

Clever Boy

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Clever Boy

by [enoby_w](#)

Summary

After an argument with an Unspeakable left Harry decades in the past, the plan was to avoid Tom Riddle at all costs. Unfortunately, Tom wasn't interested in cooperating, and no matter where Harry went, Tom was waiting.

Notes

So I got the idea for this fic in the middle of the night and wrote a pretty much illegible outline on a napkin because I was too tired to mess with the computer, and now it's a fic! I had a lot of fun working on it & I really hope you'll enjoy reading it.

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

Project Cerberus

Chapter One: Project Cerberus

The first time Harry heard about Project Cerberus, it sounded so barmy that he thought it was a rather poor joke.

"Are you taking the piss?" he asked the mousey middle-aged witch who had knocked on his door, "The Department of Mysteries wants to do *what?*"

"It's a specialty time mission," said the woman, who had introduced herself as Unspeakable Cobswoth.

"A specialty time mission? What the hell is a time mission? Haven't you heard that messing with time is a horrible idea?"

"It *was*," said Unspeakable Cobswoth, "but that was *before*."

"Before what?"

"The infinity measure. It changes *everything*."

Harry did not know what the infinity measure was, nor didn't he want to. What he wanted was for Unspeakable Cobswoth to go away so he could leave to meet Ron at the pub.

After another agonizing forty minutes, which did not give Harry any clearer idea what Unspeakable Cobswoth wanted from him or what an infinity measure was, she excused herself, informing him she was due back for a very important relative time anomaly.

"Right," said Harry, "*best* be off then."

"Unspeakable Wordsworth will be in touch," she said brightly, "he'll be very happy to hear about your cooperation in this very important project."

"Wait!" said Harry, "I'm not cooperating!"

It was too late. Cobswoth touched something around her neck that glowed in a rather alarming green-tinged light and vanished.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Ron when Harry slid into the worn leather booth across from him.

"Very weird day," said Harry, sucking the foam off the top of his beer. "An Unspeakable turned up at my door about five minutes before I was due to leave."

"Oh, bloody hell, what did they want? God, they give me the creeps," said Ron, "you know Hermione is still trying to get that apprentice position."

"I know she is," said Harry, "and I still think she should reconsider."

"I'm not arguing," said Ron, "but she thinks it'll help her find her parents."

He looked at Harry with raised eyebrows, making it very clear what he thought of that.

"So what did they want?" he asked.

Harry tried to tell him. Really he did, but every time he opened his mouth, the words he wanted to say vanished from his brain. After staring at Ron open-mouthed, gaping like a fish for over a minute, he gave up. Chugging his pint and slamming the glass on the table.

"I *hate* the Unspeakables," he said vehemently, tugging absently on the fine gold chain around his neck.

It was a bad habit. Harry knew it was a bad habit, and whenever Hermione saw him doing it, she liked telling him it would break one day.

"What are you going to do if it falls off and you lose it?" she said, "It's not like you can ever replace it."

She was right. It had been his mother's, and he really didn't want to lose it. But that didn't stop him from tugging on it when he was annoyed.

"Wow," said Ron, "must be important if they won't let you talk about it."

"It's not just important. It's ruddy irresponsible, and probably dangerous. No, not probably, *definitely* dangerous."

The more Harry thought about what Unspeakable Cobswoth had told him, the more it made him seethe. He may not have understood much of what she'd said, but he knew enough to know that she wanted to play with time and wanted him to be the one to do it.

He'd had his fair share of running around doing stupid, dangerous things, and he was not interested in running off to do something dangerous and probably- *definitely* stupid on behalf of the Department of Mysteries and the Ministry.

And that should have been the end of it. Only it wasn't, because the letters started the very next day. The first one was waiting for Harry when he came down for breakfast. He tossed it into the fire without opening it.

The second arrived after lunch. It also went into the fire. Harry had burned twelve letters from the Department of Mysteries by dinner.

He went to bed dreading the letters he was sure would arrive in the morning and had, for the first time, a pang of sympathy for the deluge of letters his aunt and uncle had experienced when he was eleven.

Maybe they were terrible, but it was a massive pain to keep getting letters you didn't want, and it was even worse when they kept multiplying.

By the end of the week, the letters had started following him wherever he went, and he got three while sitting on the balcony drinking a beer with Ron.

"Fucking hell," he said when the third letter landed in his lap, "I'm not bloody interested."

"Obviously," said Ron, looking over the top of his bottle at Harry, "but have you told them that?"

"I'm not answering. Isn't that enough?"

"You tell me," said Ron as the fourth letter floated down, landing on the metal table between them.

"Do you have a quill?" asked Harry.

"Just a mo'," said Ron, flicking his wand once, and a quill and small bottle of ink came rocketing out of the open window into his hands.

"There you go."

"Cheers," said Harry, dipping the quill into the ink and scrawling messily on the back of the last letter.

The letters stopped for the rest of the evening. But in the morning, a letter was sitting on the table when Harry came down for breakfast.

"God damn it," said Harry, slumping over the table. He sighed, rubbing his eyes. He'd have to open one of them, wasn't he? That would be the only way to get them to stop, and then he'd have to write a proper reply and not just scribble, "Fuck off" fifteen times on a roll of parchment like he wanted.

Unfortunately, writing a proper reply didn't work either, but at least the letters had stopped following him out of the house, even if one was dutifully waiting for him every time he came home.

"I do not understand how to make it any clearer that I'm not interested," said Harry, stabbing at his potatoes. He had met Ron and Hermione for dinner at a pub down the street from Number Twelve for their weekly catch up and so far had spent the last ten minutes complaining about letters, sounding only mildly unhinged.

"You could keep sending them back," said Ron, pointing with his fork, "maybe make each one a little ruder than the last. I'm sure they'd get the message eventually."

"Will the two of you be serious," said Hermione, "this an academic endeavor. I'm sure they only want Harry to help sponsor it-"

Harry started laughing a little too loudly, and people turned to stare.

"I wish," he said, leaning forward on the table, "more than anything, I could tell you what this was really about because if you knew, you would tell me to take it to the Minister."

"So why don't you?" asked Hermione, her eyebrows raised, "if it's that unethical, I'm sure he'd want to know."

"And tell him what exactly?" asked Harry. He shoved a spoonful of peas into his mouth, "Kingsley, my man, one of your departments is doing something very naughty, and I'd love to tell you all about it, only they've conveniently made it so I can't. Maybe you should ask them about it? Oh, by the way, they're spamming me with letters and won't leave me alone."

"Sure, why not," she said, "or are you worried that he might think you're overreacting just a smidge?"

Harry was afraid, but not for the reason that Hermione was thinking. Project Cerberus had the potential to end the world as they knew it, and whether or not anyone else wanted to acknowledge it didn't change the fact that it was true.

After seeing the pinched look around Hermione's mouth and how Harry gripped his silverware a little too tightly, Ron swiftly changed the subject.

"Did you hear the Harpies won their last match? That bludger Medina took to the skull put her out for the rest of the season, so Gin's going to be starting next week."

"Shame about Medina," said Harry, "she's a damn good chaser. But good on Gin. She deserves it."

"There are already rumors about her taking Helen's spot next season. Everyone knows she wants to have a baby," said Ron.

Harry yawned, shaking his head. It was late, it had been a long day, and he very much wanted to already be in his bed.

"Right, you lot," he said, finishing his drink with a flourish, "I best be off. I probably have a whole pile of letters to burn."

"You know," said Hermione, "you could just go to the Ministry and talk to them."

Harry had stood and paused next to the booth, "I don't think that's a good idea," he said, "I don't want to encourage them."

"Suit yourself," said Hermione, "you can keep getting letters every day for the rest of your life."

"Oh, come off it," said Ron, "the cost of the parchment alone would get ridiculous. I've seen those letters; they're all fancy and embossed- they must cost a small fortune."

"I'm just saying I think they might be willing to listen to you if you show up," said Hermione, "otherwise, they are just going to keep sending you letters until you get so sick of it that you

show up out of spite or they run out of funds. I would be willing to bet I know which will happen first."

"If I go, then they win," said Harry sullenly.

Hermione just looked at him over her glass of wine, eyebrows raised. "Win what exactly?" she asked.

Harry couldn't tell her what they would win if he went. He just knew that they would. It would prove that the Ministry still had ways of getting him to cooperate, which was a notion that Harry wanted to discourage as much as possible.

But in the end, it didn't matter what he wanted because two weeks later, Harry had very reluctantly scheduled an appointment with Unspeakable Wordsworth.

Hermione had been right. The letters kept coming, and they were driving him postal. It had not mattered how often Harry took the time to sit down and politely declined their offer of collaboration; the letters had not stopped.

He had even written to the Minister in a fit of rage. It was the first time he had tried to use his name to get into a room, and it hadn't worked. The Minister was in America for the next six weeks for the bi-annual Leaders of the Magical World Summit.

So that left Harry with two choices. He could go to the Ministry, or he could wait, and he had never been very good at waiting.

He turned up ten minutes early for his appointment, taking the lift down from the visitor's entrance to the Atrium. The moment he stepped out of the lift, he was met by a young round-faced witch, her dirty blond hair slicked back into a neat bun.

"Mr. Potter," she said brightly, "how nice of you to be early!"

"Er-" said Harry, taken aback.

"I'm Merrill," she said, "Unspeakable Wordsworth's secretary. Now, if you'll just follow me, I can take you to the round room downstairs," she said, her slender hands clutching her clipboard.

She led the way across the expansive marble floor, and they rode the lift down in silence. The cool female voice told them they were now entering the Department of Mysteries.

The grate opened, and they stepped into a long plain stone corridor.

"Unspeakable Wordsworth wanted me to tell you that he will be arriving in a few minutes," she said, opening the plain looking door at the end of the corridor. She held it open for Harry, closing it once she had stepped through. "There is a critical time anomaly analysis that he's finishing right now- step this way, please."

They stopped on a small white square stone set into the floor, and while the walls whirled around them, Harry wondered if he had made a mistake coming here. It would be very hard

to leave on his own.

Finally, the walls stopped, and Merrill confidently crossed to one of the identical doors. She tapped it twice with her wand, and it opened.

"Welcome to the round room Mr. Potter," she said, beckoning for him to enter.

The round room was, as its name stated, round. It was a huge circular rough stone chamber with a large dias in the center. Harry stepped into the room, looking around the expansive empty space. Merrill did not follow him, "Unspeakable Wordsworth should arrive shortly," she said, closing the door.

"Wait-!" said Harry, but it was too late. She was already gone, the door melting away into the wall.

So far, his trip to the Ministry had not gone well, and he had a feeling that it wouldn't get any better. Harry waited much longer than a few minutes for Unspeakable Wordsworth to arrive, and right when he was frustrated enough to try and leave, the door swung open.

Unspeakable Wordsworth had arrived. He was a short, round, balding man with thin silver wireframe glasses and a turned up nose.

"Mr. Potter," he said, voice high and clear, "how wonderful for you to come. Please do sit down."

He gestured at the sofa.

Harry felt compelled to sit, and so he did.

"If you say so," said Harry, already annoyed, "look, I'm not going to stay long. I'm just here to tell you-"

Unspeakable Wordsworth was not listening, cutting Harry off mid-sentence.

"Now," he said cheerfully, "I expect you are wondering why you are here. This is a very exciting day in a very exciting time, and I'm thrilled to have you be part of this historic project."

"That's the thing-"

"Where should I begin?" muttered Wordsworth, walking into the round room, the door closing behind him. "Ah- yes, we will begin with the measure."

"Look, if you'd just listen-"

Wordsworth had no intention of listening, explaining, "The measure was something of a recent discovery, and I think you'll find that it changes everything as we know it! Everything! It may be our most important discovery since we first harnessed magic. But what does it do, you ask? I'll tell you, it's amazing is what it is, and it shows you the future, but not the whole

future, and more importantly, not just one future. Because that was the true discovery of the Infinity measure- the possibility of infinite futures."

Harry couldn't have heard that correctly.

"Wait, what did you just say?" he said.

"Ah, see, I finally have your attention," said Unspeakable Wordsworth, "as I was saying, there is an infinite universe with infinite possibilities for each of us."

"That's mad," said Harry, "how can you possibly know that?"

"Because we can see it!" said Unspeakable Wordsworth excitedly, "that is what the infinity measure does. It allows us a glimpse of the potential of our future or futures! And that is how I know project Cerberus will be a success."

"I would like to leave now," said Harry, getting up from his seat and walking to where he thought the door might be.

"Not just yet, Mr. Potter," said Unspeakable Wordsworth.

"Yes, just yet," said Harry.

"But don't you want to know why you're here?"

"No," said Harry, "I am not interested."

Unspeakable Wordsworth was not deterred by Harry's abrupt attempt to leave and continued talking as if he was still seated on the sofa.

"If you only see the possibilities, Mr. Potter, I think you might be a little more agreeable to the nature of the situation," said Wordsworth, "words can only say so much, Mr. Potter. I think you'll have to see it for yourself. *Infinium metimur*."

There was a noise like a thousand metallic wings, and Harry's vision started to blur, and thick bluish fog billowed around him. He opened his mouth to shout, but the fog filled his lungs, and nothing came out.

The world shifted like he was on a stage, and a hundred mirrored panels towered around him, each one filled with a scene, flicking from one moment to the next so fast he could hardly take them in.

There was no order to them. Each one, a possible moment in Harry's life, spread all across time. He was at Ron and Hermione's wedding. Ginny won the Quidditch world cup. George dipped Angelina kissing her to the whooping cheer all around them. He had a house in the country and a dog.

He worked in a bakery, hands covered in flour. He was greying, with crow's feet around his eyes, smiling at a small ginger girl.

It moved so fast he could hardly make out half the scenes.

There was a thread he noticed as time slipped by him. It caused a lump in his throat, confirming something he'd always thought about late at night but had tried to dismiss.

In every scene, he was alone.

His friends got married and had families, but even as he changed and aged or changed professions, he was alone. No matter how homey the place he lived, no one was with him.

And then, just for a second, he saw it. The curve of a jawline, sharp, bright eyes, pale skin, a wicked grin. He took Harry's breath away, and then he was gone, and Harry was back in the round room, swaying on his feet, trying to keep his balance.

"Now that you understand a little better," said Wordsworth, his high voice boomed in the cavernous space, "let us discuss project Cerberus."

"What is it?" asked Harry sullenly, sure that it didn't matter how much he argued; he wouldn't be able to leave until Wordsworth was satisfied the discussion was over.

"It's an opportunity for things to be different," said Unspeakable Wordsworth.

"Why?" said Harry, "different from what?"

"I know you may not fully understand the impacts of the recent war."

"Excuse me?"

"But our world has suffered irreparable losses. In some ways, we are a people who may never fully recover."

"That's what happens when there's a war," said Harry

"But what if it didn't have to be that way? What if we had a way to make things better?"

"At what cost? We won. Why would you want to risk the possibility of that changing? Can you imagine what life would be like if Voldemort had won?"

Unspeakable Wordsworth looked at Harry, annoyed, "I don't think you understand what I am proposing."

"I don't, at all. Spell it out for me."

"With the infinity measure, we have proved an existence of a better future," said Wordsworth, "a future where all of this could have been avoided. We want to pursue making that a reality."

"With me?" asked Harry, starting to grasp what he was talking about.

"Yes, with you," he said, "it has to be you."

Of course, it did.

"You can get fucked," said Harry, "there is nothing in the world that could make me agree to getting involved with disturbing time. Let me out of here, or I'll blast my way out."

The door appeared in the wall, and Harry was out of it before Unspeakable Wordsworth could say anything else. Harry wanted to get out of the Ministry as quickly as possible.

Nothing good ever came out of him going into that building. It was a lesson he hoped he'd really learned this time. The whole thing was mad. It was mad and reckless and dangerous, and Harry knew that no matter what he did, he wouldn't be able to say a goddamn word about it.

The Unspeakables had to keep their secrets somehow, didn't they?

He didn't want to go home. He was wound too tight for that. He'd end up pacing the length of the front hall until he drove himself mad. So he went to Ron's. Hermione wouldn't be home yet. She had meetings until the evening. Maybe it would be better this way anyways.

Ron opened the door on the second knock.

"You look like shit," he said, holding the door open for Harry, "the meeting went badly then."

"You have no bloody idea," said Harry, "there was a moment there I was certain I wasn't going to be able to leave without a fight."

"Merlin's Beard, Harry, you're serious."

"I really just want to sit down and maybe have a pizza. Can we do that?"

"Of course, we can. Double pepperoni?"

Harry nodded, crossing the kitchen and dropping into the large squishy armchair in the corner of the living room. Ron ordered the pizza, double pepperoni, and double cheese.

Then the first letter arrived.

"You have to be *joking*," said Harry when it landed in his lap. It was addressed in the same looping gold script as before.

To: Harry James Potter, on behalf of the Ministry and the Department of Mysteries.

When the pizza arrived, there were two letters piled on top. Harry set them both on fire.

"This isn't normal," said Ron, brow furrowed, "there has to be something you can do. Surely, this counts as harassment?"

Harry shrugged miserably and ate his pizza.

Late that evening, when Hermione came home, Harry was still there for fear of the pile of letters that would be waiting for him when he got home.

She stuck her head in the front room, "Ron, why are there a bunch of letters for Harry in the kitchen sink?"

"Bloody hell, there's more of them?" said Ron.

"Ah-," said Hermione, "so the meeting went poorly then?"

"That's one way to put it," said Harry.

He went home late that night. Later than then, he should have, and instead of going to the kitchen when he got home to make a cup of tea to take up to bed with him like he did every night, he went straight upstairs. He would deal with the inevitable pile of letters in the morning.

Harry climbed into his big four poster, flopping onto his back. If he was very quiet, he could hear the sound of the cars outside on the street. Unbidden, the face he saw at the Ministry kept flashing through his mind. There was something about him, something painfully familiar.

Harry wanted to see the rest of this face. Because all he had now was a flash of pale skin, dark curls, and bright warm eyes. They filled his mind, no matter how much he tried to push them away.

It made him furious. Harry knew himself well enough that he'd be looking for that face everywhere he went. Hoping to find those warm auburn eyes.

In the morning, he woke feeling uneasy but no less rested than on any given night. He couldn't remember his dreams, but they were strange. Not nightmares, but maybe something close.

In the morning, when he went down for breakfast, he hovered just outside the kitchen door while considering if it was worth it to just go out to avoid facing the letters he knew were waiting on his kitchen table.

"Stop being a prat," he muttered, pushing the kitchen door open and skipping down the three steps into the kitchen.

The pile of letters waiting for him was smaller than he'd expected, and he didn't know if it was reassuring or not. It felt ominous somehow like they were biding their time and would spring some new and irritating way to get his attention at any moment.

The new and irritating way to get his attention arrived after he'd sat down to eat his toast. It was an official summons to the Ministry. This time it was not a request, and that made it slightly harder to ignore. Harry was tempted to try. But he didn't; he opened it, and opening it was a mistake.

The Worst Idea

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the support on the first chapter! I was kind of blown away. I'm so glad y'all enjoyed it, and I really hope you'll enjoy chapter two too. I can't wait to hear what you think!

Chapter three should be up Wednesday, so hope to see ya then :)

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

Chapter Two: The Worst Idea

Going back to the Ministry was a bad idea, but Harry did it anyway, and when he arrived, Merrill was waiting for him.

"Unspeakable Wordsworth and a representative of the Minister's office will be here shortly," she said, leading the way through the Atrium.

"Fine," said Harry, already regretting his decision to come. He certainly picked a bad time to start doing as he was told. Merrill brought him back into the depths of the Department of Mysteries and back to the round room. She tapped her wand once on the wall, the door opened, and once Harry stepped inside, things went a bit funny.

He was immediately met with a deafening metallic humming and a load of eerie green smoke. He pulled his shirt over his face to try and keep it out of his lungs, but it got in anyway, clogging his throat and making it hard to breathe.

There was a shift. A great jolt, like everything on earth, slid off its axis before settling back into place. The deafening hum started to fade, and when his vision cleared, he was no longer in the Ministry.

He was standing about halfway down an alley, and while he had a bad feeling about what had just happened, he was really hoping he was wrong. But when he stuck his head into the street, his suspicion was immediately proven true, and a tight ball of panic formed in his chest.

He was in London, only this wasn't his London. This London was from a long time ago.

Stepping back into the shadow of the alley, Harry cast a strong enough 'notice-me-not charm' that he'd be able to slip through the muggle crowds without much trouble, as long as he was careful not to bump into anyone. Thank god, he at least had his wand.

Moving through a crowd when no one could see you was something that Harry very quickly learned was not easy at all, and two hours later, he dropped exhausted onto a bench under a tree at the edge of a small park. A huge grey building stood at the far end, towering over the little patch of green, casting a long shadow in the sun. In the hours he'd been here so far, Harry had confirmed a few things, none of which were good.

The year was 1945, and the date was May 31st, which meant that for better or worse, as far as the Ministry was concerned, Project Cerberus was a go. Only Harry had no intention of playing along.

While Wordsworth and the other Unspeakables might have been very keen on the idea of killing Tom Riddle, Harry wasn't interested. In fact, he'd far prefer if he never saw Riddle at all and planned on avoiding him at all costs.

Besides, it wasn't like he would be here forever. At least, he hoped he wouldn't. As far as he knew, this was the first time Unspeakables had tested this particular piece of technology, so unless something went seriously wrong, he expected they wouldn't want to leave him here, if for no other reason than to collect data when he returned.

If things went the way Harry thought they might, his time in the past would probably run out near the end of the summer. Giving him just over two months of lounging around and reading before he'd be sent back home, no harm done.

He could treat it like a vacation, and then once he was back where he belonged, he'd give Wordsworth a piece of his mind and possibly blow up the round room. One foray into messing with time was more than enough.

Harry tipped his head back, letting his hair fall out of his face, and closed his eyes. This morning he'd been in his kitchen eating toast, and now he was decades in the past. He sighed, a great exhale all at once.

It would be nice if, for once, this kind of thing happened to someone who wasn't him. Something in his pocket clunked against the bench when he shifted his weight. There was a weight in Harry's left pocket, and he was sure that it hadn't been there this morning.

How kind of the Unspeakables to give him something after they'd sent him here.

Whatever it was, he didn't want it and was tempted to walk to the river to chuck it in. But he didn't because whatever they put in his pocket was his only link back home, and as much as he resented it, it might give him some kind of explanation as to what the fuck was going on.

He pulled it out of his pocket. It was a watch, and that was all.

"Lovely," grumbled Harry, "thanks for that, *really* useful, a watch."

Still, he clipped it around his wrist, as it was, after all, his only connection to home, and maybe it would give him some insight into when he'd be able to leave.

Harry would have liked to have stayed right where he was and spend the afternoon in the shade watching people walk by, but he had things to do. He had accommodations to find, clothes to buy, and money to exchange. All of it sounded exhausting, and he wished now more than ever that he hadn't gotten out of bed that morning.

But wishing wasn't going to get anything done, so he got up and set off across London to find the little money exchange hidden behind a large, mostly dead bush next to the Ministry. When Ron first showed it to him sometime last year, he'd said it had been there for over three hundred years.

At times like this, Harry was incredibly grateful that nothing really changed in the Wizarding World. When he rounded the corner and spotted the bush, it looked just as dead as it had the day before when he'd changed a handful of knuts for pounds so he could buy a coffee at the Starbucks on the corner.

Once Harry had a pile of muggle bills folded in his pockets, all it took was a bit of luck and a probably illegal compulsion charm to find a place to stay, and by five, he had the key to a small apartment over a bookshop.

A grey haired woman in a light blue house dress led him up a narrow flight of stairs at the back.

"It's small," she said, "but it's clean, and you'll have it all to yourself."

She opened the heavy door and gestured for him to go inside. It was small, a single room with a bathroom in the corner, but Harry didn't care. He was happy to have found somewhere quiet and out of the way. Somewhere he could keep away from people as much as possible.

The less he changed here, the better. Even the idea of renting a room made him nervous. He was displacing someone, and who knew where they might end up. Even a small detail could snowball into something huge and alter the course of history.

Harry lay back on the narrow bed, looking up at the plain white ceiling, and tried not to think about it. He could do this. All he had to do was avoid one person in a huge city for two months.

It couldn't be that hard; after all, for once, no one was trying to kill him.

Only things did not go as planned. After a simple breakfast of beans on toast at a cafe on the corner, Harry took a book he'd bought at the shop below his little apartment and returned to the bench from yesterday, only to find that it was already occupied.

Tom was sitting on Harry's bench.

"Bugger," Harry muttered, turning quickly and walking in the opposite direction. Once he was back in the safety of his overly warm apartment, he flopped back on the bed, feet hanging off the end.

Harry had seen Tom, and that meant he was real, and this wasn't just some fun little vacation. Before this, everything had felt a bit like make believe, but it wasn't, and there would be consequences if Harry wasn't careful, even if he had no idea what they might be.

He'd just have to be more careful tomorrow. Avoiding Tom in a city this large couldn't be that hard, right?

But it didn't matter how careful Harry was; Tom was everywhere.

Sometimes it felt like all at once.

On the fourth day since he'd arrived, Harry sat down to eat lunch at a cafe over an hour's walk from where he was staying. It was a blatant attempt at avoiding Tom after almost running into him twice the day before.

Harry had taken the first bite of his sandwich when Tom walked into the cafe. Sliding easily through the crowd, he made his way to the far end of the counter and took a seat. The pretty waitress with cherry red lips smiled when she saw him. Although thoroughly annoyed, Harry would not give up a perfectly good sandwich to avoid Tom.

But now that he knew Tom was there, he couldn't ignore him. Harry's eyes were glued to his back for the rest of his meal, and in the end, he'd hardly tasted his food. Before leaving, he went to the counter to buy two thick slices of banana bread for his breakfast tomorrow.

After he'd paid, when he turned to leave, Tom met his eyes, just for a second. It was strange seeing him like this. Like he was real. An actual person, not a boogeyman in the dark or a haunted boy in a memory.

Harry walked away before he could give it any more thought. He was not here to watch Tom Riddle or talk to Tom Riddle. He was here to avoid Tom Riddle, and so far, he was doing a piss poor job of it.

But it didn't seem to matter what he did or where he went; inevitably, Tom would show up. Today Harry had gone to the library. He sat at one of the long tables reading the newspaper, trying to get some kind of understanding of current events in the Muggle world, so he could make conversation without sounding like a total idiot.

While Harry knew the muggle war had ended, he didn't know much else. After all, he'd only had muggle schooling until he was ten, and he hadn't been any better of a student at ten than he was at eleven.

But reading the paper wasn't like school. It was far more interesting. It was almost reminiscent of when Harry had first learned about magic. Here was this whole world he knew nothing about, lying at his feet to explore.

He shook the paper, flipping to the second page. A family disappeared, their house had burned, and strange symbols were scorched into the grass. Harry's stomach clenched. He'd forgotten that the magical world had faced its own challenges at this time. Now more than ever, he was grateful he could get by without getting *involved*.

That would bring about all kinds of complications he didn't want, like the possibility of meeting his grandparents. Even the thought of that possibility sent shivers down his spine because what if he did *something* and then his father was *never* born.

Then what would happen to him? Would he fade away? Turn to dust? Would everything he'd done to rid the world of Voldemort be undone?

Harry had no idea and didn't intend to risk it to find out. He would stick with the muggle world where no one knew him, and there were fewer risks of him accidentally ruining his own future.

Harry leaned back in the hard wooden chair, shuffling to try and get more comfortable, and then he saw him over the top of the paper. Tom was here. He'd come in the tall double doors and had stopped at the reception desk, speaking softly to the thin woman with narrow wire glasses on the end of her nose.

He must have noticed Harry watching him. He turned, tilting his head, and their eyes met for a moment before Harry quickly ducked behind the paper. He desperately hoped that Tom hadn't recognized him, but why would he?

Harry wasn't anyone to Tom. He was just some guy in the background, and if he had his way, they would never see each other again. But since they kept ending up in the same places, he really needed to get better at ignoring Tom, or else he might catch Tom's attention, and that was something he desperately didn't want.

Harry sighed, sitting up a little straighter so he wasn't cowering behind the paper. He laid it flat on the table, hoping it would make him less conspicuous, only to find that Tom had sat across from him.

What Harry wanted to do was to get up and walk right out the front of the building to never come back again. But he didn't do that because no matter what he did, this kept happening, and he would have to get used to it.

He really did try to keep his eyes on his paper. It wasn't easy with Tom right there. He was so close. Seeing him like this was shocking, so different from Dumbledore's Pensieve with its carefully curated memories. There was something about him, something much more human than Harry had ever expected.

Tom sat back from the table, his legs crossed at the ankles, holding the book at an angle that made Harry wonder if he needed glasses but was too proud to say anything. Sitting in the dim light of the library, he was just as beautiful as he had been in the memories.

Tom looked up, catching Harry's eye. He smiled, raising his dark eyebrows and holding Harry's gaze until he folded, looking away. A burning blush crawled up his neck, and he forced himself to keep his eyes on his paper.

When he dared to look again, Tom was gone.

The next day Harry went back to the library. He shouldn't have, not now that he knew Tom frequented the place. He'd tried to make a list of places he'd seen Tom to avoid them, it only took a few days before it was so long that it was useless, and Harry gave up. He returned to the library because its thick stone walls kept the inside cool, and he liked the dim lights and heavy silence in the halls. It reminded him a little of Hogwarts when he used to wander the corridors at night. It was a familiar, comfortable feeling; maybe that was why Tom came here too.

When Harry arrived, Tom was sitting in one of the arm chairs under the tall windows. It was easier ignoring him today; maybe Harry had just gotten used to him being around, and it wasn't like Tom was doing anything interesting. He was just reading.

Harry yawned, shuffling through the piles of papers for one he hadn't read the day before, and sat at the long table. His resolve to ignore Tom lasted until he realized halfway through the morning that today, instead of him watching Tom, Tom was watching him.

The little hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and even though he was sure it would only make things worse, he got up and left. He did not want to deal with this today, or any other day, for that matter. He needed to double down on his Tom avoidance if this continued.

It did continue, and no matter where he went, there Tom would be. If Harry had believed in fate, he might have thought it was a great cosmic joke, trying to shove them together, but he didn't.

Still, it felt too unnatural to just be a coincidence.

Tom seemed to agree because, after almost two weeks of watching each other, he sat across from Harry at the long table in the library.

He smiled, the corners of his mouth twitching, but his eyes were cold, "Are you going to tell me why you're following me, or am I going to have to make you?"

He met Harry's gaze with his big burgundy eyes. Harry purposefully didn't look away,

"I'm not," he said, "are you following me?"

"Why would I?"

"The same reason I would be following you," said Harry, shrugging.

Tom frowned but didn't leave.

"Did you think I was?"

"No," said Harry, "but it doesn't hurt to ask."

"I could be lying."

"You could be, but I don't think you are."

"You'd never know if I was," said Tom, his smile thin, but he'd lost some of the ice in his gaze. He didn't stay. Getting up smoothly, he disappeared among the stacks.

Harry didn't see him again for the rest of the week, the longest he'd gone since he'd arrived. While it should have been a relief, it became unnerving because as long as Harry could see Tom, he knew what Tom was doing. If he was missing, he could be doing anything, and even though Harry had already come to terms with the fact, he couldn't change the past without making a mess for himself and everyone else; it was hard letting Tom run around and potentially wreak havoc without interfering.

So when Tom appeared out of the blue outside Harry's favorite cafe that Saturday, it was something of a relief. One that almost immediately turned into panic when he sat down opposite Harry. Tom looked at him, eyebrows raised as if to challenge him to object. Harry didn't, now too curious to complain.

Tom pulled a thick book out of his bag, opened it to somewhere in the middle, and started to read. Harry returned to his breakfast. There was a glamor on the book hiding its cover, and Harry nearly asked about it but decided that some things were better left unsaid, and if he had any hope left in getting Tom to leave him alone, telling him that Harry was magical was not the way to go about it.

They spent the rest of the morning sitting in the shade at the cafe together, and when the waitress asked if Harry wanted anything else, he ordered Tom eggs. With the way their lives mirrored each other, Harry had no doubt Tom spent most of the summer hungry, as he had, and if he was in the position to do something about it, he would. He couldn't help it.

While Tom didn't acknowledge the gesture, he did eat the eggs, and when Harry paid their bill a little later, he got up and left without saying a word.

That night Harry lay on top of the duvet with the windows open to try and air out the stale summer air. He didn't know what this thing with Tom was, and he'd gone and made it worse.

Harry should have never spoken to Tom. But he had, and now that he'd opened this door, he desperately wanted to know what Tom was thinking. Was this his idea of friendship?

Did Tom *have* friends?

Dumbledore had been clear that he didn't. But the image of the boy in the pensieve was already so vastly different from the one that had sat across from him at the library that Harry had wondered how much of the old man's biases had clouded his vision when it came to Tom. Memories could be altered after all, even if it had been unconscious on the part of the alterer.

Still, something drew Tom to him; some kind of curiosity had been sparked from somewhere, and in the back of Harry's mind was a little voice that whispered that he'd shared a soul with Tom once. Once upon a time, there had been a small piece of Tom in Harry, but it had died, so that wasn't true anymore.

Or was it? How much did Harry trust an apparition of a dead man who had never told him the entire truth?

Did he really trust that man's word? He had. All this time he had, but now this thing with Tom. It planted a seed of doubt, and he wasn't so sure.

But there was no future here, and he had to remember that.

Harry needed to pack away all his questions about Tom.

Because he would leave, and Tom would stay here, and they would never see each other again, and now was the best time for Harry to stop interacting with him.

So when Harry saw Tom the next morning, instead of continuing to play the weird game they'd been playing, he turned and walked the other way. But that only worked for so long before Tom caught on. He was, after all, very clever, and he tracked Harry down under a tree in the park.

"You're avoiding me," he said, sitting next to Harry, "why is that?"

Harry wasn't going to tell the truth, but if he lied, Tom would know. He seemed to always know when people were lying.

"There's something about you," said Harry, picking at the dry grass, refusing to meet his eyes, "there's something that isn't quite right, isn't there?"

"Ah," said Tom, standing, "and here I thought you were different. My mistake."

He left Harry sitting under the tree in the park, picking at the dry grass, feeling like he'd just said something terrible and it was too late to take it back.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, and as always any and all encouragement is very much appreciated!

An Even Worse Idea

Chapter Notes

Once again thanks so much for the support on the last chapter! Y'all blow me away. I'm really enjoying reading your comments- they make my day & I can't wait to hear what you think of the new chapter! Chapter four will be up soon, & I hope to see ya then :)

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

Chapter Three: An Even Worse Idea

Harry had hoped he wouldn't see Tom again for the rest of the summer and that whatever had been building between them had been broken. His optimism only lasted until the end of the week.

He had taken a table outside his favorite little cafe and was waiting for a breakfast of eggs and coffee when Tom walked passed. He ignored Harry, and that suited Harry just fine.

The last thing he needed to do at all was to somehow get involved with Tom Riddle. Even if in person, Harry found something about him deeply intriguing.

But he supposed that was part of Voldemort's illusion, wasn't it?

He was this great immortal being that felt no pain or fear and was far above death. How did one go from a too thin boy like Tom, with his huge warm haunted eyes, to something like that?

Dumbledore always said Tom had been born that way, but Harry had never really believed it. People weren't born bad. They became bad. Things changed them until it was all they knew and all they could remember. As far as he could tell, in Tom's seventeenth summer, he was still just a damaged person, leagues away from the monster he would become.

But it didn't matter how curious Harry was. He wasn't supposed to be here, and when he went home, Tom was already dead.

Once he was gone, time here would keep moving, and everything would happen exactly as it already had.

Or that's what would happen as long as he stopped poking around in places he didn't belong. He'd already done enough damage to the timeline by just being here; he didn't need to make it worse by poking around in Tom's life. There was nothing good to be found there. He was sure of it.

Tom found him again the next morning. It was a grey, muggy day and promised rain in the afternoon, and Harry was the only person brave enough to sit outside. He'd already ordered when Tom sat beside him and stole half his toast.

"Oy-" said Harry, "get your own."

"Why would I when I can eat yours instead?" said Tom, smiling blandly, adding, "why do you look at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like I'm some kind of puzzle, but you can't work out what kind."

"It's your eyes," said Harry.

"Is that *really* the best you can come up with?"

"You're the one who asked," said Harry, stabbing his potatoes sullenly; his morning was not going at all the way he'd wanted.

"Fair enough," said Tom. He finished the half slice of toast and stood, "thanks for breakfast," he said, vanishing into the crowded sidewalk, leaving Harry sitting at the cafe table, feeling perplexed. Then it started to rain.

"Bugger," said Harry, as large drops fell into his half finished coffee.

He didn't want to return to his little apartment, not when the air was so hot and heavy that walking through it felt more like swimming. With heat like this, his little room would be miserable. Hot and sticky, full of still, oppressive air. Harry had had enough of that when he'd been at the Dursleys, thank you very much. Now that he was an adult, he had the option to avoid it, so that's what he would do.

He went back to the Library. The wallet he'd brought with him had slowly started to empty. While Harry was sure he'd have enough muggle money to last him until the end of the summer, if he could spend the day somewhere for free, he would.

He walked in a hurry and made it inside the towering stone building as the gentle drizzle turned into a downpour. He shook the rain out of his hair in the entryway and tried to move as quietly as possible, his shoes squeaking on the polished wooden floors with every step. He took refuge in the big room with the long table, taking one of the empty armchairs along the wall where he'd seen Tom the last time he'd been here.

Harry sank into the plush chair, unfolding yesterday's paper on his lap. He opened it without really looking at it. He slumped into the chair, holding the paper up to cover his face. Just in case Tom decided to make a second appearance today.

Harry was still perplexed by the first one- what the *hell* was that all about?

He hadn't the foggiest because, at the end of the day, when he set aside what Dumbledore had told him, Harry didn't know anything about Tom.

Did *anyone* know anything about Tom? Surely someone must.

He wasn't nearly as cold as Harry had pictured him being. Tom was cautious, yes, closed off even. Still, he looked at things with far more curiosity than Dumbledore had ever given him credit for, and it made Harry wonder what exactly Tom Riddle wanted out of life at seventeen.

He still hadn't killed anyone yet- and the first time had been an accident anyway- *supposedly* according to a ghost in a diary, but Harry didn't think diary Tom was the most reliable narrator.

Still , Tom wasn't a murderer yet, so what did he want?

To annoy the absolute daylights out of Harry, apparently.

He really ought to give up his pretense of avoiding Tom, it wasn't working, and now that Tom had taken some sort of interest in Harry, the chances of successfully avoiding him had got into the negatives.

This left Harry with the dilemma of deciding which of his limited options would cause the least damage to the future. Either he could keep trying to avoid Tom, which inadvertently might make him more interested in Harry, or Harry could just give up and hope that Tom would get bored with him once he realized that Harry wasn't very interesting.

Harry knew what his friends would have wanted him to do. But they weren't here, and since what he'd been doing obviously wasn't working, he might as well try something else.

When the Library closed that evening, Harry didn't go straight back to his apartment. It wasn't dark yet, and the rain had cooled the air enough that it was pleasant walking, so he went through the park. Enjoying the cool evening air.

The shop below Harry's apartment had closed, so it was dark when he went around the back of the building. Harry let himself in the back door, humming, and started up the narrow creaky stairs, two at a time.

Someone was waiting for him in the shadows of the first landing, just out of sight. Harry should have noticed. After a war, those were the kinds of things Harry couldn't allow himself to miss, but he'd let his guard down. After all, he was safe here. No one knew who he was or had any reason to be concerned with him.

Except *maybe* Tom.

And when Harry came face to face with him in the shadows of the narrow hallway leading to his apartment, he startled. He nearly stepped backward off the edge of the top step, but Tom caught his arm, steadying him.

"Tom?"

"You know my name," said Tom, grinning like a shark in the dark.

That was the first mistake Harry made that night.

The second was that when Tom yanked him forward, pulling him sharply into the deep shadows of the hallway, his hand wrapped tightly around Harry's shoulder, he didn't pull away.

And then Tom kissed him.

It was an awkward kiss, the angle was wrong, and they bumped noses. Harry let out a small noise somewhere between surprise and panic while Tom gripped tightly to Harry's shoulder, keeping him where he was.

While Harry had wondered what drew Tom to him, he'd never in a million years guessed it was this. Tom's grip on his shoulder softened, and he stepped back, looking at Harry through long lashes.

"You should invite me in. You don't want people to see us like this," he said.

The worst mistake Harry made that night was that he did. He held the door open, letting Tom go first, and when Harry closed it behind them, and muttered, "*muffliato*," without thinking because the last thing he wanted, besides someone seeing them, was an eavesdropper outside his door.

Tom's eyes lit up, and any hope that he would get bored of Harry and leave him alone disappeared.

"You're like me," said Tom, breathless, and through Tom's veneer of unspeakable confidence, there was something vulnerable lurking. Harry could see it in the way Tom stood a little too tall, his chin tipped up because Harry had done the same thing his entire life when he wanted to look more important than he felt, which was always.

Maybe that was why instead of sending Tom away or doing anything sensible, Harry reached to brush a loose strand of hair out of his face.

It could have been Harry's burning curiosity that allowed Tom to walk him back toward the bed. To touch his face, tangling his long fingers into Harry's wild hair while Tom kissed him like he was drowning. It could have been, but Harry knew it was a terrible excuse.

Later, when it was so late that it was early, Tom lay next to him, his head tucked up Harry's chin. He said, "You're going to let me stay tonight, aren't you."

It was more of a statement than a question, but either way, it was true.

Harry let Tom stay, even if he couldn't necessarily verbalize why.

He didn't like the idea of Tom wandering off in the dark. Even though he was sure to get home alright.

But Harry wanted Tom here, in front of him, where Harry could see him and try to puzzle out who exactly Tom Riddle was and how he got that way.

They stayed that way until they both fell asleep that night with the windows cracked to tempt a non-existent breeze with Tom tucked into his side.

It had been a hot week, in a hot summer, and in the morning, Tom sat at the end of the bed, his white shirt unbuttoned. In the early morning light, the scars dappling his right side looked like shiny little fish scales.

He caught Harry looking.

"They pushed me out a window," he said, "but I was alright in the end."

That was the thing about Tom; Harry only learned about him in bits and pieces and by offhand comments, all of which made him more real. More human.

"How old were you?"

"I don't remember," he said, "I don't remember much from that summer. Mrs. Cole likes to tell me I should have died, but the devil didn't want me."

Harry had so many questions that he didn't know where to start. Who pushed Tom? How far did he fall? Didn't anyone care that a small child fell out a window?

"There were a lot of sick children that summer," said Tom, tilting his head, "a fever went around, and by the end, I was the only one left in the infirmary."

"You all got better together," said Harry, "it's nice that you had company."

"No, they died," said Tom, "But *I* didn't, even if everyone seemed to think I should have. They always said I was a strange child, but it was after that when they decided I was the devil's child."

Those words struck something in Harry's chest, and long after Tom had left, they hadn't left his head.

What had little Tom done to deserve to be pushed out a window? Anything? Could a child that young do something to deserve such a fate?

Harry didn't think so.

How many children had Tom watched die by the time he was eleven?

Harry didn't know much about muggle history, but last year there had been a report about an orphanage in the city and the bodies they found under it. Hermione had told him about it over breakfast. Her eyes had welled up with tears, and her voice wobbled as she told him about what she had read.

"I shouldn't have looked," she'd said, "it's just the article didn't give much backstory, you know, and I wanted to really understand how this happened, but now I wish I hadn't- to think we used to treat people like that. *Children*, can you even imagine?"

Harry could imagine quite clearly, but he wasn't going to say that. Instead, he took her hand and said, "and you're going to make sure it never happens again, aren't you?"

She nodded. "or I am going to die trying."

That article could have been about any orphanage in London. Harry couldn't remember the name, and even though he was sure it hadn't been where Tom had grown up, he felt a stab of something sharp and protective.

Harry had already made enough stupid mistakes, letting Tom into his life. He didn't need to get attached to him; that wouldn't help anyone. Least of all, Tom.

But things in practice weren't as easy as they were on paper, and it was far too easy to get attached to Tom even when Harry knew he shouldn't.

He was charming when he wanted to be; when he wasn't, he was sharp, clever, and always ready to point out something Harry would have never noticed. Tom was a watcher, taking in all the tiniest details around him, cataloging them for later.

Harry didn't know how he did it, keeping all of that straight in his head, but he did, and he did so flawlessly. But that wasn't what Harry liked most about him.

It wasn't how charming and clever he was or his strikingly beautiful face or how, after he'd started to trust Harry, he'd lean in when he spoke, dropping his voice low so that every word felt like a secret.

It was the way when they'd sit under the big tree in the park eating sandwiches when the weather allowed; he'd read out loud. His smooth voice rolled easily over the words until he'd reach a point that was incorrect or he disagreed with and would veer into an impassioned speech on why the author was, in fact, an idiot.

It always made Harry laugh and wish very much that the moment would never end.

But that's not how time worked, and as much as Harry wanted to capture all these moments, like lightning bugs in the bottle, they always slipped away.

One morning, sometime in August, when Harry returned from the shower, he found Tom sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to the door. He turned to look at Harry, and it was as though time froze for a single moment.

Because he'd seen this before, even if it had been for only half a second. Back when he'd been in the department of mysteries when bits of all his futures had flashed before his eyes.

That face he'd desperately hoped to find was in front of him.

It had been Tom the whole time.

"Are you alright?" Tom asked, tilting his head. "You look haunted. Headache again?"

Harry nodded, rubbing his forehead.

"Something like that," he muttered, trying to keep his voice steady.

He hardly remembered what happened that day, drifting through it in a thick fog. Late that night, he lay awake long after Tom had fallen asleep, his cheek pressed into Harry's shoulder. The images from the Infinity Measure played back in his head over and over. Harry was alone in all of them. All of them but one.

Destiny was a fickle thing, and Harry hated it.

Maybe he was meant to come here. Maybe he wasn't. Maybe it was all made up and didn't mean a damn thing.

Shouldn't someone else have some destiny? It shouldn't all go to Harry; that wasn't fair to anyone.

Whether this was destiny or a cosmic coincidence didn't change anything, and when Harry thought about the future, it scared him. He'd changed so much coming here that he wasn't sure he even had a home to go back to.

Or that going back was even going home.

Because if he went back now, would he recognize his home and friends? Would they even still be there at all?

There was no way of knowing.

All Harry knew was that he was here now and that he was here with Tom, and part of him was tempted to see just how much he could change.

There were still so many steps until Tom reached the place where he became Voldemort. If Harry stayed, he'd never reach that place at all.

Maybe this was Harry's future.

Harry groaned, rubbing his tired eyes. The very thought of time travel made his head hurt. That was something he'd have to worry about in the morning. There was no point in mulling it over further now, he had no answers, and all he'd accomplished was giving himself a headache.

In the morning, Harry quickly forgot all about his existential time travel woes because in the center of the silver watch he'd been diligently wearing, a set of numbers in bright red had appeared.

He paused after putting on the watch, and the numbers flashed. Once, twice, three times, and then they started counting down.

As the tiny red numbers flashed by, all the tentative plans and ideas, and thoughts Harry had the night before were gone.

Harry was leaving, and now he knew exactly when.

His stomach lurched as reality shifted around him. Harry was going to leave, and Tom would stay here, and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

It was like everything was moving around him, and he was a drift in the sea, looking for something, anything to cling to. But there was nothing.

He had no one to blame but himself. He'd done this, and worse, he'd done this to Tom when he knew all the while that he'd leave, and yet he'd done it anyway.

He had made a mistake, hadn't he? A terrible, terrible mistake.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! As always any and all encouragement is very much appreciated.

The Bitter End

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your support on the fic so far, I'm so glad y'all are enjoying it! Your comments really make my day<3 & I can't wait to hear what you think of the new chapter. Ngl, the second half of the fic is my favorite part so I'm pretty pumped to share the rest.

The next chapter will be up soon & I hope to see ya then!

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

Chapter Four: The Bitter End

It was almost too easy to become obsessed with the little red numbers on the face of Harry's watch. They never stopped moving, reminding him that every second that passed was one less he had here with Tom.

Harry tried to push it away, back into a dark corner of his mind for later, when the numbers on the watch were lower and his departure felt more imminent. But they were hard to ignore, constantly spinning as they were, and Harry spent whole nights lying on his back in the dark watching them counting down, and down and down.

Tom noticed, which wasn't surprising. Tom noticed everything.

"What is it about your watch you find so fascinating?" he asked over breakfast.

"There's something wrong with the time," said Harry; it wasn't entirely a lie. There was something wrong with the time, but only Harry could see the problem.

Tom accepted his answer with raised eyebrows, but Harry knew he'd ask again because that was a terribly unsatisfying response. Even if it was the best that Harry had at the moment.

As he saw it, he had three choices of what he could tell Tom, and none of them were good.

Harry could do the smart thing and tell a half truth, telling Tom that at the end of the summer, he had to travel somewhere and would be away for a long time. Then he'd leave and spend his last few days alone in a hotel.

He imagined he would go to Paris; he might as well make it as romantic and cliché as he could. His heartbreak was inevitable anyways; he might as well make it dramatic, poetic even.

But Harry didn't want to leave. Not until he had to, and although he knew this was by far the best, most kind option, he still resisted taking it.

That left the other two options. The one where Harry told Tom nothing and vanished into thin air or the one where he told Tom everything, giving up his pretense of not changing anything and instead trying to change everything.

Harry wasn't sure which one was more cruel.

He hated all of his options, so he kept putting off the decision, telling himself that he still had time and would make the right choice when he needed to.

But not just yet.

Time kept ticking, and the day Harry would leave kept creeping steadily closer.

Yet he still hadn't left.

Every morning he'd tell himself that he'd just stay one more day and that he'd tell Tom tomorrow. But there were very few tomorrows left, and Harry was nearly out of time.

He had to tell Tom. He didn't have a choice anymore. Time made the choice for him.

It didn't make telling him any easier. But, now, the only other option was to leave, having told him nothing, and Harry didn't think he'd be able to live with himself if he did that.

"What's wrong? Why are you being like this?" asked Tom. He was wearing Harry's button up and little else and lay in the middle of the big bed on his back. His dark curls spread against the duvet.

"Nothing," said Harry, "just thinking."

"You're lying," said Tom, voice flat, as it always was when he was annoyed.

"Why do you do that?" he asked, flipping around onto his stomach, his eyes burning holes in Harry's back, "you know I always know, but you do it anyways. Why?"

"Because I want it to be the truth," said Harry.

"I *know* that," said Tom, "but *why*? What's the point of hiding the truth? It doesn't make it any less untrue."

"There's something that's going to happen at the end of the summer," said Harry, "before you go back to school, and it's unavoidable-"

Tom sat up, his eyes burning a bright crimson. "This is the part where you tell me you're leaving, isn't it."

It was. That was exactly what Harry was about to do, and it didn't matter how much he didn't want to. It didn't matter how much hurt he saw in those eyes and how much he wanted to lie

because Tom was right. It didn't matter how pretty the lie was; it wouldn't change the truth.

"Yes," said Harry, sitting on the end of the bed, "but also no-"

Tom moved away from him.

"It can't be both," he said, "you're either leaving, or you're not."

All Harry had to do was tell Tom that he was leaving. That's all he had to do. It would hurt, and Tom would never forgive him. But it wouldn't matter because Harry would walk out the door and never see Tom again. Because in six hours and twenty five minutes, he was going home, and at home, he'd killed Tom years ago.

But he didn't.

Harry told him the truth instead. All of it came pouring out in a jumbled mess of contradictions, poor explanations, and confusing misremembered timelines. But he couldn't stop, even watching the horror dawning on Tom's face, his eyes went dark and sad, and he pulled away. Backing further and further away until he was pressed against the headboard and had nowhere else to go.

Harry should stop. He should stop and do something that wasn't this. Anything that wasn't this, but he couldn't, and words kept coming until he'd used them all up, his voice gone hoarse.

And then there was silence.

The way Tom looked at him hurt. It hurt even more when he spoke.

"If you were supposed to kill me," he said, "you've done a piss poor job of it, haven't you."

"Yeah," said Harry, "I certainly have."

"You weren't supposed to tell me any of that."

"No, definitely not."

"That's not the outcome I wanted, that future- that wasn't how it was supposed to go," said Tom, tilting his head, "you know that, right?"

"I wouldn't still be here if I didn't," said Harry.

"What the *fuck* do I do now?" asked Tom. He'd started laughing, his fingers twisted into the duvet, "Harry, what the fuck do I do?"

"Whatever you want," said Harry. He leaned forward, desperately wanting to pull Tom to him, knowing it was a terrible idea. "You can do whatever you want, Tom; you're better than that, smarter than that. You can be anything, do anything, go anywhere-"

"I can't," he said, his voice breaking, "I can't, because if I do, then you'll never come here, and I'll never meet you, and this will never happen."

There was a truth in those words that Harry didn't want to face. If he never came here, he'd never meet Tom, and then they both would be alone.

There was no doubt in Harry's mind that the face seen in the smoke at the Ministry was Tom. At first, he'd tried to rationalize that it wasn't, that it couldn't be, but he could see it now every time he looked at him.

In the line of his jaw, the curve of his neck, the way his eyes danced when he laughed. And without this, without being sent here, Harry would never have known him or loved him. But he had, and even when he went home to spend the rest of his time alone, it would be alright because he'd had this. Even if it was just for a moment, it was enough. He'd have a good life without Tom; Harry knew he would because he'd seen it.

He'd have his friends and find ways to keep himself occupied. But after this, what did Tom have? A lifetime fighting against the tide of something he'd been told had been written in stone by fate.

And a fear that if he strayed too far off the path and changed too much, maybe Harry would never be, and then what? Would time fold in on itself? Loop back to the moment they met—but which moment, which time?

There was no way of knowing and far too much to lose.

But if Tom didn't change, he was on a slow path matching toward unavoidable death. Every step was towards the misery and madness that had tied them together, Harry's entire life. Harry hated it. Everything about it.

Every limited choice they had was worse than the last, but there was no going back now. This genie wasn't going back in the bottle. Tom knew, and Harry knew him well enough that it didn't matter how much the truth hurt; Tom would always prefer it to a lie, even when it was as painful as this.

"What do you want to do?" Harry asked.

Tom smiled tight and bitter, "we do it, as it's been written *in the stars*," he said, gesturing towards the heavens, "god forbid we step off the path of expectation."

He looked down at his hands, balled into the blankets, "you will go home," he said, "and I will stay here, and I will do everything as you've said I will. And then, years from now, when there's nothing of me left, and you aren't even you yet, you're going to kill me, and that will be the end."

Harry wanted to argue, to rage against the idea that nothing could be done. But with so little time left, what else were they to do?

Harry couldn't stay, and Tom couldn't come with him. They had been boxed into a corner by the Department of Mysteries, and Harry felt a rage building he hadn't felt since he'd been young.

It was the kind of rage that tore rooms apart and where he'd scream until his lungs ached. Rage that was born out of the choices forced upon him, choices he never would have made on his own.

There would be time for that rage later, but not now. Not when the time Harry had left here was so little. He would save it, tuck it away until later when he could unleash it all at once in a blinding fury.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed in the dark early morning. It had been a hot summer where the sun never let up and was so dry that the earth cracked in the bright sun. Today the rain came; a whole summer's worth lashed the windows.

"How long have you got," asked Tom from the far side, where he'd pressed himself against the wall.

"A little over two hours," said Harry.

Tom sighed, scrubbing at his face, "I know why you waited to tell me," he said, "and I don't know if I hate you for it or if I'm glad of it."

"Probably both," said Harry, smiling ruefully.

"Probably," said Tom, "I'm sure I'll hate you when you're gone."

"I hope you do."

"Do you really?"

"No," said Harry, "but it would make leaving easier."

Tom looked at him a long time before he shuffled across the bed, leaning his head on Harry's shoulder.

"I think, perhaps, being angry with you is not the best use of my time," he said.

Harry wanted to wrap his arms around him and hold on with all he had, but he didn't know if he dared. So instead, he let his cheek rest on the top of Tom's head while they watched the delicate little hands on the watch ticking minute by minute closer to when he would go home.

Tom took his hand, curling their fingers together. It was hard to breathe, knowing that this was the last time Harry would ever have this. That this was the last time he'd ever see Tom like this, curls loose and falling against his pale skin. He wanted to burn it into his mind so deeply that it would be all he'd see whenever he closed his eyes.

"What do you think will happen when you leave," asked Tom; he yawned, his long lashes fluttering against Harry's neck, "do you think you'll fade away or just vanish. Will you feel it, do you think? Do you remember when you arrived?"

"I don't really remember," said Harry, "there was a load of smoke; it smelled funny."

"Your descriptions are riveting; please *do* tell me more."

Harry smiled, "Sorry, I wasn't really paying attention. I'd gone to the Ministry to have an argument with an Unspeakable-"

"Never a good idea."

"I know that now," said Harry, "I didn't get the chance to say much, I walked in, and then I don't know- I was here."

"You were here- and that was it?"

Harry nodded; that had been it. One minute he'd been in the Ministry, and then he hadn't.

"I wonder," said Tom, "when you're gone, will I forget that you were real and not just something I made up."

There wasn't much time left now. Harry watched the clock tick tick tick closer. All he could think of was leaving Tom here alone and everything he would face now, knowing that every step was one closer to his death. Harry had an idea, it wasn't a good one, but it was something. Something he could give Tom so that at least he'd always know that Harry had been real. That this had been real.

He unclipped the fine chain around his neck. He'd miss it. It was the only thing he had from his mother, and he'd always kept it close, but now it would serve as a reminder that Harry had been here and he'd cared for Tom.

He strung the long chain around Tom's neck, letting the small round charm fall against his chest.

"So you'll know it was real," he said, leaning back against the headboard.

Tom rolled the charm in his fingers, "it will be a good reminder," he said softly, tucking it down the front of his shirt.

They waited together, sitting still in the early morning light, and then he was gone.

It was funny how anticlimactic his departure was for something that hurt so deeply. One moment he was in his little apartment in London, then he blinked.

It was only a second. Maybe even a part of a second, but there was a shift like the floor had tipped sideways, and Harry slid off the edge. When he opened his eyes, Tom was gone, and he was in the center of the round room of the Ministry.

Now was the time for the rage that Harry had bottled up for the past two months. It poured out of him, oozing from every pore, building into a miasma filling the room around him, waiting to be unleashed.

A door opened behind him. Footsteps echoed on the stone floor. "Oh, there you are-" said Unspeakable Wordsworth jovially from behind him, "we've been worried about you."

"Worried? About me?" Harry whirled, his voice rising until it boomed, filling the cavernous space around them. "Do you have any idea what the hell you've just done? Everything I've worked for, my whole life's sacrifice, could have been gone- gone for what? Your science experiment!"

The air crackled around his wand, clasped tight in his fist. Harry stopped, his chin raised, poised to attack. When he walked out of this room, he wanted these godforsaken people to fear his name for the rest of their miserable lives.

He wanted them to regret what they'd just taken from him. For them to feel the pain he felt in his bones. Let them think that his ire was born from the potential disaster they could have set on their future because there was no way he could ever tell anyone what he'd truly lost. Let them think it was misdirected rage; let them think him insane.

No one would ever know what he'd lost, and him standing in this room in the Ministry only moments after he'd left was proof enough that Tom had done just as he'd said he would. His lover was dead at his own hand, and now here he was, and no one would ever know.

This must be what it felt like to go mad.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! As always any and all encouragement is very much appreciated :)

Building Tomorrow

Chapter Notes

Y'all keep blowing me away with the support for this fic <3 I'm so glad you're enjoying it! I'm really excited to share this week's chapter, it might be my favorite- Chapter 6 is a close 2nd favorite. I hope you like the new chapter & I can't wait to hear what you think!

Chapter six will be up soon & I hope to see ya then.

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

Chapter Five: Building Tomorrow

Time did not stop for Harry's grief. It never had before, and he hadn't expected it to now.

It had been a mistake.

All of it had been a simple mistake.

Even the Unspeakables weren't reckless enough to send someone back in time on purpose, at least without doing tests first. That's what Unspeakable Wordsworth had said once he'd silenced Harry to keep him from shouting.

"You are scaring my interns," he said, his thick eyebrows furrowed into one long line, "and I'm afraid I can't have that. I understand you're angry, but I must tell you nothing done to you was done on purpose, and," he said, regaining some of his former cheer, "look at you! You're back where you belong, and everything is as it should be. It's a very good job you've done. Not many people would have made it back- you know time can be a funny thing."

The fact it had all been an accident made the hurt string all the worse. An accident changed everything. It wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last.

Finally, he left the Ministry and went home. He turned the lock in the door at Number Twelve, jiggling it twice before it gave, letting him swing the heavy door open and step into the foyer.

It didn't feel like home. Not anymore. Harry wasn't sure what home meant now. What was home, a place, a time, or a person? Did it matter?

Maybe it was something you made, and that with time, this would be his home again. Then again, maybe not. He'd have to wait to see. Time they say heals all wounds, but time Harry thought, was the cause of them as well.

Everything was muddled in his head, and Harry sat in his house in the dark, trying to make sense of what had happened, untangling each knotted memory until he could string them all up in a line and keep them close.

Three days after the incident, Harry met his friends for dinner. He couldn't tell them what happened even if he'd wanted to; the Unspeakables had taken care of that. The moment the words formed on his lips, they were gone from his mind. It brought back the rage from the night he tore the round room apart. The gouges in the stone from his wand would remain for centuries to come.

"Are you alright?" asked Hermione, her head tilted, long loose curls framed her narrow face, "there something about you, it's- I don't know-" she paused, sipping her beer, "something sad," she said finally, "did something happen? Were you seeing someone, and it went south?"

Harry laughed and hoped it wasn't bitter.

"No," he said, "had a nasty run-in with the Unspeakables. I'd tell you if I could."

She smiled wanly, "but you can't. I know how it is," she said.

"You shouldn't work for them, Hermione," said Harry, "you're so much better than their crackpot science. You're clever, and you're kind. Don't get swallowed by that machine. There's no ethics there; they don't care about people. Not the way you do."

"You've said," said Hermione; she sighed, "I've thought about it a lot and decided to turn down the position."

For the first time since he'd been home, Harry felt something other than numb, "did you really?" he asked, feeling lighter than he had for days.

She nodded tersely.

"Yeah," she said, "you don't say things like that lightly, Harry, I know you, and I know what kinds of things you believe in, and if whatever it is they're doing makes you this angry-" she shook her head, "then I want nothing to do with, and I hope for your sake it fails."

"I do, too," said Harry, "I do too."

"If it's that unethical, can you take it to the Minister?" she asked, "I know you can't say what it is, but can't you request an investigation? I'm sure if you're the one who brought it to Kingsley, he'd take it seriously."

That was an idea. Harry wasn't above considering it. The Unspeakables may not have planned to mess with time the way they had, but now that his trip had been a success, who was to say that they wouldn't try again?

He'd do everything in his power to make sure that they didn't, including swallowing his pride and talking to the Minister.

Ron swung himself into the booth, "Sorry," he said, slinging an arm around Hermione's shoulder, "busy day at the office, you know how it is."

Hermione pushed a pint at him, "oh, do I *ever* ," she said, "don't worry, we expected you to be late."

Harry laughed at Ron's indigent face as he spluttered about work, being on time, and the traffic, while Hermione smiled into her glass. Her big brown eyes danced in the low golden light of the pub.

This was what Harry needed to be doing. He needed to be laughing over a pint in a pub with his friends. Not locking himself up in his house with memories that felt like they had been only moments ago but were really decades away.

He had a life here to build. Now that he knew a little about what was coming- at least little glimpses of the possibilities, he needed to focus on making a life he thought was worth living, even if it would be mostly alone.

There was a moment over breakfast one morning in the cold basement kitchen of Number Twelve where he had to decide if he really believed what the infinity measure showed him or if he was setting himself up for a self fulfilling prophecy.

After all, he only saw a dozen or so moments of what the unspeakable told him were infinite possible futures. Who was to say that, he wouldn't find someone new in some of them.

Harry didn't care either way. Maybe one day he'd entertain the idea, but now, the idea of being with anyone but Tom felt impossible. Until then, he'd just have to do his best with what he had and try to build something just for himself.

That evening after dinner, he sat at the long rough kitchen table with a mug of tea and a book when the fire in the corner flashed a bright green. A ghostly pale Ron stepped out of the fire, wobbling on his feet.

"You alright?" asked Harry, "you look ill."

"I've just done something potentially very stupid," said Ron, dropping onto the bench across from Harry.

"What is it? Are you okay?"

"I dunno," said Ron, burying his head in his hands. He groaned, heaving an enormous sigh, and pulled a little black box out of his pocket, pushing toward Harry.

"Have a look," he said.

Harry opened it. In the middle sat a dainty gold ring, a string of diamonds in the center shaped like tiny glittering stars.

"She's going to hate it, isn't she?"

"What! No!" said Harry, "Ron, you prat- *Merlin*, you had me worried. This is lovely. She's going to love it."

"What if she says no?"

Harry started laughing. His head tilted back and chortled. The idea of Hermione saying no, had to be the most *absurd* thing he'd ever heard. The only person who didn't realize how mad she was for Ron was Ron.

"Yeah, yeah, alright, yuck it up," grumbled Ron, a blush creeping up his neck, the tips of his ears already a cheery red.

"Sorry," said Harry, trying to catch his breath, "it's just she's mad about you, mate. Honest. Always has been."

Ron swallowed, taking the box back and cradling it in his big hands.

"So you think it's alright then?"

"It's perfect."

"Right. Well, I just have to ask her, then, don't I?" said Ron, going slightly green.

"I believe in you!" said Harry cheerfully as Ron stood woodenly and shuffled back toward the fire. He vanished in whirling green flames, leaving Harry alone in his kitchen.

He shook his head, "*honestly*, what an idiot," he muttered affectionately.

In the morning, when he came down to make his coffee, a slip of parchment sat in the middle of the table, written in Hermione looping scrawl, demanding that he come over for dinner.

"*I'm engaged!*" it read, "*you have to come celebrate!*"

Harry showed up outside their flat at half-six with champagne and flowers. Hermione shrieked when she saw him, barreling into him and throwing her arms around his neck.

"Hullo, Hermione," said Harry, smiling into her hair, "congratulations."

She squeezed him so hard that he could hardly breathe, "I'm so bloody happy I could scream," she said, stepping back and patting him on the arm.

"Sorry," she said, "I'm just so excited!"

Harry led the way into the kitchen to fetch a vase for the flowers. He stood at the counter, turning on the tap.

"So," he said, "have you told anyone yet?"

Hermione sighed.

"Other than you? No," she bit her lip, "I wanted a minute to celebrate before the onslaught began."

Harry glanced at the clock over the sink. Ron wouldn't be home for at least an hour.

"Cup of tea?" he asked, moving easily around the kitchen.

"More like a glass of wine," said Hermione, her chin resting in her narrow hand, "I just want to be excited, you know," she said, "I've wanted this for so long, and it's perfect, it really is."

"But-" said Harry, sliding her a glass of red.

"But-" she said, taking a sip, "you saw what Mrs. Weasley was like about Bill and Fleur's wedding."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to," he said, leaning on the counter.

"I *know* that," said Hermione, "but there will be consequences if I do, and I just-" she sighed, "I suppose I have to decide if it will be worth it or not to just go along for the ride."

"What do you want?"

"Something small and quiet," she said, "maybe in the morning. I don't like the idea of all those people staring at me. I want it to be about us, not some kind of attraction- you know?"

"So do that," said Harry, "and then do the other thing if you have to, but don't give up the wedding you want to make everyone else happy."

"How are you always so smart when I've lost my head?" she asked, smiling over the rim of her glass.

"Maybe because you're so smart the rest of the time?"

She laughed, and the last of the worry vanished from her face, "I suppose we'll figure something out," she said, "we always do."

"Cheers to that," said Harry.

Ron arrived not long after, and the three of them stood together in the kitchen. Harry didn't think he'd ever seen Ron so happy, and with his arm around Hermione's narrow shoulder, the three of them toasted to a joyous future. Ron raised his glass, and it was for a moment like time had stopped; Harry had seen this before.

It had flashed before his eyes when he'd been at the Ministry, and now he was here, and it was real.

Would he have these moments for the rest of his life? Moments when the swirling images became real, and instead of watching them flash by like a film, he was suddenly standing in the middle, living the moment.

Harry found it a comfort. Something to look forward to. After all, his life had been good, at least in the flashes he saw. There were only good things to come. That's what he needed to remind himself. Good things were coming; he didn't need to dwell in the past. There was nothing but pain there. Pain and things he couldn't change.

Later that night, after they'd finished dinner, they moved outside onto the balcony. Sitting huddled together under the stars.

Harry yawned, pulling at his collar, and stretched.

"Harry?" asked Hermione.

"Hmm?"

"Where's your necklace?"

Harry's hand instinctively went to his throat, where the fine gold chain had hung for the past three years. But he didn't have it anymore. He left it around Tom's neck, but he couldn't say that.

"I've lost it," he said, smiling ruefully, "the chain must have broken, and I didn't notice."

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione, setting her small hand on his arm, "I'm so sorry. I know how much it meant to you."

He shrugged, "I'll live. It was only a necklace; there are more important things in life."

Ron returned from the kitchen with a big bowl of chips and sank between them, grinning.

"We're going to get married," he said.

Hermione giggled, "yes, we are," she said.

Late that night, when Harry lay in bed watching the lights from the cars on the corner paint bright yellow flashes of light across his ceiling, his hand lay on his chest, looking for a chain that wasn't there.

He'd been so busy trying to live in the moment and not dwell in the past he'd forgotten he'd given the necklace to Tom. It was an impulsive decision and definitely not his smartest. He wasn't supposed to change things, and now a piece of the future sat somewhere in the past.

Or it had. It wasn't the past anymore. Tom hadn't worn it as Voldemort; there was no way Harry wouldn't have noticed. Not when every detail about that monster of man took up his every waking second.

And that meant it had to be somewhere. After all, Tom had always been very particular about his things. He wouldn't have lost it, even if, as he chipped pieces of himself away, he no longer remembered its significance. No, it was his, and he would have protected it, done something with it, and Harry wanted to know what, and more than anything, he wanted it back.

The next time Harry saw Hermione was over coffee at a cafe near her office. It was sunny, and they sat outside under one of the big, brightly colored umbrellas. It was almost reminiscent of how Harry had spent his time with Tom, but the sound of the cars, and people on their mobiles, kept him grounded in the present.

"Are you sure you're alright?" asked Hermione. She ripped the top of her croissant open, pulling it apart into thin flaky layers.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I'm alright, promise."

She didn't look convinced, "I don't think I believe you," she said primly, "you've been down for weeks, Harry, and if you don't want to tell me why, that's alright, but if you need anything, please ask."

He laughed, swirling the end of his coffee in the tall mug, "I dunno," he said. "It's nothing concrete, you know; just feeling a bit adrift right now."

"You might not believe me," she said, "but I know the feeling."

"Yeah?"

She nodded, "I'm getting married," she said, "but I don't want to tell anyone because god forbid they want me to plan a wedding," she sighed, "and all I can think of is how it doesn't matter what I do, my dad isn't going to be there to walk me down the aisle."

Hermione had been looking for her parents since the war ended, but finding them had proven harder than she'd expected.

"I suppose," she said tearfully when nothing had turned up after months of searching, "I should be pleased I did a good job protecting them. I just never thought I was protecting them for me too."

Harry swallowed hard, "I'm sorry," he said, "is there anything I can do?"

"Yeah, distract me."

He chuckled. "This is going to sound lame."

"I bet it won't."

"I've been researching my mum's necklace. I found out it wasn't the only one made. There were two others."

That was a lie. According to the note Harry had found with it, his mother's necklace had been a custom gift from his father's parents. But Hermione didn't need to know that.

"Are you looking for one of the others?"

Harry nodded, "I want to, but I don't know where to start."

If Hermione wanted a distraction, he'd give her one, and he'd fulfill his selfish obsession with finding the necklace. If anyone could help him find it, it would be Hermione.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! As always any and all encouragement is very much appreciated :) See you next week for chapter 6.

Whispers in the Dark

Chapter Notes

Okay so I know I said that the last chapter was my favorite. But I lied. This one is actually my favorite & I really hope you enjoy it too! As always thank you so much for your support so far on the fic, I am enjoying your comments so much and can't wait to hear what you think of the new chapter. I can't believe there's only one chapter left, I feel like the last month has gone sooo fast. The last chapter will be up next Wednesday & I hope to see ya then.

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

Chapter Six: Whispers in the Dark

Harry sat at the counter in Ron and Hermione's apartment while Hermione shuffled around in her robe, making eggs.

"I'm really sorry I haven't been more helpful," she said, "I feel like I've let you down."

While Hermione had been diligent in helping Harry search for his mother's necklace, nothing had turned up in the six months they'd spent looking.

"It's a necklace," said Harry leaning on his elbows, "it's not like it's going to expire. I could find it fifty years from now, and I'd be happy. It might take a while; that's okay."

He took a handful of chips out of the large bowl on the counter, scooping up the salsa Hermione had made with the tomatoes and peppers from her little window garden.

"I know that," she said, sprinkling a generous handful of cheese over the eggs and folding them neatly into an omelet, "still, you've been such a help with listening to me moan about the wedding. I wanted to help you too."

Hermione cut the omelet in half, slid it onto two plates, and set one in front of Harry.

"I thought wedding planning was supposed to be fun," he said, cutting a piece off the edge.

"They keep telling me that it is," said Hermione, "but it's so hard, and there are so many details, and I just don't care about half of them- but Christ, it seems like everyone else does."

She sat beside him at the island, her long robe swishing around her legs.

"This is it," she said, shoving a handful of chips into her mouth, "I'm only doing this once. If this one doesn't stick, I'll just be unmarried."

Harry laughed. "Don't let Ron hear you say that. He's nervous enough you're going to suddenly change your mind as it is."

She rolled her eyes. "Honestly," she said, shaking her head, "the fact he can't see I'm mad for him can be endearing, but sometimes I have to wonder if he's just thick."

"He can't help it. He's blinded by your beauty."

"You're sure a flatter," she said, smoothing the front of her robe, "isn't it about time you started seeing someone? I hate thinking of you being alone."

"I'm alright," said Harry. He'd worried this would come up; it was inevitable, really.

Hermione looked at him for a long time, over the rim of her orange juice, before she nodded.

"Okay," she said, "you're alright."

A warm feeling bloomed in the center of Harry's chest. While she was, on occasion, just as pushy as she had been in school, Hermione was also observant enough to know when not to be. She wouldn't ask again, but if Harry ever wanted to bring it up, she would happily resume the conversation.

He leaned to bump her shoulder, "so, what riveting details are we planning today."

"Well," she said, "considering last week was so painfully boring, I thought we might do something at least a little bit more fun. We're looking at flower arrangements."

"For you?"

She sighed. "No for the tables, but it's better than looking at stationary, isn't it?"

Anything would be better than looking at stationery. That day had been truly a test of patience for both of them.

"They all look the same," Hermione moaned, shuffling through stacks and stacks of thick cream sheets of paper.

Ultimately, she'd gotten so annoyed that she'd closed her eyes and picked one. It was a simple design with hardly any embellishment around the edges.

Hermione held up the winning sheet, "well," she said, "this one will be fine, I suppose."

"Are you sure?" asked Harry, yawning.

She glared at him. "This is the one I picked, and this is the one I am using, and we are never going to look at stationary ever again. Are we clear?"

"Just making sure," he said, grinning sunnily at her.

Harry thought that was the last of the stationary talk, but Ron brought it up again two days later when Harry met him on his lunch break at a sandwich shop. They sat in a booth in the back, away from the other muggle customers.

Ron yawned, stretching his long arms over his head. "I owe you one, I think," he said, rubbing his chin, "for the other day."

"For what?" asked Harry, eyeing the huge sandwich in front of him, wondering how he would fit it in his mouth.

"For the thing with the stationary," said Ron, "and you know, for planning half my wedding, it should be me doing it, but Merlin, this new job, I haven't got a moment to breathe."

After the war had finished and things had started to calm down, Ron started at the Auror Academy. But after the first eight weeks, he got pulled for an assignment as a junior analyst. He'd been thrilled.

"It's all puzzles and logic and whatnot," he'd said, "and the money looks really good, too; there was no way I was going to turn it down."

Now, Ron wasn't just a junior analyst anymore. He'd been promoted so many times that he'd ended up with his own team and barely had a moment to sit down.

"You're not missing much," said Harry, "I think it would be a problem if this was something Hermione was excited about, you know? But she just wants to get it over with, so I wouldn't worry about it too much."

"Still," said Ron, poking his sandwich, "blimey, these are massive, aren't they? How are we supposed to eat them? I feel like it should be me, you know? Like, I'm not keen on wedding planning either, but I'm half of the wedding, so I should have to suffer too."

"Fair enough," said Harry, "we can save something really dull for the weekend for you if you'd like; maybe you can help pick out table runners or help sort out the seating chart—because we've tried twice, and it's a fucking nightmare."

Ron picked up half of his towering sandwich and managed to shove the corner in his mouth, "how hard can it be to pick a bloody table runner?"

Harry laughed, "that's what I said about the stationary."

As it turned out, picking out a table runner was harder than Ron expected, and then the following week, when he'd gone to lunch with Harry again, he said, "why is every part of this so bloody complicated? Makes me wonder why anyone bothers. I think Hermione had the right idea; we should get married in a backyard and go out after, fuck the rest."

"I think it's a bit late for that," said Harry, "didn't you pay the deposit on the venue?"

"Did we?"

After that, most of it was left to Hermione- and Harry, who mostly showed up as her emotional support. Not that he minded, it was something to do, and right now, he needed things to do.

He started to think Hermione had been right when she told him he'd go mental if he didn't get a job. At the time, he'd laughed her off. He'd been knee deep in hoeing out Number twelve, a process that at the time felt like it would never end. But now it was nearly finished, and soon he wouldn't have a wedding to help plan, and after that, he didn't know what he'd do with himself.

Maybe he'd take up baking. According to the flashes of the future, he seemed to like it an awful lot.

He'd even started to look into classes. Then one day, after months of dead ends, Harry got a letter about his necklace.

It was written on old splotchy parchment and came from Cork.

Mr. Potter,

I've had word that you have been looking for something very particular, and I think I have what you are looking for. It came into my possession by accident a number of years ago, and since I've kept it in a box in the basement. I've regretted keeping it since I got it, but I just can't seem to get rid of it.

I'm not sure why you're looking for it, but I'd be happy to give it to you. I know you've offered a very generous finders fee, but it would be enough for me to no longer have the damn thing in my life.

I don't have a camera, but I've included a sketch with what I think is the most important part; the initials on the back.

If you think this is what you've been searching for, I'd be happy to arrange a pick up at your convenience.

Yours,

D.R.M

He'd gotten letters before, and they had all turned into nothing, but this one felt different, even before Harry turned the page over to see the sketch on the back. It was done in charcoal and depicted his mother's necklace exactly, down to the twin scratches on the front and her initials on the back.

He wrote back almost immediately, wanting nothing more than to go to Cork right that second so that he could hold it in his hand. But things didn't work like that, and he had to wait until the following day to get a reply, suggesting he come around four days later in the mid-morning.

The wait felt impossible like it would never end, and then it ended all at once, and it was time for Harry to leave, and somehow he'd ended up late. He arrived outside the house's gate and stood in the street, looking at the tall, dark building. It reminded him a little too much of the most noble and ancient house of Black.

He'd already been curious about who D.R.M might be, but now looking at the old stately building, he wondered if perhaps he should have told someone where he was going. It had been a long time since the war, but not long enough that no one was still harboring a grudge against him.

On the whole, he should probably have been more cautious, especially in searching for something that had been Tom's; after all, it was his own followers that were most likely to have ended up with something of his.

An old man opened the door, "Mr. Potter," he wheezed, "you came."

"I did," said Harry, "you said you have something I'm looking for."

"I do indeed," said the man, holding the door open, "I've brought it into the front room for you."

It was not smart walking into that house, but Harry did it anyway. He'd come this far, he wasn't about to turn back now, and he'd hoped that even now, he'd be able to take a single old man in a duel if he had to.

The house was indeed very much like number twelve, only far less rotten. Harry looked up at the towering ceiling as he walked through the dim front hall. This is what number twelve would have been like years ago, before the fall of the Blacks. It was beautiful in its own haunting way. Harry wouldn't want to live like this; he preferred sunlight and big windows.

But he appreciated the glimpse into what his godfather's house looked like before it fell to ruin all the same.

The front room was larger than it should have been and had the same impossibly high ceilings as the hallway, although it wasn't as dark. The curtains were opened, letting in the morning sun.

"It's just here," said the man, walking around the ornate sofa to a long low coffee table. In the center sat a plain black box.

"Can I?" asked Harry, slightly breathless. He had quite wanted to believe it before, but now he was here, he knew this was what he was looking for.

The old man nodded, his lips thin.

Harry sat on the edge of the sofa and lifted the box. It was small and square and fit in the palm of his hand. He didn't want to open it for fear that he'd be wrong and that he'd gotten his hopes up for nothing.

But he did because deep down, he had a feeling that this was it. And he was right.

Wound neatly in the center of the box sat a dainty gold necklace. A small round pendant on a long fine gold chain. It was warm when Harry touched it like it had just been against someone's skin, and when he turned it over, his mother's initials were carved into the back.

Harry didn't put it on right away. It felt too personal; he wanted to wait until he was alone. He waited until he got home, and when he hung the fine chain around his neck, it was just as warm as when he'd touched it the first time in the front room of the old man's house.

It was a nice feeling, like home.

That night he dreamt for the first time since the war had ended. It had been a shock at first; it had been so long that he'd almost forgotten what it felt like.

He was in the hall outside the apartment he'd rented in London. Something told him he needed to go inside, but he didn't want to. Not with the way all of his dreams had always gone in the past. He did not want to see something horrible in a place like this.

Harry wanted to turn away, to walk down the narrow staircase and out onto the street, but he couldn't. Something wouldn't let him, so finally, after standing in front of the door for a long time, he pushed it open.

The afternoon sunlight dappled across the floor, and sitting in the middle of the bed, leaning against the headboard, was Tom.

"You have made me wait a very long time," he said.

Harry didn't dare speak, not yet. He'd wanted this too badly, and it set him on edge like it was a trick or a trap. The longer Harry looked at Tom, the more differences he noticed. His hair was a little too long, the curls framing his face. His jaw wasn't as sharp; it was more square now, like he was older. But that was impossible because Tom was *dead* and this *wasn't* real,

Tom tilted his head. "You know I expected you to be happier to see me."

"I don't-" said Harry, "you're *here* ."

"I am."

It was too much and not enough all at once looking at Tom like that. Sitting in the sunlight, rumbled and perfect and real. Like if Harry reached out to touch him, he'd be warm. Harry wanted so many things, like for this moment to last forever, and to end and to never happen again or happen every night for the rest of his life.

He sat on the edge of the bed, still not daring to touch.

"I've missed you," he said, "it's been- I've just missed you, is all."

"Then aren't you going to kiss me?"

Harry wanted to so badly that he didn't want to at all, in case somehow it wasn't what he'd thought it would be. But he did anyway, pushing down the fear that something was wrong; it would crumble around him at any moment, leaving him in the middle of a nightmare.

He pushed it all down and leaned across the bed, cupping Tom's cheek. It was warm and soft under his thumb, and when Harry kissed him, pulling him in close, it felt so real that it hurt. It was bittersweet, and enthralling, and terrible all at once. Harry never wanted it to end.

But it did because it was only a dream. Harry woke in the morning alone in his bed at Number Twelve, and Tom was still dead, and Harry was still alone. But a fine gold chain hung around his neck, and Harry planned to never take it off again.

Harry spent the day off balance, dwelling on his dream from the night before, and when night finally came, and he was back in bed watching the headlights flash across his ceiling, he wanted so very badly for the dream to come again.

And it did.

It came every night. Night after night, Harry spent in London with Tom, in the apartment or the library or sitting in the park, and every morning when he woke up, it got harder to tell what was real and what was the dream.

It set Harry on edge; even his friends noticed. He brushed off their concern, the wedding was rapidly approaching, and they didn't need to waste their precious time on him and his obsession with Tom. Because that's what it had turned into, an obsession. Harry spent the day counting the minutes until he could lie down, close his eyes, and see Tom again.

This wasn't what he'd wanted when he'd looked for the necklace. He'd wanted a reminder and anchor that Tom had been real, that Harry had loved him, and it wasn't all in his head.

He didn't think it would bring this deep need he had now to see Tom, and every morning when he woke up, Harry had to remind himself that Tom wasn't here, wasn't real, would never walk through the kitchen door so that they could have coffee together. Because Harry had killed him, and his body had turned to dust.

It was time to take the necklace off. It was hard. Harder than Harry wanted it to be. He gave himself one last night, and while he lay under the bright stars in the park with Tom's head on his chest, he had such a hard lump in his throat it was hard to swallow.

"What is it with you tonight," asked Tom. He blew against Harry's neck, "you're sad, but you're pretending you're not. Why's that?"

"I have to say goodbye to someone, and I don't want to," said Harry.

"Then why are you doing it? What's the point if it makes you this unhappy?"

"Sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do because it's the right thing to do," said Harry.

Tom laughed, "what does the other person think? Do they think it's the right thing to do?"

"They don't know."

"Well, that's a bit selfish, isn't it? Making a choice for them and not letting them have a say."

"Maybe," said Harry, "maybe I'm just selfish."

"Well, as long as you'll admit it," said Tom, "then that's fine then, isn't it. But you don't get to be mad when your friend tries to curse your balls off for not giving them a choice."

"After tomorrow, it won't matter," said Harry.

"I think you're vastly underestimating how determined a person can be under the right circumstances."

Harry wanted to say that none of it mattered because Tom wasn't real and couldn't be mad, and there would be no consequences for anyone except for Harry. But he didn't because he knew Tom well enough to know that arguing, even with a figment of his imagination, pretending to be Tom wasn't a good idea.

So instead, he tried to enjoy every moment he had here in this soft sunlit fake life until he woke up in a world without Tom. He took the necklace off after he'd had his coffee, put it back in the little black box, and tucked it in the back of the top drawer of the old writing desk in the library. Somewhere he knew it would always be safe, but also out of sight and hopefully out of mind.

He closed the drawer with a renewed sense of purpose to live in the now, to focus on what was in front of him, and stop looking into the past. Nothing good came from dwelling on memories, all it did was prevent him from building a future for himself, and that's what he wanted. He wanted a future full of new memories, experiences, places, and things. Tom's life may have ended, but that didn't mean that his had to.

With the necklace safely in its box in the desk drawer, the dreams ended just as Harry had expected them to. He didn't know where they'd come from, maybe some kind of subconscious importance he'd placed on it during his desperate search. Now that they were gone, the longer he went without them, the easier they were to forget until they started to feel hazy around the edges, like something closer to an old memory than a present experience.

Days turned into weeks and months, seasons passed, and Harry lived his life. He went out with his friends. He finally finished the last of the renovations on the house, at least until Hermione talked him into replacing the horrible narrow shower in the second-floor bathroom with an enormous soaking tub.

"Give me three good reasons you shouldn't," she said, "I bet you can't."

With every day that passed, Ron and Hermione's wedding crept closer until it was the night before, and Harry was on his way to their flat to spend a cozy night in with Hermione while Ron went out for a night on the town.

Hermione's idea of a good party included eating ice cream and pizza and watching *Pride and Prejudice* in her pajamas.

Ron's was vastly different.

"Ron can go do whatever he likes tonight, within reason, but I want to do something nice too," she'd said when she'd suggested it a few weeks before. Ron hadn't argued, knowing that Harry would much rather stay in with Hermione and watch the movies that made Ron fall asleep than go out and get drunk with Dean and Seamus.

"Sometimes there are downsides to having the same best friend as your wife," he said, scratching his nose, "Merlin, I can say that now-" he turned to Hermione, facing lighting up, "tomorrow 'mione, you're going to be my wife!"

"Yes, I am," she said, smiling softly. She sat on the end of the couch, in a huge fluffy robe, with a faintly purple face mask on and all of her hair piled into a messy knot on the top of her head. "I'm rather looking forward to it.

Ron's cheeks went a cherry red, spreading all the way to the very tips of his ears.

"Right, well," he said, trying to hide his shit eating grin, "best be off then, got a long night ahead of me."

Once he left, Hermione bent double, giggling.

"Oh my *God*," she said, "he's never going to stop being *adorable*. It's going to *kill* me, Harry; what do I do?"

"You marry him, I guess," said Harry, cracking open one of the beers she'd left for him on the table.

They sat together in the dark while the movie played. After it ended, while Hermione refilled her wine and searched for another, she sat next to Harry on the long sofa and touched his shoulder, "you stopped wearing your necklace. Is everything alright? I've been meaning to ask."

Harry's smile was tight, his eyes trained on the floor, "it wasn't the right one," he said, "it didn't feel right."

In truth, he'd forgotten about it until now. He was so focused on living and his friends that it had slowly slipped from his mind like a dream, but it was back now, and it plagued him. All throughout the wedding, when he should have been paying attention to his friends and how in love they were, his mind was on a little black box pushed all the way into the back of a drawer.

Watching the two people he cared about most in love was beautiful and painful, and he wanted that so badly for himself. So very badly that he didn't stay at the hotel like he'd planned. Harry went home, stumbling in the door of number twelve, so late it was almost

early. He went to his office, dug the black box out of the desk, and took it upstairs. Harry fell asleep on top of the cover with the chain clasped in his hand. Now he wanted the dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! See ya next week for the last chapter, I can't wait to share the end! & As always any and all encouragement is very much appreciated.

Something Tangible

Chapter Notes

We're at the end! I can't even believe how quickly the past month or so has gone, and that we're at the end already. But we're here, and I hope you enjoy the last chapter! Thank you so much for your support on the fic, I've honestly been blown away. Y'all leave me such thoughtful comments <3 It makes my day, and I can't wait to hear what you thought of the end!

I am taking the rest of the month off from posting - I've got a lot of fic coming from July through the end of the year, and I need the time to try and get ahead of the editing so I don't drown. But I'm really excited about all of them, and can't wait to be back in July.

Also: one final huge thank you to Amy, my beta, who fixes my wonky sentences, and helped turn chapter two into something readable, instead of the horrible mess that it was.

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

Chapter Seven: Something Tangible

The dreams came as soon as Harry fell asleep, but they weren't what he wanted. He wanted what he'd had before, picturesque sunny summer days spent lulling around with Tom. He wanted warm breezes and soft touches and safety and warmth.

What he got was wrath.

Rain lashed the apartment windows while Tom stood, fists clenched at his sides, his eyes glowing an eerie red in the low light. Harry had never seen him angry like this, and for the first time since he met him, he saw a flash of Voldemort in his rage.

His voice dropped low, hissing as he spat every perfectly enunciated word at Harry.

"Do you know what I've done for you?" he said, eyes narrowed. He paced the length of the room. He spun on his heel.

"Do you have any *idea* of the sacrifices I made, and this- *this* is how you repay me? You shut me in a drawer, and you leave *me*?!"

"Leave you? Tom, I'd never leave you on purpose," said Harry. He sat on the edge of the bed, confused as to what the hell Tom was on about.

"Tom," he said slowly, "you aren't real. None of this is real. I'd never abandon you, but this is just in my head. I've made you up."

Tom froze, lifting his chin in defiance.

"I'm not *real* ," he said, voice cracking. He started to laugh, high and horrible, "Not. Real. Oh, Harry, but I am real. Just as real as you are. Don't know what I am? I thought you were smarter than this."

"Sorry-" said Harry, not understanding, still tipsy from the wedding, and then things started to click into place.

There had always been something strange about the necklace. Harry had been happy to ignore it, too glad to have it in his hands. He should have paid more attention.

He looked at the necklace in his hand and back to Tom.

"You *didn't*. "

"Of *course* I did," said Tom, "you said I was clever, didn't you? Did you really think I wouldn't try and find a way out? Do you really know me that poorly? I waited for *years* for you. Years and years, and then you finally came. Finally, and I thought-" he bit his lip and looked at the floor before locking eyes with Harry. His gaze blank and heavy now, "but you didn't want me, you shut me away, and you left me. And now, look at you- now that you finally know what I've done, you're horrified."

"I'm not," said Harry.

"Don't *lie* to me," hissed Tom, "I am so tired of people *lying* ."

"I'm not. Look at me."

Tom did, holding his gaze. "I'm not lying, Tom," said Harry, "now tell me what you did."

He sat on the edge of the bed next to Harry.

"I was going to do what I'd said," said Tom, "I was, but the more I thought about it, how there was the course I had to follow, and I didn't have a choice, the more I hated it. I wanted to do something that changed things just enough so I'd get to see you again. I had your necklace and thought maybe I could use it to get back to you."

He shook his head.

"It wasn't easy. It was like I was on a track, and there was a wall every time I tried to step off. I could break through the wall if I wanted, but it felt wrong? I did it anyway. I made this one just for you," he said, "before Christmas break, my seventh year."

Tom turned to look at Harry, cocking his head. "Was it a mistake?"

"No," said Harry, lifting his hand, wanting to reach out, to touch him. Pull him close, but it wasn't the time yet. Not now when Tom still sat like a wounded cat, his eyes narrowed like he didn't trust Harry not to strike him.

"How do I get you out?"

Tom's face softened then. "You're going to let me out?" he asked softly.

"Did you really think I wouldn't?"

"At first, I was sure you would, but then- well, I thought this would go differently-"

He moved slowly, shifting closer until he could rest his head against Harry's shoulder, "I thought you didn't want to see me."

"I did," said Harry, "that's why I put you in that drawer because I wanted to see you so badly. But I didn't know it was real. I swear, I didn't know. I just thought I was going mad."

"There's only one way I know of to get me out," said Tom, "I wrote it in a book, and you're going to have to find it."

"I found the necklace. I'm sure I can find a book," said Harry.

When Harry had said it, he'd been confident it was true. But things in practice are often much harder than they are in theory, and these days finding anything that once belonged to the Dark Lord wasn't easy. There were, of course, still collectors- there always were, but when you're Harry Potter finding them isn't an easy task.

But Harry had done impossible things before, and he wasn't going to let something like a lack of connections stop him now. Not when he had a reminder around his neck of what he was working toward.

He didn't have to build a life alone anymore. Tom was right here. All Harry had to do was let him out.

His friends noticed his new obsession. It would have been hard for them not to, considering that it consumed almost all of Harry's waking hours.

But he couldn't tell them the truth. He'd *never* be able to tell them the truth. No one would ever believe him that what he was about to do wasn't the biggest mistake of his life, and sometimes when he was waiting to meet someone in another dark alley, he started to question it too.

Was he making a horrible, irrevocable mistake?

He didn't think so. After all, Tom was not Voldemort. And now, given a chance to be someone else, he never would be.

It was a chance they could take together; whatever life came out of this, neither of them had to be alone.

"I know I keep asking you," said Hermione, "but are you sure you're alright?"

"I've never been better," said Harry. She raised her eyebrows at him like she didn't believe him.

"Promise," he said, "I'm working on something really important. I can't tell you the details yet, but it means a lot to me."

"But you're going to tell me what you're doing, right?"

He nodded. "Eventually."

That was a lie. Fortunately, she wasn't Tom, so she didn't know that. He'd have to get used to lying to her if this thing with Tom was going to work. They had been working on a story about where Tom had come from, but the details were still fuzzy, and Harry knew it wouldn't hold up to scrutiny. At least not yet.

And none of it would matter until he found the book. It took months longer than he'd wanted, but he finally found it that winter.

Arranging the meeting hadn't been easy, and it had taken rather a lot of persuasion to get the older witch to come meet with him. It would have been infinitely easier if he had Tom's help, but he didn't, so he had to muddle on the best he could alone.

She was a tall, severe woman with heavy eyes, wrapped in a thick black wool cloak. A proper lady. They met in an alcove halfway down Diagon Alley, near one of the new cafes. Much to the old woman's displeasure, Harry opened the book before he'd paid for it because he had to be sure. It was filled in neat rows of familiar script, and the old witch might not know it, but he'd have been happy to pay twice the exorbitant fee that she had requested for it.

The price would have made another man weep. But Harry didn't care, shoving the bag of gold into the witch's hand and apparating out of the alley.

Later, when he'd properly warmed up, Harry sat at the table in the kitchen with the book and a mug of tea, flipping through until he found what he wanted.

Tom had left notes in the margins, explaining what needed to be done, and if Harry ignored the flowery text and only focused on the notes, the ritual sounded like something he could accomplish. But he would need time.

That night Tom was waiting for him on a hill in the park.

"Did you find it?"

Harry nodded, dropping onto the grass next to him.

"I did," he said, grinning, "and I actually understood what most of it meant since you left me notes."

"I'm glad they were helpful. I was worried you'd think I was being patronizing."

Harry laughed, "never," he said, "I need all the help I can get. I'm not clever like you."

"I think you sell yourself short," said Tom, "you can understand the things you give yourself permission to understand."

Harry had hoped that after that night, it wouldn't be long until this would be finished, and Tom would be here with him. But it wasn't until late spring that things finally started to fall into place.

"It always takes longer than you think," said Tom when Harry would complain to him at night. His face tucked into Harry's neck. "Everything takes longer than you think."

"I don't want to wait anymore," said Harry, "aren't you tired of waiting?"

"If I can wait this long, what's a few more weeks? I'd rather this work, wouldn't you?"

Harry really did.

That's why he continued to wait. Even when every cell in his body wanted to just do it already. Tom was right; he needed to get this right because he only had one chance.

When it was finally time, it was mid-summer, only days before Harry's birthday. Now that the moment he'd been waiting for so long was here, he hesitated. The consequences of this going wrong were at the forefront of his mind.

"You've been working on this for months," said Tom, "I have faith you will do everything perfectly."

"But what if I don't? What happens to you if I fuck up?"

"I don't think there is anyone who can answer that question," said Tom, "no one has ever tried this kind of magic before. We're in uncharted waters. You have to have faith. That's half of what magic is anyway."

"So you don't know if it's going to work?" asked Harry, panic rising in his chest.

Even if he did everything exactly how he needed to, he could still fail; there was no guarantee that Tom's theories were correct.

"If you think it will work, then it will work."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm willing to bet my life on it, aren't I?"

Tom meant it as a reassurance, but it only made Harry feel worse. But he wouldn't let fear stop him now, not when they were so close.

Harry sat on the floor in the old bedroom where Buckbeak had lived, sketching runes on the floor. He'd have felt better if Tom was here to make sure he didn't fuck anything up, but then

if Tom was here, he wouldn't need to be doing this in the first place.

He placed a kumquat in one of the five small silver bowls sitting around the inside circle he'd drawn on the floor. He was supposed to use a mandarin, but the shops had been out, and if they didn't do this tonight, he would have to wait at least another fortnight.

Tom had laughed and told him it was close enough. All he needed was a small citrus fruit.

"A lemon would have done in a pinch," he said, "but I appreciate your dedication to getting the details right."

Harry had put in the time and the effort, and now theoretically, everything he needed was laid out in front of him.

Honey, citrus, bone, and thyme.

All he needed now was blood, the right words, and faith. At least that's what Tom kept telling him.

"You have to believe it will work, or it won't. That's how magic is. It listens to your will. Will me into existence, Harry. I know you want this bad enough; you just have to make it so."

All he had to do was believe, and he did. Not in himself but in Tom. In Tom's clever creative mind, and that all the time he'd poured into this meant that it was perfect and would work just as he said it would. And with this thought firmly held in the front of his mind, Harry cut his hand, letting the blood run over the necklace and herbs and bone, and he whispered the words, closed his eyes, and waited.

He sat, heart, pounding in his chest. Waiting for what, he didn't know until he heard it. A gasping, like someone breaking through the waves to the surface. When he opened his eyes, Tom lay on his side where the necklace had been. He was pale and drawn, his hair falling into his eyes, but he was here and real, and when Harry touched his cheek, he was warm.

"You did it," he said, his voice hoarse, his warm auburn eyes fixed on Harry, "I told you, you could if you wanted to."

Harry cupped his cheek, choking on a flood of emotion. "You're here," he said, "you're really here."

What the future held no longer mattered, nothing mattered, except that Tom was here, and real and in Harry's arms. Harry could feel the flutter of Tom's heart under his palm as they sat on the floor wrapped around each other, soaking in a moment that neither of them had been sure would ever come.

Somehow, even after all the odds had said no, Tom had found a way back to Harry's side. He'd always been such a clever boy. Not even time could stop him, not when he believed he could. Belief, after all, is half of what magic is anyway.

The End.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed the end- see I told you it wasn't sad! & as always any and all encouragement is very much appreciated :)

End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! Chapter two will be up soon & I hope to see ya then :) As always any and all encouragement is very much appreciated.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!