Summary

What if Voldemort had chosen the pureblood boy, not the halfblood, as his opponent? This Neville would have had graves to visit, instead of a hospital. He’d still have grown up in his grandmother’s clutches, tut-tutted at, dropped out windows absentmindedly, left to bounce on paving stones.

Let’s tell this story: Alice Longbottom, who was the better at hexing, told Frank to take Neville and run.

Notes

sigma-castell asked: Have you ever thought about writing a fic in which Voldemort went after the Longbottoms instead of the Potters?
Chapter 1

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She died on the braided rug of their sitting room floor. Frank heard her fall from where he stood in front of the cradle. He did not have time to run.

When the Dark Lord climbed the stairs and saw Frank, he laughed at the small man in front of him. Frank had crooked teeth, a mis-sized nose, big fingers and small, watery eyes. Voldemort looked at him the way children would look at Neville, in almost a decade, at stubby fingers around a rememberall, a wrinkled brow and a stammer. “Move aside,” he said, the way a different Voldemort had once offered a way out to Lily Potter. That had been for the sake of another man’s love, and this was for his own contempt. “Just let me have the boy. Did you really think you could—”

When Neville met Voldemort again, in his fourth year, when Luna’s advice, his own gillyweed knowledge, and Ginny’s Bat Bogey Hex lessons had gotten him through the Triwizard Tournament he’d never signed up to enter, there would be a bubbling scar on Voldemort’s sunken left cheek. His father had had time for one curse. Frank’s love had saved his son, marked him, but his hate had been enough, too, to scar Tom Riddle through every rebirth and transformation he would ever have.

Harry Potter would have grown up as James’s oldest son. I think Lily, who missed her sister, and James, who had found three brothers at school and loved them more than life, would have had more children: a little sister who James taught to fly (little Tuney’d be Keeper to Ginny’s Seeker, in a decade, and gossip terribly about Harry), a baby brother Lily fervently talked James out of naming Lupeterius. Harry would have grown up spoiled and loved, magical, with toy broomsticks and playdates with the other Order kids— stumbling Neville, the Bones girl and the rollicking Weasley bunch.

If the Potters were never the main targets, never hiding and frightened, I don’t think Peter would have turned when he did. Not enough gain. Not enough tail-tucking fear. Peter would have limped through to the end of the war, whiskers shivering in his soul even when they were popping champagne on the night Neville Longbottom’s parents died.

They raised delicate glasses that had somehow survived all the first war, laughing, in Godric’s Hollow, to the Boy Who Lived. Augusta Longbottom planned her children’s funeral and wondered if her grandson’s forehead would scar like that. Lily danced in the living room with James, on the garish rug that Sirius had bought them as a joke and that they had kept just to spite him.

But this was a story about Neville now—it would always be a story about Harry, somewhat, because it had never been the scar that made the boy. When Draco Malfoy stole Neville’s rememberall, this Harry would still jump on a broom; when Hermione, weeping in the bathrooms, didn’t know about the troll, Harry would still run to tell her—that instinct was not something even having loving parents (especially these parents) would have kept from him.

But this had always been a story about Neville, too— unscarred Neville, Neville with his pockets full of gum wrappers, this had always been the story of his rise and his steady soul. But this time he was marked from birth, a scar on his forehead and hands that weren’t any better at holding a wand. This
time, his grandmother had even more reason to look at him with disappointment when he spent all his childhood looking powerless.

Neville was not the disappeared savior who they whispered about. Halloween was still a celebration of Voldemort’s fall, but Neville was a lucky object, not a small hero, because where there had been a vacuum to fill when it had been Harry Potter, to fill with wonderment and thanks, here Neville toddled down Diagon Alley and held his grandmother’s hand. The whole world knew this boy was probably a squib, with pudgy fingers and a slow stammer, who didn’t learn to read until it was almost time to go to Hogwarts.

When Neville got his Hogwarts letter, the whole wizarding world was very politely surprised. He got told congratulations from strangers in the street, who in different universes would be shaking Harry Potter’s hand and swooning. Neville was far above smart enough to recognize than none of the other children got congratulated for the victory of being asked to attend school.

He asked the Hat for Hufflepuff and it gave him Gryffindor. He hoped they did not expect him to learn how to roar.

This was a Neville scarred. This was a Neville who would still get a rememberall and still forget it in his room two days out of five, who would eat a Weasley treat and turn into a canary, who would take Ginny Weasley to the Yule Ball and not once step on her toes.

This was a Neville who had had long conversations with the garden snakes in his backyard as a child and who had snuck them bits of his breakfast, kept track of which little serpent liked soft boiled eggs and which would dare to try a bit of sausage if he wiggled it properly. When he first got to Hogwarts, lonely, a lion in lamb’s fleece, Neville hid out behind the greenhouses and made friends with the snakes who curled on the warm rocks there.

In their first year, the same three kids fought a troll in a bathroom and became friends, because you can’t really escape it, after that. Neville had headaches, especially in Defense Against the Dark Arts; he thought it must be the garlic stuffed in Quirrell’s turbin. He tip-toed his own self down to kitchens and made himself tea to help with the ache.

Neville still tried to stop them, on the night Harry Potter met Voldemort for the first time and was summarily ignored by him, except for the sake of the Stone hidden in Harry’s pocket. Neville stood up in that common room, shaking, because the Hat had put him in Gryffindor and if he could not choose his destinies he would at least try to live up to them. Harry was still a firecracker of a child, his wild hair only surpassed by Hermione’s, and Ron was a cheerful time bomb.

"It’s You-Know-Who," said Harry, who in this world had never been afraid before, and Neville flinched. "You of all people—"

"It’s not," said Neville. Neville called him Voldemort, but only to himself, because he hated making other people flinch but he thought you should be on a first name basis with your nightmares. "He’s dead. You’re wrong. You’re going to get in trouble, and even if you weren’t wrong, I’m useless, so don’t—"

"I’m so sorry," said Hermione, drawing her wand, and they went to go break the Stone out of the Mirror for Voldemort and put Harry into a brief coma. Neville sent him a few boxes of chocolate frogs, listened to Hogwarts cheer for Potter, and cried a little bit because all was right with the world.

Or did he go with them? I am supposed to be brave, he told himself. But this was a boy who didn’t believe he was. Neville laid on the floor, petrified, until someone tripped over him on the way to the bathroom. He nursed his bruises in his bunk while Harry Potter slept in the infirmary.
With no love’s curse on him, Harry only survived because Fawkes had shown up, shrieking, to burn Quirrell to a crisp. The phoenix had always had a soft spot for reckless children. Dumbledore had always had a contingency plan.

Harry was reckless and Neville was not, and it was different in this world—this Harry thought he was invincible, not that he was less important than other people’s lives. Harry wanted to be as brave as the stories his godfathers told around the Christmas table.

At the end of it all, when things were measured and last stands made, it would not be the phoenix that came to Neville’s aid, or the sword. By the end of this, he would have an army at his back.

When the second war came, all four Marauders would be breathing. Fred and George would have had to find their passages themselves, had to invent their own map on cheaper materials and less prowess in Transfiguration but with a stronger grasp on physical chemistry—maybe theirs would have been enchanted spectacles or a scrying stone tucked in a pocket, something they could hold onto and wouldn’t have to worry about burning.

When the second war came, the Marauders would be the ages the wizarding world imagined the martyred Longbottoms had been when they died—adults, not the young, terrified, brave twenty-somethings they had been. Sirius would have a bit of a pot belly, even when he went Animagus and curled up by the fire, all limbs splayed in the air.

Peter gardened. Remus slept on their couches, all of them, but refused to take charity. After a few years, the Gringotts goblins stopped sending Remus letters whenever his vault got broken into and some new bag of Sickles and Knuts left behind in it. They cited budget cuts and a need to preserve paper. Lily kept a tally on a piece of notepaper on the kitchen fridge, summing up who had managed the most break-ins. She was winning.

The last thing this Harry would be was a bully. Lily had made sure of it. and, more than that, so had James. Decency, kindness to people who are different than you—these had been lessons hard won, built and earned, tinged with retrospective horror. James had been a child once, but he had once been a bully, too, and he was old enough now to know that those were different things.

"Boys may be boys,” James told his sons. "But that never means cruelty. It means you trip over things, and forget your mother’s birthday—lord knows I do—and never manage to wash behind your ears. But you be kind, kids, or you aren’t worth anything at all."

In this world, Severus Snape was not a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. He was never a double agent. Lily’s death was never dangled in front of him like bait, like a bauble, to drag him into something like light. Severus shared one cell wall with Bellatrix Lestrange and another with Rodolphus.

Lily leaned on her husband’s shoulder, in the faint warm light of their kitchen, and said, “But you be kind to you, first. Harry, you don’t owe anyone any part of you, no matter what they say.” James had lost a lot more sleep over Snivellus Snape’s fate than Lily ever had over the sweet, odd boy who had brought her daisies and hissed slurs at her sister.

When Harry first met Draco Malfoy, he didn’t hate him. On principle.

Harry stopped Malfoy’s bullying whenever he saw it, but Harry also said “good morning” every breakfast, like he meant it, and enjoyed the flabbergasted look on Draco’s face. Some days it was a joke, some days a penance, and on the best it was a kindness.

But we said this was a story about Neville, and it is.
When Neville heard a whispering voice in his ears his second year, he was quietly, firmly sure he had gone mad. That type of despair was quiet, in hands like his. It was resigned.

In that common room, there was another frozen chest like his, however, another set of hands watched carefully, tearfully, by the person they belonged to.

In this story, someone listened to Ginny Weasley. Neville asked her what was wrong and listened to the answer.

She was losing time, and he was losing trust in his ears. Ginny promised to listen when he heard words, and to follow when he ran after the whispers. He promised to watch her, to help her count her hours, and to follow when she drifted Shakily away from the backs of groups.

Neville found Ginny out by the chicken coops three times, glassy-eyed, and each time he wrapped her in his small twelve-year old arms until she stopped fighting him and woke up.

He didn’t manage to find her before she scrawled red threats on the Hogwarts walls, left Mrs. Norris hanging by the tail, but he took her down to the kitchen after, got some hot soup in her, and helped her scrub all the paint off her robes. He told her it was not her fault, which he had not promised to do, but he had said he would tell her the truth.

When Neville, terrified, wary, told her he could talk to snakes, Ginny shrugged. ‘Enemies of the Heir beware’ was scrawled on the Hogwarts walls and she knew pointing fingers at this juncture might get a bit complicated. Instead she said, “Ah, that makes sense,” because whenever Neville heard voices, she heard hissing.

They went into the book together, tumbled into Riddle’s memories. “He’s lying to us,” Ginny whispered, eleven, intimate with the difference between chicken’s blood and red paint on her hands. When young Riddle pointed to Hagrid’s Aragog and called it the monster, Neville thanked him politely for the news and they both tumbled out into their bodies.

"I can talk to snakes, not spiders," Neville pointed out.

"And it’s Slytherin’s monster. Why would it be a spider?” said Ginny with exasperation.

They tried to burn the book in the fireplace, learning *Incendio* from a suspicious Hermione and borrowing fire salamanders with Fred and George’s help. They broke into the Restricted Section to learn spells of destruction. Nothing worked.

Ginny had bad dreams, her soul still half in someone else’s pages, and she thought she knew where the entrance to the Chamber was. They were talking about closing down the school. Neville thought about living with his grandmother forever, not getting to come back, and decided that was less important than anything happening here. But Hermione got petrified, so Ginny grabbed Neville by one hand and dragged him up to where Harry and Ron were huddling together.

"We’re going to do something stupid," Ginny told them. "We thought you two were the people to talk to."

They got Fred and George, too, though not Percy, and soon each of them had pockets full of the twin’s more useful tricks and toys. (“It’s not on our map,” Fred told George, offended, when the bathroom sink opened up. They would feel gratified, years later, when they met the Marauder’s Map and found that they had missed this passage too).

Ginny collapsed to her knees on the bone-strewn floor of the Chamber, but her eyes didn’t close. Riddle ripped himself from the diary. He was just a barest outline and a hiss.
This time, it was not Harry alone. Ron judged the playing field, the pieces and the resources, and called orders that his brothers mocked loudly and then followed. Fred and George threw spells and tricks that spewed gum into the snake’s lethal eyes. Fawkes brought them a Hat and Harry dragged the sword out of it. Neville drew on every old lesson from garden snakes and screamed instruction and distraction at the basilisk. Harry killed it.

Hogwarts would always help those who asked for it. “I did ask,” hissed Ginny, and yanked the fang out of the basilisk’s head. “Hogwarts wasn’t listening.” Riddle howled when he went and Ginny limped out of the Chamber with one arm on Harry’s shoulders and one on Neville’s because Fred, George, and Ron were all much too tall.

(Lockhart didn’t manage to get on the end of his own faulty Obliviate, but he did manage to trip over one of dangling sleeves and end up in a full body cast. Dumbledore started looking for a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.)

There was no Sirius to break out in their third year. He was home, teaming up with Lily to torment James, who had grown what Sirius called “stodgy” in his old age. Sirius was too busy to lurk, hollow-cheeked, in the shadows; he had to teach the littlest Potter, who was still too young to go to Hogwarts, how to fly.

There was no Peter to lurk and nibble, to chitter and flee. Pettigrew was busy trying to teach Lily how not to kill every begonia she planted. He was busy mailing bottled bedtimes stories to little first year Tuney Potter, because she was homesick and he did the best animal voices. She would pull her head under her covers and uncork the bottle, and curl up until her godfather’s voice put her to sleep. When Tuney woke up, the bottle had always restoppered itself. It would start off, the next night, at whatever part of the story she last remembered.

So, except for some very intensive education on legal policies, appeals, and animal rights (Tuney, tagging at Hermione’s heels, became passionate about Buckbeak), that third year was a rather relaxing time. Lupin was a lovely teacher, and Harry was beside himself with glee about his (other) godfather’s presence, even if some little tattletale shared about his furry problem at the end of the year. Neville quite liked Lupin. He thought he might have understood about the snakes.

Neville met Luna Lovegood that year, too. “My father says your story is propaganda from the Ministry,” was the first thing Luna ever said to him. “He says He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was really brought down by a combination of centaur secret police and the Aurors’ gingivitus scheme.” Ginny laughed aloud and Neville decided, immediately, that he liked Luna. It was nice to meet someone who disbelieved in you, sometimes.

He and Ginny spent most of Neville’s peaceful third year exploring the castle with Luna. Ginny took them flying on brooms, around and around the lake, and Luna took them out to meet thestrals. Neville, who had not had his worst memories ripped to the front of his mind by dementors, could not see them. Ginny could. She had never seen anyone die, but she had killed Tom Riddle’s ghost and sent some of her self with him.

Neville introduced them to the snakes behind the greenhouses, expecting his friends to shy away, to run. Ginny grinned, instead. “Are they poisonous?”

Luna sank to her knees, palms out, robes pooling. “They’re warm,” she said, dreamily shocked, when they curled over her wrists.

"It’s just the sun," said Neville. His hands were a little shaky.

"That’s all it ever is," said Luna.
When Neville’s name got pulled out of the Goblet of Fire the next year, Ginny had to nearly shove him to the front of the room.

"Better a Puff than a squib!" Malfoy shrieked in the hallways, thrilled with himself, flashing Support Diggory/Longbottom Stinks buttons. Harry gave him disappointed glances and Draco was really not sure what to do with that kid.

After Voldemort returned, after Neville crashed down in front of the hedge maze onto Cedric’s corpse, Neville told Harry, “It should have been you.” Neville told him that, blubbering, when they pulled him to his bruised feet, and he told Harry again, quietly, on a late midnight in the boy’s dormitory. “It should have been you. You’re the brave one. You’d have stopped it. They’d believe me, if I was you.”

"Nonsense," said Harry. "You’re a hero, Neville." Then Harry sent Hedwig for Luna and Ginny because he and Ron both knew very little about what to do when someone started crying on you.

(Ginny bumped his shoulder in what was supposed to be a warming sort of bruise. Luna counted his tears with utter seriousness, cheering each one. “Did you know tears feed blubbering grackles?”)

The next year, Umbridge came. When Hermione explained her plan to Harry to teach the other students, she wheedled with Neville, too. “Neville, you got through the Triwizard Tournament.”

"With lots of help!"

"And Harry, you got through the third floor corridor our first year, and we all fought the basilisk our second. Well, not me."

"You’re the one who figured out what it was!"

Harry taught his favorite Expelliarmus from the dueling club Neville hadn’t attended, how to keep your head in battle, and all the useful prank and battle magics his godfathers had ever taught him. He wrote home for tips and Sirius and Lily sent him letters of suggestions while Remus and James sent back letters of cautions. Peter sent a pack of Dungbombs for Umbridge’s office.

Neville and Ginny taught the fire and destruction spells they had learned for the diary. Neville told them about the graveyard, stumbling, Ginny stubbornly adding in any bits of his own bravery he forgot to repeat.

Hermione dug up instructions on Patronuses, which seemed useful as messengers, and they taught that with Lupin’s stressed head floating in the fireplace to help out. Harry’s was not a stag but a snowy owl. Neville’s Patronus was a garden snake, and it coiled shyly around his ankle when people stared at it.

Neville had a nightmare of his grandmother, spitting in Voldemort’s face somewhere dark and lined with glass orbs. He went to Ginny. “I think Tom’s lying to us again,” she said. “But we better check it out.”

They broke into Umbridge’s office. The pink menace took Harry and Hermione, the clear ringleaders, out to the forest, and while they were busy leaving her to Grawp and the centaurs, Neville, Luna and Ginny disarmed Malfoy’s crew and sent Floo after Floo out— they woke up Lily and James, and they didn’t actually wake up Sirius and Remus, who were deep in a slightly tipsy chess game. Peter peered out at them, and then rushed off to gather Mundungus and the other harder-to-find members of the Order.

There was a ruckus at the Department of Mysteries, but Neville and his friends were busy at
Hogwarts while the Order of the Phoenix did their good work. The kids woke teachers, sent someone out to rescue Umbridge, and rifled through her desk to find something to either condemn her or blackmail Fudge with. Luna called Neville’s grandmother by Floo until she bothered to wake up and ask him if he’d got better marks in Transfiguration this year, that’s a strong wizard’s subject.

When Neville went home that summer, he slept til noon the first day, exhausted. Then he packed a bag and spent most of the rest of the summer couch-hopping from the Potters’ to the Wealseys’, the Lovegoods’ and last to the Grangers’, where he learned more than he ever wanted to about dental health and quite a bit he did want to about electricity. He saw a lot of Lily Potter that summer, too, because she found the Grangers delightful. Lily came over most weeks to watch Saturday morning cartoons, which she had sorely missed.

The school seemed peaceful when they got back for their sixth year, but Draco Malfoy seemed twitchy. Only Harry noticed, but Harry had been saying “good morning” to Draco for years now, through pranks and vicious Quidditch competition, sneers in Potions and taunts in the hall. He still managed to sound like he meant it each time.

"You suck for a lot of reasons," Harry had told Draco once. "But my mom says not all of them are your fault, and dad says to be the better man. Mom says I don’t have to give you a chance, but I can, if I want to. The rest is up to you."

Draco ran away, after Christmas. His parents disappeared from their estate, as did all of the ancestral jewelry that wasn’t soldered down or already cursed. Dumbledore, if it could be avoided, had never wanted to put murder on a boy’s conscience anyway, so he already had a secondary plan in place. This didn’t bruise it much.

Peter Pettigrew had been frightened, once, but he was older now. He was not twenty and desperate, but the Death Eaters remembered when he had been, and so they believed Pettigrew, easy, when he skittered into their camp.

Dumbledore didn’t have Severus’s heartstrings to play puppetmaster on, so he had circled Peter. Dumbledore called it a penance for a crime never committed, and Peter believed him.

In a different world, Albus Dumbledore had told Severus that he wanted to keep the Potter boy safe, and alive, and well. Do not listen to wise old men when they smile at you and ask you for repentance. I do not care how clean their hands seem.

In this story, it was Pettigrew who let the Death Eaters in, and it was Pettigrew who killed Dumbledore in the high tower. It was Neville who was hidden below the tower floor, listening to Dumbledore plead and tumble off the battlements.

It was still Harry, though, who chased Pettigrew down the grassy slope, screaming about cowardice.

His godfather had been that young once, sixteen with war brewing on the horizon. When Peter had cried like that it had been quiet, alone, buried in the back of the closet, where no one would know that he was scared, that he didn’t want to die for them. Harry raged down the grass after him, the castle alight behind him, wand drawn, shrieking about cowards, about family.

"I know," said Peter, whiskers not shaking at all. "I’m sorry." He didn’t scream it. He got himself beyond Hogwarts’s borders and Disapparated.

The Potter house was stuffed with all the Marauders but one, that summer, and it was quiet like a wake. Peter had never told even his best friends about Dumbledore’s plan.
No one said, “I always knew he was a rat,” because they had known that, they all had. To them rat meant blooming hedges in the dead of winter, meant poor table manners and bottled bedtime stories. There were dried herbs hanging in Lily’s kitchen that had grown in Peter’s garden. She did not throw them out.

Harry, a locket in hand, gave Sirius his baby brother’s last letter. Sirius read Regulus’s sharp handwriting over and over, the hateful hope he threw in Voldemort’s teeth. When Regulus had died, years ago, Sirius had swallowed hard and thought good riddance. Sirius wrapped a hand now around his godson’s shoulder and said, “Thank you.”

Neville spent the first part of that last summer in that shivering house, before Bill and Fleur’s wedding, before the war fully began. After a week of stunned silence, Lily rounded them all up, fierce as Neville had only known Ginny to be, and made them all go play Quidditch in the dry summer heat until they came in exhausted, flushed, wearing some kind of smile.

Kinglsey’s Patronus warned them at the wedding, and they split up. Dumbledore had been solemnly gifting Neville with memories and theories of Tom Riddle’s Horcruxes all last year, and Neville had gone back after each lesson and told the stories to his friends. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had always been the reckless, and they volunteered to scour the world for each piece of Voldemort’s soul. Hermione was good at riddles and ruthlessness, at staying alive; Ron at seeing patterns, weaknesses; Harry at pulling through in the last, hardest moments.

They had a screaming row about it first, with Molly and James and Sirius, about children going to war. Remus sat in the corner, face in his tired hands. Lily stepped in, finally, a hand on James’s shoulder, a finger to Harry’s chin.

"I wish you didn’t have to," Lily told her oldest son. "But I am so proud of you." She had grey in her red hair that shouldn’t be there, but it was.

In his will, Dumbledore had left Luna a Put-Outer which she used to cause chaos in Hogwarts’ occupied corridors. He left Ginny nothing. He left Neville a snitch, and Neville gave it to Harry. “You’ll have more fun with this, I think,” he said. When Neville went to die he would not see the faces of parents lost. He had never found the Mirror of Erised. None of that made it hurt more, or less.

Neville went home. He went back to Hogwarts. He’d have been arrested on sight, so he took Arthur Weasley’s car and then tip-toed up to the Room of Requirement. He did not have the cloak. Harry had the stone and he would have the wand. When Neville walked out to the forest to die, he would not be master of anything, let alone death. He would be a boy, not yet quite grown, who was ready to die for other people. And, really, that was all this had ever been about.

Neville waited for children to come to the Room and they did. Some came because they were brave or wise, fair or clever. Some came because they were frightened. Young Slytherins lingered by the walls, shy, scared, and Neville greeted them each by name. Luna greeted them each by favorite ice cream flavor, but that was because she understood the important things in life.

Tuney Potter slipped in, heading straight for Ginny’s right hand; Tuney had her father’s hair, wild and tangled down to her shoulders, her mother’s freckles, and both their stubbornnesses. The youngest Potter child had been kept home, kept hidden, but Tuney had refused.

Neville stood up in front of them, and he remembered standing in the Gryffindor common room, shaking, telling three reckless kids to not be brave. “I know none of us feel like we are the people who are supposed to be here,” he said. “This is a big story, for heroes, and I think I cried three times last week.”
"Well, I cried four," a Ravenclaw from the back of the room called, grinning.

"You win," he agreed. Neville looked out at Dumbledore’s last army and they looked back. "This is supposed to be a school. It’s supposed to be safe, and you’re supposed to be children, do you see? Children, and we shouldn’t have to be fighting these battles. It never should have been us. It never should have been me."

He had Ginny at his back, all bright hair and brighter hexes. Luna had her eyes on everything but other people’s gazes, and she slipped in and out like a breeze to whisper secrets and riddles. There were dozens of frightened children staring up at him, listening like he might be saying something worth hearing.

"But we’re all there is," said Neville.

There was a small army at his feet, rosy-cheeked and soft-palmed. When they had nightmares, these days, they woke up so quiet. Their dormmates woke up, too, anyway, light sleepers all, and tossed them chocolate.

Harry came back, Horcruxes and their shattered shells in hand, Ron and Hermione at his tired heels. This time, Neville did not tell Harry he should have been the one carrying the scar. No one should have to carry this. But Neville looked out at his lieutenants, his foot soldiers, and knew— any one of them would have tried if he had asked them to.

Neville used his snakes to send messages through the Hogwarts halls. By the end, even Gryffindors were keeping snake treats in their pockets. Hufflepuffs were inventing spells to heat flagstones up to just the right sunbaked warmth, and Ravenclaws were teaming up with Slytherins, trying to see if Parseltongue was something you could learn.

When the challenge echoed through the halls, Neville walked out to the forest. He didn’t tell anyone he was going and they were not surprised when he was gone, just furious, just proud. Neville didn’t know about the Horcrux living in his skin and bone, but he did know what he owed the children clustered in the belly of that castle.

The Death Eaters carried Neville’s body to the courtyard, and offered the students ungenerous terms of surrender. Neville was not there, not in this story, to be the first to stand and refuse, but his lieutenants beat him to it, his foot soldiers and his children. In that courtyard, Harry killed a snake with a sword for the second time, but those kids had spent nearly a year watching Neville refuse to give up against all odds. He had taught them how and they would not let their general down now.

Voldemort was mortal now, every shattered piece of his soul turned back to sand and dust. When he died at Hogwarts’ doorstep, his body thumping on the flagstones, it was at the end of a half dozen avada kedavras, screamed from the throats of children who would have war living in their breastbones all their lives.

Neville was too busy to watch Tom Riddle hit ground; he counted his soldiers, his children, checked perimeters and measured enemies. Neville rose to his feet. His army turned outward, wands drawn, and the Death Eaters broke and fled.

There were bodies laid out on the Great Hall floor. In every version of this story, there were bodies here. That is what war does. A brother. Lovers. Children.

Harry’s face went rigid when he saw his godfather on the ground— Peter was not really his godfather, not exactly. Sirius had gotten Harry, and Remus got his little brother, and Peter was Harry’s little sister’s.
But Peter was laid out there. He had gotten six Death Eaters before they had gotten him. When Harry said something numbly about guilt, about repentance, Ginny, who had been there, shook her head. “No, I don’t think that was it.”

Harry went to find his sister. By the time he reached Tuney and told her the news, he was crying. It was not quiet crying and he did not care.

When they found Peter’s last letter, hidden in Tuney’s disused pile of old stuffed animals, the Marauders got drunk and loud, sad and furious, and proud, so proud, of Peter for being brave enough to let his friends hate him. It is one thing to stand up to your enemies and quite another to stand up to your friends.

The dust settled. They had to decide what to do now that imminent death was no longer so high on the menu. Neville let his bangs grow out and cover his scar. Harry got rid of the wand, the stone, and kept the cape. People recognized Neville not by his scar or his clumsy hands, but by the set of his shoulders, his chin, the way the room turned to look for his orders.

Neville would make the rest of his life about life — growing things and teaching children. Harry tried out to be an Auror, reckless and lucky and good. Neville applied to work as a Herbology teacher.

Neville listened to his students, the shrill girls and the shy ones, the boys who stumbled over their tongues and the ones who walked with chests shoved out like pigeons’. He left flowers at more graves, these days, than just his parents’. He made a little flap door in the greenhouses so the garden snakes might slither in and curl up in the warmth, even in the winter.

His scar did not ache. All was well.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Let’s tell another story where Voldemort, snippets of prophecy in hand, went after the Longbottoms instead of the Potters—

Neville Longbottom didn’t do magic until he was nearly eight (and even then it was just bouncing down the stairs after he had tripped), but his grandmother beamed proudly all the same.

"Used up eight years of it slaying dark wizards," she told her other society ladies over tea.

But Neville, in any ‘verse, was not a stupid boy. When people praised him for things that weren’t his fault, he knew better than to believe they were looking at him. Overlooking the stammering, pudgy kid in the corner isn’t that much different from seeing the scar and not the boy.

This was a Neville who stepped onto Platform 9 3/4 with all eyes on him— the Remerberall clutched tight in one sweaty fist, the sleek black cat his uncle had bought him under the other arm. He did not ask for Hufflepuff, even though he wanted to, because he was supposed to be brave.

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His grandmother smiled at him and Neville gulped, tried to will magic into being, because one day she would expect him to be done recuperating from his toddling heroism.

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Peter still betrayed James and Lily to enemy hands. Sirius still chased him down and laughed when
he was arrested on the blasted-apart street. Both of these boys were still raised by families that did not know how to love them. Just the scar exchanged hands.

Except—I wonder if old Dumbledore would have made Harry go to the Dursleys then, or if that particular condemnation was only for the Boy Who Lived, who needed blood protection. Would Harry get to go to Lupin? Or maybe one of the Order members with a more stable income—Andromeda Tonks, maybe, who already had her own little girl to raise, and who despite all the complications did miss having siblings around.

Little Nymphadora, who even then demanded to be called Tonks, turned her hair every color and let baby Harry tug on it. Harry grew up loved, in this world, but he still grew up lost. He still studied his reflection like meeting his eyes might mean meeting someone else’s.

Harry still grew up knowing how to use a telephone, spent Christmases with Muggle grandparents. Andromeda went toe to toe with Dumbledore when she disagreed with him; “If I am to raise this boy, then I am going to. I won’t be your nanny, Albus. I don’t care what half a prophecy this boy once was. I don’t care if you glower. I’m a mother and I am a Black and you can think twice before you think about trying to frighten me.”

Ted told Harry and Tonks the story of Goldilocks (he turned his Metamorphmagus nose to a bear snout whenever appropriate), and Andromeda told them about the Deathly Hollows.

"Which brother is the baby bear?" asked Tonks, not yet old enough for Hogwarts, a literary critic’s light in her eyes. "Which one is just right?"

When Harry went to St. Mungo’s, clinging to Andromeda’s steady hand, tugging on Lupin’s robe, Lily never quite met her son’s eyes. James stole bottle caps and played catch with shaking hands, tried to sneak them out into Harry’s pockets, grin skittering.

"I think he thinks they’re snitches," Lupin said. Harry was eight before he learned his father and Lupin were childhood friends. He was surprised. He’d always thought Lupin was much much older.

In this world, on the Great Hall stone, there was a boy in the crowd named Ron who would be a Gryffindor, because every Weasley always was; there was a boy named Draco who would be a Slytherin, before the Hat had even barely touched his head.

In this world, there was a boy in the crowd who would be a Hufflepuff, because his big sister was the best thing in the world and Nymphadora Tonks wore yellow on her sleeve.

The whole Gryffindor table cheered when the Hat called out Neville’s House. Which House is the honest one? he wondered to himself, walking down to a long row of roaring lions and quaking in his shoes, feeling like a liar.

Percy clapped him on the back. Professors tutted kindly when Neville’s spells didn’t come out and gave him points anyway, looking so much like his grandmother Neville almost choked on his tongue. Slughorn, in Potions, was the worst.

But Professor McGonagall frowned at Neville when his Transfiguration homework came in crumpled, stained. She pushed him in class, called him in after hours to push him harder, didn’t give him passing grades on tests when he didn’t earn them.

Neville appreciated it. McGonagall was terrifying, and he didn’t believe her when she said, “You can do this. You should be able to do this,” but he appreciated that the professor was at least reading more of his work than just the name he wrote on top of the page.
Ron was the second to last Weasley to come to Hogwarts, a dirt smudge on his nose and an old rat in his pocket. Harry had sat with Tonks and her friends on his first Hogwarts Express journey, so Ron hadn’t had another young kid, as wide-eyed, as rough-edged, to sit across from him in the train compartment and look at him like he was something worth his interest. But when Ron got up to his dormitory, Seamus was putting up Quidditch posters and Dean was asking what that was, and that was a good start.

Neville had fallen off every toy broom he’d ever sat on, and he was trying so hard to earn the grades he was blithely given, so he hunched his shoulders and studied in the common room while his dormmates tossed a Quaffle back and forth upstairs, gleeful eleven year old boys away from home for the first time.

Neville’s cat had vanished sometime between the platform and the train compartment he had wobbled into. He’d known that if he’d told someone then the whole train would have been up in arms with cheerful helpfulness that was at once honorific and pitying. Instead, he pretended the cat was shy and hiding under his bed all year long.

On Halloween, a troll got into the dungeons. Kids screamed, teachers paled, Quirrell fainted, and Dumbledore sent them all home to their Common Rooms.

"I heard Hermione was crying in the girl’s bathroom," Parvati Patil told Lavender Brown. Harry Potter was not in the crowd to hear, to fetch Ron and slip away. Percy rounded up the first years and marched them out.

"Agh," sighed Parvati, after they’d gone a few hallways towards the Gryffindor Tower.

"We should probably go get her," agreed Lavender, because they were both lionesses, too. They dragged their feet until they were in the back of the group, and then they disappeared. Neville, who had tripped leaving the Hall, was limping along at the back of the pack so he saw them go.

I’m supposed to be a hero, he thought, and followed.

The troll had already passed the bathroom, so it was an empty alcove in the next hallway where the three Gryffindors cornered the beast—well, got cornered by it.

Neither of them were any good at Wingardium Leviosa, but Neville let out a stream of red sparks when he tried and Lavender shrieked schoolyard hexes that tangled the troll’s ankles and slapped at his knees. It was Parvati, though, who shouted a curse and sent the thing crashing down.

"My mom was in the war," Parvarti said, shy, when they both stared. Neville was having trouble breathing and Lavender was grinning, flushed, from ear to ear.

"It was m-my fault," said Neville when the teachers found them and demanded explanation, and if it had been anyone but Professor McGonagall glaring down at them—Slughorn, perhaps—that might have worked. But it was Minerva, so they each got ten points taken from Gryffindor.

The next day at breakfast, Parvati dropped down on Neville’s left in the Great Hall, Lavender on the right, and they talked over him about Charms homework and the latest Witch Weekly. There are some things you just can’t live through without being friends afterward.

Lavender was silly, and sharp with it: acerbic, selfish, and kind. The next time Draco tried to trip Neville in the hall, she punched him in the nose with her little sparkly purple-nailed fist. Parvati linked an arm with her, an arm with Neville, and dragged them both, giggling frantically, down the hall.
No one went to break into the third floor corridor that year, so there was no earnest, honest kid to get the Stone out of the Mirror for Voldemort. When Dumbledore got back from his late-night trip, Quirrell and Voldemort were long gone and empty-handed. Slytherin won the House Cup. Percy cried about it.

The next year, Tonks had graduated, so Harry stepped onto the Express alone, his shy rat (a gift from Ted Tonks) in one pocket. Tonks and Andromeda were on the platform, but he had decided he was too old to press his nose against the window and wave until they were out of sight.

All of the compartments were stuffed full of talking, laughing children, looking like they’d already made all the friendships they wanted to. All but one— in the back of the train, in the compartment with the broken window latch, a girl with long white-blond hair and slightly bulging blue eyes was reading a magazine upside down. “Hi,” he said. “I’m Harry Potter. Do you mind?”

"Who?" said Luna, and scooted over to give him room to sit.

Hermione Granger studied by herself in the Gryffindor Common Room, tucked into the corner in the most comfortable chair. She carefully built a wall of books in front of her, like lovely, colorful bricks, and left herself spaces to watch through. So when Ginny Weasley came to Hogwarts and grew paler, more skittish, waning and frozen, Hermione saw her.

Hermione had spent her whole first year building walls of books and feeling herself shrink in her skin. She had sat in her bedroom, that summer, and thought long and hard about whether or not she wanted to come back to Hogwarts. In the end, she decided that it wasn’t as though she had any more friends in the Muggle school down the road, either. At least this way, she would have magic.

So when she saw Ginny growing smaller and smaller, Hermione finished her paragraph in her Potions essay, marked her page, and walked over to ask Ginny how her day had been.

This was a Hermione who had never lied about a mountain troll, never brewed Polyjuice Potion in a bathroom or fought a three-headed dog. When Ginny finally, tearfully, explained her fears about the diary, Hermione took her by hand and they took the book to Professor Flitwick, who nearly fainted upon examining it. They got fifty points for Gryffindor, each. The rest of the year passed fairly peaceably. The exams were not canceled.

When the dementors came in the third year, Neville heard his mother screaming. So did Harry, who was holed up in the compartment with Luna, who was seeing her mother’s last spell go bad over and over again.

Ginny, who had nightmares about Riddle’s voice in her head but none about the chill of the Chamber, gripped Hermione’s hand tight. Hermione had her Time Turner tucked quietly under her robes, new and nervous with it. Three weeks into the school year, Ginny would drag Hermione into the girls’ bathroom and demand an explanation.

"Ginny, I have to do my Arithmancy homework, I can’t talk right now…"

"You need to tell me why you look like you’re dying,” said Ginny. When Hermione finally gave in, Ginny took a leaf out of Percy’s book and drew up a schedule—Hermione had scheduled her classes perfectly, of course, but Ginny wrote in snack breaks and a sleep schedule to supplement her more-than-twenty-four hours days.

Harry took Muggle Studies for a third year elective, but Neville, Lavender, and Parvati all signed up for Divination. When Professor Trelawney predicted Neville’s death in the first class, Lavender, who had been watching her with soft admiration, snapped upright. “He will not,” Lavender said.
"The Inner Eye..." Trelawney murmured.

"Nothing’s killing Neville," Lav said. "Get your eyes checked."

Hermione walked out of Divination around Easter. So did Lavender. Trelawney was not predicting any future that Lav wanted a part in.

Trelawney reminded Parvati of her grandmother though, frail and big-eyed, off-kilter in ways that made you think, so she went up for tea with the old witch every week or so. When Lavender’s rabbit died in October and Lav cried on Neville’s uncertain shoulder, Parvati thought about all the things she dreaded most.

Parvati and Lavender, to the other dormitory boys’ dismay, spent most of their time now cross-legged on Neville’s four poster. “It’s not our fault boys are banned from the girls’ dormitory,” they shrilled, and went back to painting Neville’s toes a lovely midnight blue.

The boys—Ron, Seamus, Dean—talked Quidditch loudly, trying to drown them out. They tossed Seamus’s Quaffle over their heads while Neville ducked down over Herbology books, until the day Parvati caught the Quaffle and hurled it at Seamus’s chest with a rapid-fire litany of the present World Cup rankings.

"I’m rooting for Ireland," Parvati said, and told Seamus in very clear terms exactly why she thought his team was going to fall apart before the finals.

"No bad words for my Chudley Cannons?" Ron asked, when all three of the boys were blinking, subdued, at her smug grin and good aim.

Her smile turned kinder, though Lav’s didn’t. “Well,” said Parvati. “I have a soft spot for lost causes.”

That was the year Ginny got popular, lovely and loud. She got made Seeker of the Gryffindor team and helped them win the Cup for Oliver Wood’s last year.

Ginny liked cheering crowds with her name written on their cheeks in red paint. Weasley is our Queen. She liked walking out with boys and she liked the way her sharp tongue made people startle or laugh or blush.

But she always drifted back to Hermione’s little book fort, which had room for two. There was a person who had seen Ginny when she was scared and small and shrinking, and that was none of this glittering crowd.

Hagrid, outcast with odd teeth and bushy hair, was one of the few friends Hermione had made her first year, even if she didn’t quite care for the efficacy of his teaching style. She and Ginny stayed up late in the common room, drinking hot cocoa and studying for Buckbeak’s hearing, until Ginny bullied Hermione to sleep.

Sometimes Neville joined them, pouring over old cases about dangerous animals; Hagrid had known and loved the Longbottoms as well as the Potters. Neville got Lavender and Parvati to help a little, too, but their notations weren’t up to Hermione’s standards, and Parvati and Ginny just usually ended up talking about Quidditch.

It was also the year Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban. There were dementors around Hogwarts, because thirteen people in a single curse is a striking thing, but there were no specific protections around Harry Potter except for a two-way mirror in his pocket that led straight to Andromeda and Ted, the Anti-Jinx amulet Tonks had snuck out of Auror stores, and a necklace of dried, ugly roots
that Luna said gave luck.

In this story, Harry had a family who loved him, had yellow on his sleeve and spent half his free time in Lupin’s office with Luna, playing with grindylows and redcaps. Harry’s boggart was still a dementor. Harry and Luna both practiced Patronuses and nibbled chocolate under Lupin’s watchful eye.

In this world, though, Harry had known what his father’s voice sounded like before his shout echoed in unseeing ears. Take Harry and run! Lily, go! When he visited, sometimes James knew Harry’s name.

Harry always kept a bottle cap in his pocket. Ted Tonks had taught him Muggle coin tricks with it. He’d flicked the brightly painted caps over his fingers and then showed Harry his empty hands, the cap gone. “Just like magic,” said Ted and winked.

This Harry grew up with Lupin as an uncle, with stories of the Marauders—James idealized, Peter pitied, and Sirius bitterly, briefly touched on. But Harry knew enough to know that when he saw a shaggy black dog slipping down through the Whomping Willow’s branches, a rat’s tail hanging from his jaws, he probably shouldn’t give chase.

But don’t listen when they tell you Hufflepuffs don’t have adventures every bit as foolish as Gryffindors. Harry grabbed his Cloak and vanished. Luna caught his hem and made him take her with him. When they tell you Ravenclaws are wise, not loyal, don’t listen to that either.

(Peter Pettigrew had never made it past Sirius, who had been waiting in the woods outside Hagrid’s cabin for the rat he could smell inside to make a run for it. When Voldemort arose from a cauldron, in a year, it would be with Quirrell’s shaking hands, not Peter’s.)

"You look like your father," Sirius told him, staring, soft, once the shouting and threats had calmed down and everything had been explained. Luna had taken both their wands and told the grimy old man to stop being so dramatic and just talk. "You have Lily's eyes."

"I know," said Harry, and did his best not to snap it. He saw them every few weeks during hospital visiting hours. He knew what they looked like.

Sirius, grinned, sharp and skeletal and friendly. “And when you’re mad and don’t want anyone to know it, you smile just like Lily used to.”

"Oh," said Harry.

"Does anyone feel cold?" said Luna.

When the dementors swarmed down, Luna was the last one standing. Harry was better at casting a Patronus, at thinking happy thoughts that tied into the earth. But Luna was used to standing even when wrackspurts were turning her whole world gray. There were too many griefs here for any soul, though. When a shining white stag circled them, Luna finally fell, too.

In those last moments Harry still thought he saw his father, summoning a Patronus on the far side of the lake. Maybe he got better, he thought when he stirred in the infirmary, after. Maybe he woke up, woke all the way up, and came to find me.

But Harry knew better. His father gave him bottle caps. His mother never met his eyes, but she held his hand and let him brush her hair. They were finding him the best way they could.

"Why don’t we steal Buckbeak?" Luna asked the ceiling thoughtfully from the next bunk over. Madame Pomfrey was puttering on the other side of the infirmary. Luna blinked, long and slow.
"There’s a little redhead in my Defense Against the Dark Arts class who keeps calling that case An Injustice. And Sirius needs a ride, doesn’t he?"

Luna got Ginny, who got Hermione, who nervously got out her Time Turner once everything had been explained, in whispers, from where they were hiding in the infirmary supply closet.

When Harry went home that summer and told Andromeda about it all, she laughed until she cried. “Sirius was always my favorite cousin,” she said. “He was the only Black I invited to my wedding. I’m glad to know I wasn’t wrong.” Andromeda sent back a letter by the little owl who had brought Sirius’s note to Harry, explaining to her baby cousin that if he did not find a way to drop in for tea, wanted criminal or not, she would have to come find him herself.

Harry took Luna home with him for a few weeks that summer. Luna grilled Tonks about Ministry conspiracies until Tonks was laughing in her seat, her ears squishing and elongating from the effort.

This was a Harry with yellow on his robes’ hem, who snuck Luna into the kitchens after someone had stolen yet another pair of her shoes, who kicked the shins of the first Hogwarts student who said Mudblood in front of him.

Lupin met up with this Harry on Hogsmeade weekends and had to be bullied out of buying Harry candy with money he didn’t have to spare. Lupin didn’t tell him he looked like James, that he had Lily’s eyes. Remus told him things that Harry didn’t already know—that Harry drank his Butterbeer like Lily had (too fast), that he held himself like Ted Tonks and laughed like Nymphadora, like he really truly meant it.

Mad-Eye Moody had been Tonks’s mentor; in his fourth year Harry bounced around the man who had spent a dozen teas squinting at Harry’s ex-Black of an adopted mother and checking the scones for poison. The old Auror seemed off-kilter in Hogwarts, his quirks and growls not ringing quite right. “I’ve never seen him as a teacher,” Harry told Luna. “That’s probably it.”

The Goblet, again, spat out the Chosen One’s name and the whole room went silent. The other three champions stared when Neville was ushered into the back room; Cedric recovered quickest, reached out and shook his hand. Lavender had levered Neville up to standing, and Parvati had given him a kind shove toward the front of the room. Out in the Great Hall, the two girls were eyeing each other and mentally clearing that year’s schedules.

"Ah, the hero of British wizardry,” said Fleur, politely. Neville thought, firmly, refusing the butterflies in his stomach, that Parvati and Lavender were both much prettier than she was.

Dumbledore did not ask him if he had put his name into the Goblet of Fire. Neville, who hadn’t anyway, was quietly offended. I am, in fact, he thought, in the House of the rash, reckless, and brave. The Hat said so, it did!

For the first task, Neville found one herb to mask his scent and another to cause invisibility in all the spectrums dragons saw in. Hagrid had taken him out to see the dragons. Neville’s task, while successful, was voted the least interesting. The dragon napped while light footprints, too small and distant for the crowd to see, tip-toed up to the egg.

Later, Neville almost leapt out of his skin when he found Krum at his shoulder in the library one evening. He’d been told to beware of Durmstrang, but once the adrenaline had settled down Neville recognized the raised shoulders and nervous shift of Krum’s face.

"Apologies for interrupting," said Krum. "I thought you would not…"
"Not mind?" said Neville, who had been sitting alone. Parvati and Lavender were out behind the
greenhouses with the golden egg, where they wouldn’t shatter the library’s silence with its shrieks.  
(“I can do it alone,” Neville had told them and they had said, "Of course you can, silly. But you 
don’t have to.”)

“I thought you would not laugh,” said Krum. Krum had watched Neville drop his wand at the wand-
weighing and nearly trip onto his face on the way up to the Goblet in the Great Hall. Neville, for a
swift moment, felt not clumsy but safe. "Who… who is she?" Krum asked, nodding across the
library.

"Oh. That’s Hermione." Neville glanced at Krum, who was—blushing? "Do you want me to
introduce you?"

For the second task, they took Lavender. We’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss. Neville, stuffed full
of gillyweed and fresh off getting away from a grindylow (he should send Professor Lupin a thank
you note, he really should), saw she had done both her nails and her make-up fresh before getting
taken. Probably her hair, too, but that was all a great cloudy mess swaying around her head. She was
going to be bitter about this when she hit surface, water-logged and smudged.

For now, though, Lavender looked dead; cold and swollen in the green-gray water. Neville cut the
rope, rather than spell it loose, because he felt his knife was a lot more dependable than he was, and
dragged them both up toward the light. Parvati threw blankets around them both. Gryffindor
cheered, and some of Ravenclaw did, too, and Neville realized, shivering, that this time it was for
what he did and not what he was.

In the crowd, Harry Potter cheered for Cedric Diggory—the best of his House and the best of his
school. Harry would have worn a Longbottom Stinks badge, except Tonks found him with it over
winter break.

"Tearing down other people doesn’t do anything to help the people you care about," Tonks said
sternly, putting a hand out for him to give the badge to. "Go ask Cedric how you can help, if you
need to do something."

Harry did, and Cedric told him, solemnly, that the thing that would help him win best was if Harry
ate all his vegetables and did his homework. When Cedric died in the third task, Harry would think,
irrationally, guiltily, of that last sprig of broccoli he had left on his plate at dinner.

Neville would have nightmares about the graveyard. He would think, irrationally, guiltily, that he
had been lying to the world all his life, that he really was just a scar and not a boy at all.

The next year, Dumbledore’s Army would not spring into being because of Hermione’s driven hand,
but because Neville was spending every early morning and late night holed up in an empty classroom,
practicing battle magic. Parvati was the first to join him, because she was the first to notice the dark
circles under his eyes and the way he kept disappearing.

He blushed furiously when she first came across him and his sparking, off-target Expelliarmus.
Neville stammered, trying to explain why he was here, but she just shut the door and drew her wand.
“Show me how,” Parvati said.

"I c-can’t—I can barely—"

"Yes, you can," she said.

Lavender came next, because wherever Parvati was, she wasn’t far behind. Padma showed up,
dragging Cho Chang along, who dragged Luna, who had a Hufflepuff named Harry tagging at her heels.

Neville stepped up in front of the group and taught like every speck of power he had was something he had had to dig up and build himself. When Ginny dragged Hermione along, Hermione sat in the corner of the room and chewed slowly over the idea that not everyone could just learn things by reading a book four times.

Hermione started SPHEW that year, too; Ginny covered her book bag with buttons about House Elf Liberation and pressed Hermione’s pamphlets onto anyone who would read them.

Harry tagged along the edges of Parvati and Ron’s fervent Quidditch talk (“You’re the Hufflepuff Seeker, aren’t you?” said Ron and Harry blushed hard, nodded; he had taken over the empty hole Cedric had left on the team and he did not think he was filling it well enough). Harry also put Stinkbombs in the shoes of anyone in the DA who teased Luna.

When the teachers asked them about careers in their fifth year, Harry didn’t hesitate. “I want to be an Auror,” he said. Tonks had finished her first year as a full Auror and had sent him weekly letters all through it. She sent him other letters, too, half-censored stories about working with the Order: long, boring watches and frantic midnights smuggling secrets.

Mom and Molly Weasley are teaming up to stuff everyone full of corned beef, Tonks reported back. I’ve been spending a lot of time with Remus. I think even Mom’s corned beef is better than what he’s used to getting.

Hufflepuff, as a general rule, did not believe Neville Longbottom when he blubbered (this was how Rita Skeeter described it) about Voldemort being back. But Harry was the little brother of an Auror, and the adopted son of the estranged daughter of House Black. Order members had tea in his mother’s kitchen on the regular.

"I’m surprised it took him this long," Andromeda had said, buttering her toast over a summer lunch, while Ted renewed protective magics on the house. They hadn’t needed much renewing. The Tonks family had lived like they might be at war since the day Andromeda had walked out of her mother’s house for the last time.

Harry wrote I must not tell lies into the back of his fist, over and over. He wasn’t the Chosen One, not here, but that had never been why he jumped to his feet when people said simpering, untrue things.

At Neville’s career guidance meeting, he stammered. He was stammering less and less these days, in front of the DA, but here professors were looking at him with expectation. “I-I don’t know.”

"Well, what do you want to do?” said Professor McGonagall.

Neville hunched his shoulders. “I already did my life’s work, didn’t I?”

"No,” said McGonagall sternly. "Unless you’re a ghost, Mr. Longbottom, and didn’t bother to inform me?"

In their sixth year, Dumbledore started calling Neville into his office for Horcrux storytime. “Ew,” said Lavender when he explained it all to them. “That’s gross.”

"Also evil, Lav,” Parvati said.

"But also gross," said Lavender and wrinkled her nose.
Puberty hit them all that year with unsettling suddenness. Ron played exasperated matchmaker between Dean and Seamus, asking Ginny for help and advice on her ex and her ex’s best friend. Ginny rolled her eyes, went on experimentally kissing a careful selection of the student body, then went back to practicing Bat Bogey Hexes with Hermione.

When Ron started dating Lavender, Neville pulled him aside and stammered threats that he very much meant. “If y-you hurt her,” said Neville, and he was surprised to see Ron gulp audibly and nod.

Parvati slipped over and put one friendly arm around Neville’s shoulder. “And I’ll help,” she said. Ron fled.

Dumbledore withered, with no double agent’s position to earn with his death. On a hot Tuesday in the summer between their sixth and seventh years, the curse eating his hand stopped his old, wise, ruthless heart.

McGonagall found him and buried him in a quiet little ceremony, Fawkes on one shoulder, Aberforth sitting quiet on the sparse lawn chairs. This was not a master plan but a casualty of war. McGonagall put up wards that kept even little eavesdropping ladybugs away.

They held a wake, later, flung the Hog’s Head’s doors wide and for that public affair the new headmistress was able to keep her voice level, professional, mourning a man who she had thought could never die.

The war went on. Life went on. Voldemort took the Ministry of Magic. Bill married Fleur and Death Eaters swarmed, terrorizing the countryside. Tonks had been a child when the last war had happened, and Remus had barely been more than that. When they got married in that long, dark summer, they argued joyfully over whether Harry would get to be Remus’s best man or Tonks’s.

"He’s my nephew!"

"Not technically! And he’s my brother!"

"Not technically!"

Harry threw them a glare and they both grinned back, clearly pleased with themselves. “I’ll walk in with Tonks, and I’ll stand by you, okay, Remus? Jeez.”

Molly Weasley was Tonks’s maid of honor; a big black dog sat, long tongue lolling, at Remus’s threadbare side. Ted walked his daughter down the simple aisle, his hair turned bright blue to match hers.

The Ministry in their grasp, Voldemort’s people took Hogwarts too, deposed McGonagall and put Alecto Carrow in her place. McGonagall did not leave, just faded back to her Transfiguration classroom and watched over her school, tight-lipped.

Hermione could not return to Hogwarts their seventh year, so Ginny packed a bag and went with her. Hermione Apparated them both out to Neville’s sprawling, empty house, Ginny holding tight to her hand. “Well, general?” they said on his doorstep and he let them in. His living room was already stuffed full of the DA.

Neville was tall enough now that he didn’t have to stand on the coffee table to get their attention. He did anyway, for old time’s sake, and he only stammered a little.

Harry and Luna went after Hufflepuff’s cup. Hermione and Ginny went after the locket.
Hermione made her first batch of Polyjuice Potion and she and Ginny snuck into the Ministry of Magic, got it, got out. Then they went searching for ways to destroy it, the locket hung around Ginny’s neck. Hermione offered to take it and Ginny laughed.

"You could handle it," Ginny said. "I know you could. But Tom and I are old friends. I’m used to ignoring him."

Ron, Seamus, and Dean ran refugees, packages, supplies to Hogwarts and around the countryside. Ron had a handy-me-down broom and the twins’ hand-me-down Map. They all reported back to Lee Jordan’s radio and sent speedy black owls with coded messages back to Neville and his lieutenants in Hogwarts.

Their base of operations was the Room of Requirement. Neville spent a few weeks there as the only permanent resident before others started trickling in—the halls had grown too dangerous for anyone the Carrows could recognize as dissidents.

Lavender was one of the first; Parvati lasted longer, better at ducking her head and lying through her teeth. One of the Carrows told Lavender to curse another student and Lavender punched him in the jaw. “How nostalgic,” said Neville when she told him. “I feel like I’m back in first year.”

They sent curses the Carrows’ way, subtle ones and sinister ones. The best curses just seemed like bad luck, until the Death Eaters got so paranoid that even honest bad luck got attributed to Longbottom and his army.

Outside Hogwarts, away from the quiet occupation, Harry and Luna hadn’t managed to find their Horcrux yet when Tonks got word to Harry that their father had been killed by snatchers.

"We have to go talk to Mundungus tomorrow, though," said Harry, staring at the letter in his hands and not knowing how taut his face had gone.

Luna was already packing up camp. She stuffed everything into their collapsible bag, then took Harry’s hand. “C’mon,” she said, and Apparated them both into Andromeda Tonks’s living room.

"Thank you, Lune, honey," Andromeda said, pressing a kiss to Luna’s blond head. Harry was blinking, the letter still in hand. He dropped it, stepped forward, and buried his face in his mother’s shoulder.

"It’s not fair," he said.

“I know,” she said, and he squeezed her harder.

Tonks was pregnant, just starting to show obviously, and her hair was gray with grief. Lupin was threadbare, but Lupin was always threadbare. Harry felt like someone had dug into his sternum with the jagged edges of a bottle cap and it was almost worse to sit there, watching Lupin look so much like himself, and realize that Lupin always felt a little bit like this.

Harry pulled a bottle cap out of his pocket. “Hey,” he said. “I learned a new trick. Anyone want to see?”

They stayed for three quiet days, the shutters pulled and every ward blazing its worst. Tonks and Harry made special Tonks family chocolate chip cookies in the kitchen, scattering Luna and Remus with flour.

Andromeda sat by the window, looking out. Harry walked over and put a smudge of flour on the tip of her elegant nose. “C’mon, mum,” he said, taking her hand, and pulled her to her feet.
After three days, Harry and Luna left. But grief is not put aside, not even when there is a war to win, Horcruxes to find, and Dark Lords to destroy piece by piece. You shove it to the back of your mind and it echoes there. There are corners to your skull you never even knew were there, but the sound nestles in them and shows you shadows and hollows you didn’t know you had.

Tucked in a musty old tent with a blue bottle flame for light, Harry taught Luna the first coin trick Ted had ever shown him. His father had given him the bottle cap and these long, restless fingers. His other father had taught him how to flick them, twist them, and vanish the cap down his sleeve. “Like magic,” said Harry and Luna laughed.

Hermione and Ginny researched destructive magics and found a seller of curios in Germany with a few spare basilisk fangs on hand. Their worst fears and selfishnesses swirled out of the locket when they cornered it in the Black Forest, but Ginny took Hermione’s hand and Hermione brought the fang down.

Back in England, Harry and Luna got the cup out of Gringotts (setting a dragon free along the way). “Oh,” said Luna. “One of each House. I bet he found Ravenclaw’s diadem,” and they packed up and headed back to Hogwarts.

When war came to Hogwarts, it was not because Harry Potter had returned. It was because Neville Longbottom had always been there, had never left, permeated the mortar and sunk down his roots. He was whispers in the halls, the light in children’s eyes when their hands shook but their hearts refused to. Voldemort, whose lives were flickering out, brought down his armies to scour his prophesied end from the hidden halls of Hogwarts.

“Hogwarts is first and foremost a home,” said Neville. “Ours. I’m not asking you to fight for me. I’m asking you to fight for it.”

Neville smiled, looking around at the tired, young faces of the remains of the DA, at Lavender’s raised chin and Parvati’s steady one. “But I’ve never had to ask, have I?”

The Order of the Phoenix Apparated in, older faces familiar from that picture that Neville had of his parents, beaming; familiar from the Tonks’s dinner table. Harry and Luna, Ron and Seamus and Dean, Hermione and Ginny all walked, flew, and Apparated home. The Death Eaters and their allies swarmed over the property line. The battle of Hogwarts began.

When a curse hit Lavender, mid step, the first thing Neville thought was about the lake, the second task, when she had been hanging in the water there, looking dead.

What will you miss most? What do you dread? Parvati flicked her wand and sent out the same curse she had used years ago to down a troll. They were in a war. Neville was down on his knees, checking Lavender for any sign of life. She was still warm. Her nail polish was a sparkling purple that he had watched her put on, thoughtfully, that morning.

They killed the man who killed Lavender Brown. Voldemort issued a challenge and a promise—if Neville Longbottom met him in the Forest, no one else would have to die.

"Not you too," said Parvati, cornering him in a hallway. Neville had slipped from the crowd the moment the news hit, to avoid something just like this.

Parvati grabbed his wrist. “Not now, not after everything—Nev, Lavender is lying cold in there and you can’t leave me alone, you can’t.” It was always Neville who cried. He hugged her tight and Parvati shook. “Not both of you. I can’t.”
"Yes, you can," he said.

She gulped and nodded and pulled back. Neville squeezed her hands and she squeezed his back. "And so can you," Parvati said, only a little shaky. "Go on, Nev. Show ’em what bravery is."

The only way to kill a scar was to take the boy too. It took a death to deal one. Neville was almost the same age his parents had been when they died. What will you miss most? What is your life’s work? Neville hoped that the kids back in the castle got to learn one day about kinds of bravery that had nothing to do with finding something worth dying for.

When Neville turned the Stone three times, on his last walk to his first death, Alice Longbottom beamed at him and Frank hovered at her shoulder. Lavender Brown flicked her fingers at him, smiled, and gave him one insubstantial kiss on the cheek. "Go on, Longbottom," Lavender said. "Avenge me or something."

"We love you," said Frank.

"We’re so proud of you," said Alice.

"Yeah," said Lavender, grinning ear to ear, and crying a little bit anyway. "That, too."

Neville did not raise his wand, in that dark clearing. Parvati had told him to be brave, and, in this moment, this was what bravery was. "You can have me," he told Tom Riddle, who was doomed by his own incomprehension. "You can’t have them." A flash of green. Neville had dreamed that light too many times to even flinch at it.

Hagrid carried Neville’s body back to Hogwarts. Neville, leaping to shaking feet, was the one to Disarm Voldemort, but Parvati Patil flung the curse that killed him.

Harry missed all of it. Bellatrix Lestrange, who had tortured Harry’s parents, killed Nymphadora Tonks in the Great Hall, where Harry had had breakfast with his big sister all his first year of Hogwarts, feeling very grown up indeed.

Remus didn’t outlive her for more than ten minutes. Harry had not thought anything could feel more unfair than seeing what Remus had looked like in mourning and seeing that it wasn’t that different from what he had looked like living. But he’d never thought he’d see what Remus looked like dead.

Luna pressed tight to Harry’s side and dragged him to shelter, to a new vantage point, to nothing like safety.

They laid out the bodies, when the fighting had ended, row by row. Molly Weasley managed to catch her breath and look up from her son’s body just in time for someone to tell her about Tonks.

The DA, who had been living at war in these walls for months, brought out things to feed people and medical supplies dredged up from the Room of Requirement’s cabinets. The statues and suits of armor returned to their rightful places, all the ones that were not rubble or iron stains on the ground. The people returned, too, out of crooks and crannies, all the ones who could. Neville buried his face in Parvati’s dust-streaked robe and they both cried.

Harry luged med supplies and hot water until things had died down enough that they didn’t need him. Then he headed to the fireplace up in one of the older classrooms, Floo powder in hand. Luna’s bouncing footfalls followed him.

When Harry tossed Floo powder in and said, “Tonks,” meaning the last name and wishing he meant the woman lying in the Great Hall under a cold bedsheet, Luna grasped his elbow tight and stepped
into the fire with him.

“Mum,” Harry said as soon as his feet hit familiar carpet, and that was enough to say everything—I’m sorry, I hurt, she’s gone. “Both of them,” he said, and Andromeda got up from her old armchair, handed Teddy carefully to Luna, and then wrapped her arms around Harry like she couldn’t bear to stand alone.

They got to bed eventually, tearful and exhausted, not wanting to let the last of their family out of their sight. Andromeda had already lost one family, walked out on her sisters for Ted and his grins, his transformations, his clumsy kindesses, which his daughter had inherited in full.

Teddy woke up in the early morning, wailing. Harry rolled out of bed and tiptoed past where Luna was asleep on the couch. He checked Teddy’s diaper (dry) and lifted him out of the crib. “What’s up, little man?” he whispered, and Teddy tugged on Harry’s nose and quieted down, sniffling.

“I miss them, too,” Harry said, shifting him against his chest. “But you’ve got us, I promise. It’s not the same, and it won’t ever—“ Harry chewed a lip and Teddy chewed on a fist, messily. “But it’s enough,” Harry said. “We’re family. I promise, it’ll be enough.”

Years passed. The peace lasted. Hermione Granger opened up a bookshop, full of magical books, Muggle adventure novels, and biological texts. Posters were up in all the windows for food drives, seminars on House Elf rights, and marches for nonhuman representation in government.

Parvati studied to take over for Care of Magical Creatures at Hogwarts. Ginny flew for the Harpies (Ron, Seamus, Dean and Parvati screaming support from the stands), and the youngest Weasley talked about Hermione’s latest causes whenever she could squeeze them into interviews. Harry taught Teddy how to make bottle caps vanish.

Neville couldn’t sleep at night, but he dropped off during the day. Whenever he did so in Parvati’s presence, he woke to her cheerfully painting his toes sparkling green or violent pink. He went to school with Parvati and Luna, studying the simple, quiet lives of plants while they researched creatures great and small.

His scar did not ache, but the boy did.

But when he ached, he went down to Hermione’s bookstore. He fed his cat, a one-eared scruffy thing he’d let in during a rainstorm and which had then refused to leave. He went over and drank hot cocoa on Parvati’s couch until three in the morning. He had other scars to think about than the one that had been given to him by Tom Riddle.

There were children in Hogwarts’ Great Hall who thought the carriages were horseless. Neville Longbottom ached and woke, fed the cat, mourned like it was an old familiar habit, laughed when he felt like it—and he felt like it more often than not.

His scar did not ache, but this was more important: his tired hands, his old wounds, the way he and Parvati teased each other with Lavender’s old words.

His scar did not ache, but this was more important: the boy.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

omgpadfoot asked: "What if Voldemort didn't offer Frank or Alice Longbottom a chance to sacrifice themselves for their child, his offering to spare Lily was only a whim based on a prior request to do so. What if he killed Alice and Frank without hesitation, and was able to kill defenseless little Neville. Then just to be safe, he tracked the Potter's down too. What if Snape didn't find out in time, and Lily was murdered without thought, and Harry shortly after."

Chapter Notes

What if Voldemort went after Harry and Neville, and gave no one a chance to die for them? What if both Chosen Ones died as children?

Gosh, we didn't want to pull our punches today, did we. Okay, well, I guess here we go--

Because Voldemort wasn't gone, because there was not a sudden flood of peace--they didn't send enough Aurors to take down Sirius Black.

Instead of standing laughing in the street when they came to arrest him, Sirius ran. He Apparated away and went to find Remus, because they still had work to do.

That first meeting, after Remus got the news of Peter's "death," of everyone's, was a difficult one. It was outside the wreck and ruin of the little cottage in Godric's Hollow and that only made it worse. It had been the only place Sirius had been sure Remus would go that night.

"What a Halloween, eh, Moony?" he said from the bushes and Remus almost cursed him right there, until Sirius managed to shout and dodge and wave his hands enough to explain that he'd switched the Secret Keeper. Sirius started laughing when he saw Remus start to believe him, and it wasn't the mad laughter of a man who had lost everything, because Sirius hadn't, not quite.

When Remus buried his head into Sirius's shoulder, outside the slightly smoking shell of Lily and James's home, they both cried like the children they were.

In a different world, they would have had this reunion in the scarred confines of the Shrieking Shack, thirteen years too late. In a different world, Sirius would have been gaunt, grimy, gasping with demented fury. Remus would have been washed out, threadbare. They would both have looked far too old for their ages, but there would have been a boy with messy hair and his mother's green eyes staring accusingly out at them. In a different world, Harry would have hated Sirius until he understood, and then he would have loved his godfather for the rest of his life.

If you asked them, the boys crying on Lily and James's doorstep, or the skeleton of a wanted man and the wan ghost with the beast living under his skin-- if you asked them which world they
preferred, they'd have an easy answer for you.

But what did happen, in this story where they buried the Chosen Ones too early and there was no love to bring them back? They kept fighting. The war did not end. Voldemort had seven Horcruxes and he thought he was immortal. For now, he was.

In this world, there was no prophesied boy. Love was not magic; it was only soft touches and quiet words, promises they could not promise to keep. An extra piece of chocolate tucked into a packed lunch. A mother's favorite earrings passed down and down, hand to hand. Love was not magic. It did not resurrect.

Halloween Night 1981 was one more night in a long fight, to almost everyone. This was not the first time whole families had been lost. This was not the last time they would bury children.

But that night, Augusta Longbottom withered. Peter Pettigrew shivered, somewhere, welcomed into plush halls with open arms. Petunia Dursley found only the milk on her doorstep in the morning.

When Remus took Sirius back to one of his safe houses, Remus drank the same way he had in that other reality—in mourning and not any kind of celebration. But this time, he did not drink alone.

Only Dumbledore curled in on himself over lost opportunity, knowing exactly how much hope they'd lost in those two houses, now empty, now cold. He knew about the prophecies, Sybil Trelawney's hoarse forgotten promises. He knew how powerful Tom had become and he knew how much weight they had been hoping to put on the shoulders of those two lost boys. He knew Harry had had his mother's eyes.

(Albus did not know, however, about Neville's first word or that Harry had refused new, magical toys to instead chew and slobber on Lily's favorite, soft old doll, which she had carried from a Muggle world to a magical one.

Dumbledore thought about the war that night. It would save lives, this old man and his tired soul, that this was how he mourned. But there were more opportunities lost here than a war one day won; there was a grief here that had nothing to do with strategy.)

"We are lost, Minerva," Dumbledore said.

Professor McGonagall was trembling, thin and severe with it. "You don't think that," she said and she was right. But it was a night to believe thoughts like that. In the morning, there would be new plans, new hopes, but not on this Halloween. Dumbledore took out a lemon drop and sucked on it. Minerva found the fire whiskey. The sun rose, eventually. They called a meeting of the Order the next day.

There was no prophesied boy, but there was still this—dozens of shadowed young faces looking up at Albus and not running, even at the very end of the world. Dumbledore looked out at his chess pieces, pawns and queens; his children and his friends; his collateral damage. He had the beginnings of a plan swelling in his chest.

It would take them decades to get their hands, quietly, on every Horcrux. Tom Riddle had to think they were secret. He had to think he was safe. It would take them almost decades, but one day he would be mortal again.

These dozens of faces—they were mortal now. Alastor Moody could feel mortality in the aches of old broken bones; Andromeda rewrote her own last name, refused to fear sea serpents, and refused to pretend that the serpents could not swallow any one of them whole. Remus and Sirius felt empty,
gaping holes in the seats around them, and they made crude, expansive, joyous toasts to friends’ memories.

When Molly first reached over and held Arthur's hand, they knew this was something that could not last. That was why they held hands, held on, held tight.

In both worlds, Molly Prewett married Arthur Weasley in a fast, fervent little ceremony overshadowed by darker things, and they had their first six children before the war would ever have ended. But in this world, Ginny Weasley was not the first Weasley child born in peacetime. None of them were born to peace.

The wizarding world was terrified, not complacent. Tom Riddle and his Death Eaters were young upstarts, cruel and powerful, but his followers had not yet had years to insinuate themselves through all the Ministry's ranks. It took the Ministry years to fall to him.

Voldemort took the Ministry on Ginny's second birthday. Molly and Arthur talked late into the night, the way they had for months, while their children slept off birthday cake. (The sprinkles had changed color, had danced, and they hadn't been able to afford them, but that didn't matter tonight.)

That night, the Burrow burned to the ground. The fire was not at enemy hands.

Arthur stood in the backyard and wept. Bill held Ron's small hand and Percy clutched a stack of library books to his chest, the only thing he'd saved. When neighbors and authorities came to investigate, Arthur told them Molly had gone back in for Charlie, the twins, and their only girl.

He did not tell them she had taken those four children and Apparated away. Five Weasley lives were recorded that night as lost, in the official Ministry records. Arthur did not have to pretend to weep.

Charlie, his parents had decided, was too kind for the world that was coming. Charlie felt things harder; he picked things up slower but picked them up deeper. Reading had eluded him for years, but once he got it, he fell directly into stacks and stacks of books on dragons.

(Two of the library books Percy clutched to his adolescent chest were Charlie's. "Turn these back in for me?" he'd said, a hand on his little brother's thin shoulder. Charlie knew Percy handled things best when he had a responsibility to cling to.)

Ginny was so small, her parents had decided, and the twins could not be separated. George, who was the better at following, might be able to survive the world they saw brimming, but Fred would break himself against it.

Molly Apparated to Andromeda Tonks's basement, where four small beds and one bigger one had been conjured. "We'll only stay a few days," she told Andromeda. "I don't want to put you at risk."

Nymphadora ("Tonks," she would later tell Charlie haughtily, and Charlie would nod) let go of her mother's hand to go ask the twins why they had the same face because that was weird.

"At least a few weeks," said Andromeda. "They already look tired."

They stayed at the Bones's after that, then. Molly and hers lived for three memorable months in the passage between Aberforth's pub and Hogwarts. It was one of the safest places Molly knew, so they snuck back there for Christmas every year, conjured a tree and lights in that narrow, beaten tunnel.

Sometimes Arthur managed to sneak away to them, too, for the holiday. He brought cheap sweets for each kid and kissed them all on the cheeks. He was whiskered and snifflly; the twins squealed protest and clung to him; Ginny hid behind Molly. She didn't reliably recognize her father until she
was six.

Percy brought books on dragons, worn from the library, and tucked them under the tree. "But I won't be able to get them back to you," said Charlie, when he had unwrapped them.

Percy was slighter than him, his limbs gangly and sharp where Charlie was even now filling out. "I'll say I lost them," said Percy.

Some shell company of Lucius Malfoy's seized the remains of the Burrow and demolished it. Arthur and his boys had moved to a little flat, lightless and drab. Ron had nightmares that he might forget what his mother's face looked like.

Arthur's Muggle Artifacts office was closed and they moved him to Transportation. Mr. Weasley had apologized and groveled enough, the Ministry supposed, and he was a pureblood after all. If you want to keep the next generation as pure as possible, you can't go about offing good genetic material when it's offered.

Molly and her four settled down in a series of abandoned old hunting cabins. They Apparated into random towns for supplies, and grew vegetable gardens and scrubbed down floors. They kept in contact with the Order. Sirius Black taught the twins pranks spells while Molly chewed him out for corrupting her children. Remus taught them prank spells, too, but at least he had the wherewithal to look vaguely ashamed about it. Sirius just grinned.

The children played upstairs or in empty pantries while the Order circled each other, reporting on missions, laying out theories on Horcrux locations and Death Eater movements. They found the locket Regulus had stolen when Ginny was eight, the first time Sirius went back to 12 Grimmauld Place. It took them another year to figure out how to destroy it, but they left the Horcrux alive. Better to kill them all at once, and make Voldemort mortal in one fell blow.

Albus worked at tracking down Tom Riddle's past, quietly, the places he might have thought worthy to hide pieces of his soul, but this time Albus had people like Kingsley Shacklebolt and Remus Lupin and Andromeda Tonks to go investigate as well.

Ginny screamed "CONSTANT VIGILANCE" delightedly every time she saw Alastor Moody and he picked her up and threw her little frame in the air. It was the first kind of flying Ginny ever met.

Molly did not go on Order missions unless they desperately needed her, but she often watched the others' children--Susan Bones, once her aunt had left the Ministry and gone into hiding; little Dean Thomas, whose Muggle mom had gotten pulled into the war when his name came up on the list for Hogwarts. Mrs. Thomas had tea with Mrs. Weasley, taught Molly how to use a telephone while Molly taught her how to use a Floo.

Hermione Granger never came to Hogwarts. Muggleborns did not get letters from Hogwarts these days. Their houses, which were the exact same size inside as they were outside, got visits from Ministry officials with snakes tattooed over the veins of their forearms.

The houses were almost always empty when the Death Eaters arrived. However it was that Voldemort's Ministry was able to track down Muggleborns, so could the Order. These empty shells of old homes had been visited first by a short wizard with a high voice and a willingness for preventative kidnapping.

Professor Flitwick had vanished when Dumbledore had. He spent more than a decade snatching up children like he was a Pied Piper, taking whole families to safe spaces, new lives.
Some of the Muggleborn families took their magical children and ran, to Australia and New York and Amsterdam. Flitwick gave them cards for private, honorable tutors in every place they fled to and books on magic for self-study. But others stayed.

Their school was held in the basements of sweet shops and the attics of old Hufflepuff families and bespelled rooms in the backs of public libraries. Flitwick taught Charms; Molly taught Potions, Remus taught Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Sirius taught Transfiguration. Members of the Order cycled in as visiting lecturers. They all taught Silencing Spells and how to make Polyjuice Potion, how to lie, hide, run, and how to pretend to be wizardborn.

When Mr. Goldstein found out that wizarding curriculum did not include an education in mathematics, he was horrified; he had been an accountant with his own firm, before Death Eaters had come for his youngest son, Anthony.

"They never learn how to balance checkbooks?" Mrs. Creevey asked, shocked.

"I'm not sure they learn to add," said Mr. Goldstein, concerned.

"We learn how to add," said Mrs. Cohen-Goldstein, who had graduated Gryffindor before marrying Muggle. Her husband looked relieved, but he insisted on joining the teaching staff anyway and introducing the kids to fractions.

The wizarding staff taught the parents and the siblings how to slink through Magical Britain, how to navigate Knockturn and avoid Muggle turns of phrase. The Muggle parents taught the wizards how to drive a car, dress Muggle, how to slip out between the worlds and lose Death Eaters in the bright lights of a supermarket.

The children levitated tea cups, played Exploding Snap and gin rummy, read Diana Wynne Jones and Roald Dahl alongside Beedle the Bard. Watching Muggle children run and whisper with Muggleborn wizards, at-risk halfbloods, and blood traitors, you couldn't tell them apart.

Justin Finch-Fletchley's family kept running off and coming back, frightened and twitchy and exasperated. "He was on the list for Eton," his mother said, mournfully, while Justin learned Charms in the narrow attic of an apothecary's shop on Knockturn Alley. On the bench beside him, Dennis Creevey was clinging to his big brother's hand, eyes wide. Colin's eyes were just as big; Professor Flitwick was conjuring songbirds out the tip of his wand.

Mrs. Creevey got Mrs. Finch-Fletchley a cup of tea and said, smiling, "Yes, but there's magic in the world."

Dumbledore had found Severus Snape crying over Lily Potter's body in this world, too. He talked about making amends, not about saving what little was left of Lily, because Lily had left nothing behind.

(Lily had left the sorrow in Remus and Sirius's chests, and something warm for them to cling to and remember on hard days. She had left a certainty in Minerva McGonagall's spine, as she looked over new bright faces, that she would save every child she could.)

Snape became a spy for the Order, but he did not become a teacher. Voldemort put other professors in place at Hogwarts and used Snape's quick wits in fields more important than children. When Dumbledore brought Severus to the hidden school, offering a Potions master like a gift, Flitwick said no.

"I trust Severus," said Dumbledore.
"I know," said Flitwick, voice high and certain. "But this isn't your school, sir."

The Potter fortune had gotten tied up, due to lack of heirs, so Sirius and Remus had snuck in to steal all of James and Lily's money to help fund the covert school. They thought Prongs and his lady would have approved. (This, too, the food in these schoolchildren's mouths, was something Lily and James had left behind-- they had left the money, and friends to make sure it went where it should go.)

The school lived off those savings and secretive, sympathetic donations for almost a year before Mrs. Cohen-Goldstein and Mrs. Creevey sat Flitwick down and sternly took over. Using the known but not ancient wizarding name of Cohen, they started a mail order potions business. The wolfsbane potions deliveries ("no questions asked!") were particularly lucrative, especially with Greyback lose in the world.

In Arthur Weasley's little flat in the city, Ron still learned chess early. Bill taught him, but it was Percy who played with him every day, like clockwork. Ron tried playing with Arthur, sometimes, but Arthur had a tendency to get distracted mid-game or to forget the rules. Percy never forgot a rule.

They had chosen Ron to stay with Arthur because he was their smallest boy, the one who fit into the places left to fill. He was the one you didn't have to worry about; he'd be alright. Bill was responsible and steady, unruffled and flexible. Percy learned systems and social codes like he was going to be tested on them; Percy could learn this new world and build himself a place in it (and he did). But Ron, they thought, could manage. He would adapt (and he did).

Molly had not wanted Arthur to be alone, and they had not been sure whether running or staying would be safer. Just different kinds of danger, perhaps.

This was not a world that asked for bravery, where Arthur and his three sons lived, so Ron adapted. This was not a world where Weasleys were allowed to be proud of being Gryffindors. Ron spent his childhood lying, playing chess with Percy, and sneaking away to have hidden holidays with four siblings the world thought were dead. He squirmed and complained when his mother made him corned beef sandwiches over Christmastime, but he missed hers for the rest of the year; Dad's weren't as good.

When the Sorting Hat went on Ron Weasley's head, it dithered. It chewed over things, dwelling, while Ron counted the freckles on his pale, clenched hands. Everyone was staring, and his family had spent his whole life trying to keep out of sight. He would always be a hero, but in this world he would have to be a different kind.

The Death Eaters had not tampered with the Hat. It was a part of Hogwarts, the culture, the tradition. Voldemort was the same teenaged boy still in so many ways, self-centered and cruel, heady with his own power, jealously nostalgic. Hogwarts had been a promise to that orphaned child. Tom stroked the old customs of the castle fondly now, House Cups and Sortings, Christmas decorations, and dismissed the quieter history of it-- friendship, kindness, learning, safety.

But the Hat, at least, didn't lie, not even now. In this world, Ron was not a lion. He was a haunted brother, a beloved liar, and quiet child. He kept his own counsel.

From the top of Ron Weasley's head, the Hat shouted, "RAVENCLAW!" There was a polite applause from the table done up in bronze and blue. At Gryffindor, Percy clapped loud, stubbornly, face set. (Bill had graduated, vanished, disappeared into the ranks of the Order and his mother's side of the family.)

Ron's year was even smaller than it had once been. He climbed up the steps to Ravenclaw Tower,
his first night as Hogwarts, and the world got colder and colder.

There was only one filled bed in the Gryffindor boys' dormitory for that year. Four stood empty. Seamus Finnegan (half blood; his Muggle parent was in hiding) covered the empty four posters in old robes, crumpled essays, and borrowed Quaffles.

Seamus spent most of his time in the Common Room, befriending the girls (Lavender, Parvati, both pureblood). Their dormitory had an empty bed where a girl named Granger would once have cried herself to sleep over bullies and the end of the world.

They were eleven, excited and uncertain; they did not think about what empty beds meant. They did not know how very wrong it was that they flinched away when they passed some teachers in the hall. They did not know how much brighter Hogwarts had once been.

Professor McGonagall watched them, watched them all. She had watched them for years, as Albus was deposed and sent to hiding, as vultures and bullies descended on the sacred halls of her school. She looked older, here, the same way Sirius looked so much younger. She let herself wither back into wrinkles and silence, curb her tongue, comfort children only when there was no one to see.

Ron had grown up in a drab grey flat in a city with no broom sheds or open orchards for miles. He had never been taught how to fly. On his first week at Hogwarts, he told that to an older girl who'd caught him staring while she polished her broom handle in the Ravenclaw Common Room. "Well, c'mon," she said, pushing herself to her feet and pulling him up after. "Want to learn how?"

"I'm Ron," he said, hurrying after her. "Weasley."

"Cho Chang," she said. Cho paused, as they went down the stairs. "What?" said Ron. Hesitation meant something, in your chess opponents, and he bet it meant something in friends, too.

"Did you know you have dirt on your nose?"

Ron tagged along at Cho's heels for the first part of that year, and walked next to her for the rest of it, once he knew his way around. Cho was bright but not brilliant. Ron taught her the finer points of chess and played easy until she snapped at him to stop.

Cho was not Ravenclaw because things came easy to her; she would dig her teeth and heels and hands into anything she thought was worth learning. It was a colder world; things were not handed to you. (This was one of the reasons Percy kept collecting books on dragons, chess manuals for Ron, books on Impressionist paintings for Bill--he wanted something to hand to them. He wanted to give them something they could hold onto.)

Cho taught Ron how to fly--to dive, to soar, to do a barrel roll and maneuver around Bludgers. He taught her how to play a pawn's gambit, a queen's ruse. Cho beat him once at chess, after three months of afternoon matches. He never got on the Quidditch team. When he got detentions, they gave him nightmares for weeks afterward.

They met Luna Lovegood the next year, when she came drifting in with a bush of blonde hair (the right length for tugging) and wide eyes, delicate features (the right fragility for breaking).

Neither Cho nor Ron were much for pity, and Luna would have just blinked at them and wandered away, anyway. The thing about Luna was this: she looked more fragile than anyone Ron had ever met, but she wasn't. She scarred like they did, ached and slept, but she didn't break.

Luna looked around with those bulging blue eyes, that spiderweb hair, and smiled at things she shouldn't. Luna said weird things, but she meant them. So few of the people in Ron's life ever
precisely meant all the things they said.

Ron became her friend the moment she made him laugh on a bad day. Cho became her friend when Luna took them out to see thestrals, because Cho liked nothing better than learning something she’d never known before. Ron wasn’t sure when Luna decided to be their friend; he just woke up, one day, to a cold morning and an ugly world, and knew that she was.

Ron had two brothers (or five of them and one sister, some days). After years of class and detention, nightmares and late nights, he would know Luna’s laugh (hiccuping, odd) better than he would ever know Ginny’s. He would not know Cho’s as well, but that was because her laughs were rare. She seemed to think they could be stolen.

In this Hogwarts, Ron never saw Cho cry, not once. This was not strength—or, it was. But it was also a tragedy. There were detentions here that scarred. There were kids who left for summer and never came back except as somber newspaper headlines. Cho did not cry. She read books, played chess with Ron, and flew so high that cold and thin air bit at her cheeks. Crying was for children, and this was not a place for children.

Luna cried for fun sometimes, just curled up in a window seat and let the tears go. When Ron wanted to try it, he just balled his fists, counted freckles, or asked Cho to go out flying with him. It was hard to be as strong as Luna.

Luna still crafted, made little gifts of bottlecap necklaces and radish earrings. Ron asked for one, and then bundled it up and gave it to his mother the next time they managed to find each other for Christmas. Molly and her four moved with the hidden school and their families now, wreathed in Confunding Charms and other protections.

The school that lived in the basements, the attics, the backrooms, and the shadows had started teaching the children younger than Hogwarts did. It took them not at eleven, but whenever they were found, whenever they were threatened, and kept them as long as they would stay.

Flitwick counted heads like breathing, drafted teachers, listened for the muffled sounds of nightmares and tears. He didn't sleep much, but these were children who had had so much taken from them. He would give them the best possible world he could. There was a weight on his shoulders and it was made of all his students' names.

(Finances were the area Flitwick didn't have to dwell on. The hidden school's mail-order potions business was booming, though not always though strictly legal lanes. Mrs. Creevey ordered cheap, mass-produced glass vials from Muggle manufacturers to cut down on overhead costs. The promotional material talked up their Innovative New Spell for Vial Creation! to assuage suspicion. Their biggest breakthrough was signing a long-term supplier's contract with St. Mungo's.)

Anthony Goldstein was particularly good at flying, though they rarely had the space and safety at it. The Creevey brothers did everything together, even more than Fred and George did, and followed Ginny Weasley around like she was a will o th' wisp. The Grangers used a mix of borrowed spells and borrowed equipment to take care of everyone's teeth.

At age twelve, Ginny stole a pair of her mother's sewing scissors and cut off all her long red hair. Hermione Granger watched the parents squeal and mourn the locks, watched Ginny never brush her hair again, and decided it was worth it. Ginny grinned at her when she first caught sight of Hermione's hair cut and gave her a thumbs-up.

This was a Hermione in exile. Hermione had always been as ruthless as her hair was bushy; she had learned how to hide it better with age, and she had learned to write her own rules. But in this world,
her first rules weren't curfews and forbidden corridors, or no magic over the holidays and eight inches on wolfsbane by Monday. She never read *Hogwarts, A History*. She read about wizard crusades and Muggle guerrilla war tactics, and she slept as easy at night as she ever would have at Hogwarts.

The rules were these: hide, survive, be wary but never afraid.

Hermione was a rule follower. She was the very best in class. During an evacuation, she saw Fred and George lingering at the back of a classroom (a grocer's basement), dripping rudimentary magic from their wands. "What are you doing?" she asked and they grinned, cheeks pulled, creased tight, in almost the same way (but not quite).

"Leaving a surprise for the Aurors," said Fred. *Auror* meant *Death Eater*, now. If they ever re-captured the Ministry, these children would rename the division.

"The ones who're planning to clean us out," said George.

"Can I help?" said Hermione.

When the twins started inventing, Hermione was just behind them, taking notes. She hemmed them in, bolstered them up, and brought out Muggle primers on empiricism. She corrected their pronunciation and Fred tugged on her hair.

When the twins started inventing, it wasn't pranks; it was materiel of war; ways to hide, ways to hurt, ways to defend. They didn't tell the adults, whose first priorities were protection. They packed up little kits for every kid in their transient school--Muggle, Muggleborn, and blood traitor--and taught them how to use darkness powder or throw a bottled hex.

This Ginny had never met a diary. But she had still died once, though in a flaming home and not a cold, damp castle basement. She had still been reborn into something her mother would always love and never fully understand.

To Molly, this quiet, frenetic world of backrooms and late night evacuations was an aberration. It was the product of a long war and a darkening world. But this was Ginny's childhood and she grew into its dark corners and hushed sounds. They were always on the run, even when they were sitting still, and that grafted itself into her young bones.

Ginny tagged at the heels of the active Order members--shadowed Lupin and shoved bony elbows into Sirius's space, stepped on Ted Tonks's toes and tugged at Amelia Bones's perfect suit pants. They taught her curses, taught her shield spells, taught her healing, or sometimes they just sent her back to her mother. Mrs. Thomas gave her cookies and taught her how to hold a gun.

"Treat this like you would treat an *avada kedavra*," Mrs. Thomas said, stern. "Never point it at anyone you aren't willing to kill."

Ginny thought about this. Mrs. Thomas put her handgun back in her purse and taught Ginny how to pick locks. The other children gathered close, a step behind Ginny. The Creevey brothers, who still hadn't grown, looked in danger of being trod on by Dean so Ginny moved them out of the way.

"Even when they spell against Alohomora," Mrs. Thomas said, "I find they rarely include an anti-picking charm. Here, you try."

Tonks and Charlie Weasley raced each other for the head of the hushed school-- Tonks studied combatively, glaring at textbooks and Potions ingredients. Charlie studied like it was love, falling for every subject he touched.
When he graduated, Charlie teamed up with Hagrid, trying to recruit creatures to their side and occasionally getting distracted rescuing them instead. Tonks tagged on Moody's heels, grinning at his grumbles and paranoia. "You can't scare me," she told him. "Haven't you met my mum?"

Tom Riddle had seven Horcruxes: a locket, a ring, a diadem, a cup, a diary, a snake, and himself. The Order did not know about all of them, but they suspected there were seven—many more and the soul starts to fracture. They kept notes, investigated, inventing spells for tracking and for destruction.

They had found the locket early, thanks to Regulus Black (though they never found the note in the cave, so they never knew for sure it was him).

Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was working with the Aurors, discovered that the cup was in Bellatrix Lestrange's Gringotts vault. (Kingsley was pureblood, and had been in Slytherin with Andromeda Black. He wore a badge with a snake and skull on it, and they believed him.)

It was Charlie Weasley, Sirius Black, and Rubeus Hagrid who broke in and got the cup out of the vault; if Hagrid released a dragon on the way, too, no one could really fault him. This world was too ugly to begrudge a man for wanting to set even a monster free.

They put the cup in 12 Grimmauld Place with the locket, and the whole house went darker. Amelia Bones and Filius Flitwick went to talk with the Gringotts goblins and convinced them not to report the robbery.

When Percy graduated, he joined the Ministry, again, but he joined the Order first. Percy worked hard, kept lists and spreadsheets and careful stacks. He passed information out, the way his father had been doing for years.

Arthur was sweet, brave, and kind, but Percy was good at this. He moved up through the ranks. Percy knew how to listen, how to parrot others' words, how to acquiesce without surrendering anything, how to flatter. He got better and better at lifting his nose in the air, twisting his mouth in polite disgust, dressing well out of second-hand bins. He ignored his father in the corridors. He bought books on dragons and kept them in boxes under his bed.

It was Percy who discovered the location of the diary in Lucius Malfoy's house. Everyone in the Order had spent personal time with the locket in Sirius's house (the house that Remus refused to let Sirius stay in, with its screaming portraits and dark memories, and which the Order now used as an occasional base). They had tossed the locket hand to hand, felt chilled and cranky, snapped. They all knew the heady weight of suspicious whispers and dark things dredging up from the pits of their stomachs.

So when Percy got invited (a honor) to a Malfoy gala, as an obsequious and efficient young undersecretary should, he felt that pit rise up in his stomach. When someone made a joke about his father's bumbling, his enthusiasm and his lack of subtlety, Percy twisted his nose in disdain and meant it.

Oh, he thought to himself, that's not right. Percy did a very quiet grid search of the manor until he found the place where he felt the most disrespect for his loud, dirty, poor, inefficient, clumsy-- ah, there it is.

Percy left the gala when precisely half the guests had already gone, with a battered little book tucked under his robes. Lucius was much too terrified to tell the Dark Lord it was missing. It was just an old blank diary, right? A whim. No reason to upset the Dark Lord with trivialities.

Soon after, Albus found the Gaunt ring and brought it home, to nestle in place with the locket, the
cup, and the diary. Even just walking by the room, now, people could feel the dark objects pulse everything in them they least wanted to admit to, and a few things that weren't even in them. Jealousy curdled and rage simmered. They stopped holding any of the school sessions in 12 Grimmauld Place, no matter how spacious the rooms were. The war carried on, quiet, slow, careful.

This was a story of a boy with a scar and a boy without, except they were lost. There was no prophecy to save them. Love was not magic; it did not resurrect.

This was the story of so many children with scars. Cho did not cry, just went stiller and stiller, colder, flew higher, and wondered what it would be like if she just never came down. Seamus was the only kid in his dormitory; he set up shield spells at night and told himself he wasn't allowed to be afraid of shadows and empty beds.

Ginny had a fire in her that would never go out, feet that would never know how to stay still, to feel safe. All of Fred and George's mischief was pointed towards war, all their play and all their sharpest grins turned vicious. Hermione kept in step behind them, some days an enabler, some days a general. The Creevey brothers grew paler and paler, pressed closer together, like that might save them.

Anthony Goldstein and Dean Thomas took turns holding watches in the night, curled up in the tent with the younger children. There were wards and warning spells, adult sentries, but they had lived in this world too long to trust other people to keep them safe.

This was a story of children with scars, and they were lost. Ron had nightmares about the Burrow burning down, and woke to Luna leaning over him. "Nargles," she said wisely and he took her hand, held it, held tight.

There was no prophecy here to follow. Voldemort had already won; he was the one to live while the others failed to survive. But there was a boy curled up in Ravenclaw Tower holding hands with a girl who saw things no one else could. There were school children tucked in the back of sympathizers' home and shops, learning Cheering Charms, learning to jump-start cars, learning to laugh even after they'd had to evacuate three homes in five days. When little Dennis Creevey couldn't sleep, he'd get up, conjure two mugs of hot cocoa, and bring it to wherever Flitwick was pouring over the school's paperwork and protections. Dennis would sit and watch him work until he finally drifted off, and then he'd wake up tucked back into his own bed.

There was no prophecy to follow, so they would tear up the roots of this evil one by one. This was a work of years; they would be cunning, be brave, be wise; they would be unafraid of toil.

They found the diary, the cup, the locket, the ring. The snake stayed always at Voldemort's side. The last piece was Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem, tucked deep in the Room of Requirement among all the lost things.

That was how they found it-- Cho looked like she was about to cry, if she was the kind of person who ever cried. Ron took one hand and Luna the other and they pulled Cho down the corridors. *I want to get lost,* thought Ron, *I want us to get lost and for them to never find us.*

And a door guttered into existence.

Three Ravenclaws stepped into the towering chaos of the place where all lost things go. Luna closed her eyes and listened for the things that might live there. Cho opened hers wide, clenched hands, wished for a broom to lift herself up on--there was so much here to see. The Room of Requirement gives you what you need.

But Ron could feel something whispering in the pit of his stomach, about being the last, forgotten...
son; about how Cho was probably frozen all the way down to her core, that all those small smiles he'd learned to coax out of her were lies; that Luna would get bored, that she was crazy after all.

Ron knew that feeling as well as his big brother did. *That's not right,* he thought, and started a grid search.

He found the diadem sitting prettily on a pile (*worthless,* the Horcrux hummed at him, *you worthless coward*). He snatched a stray tea towel from the mound and picked the diadem up without touching it.

Ron knew the count of Horcruxes. Order children grew up knowing it like nursery rhymes. The diadem lying in his hands, glinting, lovely, and chilled, was the last fragment of soul that they needed to find. "We need to get out of the castle," he said.

"Do you know what they'll do to us when we come back?" said Cho, and even with the poison of the Horcrux whispering to him, Ron knew enough to know that that caution was not a "we can't."

"I'm not sure we're coming back," he said.

Luna dragged them out to the greenhouses to strategize and regroup. "Professor Sprout lets me look for Whizgig Flys in her begonias," she told them. "She'll hide us while she can."

Cho got brooms and Luna got her good-luck earrings and a few Stinkbombs. When they told Padma Patil, she got Parvati and Lavender to help make a ruckus; Ron told them about the Room so they would have somewhere to run to. Ernie Macmillian and Hannah Abbott, who Ron had never exchanged two words with, showed up to help them break the border wards around the Hogwarts perimeter, so they could get out.

When green-trimmed robes flashed through the glass, Hannah put a hand over Ron's mouth. "Shh, it's okay," she said. "Jordan's alright; I called him in. And he vouched for her." Lee Jordan came around the bend with Daphne Greengrass slinking in behind him. (Ambition, cunning, and bravery are not exclusive. Harry Potter was never the only one to be offered two Houses, and this was a different world.)

"You think just because we're in green we don't hate this too?" Daphne asked Ron's suspicious glare.

"Yes," said Ron, and Daphne stopped Lee from hauling out old detention scars.

But Luna beamed at the Slytherins. "Can't have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich without a knife," she said. "Or at least not without getting creative."

"Um?" said Lee.

"She means we're glad to have you on our side," said Cho.

History books would later claim that this was the beginning of the Battle of Hogwarts, that the first blows fell in this skirmish as the student body rose to get three Ravenclaws and their diadem out.

But that was wrong-- hexes flew there, yes. Hexes shattered greenhouse glass and Ernie's right shoulder, scarred Padma's face for life ("Now they can tell us apart," she'd joke to Parvati, when they had retreated to the Room of Requirement).

But these children all had scars that were years old--from punishments, lessons; from malice and petty boredom. This was the first time these young soldiers struck blows back--but it was not the
beginning of their part in the war, these children. Survival had been their first act of war. Those old scars, called discipline by those who gave them, were just as much war wounds as the way Ernie would never regain full use of his right arm.

Ron considered feeling guilty about the kids they left flinging curses on the ground. But he had the diadem tucked into his robes, its weight heavy on him, and Ron was a strategist at heart. They left Hogwarts behind.

High in the air, the land a patchwork below them, Ron wished he could go see Percy, who always knew what to do, or Bill, who always made the world seem like a saner place. But instead, he went to find where the hidden school had gotten to lately--the place Ginny, Fred, George, and Charlie called home.

They were out in an old abandoned ranch. Ron landed in a stumble. They had bound up Cho's arm mid flight, scrubbed hexes from Luna's skin. He pressed the diadem into Flitwick's small, steady hands. "It's the last one," Ron said, then turned to his mother.

Molly had taken the Weasley family clock with her, before they had burned the Burrow down. She carried it with her, through every retreat and rout. Every clock hand had turned to "Mortal Peril" and stayed there. It was in her bag now, but she checked it every night. Molly opened her arms wide and stepped forward. "You got so tall," she said.

Ron buried his face in his mother's plump shoulder. This was something he was pretty sure he'd never outgrow.

"Oh," he said, pulling back. "Mum, this is Luna, and Cho."

Molly smiled at them, Luna's bulging eyes and Cho's careful ones. "Thank you for taking such good care of my boy."

Seated nearby (his legs had given out), Flitwick stared at the diadem. "It's the end," he said. "It's time. Molly, we have to get Albus."

"Time for what?" said Luna. Ron had said they needed to run, so they had. They hadn't asked for context or explanation.

"Time to go to war."

Sirius, who taught Transfiguration when he wasn't hexing Aurors, flew the diadem to 12 Grimmauld Place. When Albus got the call, he Flooed in with Nymphadora Tonks and a bag of basilisk fangs, and told Sirius this would be his post for the last battle. It didn't go over well.

"I want to fight," hissed Sirius, Tonks a breath behind him.

"This is the fight," said Albus, a hand on their shoulders. In the face of the two Black glares, he wished he had Andromeda with him, or Molly; they knew the many sides of battlefields. Sometimes it took burping a baby to win a war. Sometimes it took burning down your own home.

"Destroy these," Dumbledore said. Five Horcruxes were laid out at their feet and the light almost puckered around them. "We will take the snake, and then Tom Riddle will be just a man."

"Less than," said Tonks, as haughtily as she would have at eight, correcting people who called her Nymphadora.

Dumbledore's next fight was at the latest grounds of the transient school (Aberforth's basement,
among kegs of butterbeer). He had come to pick up Flitwick, Lupin, Molly Weasley, and found a student body standing ready for him, armed to the teeth.

"We've watched you prepare for this chance all our lives," said Hermione, who'd they chosen as their spokesman because she had the best enunciation. "This is our world, too, and we want to fight for it."

"You're children," said Molly Weasley, shrill; the fight had begun a long time before Dumbledore popped into bemused existence. Ron stared back at his mother stubbornly, dirt smudged on his nose.

"We're not much younger than you were, back then, mum," said Fred.

Ginny had her arms crossed. "And we're a hell of a lot more prepared than you ever were."

"Ginevra! Language!"

"At least the Muggles should stay here," said Dumbledore, kindly, half-moon spectacles glinting. "This will be a magical fight."

"It's a magical world," said Mrs. Creevey. "But we live here too." Justin Finch-Fletchley's big brothers, who had not inherited magic, had bottled hexes hanging from their belts.

"Always bring a gun to a wand fight," said Mr. Granger cheerfully.

Dumbledore looked askance at Flitwick, who was sitting calmly to the side. Flitwick smiled and shrugged. "They convinced me years ago. I Charmed the Muggle weapons to keep working even within the wards."

"You can't stop us from coming," said Mr. Goldstein. Anthony and Mrs. Cohen-Goldstein bobbed at his side, wands out. "And you shouldn't even try."

Dumbledore sighed.

Back at 12 Grimmauld Place, Sirius and his cousin Tonks got to work. The locket shrieked at them; showed visions of Andromeda twisted in pain, of Remus going feral and bloody. The diadem writhed, as if in pain. The cup crumpled in on itself. The diary bled ink on the floor that would never wash out. Sirius had never liked this carpet anyway.

Tonks had bright crimson hair and a beaky nose. She'd graduated their roving school years before, been working beside Moody in the Order--rough, ugly, quiet work. But she looked so young there, kneeling beside these writhing pieces of soul, and something in Sirius's stomach was turning over and over.

He had been that young before, been fighting battles at that age, losing friends. Lily had been that young when she died.

The ring caught the light, and ate it. Something was not right.

"I'll take that one," said Sirius. He took the basilisk fang from Tonks's fine-boned hand.

The diadem and the locket had been hidden; the cup and the diary given to trusted protectors; Voldemort kept Nagini the snake at his side.

But the ring, alone among them, had been cursed.
Regulus had died, stealing one part of Voldemort's soul. Sirius died killing another. There were Malfoys and Tonks who would survive the war, the blood living on, but the name of House Black died with their oldest son.

The battlefield was Hogwarts, once again. For Voldemort, still eleven and awe-struck, still fifteen and arrogant, Hogwarts would always be the seat of everything that mattered. And, fled or not, Dumbledore was still Headmaster. The stones of the castle would answer to his call.

Flitwick and McGonagall met in battle, exchanged nods across carnage that they both knew meant, *thank you for looking after the children.*

Hermione charged in with George at one shoulder, Justin Finch-Fletchley guarding her flank. George grinned at Justin. "Almost as cool as Eton?"

Curses flew, but so did bullets. Parents and siblings had inherited this world the day threat stepped darkly into their homes. They could not bear wands, but they could throw bottled hexes. Mrs. Thomas had patiently taught gun safety and skills to anyone who wanted to learn. Ginny Weasley got on the wrong end of an Expelliarmus, and then just pulled a lady's grip handgun out.

The Hogwarts kids had charged out of the Room of Requirement and into the fray. They were not unafraid. They were all brave, all wise, all fair. They were cunning, too, quick-witted and resourceful, and they had made true friends under those darkening halls.

Percy and Kingsley Apparated in with Voldemort's Auror troops, to the outskirts of Hogwarts, and hiked in. Arthur had not been invited to the fight and had been locked up when he enthusiastically volunteered. Percy, though, they believed. He could wear those sneers too easy on his face to not mean them. Percy could sell the story of the upstart, ambitious son.

When the battle hit, Percy and Kingsley slipped to the back of the group and started taking aim. Percy's first curse got Rodolphus, from behind. His second got Crabbe Sr.; Kingsley got Lucius Malfoy.

There were only two of them, though, and a whole squad of hardened Aurors, but they had known their chances when they started. In Molly Weasley's cluttered bag, the clock hand labeled *Percy* moved.

The middle of Arthur Weasley's three surviving sons was the first Order casualty of the battle. Kingsley was the second. Mad-Eye Moody, taking on Bellatrix in the Great Hall, was the third.

There were two Horcruxes left: the snake and the visage of the man.

It was bullets that slammed through Nagini's serpentine spine, not a sword, but by the end of the night Voldemort was once more a mortal man.

Albus Dumbledore had once taught Tom Riddle Transfiguration in the hallowed halls of Hogwarts. Those halls were hushed now, defiled with the fears of students who should have been safe there above all else. In the main Hogwarts courtyard, surrounded by beautiful old stone, Dumbledore hit Voldemort with a Killing Curse.

Albus was too tired to mourn even the child Tom had once been. He was thinking of Grindelwald, of another war. He was too tired to divert the curse Bellatrix screamed at him; Dumbledore hit the ground beside Riddle, both of them just crumpled bodies in the end.
There were no prophesied boys: just this. Just an old man and a lost soul; just Sirius taking the fang from his cousin's hand, dying for a chance at peace.

There was just Percy Weasley living a cold life in Ministry grey, lying about everything except the dragons he sometimes doodled in the margins of his books; just Bill going straight to find Ron, in the ruckus, to guard his baby brother's back; Fred getting put out of it with a leg wound ten minutes in and spending the rest of the battle cracking jokes and helping guard the other injured.

There were no Chosen Ones, just kids who chose themselves-- with wands or bottled hexes at their hips, who had run and hid all their lives, because they had been waiting for the fight to matter. Anthony and Dean fought shoulder to shoulder. Ginny stayed within three protective steps of the Creevey boys, the whole battle long.

The Death Eaters fled, not long after Voldemort fell. The Order had retaken Hogwarts, but not the wizarding world--Voldemort's forces had had more than a decade to settle themselves in at the Ministry. But it was certainly a start. They buried the dead out on an island on the Lake and then got back to work.

When they took the district with Arthur's little flat in it, the Weasley family went home, both halves of it. It wasn't the Burrow, but there were knit sweaters tossed over the backs of chairs.

Underneath Percy's bed, Charlie found a box of books on dragons and he sat down heavily on the neatly-made bed, staring at it. He had handed his brother a pair of battered, borrowed old books once, to give the kid something to hold onto. Percy had been so good at holding onto things.

"Hey," said Ron from the doorway. His voice cracked on the word. "Hey, I don't remember, Charlie--do you play chess?"

Charlie lifted his head. "Why don't you teach me?"

They took the wizarding world back, town by hidden town, Ministry floor by Ministry floor. The Department of Mysteries was a week-long battle, with a bit of minor time travel thrown in to boot. They lost Flitwick in that fight. When things had settled down, the student body and alumni of the hidden school all met up in the dim basement of Aberforth's pub.

"I learned Wingardium Leviosa here," said Hermione, looking around at all the boxes and barrels.

"Levi-OH-sah," said George fondly. Fred ruffled the stuck-up parts of Hermione's coarse haircut.

"Flitwick turned up in my living room and talked Mom and Dad around," said Justin. "Had to conjure a flamingo and turn it green before they even considered believing him."

"I thought he'd come out the fireplace," said Dean Thomas. "Thought Christmas had come early, and he was a very short Santa or elf or something." Anthony snorted.

Flitwick had saved all their lives, and given them new ones, new chances. Dean summoned mugs from upstairs and filled them with butterbeer (they'd clean and put them away afterward). They all toasted to their Headmaster--a thank you, a good bye.

"Love is magic; it is magic in any universe. It remembers. It leaves things behind."

Sirius had willed 12 Grimmauld Place to Remus. It took Remus a full year to summon the courage to go back to that home. It was not like going back to Godric's Hollow, where Remus had known every stone of James and Lily's house fondly. He could cry over that cottage, but stepping into Sirius's childhood home just made him angry.
Mrs. Black's portrait shrieked from the walls, so the first thing Lupin did was cut out that whole section of wood, plaster, and crawl space and Apparate it somewhere out in the cold, deep waters of the Pacific. Next, he set about cleaning-- a big task, but people dropped by, Mrs. Thomas and Molly, the kids Lupin had taught in the hidden school, Hagrid, Mundungus (they checked his pockets for jewelry before he left), and Minerva McGonagall. Minerva wasn't much for scrubbing the floors these days, but her cleaning spells packed a wallop.

"I think I'm going to turn it into a school," said Lupin. He smiled. "One that stays still."

Ginny frowned, looking up from her scouring charm. "Why? They'll let the Muggleborn into Hogwarts now, once the repairs are finished." Her old classmates had all swarmed down on 12 Grimmauld, throwing open windows and filling the place with the sort of noise and clamor they were still learning to allow themselves to make.

"But will they let the children who are werewolves?" said Lupin, and her mouth snapped shut. "Where will the Squibs go? Or halfbreeds--look at how quick they were to turn Hagrid out. I spent a lot of my life with no place to go, and now Sirius has left me one. I'm not going to waste it. Let's make this place a home again."

"That's a wonderful idea," said Ginny, starting to smile. "You do that. And let us know if we could help. But also-- Hey Dean!" she hollered. "Anthony! Hermione! We might have to take over Hogwarts again!"

Dean scrambled down the stairs. Hermione poked her head in patiently behind him. "Or get some legislation passed," Ginny amended.

Lupin was looking at her, so she grinned back. "We already won it once," said Ginny.

The Weasleys built another Burrow on the old fallow bones of their first home. They told stories about Percy. Charlie gave old, worn, library-stamped copies of books on dragons to his nieces and nephews. Ron taught them chess and never let them win easy--well, not too easy. Ginny taught them all the curses she had learned at Sirius and Moody's knee. Cho taught them how to fly.

When the first Weasley grandchildren turned ten, every single family and friend showed up on the platform to watch them board the Express. The engine was scarlet; the platform was loud; the train would take them to a beautiful castle beside a forest, not to cramped basements, not to the cold place where Ron, Bill, and Percy had learned to do magic, to cry quiet, and to hide.

Molly hugged and kissed shockingly red hair; Ginny gave advice and lock picks, for those doors that had been spelled against Alohomora.

All around them, all across the platform, children grinned and stepped onto the Express like there was nothing to be frightened of. Somewhere on that train, there could have been a messy-haired boy who hadn't known how to get through the platform walls alone. Maybe he was making friends with a boy with a smudge on his nose and corned beef sandwiches squished in his book bag. Maybe a kid had lost his toad and a bossy, heartfelt girl was helping him find it.

Children leaned out the train windows and shrieked down at parents with something that sounded like joy.

Cho leaned back against Luna's soft shoulder and cried so hard she couldn't see, because their world had come back to life. Ron took one of her hands, Luna the other, and they all held on, held tight, didn't let go.
Love is magic. It remembers. It resurrects.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

When Petunia Dursley refused to take Harry in she forfeited his birthright protection, so Dumbledore took the baby to the safest place he knew: Hogwarts.

The applicable staff (mostly just… not Snape) took Harry in on a rotating schedule as he grew from baby to toddler to child. They traded extra credit for babysitting among the older students, and Harry grew up knowing a few dozen different laps that were safe and warm to nap in.

This was a Harry who grew up among books, among old transient walls and learned professors. They gave Binns night duty sometimes, and let him talk young Harry to sleep. This was a Harry whose world changed, on principle, daily. The stairs moved. The walls became doors. You had to keep your eyes open–you had to pay attention. So he did.

He grew up in a school. Knowledge was power, but knowledge was also joy. This was his sanctuary. There was magic in his world from birth.

Chapter Notes

ellenare asked: First, I wanted to say that I love love love your Harry Potter fics and what-ifs! thank you so much for writing them :) And I also wondered if you ever written what if the Dursleys had refused to take Harry in?

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“The castle will keep him safe,” said Dumbledore, when McGonagall came into his office to complain for the eighth time about Albus’s rather cavalier take on child-rearing. “That’s what it does.”
“Then why do we bother with chaperones ever,” McGonagall said, tempted to shriek it. “Should we let all the children run about willy-nilly at all hours, or just the orphan waifs?!”

“He’s not a student. He’s a ward of Hogwarts. It will take care of him, Minerva.”

McGonagall walked off fuming. A cat with spectacle markings followed Harry almost constantly from ages three through four. At some point McGonagall was far enough behind on her paperwork, and had seen enough suits of armor carry the kid back to his room, enough draperies lift off the wall and tug Harry away from edges, and enough stairs creakingly shift their slope for his tiny toddler legs. She gave a grumpy sigh, stole some of Albus’s lemon drops, and resigned herself to a magical world.

The Grey Lady, the ghost of Ravenclaw Tower, didn’t really like boys but she liked children. She especially liked patience, and politeness, and Harry had been raised by McGonagall’s stern table manners, by Victorian portraiture and quite a few House Elves. He said please, thank you, and ma’am, and as a child he was very cunning in how he got bedtime stories and bedtime snacks out of most every adult he met.

The Grey Lady told the best stories, you see, the ones with riddles in them. You had to think and ask questions to get all the way through them. So he hunted her down with big patient eyes and plates of very smelly cheese, and she told him stories that made him think.

When Harry was stable enough on his feet to walk, and then to run, Sir Cadogan would race him through the castle, the knight scattering banquet tables and galloping across landscapes, twisting through the abstract gallery up on the seventh and a half floor. Harry stumbled and sprinted up stairways and didn’t notice for years the way Cadogan waited at the end of corridors for him to catch up.

Harry was a chubby-legged toddler, in this world–cute cheeks and stubby limbs. It’s a cute image, yes– but this is important. He was a chubby kid. He ate in a high chair on the teacher’s dais, getting peas and mashed potatoes on the adults beside him– Sprout laughed. Snape didn’t.

But this is important–Harry filled his plate. He wobbled up on little legs and grabbed biscuits from the table, slurped his soup, got marinara sauce on his chin and forehead and somehow behind his ear. When he was hungry, he ate. If he snuck down to the kitchens at night, it was for the adventure of it and nothing else. When he was hungry, he ate.

When he was four, they started letting him go sit down with the students. Bill Weasley, on route to be a prefect next year, took him under his wing and scrubbed his face down after meals. Harry was passed around the Hufflepuff table; theirs was the House Common Room he most liked sneaking into, with its barrels and cozy warmth. Nymphadora Tonks turned her nose a dozen different shapes to make Harry laugh, gurgling, as a toddler (and then a child) (and then for the rest of her life, honestly–it never stopped being funny).

The whole Ravenclaw table got distracted from meals, trying to solve riddles from a book one of their Muggleborns had smuggled in. Harry pushed his fork through his gravy, trying to draw out his thoughts but only making squiggles.

It was years before Harry sat at the Slytherin table for the first time–no one had ever set him down there, like they had with the others. But he liked green–it was the color of Professor Sprout’s greenhouses, where he went and napped sometimes in winter. It was the color of his mother’s eyes, from the little book of moving pictures Hagrid had given him when he was three.

All the Slytherin kids seemed big, but everyone Harry ever met seemed big–except for Flitwick, who
was seeming smaller with every growth spurt. He leaned forward, teetering on the bench, and grabbed a chicken drumstick. “Hi,” he said, because he’d had a childhood full of tea parties with high portrait society—the French nobility and the tired housewife from the third floor and an old witch with her sleeve on fire but very particular table manners. “I’m Harry. What’s your name?”

By the end of the meal, they were flicking peas across the table with their spoons, like catapult projectiles. Harry had been unwelcome in so few places in his life, after he’d left 4 Privet Drive, that he simply didn’t expect it. He asked Warrington, a Slytherin with shoulders like a bulldog’s, to help him with the juice, which was too unwieldy for his kid-sized wrists. Harry sat there blinking, smiling, until Warrington took the jug and poured him a brimming glass.

Harry didn’t find out until years later that Dumbledore and the staff had asked everyone not to talk about Voldemort or the war in front of little Harry.

It was the Ravenclaws who told him about Voldemort first; there was a price to be put on information and that price was “free.” Penelope Clearwater got into passionate debate with Roger Davies over fascism in wizardry and how Muggle conflicts correlated with Voldemort’s terror. “Define your terms!” called the blue-and-bronze peanut gallery.

The Gryffindors were easy, too—they told ghost stories about You-Know-Who on Halloween (not because that day was spookier, but because that was the day he had died, and they thought it might be safer).

Harry asked the Hufflepuffs next, curled up in one of armchairs in their common room, which were so fluffy you got lost in them. It was a slow common room, sunlight coming in from the high slits up in the wall, warming everything, but there was always something happening. Harry was pretty sure the tortoise from the tortoise and hare bedtime story had been a Hufflepuff.

Harry asked the Hufflepuffs because the Ravenclaws had talked politics that went over his head, and the Gryffindors had made it all sound exciting. He’d walked around with his chest shoved out for days after the Gryffindors’, trying to ignore the bit at the end where Charlie Weasley had explained solemnly that that is why Harry ought to not sit at the Slytherin table anymore for dinner.

But Nymphadora Tonks sat him down in the scattered sun of the Hufflepuff common room and explained with a kindly, ruthless pragmatism—that Voldemort had been bad, that he was gone and a lot of people thought it was because of Harry, and that Harry was here because Voldemort had killed his mom and dad. She let Harry cry into her robes. When he was done, she got him some tea and half the House huddled up close to play Exploding Snap until way past everyone’s bedtime.

He asked his Slytherins next, and he didn’t meet their eyes when he did it. Harry shuffled his feet, stamping them softly on the rich tapestried carpet of the Library. “You don’t hate me, do you? For killing him?” He was ten, almost ready for his first year, and murder and politics didn’t seem nearly as important as Warrington refusing after this to help him reach high shelves.

“Why would we hate you?” said Warrington. “My mom’s a Mudblood.”

“Not supposed to use that word,” Hestia Carrow chided, slouching in her library chair and shooting multicolored sparks out the tip of her polished wand. “If we’re going to be nice, War, we might as well go all in.”

Warrington rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and old You-Know-Who’s dad was a straight-up Muggle. So I really don’t know what he was on.”

“I’ve got a guess,” said Hestia. “Same things my parents are on, probably.”
“I bet his cost less,” Warrington said.

Harry had started exploring early, as soon as he could escape McGonagall’s cat-eyed notice. He found the easy secrets first—that this door led here on Thursdays, that the stairs up to the third highest tower were cranky and liked to be spoken to politely.

He found the easier passages next, the ones that didn’t require magic— that you tickled a pear to get into the kitchens, that you knocked twice on this brick, that if you walked by this stretch of hall three times and really really wanted something then the wall would open. (That last one—that was magic. Wanting is magic.)

The passages that required specific spells, like the one-eyed witch statue, would take longer. He was seven, he was nine, he was still taking naps in the warmth of the greenhouses, tucked in beside some snapping vines. It would take longer; it would take friends.

He was playing Exploding Snap Solitaire in one of the easier secret passages when he heard a pair of voices and a pair of footsteps coming toward him, tossing sounds between each other. Harry had a lantern and was wishing grumpily for a wand to cast Lumos with. He scrambled to his feet, lifting the light. “You’re not supposed to be back here!”

George Weasley, eleven years old and with a truly terrible haircut, leaned forward, peering at him. “My dear lad,” Fred said grandly. “That is precisely the point.”

They showed him the Map, which they had filched from Filch. Harry ran little fingers over the curling letters and twisting corridors. In this world, like the other, he did not know the names written into the page. He imagined Misters Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs a little like he thought of Peeves—spirits of mischief, and wonderful friends to have. When he met Sirius and Remus, years later, he would think that they probably wouldn’t have minded that assessment.

The Map had a dozen small passages Harry hadn’t known about. He was struck with respect for this scrap of old paper. They, however, had missed a few Harry had tracked down. He supposed he should give them some leeway; they, after all, couldn’t chat up snakes. Harry dragged Fred and George down corridors and cobwebby staircases, showing them his findings, and they all tried to figure out how to add Harry’s passages to the Map.

Fred was more likely to speak first and George was more likely to follow through. They had a long and complicated series of inside jokes between themselves and Harry bobbed on the edge of them, trying to catch on. Raised by a castle of portraits, teachers, and ghosts, Harry found the idea of siblings flabbergasting, and twins even more fascinating. He watched where Fred ended and George began, and tried to think about Hestia Carrow and Flora, her two-minutes-younger sister.

Flora was quiet where Hestia was harsh. Hestia slouched where Flora sat prim and straight—it meant that when Hestia needed something Flora could use her good graces with the parents to get it for her; and it meant that while everyone was eyeing Hestia, Flora could read a book under the table.

They had split it up among themselves a long time ago, in a cold house. They were from an old family, a pure branch of it: had tea with Malfoys and ministers.

Harry always walked around doe-eyed for the few weeks before summer vacation, looking for someone to take him home with them. Hestia sat him down once, after he’d made Flora’s lip wobble with sympathy. “Go talk to someone else, kiddo. Our house isn’t a place for someone like you,” she said, tapping his forehead.

Harry tended to end up at the Weasley house for at least half the summer, sleeping on the floor in
Fred and George’s room and helping Mrs. Weasley with the dishes like the housewife painting from the third floor had told him to. Lee Jordan took him home for Christmases sometimes, and once Harry had gone to Warrington’s mom’s flat in Chester and learned about electric dishwashers, paintings that stayed still, and televisions (which were like pictures that ignored you when you talked to them).

Whenever he went out of the castle for summer vacation, Harry would see Aurors hiding in bushes. When he was small, he just figured all bushes had Aurors hiding in them– the Hogwarts ones generally had a few. Harry would bring them sandwiches and help them with the crossword.

Sometimes new students didn’t know what to do about this little smart-ass kid who climbed up to sit at any table during feasts, who colored in the backs of their classrooms, who rolled his eyes and pointed them to the proper stairs when they got lost.

Some called him ‘sir’ and wondered if he was just very short, like Flitwick. Others made jokes, or sucked up to him, or tried to get him to help them cheat on exams. The Weasley twins recruited him to help with pranks–his innocent little face, his quick hands, his encyclopedic knowledge of the castle and its staff.

But some of them took offense. Big Slytherins hissing at him, at his scar– but also Ravenclaws who didn’t like this pipsqueak taking their teachers’ time, Gryffindors who had to prove their badassery by picking on little kids, or Hufflepuffs who whispered about how he talked to snakes in the greenhouses. But plenty, also, with no reason at all–all of them, honestly, with no reason at all. Bullying is about power, about fear, about tradition, and here Harry was a small child with no family and no friends.

Except for a castle, of course, with its suits of armor that stepped in to intercede, and its portraits that went running for the teachers (or sometimes just Warrington and Hestia, or Fred and George, or an incandescently angry Tonks–she always made the bullies cry).

The worst was always when Peeves saw someone stepping in to bother Harry. Peeves had spent Harry’s childhood dropping water balloons on his head, jumping out of armor at him, and tying his shoes together (once Harry grew into using shoelaces). But the first time a bully loomed over Harry, Peeves flew shrieking at him and spent that next week keeping the bully from a full night’s sleep and shoving his full plates of mashed potatoes into his face at mealtimes.

Molly Weasley took Harry to get his wand from Ollivander’s when he was eleven. Warrington went, too, because he had to pick up his textbooks. Harry tried out wand after wand while they squinted suspiciously at each other in the background–Molly’s small round frame, chin jutted out; Warrington’s big shoulders and heavy glower.

The Sorting Hat had been like a birthday present every year–a song. This is where you live, this, here–the home of the brave, the wise, the just, the clever. This had been his lullaby–the way the castle murmured to itself at night, wrapped warm around the kids it sheltered inside.

When Harry sat down under the Sorting Hat, it was to a sea of faces he recognized. Some had babysat him and others he had shown around the castle when they got lost on their first week and burst out crying next to a suit of armor. The paintings had just started fetching Harry whenever they saw a distressed first year.

_Hmmm_, said the Sorting Hat. _So you are our ward, then? I’ve been listening to the castle stones talk about you._

_It’s very nice to make your acquaintance, sir_, Harry said politely. _I’ve been enjoying your songs._
Well, preened the Sorting Hat. *I have so much time to prepare, you see.*

The Sorting Hat sieved through Harry’s ambitions, his braveries, his kindnesses. Harry squirmed in his seat. He had watched almost as many Sortings as he had lived years, and finally it was his turn—to be chosen, to walk to a table, to go to classes, to learn—what would the castle be like, as its student and not its child?

Ah, said the Hat, laughing. *Well, then, better be—*

“RAVENCLAW!”

There were still homesick first years and a constantly changing Hogwarts map; Harry still slipped out the back of class sometimes because a painting whispered from the wall about a lost kid. Harry snuck out of the high Ravenclaw tower to take kids to the kitchens, or out to Hagrid’s to pet Fang and get cheerily slobbered on, or up to the Astronomy tower at night to stare up at the stars and feel comfortably small.

He did it quieter with some kids. They needed that, sometimes, a touch of privacy. Harry kept a careful log of who looked sad, or scared, or tired from sleepless nights; of who needed food, who needed quiet, who needed to go slide, shrieking joy, down the banisters at two a.m., who needed to cry in private. In his third year, he started writing out the lists in his best penmanship and giving them quarterly to Flitwick, McGonagall, Sprout, and Madame Pomfrey.

He did not give his lists to Snape. He did not give them to Dumbledore. They weren’t dealing with the care of children. They were playing bigger games (or maybe smaller ones).

Harry was undiscriminating in his efforts. “You hang out with scum like the Weasleys and that giant oaf Hagrid, I’ve heard,” Draco Malfoy sneered.

“Mhm,” said Harry. “Did you want to insult my friends, or do you want me to show you how to get to the Charms classroom? Agatha the Loud here—” He waved at a painting. “—says you’re lost.”

Harry spent a lot of time his first year (when he wasn’t playing tour guide/camp counselor or learning what homework really meant) hanging out with Lee Jordan and his new pet spider. It was very impressive to Harry, who had eagerly collected bugs from the greenhouses and grounds as an eight year old, but it was admittedly not quite as impressive as the basilisk Harry had met in the school’s sub-basement.

The first time Harry sat down at the Slytherin table in blue-trimmed robes, that first year, one of the older boys said, “Hey, you’re not in this House. You’re not everybody’s little hanger-on now, Potter.” He leaned over him, menacing. “Little chirps like you don’t belong here.”

Harry nibbled on a slice of potato, then turned to look at Warrington, who had had another growth spurt over the summer—both out and up.

“You’re fine, kid,” Warrington said, and then squinted across at the other Slytherin. “You want to repeat that?”

The other boy stared. “Why you letting the little snot sit with us? He killed our—”

“He wasn’t *my* Dark Lord,” Warrington hissed. “Watch your mouth, Pucey.”

The first time Snape took points from Ravenclaw for something inconsequential, Harry gaped. “What are you doing?”
“Do you want to lose more points?” Snape’s voice was cool.

Harry stared at him, horrified. As a ward and not a student, this was the first time he’d ever really paid attention to Snape. “And you’re Head of Slytherin House? You’re supposed to be clever,” Harry said, disgusted. “You’re supposed to be mighty. And this? It’s just–petty favoritism. You’re just mean. What’s cunning about that?”

“Ten more points from Ravenclaw, Potter, for cheek.”

When Harry snuck out to the third floor corridor at the end of that first year, to find the Stone because no one else was going to protect it, it was far from his third time walking the castle at night. This time, he tiptoed down from Ravenclaw Tower and met Lee Jordan and the Weasley twins by Fluffy’s door.

But this was the same, across both worlds, both stories–this was a boy fighting for the only home he’d ever known.

Fred and George, Beaters, took the key room. Lee Jordan, who played with his competitive grandfather, took the chess room. They had all burned through the Devil’s Snare together.

Harry took the potions riddle room, working off a childhood with the Grey Lady’s puzzles and afternoons curled up in the Ravenclaw Tower. “Oh this is basic logic,” he said, disapproving, and Lee Jordan laughed so hard he couldn’t breathe at the expression on Harry’s little kid face.

In the final chamber, a Stone dropped into Harry’s pocket because all he wanted to do was find it. Quirrell burned his hands on Harry’s face, and, eleven years dead, Lily Potter’s love reached out and killed him.

It was not supposed to work like that. Lily Potter’s sacrifice only worked so long as she had family living to take Harry in. That protection should have died with Petunia’s slammed door.

But the castle had taken Harry in. Old magic is strange magic. Lily Potter still had family here, the castle had decided, in its very walls. Hogwarts had watched over seven years of Lily’s short, brave life.

The first time Harry woke up in the infirmary, after, the heavy bulk of Warrington took up most of his vision–slumped in a chair, glaring at a Transfiguration assignment. Hestia Carrow was a slim slip of a thing next to him, reading over his shoulder and making tutting noises. When Harry stirred, her head snapped up.

“‘The whole school’s heard what you did,” Hestia said. “You stupid kid. Going up against You-Know-Who without your friends? You didn’t even tell us.”

“He had friends with him,” Warrington corrected. “The whole school’s heard about that, by now, too.”

“Gryffindors,” Hestia said.

“Those are his friends, Hess,” Warrington said. He hadn’t looked at Harry yet.

Harry pulled himself up to a sitting position, blankets pooling around his legs. He picked a bag of candy off his nightstand table, which was loaded with them. Warrington’s heavy brow was wrinkled.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Harry said finally, feeling like he was once again asking them if they hated him. “But I thought–I thought for sure it was Snape, and he’s your Head of House, and I
didn’t want to–to put you in a position…”

“Well, that’s nonsense,” said Hestia.

Warrington had raised his head.

“I didn’t want to force you to make a hard choice,” Harry said.

Warrington considered that, then shook his head. “It wouldn’t have been hard,” he said. “Next time, you tell us.”

Harry grinned. The first time he had grinned at Warrington, he had been missing a tooth. He had a feeling that every time he smiled, even years later now, Warrington would always see that gap-toothed grin. “Will do.”

A stern McGonagall forbade him from staying with friends over the summer, and a shrill Flitwick backed her up. Dumbledore gave Harry a Chocolate Frog and a wink. Harry only used the one-eyed witch passage a few times that summer to sneak out to Hogsmeade and meet up with friends–Fred, Lee, and George; Hestia, her sister Flora, and Warrington; a graduated Nymphadora Tonks. Mrs. Weasley sent him a disapproving care-package and a kindly Howler.

In Harry’s second year old school, when Lucius Malfoy slipped a possessed diary into a little girl’s transfiguration textbook, it didn’t go quite as Malfoy planned.

You see, when you are six and there is a girl who lives in a toilet and makes funny noises– well, there was magic in the world and this was a piece of it.

Harry had spent most of his sixth year of life with a childish crush on Moaning Myrtle, so he had spent a lot of it in the girls’ second floor bathroom, reading slowly aloud out of his primers, getting his hair tousled by exasperated young student witches between classes, and exploring. He had known every speck of adolescent graffiti in there, and one day he had discovered the carved snake on the side of the facet.

When he had hissed, it had opened; he had been six–he hadn’t hesitated before tumbling down the great stone slide.

Harry had been hissing delightedly to himself as he stumbled over bones and wet stone, so the basilisk had thought he might be a baby snake and had kept its great eyes closed. By the time Harry had explained he had four legs, actually, the basilisk had decided that Harry was probably a baby snake, just a very confused one. It had taken him home, back to warmer halls, by its pipe-corridors.

Once Harry had dealt with shrill adults wondering where he’d been all day, he had gone down to Hagrid to ask what to feed a giant snake. When Hagrid had stammered, tucked between concern and curiosity, Harry had snuck him down to the Chamber, asking the basilisk to keep its eyes closed, could he? Hagrid had wept big tears into his beard. “He’s beautiful.”

Harry had translated and the snake had curled round and round them; it would have purred if it could.

The basilisk was a lonely, whiny baby really. I’m bored, it had hissed, so Hagrid had imported fluttering two-headed chickens for it to chase around the Chamber. Harry read it bedtime stories on lazy afternoons, the way so many different voices had read to him. He could still get Flitwick to break out his narrator’s voice and do a run of one of Beedle the Bard’s stories if he asked sweetly enough.
So when Ginny Weasley came to Hogwarts, with her blushing crush and a cold voice whispering in her ear, the basilisk was fat and mostly just invested in Harry’s hissing rereadings of a library book on great mythological snakes.

There were no roosters to get strangled, because Hagrid had quietly cleared the ground of them years ago, so the basilisk could safely visit him on hot summer nights when there were no children to scare (except for Harry, who was likely to be standing triumphantly atop of the basilisk’s head anyway).

*Enemies of the heir beware* got written in red on the walls, but the basilisk kept not petrifying people. It was busy getting its underbelly rubbed by Harry when he snuck down to the Chamber in order to procrastinate on his Potions homework.

This was a victory, yes–Muggleborns were safe and that was good, but there was still a girl with a voice in her head that wasn’t hers. There was still a child robbed of hours, of her hands, of her safety.

In this world, Harry was safe. The very walls of his world loved him. This would not last. But he had spent years watching children get lost and scared in changing halls, sitting with them at lunch through fits of homesickness. He had decided years ago this was his job.

When he saw Ginny growing paler and quieter, he pulled up a seat next to her and asked her about her day with a politeness that paintings had taught him, an honest care he’d learned from Professor Flitwick, and a way of putting people at ease he’d picked up from Nymphadora Tonks’s clumsy kindnesses.

Ginny squeaked, and stared at her plate, and ate very little. The next night, Harry recruited Fred and George and they all snuck Ginny down to the kitchens for big steaming cups of hot cocoa.

“I’ve been sleep-walking,” Ginny said, whipped cream on her upper lip from her second cup. “Or—something. There’s this—voice—well, first there was this diary—I think…”

The diary went to Dumbledore’s capable hands; the mandrakes were not needed; the infirmary beds were not full. This was a victory.

But the infirmary beds were not completely empty, either–Ginny spent sporadic afternoons there, for years. She curled up in the quiet light, her books discarded, and tried to pretend there had never been anybody else living in her skull.

Ginny passed classes and kissed peers; she perfected her Bat Bogey Hex with a sharply gleeful studiousness, won Quidditch games, faced down Umbridge–but there were days (would always be days) when the loudest thing in the world was still Riddle’s whisper.

The biggest excitement that year wasn’t the Chamber, but Harry’s offended disgust at Gilderoy Lockhart’s terrible teaching. “This is a school,” he said at the Ravenclaw table, greeted with noises of mutual disapproval.

“He’s unsafe,” Penelope Clearwater, Ravenclaw prefect, agreed, vehement. “And he’s terrible at this!”

“If he wasn’t terrible at teaching, you wouldn’t mind that he was unsafe?” Warrington called from the Slytherin table, behind them. Flora Carrow giggled, because it was a bit true.

It started out as a study group in the Ravenclaw Tower, blue-hemmed kids reading Defense Against the Dark Arts books and trying spells with the Grey Lady’s supervision. They figured she was ancient enough to count as adult supervision, and ignored the fact that “lethal danger” didn’t ping too many warning bells in her translucent head.
But Cedric Diggory, who Harry had walked through homesickness in his first year, wanted to practice too. Fred, George, and Lee were disgusted that nothing fun was happening; Ginny Weasley, still pale but growing warmer, was quietly, firmly furious that children were not being taught to defend themselves.

So they moved the study sessions to an empty classroom. Some of the older kids, who had had sporadically useful DADA teachers, came in to give them pointers. McGonagall turned an exhausted blind eye. Percy kept track of their lessons and resources in color-coded binders that made Fred and George gag loudly (and made Penelope Clearwater eye Percy with warm interest).

It took weeks of the meetings for Harry to convince Warrington and the Carrow twins that they should come practice too.

“Defense Against Dark Arts isn’t really supposed to be in our skillset,” Hestia said, pretending to examine her nails.

“Poppycock,” Harry said. He sat at them with breakfast the next day and pestered and prodded until Flora threw up her hands and said they’d go. Warrington sighed.

“Hess?” said Fred, when Harry dragged them up to the classroom that evening and introduced them. “Your friends don’t call you Hex? I think that’d be much more fitting.”

Hestia fixed him with her best withering look. “Hex? I’m sorry, I can’t imagine letting anyone with taste that inane ever nickname me anything.”

Fred grinned.

“Oh no,” said George. “Oh no.”

“They’re going to be friends,” said Flora, horrified. “I can’t tell Mother.”

“I can’t tell Mother,” said George.

Around them, Lee and Cedric were practicing Jelly Legs on each other while Hermione Granger called criticism and advice from the book she had her nose in. Luna Lovegood, a little first-year Ravenclaw who had lingered at the edges of their first study group in the Tower, sat cross-legged on a desk and wobbled it back and forth like she couldn’t sit still. Anthony Goldstein, who Harry shared a dorm room with, read over Hermione’s shoulder.

Neville Longbottom tripped over nothing. Warrington, who had left Hestia to her snark, Flora to her exasperated horror, and Harry to his undying amusement, caught Neville by the back of the robe without thinking about it.

In three years, Ginny would perfect her Bat Bogey Hex. In three years, this would become Dumbledore’s Army. In five years, they would go to war. But, for now—Hestia rolled her eyes at Fred and hid her grin while he rolled them back. “Just sit like a normal person,” Seamas hollered at Luna (and then deeply regretted the outburst, as third-year Cho Chang leapt over to put an admonishing finger in his face).

The next year, there were dementors around Hogwarts. Harry had been spending the summer playing Quidditch out back of the Weasleys’ Burrow, but one breakfast Dumbledore Apparated in. Over eggs and bacon on mismatched ceramic, smilingly, Albus told them he was taking Harry home.

Harry fainted when they went past the dementors at the front gates and he woke up in the infirmary, steaming hot chocolate on the table beside him and Dumbledore napping in a chair. He had heard his
mother die, but he didn’t tell Dumbledore that. Dumbledore was his guardian and one of his favorite people; Harry also trusted that old Dumbly knew enough about *everything ever* to not need any extra information. He kept his mouth shut.

Lupin was a great enough teacher that they thought about disbanding the DADA study group, but Harry approached Hermione, who was their best researcher, and asked if she might be able to find out how to cast a Patronus. They set up with bars of chocolate and pillows to faint onto. Hermione got Ron to find a boggart somewhere. Harry’s greatest fear was still fear itself, and they used that for the rest of their benefits.

At the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch game, when the dementors came, Neville fell off his seat (anyone who laughed at him had to deal with Warrington). Harry, who was wearing a yellow scarf for Cedric and red mittens for Fred and George, tried to call a Patronus–it sputtered out and so did he.

When the dementors came, Hestia went still. Flora went pale. They didn’t cry, frown, shake or squeak. They held hands very quietly and held their well-bred spines perfectly straight, like they might be graded on it. When the dementors came, Hermione shook but leapt to her feet to hurl a a Hovering Charm at Gryffindor’s Seeker, Ginny Weasley, who was rapidly plummeting to the ground.

Ginny’s broom smashed to splinters in the Whomping Willow, so the study group pooled their pocket money and got her a lightly-used Cleansweep Seven to replace it.

Harry knew Scabbers from summers at the Weasleys. He’d heard about the ruckus of Fred and George’s little brother and the Granger girl’s cat–even at the Ravenclaw table you could overhear their shrieking, and Harry only sat at his own table sometimes. Ron had also stood up the study group for a month or so, while Hermione furiously attended every meeting and played drill sergeant to their extracurricular Patronus lessons. Cho finally took her aside and let her cry about it, because Hermione was making their adopted first years squeak.

So when Harry found Scabbers in the milk jug while he and Warrington were having sympathetic tea at Hagrid’s, Harry grabbed the rat and didn’t let him run. He wrapped Scabbers up in the bunched-up fabric of his robe and let Hagrid cry it out about Buckbeak’s sentence.

On the way back to the castle, a big black dog grabbed Harry by the sleeve and yanked him down the Whomping Willow’s passage. This was James’s son, not a random bystander, so Sirius was more careful, even in his desperation. The dog was mostly hair, all skin and bones otherwise; the man would be too. Warrington slammed through the Willow’s branches and followed.

Warrington came up the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack pummeled and bloody, hair full of jagged twigs. While Harry curled up on the bed around Scabbers and shouted at them, a big-shouldered, bloody troll (knight) (friend) and a skeleton of a man faced off before him. Sirius Disarmed Warrington with Harry’s stolen wand, easily. Warrington let the wand go and slammed Sirius bodily into the wall.

(Professor McGonagall had sat Warrington down, a few weeks into the school year, and explained about Sirius Black and why there were dementors around the gates. She had told the Weasley twins, too, figuring that if anyone was going to help Harry do something stupid it would be them.)

It took a lot of shouting, a lot of storytelling. Sirius transformed Scabbers back, once Warrington had removed the rat from Harry’s lap so that Black would not be in any way pointing a wand at Harry. The Marauder’s Map was safely in George Weasley’s pocket, so there were no interruptions.
By the end, they had Pettigrew at wand point, and Harry was swimming happily in the idea of a godfather. They started down the passage to the Whomping Willow and Sirius brought up, tentative, that maybe once he was cleared he could take custody of Harry.

Warrington snorted. Sirius stiffened. “What?”

“Who’re you, to Harry?” Warrington said, still bruised and bleeding some. “Yeah, how you going to pay for food for him? Kid eats like a starving puppy. You going to help with homework?”

“Oh, and you help him with homework?” Sirius drawled, eyeing Warrington’s thrice-broken nose and big stubby hands, the green on his robes.

Warrington’s jaw worked. “I help him with Care of Magical Creatures.”

Harry had been chewing things over in the background. A godfather seemed like a wonderfully fun thing to have; and this one could turn into a giant puppy. “You could come live at the castle!” said Harry.

Sirius said, “I’m not sure the students’ parents would think too kindly on that.”

Harry squinted at him, then shrugged. “That’s alright. I know a lot of places to hide here. I know all of them.”

Sirius grinned, a skeleton smile on a skeleton man, and Harry grinned back instinctively. “I bet I know more.”

Harry thought about the basilisk and the age-old air of his chamber. “Probably not,” he said.

“Trust us,” said Warrington, who had been taken down to meet the basilisk as his fifteenth birthday present from Harry. “You probably don’t, Fluffy.”

“What’s got you so against me?” Sirius demanded of Warrington. He nudged Peter, who had slowed down, in the back of his head with his wand.

Warrington worked his jaw, his big broad shoulders shifting. They were great for lifting heavy juice jugs, or catching Harry before he tripped onto his face. “Don’t you promise this kid things you can’t deliver,” he said. “The world’s stepped on him enough, okay?”

Harry stared at them, then shrugged and hurried the rest of the way out of the tunnel under the Whomping Willow. The castle shone above the lawn, a dozen twinkling lights in high windows. He didn’t know what Warrington was talking about.

(Except—sometimes, curled up in his four poster in the empty Ravenclaw tower over holidays, Harry would think about the cozy room Fred and George shared in the Burrow, Warrington’s dusty little bedroom in his mom’s house in Chester, the way all the walls stayed where they were. He thought about breakfast at Lee Jordan’s place, his laughing little sister and his cheerful parents, instead of a childhood of playing teatime with portraits and having supper with a rotating cast of teachers.)

Normally, at this point, Harry would shake his head and tell the world, “That’d just be boring, is all,” but the dementors had come.

Thinking about the castle, Harry thought about cold, wet stone. The secret passages were just holes for rats to come in by. The ground was chilly and rotten under his scraped knees.

There was no Time Turner. There was no second chance, no Patronus charging from across the lake.
Sirius went to his knees, Warrington went down like an avalanche. Peter transformed and then disappeared. Harry screamed, and the basilisk came.

The next eight times Harry got detention, they just had him help with the paperwork involved in the Ministry’s complaint against Hogwarts for the loss of a dozen dementors. Hogwarts was protesting that they had died of “natural causes” and inviting any inspector they wanted to come inspect the grounds for “a giant snake, really, Cornelius?”

When Harry found out that Remus was Mister Moony, at the end of that year, the first thing he asked was, “Oh, good, could you help us edit it? We’ve been trying, but we can’t figure out how you managed it.”

Lupin blinked, frowning. “Because one of the passages collapsed? Yes, I know.”

“No,” said Harry. “You missed some.” He ran a hand through his unruly hair, somewhere between anxious and proud.

Lupin’s face went soft, fond. “Did we now?”

Harry nodded, shuffling a foot, his hair sticking out at all angles. Lupin smiled. (Not all things are lost. Wherever we go, no matter how far, we leave things behind.) “As I am not a teacher anymore,” said Lupin, taking out his wand. “I don’t find the idea of one last lesson unethical.”

“I’ll grab Fred and George!”

Watching Fred and George bend over the Map ten minutes later, tossing words between them as they worked through Lupin’s directions, Lupin thought about how much Sirius and James would have liked these boys. And something in Remus lit up at that, remembering that Sirius was lost, not gone; hidden, not dead. Sirius had years and years to like things now. (He had a little less than twenty-four months.)

The next year, the Triwizard Tournament came to Hogwarts and so did a man who said he was Mad-Eye Moody. Harry cheered when Cedric Diggory’s name came out of the Goblet, as did all their DADA study group. When Harry’s name came out, the whole Hall went silent.

The older Hufflepuffs remembered Harry learning to read in their common room. The younger ones remembered him conjuring them hot chocolate (one of the first spells he’d ever mastered) when they were missing home most. Draco Malfoy still ran a “Potter Stinks!” campaign, but it was much less popular, especially with Harry and Cedric walking down corridors with their heads bent in towards each other.

Harry and Cedric had decided that Hogwarts should definitely win, so they settled down every afternoon with the study group and prepped together. “Is this cheating?” Cedric asked once.

Harry thought about it. “Nah,” he said. “Probably not?” But when they solved the golden egg’s riddle, they went and told Fleur and Krum how to do it.

For the second task, they took Cedric and Krum’s crushes and Fleur and Harry’s siblings. Warrington looked massive in the water there, floating between three tiny girls.

Harry saved Fleur’s little sister, too. Harry had a long habit now of taking care of children, and he had been swimming in this lake for almost a dozen summers now.

Cedric was tall and golden, a Quidditch god and a smiling soul. Harry had brought him hot chocolate his first year, when Cedric smiled just as much, but more brittlely, missing his father terribly. Now,
with Cedric still towering over him, Harry elbowed him until he went and asked Cho Chang out. “You’re been ‘admiring her wand form’ in study sessions for years!”

“She has excellent wand form,” Cedric protested, which was true, but he asked her to the Ball that night.

This Harry had shared a Common Room with Luna Lovegood’s slightly distracted smiles for years now. He learned even more quickly than he had in other stories what fun she was to invite to parties Harry didn’t really want to attend.

Luna dressed to the nines for the Yule Ball, all floating fabrics and weird hair ornaments. Harry grinned ear to ear when he saw her coming down the stairs, and they talked companionably about wrackspurts for the whole first dance.

Neville took Ginny. Flora was the good twin, so she took a nice pure-blooded Zabini. Hestia took Fred Weasley and they spent the whole night happily insulting each other, daring the world to take reports back to either of their parental units.

Luna taught the dance floor moves no one else had ever heard of until she got distracted by watching the lights in the ceiling. “They’re dancing with us,” she told Ron, who stared at her.

Harry danced with every member of the yet-unnamed DA that evening, and with every kid who was sitting out by themself and didn’t look like they wanted to be there. When he went to bed that night his feet were sore and he was content.

The third task came, raising its dark, hedged head. In this world, too, Harry and Cedric came to the Cup at the same time. There was no scuffle, no race, no fraught alliance under those green high walls. They went in as allies, and they won as friends. They reached out and, on three, grabbed the Cup together. In this world, too, it would kill one of them.

Harry was used to the very world shifting itself to his favor–stairs lifting up, passages opening in bathroom sinks. He was used to a world where everyone knew his name. The Portkey Cup yanked them both out of the castle grounds. The rustle of the hedge maze turned into the rustle of dry grass on carved stone.

They did not jump to stand back to back. They did not scan the graveyard with screaming nerves, ready curses on the tips of their tongues. Harry cast Lumos. This Harry and Cedric were better friends; they had trust strung out between them, but they had both still never seen even the edges of a war. They were not ready.

Kill the spare.

Here, too, everyone knew Harry’s name.

When Harry crashed down on the overgrown Quidditch field with Cedric’s corpse, he was crying almost as hard as Amos Diggory. He wanted to tell Amos, your son missed you so much, his first year here. He still does–’Dad says this,’ he says. ’Dad says–’

Fred and George grabbed each of Harry’s arms, and Warrington stood guard, so Moody wasn’t able to sneak him away. Barty Crouch Jr. disappeared in the night, and Dumbledore found his old friend Moody thin and grumpy at the bottom of the chest Crouch had left behind in his office.

“I vote we just boycott DADA next year,” Fred said. “I’m tired of loony nutters trying to teach me dangerous stuff.”
“I heard you singing Mad-Eye’s praises all this year,” Hestia pointed out.

“And don’t use that word,” said Cho meaningfully.

Fred sighed. “Luna, is it okay if I say loony in your presence?”

Luna was laying on the classroom’s tiled floor, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling. “I don’t think he was loony exactly. Determined, maybe?”

“Maybe next year will be better,” said Hermione. “Remember Lupin?”

“Maybe next year will be better,” Fred agreed, sighing.

(It wasn’t.)

Every piece of Harry’s world that he could remember had been safe. He didn’t remember Godric’s Hollow. He dreamed about green light flashing, but it was a dream. He didn’t remember being turned away at 4 Privet Drive, his last family tie severing. He remembered stairs rising to meet him and Peeves throwing mashed potatoes in peoples’ faces when they were mean to him.

His world was unsafe. This was not new, but it was the first time Harry had known about it. Dolores Umbridge nailed rules into the castle stone. Harry felt grave dirt under his feet when he walked his old, known grounds. When he went down to visit the basilisk, he crunched over rat skeletons and thought of Cedric’s strong jaw. He threw up on the cold stone and didn’t go back all year. The basilisk had to visit him at Hagrid’s, sulkily, under cover of darkness.

When Umbridge came to Hogwarts, Dumbledore’s Army still bloomed in back rooms, but this time it was Harry driving it. How dare she refuse them an education? This was a school. This was his school, his home, his playground, and she was simpering and nailing terrible rules to the old stone walls. How dare she? This was a school.

Harry had found the Room of Requirement when he was eight, looking for a place to hide his growing bug collection–McGonagall always found them and threw them out. He, Lee Jordan, and the twins had been using it as a base of operations for years. (Harry had always been pretty sure Dumbledore knew all about the Room, and exactly about every one of Harry’s youthful misadventures at Hogwarts, but if you spent your time worrying about what Albus Dumbledore did or did not know, you’d go insane.)

They trained in the Room, and they hid there, too. When children cried in the halls, Fred and George tried to make them laugh. Ginny circled them, make sure they felt listened to, and let the rage in her drown out the whispers echoing in her skull. She had been little once, scared and silent, and she would make sure no other child of Hogwarts ever felt like they could not speak.

When the DA went out to Hogsmeade, Warrington, Tonks, and Penelope Clearwater would meet them there and run them through drills. Tonks was working her way up through the Auror Division and Warrington was working at the Owl Emporium on Diagon Alley, cleaning out cages and manning the register. Penelope was gloriously happy, working at the small but passionate Sanitation sub-ministry of the Muggle-Wizard Public Relations Office. She was utterly certain she was making the world a better place, and she was probably right.

(In a different world, Warrington had failed a year and was repeating his seventh when Umbridge came to Hogwarts. In a different world, Warrington wore an Inquistor’s Squad badge on his robes, captured a scowling Harry in Umbridge’s office, and slept easy at night.

This Warrington woke up in his cheap little flat wondering what on earth his little hellions could
have gotten up to now. This one woke up almost wishing that Hermione Granger was less good at tutoring than she was, and that he had failed his sixth year after all. He didn’t like the stories that were coming out of Hogwarts.)

When the dream came about Sirius in the Department of Mysteries, Harry still went. He was used to believing the things laid before his eyes and ears. Fred, George, and Lee loved Sirius as much as Harry did, now. They had spent stolen days in the caves outside Hogsmeade, trading smuggled food for stories of pranks. Umbridge had gotten worse and worse, but the Weasley twins hadn’t packed up and left. Harry needed lieutenants, and friends. If they left him alone he’d mother the whole DA without remembering to sleep.

“I’m going to the Ministry with or without you,” Harry told the Carrows. “You told me to let you know when I was going to do something stupid.”

“And we told you it wouldn’t be a hard choice,” Hestia said, sniffing, grabbing her boots. When they tried to send a Floo message to Sirius at Grimmauld Place and failed, Flora put through a second call to Warrington’s cheap little flat.

In this world, like the other, little Ginny Weasley showed up with Luna at one hand and Neville at the other. “Either all that talk about Dumbledore’s Army was real, or it wasn’t,” said Neville.

“If you think you’re going,” said Ginny. “Then you can’t stop us.”

“He’s my godfather.”

“And you’re our friend,” said Luna.

They snuck into the Department of Mysteries, wands out. Hestia was making fun of Fred’s wand form when the first Death Eaters stepped out to meet them. (If Flora and Hestia recognized any of their voices or hands or builds, they didn’t say. But they stiffened, and even after it was all over Harry didn’t ask them.)

After Luna had broken her ankle, Ginny had broken Lucius Malfoy’s wrist, and Fred and George had thrown both curses and puns at the Death Eaters, Warrington showed up with the Order of the Phoenix in hand.

Once it would have taken ages to convince the Order to break into the Ministry on this green kid’s word. But Molly Weasley had heard Harry drop Warrington into the edges of stories over her breakfast table for years now–always a quiet, reliable presence in the back of his storytelling, this boy who scared the monsters away.

Lupin had watched them, all Harry’s third year, the way Warrington’s exasperation had reminded him of himself at sixteen, staring after Sirius, Peter, and James’s incorrigible antics.

Sirius had faced Warrington down in the tunnel under the castle grounds, Warrington’s face and shoulders all pummeled to black and red by the Willow. Warrington had told him not to make Harry promises he couldn’t keep.

But he had. We all make promises we can’t keep. We promise to stay, and Sirius couldn’t.

His cousin Bellatrix killed Sirius in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic. Harry screamed, but this time not even the basilisk could help.

In Harry’s sixth year as a Hogwarts students, the kids who Harry had talked cheerily through homesickness came and sat with him at lunch. Parvati Patil, who he had brought hot chocolate to
when her rabbit died, brought him a steaming mug. Ravenclaw third years who he had taken up to the Astronomy Tower after hours, to marvel at the immensity of the universe, snuck him up there at midnight and named constellations in a dozen languages until they all got too tired to tell one star from the next.

When it was Cho Chang who brought him hot chocolate, they both just ended up crying, but sometimes that was alright.

No one helped him when he got lost. Harry could not get lost in Hogwarts. He did not know how. The next time he opened the Room of Requirement it showed him the Room of Lost Things, piled high with junk, so he curled up on an ancient couch and slept through Care of Magical Creatures.

No one helped him when he got lost, but when he had nightmares in Ravenclaw Tower he tended to wake up to an invader—Luna Lovegood cross-legged at the foot of his bed, humming him awake.

Fred and George took him out into the passages to plan pranks. “For Sirius!” they said, trying to make their eyes twinkle with it, and Harry wrote a proud and consternated Lupin about their adventures.

There was good entertainment that year: for one, Ron Weasley’s loud and confused courtship with Hermione Granger, with a fascinating backdrop of Ron’s suddenly extraordinary and perplexing success in Potions.

Watching Flora and Hestia fall into high society manners in Slug Club was as intriguing as it was frankly terrifying. Harry felt at once proud, sad, and as though he barely knew them. After, though, Hestia showed him the cookies she’d snuck out in her bra and Flora giggled until she turned red in the face.

Draco Malfoy sulked around the corners of the school, like the basilisk looking for someone to read him a story. Draco had never been one of Harry’s adopted kids, exactly, but Harry kept an eye on every person who walked onto his home turf. When he saw Draco was just going to the Room of Requirement, Harry assumed Draco just needed someplace to be alone, too.

Dumbledore started calling Harry in to tell him about the Horcruxes. Harry kept it to himself for months, chewing it over. He told the Weasley twins first, when they were hiding from a furious Filch over some prank or other. The twins glanced at each other, then turned off their mischief faces and sat down to listen seriously. Lee had felt like doing homework that day (he was taking Arithmancy and it was hard). They filled him in later.

Warrington came to visit at their next Hogsmeade trip and Harry dithered over his choices for weeks beforehand. It was not that Warrington and the Carrows were Slytherins. It was not that this was pieces of the Dark Lord’s soul he was being tasked to find and destroy.

It was just that Warrington worried. Harry would always be gap-toothed and need help pouring his juice. Warrington knew that wasn’t true now, knew it, but he’d still lose sleep worrying.

All the same, Harry dragged Flora and Hestia out to have butterbeers with Warrington and congratulate him on his promotion to shift manager at the Owl Emporium. Harry herded them up to the deserted hill where the Shrieking Shack still stood and told them everything.

“The Gaunts?” said Hestia, paling and pretending not to. “I think we’re related.” She flapped a hand carelessly, so Harry reached out and held it.

“Before you do anything stupid,” Warrington said. “You call us, okay?”
“Or anything smart,” said Flora. She took Hestia’s other hand.

But the next stupid thing Harry did was with adult supervision, so he didn’t call anyone. He and Dumbledore found the fake locket and came home. Draco Malfoy let the Death Eaters in through Harry’s Room of Lost Things but failed to kill Dumbledore. Snape stepped in.

Harry did not chase Snape down the grassy lawn. He did not scream coward! at him because he did not expect Snape to care. He just drew his wand and found his army and got to work clearing the rats out of his castle.

When all the Death Eaters were done, crowds flocked down to the courtyard to look at Dumbledore’s body. Harry knew he should be down there, looking for who was crying and who was in shock, who needed tea, or blankets, or chocolate—but instead he climbed down to the Chamber, curled up with the basilisk, and went to sleep.

Harry spent the first week of summer vacation holed up in the Astronomy Tower. Molly Weasley tried to take him home to the Burrow but he refused quietly. “At least get down off the tower,” Molly said and Harry blinked, nodded.

“I think I saw everything I needed to.” He had spent the week studying Hogwarts from that birds-eye view, making battle plans. Chess with Lee, riddles with the Grey Lady, and pranks planning was surprisingly good preparation for guerrilla strategy.

Harry did not leave the castle in the seventh year. This was his home territory and he knew better than anyone how to defend it. He hid away in his chamber, in the passages, in the Room of Requirement, and took in whoever came to him.

Fred, George, and Lee began the radio broadcasts, coordinating the resistance under pseudonyms. Harry passed on his knowledge about the Horcruxes and those they spread word of mouth to trusted teams. They didn’t want Voldemort warned. Fred, George, and Tonks took the cup from Gringotts. Lee Jordan and Anthony Goldstein broke into the Ministry to get the locket, and then they came back home.

Warrington applied for a teacher’s assistant job at Hogwarts—they checked over his grades and assigned him to help shelve books in the Library instead. “You do think he knows his alphabet, right?” Alecto Carrow asked her brother Amycus.

Amycus shrugged. “He’s one of us, that’s good enough.” The Carrow siblings were new to scholastic management and not terribly interested in the educational side of this.

There were two other Carrow siblings here, too—after Dumbledore had died the previous year, Hestia had sat down and failed every one of her final exams. “Was too busy celebrating the victory,” she said, smiling, when McGonagall called her into her office to talk about it. “Oh no. Guess I’ll have to redo the classes next year.”

“Hestia,” said McGonagall, who had seen the girl face down Umbridge, wipe her little sister’s tears, and send Harry toppling over with laughter. “It’s going to be hell here next year, baring some miracle this summer.”

“Are you running?”

“Of course not. There are children here.”

Hestia smirked. “If Gryffindor’s not running, then hell if I’m going to.”
“Language, Miss Carrow. And I’m not sure you heard the Sorting Hat’s song properly.”

“I think you all just missed a quarter of it.” Hestia grabbed her book bag. “See you next year, professor.”

Flora got hired to help out in Madame Pomfrey’s grim infirmary. Hestia retook her seventh year classes, picking fights with her aunt and uncle, stepping in the way of curses. Ginny acted as Hestia’s backup until she was driven into hiding after Harry. Penelope Clearwater left her precious Sanitation Offices and signed on to the teaching assistant position they’d refused Warrington.

“Any of the other teachers come by,” Warrington said to his library study groups, “you pretend I’m real scary, okay? Can any of you cry on cue?” A little girl with blond pigtails raised her hand. “Excellent.” He gave them defense lessons and healing, a place to nap safely. When it got bad, he would ferret the ones who needed it most away to Harry.

Trying to find the last Horcrux, Harry asked the smartest being he knew—the quiet ghost who lived up in the Ravenclaw Tower. She got shiftier than he had ever seen her, so he pressed, as cruel as Hestia, as firm as Molly Weasley, and the Grey Lady told him about the lost diadem.

Harry knew what to do about lost things in Hogwarts. He called Fred and George to bring the cup in, fetched the diadem from the Room, and took them and the locket down for the basilisk to chew on.

Voldemort felt his lives withering, so he gathered his forces. Harry looked over the children sleeping in the Room of Requirement and reminded himself that he had not asked a single one of them to be here.

Dean and Seamas Finnegan curled around each other, having quietly put themselves between the huddled Creevey brothers and the rest of the world. Anthony Goldstein was barely a tuft of hair, the whole rest of him hidden inside his blankets. Hermione Granger had fallen asleep on an open book and Ron had quietly removed it and replaced it with a pillow.

Daphne Greengrass, who Flora had taken under her wing as a first year, had a gaggle of rescued first year Slytherins asleep around her. Hestia had refused to leave the open halls. “I’m safer than anyone else here,” Hestia had said as Harry put salve on her detention wounds. “There are kids who need someone out there in the open. Guess it’s going to have to be me.”

Neville and Ron were the only other ones awake, leaning over the other half of the castle map Harry had gotten distracted from. “We should put a supplies cache here,” Neville said. “And a field med kit here, here, and here.” He left shining points of light at every place he touched. Harry rubbed his eyes and leaned forward to look.

“We know you’re hiding him,” Alecto Carrow said the next morning. “The Dark Lord will offer you all safety if you give us Harry Potter.”

A terrified teenager named Pansy had surrender on the tip of her tongue, but it was little Flora Carrow who stood up. She was not so little anymore. “You can’t touch him, auntie.”

“Why not?” said Alecto, staring.

“Because we won’t let you.”

The battle broke out there in the Great Hall, but it poured and hissed out over all parts of the castle.

Death Eaters and the Order of the Pheonix clashed in the Great Hall. Children fought adults in the
hallways, classrooms, stairwells.

Cho Chang hid from Stunning Hexes in an alcove where she had once kissed Cedric Diggory silly. Flora Carrow blocked curses coming from wands whose cores and lengths she knew by heart. Penelope Clearwater, who had laughed herself out of her first Divination lesson, fought back to back with Lavender Brown. The last thing Fred Weasley ever did was laugh at his brother Percy’s joke.

In the main courtyard Nagini circled Voldemort’s ankles, hissing. Harry called and in the Chamber, the basilisk rose up from a comfortable nap.

The basilisk couldn’t use its eyes, for fear of hurting Harry’s people, but it tore into the Death Eater’s ranks with fangs and bulk. There were two halfblood boys at war here, two Heirs of Slytherin who called Hogwarts home. With Harry, his army leapt back into battle, slinging curses they had learned on the very grounds they now bled on. He had Hestia at one shoulder and Lee Jordan at another, and that was as invincible as he knew how to feel.

Voldemort’s forces retreated, cowering from the snake’s thunderous hisses, but the basilisk curled up when the last had disappeared around the bend.

Its skin had been glossy, green, and at six Harry had taken glorious naps on it, feeling safe in the darkness. Now it was going grey and dry, streaked with blood. Some of the Death Eaters’ curses had ricocheted off the basilisk’s hide, but not all of them. It wheezed and Harry went down on his knees by its great closed eyes, calling for Hagrid to come help, Flitwick, Charlie, Pomfrey, someone. You did good, you did so good, he whispered, crying it. Thank you.

When the basilisk had rattled its last, Harry rose to his feet. The courtyard was silent. The dust was settling; the Death Eaters had left, but they would be back. They would be back, but, for now, they had left.

Harry went back into the Hall, still wiping his cheeks, and saw George standing over Fred’s body. Molly Weasley, who burned bread whenever she tried to warm it for breakfast but made eggs perfectly, was crying so hard Harry wasn’t sure how she was still standing upright.

Hestia bumped into the back of Harry, who had frozen on the mantle, not wanting to take one step closer to that reality. If he stepped, even here, even now, the stairs would not rise up to catch him.

Hestia’s breath caught in Harry’s ear. George’s face looked like Fred’s face, except Fred’s was staring up at the ceiling and George was staring down at him, crumpling in and in.

“Flora,” Hestia breathed. “Flora?” She pushed past Harry. Her face looked like Flora’s face, except hers was a little rounder than Flora’s and Flora had a scar on her chin that Hestia didn’t, but their favorite smirks were the same. “Flora! Where are you?” She pushed through the crowd, past healers and stretcherers, her voice high and young. It was Percy Weasley who lifted his head, stepped out to catch her shoulder, and pointed her to the wall where Flora sat, eyes closed, breathing in and out.

Hestia flew across the floor and fell down to her knees, wrapping her shaking arms around her. Flora clung back. It was hard to tell where one of them ended and the other began.

Harry stood watching, his hands shaking too, wrapped around his elbows. Voldemort had already given his ultimatum: all of Hogwarts for Harry. “Don’t you dare,” Hestia had hissed at him then, but there Hestia was now, wrapped around her little sister, trembling. Fred was lying cold on the floor, and his brother was shaking, too. Tonks and Lupin were laid out cold, hands almost touching, on the same Great Hall floor where Tonks had changed her nose into so many things, trying to make children laugh. Harry squeezed his arms tighter.
This was his home, his family. This was his school.

Harry put his wand in his back pocket with no intention of ever taking it out again and walked out to the forest.

The forest had been Forbidden for all his childhood. This was probably still forbidden now—he remembered Warrington leaning down, much much farther than he had to now, and telling Harry to take care of himself over the summer. Harry squeezed his eyes shut. That was too bad. Harry had a job to do.

Dumbledore had left him the Snitch in his will, and the Stone within it. Harry flipped it three times in his palm. He couldn’t say good-byes back at the castle, because they would have stopped him, but he could say these.

“Mum,” he said, when Lily flickered into being. He didn’t run to hug her, but only because he was pretty sure he would never stop crying if he went right through her.

“My Harry,” she said. “You’ve been so brave.”

“I got Ravenclaw, actually,” he said, and she laughed. The only piece of her voice he’d ever had before was her pleading, and her scream. He took the laugh and buried it in him, held it close.

He turned to the rest of the shimmering circle around him. James Potter beamed at him behind eyeglasses. Sirius was clean, beard trimmed, no longer so gaunt. Lupin smiled and said, “Nothing wrong with some wisdom tucked in there with your inherited reckless bravery.”

“Yeah sorry about that,” James said, and Lily elbowed him.

But a laugh caught in a younger throat at that—no, not younger. Fred Weasley had died at the same age as Lily and James had. Harry wrapped his arms around himself and turned.

“Fred,” Harry said.

Fred shrugged. “Can’t make an omelette without breaking a few–”

“Don’t you dare,” said Harry. “Don’t you dare.”

Fred smiled, the expression shaking almost as much as Hestia’s hands had. “I was always a little cracked, wasn’t I?”

Harry scrubbed at his eyes. “That’s–right, dad–Dad,” he said, turning to James.

Sirius beamed at him over James’s shoulder and Harry breathed in sharp, desperate little gasps, trying to push it all down. “Dad, this is Fred. Ask Sirius about him. You’re going to have such fun, okay? He’s your type of people. Or at least that’s what everyone keeps telling me.” Harry swiped at his eyes again, the whole world going blurry. “He’s my type of people, okay? Fred was my friend, and I couldn’t–so you all keep care of him, okay? Please.”

“Oh course we will,” said Tonks, her kindness as rough and easy as it had ever been in the Hufflepuff Common Room. Harry gulped in a gasp, like he was six again, crying into her robes after she’d told him what had happened to his parents—this, that this had happened to them, and now it had happened to Tonks, too, and Lupin, and Sirius, and Fred–

The clearing was dark. Their shapes were insubstantial, faded, translucent, and Harry was standing in an empty clearing talking to himself. The only reason he could tell Fred’s hair was bright Weasley
red was because he knew. He had woken up on lazy summer mornings for almost his life and seen a half dozen red heads or more circling the breakfast table while Molly burned the toast.

Harry was standing in a clearing, not alone at all, and talking to himself—these were the things selves were made of: the way Lily was taking in every inch of Harry with eyes that looked just like his, the way Fred had an edge to his grin even now, the way Harry knew exactly what Tonks’s clumsy warmth looked like. There was a castle behind him that had built this boy. There was a castle behind him full of people who had taught him how to be.

“I’m going to go end it,” he told them.

“We know,” Remus said. Tonks leaned into him.

“You were always a little cracked, too,” Fred added.

Harry dropped the Stone on the Forest floor and walked on.

He died out there on that forbidden ground without even drawing his wand. He had been raised by the wise, this boy, but also by the brave, by the loyal and the kind, by those who made real friends.

His hands shook, standing there in the cold, because bravery is most of all what you do when your hands are shaking too hard to hold things. His hands shook, but true friendship is about what you do when the day is darkest. Sometimes wisdom is knowing there are things worth dying for.

The day was dark. Harry died, and then he woke up with his living cheek in the cold mulch.

Harry dropped out of Hagrid’s arms in the Hogwarts courtyard. Neville Longbottom pulled a sword from the Hat, because Neville was an Heir of Gryffindor. Neville killed the snake and a dozen curses streaked towards Tom Riddle—because they were all heirs of this place. Hestia screamed a spell and Luna murmured it and Hannah Abbot only whispered it, but Voldemort hit the ground like an old dry shell of a thing.

They tended to the wounded next. They buried their dead. Cho cried all through the funerals, on Luna’s shoulder, but so did Ginny Weasley. George was cried out, leaning on his father’s shoulder and not meeting anyone’s eye.

Harry climbed down to the Chamber. It was empty, vast and echoing. He cleared his throat. It was easiest to speak Parseltongue when there was a snake in front of him, but the Chamber was empty. *Bye*, he said. Then, “Bye,” he said again, because it wasn’t only the basilisk he was leaving behind.

He climbed back up the old stone slide, using spells to haul himself. When he reached the top and clambered out, he said hi to Myrtle and then went to find Warrington. They sat in the vegetable garden behind Hagrid’s hut in silence, watching the castle rising up before them.

“I hear there’s more world out there,” said Harry eventually.

“If you think I’m letting you go wander strange streets alone,” said Warrington. “After you went off and died on me—”

Harry smiled up at him, not a single gap-tooth showing. “I came back,” he said.

When they set out, Harry stood at the edge of the Hogwarts grounds for long minutes before he stepped over the property line. He had to tell himself over and over again that when he took that step his foot would not come down on grave dirt and dry grass. When his shoe came down it was just the
same soft dirt that he had tracked into the castle all his life, just a little farther away from home. With every step, it was a little farther away.

Harry had grown up knowing people came in different sizes. He knew Hagrid’s giant kindnesses and Flitwick’s razor wit, which was normally sheathed. When he saw his first mountain in a little town in Italy Harry pulled Warrington down onto a park bench and just sat there, staring, until he’d drunk his fill. It was like sitting on top of the Astronomy Tower at midnight– a reminder. The world was bigger than you.

(But you should always bring a friend with you, to press your shoulder up against, when staring into the immensities of the universe. You are insignificant, but remember: you are only as insignificant as the person sitting next to you, and they are here with you because they matter.) Harry leaned into Warrington’s shoulder and then they went down into the town and bought some gelato.

Harry didn’t go back to Hogwarts, except to visit the ghosts. He rented a flat near Diagon Alley with Warrington and Cho Chang, who was working at Flourish and Blotts. It was shabbier than Harry could have afforded as a paid consultant/PR emblem of the Ministry, but Warrington brought home kittens from the Emporium some nights. Members of the DA breezed in and out. Hannah Abbott brought butterbeer over from the Leaky. Ginny came over with giant binders of notes and drafted Harry into her initiatives to improve wizarding early education and legislation to protect minors.

His holidays were wondrous negotiations–Molly Weasley wanted to make sure he wasn’t starving; Teddy Lupin wanted to climb all over his godfather and mimic his scar in multicolor; Warrington’s mom’s little flat in Chester always had a couch for him.

Flora and Hestia’s parents had been uncomfortably eager to welcome their victorious children home. The winter the twins managed to wrest themselves from their parents’ grasp, Hestia threw a giant Christmas bash in their new place, heralded by invitations that read only Mudbloods and blood traitors allowed! Flora sent out apologies on the heels of Hestia’s invitations.

Molly Weasley had to use twice as much yarn for Warrington’s Weasley sweater as she did on anyone else’s. When he came over for dinner with a massive chest of dark green knit, she beamed ear to ear and filled his plate. Hestia pulled Mrs. Weasley aside, the first time she saw Molly starting to size her up for one. “Hey, how do you feel about a sweater dress?” she suggested.

Harry’s flat was full as often as it wasn’t. Hermione took over their kitchen table with paperwork, bushing her hair out even further by shoving her hands through it. Ron made tea for her, and for Cho, who came home late from the bookstore. Hestia tried to make Percy blush but mostly just managed to make Luna laugh. Lee and George showed off (and experimented with) their latest prank toys and props, once filling the whole flat with smoke–Warrington scowled over them until they scrubbed down every smoke stain on the wall, after that.

Harry usually ended up in a corner of the living room with Ginny, their shoulders pressed up together and ink all over their hands as they marked up their latest petitions and reports. He leaned over the papers like he had once leaned over war maps in the Room of Requirement, or quarterly lists of homesick children in his third year. When he looked up at the full, thrumming room, their loud voices and waving hands, he remembered that he had not asked a single one of them to be there.

But here they were. Harry let the noise of it wash over him and bent back down over his work. When Warrington bullied him to bed hours later, he slept deeply and well.

When Harry had made lists of homesick children at Hogwarts, he had not given them to Snape or Dumbledore. They had been playing bigger games, he’d thought then–saving worlds and tricking
evil into trusting them. They had not had time for children crying themselves to sleep at night as quietly as they could.

But Harry had played the bigger games, now, fought and died in other peoples’ wars. He had turned his school into a battleground, made an army of children—and that was just it. It was a war, but in the end it was still a school. It was a war, but it was fought with children, no matter how tall they had grown. There was nothing bigger than this.

This was always the fight—a child, lonely. A girl curled up in the infirmary, scared. A hand held out to a stranger. A boy talking to himself in a forest, deciding who he wanted to be.

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