

Gone From the World

by Veronica L

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Masters of Our Own Fate

Chapter 1 of 3

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Gone from the World

Chapter One Masters of Our Own Fate

I can't wake up

Save me from the nothing I've become.

Dear Harry,

I'm not going to lie to you and say that everything is all rainbows and bunnies here. It's so cold here, and if it weren't for all these nifty warming charms, I'd have already been a walking ice-cube. Even with all those charms, it's still freezing cold.

We lost Seamus today. I don't know why. I mean he was getting better and everything. He woke up last night and asked for his m'am and water, in that Irish accent, and then all of a sudden, they tell us that he's died. He didn't wake up. I don't know whether this whole idea of yours is going to work. I almost don't care what happens to me now.

The worst that could happen to me is that what you have dreamed up about my fate turns out to be true and that I really do die. But the thing that keeps me awake at night is that it's fate. Now, I know that I didn't believe a single word of Trelawney's garbage, but you're different, mate. You're Harry Potter and I trust you. I'd give you the whole blood oath thing if that didn't gross me out. And I'm telling you this, if you had a prophetic dream that involves my death, chances are that I'm going to die.

But seriously, death is overrated.

I'm coming home. It's destroying me, sitting here wondering about Hermione and my parents and brothers and Ginny and you. I hate being helpless up here in this Godforsaken Recovery Centre. I want to do something to help.

I think that we are masters of our own fate, and I reckon that if we don't believe in fate, then it's not going to affect us. Hermione would say that it's not unlike being an ostrich and burying my head in sand. Actually, come to think of it, she wouldn't. She'd tell me in her annoying way "Ronald Weasley, ostriches don't stick their heads in

sand, if only you'd read a book." I can't believe I'm saying this, but I miss her the most. I dream about her every night.

Your best mate,

Ron Weasley.

P.S. Tell everybody I wish them a great Merry Christmas. Tell Neville to go easy on the eggnog and save me some.

Harry scrunched up the smudged piece of parchment he always kept in his pocket. After all, that had been the last he had heard of Ron before he disappeared. That had been five months ago.

He rubbed his forehead impatiently, wanting to get this over and done with. He had been dreaming about doing this for the past few months, and now, finally it was going to be over. It was for the best anyway.

They had been waging war on Voldemort for the past six years now. They weren't losing, but they weren't winning either. This temporary stalemate wouldn't last long though; Harry felt this in the chill of his bones. Naked logic told him there was no chance in hell that they were going to win.

As he stepped on the podium, the crowd of 16,500 wizards and witches silenced immediately.

They gazed at him with rapt faces and expressions of undivided loyalty. Oh, how deluded and uneducated the masses were. Harry Potter would have laughed at them if he could have been bothered.

For Harry Potter was sick of everything. He wanted the war to end no matter the consequences. Winning was no longer important to him. Not that there was a chance that they would win.

The other side had Tom Marvolo Riddle, who was old enough to be Harry's grandfather.

Their side had just him some useless hero. Sure, he looked nice on a postcard (what with the new wonders of technology) but one couldn't win a war with pictures, could they? Otherwise, Gilderoy Lockhart would have succeeded dominating the world years ago.

Harry couldn't save the people he loved. He couldn't save Sirius, couldn't save Dumbledore, and couldn't even save Ron Weasley. They were dead, stone cold, and rotting in a little wooden box.

That was why he was handing the Wizarding world to Colin Creevey, his trusted Deputy. Colin was eager and a hard worker; what he lacked in intelligence, he made up tenfold with his enthusiasm. He was a better leader and Harry felt that by retiring early and handing over the crown, he was doing the Wizarding community a large favour.

"Colin Creevey," he ended his short twenty second speech and immediately tried to step out of the limelight.

A sea of confusion and numbed shock washed over the hall, and it became a soundscape of ominous muttering and many murmurs of 'what?'

Only one person gave no indication that he had heard anything of great importance.

Draco Malfoy was sitting as still as a statue, looking straight into Harry's eyes. He was smiling, although it didn't reach his eyes. Harry shivered; if eyes were a window to the soul, Draco Malfoy would have a disturbing soul indeed. Not that Harry himself was the poster child of sanity.

Harry refused to be cowed or intimidated by Malfoy's infuriating gaze. He tried to stand tall and straight and as noble as possible as he handed over his (metaphorical) crown to Colin. The fate of the Wizarding world no longer fell on his shoulders it would be safe and never crumble to dust.

"Excuse me." He left the hall in a flurry, the Wizarding paparazzi hounding after him like salivating wolves after a one-legged Siberian moose. Harry had no great desire to talk to the press; his traumatic experience back in his fourth year had scarred him for life. So, he pushed desperately past the thick throng and was almost out the door when he was suddenly confronted by somebody he wanted desperately to avoid.

Harry would have rather shared a rowdy card game of 'Strip Poker' with Voldemort than face Ginny Weasley. Though she never said so, Harry felt that Ginny blamed him for Ron's death. This was the first time he had seen her since Ron's funeral.

She was just as pretty as ever with her long curling red hair and shining tears on her white face. "Oh, Harry." She looked pale and withdrawn. "Why? We need you, Harry."

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Harry explained as calmly as he could, "but I can't do it anymore. Even you have to admit that I've done a half-arsed job, and things will get better when Colin takes over. I promise."

In his five-year career as Minister of Magic, Harry had made more empty promises than real ones.

"You did it better than anybody else could have!" Ginny was screaming at him now. Her voice seemed so faraway to him. He turned his head and cocked it to the side, wondering whether it would reduce the volume. "Harry, go back. Ron would have wanted you to! He had faith in you and so do I. So do all those people in there."

"Yes and look where it got him?" Harry asked, staring back at her patiently. She didn't understand that he was doing her a big favour. He had to make her understand. "Ron is dead and buried Ginny. It's time to forget the past. We need to move on. Colin is the new Minister; your duty lies to him."

"And what are you going to do?" bit back Ginny sharply. "Lie back and die?"

Harry didn't know how to respond. Instead, he smiled vacantly. "Ginny, it's for the best. You need somebody you can depend on. Colin can be your hero now. He's somebody you can trust, somebody you can die for."

Ginny folded her arms icily. "Was that some snarky remark about me and Colin's relationship? God, I can't believe you're bitter about that! How old are you again?"

After Harry and Ginny's break up, Ginny had been romantically involved with Colin Creevey for six months. There had been a rumour about their engagement, although it had never been confirmed.

To tell the truth, Harry had hardly given much thought about it. He had moved on.

"Ginny." He was losing patience. He could feel the anger starting to boil inside him. He needed to get away.

Unfortunately, Ginny did not seem to have any intentions of leaving. "This isn't about me, Harry Potter. This is about the war. Now, if you don't go back and reclaim your position before I say 'Colin Creevey', I will kill you," she said boldly.

Harry sighed in annoyance. His left eyelid was beginning to twitch, and he wanted to crack his knuckles or do something physical. There was a cut on his hand, and he gripped it tighter so that the pain would calm him down. It helped, a little. "I have to go, Ginny."

Ginny immediately lost the iciness. "I didn't mean it, Harry," she continued relentlessly, changing her tack and taking option B instead. "I love you, Harry. I love you. I believe in you."

Once upon a time, this would have made Harry's heart beat uncontrollably fast and send the blood rushing to his face (and possibly his groin region), but now it just made him uncomfortable.

"That's great, Ginny." He smiled. His palms were getting sweaty. He was losing it.

He sidestepped her and did what he should have done instead of confusing himself with the affections of his ex-girlfriend. He Apparated away to his own apartment, which was tucked far away in Muggle London.

He had tried to make his own dwelling as homely as possible, but he had had many things on his mind. As a result, the walls were half-painted blue, and there was still newspaper on the ground. They were yellow now and stained with age, but Harry could hardly care less. He figured that the décor didn't matter in the whole grand scheme of things. Like him it was insignificant, a teensy speck in the universe, a star in a starlit sky, one in a billion.

As his boots touched the newspaper, he ran towards the kitchen. His hands were shaking, and he tried to restrain them. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He couldn't even control his own coordination! He managed to fill the glass with murky water and not caring, he guzzled it along with two white pills.

He let the familiar feeling of dreaminess take over him. He could have cried with the sheer beauty of it. His eyelids felt heavy, and it was like being on a broomstick and flying in crisp morning air.

He lay on his bed without bothering to change or wash, and he wondered about dying. He envisioned himself lying American Beauty-like on his crisp white bed, neck slashed and trails of blood seeping through the fibres of white cotton. He wondered whether dying hurt, whether he would gasp in agony or whether everything would peacefully slide into blackness. The blood would be heavy and coppery, and slippery as it dripped down his body, the red a nice contrast with his white bed and his black hair. Death and blood was so poetic.

So Harry lay on his bed, thinking about blood, violence and possibly sex. Eventually though, he drifted off to sleep. A curl of hair fell on his face, his eyelashes fluttered, breathing slowed, and his hand clutched at his heart.

He dreamt about Ginny again. This time, she wore a white dress and carried a bunch of daffodils.

"Ron loved daffodils," she said, an obstinate look on her face.

"But daffodils are conventionally happy flowers," Harry protested. "You're not supposed to bring happy flowers to cemeteries because they're not happy places, unless you have insurance."

Ginny kissed him tenderly on the mouth. He smiled under her gentleness and softness. She smelt like daisies and sunshine and fresh parchment. He felt as if he loved her. He was under her spell.

"When I die Harry, I want to be surrounded by red rose petals," she whispered in his ear, and then pushing him back gently, she went to Ron's headstone. Harry watched with a few misgivings, he had a feeling that something bad was going to happen. Ginny knelt down ... she put her flowers down ... started to pray and ...

An arm came hurtling at her from the buried soil. It was not a pretty arm, being green and partly decomposed. The hand looked like a claw with its yellow, curved nails. It grabbed at Ginny, who screamed and stood up, but it took hold of her lovely hair, and there was nothing Ginny could do but scream and scream. Harry wanted to help, his mouth was frozen in a permanent 'O' of shock, but he was rooted to the ground literally. Strong vines had sprouted from the ground, tying him in place. They were more effective than rope.

The hand pulled and pulled, and Ginny struggled but to no avail: The hand maintained its grip. Then it gave a particularly vicious yank and pulled Ginny's head sickeningly towards the side. Harry heard a nasty loud crack as her head snapped to the side.

She stopped screaming, and as if in slow motion, her legs gave way as she sunk slowly into the mud. Mud stained her sparkling white dress, and she slowly disappeared beneath it like quicksand.

Harry could finally move, and he ran to where she had been a few minutes ago. He wanted to cry and yell like a maniac, but he couldn't. Blood was pumping vigorously through his veins; he could feel it pulsating, and he felt as if he would have some heart-related attack in the new few seconds. He wished that the arm could come back up, and he could have given it a piece of his mind but unfortunately, not everything went his way. He knelt down on the stone, looking like some great idiot and called for Ginny's name, expecting that she'd climb back up. She didn't however; his calls went unanswered, and there was nobody there, save for himself and the accursed daffodils. Red rose petals suddenly fell from the sky; the blossoms were fluttering gently in the spring air and fell on him like heavy bloodstains. All it needed was some music background featuring a violin and an assortment of flutes, and then perfection would be guaranteed.

Harry awoke drenched in sweat. His head still spun from the vivid horror 3D world his dreams had taken him, and he licked his parched lips nervously. His head was spinning uncontrollably, and there was a coiled up feeling of nervousness in his stomach.

With great difficulty, he dragged himself out of bed, towards the bathroom. He avoided the mirror, knowing that he was a total mess. There were black bags under dull green eyes, and he was so pale. He was probably anaemic. He was too skinny, too angular and his hair was crying out for a cutting. Snape probably had less greasy roots than he did.

He took a long and luxurious shower, enjoying the feel of scalding water on his muscles. He scratched away all the reminders of his unhappiness: the sweat, the tears still on his cheek. His skin was red from the brutal assault of the water but he relished it, trying to absorb all the sensations he was feeling. By the time he had finished his shower, he resembled a cooked lobster, but it was all worth it, as he had never felt more alive.

So he set down on the table and thought hard. There was a dim feeling of concern over Ginny's welfare, although Harry knew that she would die no matter what he did. It was probably going to be by Voldemort's hand, and although it really was none of his business, a sense of duty prevailed him to go on.

He mustered up all of his willpower, took several deep breaths, counted to a million, and then walked out his front door.

Ginny lived in a modest apartment five streets away, and Harry remembered a time so long ago when she and he were still together. That had been light years ago. Harry found it hard to imagine how he had spent his life back then. He sung in the shower with a croaky baritone, skipped to work and smiled at everybody within a five-meter radius.

What had been so special about Ginny Weasley?

Funny. She lived just a few blocks away from Harry, yet he had never visited her since that fateful day when he had ended it for real.

"Ginny," he had begun seriously as they lounged around the beach licking ice creams. They were there celebrating her birthday.

"Mmmm?" she asked lazily, fiery tendrils of hair curling and frizzing with the ocean mist in the air. "Oooh. I think I just freckled."

Harry smiled fondly at her, yet on the inside, his heart was breaking. "Ginny, it's not you, it's me."

Immediately, Ginny jerked up and looked at him alarmed. "What are you saying?" she asked cautiously.

Harry found it hard to look into her eyes. "I don't know. It's just that we can't do this anymore. I mean ... with Voldemort still around, he might go for the ones I love. I don't want you to get hurt. You being with me, that's a guarantee that you're a walking target for Voldemort. And I don't want that to happen."

"Maybe I should get a choice in the matter?" snapped Ginny. She got up, flinging sand on him. "I hate it when you do that, Harry Potter. It's my life you know, not yours."

He supposed he had to warn her about Voldemort. He probably owed it to her.

He swallowed and quickened his pace. He didn't want to be on this journey. The blue sky above seemed to mock him. Harry hated the sun. It burnt, its harmful UV rays radiating warmly on his skin, and he felt sick. Mockingbirds sang; flowers bloomed like whores, inviting insects to come and mate with them ...

It was the calm before a storm.

Two men in robes shoved past Harry rudely, elbowing him. Harry was about to make a sound of protest when his mind suddenly clicked together. Men in robes. Why on earth were two people who looked like professional killers in such a rush to get to Ginny? He began to run. Something bad was going to happen.

Then he saw the huge crowd of people outside her flat.

At first, he had thought that one of Ginny's neighbours was throwing a party, but at ten in the morning? Parties on a general basis, did not have Muggle police officers walking around scribbling notes, trying to avoid disgruntled Ministry wizards disguised as Muggle shopkeepers (Harry's favourite was the wizard who was wore only an apron with 'Kiss me I'm Irish' embossed upon it in gaudy gold lettering). Nor were they usually decorated with yellow tape and signs, which warned away approaching people. Something was clearly wrong.

Harry ducked underneath some of the tape and made his way past the bustling policemen hanging around the door inside. He expected to be seen, but he was not and anyway, he didn't care.

Then he stopped dead in his tracks.

It took a while for the image to sink in, and he had to grip the railing to refrain from spewing the contents of last night's dinner.

Ginny Weasley was hanging from the ceiling, her eyes wide open. Harry had seen enough dead bodies to know that she was dead. A rope was tied around her neck, a chair lying facedown several meters away.

Once again, Harry's dreams had meant something. He wasn't completely useless, was he?

An Unpleasant Encounter

Chapter 2 of 3

The wizarding world wants Harry Potter to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry Potter just wants to curl up and die. He's been having dreams about people dying lately and the bad thing is that they're all coming true. This is bad timing since the world is going to end in three days.

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Chapter Two An Unpleasant Encounter

And I look for a single star in a starlit sky

Draco Malfoy wished that he could have got up and slapped Colin Creevey silly. To put it bluntly, he was getting pissed off.

"People," said Colin, the new Minister of Magic, pompously in a manner eerily reminiscent of Ernie Macmillan. "I think it's time for change. The old times are over."

"Doom, doom, doom," said Draco loudly and dramatically as several people around him chuckled. Like him, they couldn't stand their new Leader. Colin ignored them, although judging by the vein popping out of his forehead, the strain was getting to him. He motioned impatiently to his junior secretary, a young girl who was apparently his cousin. She had wispy blonde hair and was very soft-spoken. Most people called her a beauty; Draco called her a dimwit. Then he had asked her out to dinner, but that was a totally unrelated matter.

She scurried towards Colin carrying a stack of papers. The Ministry no longer used the old fashioned means of writing with ink and parchment. As Colin had put it, Muggle pens were just as inky as ink, more economical and the mantra -- much more modern. The Ministry was then bombarded with thousands of boxes of pens. The whole office had gone overboard with them; it was Arthur Weasley's dream come true.

To Draco, however, it represented the gradual disintegration and rotting of the Ministry. But what did one expect when one had a Muggle-born Minister? Draco was privately organizing a large group of people (who fancied themselves as rebels) to call for Creevey's dismissal. He reasoned that if Fudge could be dismissed, Creevey could be as well, considering that people also thought that he was an idiot. To tell the perfect truth, Draco was secretly jealous of Creevey. The little ringworm got to be Minister by some weird twist of fate while he, with his pureblood roots, was still stuck in a dingy Law Enforcement Office listening to brainless people gabber on.

Creevey's secretary/cousin/pleasure slave, suddenly wheeling in a contraption, cut Draco's musings short. Draco had never seen it before, and he did not like the unknown. He eyed the machine balefully, wondering whether it was Muggle in origin.

Colin hit a button and immediately, an image was projected onto a white screen at the front of the room. Everybody gasped aloud while the few Muggle-borns sat back and enjoyed the confusion, that ensued.

"I think that it is a Death Machine. I've heard about those," said a witch, who had a nose ring, to her friend who was so pale, his pimples stood out like the Himalayas. "Apparently, it can detect Death Eaters by scanning for the Dark Mark."

Draco jerked backwards as if burnt.

"This is a computer," boomed Colin's voice from behind him, and Draco wheeled around stupidly. He was glad to see that everybody along the entire back row also craned their heads back.

The Muggle-borns were definitely having the time of their lives. For all their lives, they had been mocked and cast out from society. Roles had been reversed; they finally got to see the superior purebloods in a position where they weren't as superior anymore. Revenge was indeed as sweet as ever.

Hermione-Know-It-All-Granger was giving everybody an analysis of how sound speakers worked.

"It is all simple physics," she explained to a cross-eyed wizard. "It works via energy transformations. No, it's not created or anything. According to Muggle physics the Energy Law of Conservation states that energy can be neither created nor destroyed. The sound energy is a conversion of electrical energy...."

To which the cross-eyed wizard replied, "What is physics?"

"Silence!" yelled Colin. Hermione quickly straightened and looked attentive with the cross-eyed wizard next to her following suit. Draco did as well, albeit more reluctantly.

"As you can all see, I have installed Muggle Technology in the Ministry. This is so that we move into the modern era. Hermione Granger from the Communications Department has assisted me in modifying this technology to suit our environment."

Somebody raised a hand. "Minister, how is this going to aid us in the Battle against You-Know-Who?"

"Yeah," said someone else immediately. "Minister, shouldn't the funds used for new Muggle innovations be used to spend on something more worthwhile, like funding for the unemployed or something? There is a Depression going on...."

"Yeah!" came a bunch of voices, which acted as a Greek chorus. "The employees are underpaid! Pay us! Pay us!"

This led to a riot between the Law Enforcement Department and all the other Departments combined. People were shouting, screaming and yelling like lunatics. An elderly wizard was running amok as he was sprouting antlers. It made Draco feel ashamed to be human.

"They don't understand how serious this is, do they?" Blaise Zabini who was next to Draco whispered. Draco gave a start: he didn't know that Zabini was there.

"No, they're idiots," he replied contemptuously. "Creevey is going to die."

"Do you mean that literally?" Zabini asked smoothly. Draco gave him an unreadable look.

"No, I meant, eventually." He decided to choose his words carefully. Zabini was unpredictable and by no means, a friend of his. He was also a Death Eater and Death Eater politics were easy to get tangled in, but impossible to get out of.

"Let's just settle for his disposal now," Draco said, making sure that nobody in the vicinity was listening. "Walk in the desert begins with putting your shoes on."

"If you say so." Zabini smiled emptily, and then slipped away so quietly, nobody even noticed that he had even been there. Draco sighed in relief, and when some blonde witch looked at him, winked cheekily back at her, ignoring her murderous looking boyfriend.

*

Harry was being haunted by Ginny. He could not get the image of her being suspended in the air out of his head. He wanted to drill a hole through his head, and rip out the brain cells containing memories of her. Images of her laughing, images of her crying... it all seemed so insignificant, considering that she was dead. It was as if everybody around him was dying.

It wasn't as if he would sorely miss her. Harry wondered whether he should grieve. On one hand, Ginny had been the love of his life, but on the other, had he really loved her all that much? Harry had read about love. He didn't think that it existed, but nevertheless, it still fascinated him. He supposed that real love was dead love like his parents who were dead but were probably very much in love indeed. Now that Ginny was dead, should he do a Heathcliff and run to the funeral parlor, desecrate her corpse and make a vow to ensure that she would never leave his side?

Nah. He really couldn't be bothered. So he went and did the next best thing. He went and got drunk.

'Purgatory' was one of those seedier nightclubs. It was one of those places, which, were in such a state of debauchery and sexual sin; Harry felt that hell was inevitable to those who visited. It was a large lantern of blinding neon lights and spinning disco balls. Harry felt as if he was out of the world just by staring at the swirling white flashes.

The dance floor was a breeding ground for moving, nubile and trusting half-naked bodies, slippery with sweat. There was a couple making out with each other so passionately, they were practically fucking. Loud Muggle music was being boomed across the club. Harry could not remember the last time he had been here; it had been so long ago. Everything worth remembering had been long ago.

Nirvana played, and Harry hummed along subconsciously. Ginny had loved Nirvana. Harry would have been very jealous of Kurt Cobain if Cobain hadn't been dead. Now Ginny was dead like him. It seemed as if everybody cool was dead.

Hate me.

Do it and do it again.

Waste me.

Rape me, my friend.

Harry wanted to feel. He wanted to have his heart broken and feel that gut wrenching agony, like you can never breathe again. He wanted to feel that empty hollowness in his throat and that hot feeling behind his eyes when tears threaten to spill. He wanted to be drowning, like you do whenever you try to stop yourself from crying.

He enviously watched the pre-fornicating couple on the dance floor. He knew that it was perverted, but he couldn't look away. It was as if the Evil Powers That Be glued his eyes there. It was like watching somebody stack it during rollerblading or a vehicle accident.

"Look here!" squealed a girl so shrilly, Harry winced and drew back instantly. The Voice belonged to a girl with long tousled blonde hair, flushed cheeks and smudged eyeliner. She looked trashy and post-orgasmic. "Harry Potter's here."

"Yes he is," Harry said in a bored tone. He was not in the mood to be picked up.

"Are you here to relieve some stress or something? Blow off some steam?" She made a vulgar movement Harry thought best to ignore. "Well, Jesus, I guess being the fucking Minister of Magic is a tiring job, eh?"

"No."

Still not taking the hint, the girl draped herself across Harry, invading his personal space of a radius of a meter. "Tell me, Minister. How hard is it to be both Minister and our Savior?"

"I am not your Savior," Harry said automatically, removing an olive from his martini. "I am not the Minister anymore, Miss."

Harry did not want to talk to her, yet he did not know how to brush her off. All his life, he had thought about everybody else instead of himself. He felt as if he owed it to everybody. He desperately wanted her to go away, but he didn't know how to make her. Of course, there was the direct 'please go and don't come back' but Harry felt as if that would have been unforgivably rude. The last thing Harry wanted to be was rude. Harry couldn't be rude. Years of working in the Ministry and being the Savior of the Wizarding World had washed it away from him.

"You are my Savior." The girl stared at him curiously. Harry took another drink and wondered that if there were less lights, would the girl look more appealing? Her clothing left little to the imagination. She was one of the children of the modern era. "So you want to go somewhere less busy?"

"I don't know." Harry shrugged in a non-committed way. Actually, she wasn't that bad. Sex was sex, and when you were male, there was no such thing as excruciatingly torturous sex. "Aren't you making a bit of a quick decision? Maybe we should talk first or something."

"What can we talk about?" the girl giggled to herself. "I know you're famous, and you're hot, and you seem to be male, so why not?"

Harry shrugged again, but then something caught his attention, and he stood up straighter. He zoned out the girl's harsh voice and the loud grungy music.

For Harry had just seen the one and only Draco Malfoy walk in the club. It nearly made his heart stop.

Draco Malfoy was dressed stylishly in black trousers and a white shirt. His platinum blond hair was gelled into spikes, as he tossed a Galleon to the bouncer. He smiled flirtatiously at several prostitutes who swarmed around him, like fruit flies around rotten fruit, and then he waved them away as a pretty witch wearing a cheap tiara ran towards him and they embraced.

Malfoy stood out like a shiny new coin amongst all the other dull coins. Everybody seemed dim and insignificant next to him. Perhaps it was the blond hair, or the way he presented himself, or the angle Harry was viewing him at, but it seemed as if there was a halo glowing around the other man's head. Harry knew that Malfoy was no angel, but at that moment, he thought that if ever there were a fallen angel, it would take the form of Draco Malfoy.

The whore next to him was still talking, but Harry was barely listening. "You have to do something, Minister. The Ministry is employing Muggles to do some of the clerical tasks leaving us with nothing else to do...."

Draco Malfoy whispered in Tiara Girl's ear, and she giggled. Then to Harry's dismay, he made a beeline for the bar.

Then Malfoy saw him and raised an eyebrow, as if challenging him.

"Potter. I see you've changed not," he said with his trademark sneer. "The Depression affecting you? Oh, how silly of me. Of course it's affecting you. That shirt didn't you wear that to Weasley's birthday party, way back before he died?"

Harry glared at him as his hands trembled with exploding anger. "Only a queer like you Malfoy would give a shit about clothing in the middle of a Depression."

"And we're back to cheap school boy insults," Draco said dramatically. He sat down next to Harry, and smiled nastily at the prostitute who was looking nervous. "You know, you have some potential." He gave the unfortunate girl a condescending glance down before continuing. "If you didn't look so utterly plebeian. No self-respecting man, not even Potter, would want to fuck a whore who looks as if she had her last bath last year."

"Malfoy...." Harry said warningly. As usual, Malfoy was pushing his patience limits. The poor girl looked teary. Harry did not like watching girls cry. It made him flustered because he never knew what to do.

"Better go find yourself a nice young boy tonight, Potter," said Malfoy, smiling wolfishly. "There's less chance of being diseased. Hey, you there." He motioned to the girl. "There's still dirt and God knows what else on your face."

The girl bit her lip and clawed at her face. Her nails were bitten, torn off and bloody. Harry grabbed at her hands, and she flinched at the contact. They were very grubby and Harry sighed. He had had it easy. He handed her all the Galleons he had with him. She smiled at him shyly before departing as fast as possible.

"Did you give her all your savings?" asked Malfoy in his horribly sarcastic voice. "Aw, you did. Have you thought about what you're going to be eating tomorrow, or are you going to go starve yourself now?"

"Fuck off, Malfoy." Harry had had enough. "You didn't have to do that to some poor innocent girl. You're dressed in diamonds while everybody else starves. You have no shame."

"Please." Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Like shame is something to be proud of."

Harry sighed heavily. He had come here to forget, not to forget and be involved in a verbal battle and with Draco Malfoy of all people. He still hadn't forgotten the expression in Malfoy's eyes last night when he had announced his resignation. He got up and was about to head for the door when Malfoy grabbed his hand.

"Let go of me," Harry gritted his teeth. "Go and find a nice young boy to grope instead."

"Oh, shut up, Potter." Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Bloody, sodding Drama Queen."

"I thought I told you to let go?"

Malfoy let go of Harry, and Harry touched his wrist where Malfoy's hand had been twenty seconds ago. "What'd you do that for?" he asked indignantly.

"I could ask you about your sex life, but then there'd be nothing to discuss, so I'll just get to the point." Malfoy leaned forwards and smiled in a very mirthless manner. "Did you know that Creevey is planning to involve Muggles in this war?"

"No," said Harry shortly. "It's a... bad thing, right?"

Malfoy gave him an incredulous look. "Potter, that's the understatement of the year. That is like saying the Dark Lord is evil or that you are stupid."

Harry felt his hackles rising. "Contrary to what you think of them, Muggles might be useful. Voldemort doesn't have them. More people equates to being stronger. United we stand, divided we fall. Didn't your mother ever teach you that? Or was she too busy training you to become a Death Eater?"

"Don't talk about my mother," growled Malfoy. "In fact, don't talk about anything you don't understand. Of course then you wouldn't be able to say a thing...." He trailed off, looking smug at how his diatribe had naturally come out.

Harry ignored the implied insults. Perhaps the 'mother' comment had been a little undignified. "But the Muggles will be able to help," he said anxiously. "They've got weapons and stuff."

"And what, they're helping us out of the goodness of their simple but generous hearts?" Malfoy asked sarcastically. "Muggles? Help? Potter, they've nearly destroyed their world. After they've finished with it, they're going to come and destroy ours. You have a good comeback for that?"

Harry shrugged again. "Well yeah, Malfoy. If this world contains people like you, maybe it needs to be destroyed."

There was a silence. It broke when Malfoy laughed. "That was good, Potter. And here I thought that you were better off in a place where nobody can see, hear or feel you."

"Oh, fuck off." Harry had figured out that Malfoy had nothing interesting to say. He got up, threw a couple of Sickles to the bartender and made his way towards the front door.

"I heard that Ginny Weasley hung herself this morning." Draco Malfoy stood at the doorway, arms folded across his chest.

"I don't see how that's any of your business," Harry retorted, pushing past him. His fingers brushed past the material of Malfoy's shirt, and he blushed at the contact, hoping that Malfoy wouldn't see his reddening cheeks in the dim light.

"Do you know what happened to her after she died?"

"Heaven?" suggested Harry irritably. "A better place? As if you know, Malfoy."

"I meant to her body, in the literal sense." He smiled infuriatingly when Harry did not reply. "The forehead turns blue and purple as the blood flow is blocked, causing excessive hemorrhaging. Her vertebrae bone fractures and cracks before suffocation occurs. The tongue becomes stiff and protrudes, as do the eyeballs. The saliva and mucus flow into the nasal cavity," he sounded as if he were a textbook. "Basically, she wouldn't be your typical attractive corpse."

"Malfoy, I don't think she cares about what her body looks like. She's kind of dead. Nobody cares about what happens to your body after you die. Bottom line, you just leave it."

"I'm just saying." Malfoy smiled and before Harry could blink or say another word, he had disappeared. Frowning, Harry made his way back toward his apartment.

He was thinking about how much he hated crypticness, when he saw two dark shadows hovering near his front door.

"Mr. Potter?" A man wearing a black suit and dark shades showed him a card in a wallet. It was too dark to see what the card said.

"Yes?" Harry asked suspiciously. He was not in a mood to be trifled with.

"We are here to arrest you for questioning about the murder of Ginny Weasley."

the Cost of Living

Chapter 3 of 3

The wizarding world wants Harry Potter to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry Potter just wants to curl up and die. He's been having dreams about people dying lately and the bad thing is that they're all coming true. This is bad timing since the world is going to end in three days.

Gone From the World

Chapter Three the Cost of Living

I cry when angels deserve to die.- System of a Down

Harry blinked. "Excuse me?"

The man holding the wallet sighed. "I am here to arrest you," he said slowly, as if he were addressing a deaf, blind and mute three-year-old.

"Are you two, Aurors? Who are you?"

The two men looked at each other. It took Harry a second to realize that these two were Muggles.

Muggles were here to arrest him. That didn't sound quite right.

"How do you know who I am?" he asked, eyes glancing quickly from one man to another.

"You're Harry Potter," said the other man. He wore a deerstalker hat, reminding Harry of countless hours reading Sherlock Holmes with Ginny. "You are a wizard."

"How do you know this?" It was scary. Harry suddenly remembered what Malfoy had said. "Did you know that Creevey is planning to use Muggles in this war?"

"Come with us, Mr. Potter and we will tell you on the way," said both men at the same time. Harry idly wondered whether the two were a couple. If they both got time off, did they holiday together in France? Then he chided himself from thinking inappropriate thoughts during inappropriate times.

"How do you know about me?" he continued suspiciously, hand reaching for his wand in his back pocket.

"We received information from a source that you were seen at the scene of Miss Weasley's death. Also, our sources indicate that you have a history of mental illness and that you and Miss Weasley were previously romantically involved. Naturally, this has led us to believe that you are the chief suspect."

"Would your source happen to be?" Harry asked irritably, his heart pounding furiously. "Back issues of the *Daily Prophet*? *Witch Weekly* by any chance?"

The agents didn't even bat an eyelid. "Come with us, Mr Potter," said the one with the ugly hat. "Or we'll make you come with us by force."

Harry did what any intelligent wizard would do. He drew out his wand. He wanted to tell them to fuck off and die, but he checked himself before the words could tumble out uncontrollably. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I don't think I've done anything, and maybe you should go and check your 'source.' I'd like to enter my apartment now; please remove yourselves."

"As you wish." To Harry's distinct surprise, they complied. They cast him dark looks, pushing past him.

"But we will be back."

*

The first thing Harry did in the morning (besides attending to his toiletries) was to visit the Ministry of Magic. He Apparated into the lobby. There was nobody there, save for a young boy standing near the fountain. He seemed to be deep in thought.

"Please place your wand on the machine. It shall be returned to you whenever you leave the Ministry."

Harry strode purposefully to the robot, which took his wand. It was scanning it, when there was a click and it stopped moving. The hall went pitch-black, and immediately, red lights sprung up from nowhere, and the room started beeping annoyingly.

"What the..." Harry muttered. "Hello? Anyone?"

"Oh, the machines broke." The boy looked up from the fountain. "They do that sometimes. After all, they're Muggle-invented. Can't handle all the magical auras around them."

"Where did they come from? They weren't here a couple of days ago," Harry said curiously. Everything had changed.

"A couple of days ago, people were still employed," said the boy, walking towards Harry. He was blond and androgynously beautiful. "Now we've got Creevey for Minister and yesterday, five hundred people lost their jobs. They've been replaced by Muggle machines."

Harry didn't say anything. In the dark, the boy looked like an angel. Like Draco Malfoy.

"Do you think we could get the lights back up?" he asked.

"*Epis fluorescence.*" The boy waved his wand and the golden glow, which Harry was accustomed with, returned in full force.

The robot next to Harry jerked back to life. "Here you go," it said. "Please have a nice life."

The boy sniggered. He shrugged apologetically, when Harry turned, "Sorry, it's just that robot cracks me up all the time."

"What's your name? You're fourteen? Fifteen?" Harry asked, curious as to why the boy was here.

"My name is Liam." The boy smiled, showing a row of perfectly formed white, even teeth. "I'll be fifteen next month."

"So what are you doing here?"

"I have to be here." Liam smiled again, eyes shining enthusiastically with the fires of stars long dead. "My sister she has these prophetic dreams, and she dreamed that I would be here today and meet you. I really didn't want to do that, no offence, Minister, but my sister told me that it's for the best. And how can you resist something when you know it's for the best?"

"You don't," said Harry understandably. Children grew up so quickly nowadays. It was the modern era. Hogwarts had long since closed down; boarding schools were now redundant. As Colin had described it, they were 'incredibly old-fashioned.' With the onset of the twenty-first century, the Board of Education had set up schools, which operated six hours a day. That way, children could go to school and then come back home the same day. It made life easier.

"There may also be a Religion test that I ... forgot to study for," Liam added guiltily, but with school-boy grace he added flippantly, "Not that I could give a fuck."

To that, Harry had no answer to. "Don't you like school?"

Liam paused for a moment. "I think it's alright even if we don't actually use any magic. Today is Orientation Day you know, for new Muggle students." Noting Harry's look of confusion, he added, "Apparently, it's unfair that Muggles can't use magic, so we're involving them in the process."

"And you don't like this?"

"Hell no."

Harry made a mental note to talk to Colin about involving Muggles in the schools. That was taking the whole 'I have a dream that Muggle and Wizard children will hold hands' thing too far.

"I'm sorry. I'm going to go talk to the Minister now," he said nicely to Liam. "Good luck doing what you're going to do."

"Ta," said the boy, sticking his hands in the pockets. "All I know is that it'll make a difference," he added mysteriously.

Harry rounded a corner. Occasionally, he saw another wizard or witch, but before he could turn around, they were all gone. It was as though they were wisps of smoke, something he couldn't touch.

As Harry neared Colin's office, he began the walk past all the portraits of previous Ministers.

"Hello," he said to Millicent Bagnold, Minister until 1990.

The portrait did not reply. It gave no indication that it had even heard him.

"Hello?" Harry said again, waving a hand in front of it. No movement.

He moved on to a portrait of Cornelius Fudge, 1990-1996. Fudge was sitting in a chair; and, like most portraits, looked more attractive than in real life. "Hello Fudge," he said, expecting the usual scowl.

No reaction.

He raised his voice. "Hello?"

Nothing. The picture was still.

Harry tried to goad a reaction from portrait Fudge. "Fudge sucks!" he said loudly, in a squeaky voice. "I am sexy!" he exclaimed randomly. "Die, die you spawn of Satan."

Fudge didn't raise so much as an eyebrow.

Feeling extremely mystified and oddly put out; Harry stormed up faster to the Minister's office. Inside, he could hear Colin screaming.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE REFUSED TO COME WITH YOU? HE'S A DEPRESSED PSYCHOPATH. WHY DIDN'T YOU TAKE OUT YOUR GUNS? HE KILLED HER ALRIGHT? NO! FINE! I DON'T CARE! I'M THE BLOODY MINISTER FOR MAGIC! I DON'T GIVE A HIPPOGRIFF'S ARSE. WHAT THE FUCK EVER! ALRIGHT! Just remember, you get here soon. I need to talk to you."

He slammed the phone down. Harry guessed that either he was speaking on a telephone, or had gone temporarily insane. He knocked on the door.

"Come in," said the hoarse voice of Colin. "Who is it?"

"It's me," said Harry, as he entered the new Minister's Office. He blinked incredulously at the décor. During his regime as Minister, he had painted the room a nice handsome maroon and had initially stuck a few posters and paintings around the room. As time had gone on, the posters and paintings had all disappeared until the room

was as bare as a hermit crab's cave.

Now the room was stuck full of pictures of Colin with several important personages, accompanied by scrawls labelling whom Colin had taken the photo with. Harry glanced at them with some interest.

Me and the Muggle PM from Germany, Ministry Dinner....

Me and Rufus Scrimgeour, Auror's Convention 2001.

Me and Viktor Krum, last year Quidditch Match.

Me and Madonna, some random concert.

Me and a dementor.

Harry blinked again. "Lovely picture," he said politely, motioning to the picture of Colin and a dementor. "I like the whole hooded look. Very...dementor-ish."

"That was part of an operation in order to encourage magical co-operation and trust," Colin said in a deadpan voice. He looked at Harry very seriously. "Potter, what do you want?"

Harry was taken aback by the hostility in Colin's tone. "I only came here to talk to you about something, Colin," he said warily.

"What do you want to talk to me about then?" Colin looked extremely strained. "I don't have time, Potter. I'm meeting National Security at ten o'clock."

"Ten o'clock is two hours away," Harry said flatly.

Colin wriggled uncomfortably. "The computers are having a breakdown. I have to go and fix the chip-thingies." He turned to the door, but Harry had predicted this move and had immediately moved towards him, blocking his entrance.

"We're going to talk, Colin," he said.

"Fine." A look of stubbornness passed the other man's face. "Alright, we'll talk, Potter. What do you want?" He smiled resolutely and then sunk pompously into his chair.

A second passed. Colin decided that he didn't like the whole power aspect with Harry standing and him sitting, so he got up.

"I want you to tell me why this Ministry is five-hundred people less," Harry said sharply. "I want you to tell me why there's an Orientation Day for Muggle students at a wizard school. I want, hell, I want you to tell me what two Muggle Agents would possibly want with me who are they, and why do they think I have something to do with Ginny? Tell me why the portraits outside your office aren't moving. Tell me where the bloody robots came from. And why have you got a picture of a bloody dementor on your wall anyway? Fuck, they're not even photogenic!"

"That's a lot of questions," commented Colin, sounding a lot more like Albus Dumbledore than himself. If he had had a beard, he would have been stroking it. He didn't have one though, so instead, he settled for rubbing the stubble on his chin.

Harry just looked at him.

"Well...." Colin looked slightly flummoxed. "Alright, um, I can take down the dementor thing if it displeases you. It's really no trouble with m-me" he trailed off. "I "

He was interrupted by a sudden crash outside. Harry instinctively turned towards the door. When he turned back, Colin was brandishing a Muggle pistol at him.

Harry blinked. He rubbed his eyes, sure that his mind was playing tricks on him. It wouldn't be the first time.

He opened his eyes and the image of Colin holding the pistol didn't fade away. Instead, now Colin was wearing a self-satisfied smirk.

"I'm the Minister for Magic, not you...." He loaded his pistol as Harry watched in dumbfounded shock. "And I just happen to be the one with the gun."

"Why is this happening?" asked Harry. His mind couldn't register the betrayal. Didn't Colin like him?

"Because you're weak, Potter, because I despise you." Like a vulture, Colin began to circle around him. Like a vulture, he didn't seem to get dizzy.

"Let's reason." Harry's heart began to beat faster whilst Colin laughed maniacally.

"Please, Potter, don't make me sick." He rolled his eyes. "What happened to 'we're going to talk'," he imitated.

"Why, Colin?" Harry asked softly. "Why are you ruining our world?"

"Ruining our world?" Colin asked incredulously. "Don't you see, Potter? I'm making things better for us."

"No, you're not." Harry felt as if his tongue was made of rubber, and he was having trouble mustering the energy to talk.

"Let me you tell you something," Colin began. "We've been in the war against You-Know-Who for six bloody years; you, of all people know that. You-Know-Who has much better soldiers, much better resources, much more power. It doesn't take a genius to see who would win. And do you know what happens when he wins? Because he's going to win. It's not as if you can knock him out with a bomb."

Harry motioned him to go on.

"When You-Know-Who wins, they'll round up all the Muggle-borns and kill them or worse. It will be pandemonium. In my nightmares, he sends out the Death Eaters, and they round up each and every one of us. Half of us will be caught; the other luckier half will take refuge, mingling with the Muggle world.

"Things are bad enough already, Potter. Yes, there's a Depression, and we're all poor, but at least none of us are dying. When You-Know-Who takes over, we'll all be reminiscing about the good ol' days of the Depression. You're practically Muggle-born, you should understand.

"And it's not as if the wizarding world now is perfect either. Ask any Muggle-born. Take your best friend Hermione for example she's a brilliant witch and is much better than any pureblood out there, but under normal circumstances, she'll never be Head of her Department. The position will go to Draco Malfoy. Why? Because he's a pureblood and she isn't.

"All our lives, purebloods have always thought that they're better than us when they're not. It's prejudice, and it makes me sick to my stomach. How is our blood different from their blood? It's the same bloody colour, isn't it?

"I'm teaching those hypocrites a lesson. Gone are the times where they could tread on us with hobnailed boots. They're becoming less and less. It's the time for us to step above them." Colin's eyes shone violently. "Ginny Weasley couldn't understand that. That's why she died."

"You killed her?" Harry asked, shocked and scandalized.

"She killed herself. Suicide, but I blame you for her death Potter. You could have saved her." Colin wiped his sweating hands. "You rejected her that night. I watched."

"I didn't know that..." Harry buried his head in his arms. He was so tired.

"Too late," Colin said resolutely. "Goodbye, Potter, it was nice knowing you," he added coldly, and before Harry had time to react, he had already squeezed the trigger and shot.

Harry doubled over in pain. Seeker reflexes had him swerve out of the way just in time, and the bullet had got him in the thigh instead of his stomach or chest as Colin had intended. Colin stared at him piteously. "You shouldn't have done that. Now, I'll have to shoot you again. Pray to your Guardian Angel, because you're not getting out of here alive."

The pain was getting to Harry's head. Being shot was a new experience and, unsurprisingly (like most new experiences), it hurt. He could hardly feel his legs anymore, let alone run. He made a choking sound and instead concentrated on crawling towards the door. His instincts were urging him to get to the doorway where he could Apparate away.

But Colin had anticipated this very move and having the advantage of not having a bullet in his body, had moved towards the door and was currently leaning on it, breathing very heavily.

Harry knew that he was doomed when Colin took the gun and aimed at his head. He squeezed his eyes shut....

BAM!

Startled, Harry saw that Colin had been knocked to the ground. The boy who Harry had talked to earlier Liam now stood there, eyes widening at the growing pool of blood by Harry's body.

"You stupid boy," growled Colin, reaching for his pistol. This gave Harry enough time to feel for his wand in his pocket and it wasn't there.

Too late, he remembered giving it to the robot back in the Ministry hall.

"Liam!" he yelled, as loud as he could, for the young boy was still standing there looking shell-shocked. "Stop him with your wand! You can do it!"

The boy looked as if he was in a trance. He was breathing heavily. *Accio weapon*, he whispered, and the pistol flew towards his outstretched hand. Colin gave a cry of desperation as he flung himself towards the boy who stepped back.

"God, please give me the serenity to accept things I cannot change," the boy recited quietly. "Please give me the courage to change things I can change."

He aimed the weapon at Colin's head. Colin's eyes widened when he realized what was going to happen His body tensed as he was going to jump and knock the boy over....

"And please give me wisdom to know the difference." He squeezed the trigger.

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed as Colin Creevey's brain exploded everywhere in pink viscera and juices.

"What'd you do that for?" He gasped in pain as the boy threw the gun away and ran to help him up.

"He was going to kill you!" the boy protested, throwing Harry's arm across his shoulder.

There was a bang, and they heard running footsteps. Liam looked away from the corpse of Colin and at Harry desperately.

"Talk later," Harry promised. "There's a back way out. See that portrait of...."

They slipped out quietly just in time. When the portrait shut behind them, they heard voices cursing in the room behind them (there was a distinctive cry of 'motherf---!')

Harry hobbled, clinging on Liam who was moving as fast as he could. The young boy was gasping out loud. They had reached the Memorial Centre (which had been erected two years ago for the heroes who had fallen in battle) when Liam had stopped to take a break.

"You saved my life," Harry stated, whilst the younger boy nodded. He looked behind him, saw the trail of blood he had left behind and winced, rubbing his leg. "Did you say before that your sister told you to be here?"

"Yes." Liam nodded, looking warily at the entrance. "She had a dream that I'd be here. Let's get out of here, Minister."

Too late.

Two men entered via the doorway, blocking the exits. Harry recognized them as the Muggle agents who had approached him last night. He could recognize that deerstalker hat anywhere.

They entered the room, followed by ten more men dressed in army uniforms.

"Surrender and we won't shoot," ordered deerstalker Dude.

Harry felt Liam slip something inside his pocket. He knew instinctively that it was his wand.

Slowly, he raised his hands, brainstorming for a way to reach for his wand without arousing the suspicion of the Muggles.

"Good." Deerstalker motioned to the men and they hurried towards Harry and Liam, who was terrified but stood still.

"We need you Harry Potter." Deerstalker's accomplice stepped forward and looked him in the eye.

Harry felt his chest rise up and down. Despite his early years training to be an Auror, he was unready for Muggle guns. He had no idea what to do in a situation like this. He allowed himself to be handcuffed, figuring that he would untangle himself out of this situation eventually. It was best to go with it.

"What about the boy?" the man asked Deerstalker.

"Kill the spare," ordered the Muggle man.

The last thing Harry heard before he sunk into unconsciousness was Liam screaming, as blood splattered across the pure white marble floors.