these were the lovely bones:

by endoftheline7

Summary

“I think that if you decided not to go back, you would be able to… let's say… board a train.”

“And where would it take me?”

“On,” said Dumbledore simply.

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A story about loss, love, and life after death.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

this is not a happy story lol, but i hope you like.
also yes this has a LOT of angst but most of all it is a story about healing. i'm not planning what you'd call a happy ending but it will be a hopeful one

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PROLOGUE: KING'S CROSS (REVISED).

MAY 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1998, TIME UNKNOWN.

KING'S CROSS STATION, BEYOND.

HARRY

“I think that if you decided not to go back, you would be able to… let’s say… board a train.”

“And where would it take me?”

“Oh,” said Dumbledore simply.

For a second, Harry let himself consider it. It was warm and peaceful here and Harry hadn't had that for a long, long time. For the most part, his youth had been misspent fighting great evils, hidden and waiting to pounce on him at every corner. He'd barely had a chance to catch his breath. Sometimes, in the quiet moments, usually spent with Ron and Hermione, he would sit and revel in it, knowing that he would need such a memory one day. For a Patronus. For an especially hopeless time. For King's Cross Station, stuck with the impossible decision between what was right and what was easy.

But it wasn't that black and white. Going back would be the easier decision, in some ways: his friends, whom he loved with such a passion and a power that it humbled him. To abandon them would be the hardest thing in the world. But then, on the other hand, it was the harder. Going back meant pain and horror and death. Going on would be selfish beyond belief; it would be so, so easy to let this peace envelop him, swallow him whole; it would be so easy to be selfish.

Imagine it, he thought. All that atrocity, gone. The fate that had shackled him half his life, gone. He would finally get to breathe, come up for air. He'd been holding his breath for a while. He wanted, more than anything, to exhale. To take a long train ride and never return. To see his mother and father, to see Sirius and Dumbledore and Dobby, Fred and Remus, Tonks, Cedric, Hedwig, his dear friends, his lost loved ones. Fierce, wild sorrow was lodged in his throat like a caged bird, yearning, thrashing to break free.

Devastation racked his body. He wanted to fucking wail with it all, the grief and the terror, and sink to the ground and give up. He wanted to hibernate for a lifetime or two.

But going on was too hard. The faces of Ron and Hermione flashed behind his eyes, Ginny, Luna, the Weasleys. His family. His world. He had died for them and he'd do it again in a heartbeat; his love for them was righteous and true and unmatched – it was why they would win, in the end. Why
they would beat Voldemort. Love was a magic that Voldemort did not understand, but Harry felt it right to his bones. It hollowed him out and filled him. It was so _big_, it drowned out everything, drowned it so that nothing else seemed to matter.

He had died for his friends. Now, he would have to live for them.

The choice between what was right and what was easy – a sweet lie, to help him be brave, to allow him moments of reprieve, a sliver of selfishness. But it had never been a choice at all.

His fate had been decided before he'd even taken his first steps.

Chapter End Notes

-aNyway i think depressed harry would consider his options
“Are you frightened?” she asked. Harry shook his head, but she could see, from where his hands were knotted together in his lap, that they were shaking.

“It'll be alright, mate,” Ron reassured from Harry's other side. They had flanked him, subconsciously. To protect him from what, she didn't know. “Just tell the truth,” Ron urged. “There's nothing to worry about.”

Only a week after the 'Battle of Hogwarts', as the Prophet had dubbed it, the wizarding world still reeling, election campaigns for the next Minster for Magic had begun. Kingsley Shacklebolt had won the election with a landslide result, his war efforts and endorsements from many fellow fighters highly valued by the public. Hermione herself had vouched for him, giving a concise, detached statement to an especially persistent journalist. *It's time for change,* she had said, and her heart had soared as the election results came in.

“My first action as Minster will be to bring the detained Death Eaters to justice,” Kingsley had declared. “I will preside over the hearings myself. It is our responsibility to tear down the corruption and evil of these last years, before we can build a new Ministry, and more importantly, a new world.”

In a move of unbelievable altruism, Harry had attended the funeral of every victim of the battle, even those he hadn't known. He had often hidden at the back, silent and sullen. He hadn't even found words for his loved ones, had only pressed the tips of his fingers against his tears and smudged the salt of his sorrow upon their gravestones. After, had shied from publicity and had even submitted his ballot by owl, refusing to leave the gloomy refuge of Grimmauld Place. It was like that first month of their Horcrux search – trapped, unable to step outside, terrified of a simple creak of floorboards. This was his first time properly out in wizarding society since he had won the war, a society that, bar for one year, had always glorified him. Now, more than ever, he would be adored.

Hermione knew how he despised it. They all did. Harry wasn't built for fame, but he endured it nonetheless.

“Promise?” he asked, voice so quiet and hesitant, childlike and vulnerable like she had never seen him. More people were beginning to file in, their eyes going wide at the sight of Harry in the front row, glasses and scar and all. Whispers rushed like the tide throughout the crowd, the excitement they were exuding itching its way under Harry's collar, his skin.

“Promise,” Ron said, steady and sincere, clasping Harry's hand and squeezing. His eyes found hers, and Hermione's stomach flipped. She allowed him a secret smile, tremulous with words unsaid, just for them. He returned it with faint sorrow.

Sadness hung thick and heavy between them, as it had this last month and a half, its presence relentless. She had stayed only a week or two, attending the funerals she needed to, before pressing a
kiss to Ron's cheek and Harry's forehead, and escaped to Australia, seeking her parents. Modifying their memories in the first place had been a gargantuan task, and undoing her work had been harder still. To conceal the existence of a daughter, even if only temporarily, was complicated and arduous and even now, supposedly restored to their former states of being, her parents still had trouble remembering details of once-treasured memories.

They had been so angry with her at first. She had thought their rage would never subside, unspoken hostility creeping around the house on the tips of its toes, too scared to make a sound. She had longed for Ron and Harry and the Burrow but had been far too afraid that if she left her parents now then their relationship would be ruined forever. It wasn't until they'd heard her screaming in her sleep that they had finally embraced her and let her cry and tell them all that she had lost.

They had forgiven her. She had promised to visit, often, and had packed a small bag and Apparated away. The minute she'd set foot on the Weasley property she had felt the grief surrounding it and had almost choked.

"Here we go," Ron remarked, watching Kingsley take his seat, and the court fell silent around them.

The great doors swung open with a whine, and Draco Malfoy was escorted in. His head was bowed, platinum hair the only visible distinguishable feature of his. His body, perhaps, held echoes of the boy he once was. He had always been tall and slender. But now he had lost weight, worryingly, his clothes hung loose around his form. They had all lost weight. He was limp as he was manoeuvred into the chair in the centre of the courtroom; he didn't even flinch as the chains wound their way around his wrists and ankles.

"Disciplinary hearing of the eighteenth of June," Kingsley began, and Malfoy's offences were then listed, cruel and stark in the unforgiving courtroom. Attempting to kill Dumbledore, multiple times. Aiding and assisting Voldemort. Fighting alongside Death Eaters in the Battle of Hogwarts.

Malfoy finally looked up, drawing in a steady breath as he did so. He lifted his chin, jaw clenched. It was not a move of defiance or pride, but one of composure. Hermione had known Malfoy a long time. A sneering mouth and narrowed eyes were his defences, his attempts to maintain the façade he had been forced to create in his rigid, pureblood family. His gaze was darting across the courtroom with fearful curiosity, before it finally found them.

He didn't lock eyes with Hermione – he was looking right at Harry, who was undoubtedly staring right back. Colour spilled across Malfoy's pale cheeks, his mask of indifference fell, mouth parting in shock. Hermione could see his fists were clenched and his knuckles white. She had been as surprised as he was, when she'd first heard of Harry's intentions. She and Ron had received an owl a few days previous, the letter rife with scribbles and spelling mistakes and stress.

To my dear Ron and Hermione, it had read.  
*I'm sorry you haven't seen much of me recently. It's been so fuc a lot. I've just been wallowing for a bit but I needed the time and space and now I feel a bi better. I've missed you both so much and even though I haven't been great at replying i'm have been grateful for your messages and updates about everything. Mione, I'm so glad you got your parents back. Ron, I'm so sorry things have been difficult at the Burrow.*

*I'm writing to let you both know I'm ready to leave Grimmauld Place – Ron, is there space for me at the Burrow next week? I understand if not, considering everything. I know it's a lot to ask and I can easily stay somewhere else. I just want to be around people again. I feel like i've been incredibly selfish by not being around. We're all suffering. Ron, I'd love to help your family in any way I can.*
Before that (the text here had been illegible, smudged. The discernible words hadn't been spelt correctly. Hermione had wondered if he'd been drunk while writing it) ministry of magic, in a b&b nearby. I know you might not approve but on the seventeenth of june they're holding Mrs Malfoy's trial and I feel obligated to speak for her – after everything she did, saving me and stuff. The next day is malfys. I know he's been awful and shitty and merlin he was so bad to you mione, I always knew he was a bully but he crossed some lines with you, and I don't want to defend him for his racism and fascism (basically) but I cant not. He was a kid and he didn't have much of a chance to begin with & when he realised it was too late and he didn't want to be a death eater, he didn't!! He's not on trial for being small minded in school he's on trial for 'helping' voldemort and I will not let someone go to azkaban for things they did in such impossible circumstances, especialy when I saw some of it firsthand.

I dont forgive him. Not by a long shot. In fact, I still fucking hate him. Im worried when I see him i'll hex him. But that isn't the point. Who would I be if I didn't recognise that he resisted V when he could and anything he did do for him was under duress. We can say now that we would NEVER do that but we don't know. We weren't in his position. Im so so sorry if this pains you and I know it might. If it does I hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive me. But you know where i'll be on wednesday and thursday and if you want to join me you are more than welcome.

I encourage you to speak for him also. I love you both and if you arent angry, if you understand even a little where im coming from, by all means join me. Askaban is not a fair fate for malfoy, as much of an arsehole as he is. I will happily apologise for defending him but I'm afraid my mind cant be changed. I hope I'll see u later this week.

All the love in the world,
your harry. x

Hermione had read it and understood instantly. Ron had taken some thawing, after the initial bewilderment. But the idea that they would love him any less… Harry's smile had been blinding at the sight of them. He had been clear and passionate as he spoke for Narcissa Malfoy. But now, speaking for Draco, his long-term childhood nemesis, he was far more uncertain. It would be harder to defend Malfoy, who had been more than a simple pawn.

He looked as though he were about to cry where he sat, eyes fixed on Harry as the trial progressed. His twisted expression of agony didn't relent until Harry's name was called. As a witness for the defence.

Malfoy had clearly been expecting a far different motive on Harry's part. The sound he made was audible in the otherwise quiet courtroom, a breathy hitch in his throat, caught in gratitude and shock and terror. He didn't follow Harry as he stood and made his way to the stand, and instead his eyes bore into the spot he had just vacated, the nerves jumping off him like electric. His gaze flitted to Hermione, searching for any indication of what was about to occur. She steadied herself. And smiled.

Hermione considered herself educated. She knew that racism and bigotry, most especially when concerning people of Draco's age, was born from ignorance. All he had been exposed to for his first eleven years was Lucius Malfoy's backwards beliefs. His upbringing had been entirely insular. She wanted to forgive him, knowing what his position on this blood purity nonsense was now. But it didn't make it any easier – she knew prejudice, knew it firsthand. Going from black in the muggle world to muggleborn in the wizarding world had acquainted her with racism in all of its many forms. And they liked to pretend that colour wasn't an issue, at Hogwarts, but she'd heard the hushed remarks directed toward her and Parvati, from time to time.
Harry had told her what he had seen of Malfoy during the war, through Voldemort's eyes. He had grown up. Realised the error of his childish beliefs. He wasn't that foolish, bigoted little boy anymore. By no means should they forget all that he had said and done, Harry had said, but they should understand how he had changed.

“I know it's difficult,” Harry had said, once she and Ron had arrived in London and made themselves at home in his tiny room. Hermione was more open to hearing his opinions on Malfoy than perhaps anybody else. Harry hadn't had it easy either. The Dursleys had resented their half-Indian nephew and shut him in a cupboard for a decade; he could comprehend her anger better than Ron, for example.

Harry had urged her to speak for Malfoy but she couldn't. Bile rose in her throat at the very thought of defending a boy who had said, and undoubtedly thought, such vile things about her blood status, maybe even the colour of her skin. She would support Harry, always, but she wouldn't speak for Malfoy. Not in a million years.

But he had grown and so had she. She wouldn't speak for him but she allowed him a smile, one of reassurance. Harry was more kind and gracious than Draco could begin to imagine. He had no need to fear.

“How long have you known the defendant?” Kingsley was asking. Harry looked beyond uncomfortable.

“Seven years in Septe- no, August.” At Kingsley's puzzled look, he clarified, “we met in Diagon Alley, just before our first year at Hogwarts.”

“And your relationship?”

Harry paused. “Hostile,” he answered truthfully. “I'd be lying if I said it was entirely one-sided, but he was always nasty to my friends and I. We never got on. It was silly, when we were younger – that typical house rivalry stuff. But it became clear as time went on that he was more, um.” He cleared his throat. Somebody sniffed a few benches behind Hermione. It was all incredibly loud in the silence. “He was more inclined to the side of the Death Eaters than my own, when the war first began.”

“You don't deny he was allied with them?”

“Not at all. In fact, I... I was completely convinced, back in my sixth year, that he was unchangeably evil.”

“What do you believe now?” Kingsley inquired. Hermione admired his detached tone. There was no predisposed bias – this was a trial, not a condemnation.

“He was just... scared. He was as scared as all of us.”

JUNE 18th 1998, 14:29.

LEVEL TEN, MINISTRY OF MAGIC. LONDON, ENGLAND.

The trial had felt as though it were stretching on forever. Harry had been as clear and as passionate as he had been with Draco's mother, if not without a tiny touch of resentment at times. Draco had looked especially shamed here, wincing at his past self. Hermione had, unconsciously, pitied him. It all flew out the window, however, when he approached them afterwards. They were standing at the water cooler and taking a breather after the hour they had spent cooped up in a room that had been stuffy with disgust and reluctant understanding. Hermione felt as though she were in a light-hearted
sitcom, catching up with distant colleagues on the latest office gossip. A water cooler in a magical government building. The hero of the wizarding world defending a disgraced Death Eater. The day was filled with contradictions.

“I know you may not want to hear it,” Malfoy started, eyes on Harry; Hermione could see he was quite literally swallowing his pride, his throat bobbing, “but I'd like to say thank you. I know it can't have been easy, doing what you did. I'm free because of you.”

It was true – unavoidably so. Harry's testimony had swung it all. Luna's words hadn't been unheard: despite being captive in the dungeons of Malfoy Manor for months, she spoke wonderfully in favour of his acquittal. He had always been kind to her, she'd said. He'd apparently seemed as though he was just as much a prisoner as she was, simply without the locks and bars. To Luna, at least.

But there were a fair few victims of Voldemort and his followers, in that room. Luna alone would not have been enough. But Harry Potter, their golden boy, their saviour, the Boy who Lived… his word was final. If he thought Draco Malfoy should go free then go free he would.

Ron had followed, far more reluctant but nearly as convincing. He'd called Malfoy a git and a prat and the court had laughed. But his solemn assurance of Harry's testimony had been the last building block to clearing Malfoy of all charges. If those who hated him so much didn't believe that Azkaban was a deserving fate, then it was truly out of the question.

“Thank you for saying that,” Hermione eventually said, when it looked as though the boys wouldn't reply. Malfoy looked to her and shot her a weak, grateful smile.

“Yeah,” Harry suddenly said, words coming in a broken, confusing rush. “It's like – I just – I mean… I didn't do it for you, really. I did it because it was right. But, it's nice. To hear you appreciate it. I hope you use your freedom well, Malfoy.”

Malfoy's expression was unreadable, until Harry extended his hand. Malfoy flushed and swallowed, eyes going all soft as he looked down at Harry's hand. Hermione thought it wasn't pride stuck in his throat this time, though she was unaware of its true identity. It would be a tiny misunderstanding she would trouble over late at night. Some people counted sheep when they couldn't sleep. Hermione counted the things she didn't understand.

Malfoy took Harry's hand and shook it. Then, with a short nod to all of them, he turned on his heel and strode away.

“Weird guy,” Ron said, observing, without venom.

Hermione caught a glimpse of him again in the Atrium, where she sat alone on the damp ridge of the fountain while Ron and Harry wasted time at the café. The fountain had been replaced. Gone was the 'Magic is Might' monument – this new statue was reminiscent of the Fountain of Magical Brethren, only there was no order of deference now, they were equals. 'Et nos unum sumus', the inscription read. We are one. Hermione appreciated the sentiment but felt as though the gesture was lacking in any real follow-through. The hordes of Ministry employees swanning around her would look at the statue and think equality, brilliant! and go home to their house elf making them dinner, swallowing the food down along with their performative politics.

Malfoy was stood with a crowd of quiet Slytherins, leaning against the wall. Pansy Parkinson had her head on his shoulder as he stared across the room at Harry. He was too far for Hermione to consider his face. Bulstrode had spotted her, however, and had broken away from the group to make her way over. Hermione stiffened, readying her politeness like a weapon.
“Hello,” Millicent said.

“Hi.”

Millicent had fled from Hogwarts but she hadn't fought alongside the Death Eaters. In fact, Malfoy and Goyle were her only housemates that had. She wouldn't be standing trial.

“Sorry,” she said. “About all of it. The way we all treated you.”

“That's alright,” Hermione replied awkwardly. “A lot of the earlier instances were just… children being children, I suppose.”

“Not the later instances.”

“No,” Hermione confirmed. “No, they were different.”

Silence fell between them. Hermione wanted, desperately, for Harry and Ron to return.

“I… here,” Millicent finally said, fumbling with a scrap of paper, handing it to Hermione. “It's not much, and obviously you don't have to, but… well. Mum's a muggle, but she knows about all of this. And, she's um. She's a therapist. I thought you or your friends might want to… you know. If you need to.”

Hermione looked at the scrap of paper, edges jagged where it had been torn from a larger sheet. On it, Millicent had hastily scrawled an address and a phone number. Dr Joyce Bulstrode.

“Thank you,” Hermione whispered, surprised at the kindness of it. Millicent nodded jerkily in reply.

“Goodbye, Granger,” she said. “I hope I'll see you again, one day.”

She was gone in a rush of robes as Hermione bid her a brusque farewell. The war had changed them all, irreversibly. Millicent and her Slytherin friends had once been nothing more than bullies, in Hermione's mind. Now they were merely more victims, the only difference being that they had been stuck across enemy lines, prisoners of war. This small kindness had not been an act of cruelty – once upon a time, it would've been a fuck you, you're messed up! – but an olive branch, extended. If they needed, there was help out there. If they needed.

“Was that Bulstrode?”

It was Ron. Ron, oh Ron; when she was seventeen her head had been so full of him. She had let Cormac press his mouth against her neck, hitch up her skirt, fuck her, and had thought only of Ron, known he was fucking Lavender. She wasn't one for casual sex, really – she and Viktor had definitely had something, at the time, and her short-lived romance with a Greek muggle one summer had been both sweet and educational. But Ron just wouldn't look at her, not like that, and it had made her heart ache, made her lash out and let Cormac touch her. But he hadn't been good enough. He hadn't been Ron. Their kiss, their one kiss, wild and brilliant and fleeting, had come unbidden. She had loved him so very much and he had kissed her back, lifting her from her feet. It's now or never, he had said to Harry.

Then Harry had died and come back and won the war and then it was never. It had just never seemed like the right time, since. At first the notion had been ridiculous: Fred was dead and any attempt to kindle a romance would be unfair to him, to his memory. They owed him some time, allocated it for mourning. And after she'd returned to him, her parents' forgiveness bright in her heart, she just… hadn't. She'd been the one to kiss Ron, back then, she reasoned. It was his move now.
“What did she say?” Harry asked, sipping tea from a polystyrene cup, the steam rolling off it in waves.

Hermione knew Harry inside out, knew him always. He needed this. But she couldn't say it here, in public, or even in front of Ron. She was his refuge, usually, in times of vulnerability, and it tended to humiliate him so when he showed real, emotional weakness to Ron. He was proud. So was Ron, so was Malfoy, so were so many of the boys Hermione knew. The truth was that Harry was so far from the perfect superhero the Prophet were making him out to be – he was flawed and hurt and hell, he still subscribed to such redundant gender roles (men shouldn't cry, shouldn't show emotion, at least not to each other). So did Ron. She loved them all the same.

So she took the tea that Ron held out to her, gulped it down and barely winced as it scalded her tongue. There was something brilliant out there waiting for them. She and Ron would find one another again and somehow, she would convince Harry to meet with Millicent's mother. And he would get help. He would talk, about all of it. Unburden himself. Realise that superhero or not, he was a beautiful, brave boy who was deserving of the whole world and more. He would have all the tea he wanted. He would live.

“Nothing important.”
Harry had been shuffling from foot to foot for a good five minutes now. He was late. Of course he was late – he'd had so many reservations about coming in the first place. Hermione had waited until Ron had gone to take a bath on the evening of the trial, and had pressed a scrap of paper into his palm like a kiss. Her hands had been soft and cool and she'd brought one up to cup his cheek, explaining in a steady tone what the note meant.

“You've been through so much, Harry. Just think on it,” she'd pleaded, thumb stroking along the rise of his cheekbone.

He'd tossed and turned for days on end. Now, here he was, late for his appointment, scuffing the curb in his old trainers. The Bulstrodes lived in a busy place amongst busy people, their house overlooking the main road, their fences high and front drive tiny, a far cry from the suburban hellscape of Privet Drive, or even the sweet community atmosphere of Godric's Hollow. He felt a pang at the thought of it. Of Millicent, growing up here, with her two parents and their busy neighbours on their busy street.

He'd never had that. He never would.

He almost hated himself for thinking it – it hadn't been so bad, once he'd gotten to Hogwarts. Ron and Hermione and the rest of the Weasleys had been family enough, a welcome embrace, a warm companion. It almost made him Apparate right back to the Burrow and take Mrs Weasley in his arms, thank her for being the mother he never got the chance to know, for her unbelievable, inexplicable love for him.

“Are you going to stand out there all day?”

Millicent was standing on her front step, the door wide open behind her. Harry felt his cheeks heat at her light teasing, and envied her for her ease. He was finally able to make his feet move, carrying him toward her with an unspoken reluctance. His scruffy shoes and baggy clothes looked out of place before their clean-cut house: red-brick, semi-modern, beautifully gardened. The interior was just as picture perfect and spotless, decorated with still family photographs and crystal ornaments. It was the house of a well-to-do middle class family who had a roast every Sunday and told each other everything and had rabbits called bubble and squeak.

Harry was led up a carpeted, half-turn staircase, and trailed his fingertips along the varnished wooden bannister, trying to ignore the thudding of his heart. Merlin, this was a bad idea. Millicent had never been personally cruel to him but she was pally with all those snide Slytherins; if Parkinson, for example, got hold of the information that Harry was in therapy, he'd never hear the end of it.

You aren't in school anymore, a traitorous voice in his head reminded him. He missed Hogwarts something fierce. All of it. Even the Slytherins. If only he could rewind back to a time like third year, when it hadn't all been so much, when school had just been school…
“Mr Potter.” A tall, older woman stood in a doorway off the landing. Millicent was gone in an instant, ducking past him to retreat downstairs. “I'm Joyce,” she said, holding her hand out.

“Hullo,” he replied, taking the handshake, voice stiff. Joyce had a warm, open face, and brown, greying hair that fell just past her shoulders. There were lines of age on her face but they suited her, gave her character, identified her as an expressive woman to have such lines when she was likely only in her mid-forties. She was built similarly to her daughter, in that what had once been wide and rotund had developed into a womanly, ample figure. She wore smart trousers but her shirt was untucked and patterned; a lilac base and a floral print. It made Harry's eyes hurt.

“Please, come in, take a seat.”

Behind her was a small room with a few armchairs, two of which were facing another. A large bookcase took up the space along one wall, a desk sitting against another. If her outfit said trying, an attempt to distance herself from the title of doctor and humanise her to patients, then her office practically screamed it. Abstract art hung from one wall, an armchair was covered by a psychedelic throw, a tin of biscuits was balanced on a side table. It was meant to be inviting, to ease the fears of its inhabitants, remove itself from its associations to the barren walls of hospitals. Harry wasn't fooled. Harry was just as nervous as ever.

“Sorry I'm late,” he said, sinking into one of the chairs, heartbeat a drum rhythm beneath his ribs.

“No need to apologise,” she said. “Many of my patients experience nerves before their first session.”

“Do you, uh.” He coughed, uncomfortable. “Do you talk to many wizards?”

The word felt so bizarre here, in this painfully muggle abode, before this painfully muggle woman. She smiled, humoured by his obvious wariness.

“Not many,” she said. “There aren't a lot of therapists out there who are aware of the magical community, and vice versa. Of the wizards who do know of us, most are scornful of such muggle remedies to things. This is why I'm so willing to see you – in my world, the muggle world, this would be a grave conflict of interest. But you have very few other options.”

“Oh. Right.”

He didn't have anything to add, and looked away from her, worried beyond belief about the session ahead of him. What would it entail? How much did she already know about him, and about the war? What was she like? He scanned her bookcase, eyes picking out titles, trying to analyse her in turn. He drifted past the academic works to the higher shelves, finding the novels. The Handmaid's Tale – a feminist, then. Pride and Prejudice – a romantic, perhaps. Nineteen Eighty-Four – a revolutionary?

“So, why are you here, Harry? Can I call you Harry?”

“Yes.” At his lack of elaboration and expression that was likely rife with supreme unrest, she smiled, a soft, dreamy sort of thing. It made him think of Luna. He suddenly missed her so, so much. He resolved to owl her once he got back to the Burrow.

“This isn't an interrogation, Harry,” she assured. “I just want to know your thought process.”

“I've, um. I've been through a lot, I suppose.” He cringed at the sound of it. Woe is me. How pathetic. “I don't know where to start. I'm sure you know the bulk of it.”

“Well let's pretend I don't,” she suggested. “Let's pretend I'm completely and utterly clueless. That I don't know who you are.” Harry smiled, huffed, looked away. She was trying. It was endearing, in a
There was only so much to say about his first eleven years. His first year on earth had been, from what he could garner, the basis of a wonderful, fulfilling life. Formative years, and all – they'd been good, which Joyce would likely consider an advantage, psychologically. Loving parents and a happy home. Everything had been going to plan; as much as it could, amidst a war. But tragedy had struck. Dead parents, a piece of Voldemort's soul within him. And then, the Dursley's: a cupboard for a bedroom and skipped meals, an oppressive, hostile atmosphere. His only friends had been the spiders under the stairs.

“They sound neglectful,” Joyce remarked. “Abusive, even.”

“Dudley wasn't so bad, in the end. He was a child, I suppose, and he wasn't really exposed to much else. But there was little love lost there.”

“You must have been very lonely.”

“I didn't know any different.”

“Until you went to Hogwarts?”

It was impossible to speak of Hogwarts without warmth infusing his tone, fondness and nostalgia shaping his explanations of his first introductions to the world of magic and to Ron and Hermione, his real family, the only family that mattered. They had stood by his side in the fight for the Philosopher's Stone, the investigation into the Chamber, Sirius' appearance, the Triwizard Tournament, the war. Even now. Hermione had refused to defend Malfoy and Ron had taken some convincing; neither had been happy about his choice. But they had come nonetheless. They had supported him, unconditionally.

Joyce asked if they were the people he was closest to in the world, and he could only nod, once again humbled by his love for them. He leaned back in the armchair, swallowing past the lump in his throat, eyes flickering again to her bookcase. He sifted through the titles in his mind, took deep breaths. He had never been so honest, so personal, with somebody he'd just met. Harry felt as though he were on the edge of a cliff – what he had shared so far was only the verge of it. Below him was a great, steep drop into misery.

“Who did you lose?” she eventually asked, the session having ticked by quickly, covering, briefly, his earlier traumas. He could barely speak the words, their names thick on his tongue. She softened. “How many did you lose?” she amended.

“A fair few,” he confessed, attempting to lighten it with dry humour. But it fell flat. There was no amusement in loss. “And I just...”

Joyce didn't say anything. Here it came: the fall from the cliff.

“I miss them,” he admitted. “I do. I feel like I could've done more, I could've saved more. Sometimes I wish...”

Silence. Only the sound of wind in his ears as he allowed himself, this once, to grieve.

“Sometimes I wish it had been me instead. I wish I'd stayed dead.”

“It's not like you had much of a choice,” Joyce reasoned.

“I did,” Harry countered, remembering, vividly, like it was yesterday, his short time at King's Cross
Station. The choice he had been given. It had haunted him for months – what would have happened, if he'd done things differently? Perhaps he'd be happier, now. Perhaps he wouldn't feel so lost. “Call it what you will: limbo, purgatory, the afterlife. But there was something, after I died. A form of existence. And I had a choice! War or peace. Life or death. I made a choice that changed everything and I can't stop wondering if I made the wrong one.”

A deafening click sounded throughout the room; Joyce's timer, which had been balanced on the desk. It undoubtedly marked the end of the session.

“And you chose life,” Joyce observed, ignoring it.

“I chose life,” he confirmed.

She looked at him with the most pitying expression. What must she have thought? A boy not yet eighteen, and he'd already died once. He'd already lost so much. She swallowed her emotion, informed him of the time, rising leisurely to her feet and approaching her desk. Harry joined her, pulling himself from the comfortable quicksand of the armchair, feeling the grief gripping at his heart loosen its claws, sinking, settling in his stomach. Joyce was now leaning against the desk, calendar in her hands, considering him. It was like a muggle form of Legilimency, he thought. Analysing him in his quiet moments.

“Can I see you next week?” she asked. Harry's mouth went dry. This, again. Of course – it was a process. Healing took time. So did living.

So he nodded, watching her write him in. Her movements were slow and controlled, and Harry longed to have that. He felt as if everything had been frantic lately, running at a pace beyond him, as though he were about to trip over his own feet with the speed of it.

“Will you do something for me? I won't force you,” she assured, “but I think it could really help. I think you could benefit.”

“What would you like me to do?”

“Write some letters. Letters addressed to the people you've lost.” Her face was understanding but Harry froze up anyway. What a terrifying, unbelievable prospect. Writing to his dead. They would never read them – they were gone forever. “At your own pace. To whoever you want. I've found that a narrative, an opportunity to say things left unsaid, is helpful to the bereaved.”

“I…”

“Think on it,” she said. “It might be just what you need.”

NOTES OF SESSION, DR JOYCE BULSTRODE.

Patient displays bouts of extreme guilt and doubt. Early attachments seem to be secure, disrupted by death of parents. Maternal deprivation a factor? Neglect may have shifted attachment pattern. Demonstrates considerable survivor's guilt and symptoms of both PTSD and depression, as consistent with war veterans. Patient is used to having great responsibility on shoulders & has endured sporadic periods of trauma throughout life. Has recently suffered great losses he is still mourning. This appears to be focal point of upset.


THE BURROW, OTTERY ST CATCHPOLE. DEVON, ENGLAND.
Luna was sat in the kitchen when he got back, hands darting quickly around each other as she wound her hair into plaits, a clever dance. Ginny was sat next to her, thin legs curled over one another on a rickety chair, while Mrs Weasley bustled about, moving dishes here and there, mopping up invisible spills, all with an expression of fervent concentration. She was, Harry knew, desperately trying to forget Fred. They all were.

“Luna!” he exclaimed, and before she could even open her mouth he had thrown his arms around her, burying his face in her long hair. She smelt of flowers and the rain. Of course she did.

“Hello Harry,” she replied, barely phased, smiling vaguely as he completed his loop around the kitchen, pressing a kiss to Ginny's temple, letting Mrs Weasley envelop him in her arms. He felt a swell of love for them as he took a moment to simply let himself be held, cradled against the breast of Mrs Weasley. His family.

“Where did you disappear to?” Ginny asked, messily slathering butter on a hunk of bread.

“Nowhere special,” he lied. “Just needed some air.”

She smiled up at him and he drank in the sight of her. Ginny Weasley was just as beautiful as she'd always been, only now she was decorated with dark circles and sad eyes. They hadn't reconciled their relationship, not yet. Harry was beginning to wonder if he wanted a yet. He adored her, always would; his brilliant, blazing Ginny Weasley. But did he want her? Did he want to be with her? He hadn't thought much on it – there were other things on his mind, after all – but there was a voice at the back of his mind telling him that perhaps they weren't meant to be. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Ginny tucked a strand of her flaming hair behind her ear, ducking her head to take an impressive bite of her bread. Harry took a seat opposite her and reached across the table to steal her other slice, prevented only at the last minute by Ginny's Chaser reflexes, slapping his hand away and shooting him an incensed look. Luna grinned and pushed her plate forward a few inches, an offering, which he accepted gladly, scarfing down the bread dry. Here, sat at the Weasleys' dining table across from his friends, everything felt simple. It was made bittersweet only by the knowledge of its transience. Tonight, stuck with only himself and Ron's heavy breathing, he would be haunted.

“How have you been, Luna?” Harry asked, biting back his emotion. “How's your father?”

“Beginning work on the next edition of the Quibbler,” she declared, smile bright as anything, lighting up the room. She was all sunshine and smiles, Luna. Even after everything. Even on the stand, defending Draco Malfoy.

“All in support of Harry, I hope,” Mrs Weasley interjected.

Luna simply gifted her a smile of affirmation, and directed her attention back to the untidy, unfinished braids of her hair, hands flying up to save them from unravelling. Harry often marvelled at the innate, muscular ability to style hair that women possessed. Mrs Weasley frowned over at Luna, but couldn't prevent a tiny smile from itching at her mouth. She knew her well enough by now to expect such cryptic responses.

“Where are Ron and Hermione?” he asked nobody in particular, stretching his arms behind his head, leaning back in his seat with a creak.

“Ron's with George over in Diagon Alley,” Mrs Weasley answered loftily. Her tone was a mask for her mourning. RonandGeorge didn't have the same ring to it as FredandGeorge. Removing herself from the situation was her only method of making it through.
“At the shop?”

Mrs Weasley nodded, expression pinched in pain. She had never approved of the shop, but it had been theirs. His. And now he was gone. “Hermione's upstairs,” she continued, breezy, false, sad. “Napping. Maybe you should check on her, Harry, ask if she's up for any lunch?”

Harry left the same way he arrived, kissing Mrs Weasley's cheek, Ginny's ear, Luna's scalp. It was a form of greeting and farewell developed only recently: he could have lost any one of them, last month. He had never been tactile before, which was understandable considering how he had been raised by the Dursley's, held at arms length, treated more like a servant than a relative. But speaking aloud how he cherished them felt far too forced, so he learned to love them through mere touch alone. A kiss here, a link of fingers there. A hug from behind. A press of ankles.

Hermione was wide awake when Harry entered Ginny's bedroom, far too awake for the creaking stairs to have jolted her from sleep. She was stretched upon her back, gazing at the ceiling. The pink walls, the posters, the bright patchwork of the room, it didn't suit her. Harry sat on the side of her camp bed, placed his hand over the ridge of her legs under the blanket.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi Harry.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really,” she said, and finally looked down at him. Her hair was spread behind her on the pillow in curly tendrils, dark like spilt wine, like melted chocolate. Her face was puffy as if she had been crying, her eyelashes clumped together. “How was today?”

“Hard. Really hard.”

“That's what she said.”

“Mione!” he cried, faux-scandalised, and a proud, weak laugh petered from her chest, punched out of her. He squeezed a reassuring hand around her ankle, glad that she had turned to humour rather than pushing the subject. She knew him inside out. “Are you okay?”

“I'm worried about Ron,” she confessed. “He still hasn't opened up to me about Fred. And I know today will be hard for him. I know today will ruin him. And George, for that matter. This is their first time at the shop, since... I'm just… sad for him. For both of them.” She sighed, the sound catching in her throat. Harry felt her sorrow, felt a pang of concern for Ron, all the way in London. All that way away. Lost. Feeling loss.

“He'll be alright,” Harry assured. “We'll be here when he gets back. We'll be here for him.”

Hermione extended her hand down, fingers outstretched. Harry reached out for her, tangling their fingers together, feeling her nails scrape against his knuckles. Sometimes he was surprised by the humanity of his friends, by their reality. They were the same as him. Blood and bones and heart. Fingernails and grief. And they had chosen him, as he had them, as they had each other; he couldn't envision a life without them in it.

It softened the harsh inevitability of the future, if only a little. He had no idea what waited ahead of him – Harry had never lived the luxury of a life without Voldemort, without fate shaping his next steps. It was now fair game to anything, to everything, and Merlin that didn't half frighten him. Freedom. How terrifying.
“He's not like you, Harry,” she argued, soft. “He hasn't lost...”

It wasn't meant to be cruel. But Harry flinched anyway, hand jerking from Hermione's grasp.

“Sorry,” rushed from her mouth. “I didn't mean–”

“Yes you did,” he interrupted. Regret was twisted on her face. “It's okay. I understand. You're right: he hasn't lost as many people as I have. He's not as used to it.”

Sorry went unspoken again. He sighed and looked away. Stared at his knees.

He and Ron had never been brilliant at emotion. They were boys, and perhaps that was an antiquated perception, but if Harry wanted to have a good cry, then Hermione was his first stop. It didn't mean what he and Ron shared was less in value, but it was just different. Even at Fred's funeral, they hadn't really spoken about it. Harry had held Ron's hand – an anomaly in and of itself – and they had both pretended they didn't see the other crying.

Harry wondered on his mental state, all the way in Diagon Alley. At a shop supposed to be run by the twins. Twins. It was just twin, now. If Fred had lived Harry suspected the business would've boomed; there had been a war, after all, and people could do with some levity in the dark times of today, as Death Eater after Death Eater stood trial for atrocities they had all experienced the sting of, though some to a degree greater than others. But Fred hadn't lived, and now George owned a shop full of jokes he didn't want to hear.

Ha-fucking-ha.

Hermione was right but she was also wrong. Yes, Ron hadn't suffered as many losses as Harry had, and that likely made it more of a shock. But that was all. Because loss wasn't something you could just get used to. It appeared that even Hermione was guilty of that false public perception of his strength. Harry was not strong. Harry was simply resilient. Burying another loved one didn't get any easier. He was still racked by sorrow each day, tormented by his own mind. Silhouettes of Lily and James Potter still danced behind his eyelids every night, as they had since he was young enough to understand the definition of gone. Now there were just more figures in the crowd, the forms of Remus, Sirius, Fred, Dumbledore, added to his heavy heart. Harry had been defined as someone who had experienced loss since he was a year old, and his membership had been bumped up year by year, death by death.

Ron was just another addition to the club.
LILY POTTER

SOMEWHERE

25th JUNE 1998

Dear Mum,

I feel so silly writing this. I feel like it's pointless. But I'm drowning in it all, Mum. It's 3am and I can't sleep, I can't sleep most nights, now. I'll try anything at this point. If that's writing a letter to someone long gone, then so be it.

I miss you. I still do, even after all this time, even though I never knew you. Sometimes I wonder how different my life would be if you'd never died. From what I know, you were a great mum. You and dad doted on me and you DIED for me. You were wonderful. I know it. And you would've stayed wonderful.

I never would've had to live in a cupboard. I imagine you would home school me. I think you'd be a brilliant teacher – you'd handle the muggle stuff, of course. Maths and English and Science. Dad would help with the magic side. I was never good with that, early on. Maybe we would take walks in Godric's Hollow. You and dad strike me as the type to be friendly with the neighbours, and when I say friendly I mean REAL friendly, proper friendly. Not that fake, insincere hospitality that they all showed back at Privet Drive.

Would we mingle with the other pureblood families? Ron told me he sometimes saw some of the other kids at ministry functions and the like. He knew OF people like malfoy and parkinson. Would I have known them too? Would that have changed my time at Hogwarts? I feel like that's unlikely. You and dad clearly never bought into that pureblood crap so I never would have. I would've turned out great.

Sometimes I imagine you sending me off to hogwarts. You'd be sad, I think. Or would it be the other way around? Probably. From what I saw I think you wore the pants in the relationship. Maybe dad would be the weepy one. I'd miss you both. In this amazing, imagined world, you were flawless parents, and I'd miss you like hell. I miss you now.

You would love ron and hermione, mum. You would love them. They have loved me where you couldn't. In THAT world I would bring them home in the holidays and we would all get on so well. In that world there wasn't a war. You and dad didn't die and neither did ANYONE else. I didn't have to lose half my life to the dursleys and the other half to voldemort. You helped me through hogwarts. I got o's in all my exams. I went on to become a star auror. I married a great girl (ginny????) and had children of my own, who you loved so dearly. You and dad went peacefully, in your sleep, because everyone has to die. But you didn't die for me.
I imagine it. But it isn't real. It will never be real. Doesn't mean it doesn't hurt, though.

I went to your grave with Hermione. It was eerie out there but I suppose we were kind of asking for it, spending christmas in a graveyard. It was just so SAD. I forget sometimes that you were only 21 when you died. You had so much ahead of you. You were only a few years older than I am now. It makes me feel so sad to think you had all that life stolen from you. And its even sadder to think that you really, truly were ALIVE. You were a whole person with hopes and fears and dreams that I never knew, that I will never know.

What were you like? Did you want a big family? What was your favourite colour? What subjects did you take for newts, and what were your grades? Good, I assume, seeing as you were head girl. What job did you want to do, when you left school? Did you and dad have a proper, real life love story?

The questions keep me up at night. I did not know my mother – not like ron, not like hermione. Ron knows jam on toast is his mother's favourite breakfast. Hermione knows her mum's favourite band is the beatles. I didn't KNOW you. I wish so desperately that I had. People paint a picture of you nowadays, and it's not like I don't appreciate it, because anything is better than nothing. But being told you were kind and good and clever is stuff I can easily work out for myself. It's not the little things, which make up a person, in the end. Things like whether you ever thought of dying your hair or if you thought tattoos looked bad or not. I miss you. I miss a person I never knew.

I should've asked Sirius or Remus. I just never got round to it. I suppose I told myself i'd ask them when it was all over. But they didn't make it out.

I hope you're happy. I hope you're at peace. I hope you know, wherever you are, that your sacrifice meant something – we beat him in the end. We fought him and we WON. People like us will always beat people like him, because we have something to fight FOR, because we have love. Everyone always tells me I have your eyes, like that's the only thing worth inheriting, but at risk of sounding arrogant, I believe I got your capacity for love. I would die for my friends twice over. I get it, dying for someone you love. I get it.

I love you mum. I will always love you, and as valiantly as Mrs Weasley tries (she really does, and i'm not her son, so she doesn't have to, but she does anyway, you would love her so) to fill it, there will always be a hole in my life where you are concerned. I hate that you died for me. But I am so very proud to call myself your son. Thank you for everything. And thank you for being with me at the end.

All the love in the world,

your harry. x
Ron liked Hermione in the mornings. If he lived in a romance novel, he'd say it was because of her unusual disposition; sleepy, surprised, pliant (of course, this wasn't unusual, because the girl in these novels was always subservient and quiet. The perfect girl. The perfect male fantasy). Because she smelt like toothpaste and her. Because she spread his jam on toast just the way he wanted.

But that wasn't Hermione. That had never been Hermione, who was always loud and brilliant and brimming with intelligence, no matter the time of day. She smelt of his sister's deodorant and his mother's lemon shampoo. She still didn't remember how he had his toast – Hermione had so much in that head of hers. How could he expect her to retain something so simple?

In truth, Ron liked Hermione in the mornings because he hadn't seen her all night and he missed her. He liked her in the mornings because of how the rising sun illuminated her face. Because he was tired of listening to the sweet birdsong and preferred the shrill tones of her voice.

“Morning, Ron,” she greeted, creaking down the stairs and shuffling to the whistling kettle. At his move to intercept her, she smiled and huffed him off. “I'll make the tea, don't worry.”

“Do you remember how I take it?” he asked, challenging.

“...One sugar?”

He laughed at her and she hung her head in faux-shame, holding her hands up in surrender and deferring the tea to him. She stole his seat at the kitchen table and he smiled at the way she hooked her feet behind its legs. They all sat differently: Ginny liked to lift her legs clean off the ground, Harry stretched his out as far as they could go, Luna let them hang down limply. Hermione hooked her feet behind the seat's front legs. Ron crossed one leg over the other. They were a mosaic of human variation.

“Sleep well?” he asked, pouring milk with a flick of his wand and some hushed words under his breath, ending the charm nearly as swiftly as he had started it. Mum had tried to teach Ginny all this stuff when she was younger but she had never taken to it. Instead, Ron was the one with the aptitude for household charms. Someone had to learn how to clean up after Fred and George.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, and he knew she was lying. “Did you?”

“Like a rock,” he lied back.

It had become code between them. How could they, after everything? He and Harry would retire to bed sometime around midnight and both feign sleep, breathing heavy and staring at the ceiling, remembering a time when they were simply staring at thin canvas in the middle of the wilderness, the
sky only moments away. Ron would bet half his savings that Hermione and Ginny had a similar arrangement. And what was the use of going into specifics, of talking about it? They’d all shared similar experiences. Ron found comfort in the dry humour of it, the fucking *hilarity* of it. He hadn't even been alive two decades, and death had already been so close to him, rotting breath fanning across his face, more times than he could count. *I slept like a rock* as a substitute for *I was up all night with dreams of my dead brother* was the only reprieve he had from the monotonous days of misery.

Hermione shot him an understanding smile over the mug of tea he handed her, and he was struck by how lovely she was, how easy this felt. How *natural* it felt: making her tea, pointless morning conversations, secret codes, sitting with their legs in different positions, socked feet soft against the floor. Domesticity suited them. Once, it may have seemed boring, considering the whirlwind of a life Harry had brought them. But nothing was ever boring with Hermione Granger. She filled every room she entered, her mind spilling from her ears, her nose, her mouth; the tendrils of her brain reaching out and soaking up knowledge. Not even early morning tea was dull, when it included her. It was lit brightly with words unsaid and emotions not yet articulated. It was shining with her unmatched, unbelievable wisdom, it poured from her.

“Crookshanks,” she murmured, acknowledging the cat as he trotted in through the open door, heading straight for Hermione, and the illusion was shattered. Ron glared at the thing as it leapt onto her lap, purring and settling. If they lived together one day, would it really have to come with them? He knew she'd insist on it. The battle was already lost.

But battles weren't just about winning. They had won their fair share of battles, after all, which was all well and good, but that didn't mean that nothing was lost.

Slowly, one by one, his family awoke, joining them in the kitchen, step by step, tea by tea. First Mum, then Ginny, then George and Harry, and finally, Percy. No Fred. Dad bumbled in after a morning with the gnomes at around the same time Pig arrived with the post, face damp with perspiration and eyes distant. Charlie and Bill had hung around for a little while, after Fred, but they had their lives to get on with. Bill had returned to his seaside home and Charlie to his dragons. Everyone else was simply standing still.

Perhaps that was harsh. Who was Ron to judge his brothers on how they mourned – it wasn't as if he didn't want to run away. He longed for Hogwarts, at these times. Longed for the innocence of youth and the life of his brother. To turn back the clock.

That morning was a rare occasion: everyone at the table received at least one letter. Two envelopes fell down before Ron, cream-white and crisp. Ron recognised the seal on one of them immediately, deep red and familiar, lifting him from his sorrow, ever so slightly. That trusty H. That same letter and with the same crest that he had received every year since he was eleven, on the precipice of the rest of his life. He felt that same buzz of anticipation as he eased it open, head swimming with the wondering of it all.

*HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY.*

*Headmistress: Minerva McGonagall.*

*(Order of Merlin, First Class)*

*Dear Mr Weasley,*

*We are pleased to inform you that you have been invited to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to continue your education through means of an eighth year.*
Term will begin on 1 September as usual. We await your owl by no later than 31 July.

Yours sincerely,

Filius Flitwick

Deputy Headmaster

“I don’t understand,” Harry said. “Hogwarts was completely destroyed. How…”

“I expect many convicts with community service sentences were ordered to help rebuild it,” Hermione explained, staring down at her supply list. “Also, the Educational Office, the international one, I mean, likely would’ve sent in wizards from across the world to help our Department of Magical Education. Hogwarts is the only school available for young wizards in the United Kingdom – we really can’t do without it.”

Ron felt a rush of warmth for her, and she caught his glance across the table. Something charged leapt between them; her eyes were honeyed and kind, and only a small smile was enough to send Ron's stomach cartwheeling. He looked down to the other letter, frowning as he flipped it and recognised the M in the corner, brain dredging up far-fetched conclusions about his impending arrest and imminent Dementor kiss. Instead, the letter read entirely differently.

Dear Mr Weasley,

We would like to invite you to a remembrance ceremony occurring at 12pm on July 7th. In the Ministry a plaque will be unveiled, commemorating the names of those lost during the war. We hope to see you in attendance.

Yours sincerely,

Rowan Khanna

Public Information Services Office

Ministry of Magic

“Oh,” Ron said dumbly.

“How… nice,” Percy mumbled, almost to himself. He was cut off by a screech as the legs of George’s chair scraped against the floor, the sound angry and grating.

“I think it's cheap,” he spat as he rose, crumpling the letter in his hand and throwing it into the fireplace. Ron, at first, thought it was fury he glimpsed on his brother's face as he turned and stormed from the kitchen, the door swinging open with a bang as he marched away to nowhere in particular. But as Ron watched the letter curl and catch aflame in the heat, he wondered if it was simply sorrow that he had seen.

It was how he hid it. Their time sorting through all the junk (it was junk now, it would go unused and unsold for a long, long time) at Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes had been rife with Fred and his memory, waiting round every corner, popping up at every joke product, like a morbid jack-in-the-box. Ron had gone for something to eat around lunchtime, had stopped short at the empty husk of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour, having forgotten, only for a moment. When he'd returned the shop had been in tatters, the tiny reminders of Fred, the work they had so painstakingly devoted themselves to, strewn from top to bottom. George had destroyed most of it. Out of anger. Out of sadness.
Dad cleared his throat; aside from him, the table was silent as they watched the parchment dwindle into nothing, burn to a crisp. Fred was rarely spoken of, now. There had been an especially raw period back in May, where he had been nowhere but everywhere at the same time, lingering in his room, in the broomshed, in the mirror. Nowadays, when somebody let his name slip – an accident, a reflex, a thing of the past – the acceptable response was to go all thin-lipped and promptly change the subject. That was difficult when they were all holding letters that may as well have had his name written all over them.

“Mum?” Ginny asked, noting their mother hunched over the letter, a hand clamped over her mouth, head bent.

“Yes,” she said, like air being forced from a deflating balloon, the word jumping from her. “Yes, it's fine. I won't... I don't think I'll be going.” Her voice was high and quiet. It was not like his mother at all.

An awkward silence fell upon them as she reigned in her grief, the air humid with it. It trembled between them, a thick, hot moment of agony, an aching realisation of absence. A goodbye they never had. A joke that was never finished. His name etched in stone was a start, but would never be capable of encompassing the depth of what they had lost – not just with Fred, but with Lupin, Tonks, Lavender. It just wasn't enough.

“I've been asked to make a speech,” Harry elected, conforming to the usual routine: ignore it, move past it, forget. The conversation quickly diverted to this, wiping away the event of George's rage, of Mum's misery.

“A speech about what?” Hermione asked, leaning over and plucking his letter from his hands. Harry put up no resistance, yielding it to her an instant.

“The war.”

His tone was utterly resigned. That was all he was ever asked to talk about – how does it feel to have won the war single-handedly? What was that final battle like? Did you really survive the killing curse? Again? He was the Boy Who Lived Twice. The Boy Who Lived Again. He was never just a boy who had experienced a great deal of suffering, to the rest of the world.

The kitchen began to clear; Ginny went off in search of George, Percy retreated to his room, Mum and Dad moved to talk in hushed voices in the orchard. The conversation would be about Fred. The conversation was always about Fred.

“Will you do it?” Hermione questioned, covering Harry's hand with her own.

“I suppose so.”

“You don't have to, Harry,” Ron interjected. “You don't have to do anything.”

“I know.” Harry looked as though he were steeling himself, sucking in a shaky breath. “I'm going to do it.”

“You don't have to be strong all the time,” was Hermione's input, spoken softly, as not to startle a sleeping beast, as if to coax the truth from him. But it hit a nerve. Harry bristled, jaw clenching.

“It's not about being strong. It's about honouring them.”

“I don't-“
“Hermione.”

Harry rarely used such a harsh tone. They’d heard it more and more, in the past year, as everything fell apart. Ron had hoped, absently, that things would return to exactly as they were before. Harry and Ron and Hermione. Picture perfect friends. Arguing over Crookshanks and Scabbers, talking about unfinished homework and upcoming exams, looking at one another and seeing nothing but friend. Now they argued about the war. Now they talked about the war. Now they looked at each other and saw ally.

“Well what about eighth year, Harry?” she went on boldly. A year ago his sudden exasperation would’ve stung – not anymore. “And you, Ron?”

Harry fell sullen and silent, Hermione turned to Ron, imploring. It hit him in the gut. What did he want? He’d been so lost in Fred these last months he hadn’t stopped to consider the future. Becoming an Auror had appealed to him, once upon a time. But it was safe to say that a lot had happened since then.

He thought of Hogwarts, warm and welcome and home. Alive. Hogwarts was so alive that it made his heart swell so large in his chest he feared it would burst. In every corner of the castle there was evidence of life: abandoned pieces of parchment, spell-scuffed walls, the clatter of footsteps. It would be the same this September – the first years, the children, they hadn’t known pain like he had. They would bustle through the corridors and bellow to one another from other ends of the Great Hall, they would live without thought. He imagined the castle and its high, arching corridors, the way the moon shone through the windows of the Gryffindor tower once night came, illuminating the circular shape of the common room, the vast expanse of it, its book-lined, tapestry-adorned walls.

In the Burrow, the mere creak of a floorboard was frowned at. Once it had been as full as Hogwarts, all seven of them loud and growing and careless, but. It was always that: but. But now. But after. Post-war. Post-Fred.

They wouldn't speak Fred's name but they would remember him in the quiet moments. Mum wanted quiet, these days.

Ron thought of Hogwarts on its bad days. All the danger and the drama and the mind-numbing monotony of school and homework and tests. He thought of facing those Slytherins who had spewed such prejudice for all those years and now wanted to be accepted back into the loving, forgiving world of Hogwarts. And those funny, rowdy younger years. They could be insensitive. Tactless. Impressionable. What if some simply didn't care about the war? About what people had sacrificed for them? Children were foolish and they didn't know that Fred (endlessly entertaining, blindingly joyous, bright and loving and one in a million) had died so they could live.

“I don't know,” he said. “I really don't know.”

Hermione saw his genuine confusion and sighed, shaking her head at the two of them. For a split second it was third year all over again and Ron and Harry were fabricating increasingly unrealistic scenarios to bullshit their Divination homework. Hermione was huffing at them, long-suffering, and Ron was being an idiot and not appreciating such tiny, little moments of contented peace that would keep him sane in the following years. And then it was now.

“Think on it,” she urged. “You might find that Hogwarts is exactly what you need to set you back on track. To give you purpose.”

JULY 7th 1998, 12:08.
The plaque stretched along the height of an entire wall, dull black and decorated with golden names in a long list, absent from emotion. It was like a shared gravestone. *Sirius Black. Alastor Moody. Severus Snape.* Ron swallowed down the venom at Snape's name as he finally reached *Fred Weasley*, right near the bottom. One of the last casualties.

After Fred's funeral Ron had come across the vague notion that if Harry had died earlier that night then Fred would've been protected. Momentarily, a vicious longing for that to have been the case emerged within him. He hadn't been able to make it to the bathroom; he'd been sick in the kitchen sink at the realisation he had just wanted another of his brothers – Harry, Harry Potter, his best friend and his brother by blood of the covenant – to die in place of the other.

“We never expect to lose the people we love,” Harry was saying, intensely uncomfortable, shifting and sweating in his robes. He had stumbled and stuttered through a speech about loss and sacrifice and how death meant peace. “But it has been said that the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. It can be defeated. We can live beyond it. And I know, in my heart, that as long as we love them, they do.”

His words earned modest applause. The ministry employees who had worked so very hard on their plaque were surprised by the lack of enthusiasm and absence of great wisdom seen in Harry Potter. Dumbledore was dead and here was their new wizard to admire – only he didn't have the grandiose speeches and charismatic flair to match. They were disappointed. But the attendees, the mourning, those who were here for a name on the board, had seen him at the funerals. Sometimes it was about simple gestures and not empty proclamations from a boy of only seventeen.

“Well done, mate,” Ron murmured, patting Harry on the back as he merged back into the crowd, feeling his friend trembling like a leaf under his hand. Whether with fear or sorrow, Ron didn't know. The mass around them buzzed with muttered conversation as a dark-haired ministry worker took Harry's place before them, clearing her throat.

“They – they didn't...” Harry was still shaking, words stuck in his throat.

The ministry worker began reading the names on the list.

*Cedric Diggory.*

“Great speech mate.” It was Charlie, popping up at Harry's side, speaking in a hushed tone. Ron hadn't known he was coming back to England for this – it seemed a drastic action to take to simply see his brother's name on a wall, but Ron didn't think much on it as he grinned over at Charlie, suddenly immensely pleased to see him. Harry shot Charlie a weak smile, but Ron could see something else was weighing on his mind.

*Albus Dumbledore.*

“Oh,” Hermione said.

*Nymphadora Tonks.*

“This is wrong.”

Ron realised from Harry's tone that it was rage that he had been shaking with as he'd stepped from the stage, rage that Hermione now understood (because of course she did), that Ron was still clueless to. He furrowed his brow and looked to Hermione for help, desperately confused, and while she seemed saddened, she smiled at him. *Teaspoon,* she mouthed, and Ron's insides warmed. It had
become a joke over the years – 'pass me your emotional range, Ron' – and seemed unbelievably out of place at such a sombre affair.

*Fred Weasley.*

Ron, for a moment, felt so disgustingly dishonourable. This was in memory of his brother, who was gone forever. And here he was. Having a chat. Having a laugh.

It seized him with the most unimaginable agony, brought stinging tears to his eyes and an aching heaviness to his heart. *Fred was gone.* The permanence of it always hit him at the most unusual of times; in the bath, mid-laugh, at the sight of a broom. Fred would never have a bath again, he would never get to laugh again, nor fly. His body was rotting in the ground and his soul was somewhere entirely unreachable. He now existed in memory alone, in Ron's flashes of his laugh, the fragments of his voice, his wild eyes and wild, wild grin.

Who was he kidding? Fred would want him to laugh. That was all he'd ever wanted.

“Dobby,” Hermione hissed into his ear as the list of names came to an end. “They didn’t honour Dobby.”

Ron felt a swell of the same rage that Harry must have been feeling, though he knew it would pale in comparison – Harry had known him, Harry had loved him. Ron's mind was full of all that they had lost. He wanted so desperately to rewind, to start over. He wouldn't associate with Harry. He'd hide, sink into the background. He’d never know his best friend, he'd never know the love of his life. Fred would live.

Merlin, it wasn’t worth it. Wasn't that ironic? He'd do it all over again, lose Fred all over again, given the choice.

Ron was sure that he would be sick. He turned, shoving himself bodily through the crowd, the hordes of the bereaved, nausea churning in his stomach. Hermione had made a sound of surprise behind him as he left so abruptly, but he paid it no mind, working his way across the Atrium and bursting into the toilets, gasping for breath, grabbing at one of the sinks for anchorage. He sucked in air that wasn't full of despair, a part of him wanting to laugh that it had come about in the bloody *bathroom*. Fred would want him to laugh. So he did, the noise high and forced as it tapered from his throat. He sounded like a man on the verge of madness.

In the mirror, his eyes were wet and his face ashen. His smile – a side effect of the laugh – looked pasted on. Out of place. Like a pin-drop in a silent room. Like a joke in the midst of a battle.

*Did I mention I'm resigning?*

*I don't think I've heard you laugh since you were -*

He bit back a crazed sob, longing, in a way that he never had, for the embrace of his brother. Six boys out of seven: they'd never been much for tactile affection. Which Ron despised, because though he knew he had hugged Fred more than a handful of times, he couldn't remember *when*. At the time it had likely passed through his life unnoticed, unimportant, only now Fred was gone and half of George's heart with him and Ron couldn't remember for the life of him the last time they had hugged.

The door swung open behind him, and for a second he thought it must be Harry, or perhaps even Hermione; it wasn't unlike her to walk proudly into a men's bathroom. But he saw a flash of red hair in the mirror and knew that it was Charlie, here, seeing him bent over the sink and trying not to cry. Ron didn't speak for fear of his voice breaking.
“I miss him too,” Charlie said, and Ron turned, noting that his face was flushed with sorrow. “It's why I came back. I just… I miss him.”

Charlie's voice broke. He wasn't like Ron – he was broader, shorter, much more like Fred. Ron even thought their voices sounded similar, and he couldn't deny the anguish of it anymore, and went to him. Their arms came up to surround one another simultaneously; they were both so desperate and so sad and Ron could do nothing but bury his face into his shoulder and weep. Weep and shake and fall apart entirely, lose himself to intense waves of loss that threatened to cripple him, send him falling to his knees. Both were wishing the other was Fred, and both knew it.

Fred would want them laughing. Ron had to deny him. He had to try grieving the other way.

Chapter End Notes

i'm gay and i miss fred weasley
some smut ahead for a pairing not in the tags. the pairing isn't serious and OFC drarry, linny and romione are the endgames of this fic and they'll all get their moments i promise!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FIVE: THE LOVES OF HARRY POTTER.

JULY 9th 1998, 02:45.

THE BURROW, OTTERY ST CATCHPOLE. DEVON, ENGLAND.

HARRY

Where the train was taking Harry, he did not know. He only knew that he was encompassed by the oddest and most serene sort of peace, slowing his breathing, steadying his heart. The white of the station was gone, a blur in the distance as the world faded into colour, bright colour, loud colour. It was ugly. It was everything he wanted. He had grown fond of trains over the years, and preferred them to any other sort of muggle transport. The gentle lull of the engine was often enough to send him to sleep, finding a rare peace as the countryside rushed by. Only now sleeping was the last thing on his mind: he was filled with a startlingly intense mixture of both dread and excitement, a concoction of contradiction swirling within him. He did not know what awaited him at the end of the journey.

His heart lurched as the train began to slow. It was an old steam train, not unlike the Hogwarts Express, only it lacked the bustle of his classmates. He was entirely alone; the train was deadly silent but for the engine and the occasional whistle. A part of him longed for that normalcy, for Ron and Hermione by his side, for bloody Malfoy to come and annoy him, but another part of him knew they were long gone. He felt a vague sense of recognition as he took in the landscape through the smudged barrier of the window – a hook inside him, a knowing. It wasn't until the train stopped and he made his way to the exit that he realised, breathing in the clean country air and drinking in the greenery and quaint, homely scene.

Godric's Hollow. It looked different in the summer. Though he wasn't entirely sure if it was summer or spring or perhaps even an especially warm autumn. The train ride had felt as though it had lasted two minutes and two months simultaneously. As he emerged onto the platform he was hit with the distant memory of a distinct lack of a train station when he visited Godric's Hollow, but the memory fled as quickly as it had materialised, his consciousness suddenly consumed by the sight of a figure approaching, a shock of red hair surrounding her head.

It was his mother. Who else? Her face was kind and open, it was lined. She was growing old in a way she never had the chance to. She was nearing forty now, her hair growing that tiniest bit duller, her face losing its youthful fullness. It didn't matter. Lily Potter was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen – age was irrelevant. In fact, she was more beautiful now. She had lived. She had grown. She had laugh lines and wise eyes. Harry loved her more than ever.
“Harry,” she said.

“Mum,” he replied. The emotion that captured him in that moment was unrivalled, a brilliant flash of relief and the bittersweet longing of reunion. His mum. She had carried him for nine months and endured back pain and swelling feet and the agony of labour to bring him to existence. She had loved him, fiercely. “Mummy,” he said, voice breaking into pieces, the lost child in him surfacing.

Lily took him in her arms, an action she had never done, not in his living memory. Harry wanted so badly to cry but he didn't, floored by the reality of her solid form, her hands rubbing his back. The embrace of his mother – a tiny desire that he had always secretly nurtured, a quiet, flickering flame.

“You're alright, Harry,” she reassured. “You're going to be alright.”

“You don't think I'm a coward?”

“Not at all. I think you've been so brave.”

“I don't know what to do now,” he murmured, pulling back to look her full in the face, confirm again that it was truly her. “I don't know where to go.”

“Why, Harry,” she laughed, “you don't need to go anywhere. You're home.”

Harry awoke with a start, as he often did, these days. He was well acquainted with disturbing dreams, but was struck by the fact that this dream had only been disturbing because it wasn't. Most nights, his dreams consisted of cruel reminders of the people he had lost, blinding flares of the terror of the final battle, the occasional glimpses of his earlier traumas. But a dream… not a nightmare, a dream. One where he had been utterly and completely at peace. His mother had been whole and true.

He blinked back tears, grounding himself in wakefulness, listening to the rise and fall of Ron's breathing. They often faked it, maintaining a farce of slumber as they both thought on their respective issues. But they had slept in the same room for going on seven years – Harry had grown used to his quiet snores, and was easily able to tell them apart from Ron's false silences of fraudulent sleep. He was glad Ron was sleeping now. They all needed sleep. Dim circles had started to darken beneath their eyes.

Harry's many summers spent at the Burrow had taught him how deeply the Weasleys slept – a family trait, apparently – so he didn't worry too much as he began the steep decline down the creaking stairs, fumbling his glasses back onto his face. He ran himself a glass of water under the kitchen tap, absently deciding against tea from the whistling kettle, and leant against the counter, breathing in the earthy smell of the Burrow and the tang of his own sweat. He felt ancient. Exhausted and old beyond his years. The dream had been an odd regression to a childhood he had never experienced.

Joyce would want to hear about it. They'd only had three sessions together but Harry was already beginning to rely on it greatly – even simply to vent, it was helpful, and she smiled in all the right places and asked all the right questions. Harry supposed that was what she was trained to do, but he was grateful nonetheless: not many people from his world had access to such advantages. And he adored their muggle town, having been stuck in either Privet Drive or Hogwarts for most of his life. He'd gone and gotten himself a provisional license and started taking driving lessons after every session, and delighted in how they made him feel alive and ridiculous, even if only for an hour or two. He liked how muggle they made him feel. How ordinary. He'd even been considering trying for a job at the local Pret a Manger before remembering he had not a single muggle qualification to his name.
“Harry.”

The voice surprised him, a little, and he set aside the cool glass of water to see Ginny standing at the foot of the staircase, dressed in tiny pyjamas. Her shorts rode high and her top was slightly translucent. Harry worried why it didn't make him feel a thing. Maybe he couldn't feel anymore.

“Hi, Gin.”

“Couldn't sleep?” she asked, and he nodded, affirmative. She pulled a sympathetic face, and added “me neither.”

Harry poured another glass of water for her and placed it upon the table. When she picked it up to drink he admired the rings of smeared condensation it left behind, envied how they could simply disappear, fade into nothing. Harry had either been entirely invisible or far too blatant for his liking, and had always wanted the opposite at the time. However in the Weasleys' kitchen, in the early hours of the morning, he felt just the right amount of seen.

They sat across from each other, revelling in the silence. He and Ginny had always had something that ran deeper than words, and as she slid her hand across to him, he took it, feeling a rush of warm sadness that he knew she shared. Their hands fit together perfectly. He smiled at the coarse feel of her palms, rough from years on a broom, the ridges of her knuckles and prick of her fingernails.

“We need to have a conversation, don't we?” he finally asked, relenting, knowing the words would come anyway, at some point.

She laughed at his reluctance. “You're such a boy,” she said, giving his hand a squeeze before pulling back. “Just tell me this: do you want me?”

Be honest wasn't spoken but it was meant. Harry thought about it, about her. He thought about her with her clothes off, all bare and freckled. He thought about kissing her, like he once had, his tongue against hers, wet and warm. He thought about touching her, everywhere, like he never had, her waist and her chest and between her legs.

It wasn't an unpleasant idea. He didn't feel sick. But he didn't feel anything. He doubted it would entice much arousal from him if it did occur, and Ginny didn't deserve that. She deserved someone that wanted her. And whether it was a matter of Ginny and Harry weren't meant to be or simply Harry was too broken to want wasn't important. It wouldn't be fair on her, to ask her wait for something that may never happen.

“No,” he confessed. She smiled, seemingly satisfied, and Harry may not have been as bright as Hermione but he wasn't Ron. Girls didn't act like that if they wanted you to want them. “But you don't want me either,” he hazarded, and her smile rose to a fully-fledged grin.

“Well done,” she congratulated. “You can be clever when you want to be.”

“It's my hidden talent,” he said, off-handed, mind tumbling over the events that had just occurred. Five minutes ago he'd wanted some water. Now he had a definition for his relationship with Ginny, a matter they had both danced around since the battle. “Should we be sad?”

“I don't know,” she replied. She appeared to ponder it, swirling the remnants of her water around in the glass. “Maybe? But I'm tired of being sad. I don't think we should be sad. This isn't the end of us, it's just… a new beginning. That's happy.”

“I'll always love you, Gin,” he whispered, and pressed his palm to her cheek, drinking down the sight of her. Her jaw fit against his hand perfectly, just like her hand. But they didn't fit together. Not
anymore. “I want you to be happy.”

Harry let his hand drop, the burden of his dwindling romance with Ginny finally off his shoulders. It seemed so inconsequential now, amidst odd dreams and dead friends, but he was glad for it nonetheless. It felt like a gust of fresh air, alleviating the pain of his rotten husk of a heart. To have things sorted out between them was a sooth. He wondered vaguely what and how he would tell Ron, but pushed the thought aside; it was a worry for another time, and he had to grasp these moments of peace as they came.

“How long have you known?” he asked.

“That I didn't want you? Not long.” She looked down to the table, and there was a distant confusion on her face. “I, uh. I thought I was bisexual, for a long time.”

“Oh.” It wasn't as if Harry wasn't aware of gayness – he'd been wondering about Dean and Seamus for years – but to find it so close to home was surprising. In Ginny, of all people. She was someone that he had kissed and she had wanted girls. It didn't disgust him, not by a long shot, but it shocked him blind. “And… now?”

“I don't know. I'm considering options that… don't necessarily include boys.” She sighed, and Harry couldn't come up with a single thing to say. “But I don't know. It's confusing. You don't… mind?”

Harry wasn't sure how different his parents would've raised him but the Dursleys had been quietly homophobic throughout the years. It hadn't been violent, nor constant, not quite, but the snide remark here and there, the sickened looks, hadn't painted a pretty picture. Harry hadn't really understood. And watching Seamus and Dean twirl around one another at the Yule Ball – it could've been a joke, just a bit of fun, but Harry didn't half wonder about those two – had made him realise pretty quickly that he didn't care about that sort of thing.

And Ginny was something else. Perhaps he no longer wanted her, but that didn't matter – he had wanted her once, or at least he'd thought he had. He'd wanted her for a reason: she was brilliant, a blazing storm that had blustered into his life for a short time, and then tore her way out again. She was one of a kind and anybody would be lucky to have her. If that anybody was a girl, then so be it.

“I want you to be happy,” he repeated. “I couldn't care less.”

JULY 9th 1998, 18:56.

THE BURROW, OTTERY ST CATCHPOLE, DEVON, ENGLAND.

When Harry knocked on the door to Charlie's room (Bill's, once upon a time) he didn't know what to expect. At Charlie's responding noise of approval, he pushed the door open and took a shy step across the threshold, finding himself surprised at the surroundings. The door swung shut behind him with a bang, making him start. Ginny and Ron's bedrooms had been tacked together by posters and garish colours, Fred and George's room had been dusty and half-boxed up, with only their discarded joke products indicating that their room had been similar to that of their siblings': childish, fun. Instead, Charlie's (Bill's) room was a simple-toned blue with bare walls, decorated only with a rickety double bed and a scruffy wardrobe, a decaying bedside table, an old bookcase adorned with the greying spines of unread books, a window seat with a single cushion. It was clearly uninhabited, meant for guests. Charlie had only been here a few days.

He was hunched over his trunk, which was strewn open at the foot of his bed, clothes haphazardly stuffed against one another. A muggle bottle of rum was balanced on the bedside table. It had clearly been opened, and the liquid had abated, but for the most part, it was full. Harry felt a sudden longing
“Hi Harry,” Charlie greeted, sitting back on his haunches.

“I’m heading down. I was, um… I was going to ask if you wanted any tea?” Harry asked, feeling suddenly timid before Ron’s cool older brother.

Charlie grinned, rugged and easy, nodding his head toward the rum. “I’d planned on drinking something else, if you know what I mean. But thanks for the offer, Harry.” Harry nodded, and made to leave, but Charlie made a halting sound behind him. “Come and look at this!” he said.

Harry went and crouched beside him. In his hands he was holding a few small photos of a vicious dragon, breathing fire toward the camera, railing against another handler, preparing for flight. Harry did marvel at dragons and their magnificence, and could comprehend why Charlie loved them so, but after his brushes with them in the Triwizard Tournament he preferred them like this, in photo form.

“A Hungarian Horntail?”


“Oh!” Harry felt a rush of nostalgia as he looked down at the photographs; the dragon was just as alive as she had been back in first year. Merlin, he missed when his biggest problems were dragons and detentions and Draco Malfoy. “Oh, you have to show these to Hagrid, Charlie. He’ll be thrilled.”

“Maybe you can take them when you go back to Hogwarts,” Charlie suggested, and Harry stiffened, their proximity making it an action that was unavoidable. Charlie drew in a sharp breath, and began hesitantly. “Do you… think you’ll go?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted with a sigh. “I have no idea. It’s… there’s a lot to consider. Mark me down as unsure.”

“Do you want a drink?” Charlie offered with a sympathetic air, and Harry obliged in an instant.

The rum was old but most definitely drinkable. Sirius had hidden away a lot of old muggle drink in Grimmauld Place and during the month Harry had spent shut away there, he’d spent many a night gorging himself on it, losing himself to the haze, blocking out reality and its sting. So when he swallowed the strong bite of Charlie’s rum he barely flinched, grown used to alcohol and its cruelty. Charlie watched him shoot back the rum with a handsome smile.

Harry knew that Ron may be wondering where he was, but they were older now, and more damaged. If this had been summer and they were fourteen Ron undoubtedly would’ve come searching, bumbling into the oddly intimate scene of Harry sharing a drink or two with his brother. But now, often, they would simply change their minds. Ron would go to check on George and he’d return hours later after helping his dad with the car. Harry would go for a cup of tea and find himself in Charlie’s (Bill’s) room, knocking back caramel liquid like it was going out of style.

They were no longer attached at the hip and it was sad, in a way. But somehow they still worked just as well as they had at age eleven – they had grown up, grown into different people, and loved each and every version of one another there was. Maybe he and Ron wouldn’t be sharing a room together forever, but Harry knew they would always be in each other’s lives, though not through his marriage to Ginny like he had once imagined. It didn’t matter. Brothers never stopped being brothers.

Harry felt as though Ginny were his sister and George were his brother (Fred had been, too). Mr and Mrs Weasley were surrogate parents and Percy was a distant relative he didn’t particularly get on
with, Bill was a cool cousin. But Charlie he had never known quite as well. Charlie wasn't family. Not quite.

“Typical,” he was saying, shaking with laughter. They had migrated to the bed, were lying prostrate beside each other. “Fred and George have a magical map showing all the goings on in Hogwarts and they never tell me.”

“They were probably using it to spy on you!”

“Oh Merlin,” Charlie exclaimed, going that funny Weasley shade of red. “They must've been so confused as to why I spent all my time in the Astronomy Tower with Andre Egwu.”

Harry frowned. “Why did you spend all your time in the Astronomy Tower with Andre Egwu?”

“We were a thing, back then,” Charlie explained, barely missing a beat. “It was typical first love stuff. Couldn't keep our hands off each other. But we were not as bad as Tonks and Tulip – my only defence.”

“You were gay?” Harry asked, and then his mind caught up with the words. “Tonks was gay?”

Don't mention Ginny, he warned himself. He was well on the way to intoxication and knew from experience how loose his tongue could get in times like that. He bit back his knowledge about Charlie's sister and watched as he gazed at Harry bemusedly.

“I'm still gay, Harry,” he answered. “Just not for Andre anymore. And Tonks stayed gay too. Just... a different sort of gay. She and Tulip broke up years ago and then she fell for Lupin.” He looked dreamy, far-off. It was sad, in a way. Tonks had lived a whole life before Harry had known her. She had loved and lost and loved again. “It happens. Life goes on.”

“I didn't know,” Harry said, mind spinning with the knowledge.


Harry became suddenly aware of them. They were lying beside each other in bed. Their faces were close and turned toward each other; Charlie was warm and attractive and right there. Charlie was swallowing and shutting his eyes and leaning into Harry, and before Harry could even think, he was doing the same. The kiss was sticky with alcohol and slow with exploration; Charlie tasted sweeter than he expected. He hadn't expected when he'd knocked on the door that he'd be tasting Charlie at all.

Charlie sighed and opened his mouth wider, pressing his tongue forth expertly. His neck was damp with perspiration where Harry came up to touch him, to steady himself, to have more, more, more. He wanted to wonder whether this made him gay or not but it really wasn't the time: Charlie Weasley was fantastically distracting and great with his tongue. He shifted onto his side, palming at Harry's waist, fingers dancing above his thigh. It was in this moment that Harry realised his parting with Ginny hadn't been a case of Ginny and Harry weren't meant to be or Harry was too broken to want. He was harder than he'd ever been in his life – he wasn't broken at all. He just hadn't been kissing the right Weasley.

When Charlie's hands brushed his skin, venturing under his t-shirt, Harry started. He had never been touched quite like this, with such intent. He and Cho had kissed once and he and Ginny had been strictly over-the-clothes. Harry was two weeks from eighteen and suddenly violently aware that he was a virgin, while Charlie was anything but. Charlie was cool and fit and older and Harry wasn't saying no, not by a long shot, but he was, if only for a moment, a little intimidated by the world of
sex, a thing he had never touched upon before.

“I'm sorry,” Charlie said, pulling back. “Are you alright? Would you like to stop?”

“No,” Harry confessed, biting his lip, and feeling another surge of arousal as Charlie's eyes fell to his mouth, dark and intense and dilated. “I've never done this before, though. Not with anybody. And I've never even thought about… boys.”

“I understand,” Charlie soothed. “If this is too much -”

“No,” Harry said again, “no I want it. I need to… I need to see.”

He realised absently that he was treating – and had admitted to it – Charlie like an experiment (which he sort of was). But he wasn't a fool. They were both drunk and both grieving their own losses, which overlapped in places like Fred and Tonks. They knew each other's pain, and they weren't close. They were both willing. So why not? Why not snog and maybe even shag away the pain?

Charlie didn't seem offended in the slightest, and let Harry lean in and kiss him again, was pliant and understanding as Harry manoeuvred himself on top. They both needed oblivion, for a little while. And Charlie relinquished control in an instant, knowing Harry needed to call the shots here, to figure himself out. He felt himself trembling, and without thought, his hands reached for Charlie's shirt. He was dizzy with the knowledge that the hard ridge he was sat upon was the erection of another boy. A boy.

He and the guys in his dorm had only talked occasionally and off-handedly about that sort of thing. Dean had told them the night of the Yule Ball how excited he'd gotten when Lily Moon let him touch her (fourth year! a lifetime ago. Harry still wondered about Seamus and him), and years later, Ron had whispered eagerly one night about his first time with Lavender, and Harry had kept his mouth shut. He'd overheard rowdy Ravenclaw conversations about tits and cunt and wrinkled his nose at their vulgarity. He had never been turned on with Cho, and Ginny had barely stirred want in him (and vice versa, apparently). But now, sitting astride Charlie bloody Weasley of all people, he felt as though he might die if he weren't touched soon.

“Can I?” Charlie questioned, playing with the buckle on Harry's jeans. They were shirtless, both of them, now. Skin to skin contact. Charlie was tough and burly and had a run of ginger hair that extended down from his chest to below his navel, below his belt. Harry nodded, hasty.

The first brush against his cock was like electric, it was a lightning flash of shock. Nobody had ever touched him before. He fumbled in return with Charlie's zipper, feeling the cotton of his underwear damp with pre-come, and under that, flesh. Hot and hard and similar to Harry's own. He knew how to handle his own – he had touched himself, now and again, and it wasn't that he was asexual he just hadn't had a lot of time, back then – but another cock was a different game entirely. Charlie pulled him down by the hair, kissing him, kissing him, his other hand enveloping their cocks, pulling them against one another.

Harry gasped into Charlie's mouth, arousal alight between them, and once, twice, thrice more, and Harry was coming, sucking in air like a dying man, hips pressing against Charlie's in the throes of his orgasm. Charlie followed a few strokes later, the spray of his come landing upon Harry's torso in short, sharp spatters. Their bodies were slick with sweat and semen and Harry's arms gave out; he panted against Charlie's neck, resolutely ignoring the gravity of the situation. If he screwed his eyes shut tight enough he could ignore the fact that he'd just lost his virginity to Ron's older brother.

“Would you like to stay?” Charlie asked.
“No thank you,” Harry replied, and went to take a shower.

Chapter End Notes

me referencing hogwarts mystery: i am FUCKING iconic
also i'm S or ry about harry x charlie i couldn't help myself it was such a pillar in all the old drarry i read... they're non-smutty after this and not major. this IS a drarry but also a harry story so he's doing some figuring out. hope it was ok :)

Draco had never been one for cleaning. But he was different, now. The world was different. They hadn't any house elves anymore and Mother spent most of her time asleep in bed or asleep in the sitting room or asleep in the gardens. That, or she was resting her eyes. It was as though she'd had them shut since Father went to Azkaban. Draco had wondered at first if it had been that she didn't want to see a world without him but knew, instinctively, that it wasn't the case. She had loved him once and he had loved her in return, but nearer the end Mother had realised what a cruel man he had become, and how unworthy he was of her love. Draco thought now she simply closed her eyes because she didn't have anything better to do.

His room was a mess. He'd spent a lot of time locked up in here during the Dark Lord's stay; it was littered with broken objects and overflowing storage units – he could afford to hoard. He could afford a lot. But there wasn't much he wanted to spend all his fortune on, these days. So he'd settle for emptying out the things he didn't need, an idea that had seemed unnecessary during the war.

He had started the arduous task of sorting through his old possessions after the trial. He had his freedom but what to do with that freedom was still a mystery to him. So he decided: out with the old and in with the new. Gone were the funny pyjama t-shirts he was never allowed to wear around his father – 'really Draco, it's so pedestrian' – and he began throwing his old papers and essays into the rubbish. He felt certain pangs looking at his childish doodles and untidy scribbles. He had been a child once. He had been free.

Now he had grown accustomed to the feel of dust on his hands. That freelance artist (not really) of his youth would've cringed at the thought. But he dug deeper nonetheless, hands smudged grey, as he reunited with his childhood. He liked the peace it brought him, and the purpose. It was his first purpose in life that didn't sicken him.

Draco flipped through the books he used to read, The Tales of the Beedle and the Bard, Quidditch Through the Ages, his secret Martin Miggs comic, and found, at the bottom of the pile, an old journal, its pages yellowing. It was thick and bound with brown leather. It looked years old. In an instant, Draco knew what its pages held. He had been young and frightened and his mind had been fit to bursting with secrets he had to spill. He peeled the book open, the stick of the leather sounding deafening in his ears.

November 1993

I hate him.

His heart clenched. He turned the page. It was funny, he thought, how it had consumed him all these years. This was the beginning, right here, in written form. He started to skim – there wasn't enough time in the world to read it all, word for word. It was years worth of agony.

December 1993
No I don't, and I think that's the problem. I just. I want I want I want.

I want him to look at me. I want him to see me. I want him to want me. I feel pathetic. I wish I

I wish I wasn't so weak when it came to him.

I wish he didn't look like that. I wish he didn't have those eyes. That hair. That smile.

Draco had been thirteen and becoming increasingly aware of the fact that he might just be gay. Girls were, and always had been, entirely irrelevant to him. Draco had been thirteen and starting to realise that it wasn't hate that surrounded his obsessive wondering on one Harry James Potter. It was something else entirely. He was gay and he couldn't stop thinking about Potter.

February 1994

If only, I sometimes think. But he barely looks at me, most days. On the days he does it's because I can't help but tease him so. I don't want to want him but I do. And the only time it ever means thing is when he's looking at me.

Father would be furious if he knew.

Father never did find out. At least not explicitly. And now he was locked up without a key and Draco never had to see him again. He could be unabashedly and ridiculously gay in peace. The prospect was more daunting than anything else.

July 1994

The worst part is that it might not be want. It might be more. He's everywhere.

October 1994

Sometimes when I think of him I think of the sky. He looks at home up there. No wonder he always beats me to the snitch; I get so distracted up there watching him with the wind in his hair. The whole bloody school must know how I feel by now. He's so so beautiful. I don't deserve him at all

January 1995

He'd laugh at me if he knew. I don't think he'd laugh because I'm gay but because I'm ME. Potter doesn't strike me as the type to be homophobic, but he hates me. It's not as though I've given him any cause to feel different but I do wish he did. He wouldn't be overly cruel but he'd laugh at me for sure.

I fucked it up royally all those years ago didn't I? I was so proud. If I could go back and do it all different I would in a heartbeat. But time turners are hard to come by and to go back 4 years would be pretty difficult. But I want him so much. If I had the opportunity I might just try.

I'd do anything for him. It's pretty frightening.

Nobody knows but me. I'm scared out of my wits.

May 1995

I wish I hated him

Draco smiled wryly at the musings of his fourth year counterpart. It was something he felt right to his bones. Still. Now.
August 1995

I hate him. I hate him for turning me into this.

December 1995

I don't hate him at all. He is so broken and so lost and I just want to hold him. I want to free him from that wretched destiny of his. He deserves so much more than this

I hate seeing him scared. I care about him more than I thought

March 1996

I must not tell lies. That's what it says on his hand – I've noticed. And I hate her for doing that to him with such a passion it frightens me. But I know why now. To tell the truth: I love I love I love.

It doesn't feel real. But it is. It's the most real thing i've ever known

I'm in love with him

Draco swallowed the lump in his throat when he flicked past that particular entry. He remembered all too well what it felt like to be fifteen and head over heels for somebody he was supposed to hate. He remembered what it felt like to realise it, to be lost in despair and conflict and the sweet, horrible hurting of it all. Gone had been the sheer excitement of sneaking glances at him changing after Quidditch, of following him around and taunting him, watching him from across the Great Hall. When he had known it was love it had been so very scary. It had been so very unavoidable.

July 1996

I wish he could save me from this

The entries ended there. He had stowed it away beneath his things in the summer before his sixth year and it hadn't seen the light of day since. It wasn't his usual journal, that had been filled with day-to-day ramblings about Pansy and Blaise and Quidditch. There had been the occasional mention of a someone in that book. But this was the truth. The whole truth. Unfiltered and raw. And Potter hadn't been the centre of his universe once the Dark Lord had eclipsed his world. He'd been something secret, he'd been a brief escape. At night he'd pressed his fingertips so hard against his eyes that colours had erupted behind his eyelids and thought of him. Of his hands and his laugh and his brilliant anger.

Draco had known Potter would win. Always. It had been inevitable – he was righteous, he was right. Potter was fighting for something far bigger than what the Dark Lord was. So night by night Draco had pressed his fingers to his eyes and dreamt of Potter and known, known he would win, had just willed it closer, for his terror to end.

Draco had known Potter would save him. Because however much Potter hated him, he pitied him, and Potter was still Potter. Even to Voldemort himself, he offered redemption. The flames had licked their way toward Draco in the Room but he had known Potter would save him because that was Potter. All over. Until the end.

Draco hadn't known Potter would have to die for them to win. His grief had been beyond his imagining.

Draco hadn't known Potter would speak at his trial. He had never felt so humbled by him.
Potter had extended his hand and for the first time, Draco had touched him with civility. He had been bewildered and besotted and had taken his hand in a giddy haze, wondering mildly how his eleven year old self would rejoice at the action. Granger and Weasley had become a distant din in his ears; he didn't hate them like he used to, the war had worn away a lot of that futile bitterness, but he didn't care much for them either. It was still a slight mystery to him as to why Potter was so taken with them, but to dwell on it, to dwell on any of their past, would be an endeavour that was ultimately foolish and only the cause of more pain. The past was unchangeable. It became only truth.

The truth was: Draco had wanted Potter for years. And the truth was that Potter had no idea and he was incapable of reciprocation. He was painfully heterosexual and even if in the highly unlikely situation that he were willing to try out the joys of same-sex activity, Draco would be last on his list.

It stung, of course it stung, but the truth could only be denied for so long. In truth Granger was smarter than he was. Muggleborns were no different than him. And maybe, just maybe, muggles on the whole weren't inherently awful either. And if Potter thought he was deserving of freedom then perhaps he truly was.

“Why you lock yourself up in this musty old manor I'll never know.” It was Pansy, loitering at the door. Draco had been so wrapped up in the past (like the fool that he was) he hadn't noticed her arriving. “And in your room? The least you could do is go outside.”

“Nice to see you too, Pans.”

During the war her skin had lost its shine, her hair had grown dull. But she'd already regained that spark in her eyes: Draco knew recovery was on the horizon for her and he was glad for it. Pansy was a constant in his life the same way Weasley was in Potter's, as insulting as the comparison was. Pansy was all grace and elegance while Weasley was red-faced bumbling. Perhaps it was a Slytherin thing: he and Pansy and Blaise, and Daphne, to an extent, had all perfected that lofty ease to their movements. Pansy was leant against the doorframe in a skirt so short it left little to the imagination, one leg swung over the other. Perhaps it was just a gay thing.

“What are you reading?” she asked, zeroing in on the book in his hands. She was a bloody vulture.

“An old journal of mine,” he admitted. There was no use trying to hide it, or getting defensive. Pansy was a bloodhound with that sort of thing. She'd helped him perfect his haughty retorts merely through existing in his life.

“Any dirty little secrets I haven't pried out of you yet?” At his eye roll, she began to approach, and he knew immediately he'd made a mistake.

“I think you know it all now,” he said, but it was no use. She had crouched before him and raised an eyebrow.

“Well give over, then.”

“Pansy,” he pleaded, and she lunged for the book. He hurled himself backwards, scrambling away from her, sighing in relief as she missed it by a hairsbreadth. “It's Potter stuff,” he confessed, and he could see the change in her face. It was a touchy subject. If he really wanted to have a good cry about it she had to catch him alone and absolutely twatted on Firewhisky; any other day and it was a no-go. In the earlier years they had all enjoyed teasing him about it, but time had gone on and it had gotten progressively sadder.

“Fine,” she relented, long-suffering. “But this means I get a favour.”
“And what would that be?”

“Party?” she suggested, and Draco blanched.

“That seems a little soon,” he said, thinking of the war and the battle and Crabbe's final screams. The hedonistic Slytherin stereotype wasn't true for all of them but Draco and his year had certainly lived up to it, starting their progression onto harder alcohols at age fourteen, wild promiscuity at fifteen (Blaise was the one to cement Dean Thomas into bisexuality, back then. Pansy turned Lisa Turpin). Draco hadn't partaken in the latter but he had been one hell of a sucker for a party, once upon a time.

But the world was different now.

“A gathering?” Pansy bartered.

“Who?”

“Just the usuals.”

JULY 16th 1998, 19:08.

MALFOY MANOR. WILTSHIRE, ENGLAND.

When he'd asked his mother if he could have some friends over she had barely registered him. “Why not,” had been her vague answer, and she had turned over and fallen asleep. His heart ached for the girl his mother had once been and how lost she was now. He adored her. He wanted her to heal. He wanted her to wake up.

“Sounds symptomatic of depression, to me,” Millie said when he began muttering about her to the group, sipping from his old wine, stolen from the cellar (only it wasn't stolen because the manor was his and Mother's now), and Theo only groaned at her.

“Don't bring it in here, Bulstrode. Take the therapy bullshit outside.”

“It's not bullshit,” she defended. “Ma studied this stuff for years. It works. And it's good enough for Potter.”

“Potter?” Blaise had the question out before Draco, though he felt several pairs of eyes swivel to him anyway. He was, admittedly, curious.

“He's started seeing her,” Millie explained. “I don't know much more than that. It's private, and all. But Ma said he's one of the toughest patients she's had. She don't know where to even start with it all. I get the feeling he's pretty messed up.”

“Can't say I'm surprised,” Daphne interjected. “Do you think he'll go back in September?”

She had broken the invisible verbal barrier. Hogwarts had not yet been mentioned – they had all received letters. Draco was sure of it: if he had one then so did everyone else. He'd been swimming in conflict since it had arrived and was all too aware of the approaching deadline. He felt incredibly uncertain about returning to the place he had helped destroy, even if indirectly. And returning to a student body that would hate him, shun him, potentially jeer at him, wasn't a pleasant notion.

However, Draco didn't know what other choice he had. He was already an ex-Death Eater with a constant reminder of the war on his wrist, and with no NEWTs to accompany that, he didn't see where else he could go. He was not Potter, who likely had job offers flying in from all over the world. He was Malfoy. Cruel. Criminal. Outcast.
“He was never that interested in his education,” Draco found himself saying. “And he doesn't have to go back. So no, I don't think he will. Neither will Weasley.”

“Granger will,” Pansy pointed out, and grinned at Draco. “Looks like you'll still have competition this year, darling.”

“Will they let us play Quidditch?” Theo wondered, and was met with a number of different theories.

Draco was stuck on Potter. It wasn’t an unusual occurrence but it felt a little scandalous, it felt surreal, done now, beyond their schoolboy rivalry. He and Potter were no longer classmates. They were distant allies with a whole lot of history, and Draco would only see Potter on the front page of the Prophet, from now on. He was alive only in his memory, really. He would forever be Draco's first love and Draco would eventually have to move on from someone who had never loved him back. Life really was strange.

The romantic in him secretly thought Potter would return to school. Because Draco was nasty and jealous but he was, Merlin help him, a soppy romantic. And that Draco would stay up late at night playing scenarios of impossibility and wanting, pushing back the hormonal teenager Draco that only wanted to wank and forcing him to endure saccharine fantasies that would be enough to fuel whole collections of poetry.

The romantic in him wanted Potter to return to school and unshackle himself from the rigid fate that had guided him throughout the better part of his life, and live a little. Join the Slytherins. Drink hard alcohol and fuck his way through the older Hogwarts population. Learn how to roll a fluxweed cigarette. Experiment with boys. It was, in part, a selfish desire, but it wasn’t as if Potter hadn't earned the right to use carpe diem as an excuse and throw caution to the wind.

The realist in him knew it was improbable. Potter had no reasoning for returning to Hogwarts and Draco prided himself on knowing the boy fairly well. The pessimist in him thought he just might – but on the arm of Ginny Weasley. Draco couldn't bear it if the year was spent watching those two snog in the corridors and prepare for their long and happy life together. The optimist in him thought Harry might come back to Hogwarts completely separated from the Weasley’s and his friends and looking for a new crowd – oh, and he was gay, in this scenario. He was always gay in Draco's optimist scenarios.

Draco on the whole understood that Harry Potter wouldn't be returning to Hogwarts this September, and that if he did, no matter his personal circumstances, he wouldn't give Draco a second glance. It was the truth of the matter and Draco was done lying to himself to make it through the day. He wasn't sixteen anymore, for Merlin's sake. He was eighteen and he felt as though he'd lived a lifetime or two. He'd narrowly escaped death more times than he could count and the subject of his long-term teenage infatuation (who thought they were enemies) had saved him from a life in Azkaban beside his Father. It was ridiculous but it was true.

“Do you think Goyle got invited back?” Daphne was asking, slumping into her inebriation. They were drunk enough now that all of it could be spoken. Hogwarts and Goyle and maybe even Crabbe.

“No,” Blaise mumbled. “He's still in Azkaban. He won't be getting out until October. And even if he did get a letter I doubt he'd want to come back.”

Not without Crabbe went unspoken and so did he was and still is a huge racist. Draco snorted, uncouth, as he often was after a few drinks. He found it impossible to think on those two without a little confusion. They had been friends, of a sort. Way back when. Way back when Draco was as ignorant as sin.
“Good riddance,” he said, words coming unbidden. “To them both.”

“Draco.”

“No, Millie, someone needs to say it,” he spat. “I know you don't speak ill of the dead but I do: fuck all of them. Fuck Crabbe and Goyle and my father. Fuck Voldemort. They were wrong.”

Millie winced but bar from her his friends were silent. He knew they were of a similar mind, and perhaps it should have been kept quiet, but it was too late now. It was out there. It was true. And just because they had all shared a common room for the last seven years didn't mean they had to watch their words when they spoke of them or, Merlin forbid, forgive them for all their treachery. Maybe Draco was a hypocrite. But he despised them all the same.

“You didn't tell me you and Voldemort were so… intimate,” Pansy whispered, and fuck it crossed the line but it didn't half make Draco laugh.

The only possible way for him to swallow these remnants of the war, the echoes of hatred it had left, was to laugh. It was why he did not decline Pansy's suggestion of a so-called 'gathering', as soon as he felt it to be. These moments of reprieve, that allowed him to laugh, allowed him to breathe, were his method of survival. It was all he had to pull him from the precipice of his mother's dark, shut-eyed world. Laughter at the wrong moments was better than no laughter at all.

So they laughed, for a little while, the absence of their previous housemates all but forgotten, much like their dead, much like their imprisoned. They laughed to forget their loss. They drank it down with the wine, swallowed it, stored it for a later time, a sadder time. They were young and there was much life in them yet; it would not do to dwell on the unchangeable. They would have to count the blessings they had left: each other.

Draco watched on fondly as his friends succumbed to alcohol one by one; first Daphne, then Millie, Theo, Pansy, all of them drooping into unconsciousness. Blaise was half-asleep when the incessant tapping at the window came, and he barely raised his head to the sound. Draco had grown weary of sleeping, afraid he would revert to the grey, in-between stage of Narcissa Malfoy, and remained wide awake to receive the owl addressed to him from the boy he had loved half his life.

The owl was over-friendly and excitable, it burst into the room with a happy flutter and lapped it, twice, before finally delivering the folded, crumpled parchment to Draco. He knew Potter's handwriting on sight (funny how he'd pretended not to know his face when he'd spent most of his time over the last few years studying it), slightly scruffy, long and loping, but had never had the honour of it signing his name.

Draco Malfoy, it read, and Draco scanned over it half a dozen times before he could summon the courage to progress. His eyes darted down, skipping over the words.

Your wand, he saw, and Diagon Alley.

It was not a love confession. But it was a letter, a letter, from Potter himself, and however simple and meaningless it truly was, the optimist in Draco, that dirty traitor, reared his head. A letter was all it took. A letter was all he needed. Heart thumping, face flushing, Draco reread the letter again, again, drinking it down, read until he knew it by heart.

Harry Potter, it was signed, as though Potter or even Harry wouldn't be enough, like Draco didn't know him by heart, the fall of his breaths and the rhythm of his blinking. Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived.
Harry. Just Harry.
it's already in the tags but i'll warn again: this fic will include self harm from now on. 
this is not a happy story

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE LOSSES OF HARRY POTTER.


DIAGON ALLEY. LONDON, ENGLAND.

HARRY

Malfoy looked much the same as he had at his trial; still as proud and angular as he was at school, 
but softer. Lesser. To meet him here – not simply see him, but meet him – was a surrealist's most 
treasured dream. Something so out of the ordinary it begged to be remembered. Like flying cars. 
Disappearing train platforms. A magical school in the mountains.

Was it really that odd? They were two sides of the same coin. One head of platinum and another of 
ebony, one with skin of ivory and another of bronze. Traditional wizard robes and a shabby t-shirt 
paired with too-big jeans. A Death Eater and his saviour. Two broken boys, looking to heal. Lost in 
their own personal oceans of agony, drifting down amongst the seaweed and the shells and the bones 
of their dead. Harry had felt strangely at peace as he'd stepped into the Weasley fireplace and felt the 
Floo carry him across to London, and when he clapped eyes on Malfoy, his long-term nemesis, 
sitting sullen and alone in the Leaky Cauldron, he felt none of the hate he once had.

Malfoy had tormented him for years but Harry finally, in the rawness of these months after the war, 
felt as though it was time to let go. He wanted to let go. It was unlikely that they would ever be 
friends, maybe it was impossible that they would ever be friendly, but civil would do. Civil would 
have to do.

Harry made his way to the bar and ordered a Butterbeer, all too aware of a certain grey pair of eyes 
boring into his back. The feeling wasn't unfamiliar but it was odd to experience it so far from the 
grounds of Hogwarts. He took a sip of the sweet liquid when it arrived, and breathed in the musky 
pub air, the stale alcohol and the stench of sweat and humanity. It was this that they had saved. It was 
this that they had preserved. Life, even at its most base, most primal. Harry thought it was grubby 
and unattractive but a part of him loved it for its honesty.

“Potter,” Malfoy greeted, stiffening as he approached. Harry pulled out the chair opposite and took a 
seat, swallowing awkwardly. They both resolutely ignored the stares thrown their way, the 
incredules whispers that rushed through the pub like a wave.

“Malfoy,” he said.

He'd almost forgotten entirely about Malfoy's wand, stowed away in Grimmauld Place at the back of 
the alcohol cupboard. He'd come across it during one of his rare visits, sorely needed after the 
clusterfuck of a week he'd spent in Charlie's bed, up against Charlie's wall, on Charlie's bedroom
floor. He'd escaped to Sirius' old home and gotten drunk on old whiskey and cried for the confusion of it all. And his fingers had breached the ridge of Malfoy's wand, a reminder of the war that he had hidden somewhere out of plain sight. It had secured his final victory over Voldemort. He hadn't wanted to touch it. He hadn't wanted to see it.

But it hadn't been his to hide.

“Sorry this took so long.” Harry muttered, a little abashed. Malfoy only watched in silence as he bent to retrieve the wand from his bag, searching until his hand brushed against its cool wood, the solid buzz of its power. He lifted it into the open and held it in his hands, taking a moment to look. It had been a fair wand, he thought. It had channelled his magic with pride. But it wasn't his. It yearned for another – he felt it. His old holly wand would do just fine. He had lost enough, after all.

There was a shift in the air as Harry handed back the wand, their fingers grazing one another. A shift of magic, rightfully restored. Malfoy hadn't said anything but Harry's name so far but he wasn't entirely unfeeling: there was an unguarded flush of relief as he reunited with the wand that had accompanied him throughout his years at Hogwarts. It was a strangely private moment and Harry was struck with the realisation that it was only he and Malfoy, in his immediate circle of acquaintance, that had felt the loss of a wand and its subsequent return. It was one thing to work with a wand that you had won, or even a replacement that had chosen you, but there was nothing quite like your wand. The wand that had half-raised you.

“I hope you haven't been too lost without it,” Harry remarked, and Malfoy's gaze returned to him.

“I've been alright,” he said. “Mother's wand works well enough, and it's not as though these last months have called for any particularly tough spellwork.”

Harry smiled, dry. “How have you been?” left his mouth before he could help himself, and they both looked equally surprised at the question. Malfoy regarded him warily but Harry reigned in his shock quickly and allowed Malfoy a weak, encouraging glance.

“I've been alright,” he said again, fingers gripping around his wand. It was more exploratory than threatening. And Harry had enough trust in his power now to know that Malfoy would not attempt to duel him and that even so, he would most definitely lose. “Getting by.”

“And your mother?”

“She's… quiet,” he confessed. “I never did thank you for defending her.”

“Don't mention it,” Harry dismissed.

“You don't like being thanked, do you?”

Harry found himself blushing. Outside the walls of Joyce's office, he wasn't used to being understood, at least not aloud. Ron and Hermione knew all they needed to know about him; he had either told them or they had deduced it themselves. Spending your lives together came with that sort of instinct about each other. But for Malfoy, so brazen, to say such a simple but misunderstood truth… Harry blushed.

“It's not my favourite thing to endure, no.”

“You ever think about telling them that?”

He shook his head, pausing to drink from his tankard. Its warmth, its smell, it made him think longingly of Hogwarts, of their trips to Hogsmeade and laughing in the Three Broomsticks, plotting
in the Hog's Head. What the papers didn't include about the war was those quiet moments. The lulls, spent with those you loved most, trying to forget that any day could be your last. Harry had spent years fighting the evils he was faced with but years loving the good. It had been interspersed in his memory during that final walk to the forest: thick Christmas cheer with his friends, essays he drивelled on in forever, the taste of Butterbeer. Life as it came. Simple and plain. It had all been worth it in the end.

Malfoy was watching him, as he had for the last seven years, as Harry had done to a lesser extent for a while and then suddenly a lot, consumed by desperation to take control of the cruel hand that destiny had dealt him. Seeing Malfoy watch him close up was a different thing altogether. There was something in his eyes, Harry thought. Something he hadn't noticed before today. He thought maybe it was gratitude – Harry had defended him as well as his mother – but it didn't strike him as a new addition. Just new to him. New to Harry.

It frightened him but he embraced it. There was a whole new world out there. A whole new life. Harry had died and now it was his turn to live life on his terms. To cringe and shy at the unknown would be a dishonour to the boy he had once been, the boy who had been too wrapped up in danger and distracted by disaster to notice that he apparently wanted to have sex with men.

“I expect you'll be heading into Auror training this September,” Malfoy finally said, breaking the strangely serene silence that had bloomed between them.

“No,” Harry admitted. “I sent my owl to McGonagall yesterday. I'm coming back to Hogwarts.”

The twist in Malfoy's expression was unreadable. Harry was more of a tablespoon than a teaspoon but he still wasn't Hermione when it came to emotion. He knew his friends well enough to read them in a simple glance, but for strangers, and ex-enemies like Malfoy, he wasn't well-versed enough in the variety of humanity to comprehend feelings on command.

He thought of their years of animosity and assumed it must be annoyance written all over the face of the boy he had hated half his life.

“Another year of Hogwarts together it is, Potter,” Malfoy declared, and Harry had to fight back his mad urge to laugh. To have ended up here, of all places. To have outlived the war and to head forward from it with Malfoy by his side was an incredible, relieving sort of thing. But Malfoy was still looking at him with the most absurd disbelief. “Why?”

Harry felt his bottom lip give as he sunk his teeth into it, pensive. There were a million answers to the question. Hermione, he was sure, had figured them out, but he had only confessed them to Ron, in a rare moment of vulnerability. Both wide awake and sweat plastered from respective nightmares, they had started to speak. About death and life and the secret worlds that lay between them. About matters of the heart and the head and the home.

At fifteen years old he had thought the job of Auror sounded cool because it was all he'd ever known. Now, days away from eighteen, he knew it had been a misguided notion. He had wanted to be brave like his parents and follow in their footsteps. But he had done all that – he'd lived years of his life fighting a war he'd never asked to be a part of. He had been brave. He had echoed his parents' sacrifice, twofold. There had to be something more out there for him. Surely.

At seventeen, almost an entire year ago now, he had fled the Burrow and began the search for the keys to Voldemort's destruction. He had passed on his final year of school because not only had it sunk into ruin but it didn't seem to matter all that much anymore. He was the centre of it all, he had a duty to fulfil, and the lives of innocents came before exams. Harry hadn't thought much on the prospect of after.
“Because Hogwarts was the first and the best home I’ve ever known,” he finally said, voice scraping a whisper. “I’m not quite ready to let it go. Not yet.”

If Malfoy wanted to make fun of him it didn’t show. He tilted his tankard in commiseration, and took a big drink from it, the amber liquid startlingly depleted once he set it back on the table.

“The manor never was all that homely.” The words were bitter and unexpected and Harry tried his best not to let on how much they shocked him, schooling his features to indifference, to understanding and openness. Malfoy. Being truthful with him. Being real. “Hogwarts was something else,” he agreed.

For the second time that day, Harry felt a surprising kinship to the boy sat across the table from him. He studied Malfoy’s face, catalogued its sharp edges, its clear-cut lines. Harry had hated him for so long and yet he hadn’t a clue what went on inside his head. In fact, he barely knew him. Who was this stranger, with a face so familiar? It was like looking at his mother or his father. He had never truly known them, and the same went for Malfoy. His mind was a mystery to Harry. They were so similar. They were so far apart from one another. It was quite sad, really.

“September feels like a lifetime away,” was all he said, thoughts of Malfoy tumbling around his head.

“It feels like tomorrow.”

Harry laughed. He couldn’t help it. He saw Malfoy’s mouth twitch in tandem. The summer ahead of them was daunting – Harry wanted to rush back to life, seize it by the horns. A summer of sitting around and doing nothing but driving in circles in Cheshire and going through Sirius’ alcohol bottle by bottle did not appeal to him. Malfoy, on the other hand, was frightened. Beginning life anew after Voldemort was perhaps something he felt as though he didn’t deserve, after everything. Hogwarts would not welcome him the way it would welcome Harry.

Then again, he may have simply said it to be contrary.


WARRINGTON, CHESHIRE, ENGLAND.

Joyce had laughed when he’d told her about Charlie. He’d thought about her during his shower after that first time, vaguely realising that his life had been split into things Joyce would want to know and unimportant, everyday things that he had once thought were silly but now sometimes took a minute to marvel at, violently aware of his fragile humanity and the transience of life. But to talk about how the whistling kettle brought tears to his eyes, or the way the excited bustling of Pig in the mornings made his heart fit to bursting, felt so stupid to say aloud. So he stuck to telling her the more exciting events: fucking his best friend’s brother and sharing a drink with they guy he’d hated for years.

“Oh, Harry,” she’d said. “What are we going to do with you?”

“You think I'm an idiot,” he’d replied, but grinned, able to see the humour like she had.

“I think you're an incredibly damaged teenage boy,” had been her counter. “I think you revert to these reckless tendencies to numb yourself. And I think you're aware of this, but you do it anyway. Because it makes you feel something. Because it makes you feel good. I think you don't think very much of yourself.”

Of course, she had been spot on, he thought now, as he smoked his third cigarette down to the stub,
hating the ashy taste of them but knowing how Sirius had liked them. Harry had worked through his stash and had now taken to buying a pack of Mayfairs in every shop he visited, feeling as though the ghost of his godfather rejoiced as Harry shrunk into his old habits. Harry wanted it. Wanted it with an ache he had never imagined; an ache that was dulled only briefly by the endless smoke of his cigarettes, the tang of his drink, the smooth stretch of his leather jacket. He felt as though he were trying on a persona for size. He didn't have to be little boy Harry anymore. Now he had sex and he smoked but he felt like a child smearing his face with his mother's make up.

Charlie had said the leather jacket made him look sexy but that he should probably slow down on the fags. Harry had just blown smoke in his face and kissed the words away into nothingness. However much he looked in the mirror and saw his parents, however much he adopted his godfather's mannerisms, he just felt a whole lot of nothingness. He'd fucked Charlie to feel oblivion and then he'd kept fucking Charlie and now it wouldn't leave. In a week he would be an adult, by muggle standards, and he still didn't know who he was.

Harry tilted his face up to the drizzle, flicking his cigarette butt into an available ashtray. It was filling with water on an abandoned table in the pub garden he was strolling past. He watched the rain catch hold of his discarded cigarette end in the tray, floating it to the top. He watched it dampen and droop, embers fizzling to air, making it wet, limp, forgotten. It grew saturated and bobbed along beside the other deserted stubs of tobacco. The sky above it was grey. Harry thought that was what dying felt like.

A child caught his eyes from across the garden. They were bright and full of the future. Harry looked away, and pulled the pack of Mayfairs from his pocket.

“Letting go of your past with Draco Malfoy seems wise,” Joyce had remarked, not letting on that she had ever heard of him outside of her sessions with Harry, both of them knowing full well that she had. Theirs was an informal arrangement. Harry paid her in galleons and he knew her daughter. It didn't make it easy.

“But?” Harry had asked, knowing there was a but.

“But he's not the only thing you need to let go of.”

Letting go of the living was far easier than letting go of the dead. With the living, there was always a second try, there was always another chance. The dead didn't get chances, just mud and rot and something else, something beyond human understanding. So Harry shook Malfoy's hand and returned his wand and pondered on the possibility of a truce between them this coming year. He did this all the while wrapping himself in Sirius' old jacket, reeking of smoke. He broke the emotional barrier between him and Ron and watched a new form of honest, vulnerable friendship blossom between them as he sniffled and spoke of Hogwarts. But he dreamt of his mother and his father and jam on toast at Godric's Hollow.

Harry knew Joyce was right – to move on, to heal, he would have to let go of all that had caused him suffering. Namely, those he had lost. But some had only been gone a few months – Fred was unavoidable in the Burrow, lit up in his siblings' faces, and Colin Creevey hid behind the eager, excited children that approached Harry in Diagon Alley, begging to know all they could about the Boy Who Lived Twice. It was why he began frequenting muggle towns like this. He was unknown here. It was all that kept him sane.

Remus and Tonks haunted him in the shouts of those children too. He thought of Teddy, a child born to parents soon to be dead, and swallowed the bite of his ignored duty as godfather. Sirius found him there, as well. Dumbledore danced along any lines of wisdom Harry came across. Hedwig and Dobby lived in the wide and guileless eyes of Crookshanks, innocent, no real understanding of
death. He saw groups of young, twenty-something men in creased suits and ties, on their way home from work, and imagined the future that Cedric never had; their sickly-sweet, doting girlfriends reminded him with a pang of Lavender Brown. Moody inhabited his instincts and his fears, the vigilance that was impossible to lose on the other side of a war.

To let them go felt like such a dishonour. They had fought and died for the same cause that he had, and how was it _fair_ that he'd gotten a choice? Simply because his mother had loved him? Save for Sirius, everyone who had died had been loved by a mother. And now they were decaying in the ground whilst he chain-smoked amongst the living. The pain was incomparable, rattling like a cough at his ribs, desperate to be set free.

Harry collapsed to his knees in the first back-alley he found, dark and dingy and stinking of pot. He began to cry, silently, the puddle he'd fallen into wetting his jeans, his tears dampening his cheeks. What a funny thing, to be ashamed of your own grief. How dare you, he thought to himself. How was it fair that they had died and he had lived, _him_, who was longing to go back to King's Cross Station and choose differently, not that he'd ever admit it to anyone but Joyce. The Boy Who Wanted to Die had been the one to survive – why not Fred, with a million jokes to brighten the world, or Colin with his persistence and ambition, Lavender, who had so much love to give.

“Why do you mourn those you barely knew?” Joyce had wanted to know.

“Because I wish they'd lived in my place,” he'd answered.

“But then you wouldn't have been able to save the others.”

“That's just how selfish I am.”

The burning end of his new cigarette was growing closer to his fingers as he sat and cried in an alley so far from home, from any of his homes. He relished the heat. It made him think of the hot chase of Fiendfyre, of burning Inferi, of his scar pounding in his head. The rain was far from pouring; it did not drown out his thoughts of flames.

“Some say the world will end in fire,” Hermione had whispered to him once, back in fifth year, the words _I must not tell lies_ burning their way into the back of his hand as hotly as the fireplace endured. She had been stroking his hair like a mother. Her tone had been smooth and soft. “Some say in ice.” Her thumb had skirted past the shell of his ear. “From what I've tasted of desire, I hold with those who favour fire.”

Harry had found the poem years later in the back of a book. He hadn't thought much of the second half: Voldemort had been all ice, cold hatred, steely ambition. Harry had been fire. He had been so much he'd finished even Voldemort, the great and feared He Who Must Not Be Named, You-Know-Who, the Dark Lord. Harry knew that he was just Tom Riddle and that he hadn't burnt hot enough. Love was fire. Love was light.

He thought of this as he pressed the circled end of the cigarette into the skin on his forearm, watching it sizzle, feeling a bright burst of pain. He fell backward onto the damp asphalt, hand steady as he pressed the heat against his skin. It was like sex, he thought. It helped him forget, for a moment or two.

“Does having sex with Charlie make me gay?” he had questioned Joyce.

“There are a lot of labels and a lot of possibilities open to you,” she had explained. “But I'd encourage you to think about it. Sometimes definitions aren't for everyone, but it can certainly be a help. It may just be a part of forming this new identity you seem so desperately to want.”
Identity? Harry just wanted escape. Harry wanted ice. He was so hot, all the time, and he felt in danger of burning out. But nobody really noticed. They just watched him aflame in the dreary plateau of July and walked on by. Malfoy was the only one that had seen through the fire recently – no, he didn’t like being thanked. He was still here. He had thoughts and pains and wants.

Harry looked down at the red ring of his ruined flesh, an inch below the crook of his arm. He smiled, wishing to switch places with his dead, letting the husk of the cigarette fall to the floor. He rose and ground it into the gravel with his grubby trainers, and pulled out the pack of Mayfairs again, thumb flicking uselessly against the lighter once, twice, before setting fire to his new cigarette and the rain.
Hi Dad.

Happy Birthday to me! Ten minutes ago I officially turned eighteen, but then you know that. I'm sure I'll dream of it. I keep dreaming of you. And mum. It's simple stuff really: we're in Godric's Hollow, she makes me breakfast, you and I go for a walk. Isn't it pathetic that my most desperate dreams are such simple scenarios? If I looked in the mirror of erised I know what i'd see.

I wonder what you'd get me if you were alive. I know I'll be receiving hoards of chocolate frogs and pumpkin pasties in the post and probably something a little more thoughtful closer to home. But I do wonder what I'd receive from you. A new broom? Sometimes I think a hug would do. I wish you were here. I wish you had lived.

I look in the mirror sometimes and it floors me. And as the years go by, I know I will outlive you. I will grow to 22 and i'll look at myself and see a reflection of the person you could've been, that you never got to be. You died so young and I didn't get it when I was small, because you seemed so big and all knowing, but now I get it. I'm 3 years away from becoming you. 21 is far too young to die.

I feel like I'm falling apart, dad. I'm wearing sirius's stuff and doing all the things he used to do and I think it might be because I don't have anything left of you. If you'd worn denim jackets and played with a butterfly knife I'm sure i'd be doing that but there isn't all that much left of you. Just a burnt down house and dead friends. I have mourned you so deeply but in truth I never really knew you – I learnt that from snape. You had a life beyond me and I long for parents that didn't raise me. I don't care that you weren't perfect and that you made mistakes as a child. To be flawed is to be human. I only wish I had found that out from you rather than HIM. At the end of the day you died for me and whatever happened before that I love you all the same. I came from you. I am a part of you and vice versa. Doing bad things doesn't automatically make you a bad person.

I do worry what you would think of me now. I'm smoking like a chimney and i'm having sex with a boy. I think you'd love me no matter what but I can't help but imagine you being disgusted and seeing me completely differently. I know in my heart you wouldn't care though. If there's anything i'm certain of it's how much you and mum loved me.

I think you'd be so brilliantly happy that I made it to 18. I've lived all these years because you gave up your life for me. I'm here because of you and I know how lucky that makes me. We beat him, in the end. And it all started with you and mum. Who knows what would've happened if you hadn't fought him, or if you'd simply let him kill me. The world today may have been a very different one.
But to say no to that. To die for the sheer wrongness of what he believed in, is important. These little sparks of hope are what’s needed to build a sustainable rebellion. Dumbledore’s Army, The Order of the Phoenix, were born from hope. Born from people like you.

It is the only way I can remember you – as this brave, unreachable hero. My wonderful father. To think of you as a man with a whole life ahead of him, with more children to bear and anniversaries to enjoy and hope to spread, a real person, a flawed, courageous man, hurts too much. It aches that I never had a mother and father to raise me but I like to think of you, the real you, as a historical figure. I have to block out the personality there. Not that I ever really knew much about you.

I hope dying for me was worth it. I know it’s an awful thing to say but sometimes I wonder if your lives would’ve been a whole lot more than mine. It feels like all I’ve ever done is fight, and now the war is over all I’m doing is going through the motions, existing day to day. I’m not sure if this is what living should feel like. Maybe you should’ve just let me go.

Goodbye, dad. I think of you often. I miss you every day.

All the love in the world,

your harry. x
George's breathing below her was not enough to send her off to sleep. She had never been in a bunk bed before, let alone a top bunk. At home, her bed wasn't far from the ground. But Ginny preferred height, always had; relished the cool sky and her closeness to the stars and all their greatness. She imagined now that she was soaring on her broom, the rush of George's breathing was the build of applause, cheering, hollering below her. She imagined that her bed was a boat and that her brother's breathing was the give and take of the gentle waves. She was glad for his breath. It meant he was still alive. These were the only reasons she had elected to stay with George – the bunk bed and her longing for Fred. She had the comfortable middle. Hermione and Luna were the lucky ones, with their beautiful twin room, and Harry and Ron had gotten off the worst, sharing the springy sofa bed downstairs. Ginny was happy with middle.

A holiday had been Dad's idea – to have some time away from the Fred-filled Burrow would be a good thing. It would help them heal. Mum had protested, had wanted her children in sight at all times, but Dad had been adamant, Bill encouraging. They needed some sun and sea. They needed some time to be free.

“You have the clock,” Ginny had said. “We'll be fine.”

They had both glanced at the thing. Fred's hand remained pointing to Lost at all times, yet another painful reminder that was impossible to escape. On the night before they had left, it was only Ginny who had noticed the two extra names that her mother had added. Harry and Hermione. They were Weasley in all but name.

Where she lay she could smell the faint spice of her sweat and felt an empty twinge in her stomach, her womb shedding its lining, her body working ceaselessly in spite of the wishes of her brain. It would never carry a child. And yet, it continued, spurred on by her youth and health. The ritual would repeat once a month until she began to grow grey. She thought about how easy her brothers had it. Growing up she had been the odd one out, the girl, obstacles shackling her at every turn. But Ginny was Gryffindor through and through. She had more than enough nerve to last her a lifetime. She'd taught herself how to fly and pulled boys in one by one, because it felt good to be desired, because she hadn't wanted to be lonely in the midst of the war, and her womanhood had become strength, not weakness. She had shaped it into power. She was capable of such transformation.

Ginny had never been to Bill's cottage before – she had assumed she wouldn't care for it, preferring the sky to the sea, but it had, undeniably, a charm. Something in the salty air and the way the ocean crashed against the rocks. Like a distant cheer. Like George's breath. It was quaint like the Burrow but Fleur had brought a class to the cottage that was a rare find in the residence of a Weasley. It made Ginny wonder on her future after Hogwarts – where would she live? What would she go on to do?
She thought of Luna. She always thought of Luna when she thought of the future. They went hand in hand; they were an inevitability. Something warm had settled between them: Ginny was sure that Luna knew. And sometimes, just sometimes, she imagined that Luna might feel the same. That the warmth between them was indication of possibility. It was around here that she imagined kissing her, lips chapped and hair flying, slow and soft in the summer wind.

It was things like this that made her think she was a lesbian.

Girls had always made her head spin – puberty came, she'd fancied half the Holyhead Harpies and she'd kissed Parvati Patil behind the Quidditch stands. She'd breathed through it. Lavender had told her the word bisexual and she'd clung onto it, the only explanation available to her. It was an explanation that still involved boys and she'd let Michael kiss her, let Dean stick his tongue down her throat, and told herself it made sense. She had kissed Michael and Dean and Parvati and imagined Luna. She had kissed Harry and imagined Luna.

Ginny had lost her virginity to Pansy Parkinson and imagined Luna.

“Out of bed after hours, Weasley?” she'd said, grinning like a shark, coming upon Ginny in a dark corridor, Dumbledore's Army written shakily on the wall behind her. Her voice had been low and crooning. “What are we going to do with you?”

There had been something dark in her words but it was not the darkness of the Carrows; it was like sea on the rocks, a whispered confession, purred, desired. Ginny had looked at her, and known. It was not the sunny sweetness of Luna but there was a fiery attraction that came with Parkinson's teasing, her wicked demeanour. Ginny had kissed her, bold and blazing, a burst of light in all that dark. She'd let Parkinson push her up against the wall and run her fingers up Ginny's skirt, brushing against her cunt. The arousal that had seized her had been sudden and powerful, nothing at all like what she had felt while kissing Harry, which she had started to deduce recently had been a big fat nothing anyway. Parkinson had pressed her fingers inside her, it had been slick and wet and Ginny's stomach had lurched; it had been obvious this was not Parkinson's first rodeo. Her ministrations as she'd thumbed Ginny's clit, expertly sucked bruises against her collarbone, teased the vulnerable flesh of her inner thighs with come-slick fingers, had said all it needed. After Ginny had come she returned the favour in a haze of lust and gratitude, barely registering that this was the only vagina she had touched besides her own. The way Parkinson had moaned and moved against her had turned her on so, so much.

They had barely spoken after that. If they'd caught eyes in the corridor they had looked away. Parkinson hadn't reported her and Ginny had realised she was far from evil: she was a child, like all of them. She was scared and she had sought comfort in the arms of another just as Ginny had.

It felt wrong to imagine Luna like that but Ginny did it anyway, had done since well into fifth year. Luna was bisexual, though she preferred girls and didn't often use the word – Ginny knew she had fucked Padma and knew that Harper was who she went to meet at midnight. Luna had sex. More so than Ginny. But Ginny had built this beautiful songbird image of her, made her delicate and innocent in her mind's eye. She did not ooze sex in the way that Parkinson did. So when Ginny put her hand on herself at night, she felt dirty when she thought of Luna and her dreamy eyes, her pretty blonde hair, her simple world view and her bare feet. But she did it anyway.

“Kiss me,” Luna would say, and the words would carry on the wind. Ginny would tell her how beautiful she was. How she had kept her afloat during the war, even when she wasn't there in person.

“That's nice,” Luna would say, in that way of hers, and then Ginny would finally kiss her.
Ginny would kiss the brine and the sand from her lips and press her down into the beach, the naval of the world. She would kiss away the pain and the grief and for the first time since Fred had died, she would feel whole. She would hold the small, feminine curve of Luna's waist, the one that Ginny had never quite accomplished, and the handful of her breasts, the ones Ginny had never quite caught up with. Ginny's muscled abdomen would press against Luna's soft one, and Luna was far too ethereal to have a cunt so with her it was vagina, and she would sigh and shift against Ginny's palm until she was finished, hair spread on the sand, dirty blonde and seashelled. And then they would put rocks in their pockets and stroll out to sea, let the waves envelop them, let the water take them. All they would leave would be their shoes and their socks at the edge of the ocean.

But those were just fantasies. In reality Ginny knew that Luna was not an idiot and that she may have figured out how deeply and irrevocably Ginny wanted her; if she had, she had not let on. She appeared to be averse to pursuing anything. So Ginny locked it up. Shut her mouth. Swallowed down her love and inhaled the salt air all on her own.

To drag Luna down with her would be cruel – the rocks were Ginny's to bear. She only imagined them dying together because of the reckless romanticism of it: to finally give in to drowning would be a great relief, and to have her Luna with her would be sweet solace. But it was selfish. She knew this.

George breathed on beneath her. There had been no conversation between them as they'd retired to bed. George had fallen onto the bottom bunk immediately, the exhaustion evident in him, and Ginny had wondered if he genuinely didn't have the energy to climb to the top bunk. She had wondered if he'd ever slept in a bunk bed before. And if so, had Fred always taken the top? Ginny hadn't said a word to him. She had only listened to him drift into a fitful sleep, from which he often stirred and mumbled, tossing and turning. It wasn't hard to guess who haunted his dreams.

She thought on the rest of the cottage. She could hear Fleur and Bill through the wall, trying to be quiet in their hazy late-night lovemaking. Through the other wall there was the low buzz of voices, Hermione and Luna, sharing midnight secrets and giggled confessions. Tiny bursts of laughter occasionally came up through the floor, remnants of Harry and Ron's conversation. But George slept and Ginny kept quiet. Life and its variations: the union of husband and wife, the laughter of old friends, the unspoken loss of brother and sister and a brother who wasn't there but should've been.

Ginny began to cry. It was silent, as always. She had grown apt at clenching her jaw and holding back the longing shout that threatened to tear from her chest. The tears fled from her eyes unstoppered, like falling drops of condensation, the slow progression of sweat. They squeezed from her eyes forcibly, pumped through by the endless working of her heart. She shook and cried above her lone twin brother, an empty ache stretching between them. It was different when she was at home – her old patchwork quilt carried her to sleep and if she shut her eyes then nothing was amiss. But here, visiting her older brother at the edge of the world (not really, but the edge of her world), Fred's absence was screaming to her.

She said his name, to remember him. She said his name to miss him.

“Fred,” she said, ears trained to the rise and fall of George's life. She imagined that wherever her brother was, he had finished that laugh.


SHELL COTTAGE, TINWORTH, CORNWALL, ENGLAND.

Harry was singing along to that Semisonic song under his breath that morning, where it petered out from the old radio on the counter. He was off-key and he didn't know half the lyrics and Ginny loved
him so, so much. He was flicking through the newspaper one-handed, taking pauses to spoon more cornflakes into his mouth. His other hand was in the possession of Ginny, who was painting each of his nails with painstaking caution. She'd decided on a luminous pink. He needed to branch out his colour scheme, she thought. Greys and blacks were out.

*I must tell not tell lies* was scratched into his skin in that scruffy handwriting of his. It was all reluctance and scar tissue. Ginny brushed her finger over it tenderly, tracing the untidy angles of Harry's letters. He barely looked up from his breakfast. Ginny marvelled at how he had simply let his scars become a part of him, absorbed them into his being. She still wrinkled her nose at the scar on her left knee from her first few attempts at flying, saw it as a blemish and a frustration. But Harry was like the sun. He was the centre of everything and they were all simply orbiting around him; anything he touched he pulled into his universe, his scars, his friends, his bloody cornflakes, the nail varnish that was caked on his fingernails. Ginny picked up the fluorescent pink and continued. A part of her thought if she pasted enough brightness in the world around her it would drag her up and out of the dark.

When Luna wandered into the kitchen with a bleary greeting, Ginny's hand barely shook, pulling the brush taught across the curve of Harry's nail. She swallowed and glanced up through her eyelashes, teeth puncturing her lip harshly. Luna's hair was unbrushed. Her pyjamas were crumpled and her smile was small and private. Ginny tumbled effortlessly into the girl she had once been, before the war: a girl in love. For a moment it all faded away. It was only her and Luna in her brother's kitchen that stood on the coastline, threatening to be swept out to sea with the rest of the driftwood and debris. For a moment Fred was gone but not dead.

And then Luna hummed her way into the downstairs bathroom, disappearing behind the closed door, and all that pain came rushing back. Ginny's lip began to bleed. She darted her tongue out to slow the flow, tasting the coppery tang of it, noting absently that this was exactly how her mouth had tasted for weeks after Fred. Like blood. Like metal. Metal and mourning.

“I wish they'd stop playing this song on repeat,” Bill said, shifting eggs in the frying pan, long hair curling around his neck in the heat of it.

“I theenk you shall be saying zat about any song zey play on ze radio,” Fleur teased, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

Bill, for a moment, abandoned his sizzling eggs, and spun into the warmth of his wife, fastening his hands around her waist and lifting her, spinning her, kissing her. Kissing her as she laughed and shrieked at him to put her down, kissing her in spite of his eggs, so that for a moment, she was the only one in the world. There was something eerie about Shell Cottage in that the sounds of Fleur and the music of the radio were but a distant din. The sounds of humanity were drowned out in favour of nature: the patio doors were always open during the day, the windchimes twinkling their song and the thin curtains billowing inward, as the sea worked onward, loudly. It was only fair, Ginny supposed. Bill and Fleur were transient, had only lived for a few decades or so. Nature had earned the right to make noise. It had lived forever.

No person lived forever.

Ginny was humbled by their personal little love story. Once upon a time she had not cared much for Fleur, but she'd been fifteen and had hated all pretty girls. Because she'd wanted to look like them. Because she'd wanted them. Fleur was kind and brave and she loved Bill, Ginny couldn't ask for anything more. They had built themselves a little life here in Cornwall, where they took joy in simple pleasures like tinny music from a beat up radio and the smell of frying eggs. Ginny envied the life that Bill had led after Fred's death: he'd been able to retreat to his little seaside paradise and take
comfort in his wife, with only a few family photos to remind him. George, on the other hand, had returned to the Burrow and slept in their childhood bedroom, Fred hidden in every corner, alive in every poster, empty in his unmade bed.

Ginny blew on Harry's nails and kissed his scar, rising from the dining table. Bill was turning back to his eggs and Fleur was dancing over to the fridge, long dress flowing as she turned in a circle. Harry didn't look up from the newspaper. Ginny was secretly relieved that the sound of the shower cut out as she left the cottage; seeing Luna, hair wet, scrubbed clean, soft and damp, would perhaps be too much to bear.

English beaches had a brittle air about them. They were neither dry nor humid, but crisp, as though the salt from the sea truly leapt to shore, seeking lips to chap and eyes to sting. It may have been August but Britain remained cool if not slightly sunny. Ginny breathed in the sea air and toed her way down the rocks, barefoot, feeling pinpricks of pain as she stepped upon the particularly sharp ones. In the distance she saw Hermione sat upon the beach, and after her, Ron, his jeans rolled up to his knees as he stood in the shallows. The image was a peaceful one, a picturesque scene that Ginny was hesitant to interrupt. But she did it anyway.

“Morning,” Hermione murmured when Ginny joined her, sitting in the sand in her pyjamas.

Ron was skimming rocks. They skipped along the water's surface, sending ripples outward. It was like grief, Ginny thought. One stone led to such a widespread effect. One Fred. A whole lot of pain.

“How did you sleep?” Ginny asked.

“Better than usual,” Hermione confessed. “I think it might be the change of scene.”

“It's nice here,” Ginny said. “Too nice. I feel like I'm in a storybook.”

“And they lived sadly ever after.”

She laughed; Ron skipped another stone, and it arched forwards, yearning, darting towards the horizon. Another piece of nature, disturbed by humanity and their reckless and pointless desires, returned home. Her poor broken brother, wading out to sea. And beside her, Hermione. Hermione whom she loved desperately and unbelievably, another who had taken her femininity and refused to let it restrain her. She and Harry and Ron lived in an odd ageless, genderless bubble, a tiny little universe they had built all on their own. A universe with a different sea and a different sky and without the shrill screams of seagulls overhead. She envied them, wished for a friendship like that, a little found family of her own. But what she had with Luna, what she had with Neville, it still mattered. Perhaps they would never be those three. But that was to be human – difference, individuality. Beauty changed as quickly as the tide.

“Ready for school?” she heard herself asking, mind tripping over the promise of its brevity. One year remaining, and then: the rest of her life. Her life without Fred. “Because I'm assuming Ron isn't.”

“He's regretting his decision to return day by day. But me? I'm always ready.” Hermione confirmed. It went unsaid that she was brimming with excitement for her return to education. Hermione had always taken it to well. “Are you?” she asked, and Ginny pulled a face. She did not have the intellect nor the enthusiasm that Hermione did concerning such matters. In truth, she had always been middling in class, had endured it easily but not quite enjoyed it. But Ginny was happy with middle. “Just one more year until you're free,” Hermione reassured, noting her expression.

Ginny could not stop herself: “free to do what?” she asked. That was the big question, wasn't it? What then? Without her brother it didn't really feel like freedom at all. Barely life. Just existence,
slow and dull and making it through the day. Hogwarts, at least, would soften the ache of grief. Hogwarts meant distraction.

Hermione was looking at her with the sweetest pity. “Whatever you want,” she whispered. “Ginny, you can do anything you want. Be whoever you want to be. You just have to want it.”

A wave of emotion crested within her. She sighed, the sea came in and touched her toes with its salty, greedy fingers, and retreated once more. The sand it left behind was pliant and wet, Ginny dug into it with her feet, uprooted it. A gust of wind shivered by them: off went Ginny's hair, sailing into the air as usual, a flickering flame to anyone in the distance. It flew over her eyes. She watched it stretch away from her, remembered how Fred had used to pull at it when he wanted to tease.

Once, it had wormed its way into her bowl of cereal, gotten its ends dampened by milk. Fred had guffawed and rolled his eyes at her. “I don't know,” he'd said, referring to the maintenance of it. “It just seems so difficult. I couldn't do it.”

Words from a dead boy. Ginny stood without explanation nonetheless, overcome with her loss, with the simplicity of who he had been and how they had loved one another. She sprinted up to the house, darting from rock to rock, through the reeds, enticing her back as they grazed at her calves. Nobody paid her any mind as she tore back into the cottage, the memory gnawing away at her. In the third drawer on the left – the scissors, which she grasped with reckless intensity, the blade biting into her palm. The rough wood of the stairs scratched the soles of her feet; she ducked into the bathroom and pushed the door shut, leaning heavily against it, choking back her sobs, which rose and fell like breaths, in and out like the tide.

Ginny moved to the sink, looked in the mirror at her ginger hair that fell to her chest. And she began to cut. Pulled her hair away from her scalp, secured the scissors around it in their metal grip, pushed them together. Cut. Again. Cut. Again. Cut. Again and again and again. Cut cut cut. It started to drop into the sink like falling embers, a building bonfire. A pyre on which she could burn her tired grief and her memories that would not leave her be. She did not cry. She held her chin high and defiant and watched the girl in the mirror become somebody else. Somebody with a jagged haircut and wild sorrow in her eyes.

She said her name, to remember her. She said her name to honour her.

“Ginny,” she said.

This was the future:

Chapter End Notes

don't know why i have such a thing for past pansy x ginny but there we go. i surrender however that luna x ginny is far superior and endgame as hell in this fic
“Happy Birthday Harry!”

Harry was taken aback – he was still in his pyjamas for Merlin’s sake! But the warm faces of Sirius and Remus were far from unwelcome, and he embraced them hurriedly, rejoicing in the union of his little family, no longer bothered that he was dressed in a rumpled t-shirt and pants that were too big for him. The arms of his godfather and great friend were enough to make him forget. Dad was grinning up at them from the sagging, faded couch; Harry could hear Mum bustling about in the kitchen, humming an old song as she worked. He imagined her, hair piled atop her head, a spot of flour dusting her cheek. Maternal and domestic like he had never seen her. Not during life.

“Eighteen!” Sirius exclaimed, stepping back to take him in. “I remember what I did for my eighteenth...”

“Sirius, let’s spare him the dirty details,” Remus interjected, long-suffering, and Harry could do nothing but laugh at the both of them, the depth of his joy not quite registering with him.

“Let’s not,” he argued, and Dad, smiling from ear to ear, shook his head at them.

“You’ll watch your mouth around my son,” he warned, but the threat had no bite. It came out fond and a little exasperated, and Harry looked up at his father and felt the greatest rush of gratitude. Gratitude for what, he did not know, all he understood was that the day was a joyous one and that he loved his family endlessly.

It was a sunny day in Godric’s Hollow. The light beat through the window and touched the landscape of the house with affection – the flowers seemed to bloom a little more, the ornaments shone a touch brighter. The room was cosy and colourful, the design of young parents who were still in love with the world. It was a brilliant mix of muggle and wizard, with the Daily Prophet and the Times discarded on the side, a wand balanced beside a telephone. Two worlds condensed into one. Lily and James and Harry. Sirius, launching into an exaggerated tale of sex and drugs and booze. Remus, huffing and sighing and hiding his laughter.

Harry’s love for them came as easy as breathing. It stretched beyond his lungs: heart and liver and brain, it encompassed him, surrounded him, an ocean. His love was salt and sea and sand. They were here and they were real, singing Happy Birthday in lilting tune as his mother carried in a shoddily-iced cake, candles alight where they protruded from it. It was okay. Harry had never asked for perfection, he had never wanted it. All he had wanted was the normalcy of a mother and a father and dry, homemade sponge cake for breakfast.

For a beautiful, brilliant moment, everything was great. The expressions around him held such pride and such affection and it swelled throughout the house, full and free and inescapable. But Harry realised, watching the cake drift toward him, tiny flames fluttering, that there was an emptiness to the room, a lacking.
“Where are Ron and Hermione?” he asked, and the family scene froze, paused, wavering for a second.

“They aren’t here,” his father said. It wasn’t sinister, just matter-of-fact.

“Why not?”

The adults looked at each other. There was an awkwardness hanging in the air, the contradiction of knowing and unknowing. They knew, and he didn’t.

“They’re amongst the living, Harry,” Sirius finally replied, face kind and pitying, “and we are the dead.”

It was as though a glass had been shattered, ringing in Harry’s ears. The universe around him was homely and open and so, so real – he could touch it, feel it, love it. It was the birthday he deserved. But it was not whole without Ron and Hermione. He felt such a sudden and hot burst of longing for them that it almost sent him to his knees, buckled him, untethered him from the steady ground of his family. This all felt so right but he knew, somewhere deep inside of him, that it wasn’t.

Mum didn’t seem to care. In fact, the people around him had simply resumed, returning to that silly, cloying birthday state of before. Harry’s head was pounding.

“Make a wish,” Lily urged.

Harry did: two worlds, condensed into one.

Ron merely shifted beside him as Harry broke into wakefulness, panting, sweating, heart bounding. He was trembling. A high window had been left cracked open: perhaps this was why. By the sea, the nights were colder than Harry had expected. But that wasn't so bad. He wanted ice, after all, and these nights cooled him. He unstuck himself from the sheets, crept from the bed, careful not to jostle Ron as he did so. But Ron usually slept like the dead – Harry wasn’t really in any danger of waking him.

Harry pulled the window shut with a quiet squeak and Ron still did not wake. Harry smiled over at him, his dear friend, a mess of ginger hair and freckles in a tangle of blankets. He looked incredibly young in sleep, with the faded agony of Fred no longer written all over his expression. Now he was just soft skin and thin eyelids and parted lips. Faint snores and a long nose. *I never want to live without you*, Harry thought, remembering his dead for a second and clutching for any tiny rays of positivity: he had not lost Ron. Ron was here, buried in sleep, missing his brother. It was awful but Harry was glad for it. Glad for Ron’s tangible lifeforce on the creaky old sofa bed.

Perhaps he was in love with Ron. It seemed probable that he was gay and Ron had been by his side for years. Harry had fucked his brother, time and time again. Perhaps it wasn’t Charlie Weasley that he wanted.

One thought of Ron like that and the possibility tumbled away as quickly as it had arrived. Harry cringed, shaking the image of Ron in Charlie’s place from his head, feeling settled in the knowledge that he and Ron were, and always would be, platonic. He thought Ron was beautiful because he was his friend and he was alive, and Harry was grateful for it. It wasn’t because he wanted him. He thought Ron was beautiful in the same way he thought Hermione was beautiful, and he definitely didn't want her. The realisation comforted him, though only a little. The word gay was still incredibly frightening but at least he had some of it figured out.

Carefully, Harry padded to where his duffel bag sat in the corner of the room. With the utmost care
he unzipped it, reached inside and felt around until he could produce his trusty lighter and a crumpled pack of Mayfairs, tossing them into his pocket. He decided against shoes or a jacket, and instead relished the hard reality of the outdoors as he snatched up his wand and fled from the cottage, cold air biting through his thin pyjamas, hard ground unkind to the soft soles of his feet. The breeze tousled his hair and he felt a certain fondness for the earth and its inevitabilities as he stepped through the garden toward the lone gravestone. There would always be wind. There would always be night.

*Here Lies Dobby, a Free Elf.*

Harry remembered it like it was yesterday. Regret seized him at his lack of words – at the time, he had been lost in wild grief and shock. Luna had thanked Dobby for what he had done, and absenty, Harry had thought that was all that needed to be said.

But that wasn't the case. To Luna, that was all Dobby had been: a dead saviour. To Harry, there laid a dead friend. A friend who had been a constant throughout his years at Hogwarts, who had, however disastrously, *always* tried to help him, had only ever sought his safety. A little House Elf so brave and selfless. He had been Harry's *friend*, and in his own way, Harry had loved him. Tears pricked at his eyes now, and Harry did not wipe them away. He was proud of his loss, here. Alone in the night. Sat before the grave of a friend who had given his life to preserve Harry's.

“Thank you, Dobby,” he said thickly, heart threatening to push up through his throat. “Thank you for saving me. Thank you for being there for me. You have been such a wonderful friend.”

Harry had to pause, a wounded cry falling from his lips. He stretched out a hand, and ran his fingers over the inscription, sad, blind. His fluorescent pink nails looked garish against the backdrop of the stone. He thought with fondness of Dobby's madness in his second year, his gift of gillyweed years later, the aid he lent to Dumbledore's Army.

“I'll never forget you,” he whispered, the truth coming raw in the dim light of early morning. Dobby hurt just as much as any of his losses, and there were many. Harry felt as though the dead took turns at causing him heartache. More than one and he would not be able to breathe through it. For now, it was Dobby that his grief fixated on. “I'll show those bastards at the Ministry. I'll tell the world about you.”

His anguish at Dobby's missing name had been great, but it had drifted aside as other issues hollered at Harry to be heard; his strangely tranquil dreams, his unexpected affair with Charlie. Now he berated himself for his negligence. It was time, he thought, to begin speaking out. When their break here at Shell Cottage was done, he would come forward, finally, about his experiences. Harry knew he would shy from detail – the war had been agony, pure and blind, and to repeat it all would only send him reeling back to square one, any progress into adequate mental health reversed. But he'd talk of the dead. Of Dobby. It was the least they deserved.

Harry lit a cigarette and looked up to the dawning sky. It was all grey up there, dreary and leeched of all magic. He breathed in the dizzying smoke, feeling it prickle his throat, inflate his lungs. In truth he wasn't sure why he had fallen on such a crutch when it had only began as a poor imitation of his godfather, now sprung into an unhealthy habit and strange coping mechanism. It was just… Harry felt like all the air he breathed nowadays was thick with sorrow. For a wonderful few hours or so, Tinworth had represented hope and a possibility to breathe. But then Ginny had cut her hair and Ron had stood in the sea for ages and Harry had realised that the memory of Fred would follow them all wherever they went. Harry had breathed in and found that the air here had been polluted just the same as the air at the Burrow. It was heavy and humid with despair.

So the cigarettes: they were different air. No less heady but different all the same, air that wasn't filled with Fred or haunted by Hedwig. A tiny reprieve from the constant reminders of their fallen friends.
Something that didn't make his magenta nails look so silly.

He sighed in the night and rolled up the edge of his pyjama trousers. His ankle was dotted with little rings, some reddened, some a fading orange. They climbed from his heel, around his bone, to the bottom of his calf. Harry had grown clever: his forearm, in the summer, was far too noticeable. So he exposed his leg and foot and pressed the cigarette end down there instead, wincing at the pain of it but feeling giddy with how alive it made him feel. Like flying, he thought. Like sex. Like running.

But he'd done enough running for a lifetime.

The door to the cottage swung open, an eerie screech somewhere in Harry's peripheral. At first he thought it was Ron, noting the flaming hair. But the figure wasn't tall enough, and immediately he thought Charlie, before realising it was George. Charlie had opted out of the seaside holiday to remain in the close quarters of the Burrow. Harry thought he maybe felt guilty about his sudden departure after Fred's funeral and was now hesitant to leave.

“You'll have to go back eventually,” Harry had said, wiping his mouth clean and swallowing against the unpleasant aftertaste of Charlie's come.

“I know,” he'd replied. “Soon.” He had begun sucking sloppy kisses against Harry's jaw, sending his head drooping backward onto the soft pillow. “But so do you.”

Harry did like Charlie and he was sure that the sentiment was returned, but they both knew it was fleeting. It was to forget. It was easy. Though it was not easy to hide: Harry knew Hermione knew. She'd seen him creeping from Charlie's room late one night, mouth wide in shock and a smear of toothpaste on her cheek, and he thought it was likely she'd noticed their flirtatious yet subtle interactions across breakfast and dinner. She hadn't said anything, which he appreciated. He'd go to her about it eventually, and she knew that. When he was ready.

George had spotted him across the garden, and froze, seemingly deciding between offering him greeting or not. Harry was sat by a gravestone, and they were both up at an unreasonably early hour. It was most definitely a situation that needed consideration. Harry made the choice for him; he rose and trudged toward George, limbs slow and heavy in the surreal minutes before dawn. George was tactful enough not to mention Harry's tear-stained face. Merlin knows the scene had been reversed many a time during the summer.

“Morning,” George said, voice gravelly with slumber.

“Hi,” Harry said. He nodded to the beach below them; the shift of the sea, the soft morning sand, the tawny dunes in the distance, painted a pretty picture. But they did not live in a picture book. “Walk?”

George had no shoes either, so they strolled along the shoreline, wetting their feet in the foam. Harry felt as though he were walking alongside the living ghost of Fred Weasley. It still hurt to even look at George sometimes – they were so alike and the lack of Fred's presence was unavoidable. He and George had practically been one. Harry felt such a rush of love for them both, and a longing. To simply be laughing with them in the Gryffindor common room. To have a summer Quidditch match at the Burrow. To hold Fred in his arms in a way he never had. His death had been such an odd one for Harry: he had not appreciated the twins while they had lived. Sirius and Remus had been a marvel to him, a connection to his parents, while Dumbledore had grown into a cause he had to fight for. But Fred, who was his family, really, he had not loved how he could. He had never said. He had barely thought of it.

“Do you mind?” Harry asked, proffering his cigarettes. George shook his head silently and watched as Harry brought one to life, sending it smoking in the dawn.
“One day I'll have to show you how to do a fluxweed one,” George remarked. At Harry's clueless look, he huffed a laugh. “It's weed for wizards,” he said.

“I've never tried either.”

“You don't have to.”

“No,” Harry said. “I want to. There's a lot of things I want to try. A lot of life I want to live. By the time I get to your age, at least.”

George smiled wryly. “It's not all sunshine and rainbows.”

A strained silence fell between them. The sun was creeping up beyond the horizon, peeking at them in their early morning intimacy. The waves lapped at their ankles, Harry felt the bottom of his pyjama trousers trail in it, dampening, stroking against the growing pattern of cigarette burns on his ankle. Fred was toeing along beside them, laughing, urging them from their quiet misery, poking fun at the way Harry held his cigarette and George's bedhead. Fred was alive beside them.

Each rush of the sea was like an exhale, breathing out brine and bereavement. Harry missed Fred something fierce but the depth of George's agony was more than he could fathom. To lose a twin, he thought, must be hell. They had been together from the very moment of conception, had shared a womb and a home and a sense of humour.

“You're thinking about him, aren't you?” George suddenly asked, breaking their awkward peace.

“Yes,” Harry admitted. “Aren't you?”

“Always,” he said. “All anyone sees when they look at me now is him. And I can't get angry because I'm no different. I look in the mirror and there he is.”

“Do you miss him?”

Harry was not dense – of course George missed him. It was not to condescend. There just wasn't a lot to say. It was not a question, it was an offer. An invitation to mourn aloud. George took it.

“Does the sun rise in the east?” George's voice was tremulous with grief. The words came tumbling from his mouth and Harry wondered if anyone had ever actually asked him about Fred, rather than assuming his state of mind. “It's like… It's like when I lost my ear. It's like a phantom limb. I'm so used to him being here that sometimes I forget he's gone. He's always with me. And I…” He looked close to tears. He breathed in, deep. “It's not even that I'm missing him. I'm missing who he was to me. What he meant to me. If I let myself miss the person he truly was it'll be too much. I can't do it yet. Is… is that selfish?”

“Not at all. It's just… grief. We all do it differently,” Harry soothed. He offered the cigarette.

“Smoke?” he asked.

George laughed and took it, sighing in the smoke, head tipped against the breeze. His eyes were half-lidded and his mouth parted as he breathed out the toxins and tar. Harry noted vaguely that he was attractive. Another boy to add to the list. Another Weasley.

“I don't think it'll ever stop hurting,” George confessed, handing back the burning stick. Harry's hand itched with the desire to press it against his skin, but displaced it in George's company. He reached for George's hand and took it, warm in the cool morning. It was not an action of romance, as much as Harry felt inclined to kiss him. It was a comfort, a shared loss.
“He died brave,” was all he could say, voice cracking, “and he won’t ever be forgotten.”

A quiet, shaky breath left George's lips. A whimper.

“I know we never talked about this,” Harry continued, “but in truth, there is life after death. I died in that forest and there was something there. Beyond life. Beyond ghosts. Fred is out there somewhere and he is at peace, I promise you that.” George's expression was twisted in shock. “You'll see him again.”

The wind picked up around them, almost as though he was watching, wherever he was. Like he had breathed out and the air had carried it to those who missed him so. He danced in the weather around them and the sand between their toes. He bathed in their memories and didn't let go. His face would never fade in Harry's mind: it was here in front of him. But what Harry truly remembered was his laugh. How it leapt from his chest and into yours. How it lingered.

George began to weep. “Harry,” he said, and turned to him. Harry's arms were ready for him, and he held George as he cried. George was solid and warm and Harry knew in an instant how deeply he loved him, how deeply he had loved his brother. They were family and they had chosen each other. They were family and Harry vowed, silently, to himself, to always be there to hold him up. His hair was coarse under Harry's steadying hand, his pyjamas were thin and rough.

George wept. Great, heaving sobs that Fred lived in also. Fred's death was a thing of the past: he lived on in them, their crying, their missing him. The face of his twin and hair of his siblings. In laughter. In the sky and the sea.

So did all of their lost. They lived on, in them. Two worlds condensed.

_We are the dead_, Harry thought.
Luna thought that Fleur was very beautiful. There was kindness in her face, a soft femininity. Like flowers or birds. Like a sunrise. Luna knew they resembled each other in that respect – they did not carry the tough, defined features of girls like Hermione, a characteristic that was no less beautiful. But she and Fleur had a whimsy that removed them. It flitted about their faces and made them untouchable. Unusual.

“’Ello Luna,” she said, breezing into the room, a washing basket under one arm. Her silvery blonde hair was pulled up around her pretty, youthful face, strands falling from it, little imperfections. Her smile was small. She seemed to glow. Like a fairy. Like a veela. “’Ow are you today?”

“I'm quite sad, actually,” Luna said. She shifted from her mattress, moving to her feet. The floor was soft and carpeted; it tickled the soles of her feet. She had to confess she preferred floors like this to the hard corridors of Hogwarts. Without any words between them she moved to Fleur, helped her unfold the sheets from the basket. Airing them. Letting them breathe.

“Why are you sad?”

“It's Ginny's birthday today,” she said. They spread the sheet taut, and Luna stepped to the head of the bed.

“Why does zat make you sad?” Fleur asked. She started to tuck the sheet under the mattress.

“Fred is dead,” Luna said.

She hadn't known him well. Dumbledore's Army had been a full and all-encompassing when it had first began, and they had smiled at one another from time to time in the corridors. Smiles full of secrets blossoming and rebellion beginning. Then he had died. Luna had been sad for the sheer loss of life alone. Luna hadn't known Fred. But she knew Ginny. Aside from her mother, Ginny was the most beautiful woman that Luna had ever known. Ginny was neither flowers nor birds, not like Fleur. She was all hard and hot and blazing brilliance. And to Ginny, Fred was important. And Fred was dead.

“You loved 'im?”

“In a way, I suppose.” Luna smiled to herself. Fleur and Bill were a truly lovely couple. They had treated her well earlier this year and they treated her well now. “I loved him in the same way you did.”

Luna saw a glint of assumption spark in Fleur's pretty eyes. Not understanding, but assumption. She hadn't been explicit enough to elicit understanding. But assumption… that was fair game. Luna
enjoyed these moments of intuition in people; she liked to remember them in a snapshot and store them away for a rainy day. The bloom of intelligence. It was like a new moon. It was one of the prettiest things, to her.

They worked around one another, quickly, in tune. Luna's bed was made and then so was Hermione's, the one closer to the window. Luna didn't mind so much but sometimes when it was late and Hermione was fast asleep she crossed the room to look at the stars, count them dot for dot. Perhaps they were the souls of people who had died. Perhaps Fred was up there. Or that beautiful little Elf. Colin Creevey. Mum.

Harry had told her one night that life after death had existed. She'd visited him one evening at Grimmauld Place. The war had been fresh in his mind and he had looked entirely deflated when he had greeted her at the door. He had said that beyond had not been up or down but simply across. Somewhere on the line of the horizon, perhaps. But that didn't mean Luna didn't like to look at the stars. Imagine things. Imagine worlds.

“Bill is steell very 'urt,” Fleur remarked suddenly, beginning to pull their clothes from the basket. “I know if it were my sister…” She swallowed. “I can imageeene ze ache.”

“I don't have any sisters,” Luna said.

“Brothers?”

“No,” she replied. “It's only me and Dad.”

“You miss 'im?”

“Yes.”

Luna felt awful leaving Dad behind but they weren't to be at Shell Cottage very long. Besides, she had wanted to see it again. She thought it was very pretty. She had thought that Malfoy Manor, despite its imposing size, was ugly. But tiny little Shell Cottage and its dilapidated design, its appropriate seaside exterior, were filled with far more character than a cold old mansion could ever hold. She enjoyed falling asleep to the ebb and flow of the sea. She enjoyed being with her friends and sharing pieces of peppermint rock with Ron, learning how to skip stones. Luna imagined they had grown a little universe here. A world within a snowglobe.

“You'll see 'im soon,” Fleur was saying, and then she wasn't. She suddenly paled and dropped the dress she was shaking free of creases. It fell crumpled on the carpet, curled around itself like a sleeping animal. Fleur ran from the room, a hand clapped over her mouth. Luna heard the bathroom door slam shut.

She bent to retrieve the dress from the floor. It was thin and floral. It was Hermione's. Luna smoothed it down, straightened it, folded it and fit it in one of the drawers atop the other summery clothes. She padded to the landing, knocked on the bathroom door. A deafening pause rang out. And finally, Fleur made a weak sound of invitation from within. Her face was pasty and she was leant against the tiled wall, breathing hard. The acrid smell of vomit wafted to Luna. Fleur was holding her stomach, her long fingers and painted pale blue nails cupped around the small rise of it.

“What's wrong?” Luna said.

“I am pregnant,” was Fleur's answer.

“You're sure?”
“My period is over a month late,” she admitted. “My breasts ‘urt. I am being sick.” She smiled, wan. She had never looked more beautiful, imbued with new life. She was sick and alive. “Sometimes I theenk I can feel it inside me.”

Luna crouched beside her, and motioned to her stomach. Fleur nodded, shifting her hand. Luna pressed her palm to where the foetus would be, felt nothing but soft flesh and the faint tightness of muscles. No baby. But then she would not feel it this early on. For now all Fleur was carrying was a mutating group of cells. Luna smiled at life and its creativity. At its beginning, so minuscule. It was impossible to feel and would be for many months. But it was there. Intangible, but present.

“I am not going to keep it,” Fleur said, and Luna cocked her head in confusion.

“Why?”

“It is too soon,” she said. “Bill… ’e only just lost Fred. ’E would zink zat we were trying to replece ’im.”

“It’s your decision too.”

“Ze war ’as only just ended,” Fleur said desperately. “Is it really ze time to be meking babies?”

“When is the right time?” Luna asked. She shifted back onto her haunches, legs straining from keeping her balance. The bathroom window was open and she could hear the shift of the sea, in and out, easy as breathing. Somewhere out there, someone was laughing. Luna thought it might be Hermione. She had a small laugh. She had a big voice but a little laugh that came out shy and reserved; Luna loved her. Beside her there was the buzz of Harry and Ron. Typical. Luna smiled. “Next it'll be money. And after that he won't ready. There will always be a reason to not.”

Luna liked children, and they liked her. They liked to tug at her hair and they liked her talk of Nargles and Wrackspurts. They were light and beautiful and they drove out the darkness of war and cruelty. Luna liked talking to people that believed her, that did not shy from her eccentricities and didn't doubt the unknown. That was the sad thing about growing up, she thought. Children were curious, adults were not. Their beliefs were cemented. The only world they knew was the visible one.

Luna knew a thousand worlds. They darted from nerve to nerve in her mind and sang songs of the stars and the sea. Mum used to laugh at her and tell her to listen. There was nothing wrong with a little imagination, she had said. Luna didn't think it was imagined. She just thought it was a different reality. Like Harry's beyond that was neither up or down but across.

“You zink I should keep it,” Fleur observed.

“I think you shouldn't let the war stop you,” Luna whispered. Emotion prickled at her, bristled inside her. She remembered cold nights in the Malfoy's cellar and the screams of children in the battle. “It's done enough damage.”

“I don't zink I want a family yet,” Fleur said. “I am too young.”

“Then don't keep it,” Luna said. “For that reason.”

She knew that people thought she was mad. But she wasn't. She knew how to make a bed and cast a decent Patronus. She just saw the world through different eyes, and didn't everyone? Harry had died and seen King's Cross Station. Hermione saw a different universe in each new book she read. Ron and his brothers plucked humour from each situation. And Ginny, lovely Ginny, viewed the world from up high. Ginny who was at home amongst the clouds.
Luna didn't mind flying – it was like magic. But brooms were a little to rigid for her: they did not gift her the same life that they did Ginny. Watching was enough for Luna. Ginny up there was like another girl entirely, beyond human, and her broom seemed to fade in the rush of her red hair, transforming her, taking her beauty and elevating it. It was a brilliant thing to witness. The real spectator sport was watching a girl tackle the wind head on.

Luna had never been in love before. She had touched Padma, felt her rock against her in the dark softness of her bed, curtains drawn around them. She had let Harper push his way inside her, time and time again, somewhere behind a tapestry, in an empty classroom, in the empty husk of the Shrieking Shack. She had let him kiss her like a lover. Because they had been alone and scared. Because she had needed to touch someone to forget the frightening rule of the Carrows.

She had never touched Ginny, not like that. She thought she might want to. When Ginny looked at her Luna wondered if that was how it felt to fall in love. Ginny wouldn't be soft and distant like Padma or tender and sad like Harper. She'd just be Ginny. Luna supposed that love was exactly that: without adjectives. It was a little intimidating. Because she had never been in love before.

But fear was not strong enough to dampen that. Love was all they had left, and love made new life like the one burgeoning in Fleur's belly, it sent the sea sprawling inward and flowers growing around the rocky stand of the cottage. Love was born from the bones and breast of Ginny Weasley.


SHELL COTTAGE, TINWORTH, CORNWALL, ENGLAND.

Ginny was stood in the sea. She wasn't far out, it lapped at her knees. Once, her hair would've been trailing in the wind, but she had cut it short. It fell just below her chin and sat uneven. Luna thought it was a fair representation of her current state – Luna simply couldn't keep up with her at the moment, though that wasn't to Ginny's detriment. It was understandable. Pain could not be contained. Pain was not pretty.

Luna had seen a mood ring in one of the muggle shops in town. She had been quite charmed by it. Even muggles had their own little ways of creating magic; of fostering joy. She had bought it and gifted it to Ginny, had stored away a little snapshot of her smiling face. It had been blue with her happiness when she had first slipped it on her finger. Luna wondered on the colour now.

The night was thick as Luna made her way toward her. It was like an invisible pull. Like the pull of the moon and the tides. She felt the cool grains of sand envelop her toes, didn't bother hiking up her skirt to join her in the sea, felt the hem dampen and grow heavier as she waded through the waves. "Do you feel any different?" Luna asked.

"Now I'm seventeen? Not at all." Ginny was staring up at the crescent moon. It was alight on her face, illuminating its soft lines, its tender sorrow. When Luna thought of Ginny she thought of sunlight but she still looked pretty in the moon. Luna thought she might just look pretty anywhere.

"Were you happy with your presents?"

"Happy? I don't know." She lifted her hand to the light. The ring was a deep black. "This says I'm unhappy."

"Are you?"

Ginny's face was shuttered. "Incredibly," she said.
“I suppose the ring works.”

Ginny laughed and laughed and laughed, and sat down in the sea, jeans drenching at the mere contact. Luna joined her, feeling the ocean stretch to encompass them. She felt the saltwater stain her thighs and her hips, her movements sending it splashing upon her face like tears. Her hair sank into it, floating like driftwood, flowing underwater like the hair of a mermaid. It was so dark that she could barely see the horizon, the beyond that Harry had talked about so fondly. Luna knew that Harry sort of wanted to die, she felt it emanating off of him in waves during his especially quiet moments, or when she caught a glimpse of him through the window, smoking like his life depended on it. It sort of broke her heart.

Ginny was like that only with her it wasn't cigarettes, it was cutting her hair and sitting on the beach for hours. It was picking at her breakfast with circles under her eyes that were the colour of the night sky. Luna loved her and loved her some more. She interlinked their fingers under the rippling water, and Ginny's hands were wet and strong as they gripped her back, an anchor in the sea. It was something private, secret. Something that was theirs and only theirs. A secret world below the surface, a small Atlantis.

“You wish he were here,” Luna murmured.

“More than anything in the world.”

Which world, Luna thought. The world in which all that was beautiful and warm died, or Luna's world, where there were Heliopaths and Moon Frogs that roamed the earth. The world where the sky met the sea or the world where there was a beyond, a something, a life after death, sandwiched between the two. Not all that existed could be seen by the human eye. That was the beautiful tragedy of being alive, wasn't it? Not seeing all there was that the world offered. Luna knew it was there. She knew the secret creatures and their secret worlds while so many denied them, called her mad, called her loony.

Luna was not mad. She felt sad when she thought of the House Elf buried in the garden and she felt unbelievably and incandescently happy when she thought of Ginny. She was just like anybody else, only she had opened her mind to the possibility of more, of something, something else. A world below the surface of the sea. A world in the ripples of pebbles.

“You miss him.”

“More than anything in the world.”

Luna untangled their hands, turned, pushed her damp palm against Ginny's cheek. Ginny did not look toward her, and only stared at the crescent moon. The fingernail of the sky.

“Shall we swim?” she asked.

“I haven't anything with me,” she said. “It's up at the house.”

“We don't need anything.”

“Alright.”

They stood, displacing the shallows they had sat in. It shifted noisily in the silence, a faint imitation of waves on the rocks. They moved to the shore. Ginny flushed and looked away as Luna began to shed herself of her skirt, wet and dripping in the sand. Then came her top, pulled over her head in fluid motion. Her underwear, stepped out of. Luna didn't really wear bras. She didn't see the point. Her chest was far from big. She stood bare in the sand, before Ginny, who was undressing shakily.
She was different to Luna: her breasts smaller, her waist a little less defined, her legs thinner, her stomach pressed into muscles. She was beautiful and perfect. There was no right. Ginny was Ginny and Luna loved her.

Merlin, perhaps this was how it felt to be in love. A vague surge of arousal threatened her, low in her stomach, between her legs. Ginny nude was no different than Ginny clothed but Luna, guided by her experiences with Padma and Harper, had learned to associate the naked human body with want. And Ginny's was something to behold, all fair and freckled and lean. Luna looked at the curve of her spine and the red thicket of her pubic hair, the indentation of her navel, a closed flower within the rise of her stomach.

Luna glanced away. She was not bashful but it felt as though she were watching a private moment, Ginny at her most vulnerable, most exposed. It was not Luna's place to peer in at that, not without explicit permission. So she turned back to the moon and its unavoidable lacking. Its status as half. Its promise to be ever-changing.

She stepped further into the sea, it reached out for her, twisted around her ankles, promising to swallow her whole. The soles of her feet scratched against the pebbles, lodged in the sinking throat of the sand. It drifted up her calves, her knees, her thighs. She walked until the waves wrapped around her neck, strangling her, the salt dancing on her lips. Ginny was close behind, the water soft around the buds of her nipples. She looked very pretty in the moonlight. Her hair was fire in the dark. Light – it would always prevail.

Luna sucked in a breath and ducked below the surface, drifted into the deep. Her hair flew above her, blonde seaweed. The water was pure ink in the nighttime, and though the salt stung her eyes when she opened them, she couldn't see a thing. It was murky and blurred. Endless. She couldn't even see Ginny, not from down here. It was startling. Even in the cold bowels of Malfoy Manor, Luna had felt as though Ginny had always been with her. In spirit. In heart.

Her lungs began to hurt. She stayed down, exhaling, feeling the bubbles drift away from her mouth. She yearned for air, she did not take it. The darkness down here was beautiful in its own special way. A place where she and Ginny could hold hands and it was between them and them alone, an underwater paradise, where light was not needed for beauty, not like up there. On land, light was all they had. It was all they'd had for so long.

Finally she could stand it no longer. Oxygen was a sweet relief once she surfaced. Ginny looked to her as soon as she broke through the water, hair plastered to her face, a smile twirling at her mouth. She softened, and began to swim to her. Their world of illusion shattered.

“Oh come on Harry,” came Hermione's tone. The door of Shell Cottage had swung open, and with it, came a burst of distant laughter and a flash of light; it was there for a moment, and then it was gone. A fleeting brush of wind sent the door banging shut again.

Their words carried as they climbed down the rocky path to the beach, Luna let her mind sail away. Their words were unimportant. It was their voices that Luna liked, the low timbre of Harry and the shrill call of Hermione. It was only missing Ron and his encouraging laughter. They called out to Ginny, she responded, and Luna watched as they began to strip off their clothes. It was not the same. They waded into the ocean in their underwear – their intimacy was not one that buzzed with a sexual potential in the way that Luna and Ginny's did. It was pure and simple and nakedness seemed odd and unnatural to them; underwear was bearable.

They shifted closer to her and Ginny, and Luna watched their movements through the shifting ocean, obscuring her sight, enhancing it, painting the world elegant and new. They were laughing, splashing, living. Luna marvelled at the little lives they all led, the little worlds they stayed trapped in,
the way they were able to forget, for a moment, what they had lost. The sea became a crucible. A way to lose yourself. To breathe underwater.

“Luna,” Harry was saying, paddling in earshot. Droplets of water were clumped in his eyelashes. He was beautiful, Luna thought. Delicate and soft and kind. Luna’s friend.

“Hello Harry.”

He asked about her day. Luna looked at the sky and the moon and told him it was fine. That she was sad about Fred but wondered if he watched them from the stars. She glanced at Ginny, her hair wild and soaking in her face, the ring blue on her finger. Harry looked at Luna so fond but before he could reply she let herself drift again, falling down into the dark, hair tangling behind her. It was like a dungeon down here. Like the months she had spent in one. The moon followed her down.

Chapter End Notes

this is like a year before fleur would’ve had to get pregnant with victoire so it's not meant to be her :)

“You've been self-harming?”

“It's just cigarettes.”

“Just because it isn't razors it doesn't mean it isn't self-harm.”

Harry paused. “I'm sorry,” he said.

“You don't need to apologise.”

He hadn't thought of it as self-harm. He'd just seen it as a way to breathe, a release. A window back into the past, to King's Cross Station and that unbelievable choice that had ruined him forevermore. He liked the pain it gave him. He liked the pattern it left upon his skin. Reddened orange rings that circled around the bone of his ankle, like a necklace.

Harry yearned to burn higher, longer. For the first time last night he had pressed the cigarette end to his hip, gasping at the hissing sting of it, watching his skin flee the heat, loose its smooth bronze. The sea had crashed inward, a last goodbye, and Harry had lost his world to fire for a minute or two.

So perhaps it was self-harm. He supposed it didn't really matter: it helped him feel something. Something other than the intense, empty longing to return to death in the moments he didn't share with Ron and Hermione, his only other form of self-medication. They made him laugh and made him forget what he had lost. Without them, he fell right back into that habitual depression of his. Self-harm: Harry preferred the term self-help.

“Are you going to kill yourself?” Joyce asked.

“No,” he said. “I don't think so.”

Was that cowardly? It wasn't as though he didn't think of death. It wasn't as though he didn't dream of it, night by night, haunted by the eyes of his mother and the laugh of his father, his godfather's happy expression, the rest of his dead not following far behind. To join them would be so easy. So simple. But before he could even consider it, truly, his tethers to the living world discarded such thoughts immediately. Ron and Hermione and Ginny and Luna and everybody else who still lived, who swam with him late at night, slept by his side, opened their home to him, were far too important to him to leave.

So Harry stayed. Burnt himself raw to distract himself from the wanting of it all, the wanting to die,
the wanting for Charlie, to step into the sea and breathe anew, lose himself in the deep. He would not kill himself. But he would get close enough.

“Why do you do it?” she asked, expression open and imploring. “Why do you hurt yourself?”

“You know why.”

“Saying it aloud can help you come to terms with it.”

“Because sometimes I want to die.”

She had been right. To hear the words loud and clear, ringing in the air between them, sent him reeling. It was real. He wanted to die, even if only sometimes. He was not the little boy from the cupboard anymore, or the hopeful preteen who found so many reasons to keep fighting in the faces of his friends. Even during the war, he had woken up everyday and told himself that he had to keep going. For his family, for the rest of the world. Voldemort could not win.

But Voldemort had won. He had died and he had lost the war, but in the battle for Harry's soul he had won. Because now Harry sat sullen and wishing to be back in that forest, reliving his very own death, because it meant relief. Relief that was bigger than a few cigarette burns from time to time. Harry was tired of fighting.

“Why?” Joyce asked, soft.

“Because it isn't fair,” he said. “That I lived and they didn't.”

“If you hadn't lived,” she argued, “Voldemort never would've been beaten.”

“Perhaps someone else would've managed it.”

“I thought there was a prophecy?”

“Divination isn't the most foolproof subject.”

“But you're here now,” she murmured, “and he isn't.”

Harry felt his jaw clench, hands knotting in his lap. She was right. The prophecy had clearly meant something – magic existed. He lived in a world with flying brooms and bags that were bigger on the inside. Prophecies were not entirely unbelievable: in fact, they were entirely possible. Likely, even, considering the events of Harry's life so far. Perhaps the prophecy was true, but he could do nothing but resent it. It had shaped his life so cruelly for so long.

“The burning helps,” he finally said. “It helps me breathe.”

“Like sex?”

“Like sex,” he confirmed.

“Has Charlie seen these scars?”

“A few. When it started. I haven't seen him for a week or two.”

“What did he say?”

“Not much.”
Not much, of course, meant Charlie had looked incredibly sad but had known how Harry would react, so had kissed at the fading mark on his forearm and sucked a bruise into the skin beside it. Then he had pushed himself inside Harry, soft, slow, hand fisting around his cock. Harry was aching to be with him again, but their reunion had been amidst the entire Weasley family, so jumping straight to fucking had been difficult. Later tonight, however… But Harry could not repeat this to Joyce. A little too far, he thought.

“He doesn't sound very caring.”

“He isn't my boyfriend,” Harry huffed. “He's my best friend's brother. And we're only having sex. He's lovely, really, it just isn't like that.”

“You ever think about wanting anything more?”

“With a boy?”

“You like boys. Do you like girls too?”

“No,” he said. He'd been thinking about it for a while. He'd wondered at first if it was that Ginny was too close to him – maybe he was picky when it came to women. But he'd thought about those he knew lesser: Parvati Patil, Mandy Brocklehurst, Pansy Parkinson, who'd turned out fairly attractive in the end. It stirred nothing in him. No rise of desire, no fondness for any of them but Parvati. “But I don't think I'm in the right mind to want anything more, at the moment.”

“Have you thought at all about definitions?”

“I've thought about it. I haven't said it.”

“Gay, you mean.”

“I guess.”

Joyce smiled and dropped the subject knowingly. Harry breathed through his sudden burst of adrenaline, heart rate jumping at the prospect of his likely homosexuality. He was having sex with a boy. That had taken a while to come to terms with, but the idea that he only ever wanted to have sex with boys for the rest of his life was something he had not yet grasped. It was something that would take a while for him to swallow. He wasn't there, not yet.

It frightened him. He'd had all the darkness in the world on his shoulders at the raw age of seventeen, a darkness he had defeated, and this was suddenly the most terrifying thing in the world. Liking boys. He'd feel pathetic if it didn't scare him so very much.

“How was Cornwall?”

“It was okay. Quiet.” He sighed. In his mind visions of Dobby danced, his kind eyes and his squeaky voice, his idiotic bravery. “One of my friends is buried down there.”

“Was it cathartic? Visiting his grave?”

“No. It just hurt.”

“Grief will do that to you,” she said. Harry wondered if she had lost someone. He wondered who. “What was your friend like?”

“Small.”
She smiled and understood; Harry almost saw the subject flying through the window. Joyce was good like that. Small meant no, I don't want to talk about this. He silently berated himself. He couldn't talk about this with anyone else, could barely struggle through the thoughts himself, yet he couldn't even voice them here. His money was going to waste, and it was nobody's fault but his own.

“You seem frustrated,” she said. “At me?”

“No. I'm angry I can't speak about it. About him. About all of them.”

“We all grieve differently,” Joyce said. They were words that Harry himself had said to George. But… it wasn't the same for him. Fred wasn't his twin. He had lost his parents years ago. He had to be strong, now. He always, always had to be strong. It was exhausting but it had to be done. “You are so hard on yourself,” Joyce sighed, reading his face. “You need to cut yourself some slack, Harry.”

“I can't,” he said. “I just can't.”

“Because you deserved to die?”

“The Weasleys, they've lost a son to me. To the awful fucking trouble I attract.” He screwed his eyes shut, put his head in his hands. “I know it was about more than me,” he said. “I know. But I was still responsible. It is not my place to mourn him. To mourn any of them. But I can't help but miss them.”

“Do they blame you? The Weasleys?”

“Not to my face.”

“Harry,” she said. “They're your family. They love you. If you can't respect your own form of grief, your own struggles, then respect the love they have for you.” She leant forward in her chair, he looked up to her. Her eyes were boring into him, scrutinising, seeing. “You are loved,” she said. “Far and wide. You are absolutely adored.”

“That doesn't mean anything!” he exclaimed. “Those people… they don't know me.”

“Surely it means something?” she said. “It's for a reason, after all. And some do know you. You have other friends out there. Other family.”

“The Dursley's despise me.”

“You mentioned a godson?”

“Oh,” he said. “Him.”

Harry had not yet met Teddy. The thought of it, of that lost little boy so alike to him, was terrifying. He felt so indebted to him, as a godfather. He should be there, helping raise him. But Harry was a fucking liability. He brought nothing but pain and horror and manoeuvring himself into Teddy's life would not do the little boy any good. He deserved a life long away from Harry and his pain. He deserved a long life.

“Isn't that his decision to make?” Joyce reasoned, after he had said this aloud.

“He's four months old. He can't choose anything yet.”

“You were named his godfather for a reason,” Joyce said.

Merlin. She was fucking right. Harry had been running in circles feeling unworthy of mourning them
and had simply wanted to honour them instead. See their names carved in stone. But Remus had named him godfather, had died, and now Harry sat around doing nothing in the name of saving his son from danger. But the only danger now was Harry and his bloody cigarettes. Voldemort existed only in his memory.

Sirius hadn't been around for twelve years or so but he'd had good reason. And when he was, he had been dangerous and reckless but at least he'd been there. A godfather, a tie to his parents, had been brilliant comfort to a lonely orphan. An honour to Remus would be facing his son head on and telling tales of his father and his funny friends, of his mother and her humour, her hope. It was not easy to lose parents. Harry knew better than anyone how it felt to be Teddy Lupin, and it frightened the wits out of him.

But Harry had never been fearless. He'd always just done it anyway.

“What if he doesn't like me?” he heard himself ask.

Joyce grinned.

“He's four months old. He can't like anybody yet.”

NOTES OF SESSION, DR JOYCE BULSTRODE

Patient has reverted to self-harming tendencies as coping mechanism. Symptoms of PTSD and unipolar depression consistent with last session. If these worsen suggest drug trial alongside current CBT and behavioural treatments. Patient still struggles with grief and survivor's guilt – self-loathing has become more prominent since first session. Aim at identifying these masturbatory beliefs of fault more clearly before attempting to modify.


TONKS RESIDENCE, DORKING, SURREY, ENGLAND.

Andromeda's resemblance to her sister truly was startling. Harry struggled to digest it at first, feeling bile rise at the mere memory of her, but the baby in Andromeda's arms did help to dispel the similarities she held to her sister. She carried a softness, and honesty, a loveliness, that Bellatrix could never have mastered. The baby shifted and stirred in her arms. Harry was having some trouble with thinking of it as Teddy, labelling it the baby. He had no reality yet. No personality, no memories, no opinions. It was just a baby. A little nothing. The beginnings of a person.

“Thank you for having me,” he said, voice coming out stiff, unsticking from his throat.

“That's alright.”

Andromeda's reply was equally as forced. Harry felt a surge of guilt that was impossible to contain. The woman before him was not unlike him – she had lost a great deal. Her husband, her daughter, her son-in-law, her cousin, her sister. And she hadn't been given the time he had. She had been thrust into a second bout of motherhood, years after her firstborn had grown and married and had children of her own. She should've just been a grandmother. But she didn't have that luxury.

“I'm sorry,” Harry found himself saying. “I should've come sooner.”

“It's alright.”

“No it isn't.” He looked at the baby, at Teddy. Pink in the face and ready to wail at any moment. A living, breathing echo of Remus and Tonks. “I needed some time but… that was selfish. You didn't
get time. You just had to… forget. I'm sorry.”

“Harry…”

“I should've been here,” he said. “I should've been here for both of you. I'm his godfather. It's what they would've wanted.” A heavy moment of loss diffused between them. “I hope you can forgive me, Andromeda.”

She softened. Her uncomfortable, rehearsed demeanour of before dissolved, leaving behind the kind woman he had met last year, with her sweet eyes and pretty hair. Harry thought he could see Tonks and her brilliant boldness in her mother's expression. He felt a swell of sadness for her. A burst of longing for Tonks. Andromeda had done a world-class job with Tonks. Teddy couldn't be in better hands.

“I was angry at you for a little while, Harry,” she confessed. “For not being here. But… you're eighteen years old. And you're here now.” Harry was humbled by her great, impossible forgiveness. “We're on the same side, at the end of the day. The war has taught me not to hold grudges.”

“Thank you.”

She nodded curtly, and the subject was dropped. “Would you like some tea?”

Harry realised as soon as he agreed that he had made a mistake. She moved from the sofa with the baby in her arms, held the thing out to Harry. He took it nervously, barely listening to her instructions on supporting its head and keeping its body steady. And then she breezed from the room, and Harry heard distantly the bang of drawers and the hiss of a kettle starting to boil. The baby in his arms felt like it weighed a ton. He shifted awkwardly, leaning back against the cushioning of the armchair. Teddy was screwing his eyes shut and pursing his mouth, arms flailing.

He gazed up at Harry with dark eyes. He looked curious, even at his young age. Harry watched as a scar grew on his forehead, a little bolt of lightning, and marvelled at this Metamorphmagus in his arms. And that bloody scar. It had been plastered on his head since he was a year old and Teddy could shed it whenever he wanted. Teddy didn't understand – he'd not even lived half a year. He was young and fresh and figuring the world out. He was Harry's godson and he was a true human life, held against his chest.

“I love you,” he said, to see how it sounded. He was surprised to discover that he meant it, that there was a wave of tenderness cresting within him toward the little boy he cradled so gently. “I love you,” he said again, voice quiet and far warmer. “I'll never leave you again. It's you and me, bud.”

Harry smoothed a hand through the thin, downy hair on Teddy's head. It was so strange to hold a little life. To think of how it had sprouted hair and how it would grow teeth, how its eyes had changed from blue to brown. And Teddy was stranger than most – he could change his appearance at will, though it was unlikely he had any mastery over the ability yet. Instead, he was just a baby, now. Cooing and gurgling and unaware of what he had lost. Of how his parents had died so he could live in a world with less hate.

Tears brimmed in Harry's eyes. To grow up without parents wasn't easy. To find out they had died for you, on top of that, was even harder. It begged so many questions: would they still think it was worth it? How different would things be if they still lived? Why?

And Harry had been locked in a cupboard and raised by brutes. His parents had become distant mythology. But… Teddy did not have to live that life. When Teddy grew up the war would be a thing of the past, there would be no chosen one, no pain, no loss. Teddy would live with his
grandmother and his godfather would visit on the regular. He would be told at a young age of his parents and their resolute bravery, the sacrifice they made for him, and he would never know want.

The kettle began to grow hysterical in the other room, boiling to a close. Harry held Teddy and was glad.

“You and me, little man,” he whispered, bending to press a kiss to the baby's head, to that temporary lightning scar, an imitation of what had caused Harry so much pain all these years. He smelt vaguely of talcum powder. Harry felt a soft yearning to switch places. To start all over again. For his only worry to be when his next meal was coming.

Andromeda bustled into the room, a mug in each hand. She placed them down on the coffee table, one before Harry and one closer to her. They were funny colours with silly slogans on. Harry thought they were exactly the sort of thing that Tonks would own. He ignored his tea in favour of the baby in his arms.

“You seem to have taken to him quite well,” Andromeda remarked, nodding to them.

“He's a funny little thing,” Harry said, looking down at him. He felt another surge of affection, had to swallow it down, breathe through it, to make it less noticeable.

“Will you be going to Hogwarts next week?” she asked, sipping from her tea. Harry nodded, feeling a little prick of guilt.

“I'll visit,” he promised. She smiled demurely at him.

“I hope you do,” she said. She glanced at the floor, clearing her throat. “Can I ask you something?”

“And Draco?”

“I, uh. I have something of a history with Draco Malfoy.” He almost laughed to himself, remembering the years of schoolboy torment. How he had hated him. There was still a little venom there, when he thought of him, but it was no longer as pure and spiteful as it had been when he was younger. “Honestly… I think he's nasty and vindictive. An attention-seeking brat. But I don't think he's an awful person. He loves his family too, and… I defended him for a reason. I'm not fond of either of them, Andromeda, but if you're asking if I think they're awful war criminals who should be kept away from my godson then the answer is no. If they want to know him, then why not?

“You're right, really. Family is everything. And I won't have Teddy grow up like I did. I'm going to be here for him and so will the Weasleys. As long as Lucius is never anywhere near him then I couldn't care less if they're in his life. As long as they love him and want the best for him. So by all
means, reach out to them. Teddy will either dodge a massive bullet or get two more people in his life.”

Teddy was starting to cry, fussing in Harry’s arms. Harry watched as his face went redder and the wails leapt from him, impressively loud from such a tiny being. Andromeda swore under her breath, jumped to her feet, muttering something about formula under her breath and darting from the room. Harry watched her, this woman comfortable in her middle age, saddled with a squalling baby. She took to it easily, a duck to water. Harry ached for her. A baby was the only remnant of her daughter she really had left.

For the first time in a while, Harry didn't long to burn. Teddy was warm but not hot. Loud but not deafening. A human growing and living beyond the wreck that the war had left behind. The world around him was half-destroyed, his family were either dead or devastated. But he had no way of knowing. His brain was new and underdeveloped, he had the luxury of youth and naivety. Harry memorised him, his delicate little features, his shrill yells. This was their future. This was what he and so many had died for. For life.

Teddy cried on about nothing in particular. Harry was sure, for the first time, that all of it, all that suffering, had been worth it. Life endured on.

Chapter End Notes

so my laptop broke! I salvaged this file but I'm behind on writing and (obviously) posting. I'm so sorry I kept people waiting. nearly 2 weeks for me is... astounding. you won't usually have to wait this long - my new laptop is here now :)
Hi mate,

I know this is stupid. But so many people are gone and I didn't know where to start so I just thought why not at the beginning? You were the first, Cedric. They didn't believe me at the time but you were the first casualty of the war and I won't let them forget that. I've got an interview in a few days, before I go back to school. I promise I'll say your name. I promise I'll remember you. I'll make them remember, too.

I'm sorry I couldn't save you. You were anything but a spare, you just got caught in the crossfire of it all. I suppose that was my fault in a way. I hope you're at peace now, wherever you are. I do wished you had lived though. It isn't fair, you were only 17. I was 17 only a month ago. You may be officially an adult but its not some magic age where everything comes easy all of a sudden. Things are just the same. The world is still terrifying. You deserved better.

Your parents never stopped fighting for you. I heard rumours about them playing a part in the war, though I don't know details. They didn't blame me for you but sometimes I wish i'd just taken that fucking cup on my own.

You were one of the good ones, I think. You were honourable. I think you'd have fought him anyway, in the end – at the battle, or just the war in general. You were a good person and you could've done a lot of good in the world if he hadn't had you murdered so young.

You did good anyway, even in death. Dumbledore's army wasn't yours in name but it was because of YOU. Nobody would've listened otherwise. We remembered you. We did it for you. I think you hurt us all so much because it could've been anyone – it was unlucky accident that put you in his path. You were kind and brave and true. You died for no REASON and it breaks my heart to think of you. But we united because of you, I suppose. We stood together to stop such injustice from happening again.

It did, of course, but that isn't the point. We won in the end because we were fighting for people like you, and he wasn't fighting for anything. That counts. That means something.

Goodbye, Cedric Diggory, and good luck. I'll see you again one day. I hope you don't blame me, but I am sorry anyway – it is in the nature of grief, I suppose, to wonder on how we could change the past. May you rest in peace.

From Harry Potter.
“Cole, Annabelle.”

A little girl with dark skin and bushy hair crept toward the stool. It was like 1991 all over again, Neville thought. The Hall was lit with kindly, glowing candles and the castle was restored to its former glory. It was like nothing had happened. It had just been one long, lingering nightmare. It was over now.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Howls of merriment flew from all around him, his housemates rejoicing at their first addition to Gryffindor. This girl was about to begin the rest of her life and she would do it with them, in the cosy confines of the common room, before the great fireplace, in the Quidditch stands, cheering them on. Gryffindor had treated him well. It had accompanied him from childhood to adolescence to maturity.

“Copper, Brian.”

A boy with mousy hair was trembling his way towards where Professor Flitwick stood beside the hat. Neville was reminded so suddenly and powerfully of himself, small and scared at every turn. Or maybe the boy was just cold – Neville was grateful for the layer of body fat around his middle that kept him warm in autumn and winter.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

The boy's face fell in shock, and the table erupted in shouts and cheers. Another Gryffindor! Brian Copper tottered over to them on unsteady legs and Neville knew that he truly was an echo of himself, and not just a product of the September chill. The Great Hall was warm and radiating with joy. He remembered hearing Gryffindor and thinking it couldn't be right. But it had been. Neville knew that now.

“Court, Jacqueline.”

It had taken a lot of courage to keep on fighting. And even more to deny Voldemort to his face. Neville didn't think of himself as arrogant but he thought, he hoped, that he had made his parents proud on that day. He had said no. He had said when hell freezes over. He had found light and love in his friends and had considered the prospect of dying. He'd thought it would be worth it, if it was for them. If it was for what was right.

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

*It doesn't matter that Harry's gone,* he'd thought, heart fucking aching for the dead boy in Hagrid's
arms. Harry had been a good friend to him and it hurt more than he had ever realised to see him limp and lifeless. But people died every day! And these people were dying for something. For something bigger than Harry, bigger than all of them. To die for what you believed in was not dying in vain. They were gone but they were right, and Voldemort was wrong. He'd never seen the world in black and white before but that day had been simple and plain.

“Davies, Charlie.”

Neville felt nothing but affection for the scene unfolding before him. The Sorting of last year had been a dismal affair, with far less children and a sinister fear shimmering in the air. Not even the Slytherins had cheered very loudly. Not only was this homecoming a return to normalcy that they all sorely needed, but it was a new beginning. If these children were lucky, and their parents were not persecuted during the war, then many of them had not experienced a single effect of the last few years. They were bright, gleaming and new. They were the hope that had been fought for. The generation that would go on to maintain a world without hate.

“RAVENCLAW!”

One of the most charming things about Hogwarts, Neville thought, was its sentience. The Room of Requirement had plied them with space and possibility, it had made itself into a safe haven, it had wanted them to fight back. It had ghosts and portraits in every nook and cranny, personalities and characters of agelessness giving the castle a voice. And the enchanted ceiling: the sky only moments away, mirroring the world outside. Hogwarts was so proud and alive and Neville had despaired for its descent into ruin last year, had ached to see it fall amidst the dark desperation of the battle.

“Egwu, Anthony.”

But it did not do to dwell on the past. Hogwarts had once been destroyed, yes, but now it was as whole and as beautiful as ever, and he was home now. Now he was sat by Hermione on one side and Dean on the other, across from Harry and Ron and Seamus. Further down, was Ginny and Parvati, laughing with Dennis and Demelza. It was a little family coming together, a reunion, though Neville did long to hear the twins' raucous laughter and the old Gryffindor Quidditch Team preparing for a new year. But they had gone and grown up, or in Fred's case, they had died. The world was not what it once was. The only solution was to keep on living.

“RAVENCLAW!”

Things had not been easy after the war. Neville had wandered through the wrecked Hogwarts grounds for hours, head spinning with the unbelievable miracle of surviving. He had been buzzing with adrenaline since those first words he had spat at Voldemort, had been so very close to death, shaking with rage and righteousness before both sides of the battle. Hannah had found him in the shattered greenhouses, sorting through upended pots and sprawling plants. She had kissed the dirt and the grime from his lips and pushed him down onto the soiled floor, hitched her skirt up, made him forget, for a little while. His back had begun to bleed, scratched at by broken glass, but he had paid it no mind. To be alive and to bleed was a wondrous, brilliant thing.

“Haywood, Pippa.”

The atmosphere in the Great Hall was a surprisingly joyful one. Neville had expected a little solemnity, a sombre remembrance of those who should have been there. He thought sadly of Lavender Brown and little Colin Creevey. But it was not a dishonour to laugh: they had not been forgotten. Life had to go on. And his and his friends’ freedom now, to live, to laugh, was what Lavender and Colin and countless others had fought and died for. It was what had beat him in the end. Knowing love. Knowing the joy that permeated the Great Hall, that erased the agony of the last
few years, that sent Neville reeling back to his first years here at Hogwarts, when everything was
glorious and nothing hurt. When the dead didn't dance in every memory.

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

Gryffindor wasn't the only house bursting with happiness. He looked over at Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw,
Slytherin. Yellow and blue and green. Once upon a time the housing system had divided them so
greatly but now they were the same, all smiling and hopeful and ready to begin again. To build a
new world from the ashes the same as how the Ministry had restored Hogwarts. The year ahead
would bring the monotonous continuation of school, of class and homework and exams, but save for
the first years filing to the Hat at the head of the Hall, they all remembered the past year. They had
either been deprived of education altogether or forced to learn firsthand about the darkness that so
many of them wanted to fight. Petty house rivalries, Neville suspected, were to be dampened in the
coming months.

“Karasu, Talia.”

He spotted some familiar faces amidst the crowds: his beautiful Hannah, laughing with Ernie and
Justin, and Luna, looking whimsy as she stared at the darkening ceiling, unaffected as Terry Boot
and Morag MacDougal attempted to coax her into conversation. And Merlin, he even had difficulty
dredging up hatred for the Slytherins. Davis and Nott were bickering about something or rather;
Greengrass was laughing at them. Malfoy was there too, chin balanced on his hand, seemingly
staring at Neville. But he wasn't staring at Neville. His eyes were boring into the back of Harry's
head, like usual.

“RAVENCLAW!”

Neville did sort of hate him. He was nothing but a cruel and privileged little boy who had treated
Neville awfully for years. But Harry, Ron and Luna had spoken for him at his trial. Neville hadn't
attended, had blanched at the mere idea of it, but wondered at his brave friends and their belief that
Draco Malfoy was deserving of such forgiveness, of a second chance. But he trusted them. The
report in the paper had detailed how fair and disapproving of him they had been, and had outlined
why they didn't believe Azkaban was a fair fate. All the fight had drained from Neville that first
day after the war, after he had let Hannah ride him in the greenhouses, after he had returned to his dorm
and slept for what felt like an age. To hold such a grudge toward someone who wasn't evil,
technically, felt a little pointless.

“Khanna, Robin.”

He would be better pressed to find good in the world. To focus on love, rather than hate. He felt
prickle of pity for poor Harry, who now, looked as happy as Larry, grinning at the children who
were being introduced to the brilliant world of magic that Hogwarts had to offer. But he wasn't
happy. Neville knew that. His interview in the Quibbler had spoken volumes: all he had to offer was
talk of the dead and of the war. The public had been expecting something akin to the uplifting words
of Kingsely Shacklebolt, talk of hope and moving forward, a wonderful message filled with triumph
and pride from their boy saviour.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

It had been his first real address about the war. To the press, at least. The trials hadn't counted. He'd
bristled and talked about a dead House Elf, about long lost Cedric Diggory, his bloody owl. He had
seemed to find tragedy in every question and it had haunted his words. Personally, Neville had found
it incredibly moving and had appreciated the interview. But the general public, those who hadn't
been so dreadfully hurt by the war… Neville wondered if the interview had been a good idea. It
would likely just disappoint.

“Lee, Bradley.”

But then Harry was not your average war hero. He had died for them, for all of them. If he lived his new life trying to fit the criteria of a society who only wanted him for sheer principle and symbolism, he would not end up very happy. And Harry Potter deserved better than that. He was worth so much more than those nasty articles they’d printed back in ’95 and ’96, than Draco Malfoy glaring at him over the Great Hall, than being poked and prodded and held under a microscope. Harry was reborn. Neville hoped he embraced the abandon of selfishness.

“SLYTHERIN!”

Neville hoped they all did. They had changed so much this summer – Harry with an odd new weight to the way he moved and a pack of cigarettes protruding from his pocket, Ron with a thick air of grief surrounding him and shadows beneath his eyes, Hermione with a tiny little tattoo on the flesh of her forearm, one that Neville hadn't quite gotten to read yet. Ginny had chopped all her hair off. Luna was wearing shoes. Dean had a sleeve of earrings climbing up his ear; Seamus, even now, was staring off into the distance, looking glum. Neville had put on weight. Hannah had lost it.

“Murk, Isobel.”

Once she had been plump and rosy-cheeked; Neville had loved her thick thighs and the stretch marks that had curved around her waist and hips, a million little lightning scars like Harry's. She didn’t really eat anymore. War had stolen her appetite and her joy and the flesh of her stomach had started to diminish, the pillow of her breasts lessening by the day. It was not that Neville missed her body. He loved her like a second nature. He would love her big or small, blonde or grey. He worried about her: now she was pale and shrinking and sometimes forgot to wash her hair. There was old, bone-deep exhaustion in her. Exhaustion that could not be dispelled by sleep.

“SLYTHERIN!”

Hannah Abbott was not the only one: Neville saw her tiredness reflected in Seamus, in Harry, in Ron. At the ripe age of eighteen, with the rest of their lives ahead of them, not truly wanting to live it. Wanting to go back to bed. Being heard but not listened to, their personhood reduced to soldierhood, their pain being brushed aside and written out of the history books. Because the next generation would not read of how Hannah stopped eating and Harry turned to cigarettes. Voldemort would die and that would be the end. The story of how they had sacrificed their innocence would not be told.

“Rakepick, Pamela.”

Neville longed to soothe their pain and to erase his own. All he did nowadays was sleep and eat, eat and sleep. On occasion, he would visit Hannah, kiss her and hold her slimming figure. Then he would go home and fill the hole within himself with pumpkin pasties and treacle tart. And then he would go to bed and dream of the war. He would wake and think of the war.

“RAVENCLAW!”

His Hogwarts letter had been his first shot at escape. At first he had shied at the thought of it – school had not been a pleasant affair this last year, what with all the torture and the bigotry. But... this was what he had fought for. For the principle, yes, but for freedom. Freedom for everyone, so they could eat cereal in the Great Hall and bullshit their Potions essays. That boring in-between stuff. The things that went unnoticed, that you didn't appreciate until you had a new normal that was much, much worse.
“Rosier, Flynn.”

So he had written a shaky letter of confirmation in reply. He had agreed to a do-over. His final year of school would no longer be one that consisted of revolution – instead, it would be beautifully dull. It would be trips to Hogsmeade and snoring boys in his dorm and giggly meetings with Hannah after hours. It would be the boring in-between stuff. It would be living, in its purest, most honest form. The most terrifying thing all year would be the question of whether they would win the House Cup.

“SLYTHERIN!”

Only, things were different now. Dumbledore would not be making a ridiculous speech and Snape would not be tormenting him this year. There would be no background laughter from Lavender, or the excited buzz of Colin Creevey. Hedwig would not be dropping any letters before Harry. Not this year. Not any year. The terrifying, unbelievable truth was this: they were no longer eleven years old.

“Snyde, Milly.”

Perhaps it was foolish but Neville did often wish for those simpler times, when the worst people in the world were Malfoy and Snape. When his greatest fears were impromptu tests and making a mess of another potion. Because ignorance truly was bliss, and these were times of vibrant childish imagination and no true understanding of the dangers that awaited them, out there in the big, bad world. What had happened to his parents was an awful, terrible thing, but a thing of the past. Neville, of course, would never encounter such cruelty firsthand. Or so he had believed.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Being at Hogwarts had not made him feel any less useless but it had provided him with the most important thing of all: friends. And Harry and Ron and Hermione, Seamus and Dean, Luna and Ginny in his later years, had meant everything in the world. Before the war, the world hadn’t been so bad. It hadn’t been easy but it had been enough to tell him, later, that it was worth fighting for. Love and light and friendship. Clichés. They made the world go round. They were worth dying for.

“Tuttle, Linda.”

Maybe things were not the same. Maybe they would never be the same again. But there were little slivers of joy here in Hogwarts, nestled in the dorm Neville had spent seven years in, in the Great Hall, the Greenhouses. It was why they had all returned, in part. To remember why their trauma was worth it. That, and the Ministry, with Kingsley Shacklebolt in charge, was not simply handing out jobs. Those like Harry and Ron and maybe even Neville, who had fought on the front lines, would perhaps be allowed special consideration. But NEWTs were still important, apparently. Neville suspected it was a desperate attempt to return to the system they all knew.

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

He envied them, these little first years, for their naivety. They hadn’t realised the education system had suffered a blip at all. And now they were packed in a Hall with people who had lost family for them, and to them, the war was but a distant folktale. To Neville, it was a nightmare of only a few months ago. But history had already occurred. Rita Skeeter was already busy shaping it into something ugly and false. Stories were already being told. Stories, like they weren’t as fresh in the memory as breakfast.

“Tyler, Emma.”

Neville saw his life backward and forward in that Great Hall. He saw himself shaking and unsure
about Gryffindor, years on and settled but forcing himself not to shy from the brewing war. He saw himself taller and braver than he had ever been, leading a rebellion, Dumbledore's Army a cry on his lips and a new power, a magic in his fingertips. He saw himself becoming old, withering, sat by McGonagall's side. Watching the world ever-changing and children always growing.

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

There had been a time that he thought he was sure to die. He had pushed it too many times, he had defied the Carrows over and over again, the war seemed never-ending. Then the Battle of Hogwarts had begun, and he had kissed Hannah with a frantic fire, a final farewell. And from the rubble a new Neville had emerged, pink and powerful and so, so lucky to be alive.

“Travers, Thomas.”

This new Neville would throw himself into this last year at Hogwarts. He would try to heal. He would not hide, or blush, or recoil. He was not that meek boy from his younger years. He had fought in a war and he had won, he had stood up to Voldemort himself. Neville was done second-guessing himself. Neville was done denying his potential, his ability. He was brave and he was kind. He was loving and he was loved.

“SLYTHERIN!”

The Sorting Ceremony came to a close. Neville looked down the table at their new Gryffindors, beaming with excited energy, sneaking glances down at Harry, before flushing and breaking into disbelieving whispers. They didn't really get it, not yet. They didn't get that he was just a kid. That he had been them, once. Professor McGonagall was speaking in a clear voice, introducing Professor Savage, Professor Wainscott and Professor Perkins to the staff body, talking about silly, childish things like staying away from the Forbidden Forest. She cleared her throat. She was painfully aware that she was not Dumbledore, that she was not light-hearted and bizarre like him.

The joy was sucked from the room in an instant once she mentioned the war.

“I would like us to remember, just for a moment, those who should be with us now,” she said.

“Those who didn't make it.”

The moment ended in a mere minutes, and the feast began. To Neville it was nothing new, but it felt like the first time all over again. Sitting amidst his friends, watching life bloom around them, under the bright candles and dark ceiling, felt like a privilege. Eighth year. He had not thought he would make it this far. He watched them, his friends. The bright spots of colour on Ron's cheeks. The rise and fall of Seamus' throat as he swallowed. Parvati's dirty fingernails. They were real and they were here, they were together. They had made it. Bags of blood and flesh and heart. This was living – it was such a far cry from surviving.

Surviving had been camping in the Room of Requirement indefinitely, unable to see the end of the dark tunnel. Living was here, September in Scotland, a home in Hogwarts. It was like a breathing, beating-heart thing. It sat at his side and stretched within him. It unfurled leisurely. They lived on and it meant so much. And if living meant change, meant going on with new Professors and old dead, then so be it. Autumn would roll into winter and winter into spring, to summer, and so on. The seasons would change. The years would pass. They would grow and vary and choose so many different things, again and again and again. Because they were here, and it was a luxury they had earned.

Neville smiled into his chicken drumstick. Malfoy kept staring at Harry. Some things never did change.
yes the majority of the 1st year names are very similar to hogwarts mystery characters
lmaooo
Harry had grown used to the ashy taste of cigarettes and the way they burnt in the darkness. A firefly he held against his lips to help him get through the day, to sift through the pain. He had wondered, briefly, longingly, if Hogwarts would stem the ache. He’d lost himself in the Gryffindor exhilaration, for a night, and when he'd awoken he'd been just the same as usual. His fingers had twitched around cigarettes that weren't there and exhaustion had accompanied him day by day, his dark circles the residuum of his night, which was haunted by his mother and his father and the home he never had. We are the dead, they said. And then they turned to smoke.

Slughorn let him drift away in Potions, gazing into nothingness, Flitwick was quietly disapproving but did not pull him up on it, kind as he was. Savage and Wainscott, the new Professors for Defence and Transfiguration respectively, regarded him with a vague reverence and let him do whatever he want. Sprout was the only one who didn't stand for his absent-mindedness. He was sort of grateful for it: being treated like he was normal.

All he'd received lately was stares. Adoring, unseeing stares. Stares that went right through him, that were aimed at his wand or his scar, his trademark glasses. Harry was tired of being seen and unseen all at once. He just wanted to be at peace. He wanted to live in the safe haven of Joyce's office.

For a brilliant and wonderful evening he had thought he would love the first years. He would envy them of their youth and their naivety but he would love them, for their frivolity, their meaningful little lives regrowing the world that had once been destroyed. Flowers in a graveyard. Flowers who grew unbidden, without a care for what decayed beneath them. Lives blooming and bringing light to all that was dying.

But all they did was look at Harry. And so he had fled from a world closing in on him, press and public, clamouring to see him, to hear his tale of great courage, to a school population that wanted the same. Harry was fonder of the elder years, who had schooled with him for a while now. After a few days they had quickly returned to normal, remembering him his days as a mere presence in the peripheral of their lives, and they allowed themselves to be swept up in the schoolyard drama of gossip and class and the opposite sex soon enough.

Harry was decidedly not interested in any of those things. Though… he had never really gotten involved in a lot of gossip, way back when. Maybe it would be a good distraction. But class seemed dreary and unexciting to him now. And girls were certainly a no-go.

But boys, boys… on the last night of August Charlie had left for Romania. He’d left his pictures of Norberta behind and had let Harry fuck him until they were both spent, reeling and gasping and lost in goodbye. Goodbye to each other. Goodbye to escape. I'm gay, Harry had said aloud for the first time, speaking only to Charlie's empty room, his bare mattress. The mattress they had slept on. Had sex on. The truth had caught up with him in the end.

Harry had bought stacks upon stacks of cigarettes, that night. With nobody to hide his scars from
anymore, he had started going to town on his leg, making little pieces of art in his burned skin. They were helpful, but faced with the daunting prospect of not knowing the next time he were to fuck away the pain, Harry realised he had enjoyed the intimacy. Especially with Charlie, a testament to shared life experience. At the end of the day, a cigarette was just a cigarette. A person was hopes and dreams and desires. Secrets and losses. A person lasted longer than a few minutes.

He missed Charlie but perhaps it was time to branch out. No more redheads. In fact, Harry wondered on the likes of Dean and Zabini. Maybe some colour in his life would do him some good. It wasn't as though he didn't love Ron and the rest of the Weasleys fiercely, but there was something, with Hermione. An undertone of understanding. He felt the same odd kinship with Dean, with the other people of colour in his year. But race, sexuality, the cornerstones of people's identities… he hadn't given himself a chance to think about such things. Voldemort had been everywhere, had made him who he was, had followed him into his dreams.

Of course that still happened today, from time to time. It was not an unfamiliar occurrence to see the crimson eyes of his murderer staring back at him, to remember a flash of green and an absolute blackness. But then there would be the nights he dreamt of his dead turning to smoke. These were growing increasingly frequent and it was beginning to worry him. They were so unbelievably real. His mother and father were touchable. Knowable. Knowable as he had never known them.

But they were only dreams, of course. It was foolish to think otherwise. Constructs of a family he hadn't ever had, to soothe him at night, allow him reprieve from nightmares. It was his mind, doing him a solid. He was grateful for the occasional joy it gave him.

“Potter?”

He jerked, tearing the cigarette away from his tender knee, too late to reach for his wand, discarded at his side, *Lumos* flooding light to his surroundings. He had grown sloppy in his retirement from fighting evil. He fixed his eyes on the figure behind him, hair almost silver in the night, gazing down at the cigarette dripping ash and embers in Harry's hand. That gaze flickered over him, bundled up in his leather jacket, thin pyjama top underneath. His trousers were rolled up to his knees, dangling in the Great Lake. Harry only hoped he didn't notice the fresh burn on his leg.

That was the thing, about his burning. He was a little bit embarrassed by it. By his physical display of weakness. Joyce would never tell a soul and Charlie wouldn't betray him like that. And even for Ron and Hermione to know felt a little too personal. Scars and burning. His brilliant fucking secrets.

“Malfoy,” he said coolly.

Harry was struck by the ice. He had been so consumed with fire but with Malfoy there would always, always be ice. Damn him if it wasn't a relief.

“You're up late,” Malfoy remarked.

“Going to dock points?”

“I don't count as a prefect anymore,” he reassured. His eyes tracked Harry's mouth as he brought the cigarette up and inhaled it; his pale cheeks were flushed in the dim light. He looked restless, human. Harry could get used to this Draco Malfoy. How he had despised the haughty boy he had once been…

“Smoke?” Harry asked, overcome with a sudden desire for companionship, the burn on his leg all but forgotten, soothed by the cold water of the lake.
“I've never...”

Harry inclined his head, and Malfoy looked hesitant, shifting from foot to foot. A moment passed before he crept toward him with the most absurd reluctance. He sat on the grass beside Harry stiffly, swallowing, his usual graceful, slender build suddenly looking awkward and gangly. His hair fell loose and soft around his face, his features seeming far less cut from stone in the indirect light of Harry's wand. He was quite pretty, Harry thought, in a conventional sort of way. He was more surprised at the raw reality of him, his ability to blush and sit in an awkward fashion like any other teenage boy.

Harry proffered him the thing, telling him how to breathe it in, breathe it out, make it a part of you. Malfoy held it like the stick of disgusting tar it truly was and his face twisted in disgust as he stuck it between his lips, sucking it in shakily. His eyelashes were translucent, they fluttered against the skin below his eyes. In an instant, he was shoving the cigarette back to Harry, coughing violently, hiding it in the crook of his arm. His body convulsed with the actions. So human, Harry thought. So he could cough. He had lungs just like anybody else. Perhaps somewhere in there he had a heart.

“What,” he began, red in the face, “the fuck did you just give me?”

“You've never seen –”

“I've course I've seen, Potter, I haven't been living under a rock,” he spat. “But I never… ugh. Why on earth do people do it? Why do you do it?”

“It makes me feel good,” he said off-handedly. He thought launching into the truth of burning and how good it felt was a little morbid, especially between rivals. It was something he would tiptoe around with Hermione, something he was not yet ready to broach with her. It was barely thought of in the presence of Malfoy. “I like the taste.”

“It tastes awful.”

“You didn't really taste it. You just got the smoke in your throat.” Harry thought it was funny how they bickered. It was not over blood status or popularity anymore but it was them, plain and simple. It was like the war had never happened at all. “You can try it the other way,” he suggested.

(The war had happened, though. It was impossible to forget. It was in every crisp inhale of the cigarette, the sighing wind, the dark waters before them. The war was what had led them here. To bickering and not fighting.)

“What's that?”

“Open your mouth.”

Malfoy looked sceptical, raising an eyebrow at Harry, who could do nothing but look on expectantly, tapping the ash from the end in a move he had perfected these last months. Eventually, Malfoy complied, parting his lips and waiting on Harry, who brought the cigarette to his mouth and pulled the smoke in with the breeze of his breath. And then, ever so carefully, he moved toward Malfoy, as though to press their mouths together. He ignored the widening of Malfoy's eyes, the blush spreading across his face, reddening his ears. Harry exhaled into Malfoy's mouth, watching the smoke in the air like cold breath; Malfoy gasped, seemingly involuntarily, and did his part, taking it down his throat. Harry sat back and started smoking again, leaving Malfoy clearing his throat, expression pink and bashful, pulling the fabric of his pyjama shirt down over his crotch in a clumsy motion.
They sat in silence for a little while. Harry leant back onto his elbows and smoked his cigarette to completion, and when he was done, flicked it into the Great Lake, unable to find any regret for the lacklustre action. He heard shifting behind him and a faint splash of water; Malfoy had rolled up his trousers and joined him, letting his calves fall into the cool water. The evening chill was cutting through Harry like a knife but he barely felt it. All that burning, you see.

He looked up at the stars and wondered how long it would take to count them, one by one, painstakingly. Years. A lifetime. A whole life that he now had. And what to do with it? Counting the stars was his best idea yet. Counting the stars and holding his tiny godson.

“You're different, now,” Malfoy said. Harry looked over at him. He looked all pale and proud again. Gone was the healthy flush on his skin, and he had returned to the ghostlike boy that Harry had defended in the Ministry. There was something indistinguishable in his face as he read Harry, eyes scanning his face.

“So are you.”

“You're more different.”

“How's that?”

“I know you better than you know me. You just are.”

Harry wanted to scoff, to protest, but Malfoy had a point. Harry had been spoken of like a celebrity since he was a year old, and during most of his acquaintance with Malfoy, he had been preoccupied with Voldemort, and far too distracted to note down things like Malfoy's favourite colour or how many letters he received a day. Sixth year didn't count. So yeah. Malfoy was right. Now wasn't that a hard pill to swallow.

“What is it about me then, may I ask,” he started, sitting up straight, not sure where the words were coming from, “that you hated so much? If you know me oh so well?”

“Merlin… you don't ask the easy questions, do you?” Malfoy looked stumped, pensive, but he wasn't looking at the sky like Harry had been. His eyes were trained directly on him, watching the way his hair ruffled in the wind, how his fingers plaited the grass. “I don't know,” he said. “I just did.”

“Do you hate me now?”

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. He looked frightening in the moonlight, other-worldly. He looked like the villain Harry had made him into, those first few years. “Do you hate me?” Malfoy asked in retaliation.

“No,” Harry said. “I mean. I don't particularly like you. But I'm done with hate.”

“How eloquent of you, Potter,” Malfoy sneered. “You really are different.”

Harry barked a laugh, it felt good. To laugh in the night with nobody to hear but Malfoy. It felt good to have someone other than his friends criticise him, mock him, treat him normal. Like he wasn't an exhibit to gawk and peer at. It may have come from a place of hatred on Malfoy's part but it still meant something. It still helped.

“I take it back,” he replied. “You haven't changed a bit.”

Malfoy's mouth twitched into a weak imitation of a smile, but his brow remained furrowed.
Worrying a thought around in his mind that begged to be set free. Harry thought how Hermione would love this simple moment, how she would long to understand and set it out like a puzzle in her head. Malfoy was a mystery and Harry had never been closer to him.

“You really think that?” he asked. Harry could sense the severity in his voice, the sorrow.

“In some ways,” he confessed. “Just… your manner. It's the same. And it's fine. It's who you are.” He poked at that old, sad part of his brain. Where the hatred slumbered, long and heavy. It barely stirred for Draco Malfoy, even after everything. “But of course you're different.” He looked at Malfoy, who had such a peculiar expression. “In all the important ways.”

“Potter,” he breathed, his words were sticky in his throat, Harry heard them hitch and crack, poised for life. “I'm sorry.”

“Malfoy –”

“I'm sorry,” he said again, his fist was balanced upon one wrist. Presumably, this was where the Dark Mark lay. Harry felt a surge of sympathy for him. “You had a lot going on and I didn't make things any easier. I'm just… for all of it. I'm sorry.”

“Me too.”

“What do you have to be sorry for?” Malfoy appeared surprisingly genuine, looking at Harry through clear grey eyes, head on in a way he never had before.

“A fair few things. But with you, I mean… it takes two to tango. It was never completely one-sided, with us.” Malfoy made a funny sort of noise at that. A half-laugh, caught in his mouth. It sounded rather hysterical. “I'll accept responsibility where it's due.”

“That's… awfully noble of you, Potter.”

“I've heard rumours that I'm an awfully noble guy.”

“Really? I've heard rumours that you're pretty full of yourself.”

“Slander,” he hummed, and produced the pack of Mayfairs from his pocket.

“Aren't they bad for you?” Malfoy asked, eyes going all weird and intense again as Harry lit one, ears tinting scarlet. Harry inhaled, and blew the smoke from his mouth, watching as it obscured his sight, blurring his vision of Malfoy, so that all was left was light hair and the vague shape of a person. It could've been anyone, he thought. But it wasn't. It was Draco Malfoy. The night was already surreal – smoking at Hogwarts, his childhood home – but Malfoy only made it more so.

“Like you care,” Harry muttered. “Don't you want me dead?”

“That's a little far,” Malfoy said. “Maybe just seriously hurt.”

Harry laughed again. It was nice to be hated. And not that unforgivable Death Eater hate, either, just a normal, casual hate. A childish hate. A hate that was calm and collected and a companion, in a way. It wasn't because of who he represented (magic to the Dursleys and love to Voldemort) but who he was. Harry could live with that. He could more than live with that, he liked it.

“I know they're bad for you,” he finally said, and because it was late, because it was only Malfoy, and because he didn't care much about anything anymore, he added, “but dying is bad for you. I did that. I'm still here.”
“You,” Malfoy tripped over his words. He was frowning, his eyes were still tracking the cigarette and Harry's mouth. “You died? You really died?”

“You thought it was a lie?”

“I thought it was a rumour. They always liked their 'Boy Who Lived' story.”

“It's true.” Harry felt careless. Malfoy was nothing to him, really. He'd defended him but it had been for his own conscience, for Dumbledore. And Merlin, it felt good to talk. What did it matter that Malfoy knew all this? Would he really use it against Harry now, after everything? “I died. And now I'm alive. A few fucking cigarettes don't seem so bad.”

“You died?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“Forgive me, Potter, but you do realise your predicament is far from common?”

“Right, yeah, not many people die and come back,” he mumbled, breathed in life through his cigarette. Malfoy was just watching him, the strangest things written on his face.

“You let it happen, didn't you.”

It wasn't a question. Malfoy was near-glaring at him, there was fire in his eyes like Harry had never seen. Harry was surprised – he didn't think Malfoy burnt like that. But the evidence was clear and there, flaming in the darkness.

“How do you figure that?”

“I know you, Potter. He asked you to turn yourself over and you ended up dead. You let it happen.”

Harry ached to put the cigarette to good use, to feel the sharp pain as he pressed embers so hard against his flesh that it was as though he wanted to meld them with him, to hear the sizzle of it, to admire the art it left behind, the scar. Harry knew what it was to scar. Harry knew what it was to burn. But Malfoy was here, and as much as he claimed to know 'Potter', he didn't know Harry. Not poor broken Harry who went to therapy and wrote letters to his dead friends.

“Yeah,” he admitted, “I did.” He sighed, falling back onto his elbows, stifling the fag in the grass. “What does it matter now? What does it matter to you?”

“It doesn't.” Malfoy was scowling, like usual.

“So forget it.”

“Fine.”

The wind tore right through him, it was nearly unbearable. The weather had taken a turn almost as soon as summer had come to a close, and Harry was glad. He enjoyed autumn, adored winter. He didn't mind the cold so much. He shrugged off his jacket, ignoring Malfoy's confused, enquiring noise, that shifted quickly to alarm as Harry pulled off his t-shirt, exposing his skin to the chilled night air. He felt gooseflesh ripple upon his arms, his torso, his nipples pebbling. A choked sound caught in Malfoy’s throat, he did nothing but squirm uncomfortably beside Harry, who pulled his legs from the lake and made to stand.

“Potter,” Malfoy protested as Harry shucked off his trousers, but any further words he had to say
were drowned out by the pull of the water.

His world turned to utter darkness in the lake, and he heard nothing but the distant echoes of
splashing, the shift of his own limbs. When he broke into air, Malfoy was glaring on the bank of the
lake, still sat as he had been before. He looked incensed.

“What?”

“When I agreed to try smoking I did not agree to see you half-naked!” he spat, and Harry shook
droplets from his hair, feeling it droop and stick to his face.

“I'm wearing underwear,” he said. “Even so, it's nothing you haven’t seen before. You share a dorm
with four other boys.”

“Three,” Malfoy corrected.

And there went the light-hearted conversation. Harry swallowed, sighing. He hadn't known Crabbe
and he was sure that Malfoy had never been all that fond either. Still, a dead boy was still a dead
boy. Still a dormmate. Still an element of normalcy stolen from Malfoy this year. Guilt threatened to
pull him under the water, choke the air from him.

“Sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“Still, sorry.”

Malfoy shook his head. “Why did you jump in?” he asked.

“Felt like it,” Harry said.

“You're a right idiot. It must be freezing.”

“It absolutely is,” Harry admitted, and felt himself grinning. It didn't matter. Nothing like that
mattered. Temperature worked on, the seasons shifted, and his dead remained dead. They would
remain dead in the warmth or the cold, in summer and in winter. They were dead whether he was
chatting with Ron and Hermione or having an unexpected conversation with Draco Malfoy in the
early hours of the morning.

He ducked into the dark waters without another word, feeling them soothe his burns. The ones on
the outside. The hot, roaring pain in his heart: that was incurable. You couldn't bring back the dead,
no matter how you missed them. You just had to endure the living.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

heterosexuals ahead - consider yourself warned

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE PRIDE OF HERMIONE GRANGER.

SEPTEMBER 10\textsuperscript{th} 1998, 09:24.

CLASSROOM 7C, HOGWARTS. HIGHLANDS, SCOTLAND.

HERMIONE

Hermione appreciated the sound of her quill on the parchment as she drew out her graph, scratching in the numbers with care. She’d considered asking her parents to send her pens after her very first week at Hogwarts, tired of the endless system of inkpot to parchment, the smudges it caused, the tickle of her quill. But since when did Hermione Granger give up? She’d been eleven and desperate to fit in. A pen might’ve just alienated her more. So she had worked at it. Perfected the routine of parchment to inkpot to parchment, learned how to avoid smudging the wet ink, desensitised herself to the brush of the feather. Now it was a testament to her hard work.

“Don't forget to assess the exponentials,” Professor Vector reminded from the front of the classroom, not looking up from the papers she was sorting through.

Hermione heard a sound of frustration from the next desk, and peered discreetly at Malfoy, who sat with his hands in his hair and a sour face as he glowered down at his work. She hadn't been overly pleased at being stuck in such small quarters with him, but the class was small – not many eighth years had elected to take Arithmancy – so she didn't want to complain. She would swallow her bitterness and try to move on after the war, after everything. She was sat with Kevin Entwhistle, anyway. He was nice enough, if a little dopey.

“Do you want the data in ordinal or interval form?” asked Sally-Anne, barely bothering to raise her hand before speaking, words bursting from her.

“Stick with ordinal for now,” Vector answered, and Hermione marvelled at the change in them all. Two years ago Sally would not have dared speak without her hand in the air. Two years ago Vector would've been furious if she had not. But now… Hermione wondered if it was the effect of the war, softening the once-stern. Hermione wondered if it was simply because they were all eighteen.

Malfoy looked thoroughly perplexed, sinking further into his confusion. It was odd, she thought, how he had ignored her throughout all their years of shared Arithmancy. He'd been borderline polite, allowing her a curt nod here and there, and he'd always been fair during peer-marking sessions. And yet, the minute she’d been with Harry it had been mudblood this and mudblood that. She supposed he’d just said it to show off, the way that boys do. It was a comfort, at least, that it meant he'd never really believed it.

It made it easier when she leant over to him and asked if he wanted any help. Vector even let them talk, now. A blush crept up from beneath Malfoy's collar, staining his neck, and for a moment
Hermione thought he would refuse her, thought he would recoil in disgust at her mere proximity.

“Please,” he finally answered, swallowing his pride.

The class looked on in shock as Hermione pulled her chair closer to Malfoy’s desk, its quiet screech against the floor gaining their attention. This was not Kevin helping Lily Moon. This was Hermione Granger helping Draco Malfoy, and the room filled with a strange sort of tension. Malfoy bent over his work further, dying of humiliation, but Hermione levelled her breath and calmly looked over his numbers. She thought even Professor Vector was watching them.

“You’ve integrated it wrong,” she said quietly, and the spell slowly but surely broke. Sally-Anne went back to gossiping with Lily, Kevin returned to scratching at his parchment and murmuring lowly to Wayne, Vector flicked through her papers once more. Hermione pressed her finger to his page, fingernail breaching the incorrect number. “You need to divide the coefficient by the power, not multiply them together.”

“Oh,” left his mouth. He scanned his numbers, doing the calculation in his head, briefly. “You’re right,” he finally admitted. “Thank you.”

“That’s alright,” she replied, and was about to return to her desk, to leave the deep ocean of his being. She was surprised by him, the faint smell of his cologne (because of course he wore cologne, and not just deodorant like Harry and Ron) that wasn’t quite enough to mask the scent of his boyish sweat. She was surprised by his human, teenage existence. He appeared far too posh to experience life like the rest of them.

But Hermione had seen him during the war, scared and hesitant at Malfoy Manor, terrified and remorseful during the final battle. She had seen him during his trial, shocked and humbled and exhausted. Malfoy lived just like all of them. He had been pushed to such circumstances out of love for his family and he had lost his innocence just as easily as she, Ron and Harry had. She pitied him. Perhaps she had misjudged him.

“How have you been, Granger?” he asked, out of the blue.

“I’ve been okay,” she said, startled. “Thank you for asking.”

“And Potter?” he added, a little rushed. Hermione assumed he simply wanted to get the niceties out of the way for peace of mind, and return to his work.

“He’s fine.”

Malfoy finally looked at her, head on, and raised an eyebrow. “Is he really?” he asked. “I saw him after hours the other day, and… he didn’t seem fine.”

“Oh?” she said, voice lilting into a question. “And how did he seem?”

“Pretty messed up,” Malfoy responded. “He was smoking a lot. He went swimming in only his underpants, and it was a cold night.”

Hermione felt her lips purse in disapproval. She knew about the smoking, of course, they all did. Whenever he was outside he was on the things. But swimming in the cold? Without any clothes? If he were here she’d make a snide comment asking if he were looking for Gryffindor’s sword again, and they would laugh because it made the war softer and funnier, and then he would open up to her. But he wasn’t here. It was just Malfoy and the quiet buzz of Arithmancy around her.

“He’s… managing,” was all she could come up with in the end, feeling a protective rush toward him.
Harry's issues were not Malfoy's to know and Harry was reckless and careless at the moment, and he didn't care what Malfoy thought. Hermione did. She remembered all too well their years at school and how Malfoy would grasp at any little thing to mock him with, to mortify him, make his poor, burdened plate even fuller.

Malfoy did not look convinced, but what could Hermione say? 'He did it to mislead you'? 'He's training for a swim in the Arctic'? Harry was damaged beyond belief and there was no way around it. She longed for him to heal but she knew, in truth, that it would take more than a few therapy sessions to 'fix' him.

"Are you sure about that?"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Hermione clamped down on his wrist, hand tight. Her dark skin was stark against his pale complexion, it was grounding. She and Malfoy, they would never be the same. He may not have been evil but he remained cruel, and to be cruel for no reason was something Hermione could never do.

"Watch yourself, Draco," she hissed; he was frozen in fear, eyes wide. "I don't want to hear you've been nasty. You know I'll report you to McGonagall in an instant. Or maybe I'll just slap you again. But don't you fucking dare try anything with Harry. After all he's done for you..." She sighed. "Maybe I shouldn't have expected anything different. But I'll admit, I'm disappointed in you."

"Granger," he protested hoarsely, "it isn't like that. I wasn't... angling at anything. I don't hate him like I used to," he confessed. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, gauging him.

"You mean it?"

"Of course I mean it," he muttered, pulling at his arm, trying to extricate it. "It seems a bit pointless to hate him now, doesn't it?"

"You tell me."

Malfoy rolled his eyes, and finally pulled his arm free. "Don't play dumb. And I'm not getting all sentimental on you. It's just, you know. The war wasn't fun. For anyone." He flushed, looked away. She was struck by his lack of eloquence, the honesty of him. "I can't hate the person who stopped all of that."

"You expect me to believe you're Harry's biggest fan, now?" Hermione questioned, sceptical.

"Merlin, no," Malfoy insisted. His eyes flicked away guiltily as he continued, "I suppose I'll never really like him as a person." There was something in his tone, Hermione thought. He was absolutely fascinating. It was another action of his that she pocketed, an action she did not understand, and would soon try to, very late at night when she was bored and had nothing better to do. "But he doesn't deserve to... be in that much pain." Malfoy pulled a face at the solemnity of his words, but the air around them, the background studying, helped lessen their severity.

Merlin help her, but Hermione believed him. He was still that same sneering and sarcastic boy he had always been, but there was an underlying sincerity to him now that he had never possessed before. There was a pain. A pain that they all felt, to their bones. Their lovely bones. They held them up through it all and structured them, protected tender organs below. They ached with such pain but they continued.

Hermione was brain. Harry was heart. But Ron... he was bones. He was lovely and strong and they had fallen apart without him, they had crumbled, and what use was the heart pumping blood to the
brain, if there were no bones to hold the body up? Ginny was blood, raw and rushing, Luna was skin, delicate and always. Neville: flesh. Substance and warmth and surroundings. Dean was charm and Seamus was humour and Hermione had once longed to be free and no longer a part of this collective being. Not now. No, now, she didn't want freedom. They had fought for that and they had won it. Now Hermione wanted peace. She found peace in her friends' hearts and bones and blood.

“Okay,” she finally said. She shuffled back to her desk, the legs of her chair squeaking again. She paid no mind to the stares, shifted seamlessly back into her parchment-inkpot-parchment system. She avoided smudges. She did not smile at the tickle of her quill.

Hermione wondered absently if that made Draco Malfoy scars. You didn't want them but they were there. They were a part of life, wrapped around Ron's arms, on Harry's forehead and hand and chest, tattered on Bill's face. Hermione remained scar-free but for the mark on her neck left by Bellatrix. She liked to forget it existed, to imagine that her only permanent mark was the tattoo on her inner forearm. Her parents had wrinkled their noses, dismissing tattoos as a pedestrian, working-class feature. Hermione hadn't cared what they thought. They were her parents and she loved them but Hermione had lived an entire life they didn't understand, lived in a world they would never truly know. She'd gotten the tattoo because she'd needed it. She'd needed it to remind her, to remember who she was. To honour who she was.

In striking red, simple print, it read: mudlblood. Scars and slurs and the colours of Gryffindor, a home that had taken her in with no thought to her blood status. A world of meaning balanced over her veins. She wore the slur proudly.

SEPTEMBER 10th 1998, 18:43.

EIGHTH YEAR GRYFFINDOR BOYS' DORMITORY, HOGWARTS, HIGHLANDS, SCOTLAND.

Hermione liked the boys' dorm. She and Fay had been terrible control freaks back before the war, constantly reprimanding Lavender for her discarded clothes and Parvati for her scattered make-up; a lipstick on the floor, an eyeliner in someone else's bed. Now Lavender was dead and Parvati no longer found joy in her make-up. She walked around school bare-faced and grim. Hermione couldn't help but miss the mess – it had been normalcy, it had been teenage girls living thoughtlessly and honestly. The boys' dormitory hadn't changed a bit. Its beds were unmade, tangled in sheets, and the smell of deodorant and boy permeated the room, she saw Dean's posters, Ron and Harry's Quidditch things.

One bed in her dorm remained empty. It was stripped down to the mattress. Nobody would be sleeping in it this year.

Hermione knew Parvati did sometimes. She curled up on the barren chill of it and didn't sleep the whole night. It was so very sad, to lose someone you loved.

Lavender and Hermione had never been close. Hermione hadn't cared for her melodrama or her sickly sentimentality, she'd thought her vapid. She'd seethed with jealousy over her and Ron, had hated her even more for simply wanting him and being wanted by him in return. But it hadn't been fair – she knew this now. Lavender had died and Hermione had felt a blow she had not expected. She had grown used to her insipid chatter over the years, like a pleasant hum. They had never been friends but she hadn't deserved to die: she had been brave enough to fight and die for what was right. And Hermione felt so sad for her. She was pretty sure some time in May had been her birthday. She had died on the very cusp of eighteen.

Hermione gazed at Ron as he sorted through his trunk at the foot of his bed, on which she was
nestled upon. His sheets were warm and they smelt like him, freshly mown grass and new parchment and his hair, and they slowed her. Made her want to sleep for an age, curled in his bed. He'd always been like this, disorganised, with a tendency for procrastination. He used to be up until the early hours of the morning writing last-minute essays. He never unpacked until at least the second week of Hogwarts.

She had resented Lavender for kissing him first but if it had been anyone, Hermione was glad it had been her. Her skin had been deep honey and cream, vitiligo marking her, shaping her. She had been big, bigger than Hermione, her hips wide and her thighs round. She hadn't possessed Luna's ivory skin or Parkinson's slender figure. She hadn't been the perfect white, skinny 90s babe, with a tiny chest and willowy lines. She'd just been Lavender, and Ron had wanted her. Not Luna, not Parkinson: Lavender.

Did he want Hermione just the same?

She felt cruel using a dead girl for hope. She should've cut her more slack when she was alive. She should've got there quicker in the battle: Lavender may have lived. But, she told herself, there's something out there. Something else, something more, beyond. Harry had told her so. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

Hermione imagined her there, as alive as always. Happy and pretty and free of pain. It was funny how the dead, once gone, became larger than life. But Lavender had been small in death. Ashen and diminishing. The image was burned into Hermione's mind, along with the limp bodies of poor Colin Creevey and long lost Roger Malone, who she'd sat beside in Ancient Runes for years. She had not cared for them, but they had become staples of her life here at Hogwarts. To lose the boy who'd always been at home with a camera and the guy who'd cheated off her test in fourth year, was harder to endure than she had expected.

“You're quiet,” Ron remarked, pausing to peer at her, clothes draped loosely over his arms. Hermione made a non-committal sound in lieu of reply, and he sighed, went back to hanging up his clothes. The hangers clinked in the wardrobe, Hermione felt a strange pang at the simple domesticity of it. “You aren't usually this quiet,” he said.

“You didn't want dinner,” he continued, and moved to sit next to her on the bed. She did not turn. She left her back to him. The past him in the bed and the present him right beside her was overwhelming. “You usually want dinner.”

“I could say the same for you,” she replied stiffly, sinking further into his mattress, the soft imprint of himself he had left behind. He had inhabited this bed for years. As long as they had known each other.

“I needed to unpack. The kitchen leftovers are better than dinner, sometimes. I was going to go later. You can come, if you want.”

“I'm not really hungry.”

“Ohay,” he said, and then his hand was in her hair, smoothing it through. She closed her eyes at the sweet sensation, the solace, freely given. She felt like she wanted to cry: not for anything specific, but just for the sheer beauty of tears and their catharsis, the salt of their crucible. She wanted to cry for Ron and how dearly she loved him. “But you know you can talk to me?”

Hermione finally faced him. She shuffled over onto her other side, laid her head in his lap, the heat of him more alive than the ghost he had left in the blankets of his bed. His hand did not falter, it trailed through her springy mess of curls, endless. She had grown to love her bushy hair, her dark skin, her
reality and her honesty in who she was. At fifteen she'd made her hair as sleek and straight as possible and she'd shrunk her teeth to an 'acceptable' size. She regretted this now. What was beauty other than an arbitrary concept used to determine worth at face-value? It was tiring, and she had survived a war. Beauty was transcendent of society and its restrictions. Beauty was Harry dragging himself on day by day, hunting Horcruxes, beauty was people from all backgrounds and walks of life joining together to fight for truth and fairness. It was the euphoric relief when Voldemort died, the heady rush of freedom.

Beauty was Ron and all his love, his freckles like kisses, his bones that kept her solid.

“Thanks, Ron,” she whispered, pulling at a loose thread in his jumper. She felt him lean back against his headboard, lift his feet onto the bed, abandon his task of unpacking. His hand edged downward, finding her hand, her wrist. His fingertips traced her tattoo.

“What did the muggle say, when you asked to get it done?”

“Not much,” she said. “I think they get a lot of strange requests. Mine was just another odd one.”

“Did it hurt?” he asked.

“No,” she confessed. “At least, not really. It was a good kind of pain. A proud kind of pain.”

She glanced up at his face, the back of her head flat against his thigh; he was looking at her with so much affection. He so often wore this mask of nonchalance nowadays, held it like a shield before his newly-endowed vulnerability that he detested so greatly. So to see him so genuine felt like an honour. It was a chink in his armour that he was allowing her to see, raw and red and pretty.

“Hermione,” he started, voice a croak as he said her name with so much meaning, meaning they had almost forgotten in their many years of friendship. “I...”

Hermione had read a hundred books. She knew words and their wisdom, their grounding in the real, their grasp on the surreal. She loved them for their duplicity; for their eternal possibility. They could be anything. They were like her, she thought. She could be anything she wanted. She could hold the world in her hands if she wanted because she was Hermione Granger, brightest witch of her age, mudblood written infinitely on her arm.

But words were not invincible. They could not encompass it all.

“So Ron shut up. Ron kissed her, leaning down in spite of the awkward angle, lips dry and sincere. Ron kissed her upside down in his dorm during dinner time. It felt natural. It felt right. It was not a passionate farewell, not like before, but an exploratory greeting. Something sparked between their mouths, a knowing, an understanding that this was it. This was them. This was the rest of their lives. Ron kissed her and it was all she had been wanting for years. Her tongue ventured forward hesitantly, met his, she felt him sigh into her, give into it all. She felt dizzy, she felt the world drift away.

The war, momentarily, disappeared with their kisses, just like words. It was lost in their lips and she was grateful to forget, for a little while. She was grateful for Ron's steadying hand in her hair again, the way he pulled her gently up to his level. He was more apt than she had imagined as their intimacy grew heated, his shirt falling from his shoulders, her t-shirt pulled over her head. He hesitated for a moment, fingers hovering at the clasp of her bra.

“Is this okay?” he asked, quiet and low and thick with arousal.
“Didn’t I tell you to shut up?”

He grinned and then they were kissing again, teeth and tongue and wanting. Her bra clicked open and her nipples were peaked in the cool air. She remembered with a faint aura of disgust how Cormac had handled them so sloppily, but not Ron. He only brushed the rough pad of his thumbs against them, pressed a demure kiss to the rise of her breast. Hermione realised, with a jolt, how different this was. Her experiences before had been muddled and teenage: in a quiet corner of the library with Viktor, on the beach at nighttime with a forgotten muggle, in the girls' toilets with Cormac. Now she was in a bed. She was with the love of her life. She had never felt more adult (aside from when she was facing down Death Eaters, but that was a different kind of adult).

When he finally pulled a condom on and eased himself inside her, Hermione’s vision nearly blurred, fizzling with hot desire. He was so careful with her, pressing close-mouthed kisses to her collarbone, stroking at her hips, tickling her jaw with his hair. She decided she enjoyed this tender sort of sex. Sex with someone you loved was, all in all, incredibly different. Insanely better.

“Are you alright?” he asked at one point, forehead covered with a sheen of sweat, plastering his hair to it.

Hermione gasped, breathless, and kissed him once more, open-mouthed, not messy but certainly feverish. “Teaspoon,” she said. “I’m better than alright.”

Her orgasm was more soft than it was blinding: it brought her a beautiful, abundant pleasure as Ron groaned above her, joining her in climax. He looked delightfully dishevelled and Hermione smoothed his sweaty hair back from his face as they righted themselves on the bed, blushing despite everything. Despite the long build-up to this and their years of instinctive knowledge of one another. He smiled at her fondly as she retracted her hand, and Hermione felt it between them like a corporeal being. Hermione felt the words about to come like a whisper of wind in her ear and her heart was ready when Ron finally said: “I love you, Hermione.”

“Me too,” she murmured, “me too, Ron.”
“So?” Fred was asking, grinning. His eyes were twinkling mischievously but Harry had, over the years, perfected his ability to identify whether or not he should actually be worried for his life at the hands of the twins. This was simple fun: his new prototype was ready, and Harry was his tester. Potentially dangerous but not life-threatening. Not that it mattered. Life: something they had all left behind, here. “What did you think of ‘Dreaming Discs’?”

“Well they work,” was all he could manage for a moment, still reeling a little from his intense illusion of life and loss and burning. “But they don’t taste like much.”

Fred sighed, frustrated, pouting at the little bag of sweets he’d set on the picnic table. To see him sat in Harry’s back garden, fiery hair gleaming in the sun, was a little startling. They had loved one another in life, absently, but they hadn’t exactly been the best of friends, and to spend one-on-one time together was, admittedly, a new occurrence. But it worked, it was seamless. It was natural. Ron was no longer by Harry’s side – this was all he had. Fred was a brilliant, talkative substitute. Harry suspected that they were both seeking the same thing, both wanting to see Ron in the other’s face.

“What did you dream of?” Fred asked, and Harry felt a little prickle of embarrassment.

“I think you know,” he murmured.

“Harry -” Fred began.

“It’s a good product,” Harry interrupted, breezy as he reviewed the sweet. “I’m telling you, people will be flocking to buy sweets that give them such great dreams. It’s pretty impressive magic.”

“Nah,” Fred protested, smile returning full-force, charming and cheeky as he had been when he was alive. “Deconstructing the Mirror of Erised was child’s play. Just wait until I get started on Lying Lollipops.”

“Sounds delicious.”

“What did you dream?” Fred asked again. His expression was open and raw. “Because I dreamed of George, when I tried them. And Ginny, and Ron and Bill and Charlie. Mum and Dad. Percy. Lee was there. So was Angelina, so was Hermione.”

“Me too,” Harry confessed. “Well, along those lines.”

“But you weren’t,” Fred admitted, pulling a face. “That’s the part I don’t get. If it’s what I want most in the world then why were you dead? Why did we suffer and mourn you?”

“The mirror isn’t a crystal ball,” Harry reasoned. “It’s your deepest desire. Just that. Reduced, I suppose, to its simplest form. What we want is life. So the dreams gave us that. Mine was pretty
depressing too, but I was alive. The realism is the scariest part. I think most people here would dream of that sort of thing.”

“Too sad to sell?”

“Merlin, no. You might as well make profit off the fact that we're dead.”

Fred laughed that laugh that Harry had been longing to hear in his dream. But it was just a dream. Fred was here and so was he. They had nothing to mourn; they were the mourned. They were at peace and everyone they loved would one day join them.

Dead. Harry had struggled to come to terms with it at first, worried sick about Ron and Hermione and the rest of the Weasleys, about the world he had left behind. But he knew now that would see them all again. One day. He only hoped they didn’t resent him for his choice: the train that had taken him so far away from the possibility of a life with them. Heart heavy and head spinning, he had boarded it, let it take him from King’s Cross to Godric’s Hollow, from a cold and empty forest amidst a battle, to his childhood home in the village he should’ve grown up in. He had chosen peace. And now he had Mum and Dad and Remus and Sirius. He had Hedwig and Fred and everybody he had lost. Now he was the last one. Now he was one of the dead.

And the dead lived on. They laughed and celebrated birthdays and sang long forgotten songs. It was like life only there were people missing that were not yet on their way. It was like life only Fred sold jokes all on his own and Harry felt an empty ache at each side. But for the most part, they were content. They would see their living again someday. Fred would reunite with his business partner and Harry’s ache would subside, his friends taking their places.

“Boys!” came filtering through the kitchen window, breaking the summer day serenity. “Lunch!”

Harry would never grow tired of hearing her voice. And now he would have it forever, for the rest of his death. Death was an endless state, and Lily Potter navigated it well. She filled the house with flowers and painted pretty pictures and made sure she watered all the plants. It was like this Godric’s Hollow was the real one, like their house had never been destroyed. That, of course, wasn’t the case. But it was easy to forget. It was easy to decorate death and drown it out with colour.

He poured far too much ketchup into his chip butty, felt it ooze around his mouth like blood at the first bite. It tasted real. Fred’s laugh at his stained face: real. Real: Harry’s body was rotting in the ground somewhere on earth, his mind danced in this fantastical world of the dead, and at night it carried him to a life he had never gotten to live. A life of one last year at Hogwarts and cigarettes and sex. It made him sad but he loved his Ron and Hermione there, his Ron and Hermione anywhere. It was better than waiting blindly for them, even if his dreams were false constructs of the potential of his other choice. The potential of not taking that train after all and returning to the war.


“I’m fine,” he said. “I’m tired.”

Harry sucked air in desperately, hurriedly, clutching at his curtains for grounding. His heart was trying to claw its way from his chest, rocketing at a mile a minute. The scene kept turning over in his head as he breathed in the fresh air, wiping away the sweat that was trickling on his forehead. He was shaking. He hadn’t had dreams like it since he’d been in Voldemort’s head, seeing through his eyes, the Horcrux in him straining to return to its master.

He’d been having dreams like this for months, now. Each one different, but ultimately portraying the same situation: death. For a moment, he wondered. Perhaps something had gone wrong, back there
in the forest. Perhaps…

Perhaps he was still out there.

No. He would not let himself consider it. Voldemort was dead; they had worked so hard and for so long and they had scoured him from the earth. Harry had died for that. Voldemort would never return. And the dream, it had been vivid, yes, but not hostile. And it had been through Harry's eyes, supposedly.

Harry had been dead. He'd been with everyone he had lost. There was something so lucid about the dream that frightened him but he breathed through the terror, his pulse slowing, adrenaline calming. It was a dream. Just a dream. He'd imagined some unbelievable alternative life where he was at peace, with his mother and father. He had been longing so desperately to rewind and make a different decision in that undefinable state of Beyond, to have taken a train and forgotten all about life and its impossible responsibility. He'd died. He'd had enough. He had been selfish, for once.

That was all the dream was. His deep desires were dredged up and paraded behind his closed eyes for a few hours at night, and he was torn between contentment and anguish. It had been nice, to see what could've been. It hurt that it hadn't happened. But a vivid dream? It wasn't dangerous. He was safe. He was here.

Did he want to be safe? Did he want to be here?

Danger had become something rather attractive, now it wasn't a necessity. He loved smoking his lungs to death and driving so fast his instructor threatened to drop him as a student. He had scalding hot showers. He burnt his skin. He often drunk himself into a stupor or swam in the freezing cold waters of the Great Lake. Many philosophical conversations with Joyce had led him to the conclusion that he had grown so used to it over the years that he now sought it out. That these reckless behaviours helped him deal with this so-called peace that they had achieved after the war. That he relied on them to keep him anchored to his identity.

His identity had been so fixed all these years. As long as he had been old enough to understand the concept of the self he had been rarely allowed the privilege of personhood. With the Dursleys he had been the unwanted nephew in the cupboard, and at school, the tiny little weirdo with too much hair. Then he had assumed the role of the Boy Who Lived, then Triwizard Champion, Liar, Chosen One, Undesirable No. 1. He had been Master of Death, a title he had never wanted. Death… he didn't want to defeat it. He just wanted it.

Now he was the Boy Who Lived Twice. Children gazed at him with glassy eyes and randoms approached him at all hours of the day, as though it was a right of passage. They went to school with the famous Harry Potter! And he remained a symbol. A circus act to gawk at. People would snap pictures as often as they could and send them in to the Daily Prophet for a little pocket money to spend at Hogsmeade. Harry only appreciated that those in seventh and eighth year, even the Slytherins, were respectful enough to leave him be, or treat him as they always had.

With them he was Harry. Just Harry. And he liked Just Harry, who had a dry sense of humour and did semi-well in class, who loved Quidditch and treacle tart. It was almost like he was ordinary. These people, the ones who had grown up with him and watched him toe the line between life and death, recklessly, those who had witnessed him humiliated by Snape and falling asleep in History of Magic, knew his humanity. He was just a boy. He was just like them. He was so very glad things were not that different to before.

Apart from, of course, one very notable exception: Quidditch.
McGonagall had called all the eighth years to stay on after breakfast, their first day back. She’d talked about inter-house unity and respecting each other in spite of the past, her gaze flickering briefly between Harry and Malfoy. And then had come the real blow: they would not be permitted onto their house teams for Quidditch. They were, of course, allowed to use the pitch as long as it was free. But to place them on teams with and against eleven year-olds, would be unfair, apparently. And it would deprive younger years of opportunities to join the team – last year, Quidditch had not been held for obvious reasons. Now their places on the house teams would be vacated and new captains would be appointed.

Harry understood. He did, and he was overjoyed for Ginny and her new captaincy, but it provoked a little sting of envy in him. Quidditch was his sport and that was his team. It was something he had been looking forward to. He needed to look forward to things if he wanted to get through the day. Quidditch was stolen from him and it stung. He longed for the open air and the excitement that came with an impending game, the breathless joy of winning, the frantic scanning for the Snitch.

Swallowing, Harry finally climbed from his bed, padding to the window. From here he could see the pitch in the distance: they had done a brilliant job in repairing it, it was like nothing had changed. But it had. Everything had changed. Harry couldn’t escape to the skies anymore, and he had to watch the team he had once led compete without him, he had to remain footed in the stands.

He didn’t bother dressing properly, just pulled on a pair of jeans and smoothed down Ron’s old Chudley Cannons t-shirt that had transformed into half of Harry’s pyjamas. Under his bed laid his new Firebolt, brand new and practically unused. He’d lost his broom from before during the flight from Privet Drive to the Burrow; it had fallen down somewhere over Surrey, had likely broken upon impact with the ground. This new broom was perfectly okay. It was the same model and it worked just fine. But it wasn’t his trusty broom from third year that he had loved so well, that had seen him through Quidditch game after Quidditch game, a gift from his godfather. He crouched to retrieve it; it fit in his hand just as the old one had. But it wasn’t the same. Everything had changed.

Harry was careful not to wake his dormmates as he crept from the dorm and into the common room. There were a few people about, bent over essays and stretched on the sofa. It was not the middle of the night: the common room wasn't empty, there were always early-birds up and raring to go. In the early haze they barely gave Harry a second glance, though Ritchie Coote allowed him a smile.

Many of the portraits were dozing as Harry made his way down the stairs, instinct and muscle memory guiding him past the trick steps, making him marvel at how well he knew this place. It was a world unto itself. It was a place he knew inside out, every tapestry and disused classroom, its secrets and wonders and incredible personality. He loved it so dearly. He liked to believe the castle loved him back.

Dawn had broken outside, so his journey down to the pitch was simple and grey and uneventful. Magnificently, it was entirely empty when he got there. There wasn’t a soul in sight. Harry felt so very far from the castle and so very, very alone. At least in death he had been surrounded: Mum and Dad and Sirius, Remus and Fred, the cat his parents had owned that he hadn’t remembered. When he mounted his broom and flew up into the wind, he realised he was crying. Not much, but a little. The tears were soft and rare. They were tears for himself, for Hogwarts, for the sun and the sky and how little the world looked from up here.

It was well into September and they were up in the mountains, so the higher Harry rose, the colder and windier it got. It whipped at his cheeks and turned his tears of sorrow into a mere reaction to the chilling breeze. He had released no Snitch; he was up here for enjoyment only, for release. Quidditch had been a good friend to him for all these years. It had accompanied him in his journey from a lost, cupboard-dwelling eleven year-old to the man he was now, as tall as his father, scar retired, heart
hurting beyond belief. That life he had once led seemed so alien now. He had been lost and purposeless. He hadn't had anybody who loved him. With Hogwarts had come everything: what it was to love, a whole world of magic and light at fingertips, friends and family and life; excelling in school and sports, laughing over dinner, having Hermione stroke his hair and read poetry on especially slow evenings; Christmases and birthdays and the joy of receiving a Weasley sweater like he was one of them, Hagrid's Hut and his awful rock cakes, saying hello to an acquaintance as he passed them in the corridor.

He was so very grateful to this place for all of that. For the simplicity of contentment it had gifted him, for the joys it had brought him, even for the pain. The growing pains. Not being chosen for prefect and having his short-lived romance with Cho fall apart, arguing with Ron. Hating Snape. Studying for his bloody exams. Being a teenager. These were the aspects of life that everyone endured. They were ordinary. They were a part of Harry's history, flowing in his bloodstream, settled in his lovely bones.

He imagined plummeting to the ground and not pulling up in time. He imagined letting go of his broom and falling. It was early and nobody was around to save him. He would fall and die in this peace, not a spectacle like it had been in the forest, as the Death Eaters laughed and Hagrid heaved with grief. It would be a simple farewell. A seamless drift into death. A human, muggle death. There would be no fancy spellwork. He would die honestly and truly and it would show: he would be as bloodied and broken on the outside as he was on the inside.

Harry's grip on the broom began to loosen, he began to seriously consider it. Falling. Dying. He breathed in the cold air and shivered, gazed down at the ground and how very far away it was. Hogwarts was hulking in the distance, with a few faraway specks indicating his classmates beginning to wake, wading out into the grounds. They wouldn't even notice him, if he were to fall. They wouldn't be looking.

In his mind flashed images of Ron and Hermione, Ginny and Luna, Hagrid and McGonagall and Neville, Dean and Seamus, life as he knew it. The world that was, for the most part, devoted to him. He imagined the headlines, the speculations, the invasive questioning his friends would receive. Had they known that he had felt this way? Why hadn't they done something? Was there a possibility of foul play? The Boy Who Lived and Lived Again turned into The Boy Who Died. Harry wasn't quite a boy anymore. Harry didn't feel like he was living. Merely existing. Surviving, like the prophecy had so accurately established.

His indecision was solved, however, by the distant shout of 'Potter!' from the ground. The figure was indistinguishable from so high but Harry sighed, gripped the broom again, letting himself spiral slowly to the ground. He realised that it was pretty Lily Moon, who was a Slytherin but had always been kind to him. He smiled at her and landed beside her, braking sharply and dismounting onto the grass. She was looking at him with kindly, wide-set eyes that suggested no understanding of what he had been considering, up there. If it had been Hermione, she'd have known. But Lily Moon was not Hermione.

“Hello, Potter,” she said, hair tousled in the breeze.

“Lily,” he acknowledged. His mother's name felt strange on his tongue.

“I wanted to ask you something,” she said, and he noticed now that she was holding a clipboard against her chest, like a shield against the wind. He nodded at her, and she extended her arms, presenting him with the thing; on it was a blank sheet of parchment with only 'quidditch' written shakily at the top. “Since you lot aren't allowed to play Quidditch this year, I was thinking that maybe we do our own sort of thing. An eighth year league. I doubt we'd have enough interested
people for more than two teams, but it could be a lot of fun. McGonagall would definitely approve it – with mixed teams it'd be a hotbed for that 'inter-house unity' she wants. I just thought… well, your signature would mean a lot. It'd convince people.”

“You play?” Harry asked.

“Well, no. But I was thinking I could manage it, or something. I'm a big Falmouth Falcons fan. I suppose I thought we all need some fun, after… everything.”

“That's a great idea, Lily,” he said. “Really.”

“So you'll sign?” At his nod, she grinned, handed him an inky quill, placing her finger on the parchment. The half-moon of her fingernail went white with the pressure. “Write your position,” she suggested.

*Harry Potter*, he wrote, *Seeker*.

It was not Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived. Or Harry Potter, the Chosen One. It was just Harry Potter, Seeker. Harry Potter, a decent Quidditch player. A title based on his own merit. Lily allowed him smile and a thank you, before turning on her heel and striding off into the distance. Her dyed hair was flying in the wind; it was Slytherin green, faint seaweed in the air. It made Harry think of drowning. It made him want to.

Harry stood alone in the cold air of the Quidditch pitch. It cut right to the bone, hollowing him out and filling him, emptying him, all at once. It was a wild thing, to be alive. It was seaweed hair and chatting to Slytherins like old friends. It was freezing September mornings and wanting to die. Wanting to die so very, very much.
SIRIUS BLACK

SOMEWHERE

19th SEPTEMBER 1998

Dear Padfoot,

I never did thank you for loving me the way you did. I'm sure that I reminded you of my dad every time you looked at me, but you never kept me at arms length. Maybe you kept me too close – to the truth I mean – and I know some of the Order didn't approve, but I always appreciated it. I was always going to be at the centre of that war. It was better I knew all that I needed to.

Losing you… I cannot describe the pain. You would've told me not to despair, that death had not hurt, that you were at peace. But back then it felt like the world was closing in – it wasn't just people like Cedric that would die, it was people I loved, too. It was everyone and anyone. Nobody was safe.

If only i'd used that bloody mirror, it haunts me it breaks my heart. Could I have saved you? That small means of communication could have changed EVERYTHING. It could've saved your life and changed the course of the war. I don't know what to think. I don't know what could've happened. I am so, so sorry Sirius. I miss you wildly and I can't help but blame myself. You wouldn't blame me though. Because that's just who you were.

You are remembered very differently in death than you were in life. They were wilfully ignorant to your potential innocence for so very long, and after you died, you were hailed as a hero and a martyr. There was very little mention of the great injustice done to you at fault of the MINISTRY until very recently – I'm so glad I voted for Kingsley. People are given fair trials now. He isn't blinded by bias like Fudge or Scrimgeour. He knew you. He knew how you suffered at their hands and things are CHANGING. It's such a shame you died before you could see it. It's so awful you had to die for it to happen in the first place.

This letter is perhaps the hardest i've had to write yet. Because i've written to you before. Mum and dad and cedric, it's not the same. I used to write you for years. I used to confide everything in you. You were someone so solid in my life and then you were just GONE and now writing to you hurts so much because I am so so used to getting an answer. I miss you so so much sirius, it aches. But I know that you're with mum and dad and remus now. Like the old days. They way you wanted it to be – I know you were not just content with me, as much as you did love me. You wanted dad. You wanted mum. Which is fine, I don't blame you, I never did, because I wanted the same so desperately.

I miss you. Sometimes I forget how much but it's in the little things – Buckbeak at the edge of the grounds, the mirror at the bottom of my trunk, andromeda's smile. You live there. In the quiet
moments. The moments that catch me off guard. And I always imagine – I can’t help it, really – what
could’ve been, with us. It was so easy between us already and to have you now, after the war, would
mean the world. Truly. But like all of my imaginary worlds, the ones where people survived, they
exist only in me. Dumbledore once told me that we mustn’t dwell on dreams and forget to live and I
know he was right but I am struggling so much with it recently. My head is the only escape from the
misery of out here, where everyone is mourning and recovering, so what is there to live?? this is not
life. I am half-dead. I am DEAD.

Or at least, I was. This is so fucking ironic but: I’ve been having dreams. Remember when we used
to talk about those? Well I’ve been dreaming and you were there, sirius, and you got me an
expensive jacket for my birthday and a personalised quidditch jersey. We were very happy but we
were dead – you told me so. I don’t know. At first I thought it was nothing but they’ve been getting
more frequent and sue me, i’m paranoid. My dreams have never forecasted anything good in the past.

I don’t know what exactly it is or where it started – perhaps it was the resurrection stone, or when I
died, or that decision at king’s cross station. But I think I may have left something behind. A part of
me. Maybe not a horcrux but a SOMETHING. Something that is trapped in death. In that state,
forever. I feel like death is everywhere, choking me, and the boy I am in my dreams is very different
to the boy I am now. Perhaps i’m wrong. Perhaps it’s nothing. But after everything I think i’d be a
fool to dismiss anything so odd. I don’t know. I know you can’t answer but i’m so used to telling you
these sorts of things, I suppose. It’s another of those moments that I miss you so very much, right
now.

It’s Hermione’s birthday. I got her some book on advanced magical theory and how it links in with
muggle science and whatnot – it didn’t interest me but I hope she likes it. She’s nineteen years old
today. NINETEEN. And i’m less than a year away, now. You should be here for this, sirius. You
should be watching me and my friends grow up. You should be giving ron tips on the perfect gift to
get for a girl. Though I always wondered if girls were in fact what you were interested in. I suppose I
would’ve found out had you lived. I’m gay, sirius. I wish I could’ve told you. It’s a part of me I didn’t
discover until very recently. You knew me at fifteen and so much has changed since then. It breaks
my heart that you knew an old, half-true version of me. And that what I knew of you was so very
limited to what you wanted me to see, as a teenager. I know you believed that I should know
everything the rest of the order did but you weren’t perfect (which makes me love you all the more)
and the truth is that adults like to present themselves as different people to children, especially those
they are responsible for.

The truth is, that if you’d lived longer I would’ve grown up and slowly but surely would I begin to
see all of who you were. It’s like ron and ginny are realising now that their parents aren’t all powerful
and all protective and hermione is beginning to understand that her mum and dad aren’t emotionless
and distant. For all Ron’s closeness with his family and Ginny’s understanding of people and
Hermione’s cleverness, all children struggle to see their parents as people. It only begins to dawn on
them when they reach maturity that their parents have lives and history beyond them. It’s a shame
that this was accompanied by a war for my friends, but it was bound to happen eventually.

My parents have never been my parents. They've always been james and lily potter, who I look like,
who I act like. All i've ever known about them is their lives beyond me. I sort of feel like I was
robbed of that ignorance that everyone I know has. I wanted to know them as MINE, but this will
never be possible because they died when I was so young. You, at least, I get to know in different
ways. My godfather and sirius black, a good friend, fiercely loyal, but reckless and cruel. It’s fine.
You weren’t perfect. You still loved me and I still love you.

So thank you. For loving me, for being in my life, for staying with me at the end. You were there as
much as you could be, considering you were a fugitive, you were there when you didn’t have to be.
We were not related by blood. But then I suppose some of my loveliest family I am not related to by blood. There's something special about that, I think. It means that there isn't any obligation but they're there anyway. Like you and me. You sought me out, you had my back, you inserted yourself into my life because of dad. I know that. I'm not stupid. But in the end, you loved me because of me. I know that too.

Rest in peace, Sirius. I miss you so. I remember you everyday. We cleared your name and people know of your heroics. It isn't much but I'm sure you'd feel a little justice at your official innocence. You are and always will be remembered fondly, now. Yes, by the public. But also by the people that matter.

All the love in the world,

your harry. x
“We have to tell him eventually,” Ron reasoned, tucking errant strands of Hermione's wild hair behind her ear. He loved her hair. It was so absolutely and undeniably hers.

“He's got a lot on his mind.”

“You think it would bother him?”

“No, no of course not,” Hermione started, “but I don't want it to seem as though we're… rubbing it in his face, or anything.”

“Things didn't work out with Ginny for obvious reasons, but I have to disagree with you there, 'Mione,” Ron admitted, and watched her expression freeze in surprise. “I don't think he'd ever think that. I think he'd be pleased, you know. That there was more love in the world. That we worked things out. It's Harry. He'd know how we meant it. I don't like keeping anything from him.”

Hermione seemed lost for words. It was a rare and impressive feat, and Ron had to allow himself a little pride at the achievement. Always the tone of surprise, he thought. He loved her endlessly. That he could still surprise her, and of course, she him, was a brilliant and wonderful thing to possess after all these years.

“First of all, Ronald, you make a compelling case;” she conceded. “But what do you mean 'obvious reasons’? About him and Ginny?”

“I assumed you knew.”

“Of course I know,” she said crossly. “I assumed you didn't.”

“I'm not a complete idiot, 'Mione,” he grumbled. “He was away all hours of the night and suddenly best friends with Charlie. And he was weirdly defensive about the whole thing. I guess it was only an idea at first but it started adding up. I saw the way they used to look at each other over dinner. I know Charlie's gay. It's not such a ridiculous idea.”

“It doesn't bother you that he dumped Ginny?”

“If there's anything I've learnt about my sister in recent years, it's that she can take care of herself.”

“I love you,” Hermione said warmly, after a pause. “And yes, I think you're right. I wouldn't have told you but I caught him leaving Charlie's room one night. Neither of us said anything. He clearly isn't ready to talk about it, so...”

“Don't mention it to him, got it.”

She smiled. “I don't know if he's gay, or bisexual, or perhaps only experimenting – though I suspect
that's unlikely, considering how long it went on for – but we need him to approach us about this. I'm sure it's very new to him. Probably quite scary.”

“Do you think he's likely to tell the Healer woman about it?”

It had slipped out during a drunken evening of wizard's chess, that he'd been seeing someone. Someone who he could talk about the war to. Harry had been shamed but Ron had brushed it off casually in the way they always did, and things had returned to normal, only Ron knew how much Harry was struggling now and kept an eye on him. Too many a time had he awoken him from a nightmare, or found yet another empty cigarette packet, to ignore the pains that the mind could bring someone. Harry had been through so very much. So much more than was fair. No wonder he had to get help, to talk it through.

“I don't know,” Hermione confessed. “I don't know what their relationship is like. But he keeps seeing her, which is a good sign. I suppose it's a good thing it was Charlie he was with, rather than any old stranger.”

“Charlie would've been nice about it, I'm sure,” Ron said absently; Hermione's hand had found one of his forearms and was tracing his scars there, like she was fingerpainting. “He struggled a lot when he was younger. With that sort of thing. I can't imagine he'd be too careless with Harry.”

“It's odd, isn't it?” Hermione asked. “We always thought he'd end up with Ginny and now we think he might be gay. It's just – it's funny how things change. It's funny how people change.”

“Sixth year feels like fifty years ago.”

“A lot has happened since then. Fifty years worth of things.”

His hand was in her hair, her hand was on his arm. They were prone upon Ron's bed, hazy and half-naked, lost in intimacy. Hermione's breasts were squashed by her arms as she laid on her side, her hair spread on the pillow in unruly curls, her skin soft, eyes half-lidded, breath steady. There were bruises appearing on her, made by a mouth upon her neck and fingers around her hips. Ron felt dizzy with her. Not with how he wanted her, but how he loved her. She was beautiful and real and here. She was Hermione Granger and with all that mind of hers, she still wanted him. The head, he supposed, differed from the heart. The heart could not be predicted or understood. Not really. Take Harry, for example – Harry who wanted boys. The world had expected him to marry well, but his heart had led him down an unexpected path. The Chosen One, gay? Ron feared the eventual publicity of it. Harry would need them, then. And they would always, always be there.

Their friendship was a strange one. Because here, with Hermione, it was RonandHermione. He was tender and loving and slightly teasing. He liked to play with her hair and kiss her on the mouth, the ribs, the thigh. Out there, it was HarryandRon and he made jokes and grinned and laughed and teased some more. He was no longer the lover but the best friend and he played this role just as well as the last.

And then there was the matter of HarryandRonandHermione.

That wasn't a role. That was just him. That was them. Ron loved these hours fiercely: the three of them, together, alone, against the world. With no blood tying them together but a deep well of loyalty that only great winds could shake. Stretching before the fire in the common room, having hissed conversations in the library, yawning in Potions. He felt such unbelievable and indescribable love for the world they had created, just them. What did it matter that Harry was suffering over the war, or his sexuality, or the people he'd lost? Or that Hermione sometimes forgot to do her homework, because she understood now how little school truly mattered? Or that Fred still occupied a gaping hole in
Ron's heart? They would make it through. They always did. They would lean on each other, and years from now, they would look back and feel faint, forgotten sorrow for how unhappy they had once been. Faint. Forgotten. They would have moved on and started to live. There was a future in all of this, Ron knew it, and it would be born from them. His friends, and the lovely bones that had grown between them, linking them to one another, binding them together forevermore.

“What are you thinking about?” Hermione asked. “The war?”

“No,” he said, “I'm thinking about us. The three of us. About how we're still here.”

His fingers, carding through her hair still, caught in a tangle. She winced and shifted her head from his seeking hand; he let it trail to her cheek, the buoyant flesh there, feeling it plump under his fingertips as she smiled. Then to her neck, the thin scar there left by Bellatrix. A remnant of the war. Her toes grazed his ankle under the covers, a light brush, another reminder that she was there, that she was alive, that the war now existed only in scars. In her body she was hushed and serene, but not entirely – she was Hermione Granger, after all. In her deep brown eyes there was her usual vibrancy, her dynamite, erudite brain, muted only by slight fatigue. He wondered what she was thinking of. He wondered if it concerned him, or if he was even worthy of that. How she had chosen him… it astounded him. It took his breath away. Made his heart rattle against his ribs.

He knew this was forever. Or that he wanted it to be, at least. The content of their future was murky – marriage? children? a house of their own? – but the possibility of it was stark. He had wanted Hermione for years, now. He wanted her for years more. Her and Harry had cemented themselves in his life within months of their first year, happy and bumbling and loving him without thought. The way that children did. And here they were now. They no longer loved so carelessly; this love, now, was brimming with thought and knowing. Their flaws, their faults, imperfections and frustrations. Yet they loved anyway. Because their love now was a commitment, one that had been sealed amidst the war. In this wonderful private world they had made just the three of them, they chose to love one another, everyday. And this is what they would always choose.

Faint splatters began to fall upon the window. They laid and listened, Hermione tracing his scars, his thumb falling to her tender wrist, the angry lines of her tattoo. He thought it beautiful. He thought it suited her. Mudblood. He had never thought of her as anything of the sort but so many had, they had hurled it at her with such ugliness and cruelty, shaping her into something wrong, something other. Hermione was having none of it. She had welded the word to her skin like a badge of honour. It was not ugly. It was not dirty. Howling wind eventually joined in outside, freewheeling through the sky, sending the rain wild against the sides of the castle, raging, screaming, yelling. Like it was for the grief of it. Like the weather was burdened with Ron's great loss, Hermione's tumultuous emotion, Harry's silent agony.

“It's raining,” 'Mione said, turning onto her back. Ron watched her climb from the bed, bend down to retrieve a discarded item of clothing from the floor. In her tiny pink knickers, with a small rim of her flesh spilling over them, with stretch marks curled around her haunches like scar tissue, like tiger stripes, she was how Ron had never seen her. In Ron's thin school shirt, unbuttoned, loose and large as she crossed to the window, she was how Ron always wanted to see her. There was a quiet grace to her, one he hadn't noticed until they were both well into adolescence. There was wonder in the way her hair fell around her breastbone, how her chest rose and sank, how her hand pressed against the cool pane of the window.

The shirt hung to her thighs. Ron wanted to kiss her in the rain and hold her before the window, cradle her, span his hands around her waist. He felt shy. He curled his hands around the sheets and watched his girlfriend watch the heavens cry, swell with air, flash with light, rumble with thunder as though it was clearing its throat, wanting to be heard, preparing for something big. A storm.
“We should tell him,” she said. “You're right.”

“Aren't I always?”

“Don't flatter yourself.”

But she was smiling, turning from the window, extending a hand to him. Her voice was low and throaty as she began to hum, some old muggle tune that Ron didn't know from Adam. She swayed toward him and he reached up and took her hand, interlinking their fingers, pressing their palms together, allowing her haul him to his feet. She guided his other hand to her waist, threw her arm around his neck and dragged him against her, rocking from side to side. Ron shut his eyes, leant his cheek against her temple, let the rhythm take him, like how the wind caught the rain.

“I have always,” she sang, badly, breathy, sweet, “been a storm.”

Ron kissed her, slow, lingering, with all the love in the world, as they spun in the centre of the small dormitory, lit earnestly by the glow of candles, shedding romantic light upon the room. It wasn't raining in here, but it would do.

SEPTEMBER 24th 1998, 01:58.

EIGHTH YEAR GRYFFINDOR BOYS DORMITORY, HOGWARTS, HIGHLANDS, SCOTLAND.

Ron had not yet fallen asleep. His head was tempestuous and torn, flickering on Hermione for one minute, on Fred for the next. Here he was, conceiving his future, in this very room, while his brother rotted in the ground. Had Fred had that sort of thing with Angelina? From what Ron knew, they had not been together very long. But that was the thing about young relationships, he thought. You expected them to last forever. You didn't think they would be stunted by war or death.

He and Hermione were young only in years. All that they had seen, what they had lived, had thrust them far beyond the maturity expected of them at this age. When he looked at Hermione he knew, deeply, unbelievably, that it was always. He would always love her this way: quietly and recklessly. Like a muffled storm outside the window.

But Fred… he hadn't the chance to figure that out. He'd died at twenty. Hermione was already nineteen – they were catching up, drawing in close to the age he had frozen at. The age he would always remain.

Ron felt guilty growing up and leaving him behind. Ron feared the experiences and the life yet to come, waiting in the wings for him as the months passed, quick, quicker than before the war, it seemed. Life was moving on, speeding forward, leaving Fred behind as a phantom not-quite grown, breaching adulthood, barely beginning its life. He'd had so many years ahead of him, and they had been severed. Now Ron would soon surpass him. But he would never forget him.

The future without Fred… it was daunting, looming, dark and grey. It had not yet been six months since the war, barely four, and the idea of a life without him was not yet entirely conceivable. He lurked in George's face and voice, old letters of his were still found hidden in musty corners, long-lost possessions strewn amongst the storage in the attic. He lived. His face was fixed upon the family clock and his bed sat in his old room still. He could have been on just a very long holiday, for all they knew. As time went by it would get easier, he knew, the memory of him fading along with grief. But it would be harder, in certain respects – he would fade, a fate that Ron violently abhorred. Ron's brother. There was a mere two years between them; they had grown together and played Quidditch on Sundays and he held prime real estate in so many of Ron's treasured memories. The
possibility that these would slowly drift away was devastating. Frightening.

The future… oh, how absolutely terrifying it was. Forever with Hermione. Forever with the invisible ghost of Fred. Forever.

“Fred,” came a thick, sudden voice, thrown amongst the abrupt explosion of ragged gasps. It had come from Harry’s bed. Perhaps his speaking could be mistaken for words amidst slumber, not an uncommon occurrence back in fifth year, but his panting breaths could not. Ron knew Harry awake and asleep. Day and night. Dark and light. He was his best friend, and Ron had been present for far too many of his nightmares to not recognise the sound of him regaining consciousness from one.

Ron’s movements came in an instant, unbidden. He shifted from the bed and through his curtains to the rest of the room: the spot where he had danced with Hermione, the window the storm had bellowed against, the beds of Seamus, Dean and Neville. And there, Harry’s. He made no efforts to keep quiet as he shuffled to the bed, alerting Harry to his presence. Constant vigilance – he would know Ron was coming. And if he trained his ear to the gait and the breaths of the person approaching, he would know exactly who it was. So Harry did not startle when Ron gently moved his curtains, slipping into the space beyond them. Harry's body was solid and still, he was alert but not afraid.

“Harry,” Ron whispered. He laid down beside him, and Harry's head fell into the crook of his neck, breaths trembling across his clavicle.

There had been a slow progression of intimacy between them since the war. Once upon a time they'd still been best of friends but had held each other at arm's length as teenage boys were told to do. But then they had suffered, and Harry had died. Ron didn't care anymore. He had thought he was lost and now Harry's head on his shoulder barely meant a thing, closeness came naturally, easily. It was such a wonderful thing to love someone and be loved in return, so what was the use in stifling it?

“Nightmare?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Fred?”

“Yeah.”

Silence ticked by. Ron swallowed.

“I miss him. So much,” he found himself saying, shaky. Here in the quiet with Harry he felt like he could say it aloud, voice the tragic, terrible truth. He missed his brother and he always would. He thought about him constantly. There was a void left in the family by him. A void that could not and would not ever be filled.

“Me too,” Harry confessed. “I just wish I…”

His voice tailed into obscurity. Ron was careful not to breathe too hard, to jostle Harry's head where he leant into Ron, in a way he never had (not physically, at least). It had always been unspoken but there wasn't any use in softening that, now. They had lost so much.

“What do you wish?” he asked.


“Don't take that all on yourself. I wish that too, but there was nothing we could've done.”
“I could've died earlier. Protected him.”

“You didn't know you had to die yet,” Ron hissed, incensed. The thought had occurred to him in the past. As had the desire. But it wasn't fair. The past had happened now and Harry was here and Fred was not. That was sad but it was the world they lived in, now. “Don't think like that, Harry. Please. It's not what he would've wanted. It's not what I want.”

“You don't... blame me, at all?”

Ron wanted to slap him. They had all lost Fred, and in the wake of his death they had all needed one another. Mum had lamented Harry's extended stay at Grimmauld Place. Even George, wandering about in a haze of loss, had asked after him. Harry was as much a Weasley as anyone and Fred's death was nobody's fault but the explosion that had killed him. Ron wasn't really angry at him – he had blamed himself too, for a while, still did, a little bit, and he didn't like to think of himself as a hypocrite – but it ached to see Harry so cut up. He always took so much on his shoulders. He'd blamed himself for Cedric and Sirius, for Dumbledore, Mad-Eye, even Hedwig. And the countless others who had died after, those in the battle especially. Because it had all hinged on him. On his death, on his ability to persevere against You-Know-Who, his strength of leadership. It was such an injustice. Harry had always been the centre of this, since he was so painfully young. No wonder he blamed himself.

“No,” Ron said. “None of us do.”

“Oh. I suppose I –”

“I know. I get it.”

“You seem angry.”

“I'm not,” Ron said truthfully. Anger scared him now. He had been so filled with rage throughout the war and it had almost torn them apart forever – what if Harry or Hermione had died while he'd been away? He never would've forgiven himself. Anger scared him. His anger was uncontrollable and dangerous and however much he felt it now, he swallowed it, ate it up, let it burn him from within. Rage would do him no good. This was the time for misery. “I'm just sad.”

“Me too.”

A pause fell. “Hermione and me are together now,” Ron said.

“I know. I saw you two kissing behind a suit of armour.”

“You didn't say anything.”

“Neither did you,” Harry countered, and Ron started to laugh, a quiet, hidden sort of thing. An honest sort of thing. It felt so free to laugh like they used to, late at night, trying to muffle it, the teenagers that they were. So much had changed now but some things would always stay the same: how they loved one another, endlessly, unconditionally. How they laughed together. Because Harry was laughing too, now, giggling, silly and careless. Ron had missed him laughing like that. It was like the war had never happened, or they could at least pretend as much. His cheeks started to hurt. Harry lifted his head and pressed a finger to his lips, shaking with mirth; soon the finger was gone, and his hand was clapped over his mouth, they were laughing ridiculously, over nothing. Ron's head went falling back, stomach contracting with silent laughter, and then his head hit the headboard, and it was so fucking hilarious.

“Ow.”
Harry snorted and Ron shushed him, indicating his head, which was lightly aching from its interaction with the headboard, toward the curtains, their only barrier from the other boys. Harry rolled his eyes and with a flick of his hand, cast what Ron assumed to be *Muffliato*. He was getting really good at that intrinsic sort of magic. So good that it wasn't quite occurring to him. It was probably the war. Everything was always the war. If things were different they could've been just two ordinary boys trying not to laugh too loudly, in fear of waking their dormmates. But in reality they were two boys on the other side of such tragedy. Two boys easing back into normalcy, laughing like nothing had happened. Two boys scared and hurting and lost. Finding home in each other. Finding life.

Life they had nearly lost. So what if they woke the others? It meant everything. It meant the world. Because if they weren't laughing the pain came rushing back to fill the silence and Harry was gasping and waking from nightmares that haunted him and Fred's grave was flashing behind Ron's eyes.

“I love you, mate,” Ron said, quite accidentally. But he meant it.

“Love you too,” Harry murmured.

It was Harry and Ron. It was so simple, so easy. It was them against the world. Horcruxes and You-Know-Who were long gone, the war was over, but its scars remained, etched into skin and heart and bones. This was post-war. This was pain. It was no easier than before – they still needed one another. Storms beat on, hammering against the castle, angry, hurting, right to the bone.
“The assignments are quite random,” Lily was saying, trusty clipboard held before her. “But I thought it best we didn't have either team favour a house. I thought an even spread would be idea.”

“This is going to be interesting,” Dean said, under his breath, and Ron stifled a laugh on his other side. Harry stared off into the distance, listening only vaguely. Dean was right – Harry was surprised at the turn out; the room was filled with equal amounts of Slytherin and Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. He was only grateful he wouldn't be on the same team as Malfoy. But it would be like it used to. Seeker to Seeker.

“I thought of course that Harry should be captain of one team,” she continued, “he's been playing since first year and he's already been captain of Gryffindor. I hope, that’s… does anybody have an issue?” Nobody spoke. She smiled and went on. “And on that basis, I supposed that the only other logical captain would be… well, Draco Malfoy. He's been playing since second year.”

She did not ask if anybody had an issue, because of course, they had. The room was thick and tense and Malfoy was growing steadily pinker, eyes aimed resolutely on the floor. Harry took another sip of his cider, to which Ron had earlier hissed it's barely lunchtime yet!, leaving Harry to do nothing but ignore him. He couldn't smoke in here. He suspected most anger in the room at the suggestion of Malfoy as captain was superficial: Harry was an obvious choice and nobody would protest, but Malfoy, disgraced and disapproved of, was a preposterous idea. Instead, they wanted a shot at captain. They felt it only fair. In the end, it was no other than Zacharias Smith who broke the silence.

“Malfoy? You've got to be joking! You're only picking him because you're a Slytherin!” Smith exclaimed, and Harry saw Zabini bristle, Bulstrode's jaw clench. “He was on trial for Merlin's sake! He nearly ended up in Azkaban, he shouldn't be even be in school, let alone leading a Quidditch team! He cannot—”

“At least he didn't run away.” Harry was surprised to hear that the words had come from him. They fell from his lips, unexpected and unstoppable. Malfoy now, was gazing right at him. “If you weren't such a coward, Zach, who's to say you would've even fought by our side? Who's to say you wouldn't have been the one on trial?”

“But I wasn't. He was.”

Harry loved this. Fury was burning in his throat with fresh cider and he felt the venom begin to take hold. He felt so alive and the game hadn't even begun – what would happen up in the air?

“What for, hm? What for? You wouldn't know, Smith, because you weren't there. You ran away. You've no right, no right, to talk about who should be here and who shouldn't. Don't you fucking dare,” he spat. “I think Lily's right. It makes sense. He should be captain – he's been playing nearly
as long as me.” He was sort of saying it just to spite Zach, but as he said the words, he knew he believed them. Malfoy was a fair rival. “Malfoy?” he asked, looking to him. “Will you?”

“I – yes, I suppose.”

Lily smiled, shot Harry a grateful, though slightly astonished look. She was not alone. Most in the room were bewildered by Harry Potter defending his long-term childhood nemesis Draco Malfoy. But they didn't know the behind the scenes, how it made Harry burn for his rage to be heard, for such tired subjects to crucify one another over.

“Right, well,” Lily began, “Sophie Roper, you'll be Keeper for Harry's team. Ron Weasley, you'll be on Draco's.” That same awkward silence erupted again but Lily had realised, now, that the best thing to do was hurry on and pretend it didn't exist. “Harry, your Beaters are Millicent Bulstrode and Anthony Goldstein; Draco, you've got Stephen Cornfoot and Morag MacDougal. Chasers for Harry are Blaise Zabini, Wayne Hopkins and Megan Jones, so of course that leaves Zacharias Smith, Dean Thomas and Sue Li on the other team.”

Harry barely knew his team! Sophie Roper? Wayne Hopkins? Not to mention the painful awareness that Bulstrode had of his situation with her mother. Merlin, what if she’d told her friends? Zabini was on his team, perhaps he knew… but no. Malfoy would've said something. He would've been teased mercilessly for it by the Slytherins. Bulstrode, at least, he felt he could trust, however little he knew her.

“I was wondering if there was a general consensus,” Lily said. “Should this be more of a tournament, or a friendly competition?”

Her voice sort of made Harry uncomfortable. She reminded him too much of Colin Creevey: too involved, trying too hard, one of those people who couldn't bring it upon themselves to coast by. She'd dyed her hair green and organised Quidditch teams. She'd pushed herself into their lives and didn't seem to think it strange she wouldn't join them on the pitch. But then that wasn't necessarily a bad thing – Hermione and S.P.E.W, for example. People who tried hard were endearing, really. It was only that it made him think of Colin. It was quite sad.

“What does she think she's playing at?” Ron whispered, turning to Harry and Dean as a chorus of voices rose around them. “Putting me on a team with Malfoy?”

“I think she's just being a bit like McGonagall, mate,” Dean replied. “Who probably encouraged her to do so. They want everyone to get along.”

“I think that's unlikely,” Ron muttered. “Are you alright though, Harry? I didn't realise the Zach thing got your back up so much. A lot of them ran.”

“I don't care that he ran,” Harry admitted. “But he thinks that makes him better, he thinks…” He glared across the room at Smith’s haughty face. “It's just annoying. People ran because they were scared – fine. But you don't see them getting in Malfoy's face about what he did. What he did because he was scared, just like them. They don't get to judge.”

Ron nodded understandingly. Dean said: “I suppose none of us do.”

“I mean… we did a lot more good than that git,” Ron argued, pulling a face.

“I saw in the paper what Harry said at his trial, and I think he's right,” Dean countered. “You weren't in his place. It was tough, you don't know what you'd have done. It feels unfair to judge him.”

Harry had always liked Dean. He'd always been so level-headed and genuine, so ordinary. Harry
loved his West Ham poster. Harry loved the drawings he'd hung on the walls throughout the years, making it their dorm, their room, their home. There were the typical ones: lions for Gryffindor, nice portraits of them, Quidditch games. But the ones Harry loved the most were the pictures of Alice and Frank Longbottom that he'd done one year for Neville's birthday, and the funny one of Harry with a lightsaber. Perhaps, in another universe, he thought...

“So we're agreed?” Lily asked the room. “Friendly games for now, but perhaps proper a tournament next year? There's only so much we can do with two teams.”

People were obliging but not excited. They had realised that they would be caught up in a team that had an unnecessary enmity with the other, whichever way it went. They'd be led by Harry or Malfoy, both of whom hated each other. But Lily had not picked up on this, and instead launched into the availability of the pitch and when they would meet for their first match, advising them all to invest in calendars. She was so much like Hermione, only she had green hair and liked Quidditch.

Did Harry and Malfoy really hate each other? Harry felt too tired to hate. He felt so, so tired. Too tired to do anything.

“I suppose for uniforms you'll have to just wear the Quidditch stuff you already have – the different colours will be confusing but we all know each other, here,” Lily went on.

He glanced at his team, surreptitiously. Zabini and Bulstrode, he knew from afar. But Megan and Wayne, the Hufflepuffs, he'd had next to no experience with, and just as little with Ravenclaws Anthony and Sophie. Wasn’t that funny? For all that ridiculous school rivalry it had ended up being the Slytherins that he knew the most. It was the Slytherins that he would play with most easily. The Slytherins who he supposedly hated.

But he was too tired to hate.

In truth, he was put out that he wouldn't be on a team with either Ron or Dean, but he supposed he would still be up there with them – and it would be Malfoy, really, that he was playing against. There was a faint bitterness rising in him at it all, at his irrevocable past leading the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He didn't blame McGonagall (in fact, he understood her logic, as Ginny was more than deserving of the title of captain), and instead felt a deep, grating hatred for the mere passage of time. What he wouldn't give to be caught in the innocence of third year again, or the simplicity of sixth year, when Malfoy was evil and everything was black and white. Before the war. Before the pain and the loss and the burning ends of cigarettes. He longed for it. His parents had been dead but so many were still living. Life without them was not the same – he wasn't even playing Quidditch for Gryffindor anymore. What was the point?

“I still need to book the pitch up but I've spoken to some of the captains, and Summerby and Harper seem game, I'm sure the others will follow – it'll be pretty easy to co-ordinate, then.”

He took another deep swallow of his cider and caught Malfoy's eyes across the room. Something sparked between them, charging in the changing room air, that still held the faint aroma of sweat and deodorant. Harry raised his eyebrows, challenging, questioning, careless as the weak alcohol slipped down his throat, smooth as honey, and Malfoy looked away.

Malfoy was weird like that. He'd always been looking at Harry, for years and years and years. He'd been looking at Harry since 1991 and he didn't seem inclined to stop. Harry didn't mind it so much anymore – it was normal. It was something that time had not stopped, something that had, miraculously, stayed the same. Even if this remnant of the past was from Malfoy, of all people, Harry would take it.
“Maybe you should all – oh, I don't know – get to know each other, or something? I'm going to be late for Frog Choir.”

Harry found himself utterly bemused by Lily Moon, staring after her as she hurried away. He'd had very little interaction with her before the war and only knew her, as he knew many of his classmates, through the rumour mill that had circulated throughout Hogwarts. He'd often stared in it, as the Heir of Slytherin or the Triwizard Champion or the Boy Who Lied. Perhaps arrogantly, but he thought that the rumours about him had always been the most exciting. But Lily Moon, Lily Moon… she'd been the first in the year to dye her hair. He remembered something about an affair with Katie Bell. And the pregnancy scare back in fifth year – had that been her? No, that was Tracey Davis. Lily Moon was the one who got spectacularly drunk at the Yule Ball and made a pass at Professor Flitwick. The only ordinary rumours Harry had ever endured were the ones about Cho and Ginny. He felt a little sad he'd never had what Lily Moon and Tracey Davis had had: boring, ridiculous, embarrassing adolescence. Harry had never had a scandalous affair when he was younger, nor had he been acquainted with alcohol, or hair dye. Now he fucked Charlie and drank all the time, though he wasn't much inclined to dye his hair, but it wasn't the same. Doing it now didn't count. He'd never been young, not like them.

Was he still young? Harry wasn't sure if he counted. He was of age in the wizarding world and the muggle world, now. Legally, he was considered an adult. Mentally, he'd lived a million lives and more. But it wasn't fair. He had missed out on so much freedom.

But that was the thing about wars. You didn't get to be free. You were lucky if you were even alive.


THE QUAD, HOGWARTS. HIGHLANDS, SCOTLAND.

It was a warm day. Summer was fighting to stay alive, poking its head above the clouds, but Harry knew within weeks it would be gone completely: October would dawn and autumn would be in full swing. Halloween. Christmas. A new year. It frightened him, a little. The prospect of the future. The idea of growing up.

He put it out of mind. The day was warm and it made the grass seem greener than ever, shining and new. Life sprouting from the ground. He leant back on his hands, letting his legs stretch out as far as they could go, and basked in the sun. This would likely be the last time he saw it so bright for a while. He would miss it.

“It feels a bit odd that we're supposed to be getting to know one another, doesn't it?” Anthony said. “We've been at school together for years.”

“Where do we even start?” Wayne wondered.

“Maybe…” It was Zabini, clearing his throat, straightening his back. “Hi. I'm Blaise Zabini. I'm a Slytherin.” Zabini was half-mocking, half-serious, as they had little else to begin with. A few titters flew round the haphazard circle they were sat in; they were the only ones on the Quad, aside from a few sixth years sunbathing across the other side, who paid them no mind. Harry had realised that the line for people who didn't care all that much about him was fourth year: most of those had started attending Hogwarts during his disastrous fifth year. They remembered him in his state of disgrace. “I played as Chaser for Slytherin back in sixth year, though not in seventh. We didn't play Quidditch. Which you all know,” he added, as though he were stupid for saying it in the first place.

“I didn't know that,” Harry said.
“You didn't?” Zabini asked.

“No. I guess I just never… heard about that sort of stuff.” He swallowed. This was so real. These people, they knew him – they didn't love him, but there was kindness, here. The formality of acquaintanceship had worn away with the war. “I was a little distracted.”

“I didn't know either,” Sophie piped up. “I was in hiding – I'm muggleborn, if you didn't know – so I didn't attend last year.” She looked down at herself mournfully, pulling at the hem of her shirt, desperate to be doing something with her hands. She was a skinny girl, arms bony and face gaunt. “There wasn't a lot to eat. I lost so much weight.”

“Me too,” Megan interjected. “I'm muggleborn. I was on the run.”

“I used to think terrible things about you.” It was Zabini again, and Harry was surprised at his decision to admit to it. “You as a collective, I mean. It was all I was taught. I'm sorry. I was wrong. It was all wrong.”

The girls were thin-lipped at the confession but ultimately appeared glad for his desire for repentance, at his remorse. Harry supposed that was the only way to move forward from all of this. By listening. By forgiving. By starting anew.

So this was how they got to know one another: they shared war stories. Sophie spoke about her time in the little hideaway with her brother and how hard it had been to get food. Megan talked about her time on the run with defected Death Eater Merula Snyde, how incredibly alone she had felt and how she hadn't known who to trust. Anthony had stood and fought alongside Dumbledore's Army, had risked so much every night to keep hope alive, written it proud and strong on the walls. He'd spent half of Hanukkah being tortured by the Carrows. Wayne had devoted his time to helping Michael Corner attempt to free people shackled in detention, had only barely managed to escape being caught a handful of times. He still had scars from some of the beatings he had received. Bulstrode – Millicent – made Harry aware of the private little rebellion of the Slytherins, or of those who in general, had not been all that fond of Dumbledore. They had sheltered the younger years the best they could. They had distracted the Carrows when they saw they needed to. They had protected and hidden and done it quietly, without the flourish and outward revolution that Dumbledore's Army advocated.

In the end, there was no right. Harry was Dumbledore's Army, of course, Dumbledore's man through-and-through. But as long as they were on this side, fighting for good, for light, then he didn't care about the name. He felt a swell of respect for Millicent.

Zabini – Blaise – had kept his head down. He had avoided casting the Cruciatus curse when he could – it wouldn't have worked, he said wryly at this – but he was ashamed to admit that he had not done all he could to resist Voldemort. Harry felt a warm sort of shock settle in him as Blaise looked up at him, in apology. “It's… we've all done things, in the past,” Harry said. “Things that probably weren't for the best. You were scared. Don't dwell on it.”

“What...” It was Sophie, looking so incredibly apprehensive. “I don't mean to sound like them, you know. The public – they're so intent on stripping you of any privacy. But... what was it like, for you? You only really spoke about the dead in your interview. You don't have to tell us, if you don't wan-”

“No,” Harry interrupted. “It's okay. It's different here. Um, to tell the truth… it was a pretty shitty year.” People laughed. “Merlin, it… it felt like every day went so slow. Sometimes we didn't do
anything but sit and think, just... hope we'd have a breakthrough. But Horcruxes don't find themselves. Voldemort had split himself into seven parts, you see...

And so he recounted his awful history in the war. He knew the story would find its way throughout the year, but he was beyond caring. These people were good and true and they wanted to hear. They would tell their friends who would tell their friends and it may even filter down to seventh or sixth year. But it would not be the rumour mill of previous years. It would be a whispered, reverent account of all the pains that Harry Potter had suffered for them; Harry saw the valiant respect in their eyes but was glad they managed to restrain it as best they could. They still treated him as normal. That was all that mattered. It was like love but not quite.

When he told them of his status as a Horcrux, and how he had died, he heard Megan gasp. Anthony's eyes were shining with tears. It was sweet, though. Quiet reaction, that they were trying to stifle. Most had heard fragments of it during his final fight with Voldemort, though Harry suspected the blood had been rushing too loudly in their ears for them to focus on his words, and the rest through word-of-mouth. Even now, the Prophet was speculating about what he had meant – all accounts of his final speech were spotty and incomplete. People had been scared, you see. He had a hopeful notion that this story would not find its way to the paper. The people in his year were too damaged, suffering too much with their own post-war afflictions, to exploit him in such a way. Or so he believed. Harry supposed you never really knew anybody.


“What was it like, to die?” Wayne asked, and Megan elbowed him in the ribs. Harry laughed at them.

“It's fine, really. Ask what you like. As for dying...” His heart clenched; he remembered. He'd thought himself childish for asking if it hurt. He realised now how unfair he had been on himself. He was just a boy. And he had been about to let death take him, willingly, without protest. “It's quicker and easier than falling asleep.”

“So there really is something after death?” Millicent questioned. Everyone was gazing at him, rapt, but it wasn't the hungry stares of the press, but the curious and shocked eyes of children, not quite grown. Grown too much, too early.

Harry nodded. “Only a train ride away.”

He had not gone into intense detail, but a thorough enough outline. It had actually felt good to speak it all aloud, that long, complicated and torturous tale, even in short-form, with parts redacted, personal touches swallowed. These were meant for other times. He did not know his classmates well enough. But the truth was finally out, the truth about all they had experienced, about how the war had truly come to a close. It felt like breaking the surface of water after a long trip below, drinking down the air. It felt like breathing out smoke after a cigarette, pressing the fire to his ribs, his thighs, his ankles. It felt like flying. Freedom and Charlie's kiss and muggle rum and the rain.

“Well we're all pretty fucked in the head, aren't we?”

“Blaise!”

Harry was laughing, though, so was Sophie and Anthony and then everyone. Harry was laughing with these people he had never quite grown close to, before. He'd been missing out. He had missed so much. He could've been drinking with these people, and found out he was gay from a surprising snog from Blaise in fifth year behind the Quidditch stands, or an accidental grope from Wayne in the greenhouses. But Voldemort had loomed on the horizon, and Harry had rushed through his essays,
scraped through school, and felt his scar ache.

Only his infancy had been pure, happy. The Dursleys had stolen his childhood and Voldemort had marred teenagerdom. He could scarcely believe he had arrived at adulthood, but he swore to himself, sitting on the sunny Quad with people he knew he would become friends with, that this stage of his life would be controlled only by himself. Perhaps Ron and Hermione, a little bit. But this was Harry's time. He was done being restrained by cruel people that weren't worth his time, that had ultimately shaped him into the person he had become, but had also played crucial parts in the reasoning behind his smoking and drinking and despair. He hated them. He wasn't tired when he thought of them, he was just hateful, in a way he had never used to be. The war had given him the gift of bitterness and loathing. He was too tired to hate Malfoy anymore because it didn't seem to matter, but Vernon, Voldemort, the Death Eaters… they made him want to fucking rage. What they had done to him was unforgivable. It was unfair.

Nobody would ever get the chance to touch Teddy like that. He would have no mortal enemies. He might get the excitement of a school nemesis, his very own Malfoy, but a Voldemort, a Vernon Dursley? No. Harry had defeated them both, in his own way. And if they, or anybody like them, tried to touch his godson he would make them pay. He was Harry Potter. And he was not that boy from the cupboard anymore (though he did long for him, sometimes, long for his blissful ignorance), he was eighteen and he had lost and lost and lost. He would not lose anything else. Let them try. Let them dare.

Harry Potter would never be helpless again. Harry had a whole world ahead of him, a whole life at his fingertips, and such immense power. He had floored the Dark Lord himself. He'd do it again. A million times over. He had such power it wanted to explode from him, sometimes.

Maybe it was a side-effect of being dead.

Chapter End Notes

these names are all listed on the wiki as people sorted in harry's year btw i'm not making this shit up
The Room still worked. No fire could truly burn out magic, and the Fiendfyre cast by Crabbe had burnt him to a crisp, burnt itself up until it was gone, fading and extinguishing, and now the Room smelt faintly of smoke and had an odd, charred sort of look to it, but it still worked. For Draco it had given him a training room that he strongly suspected the D.A. had used back in the day; so far, he had been too afraid to look closely at the articles and pictures pasted on the walls and stuck on the mirror. There were only so many things they could be. He wondered how different things would be now, if he'd had the courage to join up back then. If he'd been willing to swallow his pride.

Potter probably would've thought it was all a big joke. He wouldn't have been trusted. Which, considering the person he used to be, wasn't entirely unfair.

"Expecto Patronum!" he shouted, flourishing his wand.

It was his thirtieth useless attempt at casting the charm. He could not say exactly why he had decided to learn it – boredom and curiosity were likely two important factors. Draco had nothing better to do and he was interested in finding out if he was actually capable of casting it. He was still alive, so that was something. But it seemed as though he wasn't powerful enough to manage it. That, or he simply wasn't happy enough. He couldn't summon a single memory strong enough to feed it.

He sighed, disappointed but not surprised. He was Draco Malfoy and he was well-acquainted with not getting what he wanted. But the year was shaping up to be a fine one already: Quidditch would be commencing soon and despite the lack of Slytherins by his side, he hadn't been saddled with a bad team. Oh, and Harry Potter had defended him. Again. Draco and his team had settled by the Great Lake – where he and Potter had seen each other all those weeks ago, where Draco had been so embarrassingly turned on by how fit he was when he smoked – and he'd apologised in a quiet voice about the Weasley is Our King business. Weasley had looked at him strangely.

"I guess it turned out okay in the end," he'd finally said. "So forget about it, Malfoy. All that's in the past."

They hadn't spoken for long, the atmosphere stilted and awkward, but Blaise hadn't returned to the common room for hours, and had seemed distant and sad when he had. He'd laid his head on Draco's shoulder, the way that Pansy usually did.

"Your boy's been through hell and back, Draco."

Draco knew that. Draco knew it and it broke his heart – all that Potter had done for them, all he had suffered... he may have looked hot blowing smoke into Draco's mouth, shrugging on a leather jacket, or handling muggle alcohol bottles between his finger and thumb, but it didn't mean that he was okay. He didn't seem okay. Draco loved all of him, loved the painful, awful parts, but it didn't make them ache any less. All he could do, all he was permitted to do, was watch from the sidelines and long for Granger and Weasley to put him back together again. To not let him fall. To not let him die all over again.
Draco would not live through a death like that this time around. Draco would not cope if he lost Potter once more; it had been such unreal, angry agony. Thinking about death was, perhaps, not the best idea of his, considering he was trying to cast a Patronus. But that was Draco. Always thinking about death. Always thinking about things he shouldn’t.

The door banged behind him, falling open. Speak of the devil: Potter. Of course it was Potter. He was flushed and dishevelled, the bottle in his hand yet another of those muggle drinks. Draco felt a little prick of irritation, frustration bubbling in him at Potter’s carelessness, desire rising at his flushed beauty.

“How did you get in here?” he asked.

“I… wanted to see the room we used.”

His voice was steady. He didn't seem all that drunk – Draco supposed he hadn't had that much to drink, then. Just enough to get the blood flowing. He appraised Draco where he stood in the centre of the Room, wand hanging limply from his hand. He moved further inward, balancing the bottle on a side table, and then out came the cigarettes. Fucking Merlin. Potter held one out as though to ask if Draco minded, to which he nodded in encouragement. He watched in fascination as Potter breathed in the stick of ash, shoulders settling with something like relief.

“What are you doing?” Potter finally asked, indicating to Draco's wand.

“Practising.” Draco didn't see the point in trying to conceal his true motives, so at Potter's imploring eyebrow raise, he relented: “I'm trying to cast a Patronus.”

“Oh! How's it going?”

“Shit.” Potter laughed and Draco felt himself glowing with pride, molten and hot in his stomach. Potter, oh Potter. “I haven't managed to produce anything at all. On the bright side, at least maggots haven't devoured me yet.”

“They'd have done it already if they were going to,” Potter said, putting the cigarette back to his lips, inhaling, exhaling. “I think we both know that wouldn't have happened. You aren't like the rest of them.”

“Because I'm oh so pure of heart?”

“Because there's goodness in you. However much you like to pretend it doesn't exist.”

A heavy silence hung between them, Draco worried that Potter could hear his heart urging to escape his chest. He looked so earnest, jaw set cleanly, brow furrowed. He was so beautiful. His hair was wild and brushing at his face, he looked at home here. Draco imagined him as he was at fifteen, smaller, skinnier, scrutinised, imparting his power and wisdom to the others in their year. Sharing his pain of the past and using it to teach. Draco loved him so.

Father would've hated that it was Potter that Draco wanted. He was half-blood, not pure, a wide circle of muggle family surrounding him. He was mixed race, dark-skinned, with heritage and culture he had lost the connection to with the death of his father. He was a boy. He was not Pansy Parkinson or one of the Greengrass girls that Draco would've been expected to marry one day, to have a brood of pale children with clean blood with, as it were.

The truth was: that blood purity nonsense didn't ring true. And Draco had never given a toss about the colour of Potter's skin; the more muggle breed of racism had been prominent in his father's teachings but had taken a back seat to the wizarding ideas of blood and family. But they had never
had to tackle all that, they had never breached any discussion of Draco's sexuality, let alone who he spent his time thinking about. Potter had never wanted him back. Potter would never want him back.

“Why are you always so intent on seeing the best in people?”

“What did I die for if I'm not?” Potter said.

Draco felt that warmth again. The warmth he had been so filled with every time he looked at Potter, all these times, all these years. He was lovely and brave and Draco adored him. He had died. He had been seventeen and he had let his life be taken from him, to protect his friends, to fight for goodness in the world. Because courage like that came as easy as breathing, to Harry Potter. It was in his very bones. His blood, blood that was pure and true despite any of Lucius Malfoy’s definitions.

“Do you want some help?” Potter eventually asked, after the quiet between them became uncomfortable.

“With the Patronus?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure.”

Potter quenched the flame of his cigarette on the wall, the wall that had already been touched so greatly by fire, and discarded it in his empty bottle. He shifted over to Draco, closer than they had ever been without violence between them. His hands were on Draco's arms then, his fucking hands, oh fuck, spinning Draco around, drawing in close behind him. It was not even sensual. It was entirely detached, Potter appeared to have taken on his role as teacher that he fit so well, hand steady on Draco's elbow as he lifted it, directed it. Draco's cock took notice anyway, because this was Potter, who he'd wanted so very much for so very long, who had never touched him with such civility. He was only glad that Potter was behind him, that he would be unable to know of Draco's arousal at the feel of his breath coasting against Draco's neck and the lobe of his ear, the press of his palm through Draco's robes. All the times Draco had stayed up late at night, holding himself in hand, thinking of Harry, of Potter. Of his eyes and hands and wild, brilliant magic.

“Do you have a memory in mind?”

“I...”

“Malfoy! Don't tell me you're trying this without even thinking happy.”

“I don't know!”

“I know it's difficult,” Potter allowed. It felt very odd to talk like this, with Potter not in eyesight. But Draco knew him inside out, knew exactly how his mouth would be moving and his expression would be shifting. It felt very odd to be having such an ordinary, calm conversation. But odd things had been happening since the war ended. “But it's the only way it'll work. It needs to be a memory that's powerful. It needs to be about joy. Think of... I don't know, when you found out you were going to Hogwarts. Or being with your friends. Or when... the battle ended. Something like that.”

Draco dove deep. He thought of learning he was going to Hogwarts. He'd felt nothing but a sense of right. He was entitled to a place there. That was the boy he had been at eleven – proud and pampered and nasty. His friends, however... there was something there. It had been around third year when he'd started dropping the act. Stopped slicking back his hair and humouring Pansy by letting her hang off his arm and hold his hand. He'd started figuring out what he wanted, and started loving his friends: Blaise and Pansy and Daphne, Millie, Theo, laughing with them on late nights in the
common room and spending sunny days in Hogsmeade together.

“Focus,” Potter said, warm in his ear.

Draco thought of an especially hot day in the spring of fourth year. Diggory had not yet died, the war had not yet broken out. They’d laid on the grass and counted the clouds. He had been at peace. Potter had been faint pain in his heart. The world had been blue skies and green trees and nothing had hurt. Pansy had admitted that after some drunken fun with Blaise she was fairly certain she didn’t like boys. Draco had held her hand. The world had been brilliant and new.

“Say the words.”

“Expecto Patronum!”

Nothing.

He tore from Potter in frustration, sending his wand flying across the Room, clattering against the mirror. That was his happiest memory? That? Perhaps peace just wouldn't do, but Draco could not think of joy, it was too difficult. He’d lived through a war. There was no joy now and any joy from before was lost to the past, swallowed by time, engulfed by loss and rage and so, so many terrible mistakes. Perhaps he would never be able to cast a Patronus, not ever. He was stuck in that moral ambiguity of in-between. He was not evil enough to rule over Dementors but not good enough to drive them away. He was pathetic and helpless and he would be eaten up by light or dark, because he did not belong to either.

Crouched on the floor, hands covering his face, he was surprised to feel Potter sink down beside him. His hand fell against Draco’s back, against his spine, between his shoulder blades. It took everything in his power not to shudder – Potter, oh Potter… how he had wanted him. How he loved him.

The hand fell away in mere seconds. Draco mourned the loss of its warmth, felt the phantom touch still resting there, flesh and blood and body. Real humanity, corporeal. He had so often imagined Potter that in his mind, he had become elevated to a fantasy sort of status. A long-lost dream. But here he was, close. Alive.

“I know it's tough, Malfoy. It's really advanced magic. Don't upset yourself about it, it's very difficult to achieve.”

“You managed it in third year.”

“Extenuating circumstances.”

Draco snorted, and sat on the floor properly, letting his legs rest. Potter, wordless, wandless, summoned Draco’s wand to his hand from where he’d thrown it. Draco gazed at him in astonished admiration and a little bit of lust. Fucking Merlin. He had no idea, did he? The bastard.

“Now you're just showing off.”

“What?”

“Non-verbal magic! Wandless magic! Bloody hell, Potter.”

“I didn't...” He trailed off in surprise, handing Draco his wand, frowning down at his hands, face twisted in hazy confusion. Draco watched his throat bob, tracked it, remembered it. For later. For when he was alone. “Sorry, I didn't realise. It just kind of happened. Sorry.” He shook his head, and
then his hands were fucking touching Draco's, wow, and he was only adjusting his grip but it was electric, it was wonderful! His palms were warm and rough. Exactly as Draco had imagined; his stomach was swooping, freewheeling, overspilling with butterflies. “Try again. Think of something more powerful.”

Draco was aware that his mouth was probably open and drooling, so he pulled his eyes from Potter, schooled himself, shifted his focus back to the magic. Potter's hand was still around his, and oh… oh, it was almost enough. Heady and brilliant and everywhere. So he tried something else. He thought of Potter. He thought of little fragments he had remembered from over the years, things he had stored away to either cry or wank over. Potter in the sun and the rain and the sky, hair wild in the wind, beating him to the Snitch, again and again and again. Potter grinning, Potter laughing, flying on the back of a Hippogriff and taking on a dragon. Potter alive. Not dead, but glaring down Voldemort and offering him remorse. Then killing him. Taking his life the way he had stolen so many, including Potter's own, if only briefly. Being the saviour they had all so desperately wanted.

“Expecto Patronum!”

It wasn't much. But from his wand, mist was spiralling, silvery and bright, depleting by the second. The Patronus was shapeless and it barely held, but it was something. It had faded into non-existence soon enough but Draco was filled with the most unbelievable joy. He supposed that the excitement with Potter was just so much more than with his friends, where things were simple and untried. With Potter it was up and down, unsettled, such unbelievable emotion.

Potter was grinning at him now, all rugged and handsome. Draco felt all light-headed and turned on again. Fucking Potter. Why did he have to be kind? Why did he have to be so unfairly attractive?

“Well, congratulations, Malfoy,” he said, standing up, and – no, no, why was he leaving! Draco wanted him here forever! “We know you can do it, now. You're on the right track. And trust me, once you know you can do it, that really helps.”

“Thank you,” Draco said. Potter was beginning to walk toward the door and Draco was scrambling hopelessly for something, anything to make Potter talk. To make him stay. To make him look at Draco. “I hear my mother's been visiting your godson.”

That did it. Potter froze, turned, and Draco wondered for a moment if he would be angry. But instead he was all weird and nervous, moving to take a seat on one of the plush couches, not quite looking at home against the purple. No… red was Potter's colour. Red like his heart, or green like his eyes.

“Will you be? Visiting Teddy, I mean?”

“I expect so. In the holidays, probably.”

Potter exhaled a shaky breath, relief written all over his face. He nodded, jerky, sinking down into an armchair the Room had provided. “Good, I – good. I'm glad you're interested.” Draco was about to interrupt, to ask, but Potter's words began filtering through, rushed, pained. “It's just, you know. Me and that baby are so alike. We both lost our parents to a war, where they were fighting for us. We both have godfathers who probably aren't… best qualified for the job.” He was saying it with a wry sort of humour, but he sobered. “Weren't,” he corrected.

“Potter –”

“The people who raised me, Malfoy, despised me. I slept in a cupboard for ten years. I wasn't fed properly. Birthdays, Christmas… they weren't what they were supposed to be. My life was so lacking in love. I will not have that for him, you hear me? If you're in his life you're in it for good.
You will love him. You will look after him. He's wonderful, I tell you, he's the reason that so many fought the war. Because they wanted a better life for the children of the future. That's exactly what I intend to give him. So please, just... I know you don't care about me, or particularly like me, but you have to be good to him. Not for me, but for him.”

Things were incredibly quiet between them. Draco loved Potter's outbursts – they often reflected pain, yes, but they were honest. They were Potter letting himself feel. Letting himself heal. Letting Draco in on his little sufferings, the boy he was beyond what he presented to the rest of the world, the boy beneath all the fame and the glory and the attention. And this... a cupboard? *Fuck*. Potter had always been skinny, had always eaten each meal like it was his last, had always shied from the public and the praise they had showered him in. No wonder. He'd spent half his life hated by his relatives. Draco hadn't had the foggiest about it. Embarrassing – Draco had prided himself for years on knowing Harry Potter inside out.

“Okay,” he said. Potter smiled.

“Thanks.”

They had never really talked like this. Simple, sweet. Almost like they were friends. The only tension in the air was the memory of their long and complicated history, their time spent on opposite sides of a shorter, but somehow more complicated war. And a tension that only Draco saw: want, unbelievable want. His love for Potter was absolutely unable to deny when he looked him full in the face, here. He was so pretty. He was so lovely. Bones and flesh, like Draco, but Harry... Harry was all heart. Draco was shallow and petty and it was heart that he didn't have. Harry had used heart to win a war.

“I should be off,” he finally said, rubbing his hands along his thighs. Draco watched him climb to his feet, inelegant, clumsy. Typical Harry Potter. “Good luck with all the Patronus stuff – you just need to keep working at it. Let me know if you need any help.”

Such a simple courtesy. It sent his head reeling, heart thumping in his ribcage as he watched Potter head to the door, haul it open and leave, his empty bottle of alcohol with the cigarette butt inside left in his stead. The Room was full of echoes of him, of him at fifteen, inspiring rebellion and light, and at seventeen, extending the hand that Draco had always longed for so desperately, pulling him away from the burning heat of it all. And now, unnecessarily kind. Holding Draco's hand and bringing him joy.

Draco trekked down the staircase in a vivid haze, head full of Harry Potter. It wasn't unlike any other day, be fair. But today, today they had spoken. He'd been civil. Borderline friendly. It was all he had ever longed for, late at night, alone, weeping for his unrequited and unnoticed love. He'd had it harder than most – he'd made it harder on himself. He'd made Harry hate him. He'd done it because it was the only way he could ever get him to look.

Draco had managed a bit of a Patronus, today. And it had been because of him. His presence behind him, his presence in Draco's head. He would be there forever. He had given Draco such unimaginable joy. Enough to make it tangible, to use magic to amplify it, bring it forth into the world and breathe life into it. Breathe life to his love.

“You've got your Potter face on,” Pansy remarked as he flopped onto the sofa beside her, still a little dizzy with the whole affair. He was glad for the cool embrace of the common room, green and grey and pretty gay. He felt at home here. It had nurtured him throughout the years, kindly, not as stony and cold-hearted as the other houses assumed. Slytherin was not synonymous with emotionless. More... repression. But everyone had been guilty of that. They were teenagers.
“Haven't I always?”

“True.” Draco looked at her; there was a despondency in her face that he hadn't been expecting. He looked at her, her delicate features, the dark flutter of her eyelashes, shadows of eyeliner around her eyes, and the rosebud of her painted red lips. He looked at her until she yielded, rolling her eyes. “Granger and Weasley finally got together. I can't say I wasn't expecting it. It just… well, it hurts.”

“What a pair we are.” Malfoy and Parkinson. It was all they were to Potter and Granger, who in contrast, were everything to them. They had grown and wanted and loved. And now they would have to bury it. Pretty soon, school would be over for good. Potter and Granger would move on with their lives and only think back on them as lost memories from school, faint impressions upon glass. “Sorry, Pans,” he murmured, and her head fell onto his shoulder, old comfort that they had relied on for years, now. “I remember when he started dating Girl Weasley. It… well, you know how it feels.”

“Why is it we're always losing them to Weasleys?”
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: THE DREAMS AND REALITY OF HARRY POTTER.

OCTOBER 11th 1998, 05:54.

EIGHTH YEAR GRYFFINDOR BOYS' DORMITORY, HOGWARTS, HIGHLANDS, SCOTLAND.

HARRY

There was a lurid melodrama to death. Everything was just that little bit intensified: when it rained it stormed, when the sun came out it was utterly blinding. Because the weather changed as normal in this land of the dead (was it heaven? hell? purgatory?), the only difference being that it was just that much more. Harry would wake to the flash of bright sun through his curtains and the whole house would shake in the wind. Though… he had only lived here for a year when he had been alive. Perhaps the house had been built on shaky foundations. He wouldn't remember.

He had been robbed of that, in life. But now he had it and he had to remind himself not to be bitter. Bitterness would eat him up as he lived this death as though it was the life he never had. So however unfair it was, however it hurt, he had to put it out of mind. Otherwise it would haunt him even now, surrounded by ghosts.

Even them, his dead (ha – like he wasn't one of them, now!), had faces that were vivid and harsh. His mother's hair dazzled him, her eyes stayed bright behind his closed eyes. Fred's head seemed on fire. The world was brilliant and new and he lived in it… he lived, in his own way, despite the fact that his body was rotting in the ground. It was nice here. It was peaceful. It was like a second universe that was an imprint of the one they had once lived in.

They hadn't buried Harry in Godric's Hollow – there hadn't been room. Instead, they had found him a plot near Fred's, in Ottery St Catchpole's graveyard. At first Harry had assumed that he'd be buried somewhere at Hogwarts if not with his parents, but his visit there had been pointless and just sad, and Dad had sighed and called him morbid but Harry needed to see it, for closure. The Burrow had been his only other idea. Fred hadn't been living there; he was staying with Harry and his parents after a short stint in his property in Diagon Alley. He'd been lonely at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and too afraid to return to his former home. He hadn't wanted to see life without himself. Harry had invited him along today but Fred had protested, saying he wasn't quite ready. It was fine. He got along brilliantly with Dad, for obvious reasons, and Mum was so hopelessly grateful to Molly Weasley for all she had done for Harry. She had taken Fred in like he was her own, without hesitation. The Weasleys and Potters looked out for one another, now. In death and in life. All because of Molly Weasley and her endless love. All because Harry and Ron had taken a liking to one another on the train.

Harry had not written a will. Due to this he suspected the Ministry would've wanted to make some spectacle of his death, give him a special tomb or control his afterlife just as they had his life. But the
Ministry were not used to dealing with Hermione Granger or Molly Weasley, and Harry knew they would've fought tooth and nail for this. He was incredibly touched – it was, as they'd known it to be, exactly what he wanted. A grave near Fred's, near the Burrow. Like he was one of them.

The cemetery here did not hold the same gloom as the one in Godric's Hollow. It was wide and the headstones were sporadic, it was filled with flowers and gifts and little reminders of the dead, from the living. People here were remembered freshly. Harry could tell. He crouched in the wet grass and ran his fingers over the cold stone before him.

IN LOVING MEMORY

Fred Gideon Weasley

Apr. 1 1978 – May 2 1998

Beloved son, devoted brother and friend

Mischief Managed

Harry could scarcely imagine their pain. And George, that poor boy. To lose a twin, Harry assumed, must be devastating. But there, in the next row, a few spaces down… there he was. He crept closer; the sky was darkening above him, the light drizzle of rain growing angrier, tougher. It didn't frighten him, though. He was dead. What could happen?

IN LOVING MEMORY

Harry James Potter

Jul. 31 1980 – May 2 1998

A brave and loving friend who was loved deeply in return

The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death

Harry had not thought it would make him cry, but it did. To the people he loved, he was dead. Oh it ached. He missed them so much, so much more than he had thought. He had lived a lifetime without his parents and of course that hurt, but he had grown used to it. He had come to mourn Sirius and Dumbledore, in time. But this world without Ron and Hermione… what was it? What was it worth? It was empty. And no matter how the sun shone and his mother's hair set the sky on fire, it was not the same. It did not erase how he longed for them.

Ron and Hermione were all of it. He had loved Hogwarts and magic and the world that it had brought, but really, truly, the gift of it all had been the love it had inspired in him. He had found two people he knew he wanted in his life forever. He had found two people that had loved him, as he had loved them, and that was magic. They had become family through the simple wanting of it. And Harry knew, that when he'd died in that forest, his love, so great and deep and wonderful, would've protected them, for a little while. Because it meant that much. Because it had been that strong. Enough to have Voldemort tremble before it.

One day he would see them again. But now he lived (died) on in this world of Other and they went about every day thinking he was gone forever, stolen from them. They would have mourned him. They would have cried for him and yearned for him, for things to be how they used to. And to cause them that pain sent such guilt rising in him – he had made the decision to abandon them, back at the station. He had been cruel and he had been selfish. Would they forgive him?
Would they forget him?

Through his tears, blurring his sight, he saw a little laminated note left by the headstone, one that stood out from the heaps of tokens left by admirers who had tracked his final resting place down. It was half-hidden, clearly there since the beginning. It was almost soaked through in spite of the lamination. He held it between his finger and thumb, gentle, sad.

We love you always. You will be with us FOREVER. Thank you for choosing us.

Your faithful R & H

Thunder rumbled above him as Harry started to weep. His faithful Ron and Hermione. It was true – what they'd had, all that love, had been down to choice. Which was what defined who they were, far more than anything else. Harry could've moved compartments. Could've taken Malfoy's hand. Could've let himself be sorted into Slytherin. He could've decided against saving Hermione from that mountain troll.

But he hadn't. Things had fallen into place and Harry had chosen, everyday, to stand by them, as they had him. Love was commitment. Love was hardship. Even a burden, sometimes. He had borne it willingly.

Harry stole the note from the headstone, pocketed it beside his wand. It would not be gone in real life, their life, he was sure. The world was different here. It was a confusing echo, and tiny things like notes did not often resonate through. That was the thing, about death: it was always a few steps behind, caught in the past. The world moved on and people here forgot. Mum hadn't even known who the Prime Minister was, when he'd told her. She'd been a woman of Thatcher's time and she always would be. That was the state she had left the living in and it was the state she remained; beautiful and twenty-one and engaging in such reckless revolution, protesting the government and taking on dark wizards. Here, in this grey place of death, she only looked three years older than her son. She appeared, for all intents and purposes, to be the same age as Fred, though she treated him like a surrogate child. But that wasn't so odd, here. You saw people of thirty mothering people of sixty. Death did not pick and choose when it came to age.

He ignored the flowers left by his so-called fans, the lilies and roses scattered before his grave, and picked a daisy from the ground, twirled its stem between his fingers. He loves me, he loves me not. His childhood in his hand. This little flower, it meant more than all the others, left by people who would visit again only to marvel, not to mourn. The daisy meant he'd been buried here of all places, for the Weasleys, who would miss him. Not for the Ministry, not for the world, but for the Weasleys. It was a quiet little grave in Devon, daisies growing in the long grass, marked by words that held so much meaning. It felt right. Shaky, Harry climbed to his feet. Beneath him was his body, rotting away. The him that existed now existed only in the form of soul and mind. The real him was dead and gone and grieved over. Never to be seen again. Swallowed up by destiny and spat out by death, those old friends, who had never once decided to cut him a break. But he had not struggled. He had held his head high and died with dignity. As his parents had done. There was a difference, you see. There was all the difference in the world.

“Goodbye,” he said, to himself, the boy trapped beneath the earth, packed below dirt and mud. The rain was pouring now, leaping from the clouds, euphoric and free even in this place without birth. The rain was pretending that everything was as it was but the rain was wrong. Everything had changed.

Harry felt so sad he had left them. But here… he'd be lying if he said it wasn't peaceful. And he liked the funny abandon that the weather had, the way it raged above him and danced without a care. His hair was dripping and sticking to the sides of his face, raindrops caught in his eyelashes with tears,
damp on his skin, wet in his clothes. In real life it would be raining. Were they here with him, saying goodbye again? Just visiting? He did not feel it. He could not. It was impossible – without the Resurrection Stone, or Merlin forbid, Priori Incantatem, he would never again be summoned to that mortal plane, sucked to earth and fed snapshots of to whom he had been called by, as his parents had told him was the case.

Harry wasn’t entirely sure if he wanted that anyway. He had left life behind for a reason. To return to it again, especially if only briefly, would ruin him, torture him further about that fateful choice he had made on the platform –

“Harry! Harry wake up!”

He shot up, shaking, grasping at Seamus as he jostled him awake. He felt his face wet with tears (rain?) and gasped for breath, blood rushing, heart thumping. His t-shirt and boxers were sticking to him with perspiration, damp and uncomfortable; he hung onto Seamus as he breathed in, breathed out, coming to terms with wakefulness.

“Harry, it's alright, mate, you're alright.” Seamus hugged him, then, took him in his arms. Harry burrowed into him and felt his heart slow, inhaling that heady, slightly singed scent of his dormmate. His friend. He was glad for them, stirring in the room around him, blinking blearily at the commotion.

He sighed, arms tight around Seamus' torso as he let himself be comforted. His hands were in sweaty fists, screwed tight. He unfurled them: in one was a daisy, half-squashed in his anguish, but unmistakeable. Stem broken open, petals crushed, the flower sat insidious against his skin, death seeping from it. The flower of his dream. Perhaps it wasn't a dream after all.

He loves me, he loves me not.

OCTOBER 12th 1998, 00:34.

ROOM OF REQUIREMENT, HOGWARTS. HIGHLANDS, SCOTLAND.

They were playing ABBA again, and the muted sounds of Dancing Queen were floating in from the main room. The Slytherins had taken control of the playlist and Parkinson had drunkenly explained to him how ABBA was just what gay people listened to and he'd better suck it up and enjoy himself. Harry had asked if she was gay. She'd said yes and then danced off into the crowd. He was surprised, but this didn't feel so wrong. Dancing with the Slytherins didn't feel so wrong. It was an eighth year party, organised by the Ravenclaws, Harry thought, and the Room was ever-changing, reproducing alcohol for them. Harry wasn't that drunk. He was in the toilets watching Dean roll fluxweed into a cigarette for them, absently listening to him explain his motions, more focused on his face, instead.

Dean was more attractive than Harry had given him credit for. He'd spent sixth year quietly resenting him for dating a girl he wasn't actually interested in. But things were different, now, and Harry knew he liked boys. Only boys. And Dean was a very attractive one indeed, handling the drugged stick with ease, lighting the end with a brief, wordless Incendio. He slipped his wand away and breathed down the reckless, teenage fun that Harry had never got a chance to experience.

Out of mind was the flower from his dream(?), found in his hand as he woke. He had pushed the worry from his head and decided to simply enjoy himself, lose himself to the flushed, merry intoxication of his classmates. It had been a tough month. Integrating back into the drudgery of school after most of them had been on the run, fighting, or enduring cruelty from the Carrows for the last year, had been tough. And people wanted to unwind. Get disgustingly drunk and make mistakes
they’d regret tomorrow. Make mistakes in a way they had not been entitled to during the war, in a way that everyone deserved amidst their youth.

So music was blasting outside, only muffled slightly by the walls and door of the toilets. Alongside it was the joyful shouts of drunken adolescents, laughter, people living after the war. Harry had longed to be carefree like them at first, before he’d realised the shallow perception he had – how did he know if they were carefree? They may have simply masked the torment. Merlin knows he did, sucking down ash like air and swallowing rum like it was going out of style.

“Take it slow,” Dean warned. His eyelashes were dark and shadowy around his eyes. Indentations of sleeplessness were cast below them, sunken in his face. His lips were parted. He was gorgeous, dark velvet. Rich and plush and soft.

Harry didn't listen, giddy with the silly rebellion and Dean's pretty face, and took hit after hit of the fluxweed, feeling his head spin and the world take on a knew knowing. The blunt bestowed a strange calm upon him, heart lifting, brain swelling. The smell of it became a little more endurable. It tasted far better. Was it tasting? Did you taste smoke? Or just breathe it, swill it like wine? The burning fluxweed spilt down his throat in swirls of vapour, seizing at his lungs, tickling his windpipe.

“It's good.”

“You think?”

“Yeah,” he said, suddenly serious, ignoring the room cartwheeling around him, handing the blunt over to Dean. “Intense, though.”

“It's basically just muggle weed,” Dean was saying, his face was far away and beautiful. A lost moon. “Not much fancier, though I'll bet loads of purebloods would insist this is much better. It's not. It's the same. It all depends on the quality, it doesn't matter which they smoke. This is just much easier to get a hold of in Hogwarts – Lisa Turpin's dealing, you see, but I think Malcolm Baddock – you know, fifth year – is who you go to see if you want anything of the muggle persuasion. Maybe another time, Harry, if you're up for it? I know I am. It's nice to take your mind off things.”

“Are you looking forward to Quidditch tomorrow?” Harry asked, accepting the fluxweed back from Dean, already around the halfway mark of the blunt. It felt good. Harry didn't want to stop. Harry wanted to go, go, go. His heart tripped on. Everything was bright and wild in his eyes, his movements slow and sleepy.

“Yeah, though Malfoy's never beaten you to the Snitch and I don't think he'll start now,” Dean babbled, taking a hit again. “So that's a lot on me, Sue and Zach Smith – who is a prat, by the way – but I suppose it doesn't really matter, the match is only a friendly. But to win that means a lot of goals, for us. Are you excited?”

“I suppose,” Harry said; the fluxweed was diminishing by the minute. His concentration drifted in and out, Quidditch seeming like such a distant notion in this dreamy state of delirium. It was not, however, as tumultuous as he had thought. It was calm. Like a whisper. “My team are pretty good. They're nice, too. Not like Zach Smith and Malfoy. Good luck with that.”

“I have Ron,” Dean argued.

“You have Malfoy.”

Harry proffered him the blunt, which was likely only a few breaths away from dying. Dean accepted gratefully and finished the thing off, the smoke spiralling into the air between them. He pressed the
last of the fluxweed against the damp ridge of the sink, extinguishing it, and discarded it in the bin without second thought. He looked brilliantly discomposed, pupils blown wide, voice garbled. Harry was really quite attracted to him and he knew it was obvious, with his eyes flicking down to Dean's lips every now and then. He didn't really mind. It was only Dean. Dean, who was leaning forward and kissing him, mouth tasting of the earthy drug they had just inhaled. His tongue probed for Harry's in an instant, seeking, searching. Arousal clouded in Harry's mind, mingling with the mist of lurid rapture from the fluxweed. A beautiful boy in this privacy. He'd be lying if he said it didn't affect him, desire twisting through his veins.

“I thought,” Harry said, pulling back, lips tingling from the pressure, “you and Seamus?”

“No,” Dean said. His eyes were fixed on Harry's mouth, tracking how he talked. Those dark eyelashes fluttered, delicate. “No, I don't think he wants that.”

“Do you?”

“Sort of,” he admitted. That meant a lot. “If that bothers you then we can stop.”

“It doesn't bother me.”

Harry's hands curled into the tight coils of Dean's hair, his body pressed forward, their mouths met. He didn't feel very present. But it was nice, it was always nice, to kiss someone. And to kiss a boy, which he knew he wanted, was even more so. He let Dean pull him into a cubicle, pushing the door shut and bolting it, an area which in sobriety, would likely have dampered his arousal. But Harry was pretty high and so was Dean, fingers prying at Harry's buckle, deftly opening his trousers, delving in. Harry's head hit the thin wall of the cubicle, rearing back in surprised need. Mercifully, the toilets were empty, and his gasped curses and swallowed moans were heard by nobody but Dean, who was stroking his cock in the open air, tonguing at Harry's neck, sucking bruises there, driving him mad. This particular interaction felt as though Harry were watching it through a haze. He liked it. Getting a handjob in the toilets felt pretty wicked, though it was a breach of social etiquette that Harry had never partaken in before. What did it matter – he'd died. The toilets were empty.

“I didn't know you liked boys,” Dean murmured, hand tightening, loosening, swift.

“I could say the same for you,” Harry replied, leaning in for a snog, feeling quite at home with Dean's tongue in his mouth, pressing against his. It felt breathtakingly good. He'd been over a month without Charlie and he hadn't realised how used to sex he had become. Blood thundered in his ears.

Dean, apparently well-versed in this sort of thing, jerked him quick and easy until he was coming with a wheeze, spilling over Dean's fist, swearing and knotting his hands into Dean's t-shirt. Harry kissed him, again and again, before falling to his knees and moving to reciprocate, not really minding the awkward angle in the small space. He fit his mouth around Dean's wanting cock, longer than Charlie's but not thicker, feeling it shift and tremble against his tongue. This was not alien to him. He had done everything with Charlie: hands and mouths and pushing inside one another, sneaking out on awkward condom runs in the middle of the night. But he had not done this with anybody else. Which made it new. Which made it different.

Harry worked him expertly (as expert as he could manage), felt Dean pulling at his hair with want. His cock was growing harder yet in Harry's mouth, weeping; his hips bucked forward, and from his mouth came a string of expletives. It was hot, it was brilliant and exciting. Harry liked it here on his knees. On the odd balance between domination and submission, the possibility of teetering into either. But this wasn't long and languid sex, it was rushed fumbles at a party. Soon Dean was finishing, sighing and coming in Harry's mouth, the head of his cock hitting at the back of Harry's throat, a tickle, making him gag. Dean's cock slipped from his mouth with the movement, and the
final spurts of his come fell against Harry's lips and chin, wet and thick, like some cheap porn video. Harry only breathed, forehead falling against Dean's abdomen. Dean smoothed down his hair, soothing, as he panted and his cock started to soften, the blood there becoming less urgent. A different ABBA song was playing at the party. Harry didn't know how many had passed. Glee was still evident in the lilting singing along and the inebriated giggling.

The door to the toilets slammed open, a burst of noise from the party with it, and footfalls entered the bathroom. The taps switched on with a squeak. Harry didn't pay it much mind and Dean just kept running his fingers through his hair, breaths coming quieter.

"I thought he was here," said Blaise Zabini, smooth tones easy to recognise, "but I don't see him anywhere."

"Why the hell would I know," Malfoy muttered. Harry knew it was Malfoy in everything about the tone, the words, the volume. The sound of water from the taps shifted in power. Harry suspected somebody was using it to splash their face.

"You're the one who fancies him."

"Shut up, Blaise."

The taps twisted off. Harry's head still span, the fluxweed tumbling around in his system. He only vaguely registered the remark about Malfoy fancying someone, storing it away to think on tomorrow, when he was beyond this strange experience and beyond himself, when the room stopped turning and the colours stopped hurting his eyes.

"Come on, let's get back," Blaise encouraged, and the door swung open with a creak. "It stinks of dope in here, and I know how funny you always were about the smoking stuff – 'oh it's so pedestrian, Zabini, I –"

The two moved from the toilets and became difficult to discern. Harry finally rose from the floor, joints aching faintly, body stiff from where he had manoeuvred himself into the little room left on the ground and remained there for an extended period of time. Dean helped him up, and ducked his head as he tucked away his cock and zipped up his jeans. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and thought of drugs and daisies. Dreamed of death. The world did not stop tilting.
ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

SOMEWHERE

17th OCTOBER 1998

To Sir,

I hope you are well. If anybody I'm writing to would somehow manage to read their letter, I know it'd be you. Because you could do everything and anything, you knew all there was to know. You were such a mystery and I don't think Skeeter's book even got past the first layer of you. There are some things I will never know. I will never fully understand you. And that's okay.

It took me a little while to come to terms with the fact that I didn't know you as well as I thought. It hurt. You were made out to be this dangerous and damaged man that hid his past from the world, which I suppose does have a ring of truth to it. Grindelwald, Ariana, your father, I didn't know about any of it. To me you were just a kindly, albeit secretive, headmaster, who CARED about me. Who wanted to save the world. Who was human and made mistakes.

Skeeter erased all of that. She wrote you as a villain. In my head, you'd been a hero. I suppose we were both wrong, and both biased, in our own ways. She should not have published such an awful and one-sided tale about you but I shouldn't have idealised you, and used your death as an excuse to believe you could do no wrong. In truth you were very clever but quite ordinary. And you did things wrong. You did some things that were wrong when you were younger and you grew as a person, you went on to do many things that were right. And some more things that were wrong. Because you were a person just like me, just like anybody, and idolising you did me no good when you were alive and no good when you were dead. I was angry at you for a very long time for all the business with the horcruxes and the hallows. And how you had never told me about any of it. How you expected me to die for the cause and knew I would because you had always taught me to be brave.

But you're gone. What is the point in spending this time despising you for things that happened when you were alive? I have decided to just mourn you. So you weren't perfect. So you expected a hell of a lot from me. It's in the past and I will remember you as the man you were, the man who always guided me toward the right thing, the man who had such a great weight on his shoulders and did the best he could. It does frustrate me, it does get under my skin, but I love you all the same. I didn't really recognise it enough but I did love you. For being so wonderful and magic. For being there.

This place, and you, really, changed my life. It gave my world so much colour and you were so brilliant. I feel such fondness when I remember you, eating Christmas dinner, making another speech, looking at me with that twinkle in your eye. You may have done so many things wrong but those times will never be marred, I will not let that happen. I remember them only with affection. And so I don't care so much anymore. I don't feel so angry. It's hard to hate the dead. Especially those who looked out for you.
What I'm trying to say is that I forgive you, and I hope you will forgive me for holding such a grudge, for any wrong I have done you. It doesn't matter that I didn't know you how I thought I did. It doesn't matter that you had so much of yourself that I didn't see. I miss the man I knew, and I will forever be your man, through and through, whether Scrimgeour thought that was an insult or not. You were fighting for what was right. We all were. It wasn't always pretty – sometimes it was so hard and so ugly. I did things I regret too. But it is all behind us now, and I just grieve for you.

I think you brushed over that part, to be honest. I think you thought that the real hardship of your death would come through the fact that I would no longer have you to teach me and show me the right way, and you were correct, of course, that part was awful. But in the simplest sort of way, you were a part of my life and I loved you. So losing you hurt. Not because I cared in general but because I cared about YOU.

I never saw Fawkes again. He mourned you, as did we all. Your funeral was sad but I suppose at least I got to say goodbye to you. I didn't get that, with a lot of people. Your death was singular and impossible to deny. You were so, so missed. You are still so missed. I wish you were still here, I wish you hadn't gone so suddenly. I wish you were here in more than portrait form. I wish a lot of things, these days.

So thank you for being good to me, mentoring me so well, helping shape me into the man I am today. For helping teach me the difference between doing what is right, and what is easy. Teaching me that our choices form us far more than our abilities, that love is the most powerful magic there is, that it is a power beyond the reach of those who do not bother to comprehend it. That death is the not something to be feared, but a great adventure. One I missed out on.

Goodbye, Dumbledore. I remember you kindly.

Harry Potter.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: THE STRENGTH OF GINNY WEASLEY.

OCTOBER 20th 1998, 07:02.

THE OWLERY, HOGWARTS. HIGHLANDS, SCOTLAND.

GINNY

The air was biting up here, especially this early. It made her shiver right to her bones, tremble as she tied the letter to Pig's foot and sent him flying to the Burrow, seeking George. It hadn't said much. It was just to check on him, really. She knew how hard he was taking Fred and even an affirmation that he could talk to her was a letter she was sure he would like to read. She loved him so. She wanted him to heal, to drift back to life, but it was far more difficult for him. He was Fred's twin, and he didn't have the chance to return to Hogwarts, not like her and Ron, who now had Quidditch to play and parties to attend as means of distraction. Of course it still hit them, of course it still hurt, but it just wasn't *all the time*, now. George did not have that luxury. So in the Owlery on this cold morning, Ginny let the absence of her brother ache. Her dear Fred. So full of love and light, so alive it was blinding. His laugh echoed in her ears even to this day.

How he had laughed. He'd laughed so unashamedly and it had made others laugh. He had devoted his life to bringing levity into a world dark with misery and fear. That darkness had ripped him from her life. From all the lives he had touched with joy. And to most people, he was remembered only faintly, had simply tinged the edges of their lives like the wet edges of polaroids. Tears building in the corners of eyes.

Fred Weasley was a war hero, now. Somebody who had fought and sacrificed his life for the greater good. For what was right. It was the same way they saw Harry, the same way they twisted the lives and deaths of so many others: Lupin, Tonks, Sirius Black. Of course, that wasn't the case. They had been people. Fred had been reckless and sometimes cruel. Lupin had been guarded and a little self-loathing. Tonks – hot-headed, clumsy. Sirius: irresponsible and nearly always angry.

They had been far from perfect. They had been real and flawed and loved. Fred was mourned by his parents and siblings and friends, Lupin by his students and the rest of the Order, and so on. The public would see them through a detached lens and feel sorry that they had died for them. That was all. But those close enough to know them, flaws and imperfections at all, had to feel it like a hole in the heart. They knew full well that those who had died for them, died for the world, were not great and brilliant figures of myth, but people, real people, who had died. They had died and it had hurt. They had left a mark on the world in more than just their heroism; they would be remembered for the screaming arguments they'd had and their favourite foods and how they wore their hair. For being alive. For loving and being loved in return.

Ginny watched Pig fly off into the cloudy sky, battling the winds, soaring higher. Flying free of any of the immense loss or gargantuan terror that haunted Ginny, these days. She hadn't gotten a lot of sleep last night. For some reason it had all been more present than usual, and the shrill screams of tortured first years had danced through her dreams, their broken, bloody faces flashing before her eyes. Trauma did not send notice before it arrived to fuck you up again. It just appeared, angry, demanding to be heard, riding in on the fire of her brother's hair and the peals of his dead laughter.

Dead dead dead. It was irreversible and she longed, *longed* for him. Like part of her heart had been carved out and teased before her eyes. If he were here he'd tell her to cheer up and he'd make her...
laugh and laugh and laugh. He wasn't particularly sensitive – none of her brothers were, except Charlie and Bill, though she suspected that was an age thing – and he'd have curled up and died before he offered to have a serious chat. So he'd make her laugh. He'd drag her forcibly from her sadness and for a moment or two, it would be forgotten. That was the way he'd worked. He and George.

But Fred wasn't here anymore, and George was too sad to do that. They all were. They had all lost so much. Mum spent half her time at his grave and half her time planning what to leave there. George hadn't even visited it since the funeral. To learn to live without him was one thing, but to accept he would never return was a different game entirely. To come to terms with the fact that he now took up residence six feet under would be so hard. Ginny hadn't quite let herself realise it, yet. To her, Fred was in the sun and her brother's smiles. He was in Gryffindor red and the joke products that still circulated around Hogwarts even now, in Peeves and his mischief, who seemed to be doing it to honour Fred, somehow. McGonagall was disapproving but Ginny saw the look on her face, sometimes. Like it reminded her of Fred or of Tonks, of Sirius Black and James Potter. Students she had taught and watched grow. Students who had died so young while she lived on. People she had lost to war after war.

It was all over now. And what was left? So many dead. So much pain. War took and took and it did so without discrimination. Gone were the evil and gone were the good.

“You're so sad.”

It was Luna, of course it was Luna, dressed in simple pyjamas and gazing at Ginny with steady eyes. She was so unbelievably and absolutely pretty, her features shaped shyly, framing her as something so harmless. Like art. Like sunsets and the world after alcohol. But Luna wasn't harmless: her words cut through any falsity, and she could, if need be, brandish her wand like a weapon. However much Ginny wanted to whitewash her, elevate her, it wasn't the truth. Luna had fought alongside them time and time again, she had risen up against Death Eaters just the same as everyone. She had her brilliantly unbelievable beliefs but she also had her grounded beliefs: equality, justice, love. The same beliefs as Ginny. Their same truths, ones that had overcome Voldemort, in the end.

Perhaps in fifth year it had been easy to see Luna as a sweet bit of innocence left in the world, a beacon of light and hope, but the world had changed, as had they. A war had come and gone. Luna had been locked in a dungeon for months. Luna had suffered and lost as much as anyone. She was not fifteen anymore. Neither was Ginny.

“I am,” Ginny confessed. “I miss Fred.”

He'd lived like this. He'd had cold Owlery mornings and hesitant flirtations. He'd been seventeen and, at times, sad. He'd been a whole person with reasons for joy and reasons for misery. And then he had died, and all of that had disappeared with him. They remembered the outside parts, the conversations they'd had and the jokes they had shared, but they would never know the thoughts and emotions and personal, private moments he had lived. There were parts of him that were entirely lost to time, now. There were parts of him that would never be known. Swept away in the cold air of the Owlery.

“I'm sure he misses you.”

Ginny reached out for her, hand and heart, and tangled their fingers together. Palms pressed against one another like the sky to the earth. Luna did not waver, not like Ginny. Because Ginny was strong, she knew she was strong, but fire burnt bright and hot and it burnt up, sometimes. Luna's strength was different. It was a resilience that Ginny didn't have. A tranquillity and a lightness, a trust, a knowledge that her strength was constant. With Ginny it flickered in and out. With Ginny it came
and went like the tide of grief she felt for her dead brother, crashing loud and unafraid in her head, tormenting her, day and night.

Strength was not invincibility. Ginny had lost so much. Ginny had lost her brother and her innocence and her chance, her simple chance, to be young and free. Voldemort had stolen that. He had stolen that from so many of them.

She was strong like that. She hadn't let him take her love. So she had stood proud alongside Dumbledore's Army and she had fought him, and she had won. She had been strong for so long and now she wanted to be weak. She felt entitled to this grief, this sorrow. She was seventeen years old and she had lost her brother; she was no superhero. That was the misconception about strength – that it had to be all the time. That it had to look like Ginny during that war, her head held high and her eyes blazing. Sometimes strength faltered. Sometimes it looked like Luna, soft and hidden. Without the vulgarity of visibility.

Luna who never blazed. Who smiled and sighed and tucked her hair behind her ears. Soft and small but honest. Unafraid. Here, with her hand in Ginny's and her hair blowing in the wind, like a princess from a fairytale. Like magic incarnate. And she was here and she let Ginny cling to her for stability. She was glorious and unreal and Ginny, Merlin, Ginny wanted her.

“I know Mum misses me,” Luna went on, hand cool but not limp, like Ginny had imagined. She was strong and stable. Her hand clasped Ginny's with dignified surety, surety that Ginny needed right now, that soothed her, helped calm the raging storm within her. The storm that was always inside her, always angry, brilliant, screaming. “I'm sure Fred misses you.”

“You think?” Her voice was tremulous, thick. Filled with loss. Filled with Fred.

“I know,” she murmured, smiling and sweet and so, so lovely. Birdsong in the cold morning. “It's how I remember her. By knowing she's missing me. It makes it okay, for a little bit.”

“And after that little bit?”

“It hurts,” Luna said. It was not sad. It was just honest. “But that's alright. That's also how I remember her. The hurt matters, you know. It means something. It means they were real.”

“And that we loved them,” Ginny added.

“And that we loved them,” Luna confirmed.

Real and loved. It was all you needed, really, to go on, to keep on living. Being real and being loved. Fred had been. Fred had been so real and solid and true, he had made her laugh so much, he had poked fun at her and slapped her on the back for getting into Gryffindor, hugged her for making the Quidditch team. And loved… he had been loved so fiercely. By Mum and Dad and Bill, Percy and George and Ron, by Lee Jordan and Harry and Hermione, by her, so much, so much that they were all drowning. She'd loved him, loved him, loved him. So much, so much. He had been her wonderful big brother and he'd held her hand when they crossed the street and he'd teased her silly but they had loved each other because they were family and they'd grown up together.

I love you, Ginny wanted to say.

It hit her here. She loved Luna Lovegood and that was okay. She was a lesbian and she was in love with her best friend, and her brother was dead. Life went on. A life that was sad and slow and scary, but life nonetheless.

The weather was tolerable, certainly, and possible to play in. But it was nearing eight and the sky was dark and drizzling, and Ginny felt wary about running her team into the ground. Morale was as important as skill; if they wanted to win, they had to play as a team, and even so… if she didn't lead Gryffindor to victory then she didn't lead Gryffindor to victory. There had been a war. It didn't matter so much. It was only school. It was only sports.

She'd kept most of the team from two years back, replacing trusty Alicia with Euan Abercrombie and Ron with Natalie McDonald. Funnily enough, Harry's place had been taken by little Dennis Creevey, who'd looked up to him for so very long and now fit well in his shoes as Seeker. Sometimes he spaced out during meals – she saw, watching as his eyes glazed over and his breathing stilling and slowing. Grief. It caught up with all of them. But in the air, Dennis was a natural. He stopped letting loss swallow him. He got distracted. Distracted from Colin.

Quidditch seemed to do that. Quidditch seemed to eclipse the war, even if only for moments.

Demelza was edging around the side of the pitch, shifting through the rain, Quaffle clutched under her arm. Ginny looped beneath Jimmy and past Dennis to be in her range; the Quaffle came flying her way, then, spiralling through the air. It was reflex when Ginny caught the ball, both hands coming up to secure it, feeling the slight pressure knock the wind from her chest. Ginny used her thighs to clamp around the broom harder, twisting to escape a Bludger, and ducked back up toward the goal hoops, valiantly defended by Natalie. But some fifth year was no match for Ginny Weasley. She put her strength into her hands and let the ball sail toward the goals, spinning through the empty space, vacant for only a split second before Natalie, arms reaching out, dodged toward the ball. Her fingers almost grazed it, but it went sweeping through the goal, and Euan was darting down to retrieve it, so play could once more commence.

“Sorry!” she shouted over, voice sounding far-off and tinny in Ginny's ears. But it was practise for both of them. Natalie had done just fine.

Ginny shook her head, holding a hand up to dismiss the apology. Natalie was just one of those girls, those girls that apologised when they hadn't done anything wrong. Because she was so used to it. Because that was what was expected of her. Ginny used to be one of those girls. But Ginny left that version of herself behind when the war began, when she and Luna became friends. Luna was the opposite of what a girl should be – no make-up, no shoes, even. She didn't apologise for who she was. Not for any old thing like missing a goal. She'd taught Ginny a lot about living; now, when someone bumped into her in the corridor, sorry was not the first thing out of Ginny's mouth. She just kept on walking. Like Luna would.

Then the ball was back, arching toward her: she caught it one-handed and sped past Ritchie, chucking it back to Demelza, feeling the breathless ease of Quidditch take over her body. It was like somebody else entirely inhabited her. That little girl who felt restrained by her brothers and turned to rely only on herself, somebody strong, someone not sad, but determined, willing. A girl living in peacetime (though that was now and it still felt like a war. Going to breakfast felt like war).

Dennis cheered somewhere above her, fist in the air, and if the rain weren't starting to pick up, if the sky weren't dreary and black, Ginny was sure she would see a golden glint in his hand. The Quaffle soared to Ginny one last time and she came to a stop, watching as her team caught on and began to settle, crowding toward her in the air.

“Let's give it a rest now guys,” she shouted to the wind, and shot Dennis an encouraging smile, nodding to the Snitch. “Game over.”
Demelza slapped Dennis on the back and the group split, heading to the ground. For a moment Ginny watched them and sat alone in the night air, hair wild in the wind. In some ways it was more difficult this short – she couldn't tie it back any longer, and it danced in the breeze untamed, obscuring her sight, exposing her neck to the chill. Laughter filtered up from the ground: the team were dismounting their brooms and Euan was sprawled on his back, the others doubled up at it, their simple camaraderie broadcasting into the world. Ritchie hauled him to his feet and the lot of them headed toward the changing rooms, joking and giggling like it was the easiest thing. Ginny felt a sting of envy at them. How uncomplicated it all appeared. Someone fell over and they had a laugh, while Ginny was trapped up here with her hair cut short and her impossible task of integrating back into normalcy.

She couldn't join them. The thought of it made her chest tighten and her stomach drop. No. She would watch through the window pane of rain and the soft cushion of distance instead – things were simpler, if she removed herself. Her captaincy would last a year and no longer. There wasn't any use in getting attached. She had made her connections, and they had lasted her through the war: she didn't need anybody else. She didn't need funny Demelza or sweet Dennis or sorry Natalie. She liked them, and they liked her, and that was it. Withdrawing from the world was a lot less difficult than it sounded. To simply sit here and twist her mood ring around her finger was no hardship.

Ginny grinned when a tiny bundle of fur came barrelling toward her, circling her a few times before perching on the end of her broom. Pig was bristling with energy as he held his leg out to her, readying to fly right off as soon as she retrieved her letter. He was an excitable little thing, and Ron rolled his eyes but they all appreciated the bright enthusiasm he brought to the sombre lives they all led now. She took the letter from him and he was off like a shot, twirling around her head a few times before racing off into the distance, likely to Ron and Harry's room. She held the rolled-up parchment loosely in her hand, the weight of it almost dragging her to the ground. Words were stuck in her throat. So was a longing, hopeless scream. So was grief.

*Hi Gin*, George had written.

*Thanks for your letter. I appreciate it. I'm sorry I've been so distant lately, but you know how it is – with Fred, with everything. It's not that I don't want to talk about it, or that I'm not ready, it's that I don't know what to SAY. We both lost him. We both know how it feels and what we're going through. What can I talk to you about that you don't already understand? I'm sorry if this comes across as rude but its the truth and we both know it. Fred is gone and that is a wound that will never heal, not for either of us.*

*I am sorry that it wasn't me reaching out to you. I'm the big brother and that's my job, right? But you were always stronger than I was. So i'm not surprised. Even now you're being strong and i'm just being sad. I'm sorry, I don't mean to put this stuff on you. I just want you to know how proud I am of the woman you've grown into. I look up to you.*

*It's good to hear you and Ron are doing well. I know how chuffed you were to be made captain and I'm so glad you've got a good team behind you. I'm sure you'll see Gryffindor winning the cup this year, you always were destined for greatness. The eighth year quidditch thing sounds pretty brilliant too – at least that way Ron and Harry still get to play without it being unfair. I'm very happy for you Ginny. For both of you. It sounds like life is going on as normal at Hogwarts, which is pretty bloody brilliant. You all deserve to have a great last year.*

*Things are pretty normal here at the burrow. mum and dad are pretending all is ok but now you're all gone, and charlie too, the house is pretty empty. It's harder to ignore the fact that i'm here and he isn't – there are less distractions. Bill and Fleur are gonna come and stay for a little while I think. Just to make things less sad. It'll be nice to have them around. So if you have any letters or anything*
for them send it here starting next week.

I miss you Gin, we all do. Mum and dad send their love. I promise if things get especially bad I will write you.

Love your amazing big brother xxx

His writing was nothing like Fred's. But his voice, the way he talked, the way he wrote… it shone through the paper. And he and Fred had developed some sort of rhythm and had so often spoken in tandem with one another, voices blending and cutting into each other. George hadn't signed his name. If Ginny pretended, really hard, then maybe…

The rain was not letting up, but awakening above her, wetting her hair, falling onto the page. Ginny watched through the raindrops spilt on her eyelashes as the ink started to run like black blood, blurring the words, making them obsolete. She crumpled the letter in her fist and aimed her broom toward the ground. She wouldn't throw it away, but its condition didn't matter. Not many things did, these days. It was heavy in her palm. The ground was wet and cold beneath her feet, grass in the rain, earth in a storm, the world after death.
“Harry!” Hermione hissed, slapping her rolled-up newspaper at his forearm, starting him from his tentative doze. He blinked further awake, and peered at her, a little miffed at being woken. Things seemed bleary and stuffy and new, through fresh eyes. Hermione was as awake as ever. She was always so awake. Aware.

“What?” he said.

“Wake up,” she replied, rolling her eyes and turning back to her breakfast. “We have Potions in twenty minutes.”

“Oh joy.”

“I thought you liked Potions now! Slughorn’s far fairer than Snape was.”

“He can’t possibly like it when he has to sit next to Malfoy,” Ron interjected, mouth half-full, jam smeared on his chin. Harry looked on at him fondly, wishing for his ease, his simplicity, a black and white palette to view the world through. Though perhaps that was harsh. Malfoy had given them good reason for hate. “I bet the git does your head in.”

“Don’t – it’s… it isn’t him,” Harry started, finding himself taken aback at the sudden rush of desire to protest. When are you going to stop defending him, he wanted to ask himself. “Malfoy isn’t so bad.”

An odd pause befell their conversation. Hermione’s eyes were wide and Ron’s mouth had dropped open, his chewed food sat on his tongue. Harry could’ve cringed but it was a sight he had seen many a time before, desensitised to Ron and his eating habits and manners. He felt a little scrutinised, but it was Ron and Hermione. It was only Ron and Hermione.

Only – wasn’t that a funny sentiment? They weren’t only anything. They were everything.

“Who are you and what have you done with Harry Potter?” Ron said, and the oddness of it subsided. Harry laughed, Hermione rolled her eyes. Ron went back to his bacon.

“You know what I mean,” Harry argued. “Just that things aren’t like they used to be. I just don’t like Potions because it’s early and it’s Potions – I suppose some things never change.”

Ron laughed; Hermione shook her head affectionately. “I, for one,” she began, and Ron’s eyes sparked with humour and sought Harry’s over the table (when Hermione had an opinion she spoke as though she were about to address the Queen. Merlin, Harry loved her so deeply his head span with it), “think it’s good you’re being friendly with Malfoy. It’s about time this silly rivalry with Slytherin got nipped in the bud. We’re adults now. No need fighting a children’s war.”

Not after we’ve fought an adult one. It went unspoken.

“I still think Malfoy’s a prick,” Ron said, and spooned more scrambled eggs into his mouth. Harry
grinned at him. If he pretended, it was fourth year and nobody was dead. They were angry at Malfoy because the world was simple and Slytherin were the enemy. Harry wasn’t burning his skin and helping his once-nemesis produce a Patronus. Colours were stark – grey areas did not exist, back then.

But Harry wasn’t fourteen anymore, sadly, as much as he wished for that innocence. The world turned on but everything was different, now. Slytherins were children and they had been just as lost as Harry and his Gryffindor friends. They wanted to move on as much as any of them. They wanted to grow just the same. There was, admittedly, a fair amount of bad blood there, but if Harry and Malfoy could reconcile (not explicitly, but sort of, right?) then Harry could forgive any of them. Hopefully the idea went both ways. Harry had lived through one hell of a war, and he wanted it to be over. No more hate.

If they hated then that would mean they had lost. They were not like him.

“He’s trying,” said Hermione, pensive, forehead furrowed in that thinking way of hers. “I think that’s important. Prick he may be,” she continued, at which Ron choked on his eggs, face going red and splotchy as his laughter disrupted his swallow, “he’s not evil.”

She slapped Ron on the back, barely sparing him a glance in his plight. Harry felt so warm and amused by them. It was so ordinary: breakfast at Hogwarts and being surprised by Hermione, as usual. This was why they had fought so hard. This was what they had fought for. Moments like these made him less enamoured by his dreams.

If that’s what they were. Harry had a button that was burning a hole in his pocket, a button he hadn’t seen before. A button from the shirt he’d been wearing in his dream, broken off, stored away to sew back on later. First the daisy, then this. Of course, there would be many a rational explanation, but Harry had lived through seven years of irrationality. What if it wasn’t nothing? What then?

It probably was nothing. Probably. But his mother’s smile, the rain on his skin... it was so real, a lucid, terrifying sort of real. Like life. Like a second life. And perhaps his mind was constructing this little universe to comfort him, cushion his trauma, but it plagued him day and night. And whether this world existed or not was not the issue (it was, a little bit – a daisy? A button?), it was that he could not let it go. It was that he wanted that life, sometimes, that death. He wanted it a lot of the time.

But not now, not now. Ron was gasping for breath and laughing and Hermione was biting back a smile at him. Seamus was gesturing wildly to Neville a few seats along, face animated and open like there had been no pain here at all. Dean was coaxing out a rare smile in Parvati, a shy and pretty thing that had been concealed since Lavender. And behind him, Harry could hear similar friendly interactions replicated a thousand times throughout the hall, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw and Slytherin; life, beating on. Life that sometimes, Harry didn’t want to live. But not now. Not with Ron and Hermione.

Owls started to filter in overhead, letters falling to their student recipients. Squeals of laughter erupted from the Ravenclaw table; Harry peered behind him, just as a Howler began sounding off to some blushing third year, surrounded by the laughter of his friends. People began seizing their ties to their families, tearing open letters and parcels with brilliant grins on their faces. Brilliant grins that made the war seem non-existent, for a few moments. Like it was just another day at Hogwarts from a long time ago.

But Hedwig wasn’t here. He felt a dull pang of grief at her absence.

A few obligatory pieces of fanmail fell before Harry, a letter that he suspected to be from Mr Weasley, and a letter that he knew was from Charlie. He thumbed through them quickly, skimming
their contents, planning to go through them properly in the evening. They were typical niceties: how
are you, how’s Hogwarts, hope you’re well. Harry didn’t really maintain proper communications like
that these days – there weren’t that many people to write to, with one third of his friends at Hogwarts
and another third dead – but he appreciated these little notes, however brief and useless they were.
I’m thinking about you, they said, though unwritten, I still care.

He got them frequently from Mr and Mrs Weasley, with little else to do other than worry on their
remaining children, and adjacent, their friends; occasionally from Bill and Fleur, who were well
into the stride of married life now, and seemed to find a little thrill in signing things off together; from
Charlie a little less so, who was endlessly distracted by the dragons he loved so dearly. George
mostly sent pictures of the Burrow – the pigs, the chickens, the gnomes in the garden – drawing
away from any deep conversation, hurtling, finding Fred in everything, even his words. Percy gave
Harry an update now and then of how he’d diverted the Ministry’s attention yet again (Kingsley,
bless him, had very little time amongst his Minister duties to give the lesser officials a good talking to
for reaching out for Harry’s statement on every little political occurrence), all the animosity and
division between them not seeming to matter so much, now. And Andromeda always sent a letter or
two between Harry’s visits to Teddy, sending him word of his godson’s recent change of appearance
or fascination with another random inevitability of the world. Harry’s replies to these extended hands
of companionship were sporadic and muddled but they were always there. Harry was not foolish
enough to neglect such love. Love he had been glad for in the war.

It was almost too good to be true. A beautiful, blossoming relationship with his godson and a
friendly, understanding relationship with Teddy’s guardian? An ongoing bond with the Weasleys,
that had outlasted the war, that had endured just about the worst possible pains? Therapy – an
opportunity to heal?

Forget too good to be true: was it true? Harry had never had it so good. Voldemort was dead and
gone and they were even civil with the Slytherins, for Merlin’s sake. Ron and Hermione were bright
and beautiful and blinding in their relationship. Ron and Hermione were as they always had been:
there. There and loving him. Of course, if his mind were constructing some great fantasy world, this
being the fantasy world, then they would be, wouldn’t they?

Harry was, in truth, scared. Because part of him was certain that this was reality, that the solid table
under his elbows and taste of syrup on his tongue could not be disputed. But another part of him was
convinced of another reality entirely – shining sun and torrential rain and endless melodrama. Tables
there were just as solid. Syrup there was just as sweet. So it begged the question: which was real?
Were they both real? Could two realities co-exist? If so, was he half dead? If not, was he fully dead?

Death didn’t scare him as it once had. He had experienced it, after all, and was faced with the
possibility that he was still doing so. But this lack of awareness, this distorted perception of the
world, the tear between two different lives, did frighten him. Harry was supposed to be finishing his
NEWTs and starting his life. Instead he was pressing cigarettes to his skin and kept up at night by an
entirely different version of himself, a boy who was sad but not grieving, who was slowly but surely
healing, coming to terms with himself and the world. The Harry sat at Hogwarts, however, was
anything but. That Harry was caught up in the past. Lost and surrounded by loss.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Hermione was asking, eyes sharp and appraising. He had faded away,
drifted into his thoughts, retreated into his mind. And Hermione had noticed. She always noticed,
and he loved her for it, loved her always, and it sent such agony rising in him.

Because if Harry had to choose, right now, between Godric’s Hollow with his own grave over in
Devon and this, this monotony and misery, he would pick death. In a heartbeat.
But death was a world without her and Ron. And what sort of world was that?


BULSTRODE RESIDENCE, WARRINGTON. CHESHIRE, ENGLAND.

Eighth years at Hogwarts were given the gift of a portal back to their early adolescence only with a few extra privileges: curfew was pushed back to midnight, for example, something that Ginny was absurdly jealous of. And, of course, permission to leave the grounds at will. So every so often Harry would make the long trek down to Hogsmeade and Apparate over to Surrey or Cheshire, to Teddy or Joyce. On occasion he would make his way to Privet Drive, gaze on the house he had been raised in (the house he had existed in). He would spend nights in Warrington buying packs upon packs of cigarettes and practising for his driving test. Or in especially dark moments, especially late at night, he would sneak out after hours and simply get on a broom, and go. He would see the Scottish Highlands from above, see Scotland in the distance and the ocean nearing him. He would want to drown. He would begin to drift toward the sea with a whimsy longing but he would remember Ron and Hermione and Teddy and stop himself at the last second.

He said this to Joyce. He was long past feeling embarrassed for his endless ideation of suicide, his loose ties to the earth. He was past shame at his self-loathing. With her, anyway. So he wanted death. So what.

“Are you still self-harming?”

“Yes,” he confessed. Scars. They would always be with him – lighting on his head, lies on his hand, a mark from the locket over his heart. And now on his arms and legs and mind, scars that were fucking burning hot.

“How often?”

“A lot.” She blinked at him, expectant. “I don’t know. Once a day, maybe. Sometimes once every two days, if I’m busy.”

“What typically triggers it?” One of her legs was folded over the other, she was peering at him, notebook flipped open on her lap, fascinated. A lot of people were fascinated by him. But she wasn’t working to find out why he’d survived the killing curse, or why he and Voldemort had been so fated, she was working to fix him (though she’d huff at him for saying – “the mind doesn’t work that way, Harry. You don’t need to be fixed because you aren’t broken” – Harry appreciated her efforts).

“Whenever I smoke, I guess.” He was itching already, yearning for tobacco and ash and smoky sight. Yearning for sharp pains of fire.

“What makes you want to smoke, Harry?”

“Being outside.”

She pursed her lips, seemingly swallowing back a laugh at his persistent obstinacy. In truth, Harry did not know why he hurt himself so often. He’d gotten addicted to the taste of tobacco, of its smell, its feeling in his mouth. And when he smoked he hurt himself. It was habit. It was an easy, easy habit. A further truth was that he’d gotten addicted to the pain, too. He liked how his skin felt when it burnt. He liked forgetting, losing himself to cigarettes and loss. Sometimes, Harry sort of felt as though he deserved such punishment. He felt as though he deserved a lot of things, these days. It didn’t half bother him.
“Do you think you may follow through with these thoughts of suicide?”

“I don’t know. No, probably not. I have things to… do. People to be with.”

“Your friends, you mean.”

“Yes.”

“You appear incredibly reliant on them,” she remarked. “Would you say that it’s people that tie you to life? That they are what you consider most important?”

“Yeah,” he said, “yeah, I would.” He thought desperately of Ron and Hermione. He thought of Mum and Dad and Sirius. How he had loved and loved and loved again, how it made him who he was. “I think… I think it might be them, you know. When I first hurt myself I was thinking of the people I’d lost. I’m smoking because of the people I lost – Sirius, my godfather, he… I don’t know. I suppose I want to kill myself because of some people but I want to live for the rest. I don’t know what I’ll choose, in the end. Who I’ll choose.”

“This feeling of conflict has been present throughout all of your time in the wizarding world, it seems. There’s always something.” Her voice was soft and considering. He cocked his head, wondering what she was getting at. “You realise the difference in your lifestyle, now? He’s gone, Harry. You don’t have to worry anymore –”

“You think if I could just stop worrying –”

“Harry,” she said, and it calmed him. A rush of anger that had started boiling was instantly soothed. “I’m not suggesting that at all. I only want to help you recognise your irrational thought patterns: it’s this that helps combat depression.”

“So you think I’m depressed, then? That’s what’s been going on?”

“I think it’s likely,” she allowed. “We’ve been seeing each other for a while now and your symptoms are certainly consistent. I also think it’s possible you’re suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. You’ve been through a lot, Harry, and it’s not so unusual. I suspect many of the children at Hogwarts are experiencing some form of mental illness. And you have been through more than most.”

“I thought there were more treatments than just trying to think differently,” he countered, and she held his gaze, steady.

“There are options. Antidepressants, for example. I was going to bring them up, actually.” She uncrossed her legs and leant forward. “A drug trial could help, Harry. It’s not a guarantee, but it could make a big difference. But it’s up to you, really.”

“I think...” His mind stumbled over the agony of it all, of dying at night and living during the day. Harry was self-harming, that was true, but that was pain he deemed himself worthy of. Pain he controlled. The thick, hazy confusion he spent hours of the day submerged in was not the same as bright spots of burning pressed against his thighs for half a minute. They made him feel alive. This just made him feel dead. “I think I’m willing to try,” he said, and Joyce’s smile was radiant.

“I assume your GP is down in Little Whinging?” she was saying, and Harry was hit with the dizzying realisation that his path to being fixed had now well and truly began. “If you send me a letter with their details I can reach out to them, and we’ll sort out a prescription for you. Getting you on SSRIs could really help.”
“Right. Okay, then.”

“Are you okay, Harry?” she prompted.

“I’m afraid,” he admitted. His head was spinning, he felt vaguely nauseous. The world and all its windows, shattering, the world and its doors unlocking. Potential, possibility. “I… I don’t know who I am anymore. I feel like there’s a stranger staring back at me in the mirror – I’m changing, I’m so different. Will drugs help me… I don’t know, get back who I used to be? Or will they just take me further away?”

“Perhaps change isn’t something to be feared,” Joyce argued. “You’re eighteen years old, Harry. You’re barely an adult. Of course you’re changing – you’re growing. There’s no use holding onto the past. It will suffocate you.” She whispered this last part. Harry felt it reverberate all the way to his bones. His aching bones, heavy with exhaustion. His lovely bones.

“If I could let go of the past so easily, Joyce,” he murmured, “I wouldn’t be here.”

She looked so sad for him. The doors to the world were wide open and the windowpanes were broken to pieces. Harry’s life was in tatters already, and it had barely started – Joyce, for one, well into her forties, with a house and a husband and kids. And still, she wasn’t old. To her Harry was practically infant and he had suffered and endured so much. He had lived a million lives in eighteen short years. No amount of fluxweed or firewhisky could properly numb such sorrow.

“Then focus on the present,” she replied, soft and low. “Your friends who are here. Your family, your classes. Your next Quidditch game.”

Harry laughed. He liked laughing during these sessions – it put him at ease, constructed a friendly relationship rather than a working one. And the last thing he wanted was any formalities here. It was in the house of one of his school acquaintances. He paid her in wizarding currency and told her about having sex with a dormmate of his in a toilet cubicle. Theirs was not an arrangement that felt particularly professional. And sue him, but Harry wasn’t really a professional guy.

“Don’t tell me to focus on school!”

“How is school?”

“Boring.” She raised an eyebrow and he huffed, head falling back, eyes scanning the room like they always did when he was thinking in this room. His eyes traced the titles on her bookcase, digging deep, wondering. *The Great Gatsby* – a dreamer; an idealist? *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* – a young soul. *A Clockwork Orange* – experimentalist tendencies, of a sort. “I feel like there isn’t that much of a point. Not after everything.”

“There isn’t a point?” she asked, incredulous, and the words jumped from him before she could continue.

“No, I know there is. I know that it means life is moving on, that things are returning to normal. People are living, and that’s important.” His breaths were trembling with frustration. “I know it but I don’t feel it. And that feels pretty fucking awful. Everyone is moving on and I’m just stuck here, talking to you, because I’m a fucking mess. And – that’s not to say it’s your fault, or that I dislike our sessions, but I just – I feel – I don’t… it’s like I’m helpless. Like I’m pathetic. The only time I ever nearly get it is up in the air with everyone, looking for the Snitch. But aside from that… day to day, I go to classes, and none of it feels real. None of it feels right. It feels so pointless.”

“Oh, Harry,” Joyce said, tender, like a mother. Like the mother he had never had. Not in his
memory, at least. “You aren’t helpless. And you definitely aren’t pathetic. You’re a young boy who has had a great weight on his shoulders for so, so long. You endured horrors not many people your age could stand. And you can finally, finally rest. You get to breathe now, Harry. Play Quidditch. Go to class. Be a kid. You saved the world. You deserve it.”

Snap marked the end of the session. Harry breathed in the clean inside air. What world, he wanted to say, what world is the real one?

NOTES OF SESSION, DR JOYCE BULSTRODE

Patient to commence drug trial soon. Symptoms for depression and PTSD worsening – keep track of progress over next weeks/months. Feelings of worthlessness and suicidal tendencies surfacing. Patient mentions dreams that are quite lucid. May develop into night terrors & should be monitored carefully. Triggers seems to centre around grief – the main area of trauma despite personal experiences – and guilt, both relating to loved ones.

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