Ron pales briefly, and then rallies. Harry, unable to finish parsing all the consequences of that statement, listens helplessly to their back and forth. "So you believe me now?" Ron says.

"Believe is a strong word. I have done independent research. However, it would seem to be supported, as the same sources state generally that soulmates cannot kill one another through magical means, and there is a rather unprecedented incidence of killing curse deflection between Harry and I."

This cannot be happening.

"Ron," Harry says frantically. "Ron, tell me that's not true?"

The look Ron gives him is not one that Harry wants to see.

"Sorry mate," he says softly. "Er. It's pretty true."

"But – "

But it can't be, he wants to say. But that means I can't kill Voldemort, he wants to say, which is a bad idea with the man himself at the table. But then if Voldemort dies –

He doesn't *want* this.

Ron and Hermione are hiding something. He notices almost as soon as he enters Grimmauld. It's there in the way Hermione keeps picking at her nails and the way Ron's eyes keep sliding off of him, never settling for too long. The certainty lives in the way Hermione keeps opening her mouth and shutting it, looking away and biting her lip. In the way that Ron has gone quieter and quieter as the evening goes on, his fingers twitching like he wishes a chess board were in front of him.

Harry knows what they look like when they want to tell him something. Really, he probably knows it better than he knows himself.

He had thought they were past this, though – past the hiding and lying and the half truths. He's told them his biggest secret – or well, it's more accurate to say that they've seen it and he's had to tell them. But still, they know. They know and they had *promised* no more lies. No more hiding things.

Mrs. Weasley sends them upstairs, eyeing them suspiciously when they go without arguing. The door closes behind them and Harry leans against it, arms crossed, eyeing Ron and Hermione. The anger at being left out is sitting low in his stomach and his fingers are itching with irritation.

They had *promised*.

They exchange a glance that he's not sure he's meant to see and then Hermione is whirling towards him, fists clenched.

"We have stuff to tell you," she says, voice quiet, eyes flickering to the door. "But we need you to promise that you'll listen and not get angry."

Ron is staring, eyes fully settled on him for the first time since he's gotten to Grimmauld. "You're going to be angry but we need you to listen before you say anything," he says, eyes steady in a way that Harry isn't used to.

"Okay," he says quietly and moves to sit on the bed. "I'm listening." Some of the anger has ebbed away now that he knows they intended to tell him.

Hermione sits down on the bed across from him, while Ron leans against the bed post, arms crossed, eyes still oddly serious.

"We – " She falters, laces her fingers together. "We were followed when we took you back to the Dursleys."

He swallows, curls his fingers into the comforter.

“He followed us when we left the coffee shop. All the way to your house and he heard everything we said on the way there.” She pauses, narrows her eyes. “Are you not going to say anything?”

“You said to listen,” he mutters. “Surely, that’s not the whole story.” Merlin, he can listen sometimes.

She tilts her head, blinks, eyes narrow and assessing in a way he doesn’t like.

“After we dropped you off, we were talking about how much we hate your *family*,” Ron says, rolling his eyes when he mentions the Dursleys. “Whatever we said worried Gaunt enough to show himself.”

“You’re still calling him Gaunt,” he cuts in, failing to keep the scorn out of his voice.

“Well...” Ron blinks, glances at Hermione. “It’s his name, innit. Would be rude to keep calling him something else.”

“Rude,” Harry echoes, wondering whether it’s worth it to point out the irony in that. He takes another glance at Hermione’s face and decides it definitely is not.

“Yeah, he tried to talk to us about it right there in the street but Hermione made us go to a different shop and talk. We learned some interesting stuff.”

“He doesn’t want you dead,” Hermione says bluntly, eyeing him as she says it.

He tries not to react, but it’s as if this weight he hadn’t known he was carrying suddenly lifts. The knowledge that your soulmate wants you dead is a heavy thing. To have that suddenly gone is –

He has to press a hand to his chest for a moment and just focus on breathing. Focus on the rise and fall of his own chest.

(He doesn’t want you dead, the little voice in his head whispers. Your soulmate wants you.)

The speculative look in Hermione’s eyes is gone when he looks back. He almost wishes it weren’t because now all he can see is thinly veiled pity, and he wants that even less.

“I’m fine,” he mutters, waves a hand at her to continue.

She hesitates, looks at Ron. Her mouth thins, his eyebrows dip.

“The scar doesn’t belong to you,” Ron says slowly, each word coming out slower than the next. “It was never yours but since he didn’t have a body after it happened... everyone just assumed it was yours.”

He wants to laugh. Or maybe cry? He knows each and every damned curve of this scar. He knows where it turns and he knows the exact places that it aches the most and it’s not even

his. Of fucking course not.

Ron grimaces when he doesn't say anything and moves to sit next to him, carefully bumping his shoulder.

"There's more..." Hermione says, sounding sorry about it and moving to sit on his other side.

It feels less life altering now that he can feel the comforting warmth of them both next to him. The scar on his face isn't his. His soulmate is no longer trying to murder him. Okay. He can... he can deal with that.

"He's worried that Dumbledore might try to hurt you to get to him." She mutters this bit. She'd been unfailingly sure of everything else she said but this, this she sounds unsure of.

Oddly, it's this that gains a reaction where nothing else really has.

"He would not," Harry hisses, stomach twisting. "He wouldn't hurt me." His voice breaks on the last word and he has to close his eyes so that he won't see the pity on their faces.

"I said that too," Hermione says softly, curling her hand around his wrist. "But Ron, well he disagrees."

For a moment there's only silence and the sound of their breathing.

"In a game of chess," Ron says, voice thoughtful, "they're the kings. The kings will do anything they have to do to win the game."

"Even sacrifice a few pawns," Harry says bitterly. Of course. What is the life of a pawn compared to the lives of *everyone else*?

They sit there in silence for another long moment. Hermione's head falls to his shoulder, her hair tickling his nose. Ron's hand on the back of his neck is seemingly the only thing keeping him from floating away.

"So what do we do?" he finally asks, the bitterness drained away and replaced with exhaustion.

"We change the board," Ron says lowly, voice dark. "We make you the king."

Hermione slips something cold into his hand and he looks down to see a galleon sitting in his palm.

"Dumbledore doesn't get to decide whose life is worth more," she mutters, voice fierce. "We're going to lay low but we're not playing by his rules anymore."

He turns the galleon over in his hand, blinks at the words glowing across the back.

"Alright then." He closes his hand around the coin. "Long live the king, I guess."

It feels like something large should have shifted – that the universe should have heard their conversation and reflected that mood back to them. Yet nothing changes. Mrs. Weasley ushers them away from meetings, the twins pop in and out of rooms without a care in the world, and Dumbledore comes and goes as he pleases, staring at Harry with sad eyes. There are several times where he looks at Dumbledore and feels anger flare up his throat. Feels sure that Dumbledore *must* see it in his eyes.

But nothing happens. Summer goes by as quietly as a summer can with a war council making base in the house. Ron bullies Harry into playing far too many games of chess, and Harry pretends it isn't practice for what's to come.

In the Great Hall, during the third week of classes, Harry receives a note from Dumbledore. It states that Harry ought to meet Dumbledore in his office that night at eight, and it gives no further sense of Dumbledore's purpose. Harry goes to Dumbledore's office at the appointed time with his heart taking up temporary lodgings in his throat, his blood cold and his head light. What if Dumbledore has worked it out – knows all about Harry and his soulmate?

Harry returns from Dumbledore's office with his heart feeling as if it's turned to stone. He gives a glance towards Ron and Hermione – they are waiting up for him, sitting in the cushy armchairs in front of the fire. They look at him with worry but Harry shakes his head minutely, and they relax. It's not a full-body relaxation, but it's a removal of the most current item of stress.

He sits down between them and stares at the fire.

"D'you want to talk about it?" Ron asks, after a long silence.

"No," Harry says reflexively. Then he remembers what they'd promised one another, and remembers that he is trying not to say 'no' anymore. "Yes," he corrects himself. "But we can't. Not here."

"*Muffliato*," Hermione murmurs. Their little corner of the room is subsumed in a buzz, as if the air itself were wrapped in wool.

"No, still not enough, I think," Harry says shortly. "It's about –"

He pauses just long enough to realize that he's almost said 'You-Know-Who', and meant 'my soulmate', but had also meant the dark wizard many people do genuinely think of as You-Know-Who. He has to laugh for a moment at himself.

"About Thomas," he finally settles on. "About him."

“Ugh, again?”

They debrief over the weekend. First, it's a lot of anger that Dumbledore still has not so much as mentioned the prophecy. Then, it's Ron and Hermione bouncing ideas around regarding Dumbledore's purpose in showing Harry *these* particular memories, while Harry sits back and feels like he can't believe anything that Dumbledore says until he is told of the prophecy.

Finally, all three of them debate whether to tell Voldemort what is going on.

At first, Harry thinks perhaps they won't mention it. Perhaps this will be a secret. But there are arguments made about soulmates and trust that Harry doesn't particularly want to think too much about right now. He still can barely believe that sometimes he actually thinks of Voldemort, and the word 'soulmate' passes across his mind without prompting. He does not enjoy the way that passing word is sometimes accompanied with the faintest resurgence of a childhood longing for somebody who would be only his. Harry doesn't particularly *want* Voldemort, of all people, to be only his.

They tell him, in the end, because as Hermione so succinctly puts it: “This is an extremely dramatic invasion of privacy, and he may not even *know* much about the Gaunts, either.” Harry finds he can't really argue with that. Any orphan would wish to know of their family.

They lounge around in the Room of Requirement, playing chess and poking desultorily at homework, for the remainder of the afternoon. Soon the galleon in Harry's pocket warms, and he draws it out hesitantly.

What the fuck? it says, and suddenly he is laughing.

The lessons continue. Harry's heart grows heavier and heavier as the year goes on, watching these snippets of a life that part of him believes he ought to have been there for. In a memory, Dumbledore burns the wardrobe of an eleven year old, and seems to want Harry to believe that it was right. That it was justified.

All Harry can do is think of how Tom Riddle's eyes held nothing in them but terror and despair. He can only think of how well *he* would have trusted Hagrid, if Hagrid had appeared at the Dursleys house and burned Harry's cupboard in a fit of outrage on Harry's behalf, with all of Harry's meager belongings trapped inside of it.

He thinks that if that had happened, his robes might well be green and silver.

Every weekend after he meets with Ron and Hermione, and they talk. Little galleon-terse messages are hammered out, and Harry has a few dreams, even, which consist mostly of Voldemort wrecking false dreamscape pottery and screaming in frustration. But he never turns on Harry in these dreams, so Harry keeps out of the way, and does not mention them further. He doesn't wish to talk about it, just as much as Voldemort clearly does not want to talk about it.

Eventually, sometime around March, Dumbledore gets to the point.

Voldemort and Harry share a single dream, in which Voldemort jabs a shaking finger at Harry and orders him not to *speak* of this. Harry can't imagine who he'd tell, besides Ron and Hermione, can't think of any way to tell that would not reek slightly of suicide. He is many things but suicidal isn't one of them.

So he says nothing about that, and instead says something that he has wanted to say for months, a set of words that have been sitting heavy and certain in his chest, waiting and waiting for their opportunity to emerge, and only growing more solid as they do.

"He shouldn't have done that," Harry tells Voldemort.

"Are you having some kind of episode, Potter?" Voldemort snaps. "*He* is right here, and *he* is *not* sorry for doing what he had to do —"

"Oh, no, not you," Harry says. He's surprised to realize that Voldemort is staring at him with bewilderment, a strange furrow formed between his eyebrows. Who'd have thought Voldemort would have such human expressions once you added some hair and a nose? "Dumbledore."

"What about that old coot?"

"He shouldn't have done that to your wardrobe," Harry says more firmly. He's very certain of this. Even if he's certain of nothing else, he is certain of this. "It wasn't right."

No sooner has his sentence finished than Harry wakes up, the dream dissolving into smoke.

"Harry," Hermione says one Friday night when she returns from yet another long session in the library. Her face is drawn, her skin duller than usual, her eyes ringed and flat. Harry and Ron nearly leap up, but she pushes them away, methodically unpacking her bag and rearranging her books instead. "We need to talk tomorrow, Harry."

“Alright,” Harry says slowly.

“In the Room.”

So they go to the Room.

Harry wishes they had not gone to the Room.

“Take it *out*,” Harry half screams, half sobs some unknowable number of sleepless nights later in his dreams. “Take it *out* of me!”

Voldemort stares at him. His expression is slack – his eyes are glazed with shock, surprise, and the lack of any sense of direction, no clue how to proceed.

Harry sits and tries to get his breathing under control. Voldemort stays across the room of their dreams, tilted perpendicular to Harry, and looks more tired than Harry has ever seen him look before.

“It won’t hurt you,” Voldemort finally says.

“How could it not hurt me?!” Harry cries.

“If there is anyone who it would not hurt, it’s you,” Voldemort says. His voice is distant, eyes unfocused. When Harry stares at him in utter bewilderment, Voldemort repeats himself.

“If there is anyone who would not be hurt by holding my soul,” the Dark Lord says slowly, “then that person would be my soulmate.” He thinks it may be the first time Voldemort’s spoken to him without even a hint of bitterness in his voice.

At their final lesson, Dumbledore asks Harry to enter the Pensieve with him. This is usual, and so Harry follows him. The memory that they watch is not usual, and Harry emerges soaked with sweat, thinking about Hermione’s statements that Dumbledore *must* know that he and Voldemort are soulmates/horcruxes/same-souls. He wishes he had never known more about this prophecy than Voldemort had ever known.

But it would be strange if Harry Potter did not give an enthusiastic yes to Albus Dumbledore’s request for the unusual extracurricular of horcrux hunting – and therefore, Harry Potter says yes, feeling for the first time that year like a liar.

But he has a soulmate and for once in Harry’s life, he is feeling a bit selfish.

Hermione and Ron are viciously against Harry going with Dumbledore. They end up frantically exchanging messages with Voldemort over the course of two whole weeks, who finally agrees to not interfere, but who will be keeping the galleon near just in case.

Just in case something goes wrong. Just in case Dumbledore does know and is about to do something about it. *Just in case Dumbledore decides to try and murder Harry.*

Sometimes he still feels a rolling sort of guilt deep in his stomach, that he would think things like this about Dumbledore, a man who has been nothing but kind to him. But then he'll remember the memory of Tom, eyes wide with terror. He'll remember the cold certainty in Dumbledore's eyes, and wonder – would Dumbledore have been so kind if he had met a version of Harry who stood up for himself against Dudley? Who had put his foot down and said *no, this is not how I should be treated?*

If his tie had been green and silver, would Dumbledore's eyes have remained kind?

The answer he gets always leaves him feeling cold and sick. He whispers these fears to Hermione and Ron one night. Ron goes pale and still. Hermione snaps her quill in half. That in itself is all the answer he needs.

They don't acknowledge how tightly they're toeing the line between both sides of the war, how very careful they have to be to not slip. But he looks at Dumbledore now and has trouble remembering why he ever wanted to follow a man who left him in the care of the Dursleys, who listened to an eleven year old *beg* to stay over the summer and didn't care.

He thinks, maybe, that if he didn't love so many people who followed Dumbledore, the choice would be easier. He wonders if there would really be a choice at all. But Mrs. Weasley still smiles at him with pride and Sirius hugs him so tightly sometimes he can't breathe. Remus ruffles his hair and McGonagall grips his shoulder tight when she enters Grimmauld. He doesn't know how to turn against these people, not even for his soulmate.

It's raining when Dumbledore decides it's time – raining like the world is finally answering his request for the weather to match his mood.

He stays quiet for as long as he can, letting Dumbledore think that it's because he's scared and not because this feels wrong. He stays quiet and holds still as Dumbledore bleeds on the cave wall and rows them across the sea of inferii. Voldemort had told him, *whatever you do, do not touch the water*. He has a decent idea of why that would be a bad idea and it leaves him fighting off a chill.

Dumbledore tells him that no matter what, he must drink all of it. Harry must make sure that he drinks all of it. Harry can't help but wonder if this is another ploy to gain his trust – another way for Dumbledore to ensure that he'll continue to follow along like the perfect little puppet.

He thinks maybe he's starting to become bitter, as he pours another cup of liquid down Dumbledore's throat and listens to him sob. Harry is listening to his headmaster beg for forgiveness from some invisible ghost, and he feels nothing. There's a small voice in the back of his head telling him that he's in shock. It sounds a lot like Hermione. He keeps pouring the liquid down Dumbledore's throat until the man's eyes roll back and he falls to the ground unconscious. The body is still and he wonders wildly if he's killed him. It would be the first time he's killed someone on purpose and he thinks he should feel something other than apathetic. Something more than blank and empty.

I need help, he sends on the galleon.

There's no way out of here, after all, not by himself. He's still underage and even through the apathy he knows that calling the Ministry down on his head in this situation is not what he wants.

Voldemort shows up before he even fully finishes that thought, and he wonders if he had been waiting outside the cave for Harry to call. The thought sends a spike of warmth through his heart.

Harry isn't sure if he walks on water or floats above the surface of the lake, but when he reaches the center, Voldemort pauses – one foot on the island, the other sitting on the surface of the water. He takes in Harry standing above Dumbledore, the cup still held loosely between his fingers. He's not sure what Voldemort sees, but the man walks towards Harry slowly, eyes narrowed just a fraction.

“Are you harmed in any way?” Voldemort asks, voice low and calm.

Harry blinks up at him, wonders why he's still holding the cup. “Did I kill him?” he asks, wishing he could find the energy to care about the blankness in his own voice.

Voldemort stares at him, runs his eyes up from the worn trainers on Harry's feet to the smudge of dirt on the side of his face. Once satisfied with Harry's own well-being, he turns to inspect Dumbledore.

“He's alive,” he says after a moment. His voice is dismissive, his attention already back on Harry. “We need to get you back to Hogwarts.”

“I can't go back without him.”

“You could. It's his own fault if he dies in this cave.”

“No.” He shakes his head, looks at Dumbledore, and looks away with a twisting stomach. “He has to go back. There'll be too many questions otherwise.”

Voldemort sighs and closes his eyes for a moment. "Only for you would I find myself rescuing Albus Dumbledore."

He reaches out one hand slowly, giving Harry time to move back. When Harry doesn't, he carefully presses three fingers to Harry's cheek. Harry finds himself leaning into the touch, the gentle press of fingers against his skin so at odds with what he's always known about Voldemort.

"Let me take you back first and then I'll come back for Dumbledore."

He nods, feeling terribly tired, and Voldemort's fingers slip away. He doesn't even have time to miss them before a hand is curling tight around his arm and the cave is blurring out of view.

A forest blurs into view, and he feels his knees buckle. He probably would have fallen, but Voldemort's grip tightens and Ron's worried face appears. Ron puts an arm around his shoulders, warm and safe and solid. Voldemort moves away to whisper quietly with Hermione about something. Presumably they're speaking about what had happened in the cave, but Harry is far too tired to care about what they're saying.

Hermione is in front of him suddenly, face scrunched up in worry. "Oh, Harry," she murmurs, voice sad. "Come on, let's get back up to the castle."

Voldemort is gone when he looks behind him, and he tries not to feel disappointed.

The Order stops meeting at Grimmauld. For a while he had thought that they had stopped meeting there because Dumbledore wasn't there, which was to be honest a pretty stupid reason.

He casually mentions this at the breakfast table one day and Sirius turns to stare at him, mouth twisted strangely.

"Did I not tell you, pup? They're not meeting here anymore because I kicked them out."

Harry, Hermione and Ron all turn to stare at him, faces bewildered.

"Why am I still here then?" Ron asks, sounding properly baffled.

Sirius shrugs. "You were too busy fussing over Harry to notice, but Molly and I had a fight. She wanted to take all three of you, and I refused to let her take Harry. You were clearly not going to leave Harry's side, and really, none of us can tell Hermione where to go. She's been sending Ginny over to check on you every day."

They all turn to stare at each other. Were they really that lost in their own world that they hadn't noticed any of this?

Now that they know the Order isn't going to be hovering over their shoulder everytime they leave their room, they start exploring the house. Hermione vanishes into the library instantly, Mrs. Weasley no longer there to caution against it. Occasionally the galleon will heat up when she asks Voldemort whether or not a book in question is rare or dangerous.

It's during one of these long, lazy days that Harry happens upon the locket. Voldemort had been incensed to learn that the locket in the cave was a fake, and here Harry stands with the real one. It's oddly warm against his skin and he turns it over in his hands, watches the light glint off of it. He's holding a piece of Voldemort's soul in the palm of his hand.

Perhaps that shouldn't mean much, since he also has a piece of Voldemort's soul stuck in his head. But – he could destroy this. If he hands this over then he's no longer toeing the line, he's fully stepping over it.

Once upon a time, he had stood in front of a mirror and told Voldemort no. He had said *I will never join you*. Now he's sitting in the sun, Voldemort's soul clutched tight in his hand. There should be a choice here, a crossroads. There isn't.

I found the locket.

The galleon heats up within minutes and at the same time he hears feet coming down the stairs.

Where?

It was in the drawing room of the Black's house.

Ron and Hermione come running in the room, eyes wide. The galleon doesn't burn again and he stares at his friends, locket still held tight.

"There's really no turning back now, huh?" Ron muses, eyes caught on the locket, on the chain dangling from Harry's hand.

"There's never been a choice to turn back," Hermione murmurs, leaning against the door. "We never would have left Harry's side, and this is the only acceptable road for him to take."

Later, as he's getting ready for bed, the locket sitting safely in his pocket, the galleon burns again.

Keep it. There's a pause as Harry stares at the galleon, mouth half open in surprise. *I trust you are worthy of a second part of me.*

Harry Potter begins his seventh and final year of Hogwarts with a gift from his soulmate warm against the skin of his chest, and with the strongest sense of optimism that he has yet had when beginning any year of Hogwarts.

There are no more lessons, because Dumbledore remains in Saint Mungo's, recuperating from his encounter with Voldemort's specially-brewed potion. McGonagall is interim Headmistress – a special lecturer whom Harry has never heard of is teaching Transfiguration in her stead. His schedule is simple, if dominated by the looming threat of NEWTs on the horizon. He feels as though Professor Fleming, somehow returned to the position of DADA professor, is not going to try and kill him or put him in danger in the way that every other DADA professor seems to have done. It leaves everything feeling oddly calm despite the business of it all.

Monday morning, on the second week of classes, a letter drops onto his plate.

Harry Potter,

I apologise if this letter reaches you with the sense of delay. I was busy last week.

In the interests of ensuring that this communication of ours remains confidential, I have provided an owl. It should be roosting in the Hogwarts owlery now, and will recognise you when you go to post your reply. If indeed you are still committed to this idea.

I confess I have no instincts for getting to know people in an unaggressive setting. Do you have any ideas?

Sincerely,

Thomas Gaunt

The strange part isn't who the letter is from – it's that Harry laughs.

Thomas Gaunt,

I've used your owl for now. Hedwig is really offended that she doesn't get to deliver my letters, though. You'd better include some owl treats in your response so that I can bribe her to let it go, or I might have to use her as my owl after all. Why did you send an owl, anyway?

I had to think about your question for a while. When Ron and I met, we got to know each other by talking about what Hogwarts houses we thought we'd be in, and by talking about what candy we liked. The Hogwarts houses thing doesn't really apply to either of us, since we've both already been Sorted, but the candy question might apply. Do you even eat candy or sweets? I like treacle tart.

Speaking of Hogwarts houses, though. You were in Slytherin. What was it actually like? I saw the Slytherin common room once (snuck in in second year, long story) and it looked like the windows were looking out into the lake? Like it was underwater? Was that real, or some sort of magical illusion thing? Was it like that when you were at Hogwarts?

~~Did the Hat have any trouble with what house to put you in? Or did you go to Slytherin automatically?~~ You don't have to answer that question, actually. That's pretty personal for a first letter.

I think that's roughly how you do it, for future reference. Just ask questions you're interested in knowing the answers to. Then I answer the questions and ask you more questions, and you answer those, and ask me more... And so on.

Just asked Hermione and she said that was pretty much how it worked.

Don't worry about being quick about replies. I know I wasn't really. NEWT year is already eating all my free periods with homework. I feel like I don't even have any free periods.

What do you do all day that makes you so busy?

Harry

For once, Harry's predictions come true. Seventh year is peaceful and almost stress free. After years of fearing for his life and being thrust into life-threatening situations, to be faced only with homework and essays and grades is like being threatened with murder by a pygmy puff. Harry can't take any of it very seriously at all. He does his work, of course, both because he'd like to graduate and because he does fear Hermione's lecturing should he fail to do his homework. But it isn't *stressful*, not in the way that Harry has come to associate Hogwarts with stress. Instead of stress, Harry finds himself enjoying the lack of panic that comes with normal school life – if this is indeed how normal teenagers feel at Hogwarts.

Dumbledore is in Saint Mungo's. Snape is working full-time for the Order and isn't in the castle anymore. The DADA professor isn't out to get him. Voldemort isn't trying to kill him, and isn't allowing any of the Death Eaters to try to kill him.

It's perfect.

As the year goes on, he does find another reason for doing well on his homework. Voldemort, oddly enough, gets tetchy in his letters when Harry makes a joke about his terrible grades. Harry grudgingly agrees to try working on an essay early, for once in his school life, rather than leaving it until the day before. The resulting grade isn't very different, to be fair – but the usual comments on Harry's handwriting don't appear, and even more stress, stress that Harry wasn't aware that he was feeling, drops away before the class, when he finishes the essay early. He didn't even realise that the tension he felt before each class was because of homework done hastily, and not just because Harry hated, and still hates, being in rooms where people can be behind him and look at his back.

It's strange, when he thinks about it, that Voldemort has shifted from wanting Harry dead to nagging Harry about his grades. He makes sure to tell his soulmate about this in his next letter, because it's kind of funny.

Voldemort acts like he doesn't appreciate this, but he doesn't stop nagging, either.

“Hey Harry,” Dean says one morning at breakfast, when Ron and Hermione are taking a certain kind of walk that Harry does not need to be involved with. “Did you get a girlfriend?”

Harry nearly drops his pumpkin juice.

“Sorry?” he finally splutters. “Why would you think that?”

“Oh,” says Dean, squinting at the small puddle of pumpkin juice. He shoves a napkin at Harry, who takes it gratefully. “Well, you’ve been getting letters all year, and you always smile when you get one. I just thought...”

“Oh,” Harry says, in a strange echo. “Er. No. Not a girlfriend.” A strange whimsy takes him. “Just my soulmate.”

There's a whistle from Seamus, a cry of happy surprise from Neville, and a pleased looking eyebrow raise from Dean. Harry pauses in his mopping up of the spilled pumpkin juice to stare around the table in bewilderment. Why are they so pleased, and why is he only just realising that he's never mentioned that he knows who his soulmate is?

Probably because his soulmate is Voldemort, he admits quietly to himself. And because he'd been in denial for most of fifth year. But *still* –

“Is there some reason you're all so excited?” he says slowly.

“You found your soulmate!” Neville cries. “That's so important! I'm really happy for you, Harry.” And he grins, all lopsided.

A part of Harry wants to look away and insist that they shouldn't be that happy for him. His soulmate is not somebody they'd want to meet. He can't help but think that they would think

less of Harry if they knew – wouldn't they?

But then again, Ron and Hermione know, and don't care. That selfish voice inside of Harry, that started to grow in sixth year, is louder now. That voice doesn't care that Voldemort is Voldemort, or about politics and those rule laden parts of society that wouldn't exist without people to follow them.

I have a soulmate, it says instead. I have a soulmate and he is *mine*.

"Yeah," Harry says slowly. He tries to smile, and it comes naturally. "It is important. Thanks."

"She doesn't go here, though," Dean is saying. "Or we'd all have known for ages. Is she a muggle?"

"He," Harry says vaguely. "He's not a muggle. He doesn't go to Hogwarts, though."

The part of him that still lives at the Dursleys expects a disgusted exclamation. His soulmate is another man, after all, and that's freakish.

Nobody exclaims.

"Shoot," Dean says instead. "Sorry, just assumed it was a girl. That was pretty gross of me."

Harry laughs, and feels oddly carefree.

... and when is your graduation, anyway? I was considering attending, but it may not fall on an auspicious day for me to get away from my responsibilities. Knowing in advance would help...

... You can't come to my graduation! Won't Dumbledore recognise you? Or even if he doesn't recognise you, then somebody might. How will we explain how you know me anyway? I'm lucky none of the adult Order members have had enough free time to poke their nose into how I got around enough to meet my soulmate...

... and as you were so worried about Dumbledore, may I gladly be the first to inform you that his stay at Saint Mungo's has recently been inexplicably extended...

... obligates me to say this: Shame. Shame on you for non-lethally poisoning an old man. But also, how'd you do it?? I want to know everything...

Am I in love? Harry wonders one day, when he's sitting in a window seat of the Gryffindor common room, curled around his latest reply to Voldemort, and staring out at the February snowfall. It's Valentine's Day in a few days. Harry has never been the overly romantic sort, and after his second year, he always worries he's going to see an ugly dwarf coming around a corner at him on Valentine's Day. Still, there it is – the urge to do *something* in this letter. But Voldemort is hardly a romantic sort of person, and Harry isn't about to act like an idiot.

Still the urge rises.

Do you like Valentine's Day? he writes down. *Or anything romantic, really. You don't seem like the romantic sort.*

Half of him wants to add a heart after he signs his name at the end. This is at odds with the question he's asked, so he forces himself not to. Then he spends about an hour questioning himself over the urge, until Ron forces him to play a game of chess. Harry is promptly distracted by how badly he loses.

I hate Valentine's Day, Voldemort says in his next letter. *As for the other question, I suppose it depends on what you mean by romance.*

Harry sends a heart with the next letter, to see how it goes.

That is not what I meant, Harry. He has to stop himself from giggling like a besotted idiot but the smile on his face refuses to leave for days.

McGonagall shuffles her papers to the side of her desk. Harry isn't sure if the Headmistress would usually be holding the career meetings for graduating seventh years, but then again – she's been the head of Gryffindor for far longer than the new Transfiguration professor, and she actually knows them all. In that sense, it's pretty practical of her. Harry approves – not that she would care if he didn't.

"I apologise for the mess," she says, before settling down and folding her hands together. Piercing eyes meet Harry's for a moment before Harry habitually shifts his gaze so he isn't meeting her head-on. Old habit, and he's pretty certain that McGonagall isn't a legilimens, but then again, with a soulmate like his... Can't hurt, right?

"It's alright," he says, and smiles.

"Now then, Potter, in your fifth year you'd mentioned a desire to become an Auror?" Harry nods, because that is true. "I see that you've continued to work at the necessary classes, and your grades have even improved some this year. On paper it all looks very good, I must say, so tell me – is that still your goal?"

No, Harry thinks instantly – and then is struck by how certain he is of that.

Oops.

“I suppose I’d like to keep the option open,” Harry says. Voldemort’s a big fan of that sort of language – *keeping my options open* – which Harry supposes might be a Slytherin thing, but it also seems like a good idea, given how many times Voldemort’s mentioned coming out on top of a situation because he kept his options open. “But I’m not really sure if I’ll go immediately into the training program.”

McGonagall eyes him. “A gap year?” she says. Her tone comes off as disapproving, but Harry can’t quite tell if that’s her general opinion of gap years, or if it’s her opinion of *him*, Harry Potter, when associated with gap years.

“Well, yeah, basically,” Harry says. “Considering the, er. Political climate,” he says delicately, “I was thinking of moving in with my soulmate, actually.”

He is?

This proclamation comes as a complete surprise to Harry. To McGonagall, as well, given her wide-eyed expression. But the more Harry thinks about it, the more certain he becomes of his idea.

He still isn’t exactly sure where he and Voldemort stand, in regards to one another. But he’d like that, and he sometimes gets the feeling that Sirius and Remus would prefer having Grimmauld place to themselves. Equally as unnerving is the fact that Dumbledore will be released from the hospital soon, and Harry has made Voldemort promise not to delay it again. It was an agreement that he only received grudgingly – but he did receive it, eventually, after a lot of ink wasted on needling sarcasm about helpless old men.

“You’ve met your soulmate?” McGonagall says, and startles Harry from his daze.

“Yeah,” Harry says. “We’ve been exchanging letters. Getting to know each other and stuff.” He shrugs, and without meaning to, a smile spreads across his face. “I really like him.”

“Well,” McGonagall says. She does not smile, but the lines of her face soften almost imperceptibly. “That seems reasonable enough.”

He writes Voldemort a letter immediately after the meeting. *Would it be weird if I lived with you for a bit after I graduate?* he asks. And then he goes on, explaining his convoluted reasoning in a strange babble of words and emotions. He’s quite certain that none of it makes any sense, and is similarly certain that Voldemort is going to write him a reply consisting entirely of scoffing. But nevertheless, it feels good to get it out and onto paper.

It’s as he’s going to shove the parchment into an envelope that Harry has a thought.

Dumbledore ended up telling me the full Prophecy last year, he writes as a postscript. Do you want to know it? I remember the wording pretty well.

He gets a reply straightaway the next morning. That was fast.

I would yell at you for not telling me sooner, Voldemort begins without any salutation – ooh, that’s bad letter writing etiquette. Harry makes a mental note to needle him about that in his reply. But in fact, don’t tell me. I’ve successfully put it entirely from my mind and would rather not even deal with that can of worms again.

As for your sentimental rambling, here are the options...

“May I present to you, the Hogwarts graduating class of 1998!”

The cheers are loud enough that Harry can feel the vibrations reverberating through his bones. He can see the Weasleys in the crowd, a small sea of screaming red. The twins are dancing in circles and Ginny is standing on a chair waving a banner that looks like it was made by Luna. Sirius and Remus are in the back corner. He swears he can hear Sirius even over the crowd, he’s screaming that loudly. Remus is leaning against the wall, arms crossed, a pleased smile on his face.

The euphoria of being done, of having made it, fills him up until he can nearly forget about the guilt that’s been living in the pit of his stomach. His friends, his family, are all so happy for him and he’s about to betray them in the worst way possible.

The rest of his year-mates all start leaving the stage but Harry hangs back, waiting for Hermione and Ron to join up with him. As much as he would like to go mingle with his friends and family, this is the perfect time for them to slip away without any questions.

Hermione is chewing on her lip, hands curled tight in the fabric of her robes. She’s been stressed over the idea of negotiating a ceasefire on both sides. The reality of what they were doing had hit her in January, and she’s since written at least fifteen different drafts of what they should demand.

Harry doesn’t plan on demanding anything. He’s let Hermione write her drafts, because it certainly won’t hurt to have a list of expectations, but he thinks it would be a bad way to begin a relationship if he goes in demanding things.

There’s a moment, right before they step through the gate, where he looks behind them, at Hogwarts towering above them, the shadows of its turrets falling across them like safety blankets. In that moment where he looks, he feels invincible. They have the rest of their lives ahead of them and they’ve already accomplished so much.

The moment breaks and they apparate away.

Sometimes he forgets that no one, apart from Ron and Hermione, knows who his soulmate is. The other boys in the dorm had teased him endlessly about how many letters he wrote and received. Ginny in particular had taken great delight in cooing over him every time an owl, either Voldemort's or Hedwig, swung by with a delivery. Sometimes, it had been easy to pretend that everyone knew, and that his life was easy and normal and that everything was going to be fine.

Then there are moments like now, the three of them standing in front of Malfoy Manor and Malfoy also standing there, one foot on the bottom step, face pale and eyes wide. Even from where he is, Harry can see Malfoy's hands shaking so hard they might fall from his body.

Sometimes it's easy to forget, and then he remembers that the wizarding world still thinks he wants Voldemort dead. They still expect him to try and kill his soulmate to save them all.

"Potter. What the fuck are you doing here?" Malfoy hisses, throwing a nervous glance over his shoulder. "Do you have a death wish?"

"I'm just here to talk." Harry probably shouldn't be so amused by how flustered and panicked Malfoy looks. "I didn't realize you cared so much about my health."

"I don't care about you at all, Potter." He spits the words out, cheeks flushed red. Briefly his glare turns on Ron, who's started snickering to himself. "If you all want to be murdered, please don't let me stand in your way."

"Why are you even here, Malfoy?" Hermione asks, hands on her hips, lips pursed in annoyance.

Malfoy sputters, drawing himself up. "I live here, Granger. Aren't you supposed to be smart?"

"She means why aren't you still at graduation?" Ron says, still quietly snickering.

Malfoy shoots him another nasty glare but still answers. "Mother had business to attend to urgently. Not that it is any of *your* business."

"Yes, Malfoy. We get it, you're so much better than us," Hermione snarks, rolls her eyes. "Since this is *your* house, why don't you show us where Voldemort is."

Malfoy flushes red and then pales rapidly again. Hermione doesn't give him a chance to recover before she goes marching into the manor. Harry exchanges an amused look with Ron before following after her. All three of them get halfway through the foyer before Malfoy pulls himself together enough to follow them. The blond boy takes the lead then, though he keeps glancing over his shoulder, eyes wide and shoulders tense. Perhaps it would be kinder

to reassure him that they do not have a death wish, but he doubts Malfoy would believe anything they say.

“My mother said that she would be in the blue room. We will stop there first and let her know that the three of you are in her house.” Harry’s not sure he’s ever met anyone else who can sound snotty, stressed and distant all at once.

Malfoy knocks sharply on the door they eventually reach, waits a moment, and then enters. Harry exchanges looks with Hermione and Ron, shrugs, and then follows him in.

Narcissa Malfoy is perched on a chair facing the door, ankles crossed, face perfectly calm. There’s a man sitting on the seat across from her, shoulders stiff and head cocked to the side. Harry finds himself staring. The back of that head looks terribly familiar.

“Draco, darling? What is it?” Narcissa asks, eyes narrowing imperceptibly. Her eyes land on Harry next and he watches them go wide for a split second before she returns to that perfectly calm facade.

“Mother. These three have come to speak with the Dark Lord and I thought it best to let you know.”

The man’s shoulders somehow manage to tense up even farther. Right as he goes to turn his head, the realization of who he’s staring at hits Harry over the head.

“No fuck— ” he starts to exclaim, and cuts off when Sirius turns and makes eye contact with him.

There’s a long moment of silence so thick one of them could have dropped a vase and it would have hung suspended in the tension of the room. Sirius stares at him, knuckles white where he’s gripping the arm of the chair and eyes impossibly wide. He hears Ron mutter a curse behind him and Hermione moves closer to his side, fingers reaching out to press against his back.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Sirius finally bites out, breaking the silence.

“What am I doing here?” he yells. “What are *you* doing here?”

“What are any of you doing here?” Malfoy mutters and then blanches when five sets of eyes turn to look at him.

“It’s a mostly valid question,” Ron says, not even blinking when everyone turns to stare at him. “Clearly, we’re not the only ones who have been fraternizing with the enemy.” He smirks over at Hermione as he says it and laughs when she smacks his arm.

Harry looks back over at Sirius and gets caught on the speculative look that Narcissa is leveling at Ron. “Really though, clearly Malfoy Jr. here has no idea why any of us are here. Are you aware of why the three of us are here, ma’am?” the red-head asks, looking at Narcissa.

She blinks, speculative look already gone. "I am not. The Dark Lord did say that he was expecting guests today but of course, I would not have assumed it would be any of you."

"Ah, right then." Ron looks thrown for a second that she had answered so easily. "Well, we're here because we've been communicating with – " He pauses, rolls his shoulders as he thinks. "We've been communicating with Voldemort for the past two-ish years and we have plans to speak with him about the war and other matters today."

Sirius has gone terribly white and that speculative look has entered Narcissa's eyes again. This time she's making no move to hide it and is leveling it all three of them. Malfoy is staring at them all like they've grown a second head.

"Which just leaves me I suppose," Sirius says, sounding weary, dragging a hand down his face. "I'm here to speak with Narcissa. We've been talking for about two years as well and she's convinced me that I should hear Voldemort out."

Harry knows he's gaping unattractively, but what else can he do? This is Sirius. He hates Voldemort, hates him more than anyone else Harry knows, and it's not any hatred that Harry can blame him for. He's the one that Harry had been worried about the most. He's the one that Harry thought he was going to lose over this mess.

"You fucking ass," he snaps out. The way Sirius's mouth falls open is actually enjoyable. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Really, pup." Sirius raises an eyebrow, levels a pointed look at him. "Are we going to play that game?"

"Guys, maybe – "

"You're the adult! You should have said something first!"

"And two years ago you were what? Fifteen? You should have come to me!"

"Harry! You really – "

"Oh please, you would have lost your mind that I was talking to him," he scoffs.

"You were fifteen! A child! You shouldn't have been talking to him at all!" Sirius yells.

"WOULD YOU BOTH SHUT UP!" Hermione suddenly screams and Harry flinches backwards, her voice right next to his ear.

He turns to look at her, one hand brought up to clutch at the side of his head. She's glaring daggers at them and out of the corner of his eye he can see Ron leaning against the wall, arms crossed, a smirk tugging at his mouth. "Thank you," she snaps, hands balled into fists at her side. "If you're quite done arguing like children then it might interest you to know – "

Predictably, before she can finish her sentence, the door to the room bangs open and Voldemort comes striding in. Hermione whirls around, hair sparking.

Harry pays her no attention, all his attention has been captured by the sight of the lines curving their way across Voldemort's face. Their peculiarly obvious soulscar is on full display for the world to see. He dimly hears Sirius start cursing in the background and even more vaguely registers Ron pushing off the wall and intercepting Sirius before he can do more than take a threatening step forward. He hadn't realized how monumental it would feel to stand in front of Voldemort, fully accepting of their shared curse scar and fully accepting of who they are to each other. He hadn't expected to be so very happy to see him.

Voldemort pauses in the doorway, taking in the chaos of the room and allowing his eyes to settle on each person, assessing, considering. His gaze reaches Harry and he pauses, the ghost of a smile seeming to tug at his mouth for a moment.

Harry meets his gaze head on. For the first time he looks into red eyes and doesn't feel anything except for safe. He still vividly remembers the gentle press of fingers to his face and the worry that had spread across Voldemort's countenance like an infusion. But still, as precious as that memory has been to him this past year, he finds himself excited to make new memories. Excited to learn more about this person that he's going to spend the rest of his life with.

"How is it that you two have barely spent any time together and you're already more sickening than Hermione and I will ever be?" Ron's amused voice breaks him out of the strange haze he's been standing in and he flushes, remembering suddenly that Sirius is still very much present.

Voldemort's mouth twists at Ron's words but he doesn't do anything other than shoot a dark glare at him.

"Harry," his soulmate says, tone gentler than Harry has ever heard before. "I'm pleased you made it out without being accosted."

The laugh that comes out of his mouth surprises everyone, including himself. "Yeah, we were surprised we got out so easily but now I see it's because *he* was also on his way here." He jerks a finger over his shoulder at Sirius.

"Yes, it would seem that we all have much to discuss," Voldemort says quietly, glancing around at everyone in the room again.

"Perhaps it would be best to adjourn to the dining room, my Lord," Narcissa cuts in.

"A reasonable suggestion. If you would lead the way," he says, moving out of the way and motioning towards the door.

Narcissa sweeps out of the room, nodding respectfully to Voldemort as she passes. Malfoy does the same, also pausing to nod, although Harry can see his hands shaking. Ron leads Sirius out of the room, one hand firmly gripping his arm. Sirius glares at Voldemort as he walks by, briefly switching his glare to Harry and then turning back to glare at Voldemort again before he's fully pulled through the door. Hermione sweeps out of the room next, stance eerily similar to Narcissa's. She doesn't pause to nod, but she does make eye contact

with Voldemort, and she must do something with her face because his lips quirk up momentarily.

Then it's just the two of them. It feels almost like a new beginning.

He walks forward until he's standing in front of his soulmate and he thinks this may be the first time that they've stood in front of each, no wands in sight. He knows for certain that this is the first time they've stood in front of each other as equals.

"Shall we?" he murmurs, inclines his head towards the door.

Voldemort blinks, head tilted slightly to the side. "I suppose we shall," he murmurs back. Yet instead of moving, he slowly, carefully reaches out and takes Harry's wrist, his actions a strange mimicry of the way he had touched Harry's face in the cave.

Even more slowly, as if he's scared that at any moment Harry is going to decide that this is not what he wants, he brings the inside of Harry's wrist up to his mouth and places his lips there. Lets them rest there gently, and Harry knows that he must be able to feel the way Harry's heartbeat is racing.

The moment stretches, bends and Harry feels any leftover doubts he had melt away. The world is going to scream and people are going to argue but he's here in this moment with his soulmate's lips cool against his wrist and the rest of his life stretching ahead of him.

There's nowhere else he would rather be.

fin.

End Notes

Kit

This fic was fully outlined and approved by Kit, very irresponsibly, during class on the Monday before Thanksgiving, whilst she was overtaken by need to show love to the adopted sister.

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