“Just-” He cuts himself off and takes a deep breath. “Just tell me who my father is.”

“Well, technically, James Potter is still your father-”

“My other father, then.”

“Alright, alright, no need to get snippy.” The man shuffles through the papers in his folder before pulling one out with a beaming grin. “Here we are. Let’s see. Harry James Potter, son of Lily J. and James F. Potter and... one Tom M. Riddle.”

In which Harry discovers he’s had another father all along (thanks to an obscure ritual his mother performed before his birth), and he isn’t handling it very well.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

I was supposed to be working on my other fics, but then this one took over so here we go! Unlike my other fics, I’ve decided this one will be entirely gen, because platonic relationships can be just as intense and fun. However, if I ever write about the future of this verse, I’d be open to suggestions about ships.

Also, expect chapters of varying lengths. From previous projects, I’ve learned that I do much better when I don’t try to hold myself to a specific word count for each chapter, as I either write too much and feel like I have to cut it off in an unsatisfying place or I write too little and have to force content that doesn’t feel natural. So yeah, chapter lengths will vary. You’ve been warned. Hopefully this will get chapters out faster since I won’t be fighting myself on every one

**Warnings:** Harry is pretty matter of fact about all the shit that’s happened to him, and it’s talked about pretty explicitly, so: **Canon levels of abuse and neglect, references to previous torture and death, Voldemort is his own warning, etc.**

That said, this fic isn’t out to hurt you.

Final Note: this fic takes place after Harry’s fifth year, but things went down differently in the Department of Mysteries because I want Harry to be not fourteen but also Sirius is too fun to kill

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s a fly in his room.

Every so often, it leaves its perch on the wall to make a circuit of the room, but it always lands again before long. The loud buzz of its wings is almost funny, in an absurd kind of way. Or maybe it’s the heat.

With great effort, Harry turns his head to look at the window of Dudley’s second bedroom. In spite of his uncle’s best efforts, it only took half a week to dig out all the nails holding the rails to the sill, so he can open it whenever he likes. Thankfully, the bars haven’t returned. The threat of his serial-killer godfather (a misconception he’s happy to leave in place) is very effective.

The Dursleys are out running errands, and they’d informed him that they’ll be returning sometime this afternoon. Which means Harry will need to close the window soon if he wants to keep his window-opening privileges a secret.

Just the thought of having to stand makes him want to groan, but groaning would take too much effort, so he just closes his eyes and imagines a nice breeze pooling through the room.

Unlike Dudley’s actual bedroom, Harry’s room has not been equipped with a fan.

Technically, he should be working on the list of chores that was left for him when the Dursleys left, but he thinks even Aunt Petunia might let his laziness slide in the face of today’s oppressive
heat. In fact, he’d be surprised if she didn’t head straight upstairs to wash and fix her makeup upon returning, as he’s often heard her complain about the terrible effects of sweat on her appearance. He’d give himself an hour after they get back before she actually bothers to check whether he’s done as instructed.

In the distance he hears a shriek of laughter.

At least Dudley and his gang have grown out of Harry Hunting, he thinks absently. He’s gotten quite good at running for his life by now, but if he were chased in this kind of heat, he might just have to lie down and take it.

How depressing.

With a heavy sigh, he pushes himself up to sit on the bed, wincing at the pull in his muscles. He spent most of the morning pushing heavy furniture around to vacuum, and his arms are going to be sore tomorrow.

He really should finish his chores.

While Aunt Petunia might be more lenient on account of the heat, Uncle Vernon tends toward spiteful, and he’d really like to eat today. He supposes he could steal something, but Dudley would surely notice, and he’d be more than happy to get Harry in trouble.

Which means he’s going to finish his chores.

Ugh.

On his way over to close the window, he grabs his discarded shirt from the floor and pulls it back on. The shirt is over-large (even though he got it two years ago when he was even smaller) and threadbare, and he’s suddenly grateful that gardening isn’t on his list for today. He’d gotten used to being the ugly, unwanted misfit in ill-fitting hand-me-downs when he was younger, but it’s always hard to readjust after months of wearing robes that were made just for him.

With a huff of frustration, he pushes those unproductive thoughts away and sets his mind to finishing his work as quickly as possible.

While he’d usually be content to do as poor a job as possible without getting smacked for it, Uncle Vernon implied that if he behaved well enough this summer, he’d have access to his school books. Not only would this let him finish his summer assignments before getting on the train to go back to Hogwarts, which would spare him the usual smears of red ink and disapproving looks, it would also give him something to do when he inevitably gets locked up again.

Not that he trusts Uncle Vernon to keep his word, of course, but it’s worth a shot.

By the time he hears the car pull up the drive, he’s finished cleaning all the floors and windows, he’s dusted various surfaces around the house, and he’s reorganized the kitchen cabinets and cleaned out the oven.

He’s honestly pretty proud of himself.

Naturally, he receives no compliments on his work. But really, no acknowledgement is often better when it comes to the Dursleys.

As his uncle settles into his place on the couch and Dudley disappears into his room to play whatever new game for his SNES that his parents just bought for him, Harry accepts the piece of
toast and glass of water that will count as his payment for today’s work and heads outside. Aunt Petunia won’t call him in to start dinner for a while now, which means he has at least an hour to kill, and it’s cooled off just enough that being outside is more comfortable than staying in a room with no airflow. Besides, this way he doesn’t have to listen to Dudley’s shouts of frustration accompanied by the ridiculous electronic noises that would undoubtedly pass through the thin walls.

He eats the toast in small bites. Unfortunately, it’s just dry enough to be unsatisfying, and all it really does is bring the hunger that had been gnawing at his stomach just a few hours earlier roaring back. Harry takes a moment to consider whether Aunt Petunia did this on purpose before deciding that she probably wouldn’t bother putting that much effort into making him uncomfortable. She does that well enough without even needing to try.

The water is similarly unsatisfying, and it leaves him feeling uncomfortably sloshy.

With a sigh, he leaves the glass by the door and wanders over to the tree near the hedge. Its leafy branches cast just enough of a shadow to fit him, so he happily flops himself down to lie in the grass.

As the sounds of children playing and nosey neighbors checking in on each other float across the hot summer air, he lets his eyes drift shut, relaxing into the clenching in his stomach. Like his clothes, the hunger always takes time to readjust to. Just a bit longer, however, and it will fade again.

It always does.

“BOY!”

His uncle’s voice is loud enough to be heard from outside, and Harry groans. Maybe, if he ignores the man, whatever's annoyed him this time will just go away and he’ll be left in peace.

The sound of the back door crashing open against the house is enough to get rid of that idea.

When he sits up, he sees his uncle standing in the doorway, his face going purple as he breathes heavily. It’s almost impressive.

“Inside.” His uncle isn’t shouting anymore, now that it’s possible for the neighbors to catch sight of the latest drama, but Harry hears him clearly. He hears the anger, too. “Now.”

Harry does as told, knowing that the sooner he complies, the sooner he'll be left alone again.

Once he’s in reach, his uncle grabs him by the neck and shoves him inside, hard enough to make him fall against the kitchen counter. He breaks his fall with his hands, and his wrists ache. At least it’s better than breaking the fall with his face.

“Explain yourself, boy!”

Harry rolls his eyes and turns to face the man, carefully edging out of grabbing range. He remembers being strangled last summer, and he isn’t eager for a repeat performance.

“Explain what?” he asks.

He sees Aunt Petunia watching from the hall, her face pinched up in disapproval, and she looks even more horse-like than usual. Dudley is hovering behind her, though he looks surprisingly unenthused to see Harry get in trouble.
“You-” His uncle steps closer. Harry glares, and the man actually hesitates. Then, anger takes over whatever semblance of reason he might possess and he crowds into Harry’s space once more, waving an unopened letter in his face. “I thought I told you that those freaks of yours were not to send letters during the day! You’re lucky that bird of theirs didn’t break anything, or I’d have-”

His annoyance building the longer he stands there being shouted at, Harry grabs the letter from his uncle’s hand. The man sputters in response, cutting off whatever (not entirely empty) threat was sure to follow, and Harry takes this opportunity to wander out of the kitchen.

His aunt flinches back as he passes, as if afraid to touch him without a frying pan in hand.

His uncle stomps along after him.

While Harry will admit to being a bit nervous at having the large man at his back, he also knows that all he needs is one bruise to justify using magic in self-defense, now that the public is back on his side after Voldemort’s reveal. His school trunk may have been locked away, but Harry managed to sneak his wand up into his room with him and has kept it on hand since, tucked into a holster that Moody had finally snapped and given him after catching him putting his wand in his pocket one time too many.

He opens the envelope carefully.

Vernon moves to snatch it back, but Harry dodges out of the way, drawing his wand and using it to smack the man’s hand away. Though some people would no doubt be disappointed in him to hear it, the way his uncle all but squeals in surprise and maybe even a little fear makes him smile.

Thankfully, the reminder of his magic is enough to keep the man away, so now the Dursley family is hovering in the threshold as Harry stands in the center of the living room.

After one last look to make sure the Dursleys haven’t moved, Harry unfolds the letter and starts to read.

Dear Mr. Potter

My name is Sulien Blackspire, and I am a representative for Lockman and Kodge, the leading agency for discreet assistance on matters relating to family and inheritance law in Magical Britain.

I am contacting you because we have discovered information, pertaining to your mother’s use of our services roughly fifteen years ago, that requires your immediate attention. While I am loathe to interrupt your summer break, this is a most sensitive matter that I believe must be discussed in person.

Please respond at your earliest convenience so that we might establish a time to meet and discuss your options.

Regards,

Sulien Blackspire, Esq.

Once he’s finished reading, Harry closes his eyes and forces himself to relax his grip on the parchment. This is… unexpected. To be entirely honest, he wasn’t even aware that wizards had lawyers, not after his disastrous hearing where only Dumbledore’s timely intervention saved him from getting his wand snapped.
“Well?” Uncle Vernon demands. “What does the letter say, boy?”

Harry hesitates, considering.

While he could hide the letter’s contents from the Dursleys, this doesn’t seem like something they’d be very interested in, so attempting to keep it from them might cause entirely avoidable trouble. On the other hand, he doesn’t trust them with anything that might be important, and if this letter is to be believed (which remains to be seen), then whatever it’s about is exceptionally important.

Honestly, it’d be really nice if people could just tell him things instead of only ever hinting at secrets that will undoubtedly mess up his life beyond repair. At least this man sounds like he wants to tell him everything as soon as possible.

Finally, once his uncle starts looking antsy, he decides to share. It’s not like they could keep him from going, after all.

“It’s a request to set up an appointment,” Harry tells them.

“An appointment?” His uncle says it as if the idea that wizards might do such normal things as set up appointments is unheard of. “Who’d want to set up an appointment with you?”

“Loads of people, actually.” Not all of them are well-meaning, but that’s beside the point. “Anyway, it’s some law firm in London. I’m to write them back as soon as possible.”

As he says this, he heads for the kitchen again. Perched just outside the window is a dull brown owl, bigger than Pig but smaller than Hedwig. Seeing as he can’t access his store of parchment at the moment, he grabs a pen and scrawls his response on the back of the letter, suggesting they meet later in the week.

As they watch the owl fly away, his aunt finally speaks up.

“Is it safe?”

Harry turns to look at her, too surprised at her expressing concern to hide it.

“Excuse me?” he asks, incredulous.

“This appointment.” Aunt Petunia gestures vaguely with one hand, looking uncomfortable. “Will it be safe, what with that awful man having returned?”

It’s almost funny.

She’s perfectly content to starve him, lock him in a cupboard, and hit him with blunt objects, but the thought of him being killed and thereby permanently taken off her hands is just too much for her.

Actually, no, it most definitely is funny.

It’s funny in the way that makes Ron and Hermione exchange those uncertain and entirely too serious glances before trying to make him talk about things. As if there’s anything to talk about.

“Should be,” is all he says after a pause that has even Dudley shifting anxiously. “If it’s not, Dudley can have my potions supplies.”

Dudley and Aunt Petunia turn white; Uncle Vernon is approaching purple again. Harry decides it’s
probably time to leave the room.

They can sort out dinner for themselves. After that comment, he doubts they'd give him any if he asked.

And anyway, he was right, earlier.

The hunger has faded again.

Chapter End Notes

Now that I think about it, Petunia seems the type to know very well what hunger feels like and how it works, even if it's not to the extent she and her husband inflict it on Harry.

Anyway, I have a [tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com) where I post about my fics and sometimes reblog stuff about the whole tomary/harrymort dynamic. It's quite fun
On the day he’s supposed to meet with Mr. Blackspire, Harry wakes with the sun. It’s a habit that not even late night study sessions and nightmares can break.

As much as he’d love to go back to sleep, as worry kept him up late last night, he knows it’s useless to try, so he spends the next hour or so just lying in bed with his eyes closed, absently tracking the way the light shifts across his eyelids as the sun moves across the sky.

He hears Aunt Petunia wake up at half-past six.

At seven, she’s rapping on his door with a hissed command to wake up.

A quarter after, she slides his breakfast through the flap in the door. She’s been generous today. In addition to the usual toast is a smear of jam on each piece and a single fried egg. It makes sense, he thinks, an ugly sort of humor rising at the thought. If he passes out from hunger in Wizarding London, she’s the person the Order would turn to first.

If they ever managed to find his body, that is.

After getting dressed in his least shabby clothes, Harry checks to find that his aunt has unlocked the bedroom door and heads downstairs, skipping over the steps that creak the loudest so as to avoid rousing the grumpy beast that is his cousin when woken before eleven. Dudley has never been a light sleeper, but it’s usually worth it to avoid the risk, anyway.

Aunt Petunia is waiting for him.

As she supervises, he pulls his trunk out from under the stairs and selects a plain black robe to shrug over his clothes. He also grabs his invisibility cloak, just in case. At the sight of it, his aunt’s nose wrinkles in distaste, but she doesn’t say anything. He folds it over his arm and promptly removes himself from her presence.

He spends the next two hours in his room. While he has no doubt that his aunt will have something for him to do by the time he gets back, she seems to have accepted that any work he does before his meeting with Mr. Blackspire will be shoddy at best and leaves him be. He mostly appreciates it, but it also means that he has two hours to work himself into an anxious spiral. In those hours, he’s convinced himself not to go five separate times, all for different reasons.

Though, to be fair to himself, he always changes his mind back around shortly after.

Finally, it’s time for him to leave.

Aunt Petunia doesn’t say goodbye, but he supposes he didn’t expect her to. Instead, she just watches him with a narrow eyed gaze, as if making sure he’s actually leaving as promised.

Once he’s walked far enough that there’s no chance of anyone (meaning: Mrs. Figg, who would most assuredly tattle on him for leaving the relative safety of the Dursleys’ property) being disturbed by the sound, he tucks his invisibility cloak away, pulls out his wand, and summons the Knight Bus.
One evening, during the summer before his third year, he’d asked Mr. Weasley if summoning the bus counted as underage magic and was promptly reassured that it did not. He’s kept it in the back of his mind as a potential escape ever since.

The bus arrives with a bang.

Once he’s given a fake name and the proper address to Stan, who still doesn’t recognize him, he settles into a seat at the front and gets ready to hold on, lest he be sent flying out of his seat. Again.

Three stops later, his thankfully short ride comes to an end, and he steps off the bus on shaking legs, waving weakly when Stan bids him farewell before shouting at Ernie to floor it.

The Wizarding World really needs to work on better modes of transportation.

As he stands outside the respectable looking building that is his destination, tucked between two storefronts, he takes a deep breath, attempting to ease his nerves at all the thoughts of what this meeting might bring, and runs a hand through his hair in a pointless attempt to make it neater. He’s been standing outside this building for five minutes, now, doing his best to stall. Luckily, he’d arrived twenty minutes early, so he thinks the stalling can be excused.

But he can’t stall forever.

After checking the lettering above the door one last time, though he knows for a fact that he’s in the right place because he’s already checked it twice, Harry heads inside.

“Hello, there!” a rather cheerful sounding voice greets him as the door swings shut behind him. Harry looks to see a young man sitting at a desk piled high with loose papers. “Welcome to Lockman and Kodge. How can I help you?”

“I, erm-” He has to pause to clear his throat. “I have an appointment with Mr. Blackspire.”

It sounds more like a question than a statement.

Thankfully, the man at the desk just nods and digs through one of the piles to pull out what must be the agenda for the day. When he sees what’s written on it, he lets out a small gasp and looks back at Harry with wide eyes.

“By Merlin,” he says faintly, still staring. Just before Harry can begin to feel awkward about it, the man seems to remember that he’s supposed to be a professional. “Er. Right this way, Mr.- Mr. Potter. You can wait here while I tell Sulien you’ve arrived. Would you like anything to drink? Tea? Water?”

Harry happily accepts a glass of water and plops himself down in one of the surprisingly comfortable chairs to wait. There’s no one else here, so he lets himself get lost in speculation over what this meeting might reveal.

He’d sent a letter to Sirius the same day he’d received Mr. Blackspire’s first missive, but his godfather’s response had been largely unhelpful. Harry honestly couldn’t tell whether someone had interfered with his response or if Sirius really did have no idea what it might be about. Either way, the uncertainty made him grateful that he’d never actually told Sirius whether he’d be meeting with Mr. Blackspire or not, as he knows it’d have been much more annoying to get here if, in addition to the usual guards, he’d had to dodge a whole host of Order members just waiting for him to make a break for London.

A short while later, he’s sitting inside a cluttered office across from a nervous looking man with
thinning hair and a tired smile. For all that the office itself looks rather spacious, no doubt expanded with magic, it feels crowded by the many books and stacks of paper that sprawl across every surface. There are more floating through the air near the ceiling.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet so quickly,” the man who must be Mr. Blackspire says, “We were unsure if our letter would be able to reach you.”

“I’m glad it did,” Harry says, and he mostly means it. “What’s this about, Mr. Blackspire?”

The man looks a bit sheepish, then, as he plucks a folder from one of the many precarious stacks and flips it open.

“Well. You see, Mr. Potter.” He clears his throat and sets the opened folder on the desk, folding his hands together atop it. “I’m afraid I don’t know how to begin.”

“That bad?” Harry asks, mostly joking. By the look on the man’s face, he’s spot on. “Alright, then. Why don’t you just start at the beginning?”

Schooling his features into a more neutral expression, Mr. Blackspire takes a deep breath then says, “Your father was infertile.”

Harry laughs. He can’t help it.

“Sorry, what?” Some of the tension drains from his shoulders. He was expecting something awful, not whatever this is turning out to be. “That’s not possible.”

“There’s no need to be ashamed,” the man says, mistaking his incredulity for discomfort, “In fact, it’s a common issue among Purebloods.”

Harry is already shaking his head.

“You don’t understand,” he says. At the man’s look of confusion, he pushes forward. “James Potter is my father. If he was infertile, I wouldn’t be here.”

Understanding breaks across his features.

“Forgive me,” Mr. Blackspire says with a careless wave of his hand, “I always forget that not everyone is as well versed in these subjects as I. How much do you know of how inheritance works in Wizarding Britain?”

“Er... Nothing,” Harry admits warily.

Mr. Blackspire looks surprised. Then, his brow furrows and he frowns.

“Truly?” he asks.

Harry just shrugs, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. As if sensing this, Mr. Blackspire makes another dismissive gesture and pastes a smile across his face.

“No matter. All you need to know is that infertility is not as serious a barrier to having children as one might think,” the man says, “Not when you have magic, at least.”

Harry takes a moment to think about all the ways magic might work around that particular problem before deciding he really doesn’t need to know about the specifics.

“In fact, that is where we come in.” Mr. Blackspire flicks through the pages in his folder before
plucking out a clipped together bundle and pushing it across the desk for Harry to see. “As you can see, shortly before your conception, Lily and James Potter reached out to us in search of legal advice pertaining to a ritual that would allow them to have a child, even with your father’s… ah… impairment.”

Harry flips through the pages. From what he can understand of the legalese-filled correspondence, if it’s legitimate, then everything the man has said so far is correct.

If it’s not legitimate, then whoever orchestrated this has put far too much effort into it.

Although, judging by the seal burned into the bottom of each page that still radiates magic almost sixteen years after they were apparently marked, he figures they’re probably not fake. He’s not entirely sure how he feels about it.

“Due to the nature of the ritual they selected,” the man continues, “you have, by blood and magic, two fathers. It was our job to keep the Ministry informed and make sure all relevant statutes were followed.”

“Two fathers?” Harry repeats faintly.

“Correct.” The man makes an attempt at smiling reassuringly. “I assure you, it’s a perfectly legal procedure, for all that the Ministry gets testy about magics dabbling in blood.”

Harry doesn’t care about the legality of the thing, not with this new knowledge and all its implications unfolding in his mind.

“I have two fathers,” he says insistently.

Frustratingly enough, the man doesn’t seem to understand why this is such a big deal.

“Well, yes.” Mr. Blackspire raises an eyebrow. “As I just said.”

“If I have two fathers, then where’s the other one?”

“Pardon?” the man asks.

“I have two fathers. One is dead, but I wouldn’t be sitting here if the other was too, would I?” When Harry pauses, Mr. Blackspire shakes his head hesitantly. “So where is he? Why didn’t he take me in when… when my parents died?”

“Ah, well, I’m afraid that’s our fault.” The man looks profoundly uncomfortable, suddenly. “Well, not our fault, as I assure you I had nothing to do with this mess. Although, even if I did, I’m afraid that your window of opportunity for compensation in relation to this matter has closed, and so there is very little you could do—”

“Sir,” Harry says, interrupting, “What exactly is going on here?”

Mr. Blackspire clears his throat and shuffles the papers in his folder again.

“As I said, your parents came to us for aid in navigating the rather… complicated situation that can arise when dealing with children of more than two bloodlines, especially when one of them is that of a Noble house. You must understand, Mr. Potter, blood magics on their own are already quite tricky, but when you attempt to mix them with such human concepts as inheritance and custody? Well, then it just gets frightful.”
“Which is why your firm exists.”

“Precisely.” For a moment, the man looks rather proud. Then his eyes go a bit shifty again. “In fact, it was our job to file the correct paperwork with the Ministry to seal all record of your second father and, if necessary, present your parents’ case should the man express a desire to take you for his own.”

Judging by the look on the man’s face, somewhere in the process, something went wrong. And now it’s Harry’s problem to deal with.

“If all of this has been settled,” Harry says, feeling more annoyed than nervous, as he’s gotten rather used to handling things not going as planned by now, “Then why am I here?”

“Well, that’s just it,” Mr. Blackspire says, “I’m afraid none of this was ever settled.”

Harry takes a moment to process.

Then another.

“What.”

“Yes, well. The war, you know.” The man gestures helplessly, though he looks at least a little bit apologetic. “It was a busy time. More than one of the staff who worked here vanished under mysterious circumstances, and not all of them showed up again once it was over. Many of our clients had their affairs pushed to the wayside, and no one was particularly concerned with paperwork in those last years before He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named fell.”

As frustrating as it might be, it does make sense. At least, part of it does.

“The war’s been over for fifteen years.” For the most part, at least. “Why am I only hearing about this now?”

“Ideally, you wouldn’t need to hear of it at all.”

Harry rolls his eyes. He can’t help it.

“Okay. And?”

“New management,” the man says with a sigh. “The firm changed hands a few months ago, and the higher-ups weren’t satisfied with the way things had piled up. It’s taken a while to get everything sorted, of course, but here we are.”

“Right,” Harry says dryly. “So, how do we get everything settled?”

“We don’t.”

He must have misheard.

“Sorry,” he says, “I could have sworn you just said-”

“You heard correctly, Mr. Potter.” He barrels through Harry’s attempt to ask another question. “Before they died, your parents never completed the process to have the record of your second father sealed. Due to the forms having a grace period of only five years, combined with your parents’ secrecy and our own unfortunate mishandling of your file, they were never completed, and they never will be.” At whatever expression he sees on Harry’s face, the man sighs and says, “Chin up, Mr. Potter. At the very least, the Ministry has no knowledge at all of your second
father’s existence, which means we can move forward without any undue intervention.”

Somehow, Mr. Blackspire manages to retain a mostly calm facade as he waits for Harry’s response, and Harry feels as if the silence stretches on forever before he finally breaks it, feeling very far away, suddenly.

“What does this mean for me?” he hears himself ask, and for all that he feels remarkably off balance, his voice is steady.

“I suppose that depends on who you’re living with now.”

Harry really doesn’t like the sound of that.

“Explain,” he says flatly, “Please.”

“The ritual your parents used is long-standing and legitimate, obscure as it may be. As such, the steps we must now take are very clearly defined. Unless your current guardians have a stronger claim, in both blood and magic, than that held by your second father, then your guardianship falls naturally to him, as his parental rights were never truly revoked.”

Harry frowns. As much as he’d always longed to get away from the Dursleys, for some long-lost relative to swoop in and rescue him, the reality isn’t exactly living up to the dream.

As per usual.

“But if my parents didn’t want him to have me, then surely-”

“I’m afraid that’s not how this works, Mr. Potter,” Mr. Blackspire interrupts, though his voice is not unkind. “To be frank, your parents’ wills were never found. Even if they had been, any choice of guardian, or any statement of who should not be your guardian, would have to be reviewed by a panel of Wizengamot members, who would then decide whether to take them into consideration or not. Considering your status as Boy-Who-Lived, it is unlikely that your parents’ wishes would have carried much weight.

“In fact, I’m certain that the only reason you are not currently a ward of the state is that your case never actually appeared before them, for reasons I have chosen not to speculate on. If you present your case to the Wizengamot now, before it is settled, then it is entirely possible that the Ministry will attempt to take you instead, regardless of your second father’s claim.”

Harry can’t help but shudder at the possibility.

“You understand, then,” Mr. Blackspire says with a grim smile, “why it is so important for us to address this as soon as possible, preferably without needing to turn to the Ministry for mediation.”

Harry sighs and tilts his head back to look up at the stacks of folders and loose papers drifting above them.

“Assuming this is all true, how do I know you won’t tell the Ministry the minute I leave your office?” Harry asks, more for something to say than any real concern.

Though, now that he mentions it, he’s actually pretty concerned about it.

“Technically, the moment you agreed to meet with me to address our incomplete dealings with your parents, you became a client of mine. As such, I am compelled to keep your secrets. To a point, that is.” At Harry’s skeptical look, the man smiles in a way that’s clearly meant to be
reassuring. “I understand the concern, but you have nothing to fear from me. I’m only here to do my job, and I’ve been told I do it quite well.”

When Harry’s skeptical look doesn’t fade, the man’s smile falls.

“Would it make you feel better if I swore an oath?” he asks.

Harry nods. “It would.”

“Alright, then.” The man clears his throat and raises his wand. “I, Sulien Blackspire, swear that everything I have said and will say in this meeting with Harry James Potter is the truth to the extent of my knowledge and that I will not share the contents of this meeting beyond the extent that is required by law and custom.”

Harry takes a moment to consider the man’s words. Then, some of the tension lifts from his shoulders as the chime of a true oath passes through the room.

“Before you ask,” the man says, “the extent required by law, at least where the Ministry is concerned, ends at filing for any action you might wish to take, which would thereby alert the Wizengamot.”

“And the extent required by custom?” Harry asks, not entirely sure he wants to know the answer.

“Setting up a meeting between you and your second father,” Mr. Blackspire responds promptly.

He was right, he thinks with a sigh, he didn’t want to know. Deciding this is an issue to tackle once he actually knows who his second father is, he sets the matter aside for now.

“So there isn’t, I don’t know, any paperwork you have to submit?” he asks.

He would have thought the Ministry would want to stay informed on things like the parentage of its citizens, but he supposes this is hardly the first time he’s expected too much sense from them.

“No, Mr. Potter,” Mr. Blackspire says with smile bordering on a smirk, “Seeing as your second father was never deprived of his parental rights, there is nothing to restore to him, and as such there is no change of status that the ministry must be alerted to.”

Harry feels as if this isn’t entirely in accordance with the spirit of the law, but if it means he doesn’t have to deal with Fudge, then he’ll take it.

His concerns mostly satisfied, he gives in and tells Mr. Blackspire what he wants to know.

“I live with Muggles,” he says.

The man hides his surprise well.

“Truly? I had heard, but I assumed...” Mr. Blackspire trails off with a sigh. “Well, never mind. Is there no one else?”

“My godfather,” Harry admits, glaring at the man. Daring him to say the wrong thing. “Sirius Black.”


There’s no judgement in his tone, but Harry bristles anyway, biting back the habitual protest.
“I’m afraid,” the man continues, “that although Sirius Black has the best chance of anyone at challenging this claim, thanks to the combination of his status as godfather, though it’s true most of the old families don’t put much stock in the role, and a distant relation to the Black family on your father’s side, his wanted status makes him utterly ineligible.”

Harry knew this already, but the reminder still hurts.

“Alright, then,” he says, shoving the hurt aside because he has other things to worry about, and it’s an old hurt, anyway, “what about emancipation?”

“You’d need to prove your second father to be an unfit guardian,” the man responds, “The process would take months and at least two hearings before a panel of Ministry officials. Seeing as you will come of age in just over one year and your spot at Hogwarts cannot be denied to you even on the off chance that your new guardian disapproves, I would advise against it.”

When Harry still doesn’t look convinced, Mr. Blackspire goes in for the kill.

“Furthermore, there remains the risk that instead of granting your emancipation, the Ministry would take you as a ward.”

Harry huffs, but he can’t deny that the man has a point.

“Alright, then,” he says reluctantly, “Let’s get it over with.”

“Before we do, may I ask you a personal question?”

Harry holds the man’s gaze, suspicion warring with the desire to push forward.

“Sure,” he finally says, his wand hand twitching.

“Why are you so resistant to the possibility of another parent?”

Though he hates to admit it, the question catches him off guard.

As he forces his body to relax from where it’s poised to run, he does his best to form an answer that won’t raise any red flags.

In the years since his introduction to Wizarding society, he’s learned that many witches and wizards, whether they’re strictly Pureblood or not, place great importance on shared blood. Based on their conversation so far, he thinks it’s safe to assume Mr. Blackspire is one of them. To someone with that worldview, how can he even begin to explain why the discovery of even more family doesn’t have him leaping for joy?

How can he explain that more family is almost exactly the opposite of what he wants?

More importantly, how can he do that without dragging the Dursleys and their treatment of him into the light?

He can’t.

So why bother to try?

“I’m just nervous, is all,” he says. For all that it’s a blatant lie, the man seems to accept it.

“Ah, well, that’s perfectly understandable. I assure you, however, that there is no need to be nervous. I’m certain that any wizard worth his wand would be happy to consider you part of his
Harry takes a moment to consider the very many wizards who wouldn’t. The list is depressingly long.

“Just-” He cuts himself off and takes a deep breath. “Just tell me who my father is.”

“Well, technically, James Potter is still your father.”

“My other father, then,” Harry snaps, not quite managing to stifle his annoyance at the man’s cheerful demeanor.

As if Harry should be grateful for being saddled with another adult who, even if he means well (which is by no means a guarantee considering how deeply Voldemort has dug his claws into all levels of society), will be undoubtedly useless at best and just as out of touch as all the rest.

As if this is a dream come true.

As if he doesn’t already have a dad who died to give him the chance to live.

As if anyone could live up to that.

As if it isn’t fifteen years too late for it to do him any good, anyway.

“Alright, alright, no need to get snippy.” As Mr. Blackspire flicks through the papers in his folder, Harry takes a deep breath, annoyance fading just as quickly as it had flared up. Finally, the man pulls out an official looking certificate, though it’s notably lacking in signatures. “Here we are. Let’s see. Harry James Potter, son of Lily J. and James F. Potter, and… Tom M. Riddle.”

Harry swears his heart stops.

Before he can even stop to think, his wand leaps into his hand, and Mr. Blackspire is thrown back against his chair in a burst of light, slumping over unconscious.

For a moment, he just stands there, not even sure when exactly he’d stood up.

Then, recovering swiftly, he paces forward around the desk and crouches down to reach for the man’s left arm, something in him relaxing when he sees his bare forearm. On one hand, it’s a relief that he hasn’t, in fact, been sitting across from a Death Eater for this whole meeting, as implausible as that would have been considering his oath.

On the other hand, there’s nothing he can do now but face the truth of the matter. Because as much as he hates to admit it, all signs really do point to it being true.

That Voldemort is his-

His-

No.

He takes it back.

He can’t face it.

He doesn’t want to face it.
Even the thought is too much.

If the smile on Mr. Blackspire’s face as he said those words (as if he was sharing good news rather than the world shattering, life ruining fact that it truly was) says anything, it’s that he has no idea who, exactly, Tom M. Riddle is. Which isn’t surprising, considering how Dumbledore likes to keep information close to his chest.

He could tell the man, of course.

But he has no way to prove it.

For all that the general public is now willing to acknowledge Voldemort’s return, neither the Ministry nor the Daily Prophet has issued an apology for the smear campaign they led against him. As such, he has his doubts about whether or not they’d listen to him this time, for all that he longs to believe the masses aren’t so stupid as to believe he’s lying again.

Even worse, if they did believe him... What would they do with the knowledge that Harry Potter, their Chosen One, is the… is somehow related to the very monster they all think he’s destined to destroy?

He shudders.

No. It’s better to keep this knowledge to himself.

For now, at least.

Mr. Blackspire groans, and Harry winces in sympathy when he hears the man’s back crack as he shifts. He stands and takes a step back to avoid crowding him. As he comes back from the effects of the stunner, Harry can almost see the gears turning as he realizes what just happened.

Then, with a gasp, Mr. Blackspire points an accusing finger Harry’s way.

Thankfully, he’s out of reach.

“You stunned me!” the man exclaims.

“Er, yeah, sorry,” Harry says, “It’s a habit.”

The man smooths down his robes with a huff, though he doesn’t look too angry, thankfully.

“Well. It’s not a very polite one,” he grumbles.

“To be fair, it has saved my life a few times,” Harry tells him.

That’s probably more important than being polite. Maybe.

It depends on who he asks.

The man grunts, as if reluctantly acknowledging the truth of that statement, and gestures for Harry to take his seat once more. Harry hesitates, but ultimately does as asked.

“Now,” he says once Harry’s put his wand away and is seated in his chair once more, “I suppose all that’s left to do is alert this Mr. Riddle so we can get you settled.”

“Do you have to?” Harry asks, not with any hope but because he feels like he needs to at least make the attempt, for all that it will most likely be useless.
“Well, yes.”

Harry considers stunning the man again and leaping out the window, but he figures that probably wouldn’t get him very far. As if sensing his thoughts, or maybe just the way his magic is gathering, ready for use, the man shifts warily.

“Is there any particular reason you object so strongly to this arrangement?” Mr. Blackspire asks, his eyes narrowing, no doubt making the connection between the name and Harry’s response, which was too quick to be anything but instinctual. “Do you know this man?”

“No.”

The scar across the back of his hand itches, and Mr. Blackspire looks doubtful.

What can he say to fix this? What would a normal person feel?

“I’m just. Scared, I suppose. I’ve been with the- my family for as long as I can remember. If... Mr. Riddle does take me in, will I ever see them again?”

Okay, so. Not his most convincing.

At least he managed to keep a straight face. Fred and George would have been so disappointed, otherwise. Well. If they knew.

Which, ideally, they never will.

“Mr. Potter,” Mr. Blackspire says with a concerned look, “is there anything you’d like to tell me?”

Yes.

“No.” There are a lot of things he’d like to tell literally anyone, but it doesn’t matter. It never has.

“There’s nothing.”

Mr. Blackspire sighs, as if he’s genuinely disappointed by the answer.

Thankfully, he soon moves on, understanding that as long as Harry refuses to admit to anything being wrong, there’s nothing he can do about it.

“If your current guardians agreed to meet with Mr. Riddle,” the man says,” I’m sure we could come to an arrangement that would please everyone.”

Harry does his best to imagine that meeting, but he has to stop before he bursts into what is probably very inappropriate laughter.

“That’s probably not going to happen,” he says, voice somewhat strangled.

Mr. Blackspire pauses, then, looking as if he's making a very difficult decision. The wait is almost enough to drive Harry mad.

“Well, then,” he finally says, just as Harry is about to tell him to spit it out, “I suppose there is another way.”

“Really? But you said-”

“For all that it is the custom, there is no law that says I must deliver you to Mr. Riddle,” Mr. Blackspire explains, “If, hypothetically, you were to leave my office before I could help establish a
meeting between the two of you, and if you could not be found if or when Mr. Riddle seeks a meeting himself, then there’s nothing I or anyone could do about it. Except perhaps the Ministry, and unless your new guardian involves them, they have no way of knowing there’s anything to be involved in.”

Harry sits in quiet shock. His opinion of Mr. Blackspire has just risen considerably.

“However,” the man says, “if he does decide to seek the Ministry’s aid in recovering you, then there is nothing I can do to stop him.”

Harry nods in understanding.

Seeing this, Mr. Blackspire smiles, though he still looks a bit uncomfortable. A bit frustrated, almost.

It’s a familiar expression to Harry. He sees it all the time when adults think he isn’t looking.

Then, before Harry can change his mind about any of the secrets he’s decided to keep today, Mr. Blackspire stands and excuses himself as he leisurely makes his way out into the hall, saying over his shoulder, his voice carefully neutral, “Do excuse me, Mr. Potter, but I'm afraid I need to grab something from a colleague. I should be back in about five minutes, and then we can go about setting up a meeting.”

Harry watches him leave, feeling unreasonably like he’s just let an opportunity slip away from him. Though, an opportunity for what, exactly, he can’t say.

Frustrated with himself, Harry shakes off this strange, sudden bout of melancholy and heads for the exit himself. This head start is the best chance he’s got to remain out of Voldemort’s clutches, after all, and he’s going to make the most of it.

As much as he hates to think this situation can’t get any worse, as it feels too much like tempting fate, he really can’t imagine that Lord Voldemort, known terrorist and public enemy number one, would turn to the Ministry for aid. Not when news of his resurrection is still so new and everyone is on such high alert.

Which means all he has to do is get back to the Dursleys undetected, contact Dumbledore, and hope that those wards he’s spent years of his life suffering for will do their job until someone can tell him what to do.

Easy.

Chapter End Notes

As always, you can find me on tumblr here

So this was supposed to be out weeks ago but then I got a full time job where thirteen hours of my day are spent either at work or commuting to and from work, and I never really got comfortable with writing on my phone. Also, what free time I did have was spent apartment hunting and eventually moving into my new place (still in progress), where I have no internet access. So. Yeah. I’ve been busy.

Also wills/inheritance/guardianship is super fun and interesting and I got into a bit of a
research spiral which wasn’t helped by my job, where I basically bury myself in court rules and other state materials about practicing law all day, so it took a while to be satisfied with the legal stuff in this chapter (even though it’s literally a story about wizards so I could have written literally anything…)

Anyway I’d love to promise that the next chapter will be out faster, but I start law school in like two weeks so we’ll see
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For what might possibly be the first time in his life, his luck holds.

Within the hour, he’s walking back down Privet Drive after an uneventful trip that consisted of two bus rides (one Muggle, one magical), a long walk, and an even longer conversation with an old Muggle woman who got off at the same stop and wouldn’t stop fawning over the stitching on his cloak, which was apparently much lovelier than anything she’d ever seen achieved with the machines in the shops she normally frequents.

In the end, he’d shrugged the cloak off and given it to her, just to get the conversation to end.

While he’s not entirely sure about the legality of the act, as the cloak was no doubt made using magic, he figures one stray cloak finding its way into a Muggle’s hands is nowhere near the level of catastrophe as flying an entirely visible car above London, so by his own standards it’s hardly even worth mentioning.

And so he isn’t going to mention it.

To anyone.

The car is gone when he finally reaches the house, so he heads around back instead, as his usual watchers would no doubt notice something was up if the front door opened and shut on its own when he’s supposedly the only one in the house.

In the fridge, he finds a plate with a single slice of bread and cheese as well as a handful of nuts that Aunt Petunia had so graciously prepared for him before she left. He scarfs them down, mindful enough to clean the plate and set it in the rack to dry before finally heading upstairs to retreat to his bedroom until the Dursleys return.

As soon as the door swings shut behind him, he folds his invisibility cloak and tucks it away beneath a loose floorboard. Hopefully, Aunt Petunia will be so disgusted by the mere memory of the object that she blocks it from her mind, forgetting to make him put it back with the rest of his things. That done, he flings himself down onto his bed, wincing at the loud screech let off by the metal frame. Right. There’s a reason he’s always slow to get in and out of bed whenever his relatives are around.

Thankfully, they’re not around now.

Unfortunately, neither is Hedwig.

Harry is almost entirely certain she’s with Hermione at the moment, which means she’ll likely be back sometime this evening. And if she isn’t, he can always ring Hermione when the Dursleys have gone to bed and ask his friend to send her back.

Then again, maybe it’d be better if he found one of his Order-appointed babysitters and handed the letter off to them instead. It’d certainly be faster. Probably safer as well…
The memory of Umbridge screening his mail last year is enough to make up his mind.

He reaches down under the bed for his stash of old notebook paper. Sure, it may be crumpled up and faded, but as far as Harry is concerned, it’s blank and therefore still usable. Also, he thinks it’s funny how annoyed some of the Order members get whenever they see it, something Sirius is always gleeful to recount. Alongside the paper, he discovers a partially crushed pen stuck between two of Dudley’s old toys, and he can admit to himself that he’s relieved by the find.

As easy as it would be to sneak a pen from Dudley’s room, Aunt Petunia seems to have a sixth sense for discovering when Harry has been places he shouldn’t be, and if she caught him with the pen, she’d make him regret it.

As utterly ridiculous as it would be to witness, it’s really not something he wants to live through. So he’s more than happy to make do with Dudley’s castoffs.

As always.

Now that all he has to do is start writing, he isn’t sure how to begin.

As he lies there, pen hovering above the page, he can almost hear the lectures about his safety he’s sure to receive when the Order learns of his newest adventure. Which is ridiculous, really, because clearly if this whole ordeal proves anything it’s that he’s more than capable of looking out for himself, thank you very much. After all, if the Order members, who know where he lives and are constantly guarding the house, can’t catch him leaving it, then how could the Death Eaters, who have no idea where he lives?

But that’s not the point, he reminds himself, though it’s certainly a point he’ll make sure to bring up later.

No. The point is, he’s…

He-

He crumples up the sheet of paper in disgust and tosses it over his shoulder before collapsing forward, burying his face in his scratchy sheets.

How is he supposed to tell the Order if he can’t even admit it to himself?

With a groan, he rolls over and reaches for the crumpled up paper again, smoothing it out as he forces himself to sit up and scoot back against the wall.

He has to do this.

And, really, it’s just a few words, right?

How could it possibly be more difficult than facing down a basilisk or tossing off Voldemort’s Imperio?

Squaring his shoulders, he glares down at the empty page. When it doesn’t catch fire with the force of his glare, some of the fight leaves his frame, and he breathes out forcefully.

“I-” he starts, only to cut himself off with a strangled, involuntary protest at the idea of the truth being put into words.

What if someone is listening?
He casts a paranoid look toward his window, but it’s firmly shut, and even distracted as he is, he knows he’d feel it if there were any surveillance charms in his room right now.

All he’s doing now is putting it off, and putting it off won’t help anyone, will it?

“I am-”

He knocks his head back against the wall, presses it there, and finds some relief in the ache that radiates through the back of his skull. He sighs, as heavy as he can.

“I am.” He pauses, takes a steadying breath. “Voldemort’s... son.”

He waits, but the world doesn’t end.

No one bursts through the door, wands blazing.

When he shifts, the metal frame of his bed creaks back at him.

Somewhere down the street, a car alarm goes off.

He’s... fine.

He’s fine.

The worst thing is, when he lets himself think about it, pushing beyond the blank panic that seems to rise automatically at this line of thinking, it isn’t actually that hard to believe. As much as the thought makes him bristle, he can’t deny its truth. Not really.

The memory of Bellatrix’s screaming laughter as he tried and mostly failed (but only mostly) to cast the Crucio presses forward in his mind, and Harry does his best to breathe through it. What does it say, he wonders, that he’s more upset by his failure than the fact that he tried to curse someone (that he tried to curse someone with an Unforgivable) just a few short weeks ago?

What does it say about him that until now, the memory hasn’t bothered him?

He isn’t sure he wants to know the answer.

He gets the feeling he won’t be able to ignore it for long.

By the time he hears the Dursleys return, Harry has two letters sitting before him on the bed. One, meant for Dumbledore, contains a barebones report of his meeting with Mr. Blackspire, more detailed than usual seeing as he intends to hand it off to an Order member rather than send it by owl. It doesn’t actually contain the damning knowledge, but he more than makes up for it with the assurance that the information he’s learned today is both world shattering and time sensitive, and so he’d really appreciate it if Dumbledore could come and retrieve him right now. As in, immediately.

The other is for Sirius.

It’s both more honest and less helpful.

As the door slams open and the heavy tread of Dudley’s footsteps makes its way up the stairs,
Harry tears the letter for Sirius to shreds and wishes hard enough that the pieces crumble to dust in his hands.

It’s less a decision and more an act of self-preservation.

He doesn’t want anyone to know.

Dumbledore needs to know.

Sirius doesn’t.

The first Order member he finds when he leaves the house is Tonks, identified by an indent in the grass beneath her feet and a half-trampled bush nearby. The indent could be anyone, but the destruction of property is so uniquely her that it makes some of the residual tension in his chest die away.

The indent shifts as he wanders closer.

“Wotcher, Tonks,” he greets the air, and the surprised breath she doesn’t quite manage to stifle makes him smile.

Her form shimmers back into visibility, and Harry can’t help but laugh when he sees the exasperated look aimed his way. In contrast to her expression, her hair is a cheerful, sunshine yellow, as if in protest of the persistent cloud cover above them.

“What gave me away?” she asks. Harry nods his head toward the trampled bush, and Tonks sighs, looking put out. With a flick of her wand, the bush grows back into shape, flowers blooming where they weren’t before. “Don’t tell Mad-Eye. I’ll never live it down.”

Harry bites back a smile.

“Alright,” he says, “I won’t tell Moody I figured you out if you don’t tell him I went to London today.”

She nods. Then her eyes widen in surprise.

“London?” she demands. “What were you doing in London?”

Harry shrugs with practiced carelessness.

“Not much,” he says, “Anyway, can you give Dumbledore a letter for me? I’d wait for Hedwig, but I don’t want to risk someone else getting their hands on it.”

“I suppose,” Tonks says, still looking vaguely concerned. “When’d you get back?”

“A couple hours ago.”

“Oh, good. I wasn’t on duty, so I won’t get in trouble for letting you slip by.” When Harry doesn’t laugh like she expects, she narrows her eyes in concern. “What’s wrong?”

“What?” Harry blinks in surprise, caught off guard by the turn in conversation. “Nothing.”

“Did something happen in London?”
“No,” he says, perhaps a bit too quickly.

“Harry.”

“I’m alright, honest.”

Tonks sighs at him. Harry glares, stubborn in his denial.

“Y’know,” she says, “Sirius told me you have a habit of doing this, but I didn’t really believe it would be this bad.”

“Doing what?”

“Trying to hide all your problems.”

“I don’t have any problems.”

Tonks just looks at him, as if she can’t believe he just said that. Harry can’t quite believe it either. He has so many problems.

“Tell me one thing?” Tonks says. When Harry nods hesitantly, she continues, “Are you in danger?”

Harry takes a moment to consider. Is he in danger?

Assuming Mr. Blackspire sent an owl to Voldemort (a thought that makes him simultaneously want to shudder and laugh until he cries) as soon as Harry left, it will probably take at least two days for them to set up a time to meet. From there, he probably has a couple days before Voldemort actually starts to look for him, and a few more before he’s found. Assuming the Death Eaters think to look for him using Muggle means, that is.

“Not yet,” he finally decides. “But I probably will be soon, so if you could get this to Dumbledore as soon as possible, that’d be great.”

That said, he holds out his letter. Tonks accepts it, suddenly looking very concerned. Thankfully, before she can begin to voice that concern, the sound of Dudley’s voice calling his name breaks through the air.

“I’ve got to go,” Harry says, already backing away toward the house. He pastes a reassuring smile on his face. “Thanks for the delivery!”

Before Tonks can reply, he jogs the rest of the way across the lawn and disappears inside, shoving down the ever persistent feeling that he’s just let something important pass him by as he goes.

As the days continue to pass without a reply, he can feel himself becoming paranoid enough to match Moody.

He checks in with Tonks whenever she’s on duty, but each day, all she does is shake her head, looking more and more frustrated until, finally, he stops asking.

For all that the questions stop, however, the paranoia doesn’t, which is why, as he’s walking down Privet Drive one evening with a bag of groceries in his arms, his cloak is tucked away beneath one of Dudley’s more atrocious castoffs. As ugly as this particular shirt is, it makes up for it in its ability to turn his body into enough of a formless mass that he gets not even one strange look at the
Well, okay, he gets plenty of strange looks, but those are mostly about the clothes, not whatever might be underneath them.

He lets himself into the house and stops, frowning, when he hears a man's voice from the living room. He’s almost distracted enough to let the door slam shut behind him, but he catches it just in time, slowly closing it the rest of the way as he shifts his grip on the groceries.

It’s a voice he doesn’t recognize, but something about it feels almost… familiar.

As he heads for the kitchen, he sneaks a glance into the living room and catches sight of red hair. For a moment, hope flares in his chest. Then he looks again and realizes that the shade is far too dark to belong to a Weasley.

With a sigh, he shakes his head at himself and nudges open the door to the kitchen, faltering when he sees Dudley standing before the fridge.

His cousin doesn’t say anything, but the long suffering look on his face as Aunt Petunia’s false laughter spills from the living room is enough to make Harry feel as if, for once, he and his cousin are on the same page. The larger boy shuffles aside, oddly obliging as Harry moves to put away the cold foods.

The low, soothing voice of the strange man in the living room makes Harry move faster than he usually would.

Neither his aunt nor his uncle like to have him around when guests are in the house, but between the two of them, Aunt Petunia holds the biggest grudge over the Dobby-induced pudding incident, so he wants to remove himself from hearing range as quickly as possible.

Aunt Petunia lets out another laugh, this one verging on a giggle, and Harry smirks when he hears Dudley grunt in dismay at the sound.

“Something wrong?” he asks.

“Shut up.” Dudley crosses his arms and slouches against the counter, watching Harry work. A moment passes, then another, before Dudley finally says, “Mum’s flirting with him.”

“That is what it sounds like.”

“I don’t like it.” Harry snorts, and Dudley immediately stands tall, puffing himself up. Harry suddenly remembers that his cousin is a boxer. “You think it’s funny?”

“No,” Harry quickly replies. He eyes Dudley’s clenched fists warily. “It’s none of my business, is all.”

Dudley scoffs.

“Right,” he says. His angry scowl turns thoughtful. “Do you reckon we should interrupt them?”

Harry pauses in putting away a can of beans. He turns an incredulous look on the larger boy.

“I just said it’s none of my business.”

Dudley ignores him. He pries the can out of Harry’s hand, places it on the counter, and drags Harry by the arm back into the hall. Harry tries to jerk free of his hold, but unfortunately for him a lot of
that weight his cousin carries is muscle, so he doesn’t manage to get away until they’re already stood in the doorway.

Harry only has time for one last furious glare at his cousin before he’s faced with Aunt Petunia’s own threatening stare. Even if he could somehow communicate without speaking that his presence before her is entirely Dudley’s fault, he knows she wouldn’t be satisfied.

He edges backward.

“Ah,” the stranger says with a charming smile, “This must be your son. Dudley, yes?”

Harry takes another step back, but before he can leave the room entirely, the man’s gaze turns on him.

“And who is this?”

The question sounds innocent, but Harry could swear that something sinister lurks behind it. He just doesn’t understand why.

“My nephew,” his aunt explains, voice tight, “We took him in after his parents died.”

The stranger tsks.

“How awful,” he drawls. He casts another smile Aunt Petunia’s way. “And how good of you to take him in.”

Harry’s wand hand twitches.

“Boys,” his aunt says, “this is Jim Bailey. He’s thinking about buying a house nearby.”

It’s clear to Harry, and Dudley too judging by the way his jaw is clenched so tight Harry fears his teeth might crack, that she very much wants him to buy a house nearby.

The man, Jim, stands and strides over to them, offering his hand. Dudley shakes it with a bruising grip, but the man doesn’t even flinch. Instead, he smiles, and his dull brown eyes gleam with barely suppressed laughter. Clearly, he’s also caught onto Aunt Petunia’s desire and his cousin’s resulting ire.

As much as Harry dislikes his aunt, he likes the thought of some creep playing with her emotions even less, even if it’s just because any emotional turmoil she feels will be paid unto him threefold, so his already low impression of the man (why is he so Merlin-damned familiar?) drops even lower.

When it’s his turn to shake the man’s hand, he does so reluctantly.

“Pleased to meet you,” he says shortly. By the annoyed glare his aunt sends him from where she’s still seated on the couch, he doesn’t do a very good job at sounding welcoming. Too bad he doesn’t care. “I’m-”

“Harry Potter,” the man says for him, and Harry thinks his heart must stop.

The world falls away beneath his feet.

He’s heard this man say his name before, he realizes, for all that the voice is different. He knows that look in his eyes.
That hungry, hateful look.

He’s seen it in exactly two faces.

Now he’s seen it in three.

Voldemort’s grip on his hand tightens, and a different sort of smile stretches across his face. Plain features, once so charming, turn sinister. Harry feels the monster’s nails dig into the flesh of his hand.

The pain is grounding.

It clears the fog from his brain and his lungs, and he takes a breath.

Then another.

Aunt Petunia rises from the couch, but it’s like she’s moving in slow motion.

Without thinking, Harry tears free of Voldemort’s grasp, and his hand comes away red, deep scratches across the back of his hand already welling with blood.

He stumbles backward.

When Voldemort moves to follow him, Harry grabs the nearest object, a gaudy, crystal vase that Marge gave to Aunt Petunia three years ago, and throws it. It shatters in midair, caught by a wordless spell, but by then Harry is already down the hall.

Time passes like the frames of an old, Muggle film.

One breath, and he’s past his cupboard.

Another, and the kitchen door bangs against the wall.

Another, and he’s tearing into the back garden, yellow light spilling across the grass. It rained just a few short hours ago, and the damp earth squishes against his socked feet as he runs.

When he thinks back to this night, hours, days, or years later, he doesn’t remember jumping the neighbor’s fence or rounding the shed. He doesn’t remember stumbling across a rose bush or finally managing to pull his cloak free or the way his lungs burned as he ran.

What he remembers is this: his aunt’s scream can be heard even three houses away.

He’s never felt more like a coward.

Chapter End Notes

That's right, Voldemort in disguise calls himself Jim, as in short for James, be he's just that much of a bastard.

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