no place like home
by dirgewithoutmusic

Summary

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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.

Notes

I had already posted this as an additional chapter to 'boy with a scar' but people were having trouble finding it, so I'm reposting it all by itself, here.

eleennare 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?

(pssst Ao3!eleennare if you aren't the same as tumblr!eleennare let me know)
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.

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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 was 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.

_Hmmmm_, 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 bemighty. 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.

“There’s 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 his 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 brittly, missing his father terribly. Now, with Cedric still towering over him, Harry elbowed him until he went and asked Cho Chang out. “You’ve 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 thrown 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 student, 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 stashed 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.

Amicus 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, though—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 Phoenix 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, slingling 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 stretchers, 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.”

“Of 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 all 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.

End Notes

Originally posted here: http://ink-splotch.tumblr.com/post/119498519714/first-i-wanted-to-
say-that-i-love-love-love-your

Works inspired by this one:

Re:place like home [PODFIC] by Opalsong

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