

Filling in the Spaces

by JackieJLH

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: This was written as a companion piece, of sorts, to [All Those Empty Spaces](#). Though set during the same time frame, All Those Empty Spaces revolves around one day—Petunia's fortieth birthday. Things mentioned in that fic will be seen in this one, but in greater detail, as this story will span the course of the entire year. While it's not *completely* necessary to read All Those Empty Spaces prior to reading this fic, it is definitely recommended.

Many thanks to Stanzi for her beta work, and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

Mrs Dursley,

The note is addressed only to her because Vernon didn't want any involvement with magical parchment or magical baskets and because Dudley balked at the idea of learning to write with a quill. Petunia's not thrilled with it either, but looks at things more practically—they need food, and this is the only way to get it.

Hestia Jones and Dedalus Diggle had planned to stay here with them, but the house is so small, and she and Vernon had protested vehemently. So the Dursley family had been left to themselves, and the witch and wizard had gone to Ms Jones' home. Mr Diggle had said something about Death Eaters knowing what side he was on and that he didn't think it safe to go to his own home. Of course, Petunia and Vernon had disapproved—it seemed obvious what two from that lot would get up to when left alone for any length of time, and they suspected that the likelihood of an actual Death Eater attack on their ridiculous little guardian was really quite small.

Now Petunia almost wishes they hadn't made their protectors leave. The house is tiny, yes, but it's also eerily silent, dark and gloomy. The sounds of the world going on around them filter in through the heavily covered windows. *Muggle sounds*, her mind whispers. She tries to remember a time when she didn't think of herself as a Muggle, but can't.

As we discussed, this basket will return to me every Thursday at 11 p.m.,

and I will send it back at the same time Friday night. Please write any correspondence

only on the parchment I gave you, with the quills I gave you, as it will keep anyone

else from being able to read it. Also, again, please do not discuss your location

or anyone else's or any information that may be used against us should the letter

be intercepted, just in case. I cannot stress the importance of this enough.

Petunia rolls her eyes. She's not an idiot, and she resents being treated like an imbecile simply because she can't do magic, as if she's not completely aware of what sort of danger her family is in and how much their safety depends on their ability to remain hidden.

I wanted to give you an update on things, as well. Harry made it to the previously discussed location. Unfortunately, the trip was not without casualties. We lost Mad-Eye Moody (I don't know that you ever met him, but he was a brave man and an asset to the Order) and Harry's owl. But Harry is safe, and that's what's most important right now. Please let me know if you need anything. Tapping the handle of the basket three times with the quill will send it back early, but please only do so in the event of a true emergency—I can't guarantee that no one else will be present to see its arrival if I don't know to expect it.

~Hestia Jones

Chapters 2 & 3

Chapter 2 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Due to the short length of some of the chapters, some of them will be posted two or three at a time.

Many thanks to Stanzi for beta-reading, and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

Chapter Two

The quill splashes ink across the parchment if Petunia doesn't hold it correctly, and she finds herself writing like a child, with large, shaky letters and a level of difficulty apparent just by the note's appearance. She frowns, tears the parchment in two, and begins again on the clean half, her words slightly more legible now. Vernon grumbles at the sight of the quill, narrows his eyes at the level of concentration on her face, and shuffles away.

Ms Jones,

Thank you for making these provisions for my family.

And for turning us into prisoners, and taking away our lives, Petunia thinks bitterly, but continues on. Wizards are fickle, she's found, and she wouldn't put it past them to 'forget' to send food if she angered them. *Maybe it's for the best,* she muses, *that Vernon isn't writing these letters.*

I'm sorry to hear of your losses. I trust that you will continue to send us any news pertinent to our situation?

~ Petunia Dursley

Thursday comes. The basket disappears from the table with an audible *POP*, and Petunia gasps, nearly jumping out of her seat. Dudley and Vernon are already sleeping, but she's waited up to make sure that everything goes as planned. She stares at the now-empty place on the table for what seems like hours, and then decides to go to bed. They only have enough food left for one more day, and she prays that Ms Jones will not forget them.

Chapter Three

She doesn't forget. At promptly eleven p.m. the following night, the basket reappears with a *POP*, and this time they're all up and waiting for it. Vernon snatches the newspaper tucked into the side, then tosses it away when he sees *The Daily Prophet* written across the top. Petunia surveys the food and nods her approval—it will do. She plucks a rolled piece of parchment from under a loaf of unsliced bread and carefully breaks the wax seal, and skims its contents before saying a word, just in case there's anything there that Dudley shouldn't hear.

Mrs Dursley,

I'm afraid things are progressing more quickly than we'd expected. The Ministry of Magic fell into the hands of the other side today, and there was an attack at the place where Harry was staying. Harry and his friend Hermione fled during the attack and went into hiding. I've received reports that they are alive and uninjured. I will send you further information if and when I receive it.

~ Hestia Jones

"What's wrong?" Vernon asks. Petunia realizes that she's been sitting staring at the letter, and wonders if she looks as afraid as she feels. Taking a deep breath, she begins reading the letter aloud. When she's done, Dudley pushes his chair back from the table and goes upstairs without a word. Vernon takes the parchment from her and reads it silently, his face growing red. He puts the letter down without a word, meets his wife's fearful eyes, and rests his hand over hers.

Chapters 4 & 5

Chapter 3 of 31

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Chapter Four

Petunia stares at the parchment before her for hours. That's fine, really. The house was cleaner than seemed natural (she knows that's because it was cleaned using unnatural means and resents that a little) when they arrived, and it doesn't take much work to keep it that way. There's no electricity, so there's also no telly, no games for Dudley. No phones, either. No going outside; that's one of the rules. No opening the windows, just in case, even though the house can't be seen from the street. The dim candlelight gives everything a haunted glow, and the heavy drapes block out the sun, and sometimes Petunia watches the clock and wonders if it's six a.m. or six p.m.

Not that the time matters. They sleep, they eat, then they sleep some more. Dudley does sit-ups and lifts weights in his room, jogs back and forth down the hall. Vernon sulks and complains, and spends most of his time staring into space or sitting in the same old armchair, his eyes closed but the pattern of his breathing betraying the fact that he's lying awake, as if waiting for something. Petunia's not sure what that something is.

They found nearly a dozen children's books in the spare bedroom, and she immerses herself in their words. She gives in and reads *The Prophet*, flinching as the pictures on the front page move suddenly and startle her. She reads and rereads Hestia Jones' letter, looking for some hint of what's going on that she may have missed. Everything must be subtlety and secrets now; nothing can be explained properly. It's frustrating, but sometimes she's not sure she wants to know.

She can't decide what to write on the parchment. Should she ask for news? She's already done that, and Ms Jones seems to be giving news to her willingly, so it'd be pointless to ask again. She doesn't want to send thank-yous every week; it's not as if they asked to be sent here, and they're not going to pretend to be happy about it for even a moment. And yet the fact that Ms Jones is risking her life by sending them provisions and information every week deserves thanks. Petunia's fairly certain that it wasn't her idea to send them here either; the young witch didn't seem important enough. Although, neither did Harry Potter, and now they're all counting on him to save the world, so one could never really tell.

Finally, she settles for something simple.

Ms Jones,

Thank you for your letter and for the supplies. The news you sent was

unsettling, but I am grateful that we are receiving it all the same.

Vernon has asked me to request a Muggle newspaper. He's used to reading

one every morning with breakfast. Obviously a daily paper isn't possible,

but perhaps weekly?

She pauses, considers this for a moment, and changes that line.

Obviously a daily paper isn't possible, but perhaps weekly, if it's not too much trouble

and doesn't involve too great a risk on your part.

She reads over the note again and nods. She almost finishes there, but can't keep herself from writing one last thing. For Dudley's sake. He's been having nightmares.

Harry mentioned that there were more Dementors and that they were

spreading. Can they find us here? Do your spells work against them?

~Petunia Dursley

Chapter Five

That night Petunia dreams of Sirius Black. His picture as it appeared on the news watches her from its frame on her wall, but it's moving, screaming silent threats. He reaches through the frame for her, and when she turns to run, he's waiting behind her, too. He's everywhere, behind every corner, around every turn, and she can't escape.

She wakes up with a shout, her heart racing. Vernon is shaking her gently. "Petunia!" he says in a low voice. "You're having a nightmare."

"S-s-sorry," she whispers, and then bursts into tears. Vernon holds her tightly against him that night, but she doesn't feel safe—how can her Muggle husband protect her when James and his magic couldn't protect Lily?—and she lies awake until the clock tells her it's time to start her day.

Chapter 6

Chapter 4 of 31

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Author's Note: Many thanks to Stanzi for beta-reading, and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

Mrs Dursley,

I'm afraid I don't have much news, good OR bad, this week. We don't hear much, and what little we do hear can't be passed on, but I assure you that nothing that will affect your situation has occurred. We're all just keeping our heads low for now and hoping for the best.

As to your question, no, thankfully, Dementors can't find you any easier than any wizard can right now, and the only way for that to happen would be for the hideout's Secret Keeper to give away the secret, and she won't, not even if her life depends on it. Dementors are only one of the things to be concerned with now, though, so if you see anything suspicious, even just a person passing by that seems out of place, make sure you tell me.

I've included a copy of The Times from last Sunday. I wasn't sure what paper Mr. Dursley would prefer, and it was the only one I could manage to get my hands on so quickly. Perhaps I can send something for you or your son this week? Please let me know.

So many things have been changing lately; I'm not sure that you even want to hear about it, but I feel like you should be aware. There have been more attacks, mostly on individual families. Dedalus's home was burnt down because of his association with the Order; I'm just thankful that so far, they have no reason to suspect me of siding with the Order because I've never publicly leaned either way. One of Harry's friends is now wanted for questioning due to being a Muggle-born. Lots of other Muggle-borns are being taken into custody for 'questioning' as well. Most of them don't seem to come back. As far as I've heard, Harry's still safe and hasn't yet been discovered. School is starting soon; I don't know yet what will become of the Muggle-born children. Many of them aren't going back, but some will, no matter how much we urge them to reconsider. With the Ministry under You-Know-Who's control, there's no telling what Hogwarts will be like this year.

Speaking of school, I know that your son was supposed to start his final year this September. If you'd like any schoolbooks for him so that he can continue his studies, please let me know what to look for, and I'll see what I can do.

You'll find that I've sent along a small bag of clothing. Without any way for you to wash your clothes other than in the bathtub, I thought you might appreciate these instead. They're very comfortable, and they have automatic cleaning charms on them. They'll Scourgify themselves every night. They're shrunk down, but you'll need to take them out of the bag before tomorrow at noon, when they'll return to their normal shape. I was guessing on the sizes, so if they don't fit, send them back with notes on the necessary alterations on Thursday, and I'll get them back to you Friday night.

~Hestia Jones

Petunia searches through the bundles of food and finds a small cloth bag, and opens it to find a dozen doll-sized robes, all in blacks and browns and blues and deep, wine-coloured reds. Unsure of what will happen when they change sizes, she stacks them in a neat pile and sets them on the floor. The following day at noon, they suddenly begin to expand and grow, and before she knows it, there are twelve full-sized wizard robes lying there.

She stares at them for a moment, then crushes them into a bag and tucks them away in the cupboard under the stairs. She won't show them to Vernon; he'd only be upset, and she doesn't want to wear robes. Her clothes are the only part of her old life that she has left. Besides, she has nothing else to fill her days, and washing laundry by hand takes so long that it almost alleviates the boredom for a short time. The work with her hands, her aching back, they remind her of gardening. She likes doing something to feel productive; sitting around all day is making her feel like she's going mad.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9

Chapter 5 of 31

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Chapter Seven

Petunia has nightmares almost every night, but sometimes between the nightmares are wonderful dreams, dreams that she hasn't had in years about memories from a time she barely remembers when she's awake. She and Lily run through the grass hand in hand, playing and laughing and refusing to leave each other's sides. They dance and sing along to the radio in Petunia's bedroom, holding hairbrushes or spoons like microphones. Petunia sits against a tree with one arm wrapped around her little sister, laboriously sounding out word after word from the book in her hand as Lily listens intently to tales of Winnie-the-Pooh.

They're always children in the dreams, always too young to know that Lily's a witch, that Petunia's a Muggle. Too young to know that one day they won't be this close, or even close at all.

Chapter Eight

Petunia thinks it really shouldn't surprise her that Dudley is the first one to voice his concern for Harry, but it does all the same. He mutters it softly one night, in the middle of their silent dinner. "D'you think Harry's okay?" His gaze is focused on the one uncovered window in the house, a high kitchen window over the locked back door. It offers a view of a tall tree, birds flitting through the branches. Sometimes, Petunia watches them for hours.

"Mum?" he says to get her attention, and she smiles reassuringly at him.

"I'm sure he's fine, Dudders. We would have heard something if he wasn't," she answers, and the way that Dudley still looks distressed almost breaks her heart.

"He should've come with us," her son insists, and he turns back to his dinner without another word.

"I'm sure he's safer with his own—" Petunia starts to answer, and Vernon pushes his plate away, the food barely touched, mutters something about their conversation ruining his appetite, and leaves the room.

Chapter Nine

Sometimes, Petunia forgets what Hestia Jones looks like.

She feels silly when she thinks about it, even though she's only spent a single day with Hestia in her entire life and thinks it's perfectly understandable that she wouldn't remember her face. There's guilt, too, though, because the witch is out there somewhere, and despite the war going on around them, she finds the time and resources to send food every week and to write letters that fill Petunia's lonely days.

It's a struggle for her to see anything but Lily's face when she thinks of Hestia. That's not really anything new; Lily's face has been superimposed over that of every witch Petunia has ever heard about in her life, as if to be magical one only needed red hair and brilliant green eyes and a cheerful smile. The wizards take on different forms, but the witches are always replicas of her sister until she sees them for herself.

Ms Jones had dark hair, she reminds herself, but still the witch's face doesn't come to her—she's just Lily, hair dyed dark and cut short. *No*, she thinks, *not Lily*. Hestia isn't Lily at all—she's nothing like her. Only the magic is the same. The wand, the spells, the self-confidence that comes with being able to turn your enemies into a toad or something just as awful.

Only the magic, but that's all Petunia can picture when she thinks of either of them. The one thing that firmly sets them together in the same group and relegates Petunia to another. Hestia may not be much like Lily, but she's *nothing* like Petunia. What could they possibly have in common?

We're both lonely, Petunia thinks. The realisation comes as a shock, in a way. *Lonely and afraid*.

For reasons she couldn't explain even if she tried, somehow those few things in common make their differences—including the magic—seem not quite so important anymore.

Chapters 10 & 11

Chapter 6 of 31

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Author's Note: Many thanks to Stanzi for beta-reading, and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

Chapter Ten

Mrs Dursley,

School began on the first of September, as usual. Snape has been made the headmaster at Hogwarts. I don't know how that happened, even with the Ministry under their control.

He can't be trusted. He killed Dumbledore; what makes his precious Dark Lord think he won't turn on him, too? Snape is a murderer.... He's nearly as evil as You-Know-Who.

Petunia's not sure what to think of this information. She tries to remember Severus Snape and sees a young boy, bitter and nasty, but also loving. At least when it came to Lily. She remembers the way he beamed happily when Lily held his hand, how he protected her when an older boy picked on her, how he'd always hold out his arms when she climbed trees as if he intended to catch her if she fell, even though he wasn't anywhere near strong enough to actually be of any help. Somewhere in her mind she's certain that he is a murderer, that he's evil. But she can't put him on the same level as Voldemort, if only because she's equally certain that Lily never would have been able to either.

There have been reports of more attacks on Muggles. We don't hear many specifics, but frankly, sometimes I'm glad of that.

Dedalus has gone into hiding. It's too dangerous for him to stay in one place now, so he left the night before last.

Of all the things I thought this war would bring, I never thought it would involve spending so much time sitting around waiting for something to happen. Everyone tells you war is horrifying and scary and terribly hard to survive, but they never tell you how boring it can be, do they?

~Hestia

Chapter Eleven

Petunia's read all the books in the house a dozen times now, the wizarding world's folklore and fairytales becoming as real and natural to her as any Muggle ones have ever been, and maybe more so. Giants, vampires, werewolves.... They haunt her nightmares, along with the Death Eaters that always look like Sirius Black and are always after her every time she closes her eyes.

She can practically recite the books from memory, so she devotes most of her time to Hestia's letters. She rations them—after a quick skim through the words to make sure nothing too important is written there, she starts at the top with just the first paragraph. Maybe two paragraphs, if she can't help herself. Then she sets the letter aside.

She reads a bit more each night before bed, and sometimes that's a blessing, Hestia's words about hope and determination and life before the War rocking her to sleep as she goes over them in her mind. But sometimes it's a curse, and her nightmares are filled with the devastation Hestia tries not to describe in too much detail. (It doesn't matter, really; Petunia's imagination supplies the rest.) She talks about vampires working for the other side. Inferi, which are, as far as Petunia can tell, something akin to the zombies of films, but controlled by intelligent wizards capable of planning, not just a hunger for brains. She tells her about how Voldemort died, how he came back. She tells her whatever seems to cross her mind as she's writing the letter, and Petunia hangs on every word.

Chapters 12 & 13

Chapter 7 of 31

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Author's Notes: Many thanks to Stanzi for her beta work and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking.

Chapter Twelve

Petunia worries about her husband. Vernon wakes up at the same time every morning and showers and dresses as if he were going to work. He eats breakfast, then settles into an armchair near the front window, closes his eyes, and doesn't move again until lunchtime. She wonders sometimes if he's imagining himself at the office. It was never a secret that Vernon took pride in his ability to provide well for his family. Being trapped here, unable to work or take them out, unable to protect them, knowing that his job can't possibly even be there waiting for him when this is over, seems to be more than he can bear.

After lunch, he returns to his chair, and only leaves it to eat once more before retiring to bed. He barely seems to realize that there are two other people living with him, and almost never talks to them anymore.

Not that there's much to talk about, of course. They don't ever have to fill each other in on the events of their day because they spend all of their days together. None of them truly have individual experiences anymore.

Sometimes, Petunia tries to come up with things to say. She talks about the antics of the birds she saw out the window, the spider she chased around the bathroom. Vernon nods and grunts his acknowledgement, but never seems to hear the words.

She almost never talks about the war, though, or about Hestia, or Harry, or about life before they went into hiding. Every time she tries, Vernon just gets angry and leaves the table, and his face stays a reddish purple for hours. Dudley has never been much for idle chatter, either, so silence has become a near-constant thing. If Petunia had to pick just one thing that she hates most about this tiny house and this awful war and everything that's happened, it would be the silence. It makes the days feel longer and lonelier than she ever thought possible.

Chapter Thirteen

In solitude, two months seem a year and each day after seems an eternity, and sometimes Petunia thinks she's mad for keeping a calendar because it only emphasises how hopeless their situation has become. October comes and brings her birthday with it, and no one remembers. Maybe it shouldn't matter, but it does. So she writes back to Hestia (she's always Hestia in Petunia's mind now, even if she's still Ms Jones on paper). This time it's her letter that's long and rambling where it would usually be concise and to the point. She pours out her worries and her fears, her boredom and her stress, and the parchment gladly receives them, the magical quill shaking in Petunia's hand.

Ms Jones,

Today is my birthday. I don't mention this because I expect anything from you; I just wanted someone to know. My sister always remembered my birthday. I know that it's silly—it's been so many years since she died, and we were never close, not since we were young—but I miss her terribly. Especially now. This world is her world, and for the first time I'm experiencing at least a small part of it, and it doesn't feel right that she shouldn't be here.

The days don't seem to pass at normal speed anymore. Every moment lasts a lifetime. Maybe that's why I'm thinking about Lily so much. I don't know what sort of sister that makes me, only missing her in times of boredom.

I apologise for going on about these things. I know that you have no reason to care, but again, I just want to tell someone. Anyone. Vernon doesn't talk at all lately, he just sleeps and sulks, and I worry about him all the time. I worry what this is doing to him, to his heart. I worry about Dudley, too. A boy his age should be in school and with friends and out having fun. It was at my insistence that Harry stayed in our home all those years, and now I can only blame myself for what my family is going through. I just wish I'd known. I wish there'd been another choice, but there wasn't. I did what I thought was right. What I owed to my sister. I don't think Vernon will ever forgive me.

I can't help but wonder if we'll ever be free. I can't bear to spend the rest of my life in this house. I miss the sun. I miss rain, of all things. I miss my life. Will this war ever end?

~Petunia

She lifts the quill, positions it to write the D of her last name, and then sets it aside instead. She rereads the letter and almost tears it up, but the basket will magically leave them soon, and she doesn't have time to write another. And she thinks maybe Hestia will understand, if only a little.

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Chapter Fourteen

The next evening, the basket reappears in the centre of the dining room table, like always, heaping with food. A rolled piece of parchment is balanced on top, and there's a single balloon, shining gold and brilliant, its string tied to the basket handle. In her nervousness, unsure of her last letter and Hestia's reaction, Petunia accidentally tears the parchment as she pries it from the wax seal, but gets it open, eventually. She anxiously reads the entire thing at once, a luxury she rarely allows herself.

Petunia,

I know there are days when I don't see the point in getting out of bed anymore, and I chose this side; I can't imagine how difficult it must be for you and your family, thrown into this without any choice. Just know that what you did in taking Harry in, in keeping him safe all those years, may have saved the world. You have to believe it was worth it.

I've heard that maybe things were not so simple as all that. I've heard... well, a lot of things. About you, about Harry. I can't say I condone much of it. I can't even say that I understand how you justified it, but—

I'm going off on a tangent here, aren't I? I didn't write to scold you, or to make you feel guilty. I just wanted to say that I know sometimes there is no 'right' choice, and that what seems easy to some can be terribly hard for others.

That even if I don't really understand the things you did, after three months spent reading your letters, I can't believe that your decisions concerning all of this have been easily made. That I realise some of those decisions may not have been—and may not currently be—easy to live with, either.

Right now, all any of us can do is try to survive. I firmly believe that the war will end, and we will win. I don't know when, or how, but I have faith in Harry and the Order, and this will be over one day.

I'd tell you to be strong and brave in the meantime, but I don't think I need to. You already know. You already are.

Happy Birthday, Petunia.

Make sure you pop the balloon.

~Hestia

Chapter Fifteen

By the time she reaches the end of Hestia's letter, Petunia is crying. She drops the parchment onto the table, dabs at her eyes, and then picks up the letter and reads it again.

After some time has passed and she's calmed down, she studies the balloon floating serenely before her. She can't understand why it should be popped. It's beautiful and almost looks as if it were made of real gold. A dozen candles reflect off the shiny surface and fill the room with bouncing, moving flashes of light. She stares at it for a while, mesmerized by the way it slowly spins even though the air around it is motionless.

Finally, she goes to her sewing kit and retrieves a needle. The instant the tip touches the balloon, it pops with *BANG*, but doesn't fall away. Instead, a flood of tiny flowers and leaves fill the air, swirling around her. And *rain*. Light rain that reminds her of dancing on the lawn through the summer afternoon showers with her sister when they were young. It occurs to Petunia that she should be terrified of the way that it's all happening, annoyed at the fact that the rain is soaking through her clothes and the wet flowers and leaves are covering the floor and sticking to everything, but she just closes her eyes and looks up toward where the warm sun should be, beaming down at her. She holds out her hands and sees herself outside, and Lily is beside her, arms raised and face to the sky, damp grass soft under her feet as she spins in circles. Petunia spins too, her skirt whirling around her legs, wind in her hair.

Slowly the rain dies away, and Petunia stops spinning and opens her eyes to an empty, dry dining room. She realizes that her clothes are dry too, and that the mess is gone. The only things left are a deflated balloon lying on the table, and a single flower that had fallen into her hand and then didn't disappear with the rest, as if to prove to her that it all really did happen. She sinks down into the nearest chair and cries, her sobs echoing through the silent, empty house. She cries for Vernon, for Dudley, for herself. For Harry. And for the first time in sixteen years, she cries for Lily. She carefully clutches the little flower in her hand, afraid to damage it in any way, and misses her sister so much that it actually hurts.

At some point, the ache in her chest dulls and fades away, and she just sits, exhausted, for what feels like an eternity. She closes her eyes, and in her mind, she can still

see Lily, tugging her by the hand to the playground every Saturday morning, and creeping into Petunia's room on nights when there were thunderstorms, and prattling on endlessly about everything and nothing for as long as her sister would listen. Somewhere along the way, the tears stop.

"Thank you," she whispers in the direction of the basket and wishes more than anything that Hestia could actually hear it.

"Petunia?" Vernon calls from upstairs suddenly, and she nearly jumps out of her seat. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine, darling," she lies, and she hastily picks up the balloon, tucking it and the flower into her pocket along with Hestia's letter. She hurries to the bathroom to rinse the evidence of her crying from her face before going to bed.

The next morning, she hides the letter in among the others Hestia has sent, in the bottom drawer of the desk in her bedroom. After a moment's consideration, she lays the remnants of the balloon and the tiny flower inside as well. Vernon doesn't know they're there, and he wouldn't approve anyway, but she knows, and every time she thinks of the tiny flower, she sees Lily's face and she smiles.

Chapters 16 & 17

Chapter 9 of 31

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Author's Notes: Many thanks to slyth_wolf for Brit-picking.

Chapter Sixteen

It takes Petunia the better part of the next six days to write her reply. She starts the letter over a dozen times, feeling ridiculous as she tries to convey her gratitude on parchment.

Dear Hestia,

I cannot thank you enough for your gift. I—

She shakes her head and starts again. She's writing on regular paper so as not to waste the magical parchment, and the plastic pen feels odd between her fingertips after writing with nothing but a quill for so long. The thought that Muggle things are becoming foreign to her makes her shudder, and when she starts again, she settles for something simple.

Hestia,

Thank you for your gift. It was wonderful and greatly appreciated.

She rereads those sentences, considers them for a moment, and then reaches for the quill and carefully writes them on a clean bit of parchment.

If I may ask, when is your birthday? Do you have a family?

Do you work? I'm afraid that even after all this time, I know

very little about you....

Pausing there, her eyes flicker toward Vernon, sitting in his chair with his eyes closed. She turns back to the parchment and pens the last sentence, and in her imagination, she can almost feel her husband's disapproval.

Has there been any word about Harry?

~Petunia

Chapter Seventeen

That night, Petunia hears noises in the attic. They're scratching, clawing sounds, like an animal. She lies awake, grateful that Vernon is a sound sleeper, and listens to the sounds overhead, wondering what it could be. *Maybe it's a bird*, she thinks. She hopes. If it's mice, she doesn't know what they'll do. Vernon will be outraged if he has to live in a house with mice—and quite frankly, she's not too thrilled at the idea either.

So she spends the next day searching for a door into the attic, and finally finds it in the back of the spare bedroom, concealed in the wall with only small, rusted hinges to give away its existence and the slimmest of edges for her to grip with her fingertips in order to open it. The door sticks, and when she does manage to pull it open, dust billows out into the room. Jumping back and waving her hands in front of her, she waits for everything to settle before peering into the darkened doorway. Only the first few steps are visible in the dim lighting, and she has to dislodge a candle from its holder on the wall and take it with her just to see where she's putting her feet.

The attic isn't large, and there's enough dust and grime coating every surface that she's fairly certain no one's been up there in a while. Boxes and old furniture and every other manner of thing are strewn about, and she only gives the mess a precursory glance before turning and going back downstairs.

Chapters 18 & 19

Chapter 10 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to slyth_wolf for Brit-picking.

Chapter Eighteen

Petunia,

You're very welcome. I'm glad that you enjoyed it.

No news on Harry yet, but as they say, no news is good news. If he'd been captured, the Death Eaters would be shouting it from the rooftops, if only to further lower morale.

I don't know how those children have managed to stay out of sight for so long, but hopefully they're getting done everything that needs done, and this will all be over soon.

As for knowing something about me, I'm afraid there's not much to know. I work for the Ministry. It's gotten quite a bit harder as of late, what with the Death Eaters running things, but I mostly just do paperwork all day, so I can't complain too much.

I don't really have any family left—my parents died nearly twenty years ago, I'm not really the marrying sort, and I've never had any children of my own. I did recently get a baby Kneazle to keep me company, though—Kneazles are sort of like cats, but larger and quite a bit smarter. She's grey and has gigantic ears. She's adorable; I spend far too much time doting on her. I named her Shadow—how original of me, right?

~Hestia

And scribbled at the bottom, almost as an afterthought:

Oh, I almost forgot—my birthday is 3 June.

Chapter Nineteen

Petunia's next letter requests a replenishment of her cleaning supplies, and everything she's asked for appears along with the food on Friday. The next morning, directly after breakfast and with Vernon safely ensconced in his chair for at least a few hours, Petunia goes back to the attic, cleaning supplies in hand.

By the time she finishes wiping the dust from the stairs and door and begins cleaning off an old, cluttered table, she has to stop to make lunch. She returns that afternoon, picking her way through the attic's contents carefully, almost reverently. While everything but the furniture had been removed from the living space of the house with very few exceptions (the books; a patchwork quilt on one of the beds; an old, stained apron in the kitchen), the attic obviously hadn't been touched before they'd arrived.

In one corner is a pile of random things atop a box. There are tiny figurines of men in robes riding broomsticks, and a dingy, mildew-smelling teddy bear, and a toy-sized broom. *A child lived here*, she thinks, and she already knew that, perhaps, because of the children's books in the spare bedroom, but these things discarded in the attic seem to drive the point home. A half-closed box reveals child-sized robes and old Muggle-style boy's clothes, small shoes and warm cloaks. The way it's all there, lumped together, feels wrong somehow. Sad, even. *Children don't generally outgrow both their toys and clothes all at once*, she thinks, and her heart sinks.

Feeling like she's invading something intensely private and not at all her business, she sets the robes back into the box and closes it back up, pushing it into its place in the corner.

She doesn't sleep well that night at all.

Chapters 20 & 21

Chapter 11 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Note: Many thanks to slyth_wolf for her wonderful Brit-picking work!

Chapter Twenty

The next morning brings Petunia back to the attic, almost despite her own will. Avoiding the corner filled with the little boy's belongings, she moves to the far side of the room and begins cleaning again. This is the first real thing she's had to occupy her time in months, and even though she's filthy and tired and her muscles ache from the bending, stretching and lifting, she feels happier than she has since arriving to this house.

The other side of the room feels less intrusive. As she opens boxes—always on the lookout for whatever has been scratching around up there every night—she finds more mundane things. Cookware. Dresses and robes that look as if they're two hundred years old. A painting of a rose. One of the boxes reveals a handful of old wizarding schoolbooks, and she carefully wipes the dust from them and places them at the top of the stairs so that she can bring them down with her later.

The last box she opens that day is the most exciting—a chess set. The pieces look old and battered, as if someone had thrown them onto the floor repeatedly, but they're all there, and she takes that as well.

She resolves to teach Dudley to play chess the next day—*Maybe I can even talk Vernon into a game*, she thinks—but only gets as far as setting the board on the table and lifting a white knight out of the box before she hears a tiny voice.

"You're going to play with us?" the knight says incredulously, and she screams, drops it and jumps back, staring at the chess piece lying unassumingly on the wooden game board.

"You... you talk?" she asks, her voice almost a whisper.

The little figurine rocks back and forth and appears to be shaking its head. *Muggles*," it says disdainfully, and the horse it rides on climbs to its feet, walks back to the box and leaps over the side. "We don't play with Muggles," the knight tells her, and then falls back among its fellow game pieces, still and silent.

Chapter Twenty-One

The books are very frustrating. They're full of how-to instructions on spells and charms and potions, all of them useless to her. She reads them anyway, in secret, tucked away in the spare bedroom. At least, until the night Vernon wanders in and catches her.

She's lying on the bed, reading glasses perched on her nose, engrossed in the hand motions required to Transfigure a hamster into a quill, when he walks into the room. If she'd realized it was him and not Dudley, then she may have closed the book and set it aside faster. Instead, she finishes the sentence she's reading. When she glances up, Vernon's staring at the cover of the textbook, his face reddish purple, eyes bulging.

"I knew it!" he shouts. Petunia pales, discarding the book on the bedside table and getting to her feet. "You want to be just like them! Just another freak in your freak family!"

She gasps. "No! Of course not!"

"Writing letters to those people all day!" he rages, throwing his hands up in the air. "With *QUILLS!* Reading this... this...." He pushes past her and snatches the book off the bed. "This *Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration!* He opens it to the middle and rips the spine in two, then throws the separate halves against the wall. With a pained cry, Petunia runs to pick them up. The book may be full of spells she can never do, but she has so few things to read; she glares at him as if he's destroyed her most prized possession instead of just an old, musty-smelling children's textbook.

Vernon spies the pile of other books on the desk across the room and heads toward them, and she blocks his path, her hands trembling where they grip the broken book she's holding. "Stop it!" she snaps, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Vernon, *please!*"

He pauses, looking at her as if he barely knows her, and as his gaze drifts down to the textbook she's clutching to her chest, his lip curls up into a sneer. "You're just another freak," he says disgustedly, storming past her and out of the room. A sob escaping her, Petunia leans against the nearest wall and then sinks down to the floor, her shoulders shaking as she cries. Dudley hovers outside the doorway, his expression one of distress and confusion.

When she tries to go to bed a few hours later, she finds Vernon's locked the door. She calls to him to open it, but he won't answer, so she sleeps in the spare bedroom that night.

Chapters 22 & 23

Chapter 12 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Slyth_Wolf for her wonderful Brit-picking work!

Chapter Twenty-Two

Hestia,

Christmas is coming in just a little more than a month. I was wondering if I may be able to ask you to purchase some things for Dudley? I'll pay for them, of course. We withdrew all of our money

from the bank and brought it here with us, so I can
send some along with a list of things I'd like
to get him. If it's too much trouble or too dangerous,
then don't give it another thought. It's just that he's had
such a hard year.... I'd like to make sure that
Christmas is special for him.

She doesn't tell Hestia about the fight. She wouldn't tell her even if they were the oldest and best of friends, of course, but it scares her how much she *wants* to. She takes a minute to consider how very angry Vernon would be if he found out she'd even *told* Hestia about all that money just sitting, virtually unprotected, in the house, but decides that she doesn't much care—despite the abundant proof she's been given over the years that magical people cannot be trusted, she can't bring herself to think of Hestia as anything but honest and kind.

Dudley misses the telly and his games and computer,
and I thought of getting him a Game Boy....

I'd also like to see if we can start stockpiling things
to eat for Christmas dinner. Can that also be bought
at Muggle shops? I can include money for that as well.

~ Petunia

Placing the parchment into the basket, she goes back to preparing lunch, still trying to think of what other Christmas presents she can get for Dudley—her options are fairly limited without electricity, after all.

That night, the scratching in the attic continues. It's not right overhead anymore, but she can still hear it through the door. She wishes there were a different room for her to sleep in. *I have to find what's making that noise*, she thinks as she lies awake.

This new bed is small, too small for two people, and she hasn't slept in bed this size since she lived with her parents. She hasn't slept alone since then, either, and she hasn't become used to it even after nearly a week of waiting for Dudley to go to bed and then slipping off to the spare room. There's no warm body to roll toward in the middle of the night, no one to hold her when she wakes up after a nightmare about Death Eaters. It feels all wrong; her heart sinks in her chest every time she gets into the small bed.

Each morning, she's up with the sun, making the bed before going down to the kitchen to cook breakfast. She won't let Dudley see that she's not sleeping in the same room as Vernon. She can't. He's been through too much; she won't upset and confuse him that way. She *won't*.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Petunia,

I'd be happy to do some shopping for you, though keep in mind

I can't make any guarantees, what with things the way they are.

Still nothing about Harry, I'm afraid.

If Hestia notices that she didn't ask about presents for her husband, she doesn't say anything, and the rest of the letter is about the war.

Petunia wonders where Hestia will spend Christmas. She'd said she had no family... surely she couldn't be spending it home alone, with just a cat to keep her company?

Petunia's next letter includes a list of things for Dudley, as well as money. As an afterthought, she adds in the names of stores where the items can be bought, just in case. Hestia is a witch, after all. She probably doesn't frequent Muggle stores. She probably doesn't even know what half of the things on the list *are*.

Over the next few days, Petunia goes back to the attic often. She cleans little by little, only staying until she can't bear the cold any more, moving boxes aside and wiping down furniture and shaking out old dust cloths. She seems to be moving the dust around more than getting rid of it, but it gives her something to do with her days.

And then one day, she's busily disentangling a pile of old jewellery she found lying in a small box when she hears the scratching sound. Looking around wildly, she sees an old trunk off to one side, shaking a bit as if something is trapped inside of it. *What on earth?* she thinks, getting slowly to her feet and grabbing a broken chair leg for protection against whatever animal might be trapped within the trunk. She steps closer, unlatching and throwing open the lid before jumping back.

Chapters 24 & 25

Chapter 13 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to slyth_wolf for Brit-picking and Pyjamarama for beta-reading! Posting this chapter a bit early because I hate leaving cliffhangers. :)

Chapter Twenty-Four

The lid of the trunk falls back against its hinges, and her heart stops in her chest.

A man, dressed in dark robes with a skull mask over his face, stands up and steps out of the trunk. She takes a step backward, her entire body trembling.

He pulls the mask away, and it's Sirius Black, eyes wild and filled with malicious glee. "But you're *redead*," she protests in her shock, and then he raises his wand and points not at her, but behind her.

"*Avada Kedavra*," he barks in the voice that has haunted her nightmares, and a green flash of light flies by her. She turns quickly, and then can't bring herself to turn back and face her attacker. *Dudley*. Dudley is lying on the floor, still and unmoving.

"No, no, no, no," she cries and races to the fallen body of her son, clutching him to her. "No, please no." And then she's screaming, her heart breaking, and she knows Sirius is behind her, knows that he'll kill her next, but she can't bring herself to care.

"Mum?" she hears from the stairwell, and then Dudley's face appears, going pale at the sight of his own likeness dead in his mother's arms. "What...?" He falls silent as he looks behind her, and before she can even feel relieved, *ecstatic*, that he's alive, she's afraid all over again. Dudley whimpers as she twists her neck around to look over her shoulder and finds herself staring at a floating, faceless black robe, bony fingers reaching toward her.

"Mum!" Dudley shouts, more panicked this time, and the desperation in her son's voice sets her into motion. She launches herself toward the stairs, dragging Dudley down with her, and they fall painfully down the remaining steps, sprawled out on the floor. Ignoring the pain of the fall, she leaps to her feet, slams the door shut, then hurries her son down the stairs.

"Stay with your father," she tells him, pushing him through the doorway into the living room, and she runs into the kitchen, scrawling a panicked, "HELP!" onto a sheet of parchment before dropping it into the basket and sending it away with three taps of the quill.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Peunia hurries back to her family, clutching Dudley against her and sobbing because he'd been *redead*, she'd *seen* him die, whispering, "My sweet boy. No one's going to hurt you, I swear it. No one. Oh, my poor boy." Vernon, very pale, is listening as Dudley tells him that there's a Dementor upstairs. Finally, a moment later, Hestia bursts through the front door and races into the room, Kingsley Shacklebolt close behind her.

Through gasps and tears, Petunia rushes to tell them about what she'd seen in the attic. Hestia nods, her eyes wide.

"Boggart?" she asks, turning to Kingsley.

"Sounds like," Kingsley answers. Their apparent lack of concern is maddening, but oddly soothing all the same. Turning to Petunia, he says, "Wait here. We'll take care of it," before the two of them dash up the stairs.

"What's a Boggart?" Vernon hisses, his face already growing purplish-red now that any danger seems to have passed.

Petunia thinks back to all of the books she's been reading and answers, "They're shape-shifters. They become what you're afraid of." Just thinking about it makes her tighten her grip around her son. Vernons looks as though he can't decide whether to be thankful for the information or angry that she knew the answer in the first place.

When she comes back downstairs only a few moments later, Hestia tells them that the Boggart has been forced back into its trunk and they'll get rid of it; to emphasize that point, Mr. Shacklebolt comes down the stairs at just that moment, the trunk bouncing through the air behind him, latched closed and then tied shut with long ropes. "We'd like to go back up," Hestia says, "and make sure that there's nothing else hiding up there that could cause any trouble. I'll be back as soon as we've disposed of our friend, here."

Petunia gives a jerky nod, still shaking from her ordeal in the attic, and mutters, "Thank you."

"*Thank you?!*" Vernon bites out incredulously, leaping to his feet and storming after them. "Now listen here, Shacklebolt," he continues, pushing past Hestia and stopping in front of the surprised-looking Auror, "you said we'd be safe. You gave us two bodyguards, and one's already run off, and the other left us in this place without even checking to make sure nothing here could kill us. We want someone better."

Mr Shacklebolt's eyes narrow in irritation, but when he speaks, his voice is calm and reasonable. "Boggarts cannot kill you, Mr Dursley. They can only scare you. I'm sorry that it gave your family a fright, but you were not in any real danger. This is the safest place for you, and Hestia is the person best placed to help you. Our side cannot move as freely as we once could, and we're under constant scrutiny from You-Know-Who and his followers. Hestia isn't publicly associated with the Order. She can get food and other supplies more easily than most of us." Flicking his wand at the trunk bobbing up and down behind him, he opens the door and continues in a placating tone, "Your family is already eating and living better than most of our people. We're doing the best we can."

"We didn't ask to be brought here," Vernon insists, looking as if he will follow Shacklebolt out the door. The Auror pauses, but instead Vernon turns to glare at Petunia and shouts, "We should never have taken your useless nephew in! He's more trouble than he's worth. Always has been." And with that, he storms off to the kitchen.

Hestia stares after him, outraged, and Shacklebolt looks around awkwardly and clears his throat, his expression full of grim anger, but not really surprise. Petunia can't bring herself to look them in the eyes.

"You'll be back?" she finally asks, her gaze flickering up to meet Hestia's, and the witch nods slowly, her expression fading from incredulous rage into something more sympathetic, laced with hurt. Petunia responds with a nod of her own and turns her attention back to her son.

Chapter 26

Chapter 14 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Note: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading, and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

Vernon returns to his chair a few minutes after Hestia and Kingsley leave, still fuming, and Petunia all but forces Dudley into the corner of the sofa in the same room, where she feels it's probably safest. She's cuddled him in every way she can think of, and even though he's started grumbling at her to leave him alone e doesn't *need* a blanket or more ice cream or for her to read to him, he says he still feels like she should be doing something more. Hestia knocks at the door an hour later, alone this time, and Petunia feels indescribably relieved as she lets the other woman in.

"I apologize," she says softly as she closes the door. "For... well, for my husband. This hasn't been easy on him."

Hestia gives her a sympathetic smile and nods. "I won't be long," she assures Petunia. "There shouldn't be anything else up there; I just want to make sure." She begins climbing the steps, and Petunia hurries after her.

"Alone?!" she exclaims, her tone incredulous.

"Yes..." Hestia replies, one eyebrow lifting sardonically, giving Petunia an amused smirk. "There's no one else here."

"Should I... well, should I go with you?" Petunia asks. She sounds a lot braver than she feels, but moves up another step anyway. "In case something happens, I mean. We won't know if we're all downstairs."

Hestia shakes her head. "It'll be safer if you stay down here. You wouldn't be able to fight against anything that's up there, and I can't focus on keeping myself safe if I'm worried about you."

Petunia nods, feeling ridiculous for even offering, but Hestia just grins at her, reaching out to squeeze her hand gently. "Thank you, though," she says, then releases Petunia's hand and hurries up the stairs.

She watches Hestia until she turns the corner and disappears down the hall. Not knowing what else to do, she returns to her family.

Twenty minutes later, Hestia still hasn't come back, and Petunia begins feeling on edge, her gaze drifting to the stairs repeatedly. Finally, she loosens her tight grip on Dudley and begins pacing.

"Petunia, sit down," Vernon grumbles, one eye opening to peer up at her.

"I hope she's all right up there," Petunia mutters in response, and then her face burns red as Vernon glares at her. "If something overpowers her, it'll come after us next," she goes on for the sake of calming him, and he slumps back into his chair with an angry frown contorting his features. Sinking down onto the sofa, she watches the clock for another five minutes before standing again and walking toward the stairs.

"I'm going to go up and make sure she doesn't need anything," she explains, and Vernon looks incredibly annoyed, but doesn't try to stop her.

"I'm going, too," Dudley decides, getting up, and Petunia whirls around to face him, shaking her head.

"Oh, no, Diddykins, it's too dangerous!" she insists, already trying to lead him back to the sofa, but he shrugs out of her grasp.

"Mum, it's just as dangerous for you," he points out, then shrugs again. "Probably more 'm bigger than you, and stronger. You check on her. I'll make sure nothing hurts you."

Petunia's heart swells with pride and love at his protective words, even if she knows that there's no way she'll allow him to go with her.

Vernon climbs to his feet suddenly, stomping across the room and pushing himself between his wife and son. "Dudley, sit back down. You're not going up there; you could be killed!"

Dudley frowns, looking confused. "But... you're letting Mum go. Aren't you worried about her?"

Lowering her gaze to the floor, Petunia folds her arms over her chest. "Do as your father says, Dudley," she insists softly. Still looking bewildered and just a little bit angry at Vernon, Dudley returns to his seat. Vernon doesn't say a word, doesn't look at his wife, just storms back over his chair, sitting down and closing his eyes again, still as a statue.

Fighting back sudden tears, Petunia turns away and goes upstairs, making her way slowly and cautiously to the spare room.

Chapter 27

Chapter 15 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to slyth_wolf for Brit-picking and Pyjamarama for beta-reading!

The hallway and bedroom are silent, and the door to the attic stands open. Grabbing the candle from its place on the wall, she tiptoes up the stairs and stops four steps up, just able to see into the dim attic.

Hestia is still up there, opening boxes and old cupboards and trunks, silently flicking and waving her wand in various directions, grim concentration evident on her face. A pile of clothes reveals something small that starts to run away, and she does away with it in an instant. Petunia flinches.

Turning her gaze to the pile of the little boy's belongings in the corner, Hestia's face twists into an expression of sad reluctance before she begins sifting through the pile. She knew him, Petunia thinks. Feeling like she's intruding, she goes back down to the bedroom and sits on the bed, waiting patiently until Hestia comes down the steps a few minutes later.

If she's surprised to see Petunia sitting there, Hestia doesn't show it. "Nothing up there but a few mice," she says, "and I got rid of them. Nothing else should bother you."

Petunia nods. "I apologise. I shouldn't have been up there looking through things that aren't mine anyway.... I'm sorry."

Hestia shrugs; the smile that she gives is a sad one. "It's fine. You can go up there all you want. Just let me know if anything else starts moving; just because nothing's there now doesn't mean something won't show up later."

"The chess set moves." Petunia remembers suddenly, and she hurries to get the box from the place it sat on the desk since the knight had told her she couldn't play with them. "It talks, too." Setting the box down on the bed, she opens the cover and looks at Hestia expectantly. Hestia only grins.

"It's wizard chess. It's supposed to talk," Hestia explains, dropping to her knees beside the box and pulling out the same white knight Petunia had picked up last time, as well as the black king. "Hey, wake up."

The knight, instead of being rude, grins a tiny little stone grin. "Miss Hestia! Have you come to play a game with us?"

"Not today, I'm afraid," she replies in a regretful tone, and the knight fidgets atop his horse. The king crosses his arms over his chest.

"You don't come to see us for years, and now that you're here, you won't even allow us one game?" he grumbles, and she laughs and kisses his stone cheek.

"Maybe next time," she says. "Besides, you won't be bored for long. Petunia, do your son and husband play?"

Petunia begins to say that no, they don't, when the knight chimes in, sounding aghast, "Miss Hestia, that creature is a Muggle!"

Hestia narrows her eyes at the knight, and he shrinks back at whatever he sees in her expression. "Yes, she is, and you'll play with her if I tell you to, or I'll transfigure you into a Muggle chess set that doesn't speak or move at all."

The king, obviously sensing that things were not looking very good for him or his 'army', interrupts with, "Of course we will. Don't listen to him; you know he's always had a nasty temper. Especially after being left alone in that dark, dusty box for so long...."

"It's fine," Petunia interrupts, trying not to sound hurt. Being rejected by a toy is quite possibly more than she can handle today. "Vernon wouldn't want to play, and Dudley doesn't know how." Frowning at the angry little knight, she adds, "And I don't think I'd feel comfortable playing with a talking chess set."

Hestia shrugs. "Oh well. Sorry, back in your box," she says cheerfully. The knight begins to protest, but falls silent and still as he's settled back into his place.

"Back in your box, *Your Majesty*," the king corrects. Hestia rolls her eyes, drops him into the box, and closes the lid.

Chapter 28

Chapter 16 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to slyth_wolf for Brit-picking and Pyjamarama for beta-reading!

Turning to grin up at Petunia, Hestia laughs. "Ridiculously self-important little things, aren't they?"

Petunia gives her a bland smile, still annoyed at the words of the tiny knight. "Yes, they are." Wanting to change the subject, she asks, "They were yours?"

Hestia nods, turning back to look at the closed box and running her fingers over the engraving on the bevelled edges. "Yeah."

"This is your house," Petunia presses.

"My parents' house," Hestia answers softly. She's silent for a moment, staring at her fingers as they dip and twist across the designs carved into the wooden box, and just as Petunia is about to apologize for bringing up the subject at all, she continues. "I was away at Hogwarts. My parents and my little brother... well, my parents were very active during the first war against You-Know-Who."

Hestia climbs to her feet and brushes dust from the ground off of her robes, her expression wistful.

Petunia's memories of her own parents, killed in a car crash—or so she was told, anyway—only two years before Lily died, race through her mind. She means it when she says, "I'm sorry," her voice almost a whisper.

"It was a long time ago," Hestia says with a shrug, but the cheery smile she adopts doesn't quite reach her eyes. She looks Petunia up and down, then grins and changes the subject. "So do you enjoy washing clothes by hand or something?"

Petunia blushes a deep red, embarrassed. "Yes?" she answers in a vaguely hopeful tone, and Hestia gives her an amused, but sceptical, look. Sighing, she admits, "It gives me something to do. And Vernon... well—"

"It's all right," Hestia interrupts gently. "I understand." Petunia expected hurt or anger, or at least annoyance, but Hestia's sympathetic tone suggests none of those things. Feeling a little guilty anyway, Petunia looks away.

"Mum?" Dudley's voice calls from the doorway, and Petunia jumps at the sudden sound. "Everything all right?"

"Yes, Dudders," she answers reassuringly. "Everything's safe now."

"Good. Um, Dad wanted to know when we're eating." Just talking about his father makes Dudley's face cloud over with concern, and Petunia feels her heart break a little.

"I'll be down in a moment to start preparing supper."

"Okay." He turns to leave, but then stops and looks back, turning to Hestia this time. "No more Dementors, right?"

"No," she says firmly, and Dudley seems to relax in the face of her confidence. "No Dementors."

"Good," he says with a nod and leaves.

"You're welcome to join us," Petunia offers as the sound of Dudley's footsteps on the stairs echoes down the hall.

"Thanks, but I have to get back. Order meeting tonight." Hestia smiles apologetically.

"Oh.... Right, of course." Feeling oddly embarrassed, Petunia turns to go downstairs, Hestia following close behind.

"Besides," the witch says as they pause before the front door, "I doubt Mr. Dursley would appreciate my company tonight." The look on Hestia's face suggests that the feeling would be quite mutual.

"Yes, I'm sure you're right," Petunia answers, hoping that she doesn't look as disappointed as she feels. Vernon never talks to her anymore anyway, and Dudley has never been very talkative. She longs for companionship from someone, anyone else—the fact that Hestia is a witch barely even matters. If she's completely honest with herself, it doesn't matter at all.

"Good night, Petunia." Opening the door just enough to allow her to slip through, Hestia steps out onto the stoop and then disappears with a *CRACK*. Petunia flinches at the sound, then glances around the street, wondering if anyone else heard. She only sees one man, walking from his car to his home, one hand holding a mobile phone and the other clutching a briefcase, and he doesn't seem to be paying attention to anything except his conversation.

This is the first time she's got a good look at anything beyond the front door for months, and Petunia leans outside, breathing in deeply and smiling at the smell of fresh, cool autumn air.

"Close the damn door," Vernon grumbles as he walks up behind her, startling her, and she spins around and slams the door shut. "Just because you're becoming one of those freaks doesn't mean you can get me and Dudley killed by letting them know we're here."

"They can't see the house," she reminds him softly, stepping around him and heading for the kitchen. Vernon starts to follow, but then mutters something about it being pointless to argue with her anyway and returns to his chair.

Chapter 29

Chapter 17 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to slyth_wolf for Brit-picking and Pyjamarama for beta-reading!

That night, long before Vernon normally retires for the evening, Petunia slips away and heads for bed. Their bed. She won't sleep in the spare room, barely four feet from the attic door. Even with Hestia's reassurances of safety, lying in the dark and jumping at each little noise doesn't seem like it will lead to sleep under any circumstances.

Curling up on the far side of the large bed, she tries to go to sleep. Eventually she hears Dudley go to bed, and then Vernon's slow footsteps echo down the hall as he climbs the stairs. As he walks into the room, the candle he holds reveals her lying there, and he stops in his tracks. It's nearly a full minute before he says anything, and she holds her breath almost the entire time.

"I'm not sleeping in that room," he finally says, irritation lacing his tone.

Petunia suppresses a sigh. "Neither am I," she answers, not getting up. "Come to bed, Vernon."

He looks as though he can't decide whether to yell or just leave, and she bites her lip and looks away. "Do you really hate me so much that you can't even be near me?" she asks quietly, and he pauses in his fidgeting and stares at her, but doesn't answer. "I can't do it, you know. Magic. I wasn't trying to anyway, but I couldn't even if I wanted to. It's not something you can learn."

Vernon begins to open his mouth to reply, but then glances down the hall toward Dudley's room and seems to change his mind. Finally stepping through the doorway, he closes the door behind him before saying, "You're lying."

Her wounded expression doesn't seem to have any effect on him, but then it didn't the last four times she tried to discuss this with him, either. At least this time, she's made it past the first three words without him walking away.

Petunia sits up, pulling the blanket up around her chest to protect herself against the cold air and the anger coming off of him in waves. "I can't learn to be magical any more than you could learn to get pregnant," she says, and if a hint of impatience creeps into her voice, it's only because she can't understand why he refuses to believe her. Vernon's eyes bug out at her words.

"It's physically impossible," she elaborates. "*I read a book*, Vernon. I needed something to do, and so I read a book. You can't honestly hate me *for that*?" Looking down at her knees, she blinks back angry tears. A few escape onto her cheeks, hot against her skin, and she hastily dabs them away with the edge of the blanket.

"You're the reason we're here," he says accusingly, and her head snaps back up, her eyes wide.

"Harry—" she begins to say, but he hits his fist against the door so hard that the mirror on the opposite wall falls to the floor and shatters.

"*You!*" he insists. "He's *your* nephew. *You* wanted to keep him!"

She feels anger boil up within her, and she gets out of bed and storms across the room, carefully avoiding the broken glass, stopping so close to him that she can see the red in his face even in the dim light. "I wanted to keep us safe! Protecting Harry meant protecting us as well! Protecting Dudley!"

"We could have moved away—far away, somewhere those freaks couldn't find us!" he grinds out, his expression all exasperated anger, and Petunia wonders just how long he's wanted to say this.

"He was a *baby!* You'd have let him die?!" she asks, the words leaving her mouth before she even knows she's saying them, and for a second she feels as shocked as Vernon looks.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Vernon looks at the broken glass on the floor around them and shakes his head. "We all would have been better off if he had."

His words feel like a slap in the face, and Petunia hugs her arms around herself and avoids his eyes. She begins to walk toward the door, but he doesn't step out of her way. "Please move," she says softly. "I need to get out of this room."

A knock on the door startles them both, and then Dudley's voice calls out, "Mum? Dad?"

Vernon's eyes don't leave her, and Petunia clears her throat and says as calmly as possible, "Yes, darling?"

"I heard things breaking.... Is everything okay?" Dudley asks, and Petunia winces at how afraid he sounds.

"Everything's fine, sweetie," Petunia says, moving again to walk past Vernon, and finally he steps aside and lets her open the door. Even with nothing more than the light from a single candle to illuminate the hallway, she can see the concern and apprehension in her son's eyes, and on impulse she reaches out to take his hand in hers. "Come downstairs with me. I was just going to get some ice cream," she lies.

Dudley stares at his father for a long moment before nodding and allowing her to lead him down the hall.

Chapters 30 & 31

Chapter 18 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to slyth_wolf for Brit-picking and Pyjamarama for beta-reading!

Chapter Thirty

Petunia wakes up the next morning on the sofa—she couldn't bring herself to sleep in the spare bedroom, and Vernon had locked the door again by the time she'd returned. Her neck aches from sleeping in the too-small space, and a deep bruise is spreading across her back and hip from tumbling down the stairs and onto the floor when fleeing the attic the day before. She wonders if Dudley is hurt at all. He hasn't mentioned anything, but then he rarely does when it comes to things like this.

Despite day and night not really looking any different in the dark and shrouded house, going to the spare bedroom is easier during the daylight hours. After her shower she goes there to dress, her eyes barely leaving the attic door the entire time, and then hurries downstairs to make breakfast.

Dudley wanders into the kitchen when the smell of bacon fills the house, and Vernon follows close behind, sitting down at the table and utterly ignoring her. Petunia pushes her food around her plate, not hungry in the least, and has to hold back a sigh of relief when her husband gets up and disappears into the living room.

"Mum," Dudley says quietly, his gaze focused on his plate, "is Dad all right?"

Petunia gives him a weak smile. "He's fine, Dudders. Being here is just hard on him." She doesn't really know what else to say.

"Oh." Dudley takes a few bites of his eggs, then stops again. "Are you all right?"

"Of course. I'm just tired." Forcing herself to eat a few bites of her breakfast for the sake of not worrying her son, she continues, "That Boggart thing gave me quite a fright yesterday. I didn't sleep well."

Dudley opens his mouth to speak again, his expression belying the inner struggle he's having, but then he frowns and turns back to his breakfast without another word.

Chapter Thirty-One

Dear Hestia,

Thank you for your help the other day. Please extend

my thanks to Auror Shackbolt as well.

I want to apologize again for Vernon's reaction. It was a

very scary moment for all of us, and his concern for our

son's safety sometimes gets the better of him.

Petunia rereads what she's written and frowns at how easily lies can spill out of her and onto the parchment.

I'm afraid I don't have much to say.... I haven't been

sleeping well lately, and I can't seem to focus on

anything. It seems like the less I have to do each day,

the more tired I become. I hate to ask, but do you by any chance have any books that I might be able to borrow? The days seem endless, and at least reading is time-consuming, if nothing else. Any books at all—wizarding or Muggle—would be wonderful.

She ends the letter with the same question many of her recent letters have ended with:

Has there been any news about Harry?

~ Petunia

Chapter 32

Chapter 19 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

The next day the basket returns, a large cloth tied around the entire thing to keep the contents from falling out. She carefully unties the knot in the cloth and begins removing the food, and when she gets to the bottom of the basket she finds a half-dozen books. The titles suggest they're all from Hestia's world—things like *Hogwarts: A History* and *The Dragon Tamer's Mistress*, the latter of which appears to be the wizarding equivalent of a Muggle romance novel, with a picture on the front cover of a scantily clad woman tracing her finger up and down the chest of a shirtless man, while a fire-breathing dragon swoops back and forth behind them.

The moving picture is hardly a surprise at this point, but she watches it in fascination for a few moments before placing it back with the others and carrying the basket upstairs, piling the books on the bedside table before returning to the dining room. Only once she's put all of the food away does she settle into a chair and turn her attention to Hestia's letter.

Dear Petunia,

I hope you enjoy these. I tried to include a variety.

Keep them there if you want to reread them later, or send them back as you finish—it's up to you. I'll send along some more next week; I ran out of room in the basket, or I'd have sent a few more.

Today was the first time I ever went to a Muggle shop.

It was the first time I'd ever spent more than five minutes in a Muggle place, actually—the closest I ever got before was your house! I managed to find some of Dudley's presents. I'll be getting the rest over the next few days. We'll have to arrange a time for me to start sending them over a few at a time in the basket. It'll probably take a few 'trips' to get them all over to you.

How about Wednesday? Just send the basket back once

Dudley's gone to bed, so I know the coast is clear!

~Hestia

P.S. I have to ask you, what are the plastic things that

the Muggles talk to? They seem to be having really

interesting conversations, but I can't see the appeal.

Why talk to those things when there are people around?

I almost asked one of the Muggles there, but I didn't want to attract too much attention, and I was already getting

funny looks because I can't for the life of me figure out

your money....

Unable to hold back a smile, Petunia grabs a sheet of parchment and her quill and spends the next twenty minutes trying to figure out how to explain Muggle telephones.

Chapter 33

Chapter 20 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

Sometimes, Petunia dreams about Vernon. Not the Vernon she lives with now, but the Vernon of a year ago. The Vernon of *twenty* years ago.

Her favourite dream is really more of a memory than anything else, and she thinks of it often. They were sitting side by side on the sofa, and she was leaning drowsily on his shoulder. She'd been nearly eight months pregnant at the time, and it was a hot and miserable day. She'd felt sweaty and ridiculously huge and just disgusting for days and couldn't imagine why he'd want to touch her at all. And Vernon, hearing her mutter this as she pulled away, had just held her closer, stroking her damp blonde hair and pressing salt-flavoured kisses to her lips and cheeks and the curve of her neck, and she'd never in her entire life felt more loved than she did in that moment.

Now, those memories do little more than hurt, and it's nearly unbearable. Vernon is barely speaking to her, and frankly, she's glad of that on most days. As lonely as she is, she can't handle the bitter, accusing tone he takes on every time he talks to her, as if she's to blame for everything that has happened to them. But she can't avoid him entirely; there are shared meals and haircuts every third week, and they're still pretending for Dudley's sake.

The haircuts are the worst, she thinks. It's not that it's hard work—when they were first married and Vernon was painstakingly working his way up at Grunnings, she'd always cut his hair herself. It had taken a few months, but she'd eventually become fairly good at it. Of course, many years have passed since then, and now, having his hair cut in the kitchen, on a rickety dining room chair with an old sheet spread below it to catch the clippings, seems to offend him more than anything else.

The hard part, she decides, is being so close to him. It's knowing that he doesn't want to be anywhere near her, seeing the reluctance and pained resignation in his eyes. The entire thing is like slow, agonising torture, and it makes her heart ache, makes her feel ill. By focusing on the task at hand, she manages to ignore his grumbles and complaints. For the most part, anyway. She tries not to notice the way he flinches every time she moves toward him with the scissors, but fails horribly.

Dudley's haircuts are always easier—she chatters on about how handsome he looks, the dinner she'll be making that night, and anything else she can think of. Dudley is mostly silent. He gives little nods when she's not mid-cut, or grunts of agreement otherwise, and that's really as talkative as he's ever been, so she doesn't terribly mind.

Her own hair is growing long after all these months, longer than she's worn it in years, but she can't bring herself to cut it. She's certain she'd do an awful job of it, and besides, Vernon always loved when she wore her hair long. She won't allow herself to do yet another thing to push him away.

Maybe, she thinks to herself, *he's right. This is all my fault.* It's not a new thought—she's feared that very thing for years. And maybe Vernon has always felt it was true as well... but he'd never said as much to her before they came here. Not even once.

This house is like poison, she thinks, but in her heart, she can't really bring herself to blame the house at all.

Chapters 34 & 35

Chapter 21 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

Not sure if anyone else will find this as awesome as I do, but my roommate emailed me a link to a picture of a woman who he said he "sees" as Hestia every time he reads this story, and she's just so *perfectly Hestia* that I thought I would share. The picture can be found here: <http://www.gazillionmovies.com/Actor/R/Ro/Pictures/robin-bartlett.jpg>

Chapter Thirty-Four

Wednesday, nearly an hour after Dudley's gone to bed, Petunia sends the basket back to Hestia. She sends along with it her most recent letter, complete with a detailed explanation of Muggle phones and how they relate to and differ from wizarding Floos. It feels nice to be the one with the answers instead of the one with the questions for a change.

Fifteen minutes later, the basket returns, filled with presents udley's Game Boy and a collection of games. She unloads everything and sends the basked away again, and it returns with more games, as well as some books for Petunia. The third trip delivers the supplies for gift-wrapping and nearly fifty comic books, all from a series Dudley had liked a few years ago he thinks he might be bored enough to give them another try, and besides, her gift options are limited without electricity nd then the last contains only four Muggle shopping bags, tied shut and nearly falling out of the basket, with a rolled up parchment balanced on top. She arches one eyebrow as she reaches for the letter, almost afraid to open the bags.

Dear Petunia,

This is the last of it. I hope I got it all right.

The sales clerk at the store said that the Game Boy needed batteries. I wasn't sure what those were, but he pointed me to these cylinder-shaped things and said they were the right size. I wasn't sure how many Dudley would need he salesman said that the batteries usually last a while but do stop working eventually, and I don't know how much longer I'll be able to wander around Muggle shops without being asked any awkward questions by You-Know-Who's obnoxious minions, so I bought all they had. I had to take them out of their cases so that they'd fit. Let me know if you think you'll need more, I can go back. Do they sell them in other shops, or just that one?

Talk to ell, write to ou again on Friday!

~ Hestia

Nearly cringing in anticipation of what she'll find, Petunia carefully unties one of the shopping bags and looks inside, her eyes wide. There are at least three hundred loose batteries in the bag. *Just* that bag ne of *four*. Sinking down into the nearest chair, for the first time in years, Petunia laughs so hard that she cries.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Vernon, thankfully, has the good sense not to look surprised when Petunia presents Dudley with a small pile of presents on Christmas. He doesn't appear entirely thrilled, either etunia thinks that he's probably concerned about how she got all those presents when he knows that they hadn't been brought from Privet Drive. But she ignores his narrow-eyed stare and instead quickly rushes to assure Dudley that of course they'd have got him more presents if they could have gone out to the stores. Dudley is so excited at the idea of having the Game Boy to occupy his time that he hardly notices the number of presents anyway, and Petunia hums happily to herself as she cleans up the scattered, shredded wrapping paper.

The day goes by quietly, as usual, but pleasantly. Even Vernon is friendly. Well, civil, anyway. He mutters, "Happy Christmas," when they sit down to breakfast and doesn't make a single snide comment all day. He compliments the dinner she's made hich surprises her because, even though she's been planning for weeks, this dinner isn't nearly as impressive as last year's, simply due to the lack of all the proper ingredients and kitchen utensils nd even holds a brief discussion with Dudley about his new games. A discussion that doesn't end with Vernon storming away from the table, for a change.

"I wish it was Christmas every day," Dudley informs her as he sneaks one more bite of mashed potatoes before she clears the bowl from the table at the end of their meal. She privately agrees with him.

Chapter 36

Chapter 22 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

Petunia's just finishing washing the dinner dishes when she hears a loud *CRACK*, and she jumps, nearly dropping the bowl she's drying. A knock on the door echoes through the house a moment later, and she sets the bowl down on the counter, nervously wiping her hands on a dish towel as she heads toward the sound. Vernon is taking a nap in his chair, and Dudley is upstairs playing his new games. She's too afraid of what might be waiting outside to call them any closer. Tiptoeing to the window nearest the door, she carefully moves the heavy drapes aside and peers out, and then sighs in relief. It's Hestia, bundled in a warm-looking cloak, balancing a large, gift-wrapped package in her arms.

As Petunia opens the door, Hestia grins. "Happy Christmas!" she chirps cheerfully, holding out the package, and Petunia can't help but smile, accepting the box with a confused quirk of her eyebrow. "It's, um, for you," Hestia explains, a faint blush spreading across her cheeks.

"Oh," Petunia says, more to herself than anyone else, her expression softening. She rapidly blinks back tears as she looks at the package in her hands and then back at Hestia and feels mildly ridiculous to be on the verge of crying over a *present*—and one she hasn't even opened yet, at that. "Thank you."

"There are instructions inside," Hestia goes on. Looking away, she shuffles her feet awkwardly. "Um, I should go. Happy Christmas," she says again with a small wave, turning to step away from the door, and on impulse, Petunia finds herself stopping her.

"Wait!" she says quickly, and Hestia pauses. "Do you have plans right now?"

Hestia shakes her head. "No. I visited with a few friends this morning, but it'll just be me and Shadow tonight."

"I was just about to make some hot chocolate for Dudley.... You could stay and, um, have some," Petunia finishes, a self-deprecating smile gracing her lips at her own fumbling words. "And you can show me what to do with this. In case I have trouble with the instructions," she adds, inclining her head toward the heavy box. "I mean, if you would like to, of course."

Hestia peers around Petunia, into the house, looking unsure. "Mr Dursley...?"

"Is probably sleeping too soundly to even notice," Petunia answers with a weak smile. "Besides, he'll get over it." *And if he doesn't, I don't much care*, she thinks, and the thought makes her smile falter. Stepping back inside long enough to set the cumbersome box down, she looks back over her shoulder. "I'd really enjoy the company...."

With a small smile and a nod, Hestia replies softly, "So would I," stepping inside the house and closing the door behind her.

Chapter 37

Chapter 23 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

Looking around speculatively and eyeing the gift-wrapped package, Hestia frowns. "There aren't many flat surfaces in this house, are there?"

Petunia, busily preparing the hot chocolate, lets out a small laugh at the unexpectedly odd statement. "There's the dining room table."

"Yes, but you eat there. You'll need somewhere to set this up." Hestia purses her lips, looks around again, and then grins. "Oh, there's a table in the attic, isn't there?"

"Yes...." Petunia answers hesitantly. "But I... well...." Focusing her gaze on the cups she's filling with milk, she finally admits, "I'm not particularly fond of the attic."

Understanding dawning on her, Hestia nods. "Oh. Well, what if brought the table downstairs? I could shrink it down a bit; it'd fit into the living room then."

Considering the idea, Petunia nods, then pauses and shakes her head. "No, it'd disturb Vernon." Reluctantly, she continues, "The attic will be fine. You're sure there's nothing dangerous up there?"

"As sure as I can be," she answers cheerfully, and when Petunia stares at her with wide eyes, Hestia laughs. "I'm joking! Nothing's up there. I promise," she says, picking up the present and heading toward the stairs. "Here, I'll take this up there and do one more check to make sure nothing's moved in recently.... Meet you up there?"

Petunia nods her agreement, carefully gathering the three mugs of hot chocolate and following close behind. She pauses at Dudley's open doorway, smiling when he nods distractedly from behind his Game Boy as she sets his drink down on the bedside table, then continues to the spare room and up to the attic. When she reaches the top of the stairs, she finds that Hestia has already cleared the remaining clutter from the table and dragged two mismatched chairs up beside it.

Moving to sit beside Hestia, she reaches for the present, nearly holding her breath in anticipation. The way Hestia looks like she's going to explode from suppressed excitement only makes Petunia more anxious to get the present unwrapped, and she tears the paper away quickly, revealing a wooden case with a small latch on the front. Opening the box, she finds a sheet of instructions written in Hestia's handwriting and a chess set.

"It's a Muggle one," Hestia says quickly. "Well, mostly. With a few differences. And, um, charms. It's... actually, it'll be easier to show you." Petunia watches, bemused, as Hestia pulls a large, glass-topped chessboard out of the box and sets it on the table. She taps it once with her wand, and light-grey coloured pieces arrange themselves on the side of the board closest to Petunia. On the other side, black pieces appear. Except... not quite.

Reaching toward them curiously, Petunia blinks in surprise as her fingers pass right through the black pawns.

"Those are at my house." Hestia points at the shadowy pieces, and then, bouncing excitedly in her chair, continues, "When you move your pieces, I'll be able to see it, and you'll be able to see when I move mine. They have to be on the board to see them, of course. Ooh, but the best part—" Stopping mid-sentence, she stands up. "I'll be right back! Watch the board," she tells Petunia, and then darts down the stairs, the distinct sound of Apparition echoing up the stairs before the front door even closes.

Staring at the board in awe, Petunia again runs her fingers through Hestia's pieces, watching carefully for something to happen. Unsure of what to expect, she stands up and takes a few steps away from the table.

A moment later, a dark shadow appears on the wide border of the board. As she looks on, the shadow forms into a line, and then another is added, and then another. A minute later, the last small line appears, spelling out a single word in block letters: "CHECKMATE."

A second later Hestia is jogging back up the stairs, a huge grin on her face.

"How did you—" Petunia begins to ask, and Hestia hands her a bag filled with tiny bits of wood, all the same length.

"I left my quill on top of one of the boards while I was trying to get it to work correctly, and realised I could see it on the other board. The book didn't say the charm would work that way, but it seems to reflect anything on the board. It's only shadows, mostly, not a lot of detail on anything but the pieces, but still... it'll allow for short messages, anyway."

"You made this?" Petunia asks, surprised.

"Technically?" Hestia blushes. "Really, I followed directions from a book and used Muggle-made chess sets, so all I did was the spellwork." Biting her lip in an unmistakable expression of nervousness, she adds, "I hope it wasn't too presumptuous of me to think you'd want to play. It's just... well, I thought we could both use the distraction, and I got the impression that you enjoy chess the last time I was here. Um, you don't *have* to play, though, of course, if you'd rather not."

Looking from the board to Hestia, then back again, Petunia can't even bring herself to form words. Turning back to meet Hestia's anxious, nervous eyes, she opens her mouth to say something, anything, but can't figure out what to say. Instead, on impulse, she pulls Hestia into a tight hug. "Thank you," she says softly as the other woman's arms wrap around her in turn. "You have no idea...."

"I think I do," Hestia answers, her voice barely a whisper, and Petunia hugs her more tightly.

Chapter 38

Chapter 24 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

The chess set, while wonderful, has the unfortunate side-effect of making the days seem unbearably long. Petunia spends her mornings cleaning and her afternoons reading, but her eyes never really leave the clock. Seven p.m. always finds her in the attic, waiting patiently for Hestia, who sits down to her own chess set around that time and always places the same message on the board: "THERE?"

Petunia quickly spells out, "YES," and the game begins. Hestia can write faster with the little bits of wood, magically shifting them around the edge of the board to spell out words quicker than Petunia can write *by hand*, let alone spell out letter by letter, piece by piece.

Finally, having had quite enough of being at a disadvantage, she mixes flour and water into paste and spends nearly an entire day sitting at the dining room table, painstakingly gluing the bits of wood into the shapes of letters and often-used words. She soon runs out of the little wooden pieces, and so she switches to broken toothpicks, the teeth of an old comb, and, finally, dried pasta.

"Mum, what are you doing?" Dudley asks when he walks through.

"Making letters," she answers simply, and his face scrunches up into a confused frown.

"But why?"

"To talk to Hestia."

As soon as the words leave her mouth, it occurs to her that perhaps she shouldn't have said that. But Dudley just surveys the dozens of makeshift letters drying on the table and then asks, "Did the quill break?"

Two minutes later, they're standing in the attic while he cautiously waves his hand through the shadow-like chess pieces on Hestia's side of the board.

"It's like an instant messenger or a chat room, kind of, isn't it?" Dudley asks, inspecting the last words Hestia left on the board: "GOING TO WORK NOW. UGH," down one entire side of the board, and on the other, "CHECKMATE." *Again*. Petunia has made it her goal to beat Hestia at chess at least five times before the end of the war, and so far has only managed it once. She doesn't mind terribly; she's never been very good at chess anyway. And Hestia's good-natured teasing about her abominable playing nearly always makes her laugh.

"What are instant messengers and chat rooms?" Petunia asks, and Dudley's eyes widen in disbelief.

"On the *internet*," he tries. "You know... they let you talk to people all over the world by typing...."

"Oh." She frowns, contemplating that thought for a second, not really understanding how such a thing would work without magic. It sounds incredibly complicated, but then, she's never really understood computers. Neither has Vernon, for that matter. They leave that to Dudley. "Well, I suppose it's like that," she concedes.

Dudley stares at her for a long moment. "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?" he finally asks, grinning. She hesitantly shakes her head, and he lets out a mock-sigh of teenage suffering, turning back to his paused Game Boy game as he walks away. She can't help but laugh as she follows him down the stairs.

Chapter 39

Chapter 25 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and slyth_wolf for Brit-picking!

"THERE?"

"YES," Petunia writes, glad that she decided to check the board. It's only ten a.m., but it's Saturday; Hestia doesn't work on Saturdays.

A few minutes pass without a reply, and she starts to think maybe she missed Hestia entirely, but then the previous message slides closer to one side of the board, more bits of wood joining the ones already there. "PLAY THERE?"

She frowns, unsure what Hestia means. "WHAT?" she finally writes back.

"ME, COME THERE TO PLAY," Hestia writes. It takes up nearly two full sides of the board.

Petunia considers that for a moment. Vernon won't be pleased in the least to have a witch over for a visit, but then, he's rarely pleased with anything anymore. Besides, it's not as if he ever comes upstairs during the day anyway.

"YES," she answers. "WHEN?"

"10 MINUTES?" As the words appear, Hestia's shadowy chess pieces disappear from the board.

"OKAY." She contemplates giving Vernon advance warning, but can't see anything pleasant coming from that conversation. Instead, she just checks to make sure Dudley doesn't need anything for at least a little while, peeks into the living room to make sure Vernon is in his usual spot, and then hovers near the door until she hears the muffled *CRACK* of Apparition outside. She opens the door before Hestia has the chance to knock.

Hestia, as always, looks cheerful and just a bit excited by life in general. Petunia finds herself smiling in return.

"Come in," Petunia says softly, hoping not to wake her husband.

Her efforts are in vain. Before Hestia's even completely stepped inside, Vernon's calling from the other room, "Petunia, who's here?"

She hesitates for a moment, silently praying for him to be understanding, and he pushes himself out of his chair and comes to see who's arrived for himself.

"Oh, it's you," he says in a tone that makes it painfully clear how unhappy he is to see Hestia. Petunia blushes, embarrassed. "What's she doing here?" Vernon asks, apparently deciding to ignore Hestia entirely.

"She's visiting," Petunia answers in as firm a voice as she can muster, and then quickly turns away from her husband, hoping to end his questions there. "Shall we?" she asks, indicating the stairs.

Hestia, looking grateful for an excuse to walk away from the tense, awkward situation, nods and hurries up the steps.

"Petunia," Vernon begins angrily.

"Don't," she says in a tone that's half-pleading, half-warning. He narrows his eyes and glares at her for a long moment before turning and marching back into the living room. Letting out a breath she didn't realise she'd been holding, Petunia heads for the attic.

Chapters 40 & 41

Chapter 26 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and janus for Brit-picking!

Chapter Forty

"I'm sorry," Hestia says as soon as Petunia steps into the attic. "I didn't even think about... well, coming here probably wasn't the best idea."

"No, it's fine," Petunia hurries to reassure her. "Vernon, he... well, this is all just..."

"Hard for him?" Hestia finishes for her, raising one eyebrow, and Petunia blushes again. With a tight smile, Hestia pulls a small bag from her robes and turns it over onto the table, her chess pieces tumbling out onto the board, and then busies herself with setting them into their proper places.

Wanting to change the subject, Petunia asks, "Is it safe for you to be here?"

Hestia shrugs. "Should be. My inspection happened this morning, so I should have at least few days before the next one." Her lack of certainty is worrying, and Petunia frowns. "The idiots woke me up at six a.m."

"But what if they come back?"

"Then I suppose I'll have to get better at lying about my whereabouts very, very quickly." Hestia grins, but there is a hint of weariness and worry in her eyes. "C'mon, let's play."

Sinking down into the chair opposite Hestia, Petunia studies the board for a moment, then moves one of her pawns. "Why do they even bother? I'd think you could just use magic to hide anything *problematic* anyway."

"I think they're just trying to discourage people from hiding fugitives in their spare bedrooms," Hestia answers, moving one of her own pawns forward two squares. "And there's a leak in the Ministry. Nearly every other time they go after someone, that person mysteriously disappears just in time to get away." Her voice taking on a mocking tone, she adds, "I imagine it's very frustrating for them."

Petunia barely manages to suppress a shudder at the thought. "I don't know how you manage to see those people day in and day out and not just start screaming at them."

"Being dead doesn't really appeal to me." Hestia smirks. "Besides, I'm a Hufflepuff. We can be nice to anyone, even if we secretly want to hex their brains right out of their heads." She frowns when Petunia rolls her eyes. "What?"

"It's just always amazed me how much stock wizards seem to put in what house they were in during their school days," Petunia explains. "Lily and Severus used to talk endlessly about what House they'd be in, and over the years it seemed like half the banter between them consisted of jabs at the other one's House. Even her other friends seemed to talk of nothing but Gryffindor bravery." She wrinkles her nose. "The creepy one, Peter, said that I would have been in Slytherin, and from the way he said it, I'm pretty sure it was supposed to be an insult."

Hestia shakes her head. "No, definitely not Slytherin. Not least of all because even if you'd been at Hogwarts, you'd still have been a Muggle-born, and Slytherin doesn't allow Muggle-borns generally. You probably would have been in Gryffindor." She watches Petunia make her next move, then grins mischievously.

Petunia sighs, sensing another checkmate in her future. "The book says that Gryffindors are brave," she protests.

"Yes, it does," Hestia says pointedly, the corners of her lips twitching with a smile. "You're braver than you think." At Petunia's sceptical look, she shrugs. "Besides, Lily and Harry were both Gryffindors."

She hadn't known Harry was in the same house as Lily; she's never thought of him as particularly brave. But then, he's seventeen and fighting a war against a psychotic, evil wizard, so perhaps 'brave' fit him better than she'd ever realised. "Sirius Black once said that all of the evil wizards come out of Slytherin. If that's true, and they won't even allow Muggle-borns, why have the House at all?"

"Well, the Muggle-born thing started because the founder of Slytherin believed Muggle-borns would put our world in danger, that Muggles would come after us if they knew what we could do."

Petunia blinked in surprise. "Does that happen?"

Chapter Forty-One

Petunia can certainly understand Muggles being afraid of wizards, but it would never have occurred to her that the same may be true in reverse. What could wizards, with their magic, possibly have to fear from Muggles?

Hestia stares at her for a long moment, looking torn between incredulity and amusement, and Petunia is overwhelmed by the feeling that she's said something incredibly stupid without even realising it.

Finally, Hestia answers dryly, "Not often." She pauses, then continues, "And not on as large a scale. In Slytherin's day, Muggles would burn or hang someone suspected of witchcraft. Nothing like that happens anymore...not in this part of the world, anyway. But you still hear the occasional story of children..." She hesitates, her lips already forming her next word, but then shakes her head and falls silent.

And suddenly, painfully, Petunia understands. "Children being locked in cupboards?" she supplies quietly. She dares a glance up to meet Hestia's eyes, but Hestia keeps her gaze firmly focused on her chess pieces.

"Yeah," Hestia finally says. "Sometimes." The moment is so horribly awkward that it almost hurts, and Petunia bites her lip and looks away. Hestia falls quiet, studying the board for a moment, then moves her knight before continuing in a more cheerful tone, "Anyway, all Slytherins aren't evil. My best friend was a Slytherin. I mean, she's not exactly the nicest person in the world, but she doesn't run around killing people or anything, either."

A slight pang of jealousy runs through Petunia for just a moment, catching her off guard. She'd never been very good at making friends when she was at school. To be honest, she still isn't, and she can't remember ever having a best friend. Not since Lily, anyway. But the thought makes her feel incredibly childish, and at Hestia's curious look, she just says, "I didn't think Hogwarts students made friends outside their own House very often."

"Sometimes they do. But I didn't meet Andy at school. She was finished long before I went to Hogwarts," she explains.

"Do you work together?"

"No." Hestia grins, a blush staining her cheeks. "I dated her kid for a while." She rolls her eyes. "It was doomed to failure right from the start. 'Kid' is exactly the right word...much too young for me. I mean, it was... *fun*, but it never really became anything serious. And we didn't get along nearly as well as I got on with Andromeda and her husband."

Wrinkling her nose, Petunia says, "I don't think I could ever have dated a younger man. Not that I would really know, I guess; Vernon was my first boyfriend, and I never really wanted anyone else." The wistfulness creeping into her tone is evident, even to her own ears, and she quickly changes the subject because the last thing she wants to do right now is start crying over twenty-year-old memories. "Just how young was this man? Or should I say 'boy'?" she teases.

"Well, actually," Hestia begins, then seems to visibly change her mind about what she was saying and finishes with, "Eighteen." At Petunia's scandalised expression, she adds pointedly, "It's not like this all happened last week, you know. It was seven or eight years ago; I was only..." she hesitates, thinking for a moment, "twenty-three at the time. There's just a world of difference between eighteen and twenty-three, somehow."

Petunia quickly does the math, then frowns. "God, you're young."

At that, Hestia laughs. "I'm not that young. You make it sound like I'm a child."

Unable to help herself, Petunia finds herself counting back years. "You went to school with Lily, then," she realises. "You knew her."

"I knew *of* her," Hestia clarifies. "I was just starting school the year she was Head Girl. So I knew who she was, what she looked like. But we were in different houses and six years apart; I don't think she could have picked me out of a crowd."

There are a million things Petunia wants to ask...what Lily was like at school, if Hestia knew anything about the life her sister had led, all the things Petunia's only been able to guess at over the years. But she can't quite bring herself to form the words. From the sound of things, she doubts Hestia would have many answers for her anyway.

"Checkmate," Hestia says cheerfully with a hint of a smug grin on her face.

Petunia stares at the board in surprise. With a resigned sigh, she shakes her head, unable to keep from smiling a bit herself. "Do you have time for another game?"

"Yes!" Hestia says, bouncing happily in her seat and already moving all the pieces back into position.

Chapter 42

Chapter 27 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and Janus for Brit-picking!

Petunia is just drifting off to sleep a few nights later when there is a knock at her bedroom door. Frowning and wondering what Vernon could possibly want so late at night, she gets up and opens the door, then freezes when she sees Dudley standing there in his pyjamas.

"The batteries died," he says, holding up his Game Boy. "You said you've got more, right?"

She nods slowly, hesitating before pushing the door open and letting him in. "Your father was snoring," she says, feeling an awful panic rise up in her chest. "I—"

"Mum," he interrupts, giving her an exasperated look, "I know where you sleep." He shuffles past her and sits down on the chair by the desk in the corner, watching her expectantly.

"Oh," she replies softly, feeling as though he's just doused her in ice-cold water. Somehow her feet carry her to the attic, and she grabs one of the shopping sacks and brings it down the steps with her, trying not to notice the way her hands tremble.

Dudley takes the sack when she offers it to him, his eyes going wide as he looks inside. "Why are there so many?"

She gives him a weak smile. "It's a long story." It's not, really, but at the moment she can barely string those words together, with her mind reeling the way it is. She watches her son as he takes the cover off the back of the Game Boy and then begins trying to wedge his finger between the battery and the plastic casing. Frowning in frustration, he scans the top of the desk, then grabs a letter opener and uses it to pry one of the batteries out.

"Um, do you have any..." she begins and then stops because she has no idea what she's trying to say. "Do you want to talk about this?" she finally gets out, but even that sounds wrong. Like it's not enough.

"No," he answers with a shrug, snapping new batteries into the Game Boy before replacing the plastic cover, tying the plastic sack shut, and climbing to his feet.

To give herself something to do, Petunia gathers up the dead batteries from where they've been left on the desk as Dudley turns to leave.

"Mum?" he says just before he opens the door, not turning to look back at her.

"Yes, darling?" she asks, willing a tremor out of her voice.

"Why's he so angry at you?"

This conversation is one Petunia had hoped to avoid having with her son. She'd wanted so badly to spare him this. Contemplating her words carefully, she finally answers, "He thinks I've done something wrong."

Dudley turns around, his face twisted into a frown. "Have you?"

"I don't think so. Not in the way he believes, anyway," she says because it's the most truthful answer she can come up with that doesn't involve saying, "Your father feels I should have let Harry die." Her son has become uncharacteristically protective when it comes to Harry, and she doesn't want to do anything to damage his relationship with Vernon. Yet she also can't bring herself to say, "He's upset because he thinks I'm to blame for our situation." She's terrified that Dudley will realise that she *is*, and the only thing worse than having Vernon upset with her would be for Dudley to start feeling the same way.

"So... why don't you tell him that, so he'll stop being so mean to you?" he asks.

She sighs. "I've tried, Dudders. Your father is... well, he's a very stubborn man."

"Yeah," he agrees, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "I'm tired," he says quietly, opening the door. "Night, Mum."

"Good night," she answers softly. "I love you, Dudley," she says before he can leave. "Very much. So does your father."

"I know. Love you, too," he mumbles as he steps outside and closes the door.

Petunia sinks down onto the chair, tossing the batteries onto the desk before she puts her head in her hands, desperately trying not to cry. She fails terribly at that, and so she goes up to the attic, not wanting Dudley to hear her. Sitting down at the table, she places a single, small scrap of parchment on the corner of the board—the signal that she's there. Anything larger might be noticed by someone on the other end if Hestia isn't alone.

"THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO BED," appears a moment later along two sides of the board.

"CAN'T SLEEP," she spells out.

"ME EITHER. GAME?" Hestia writes back.

"NO. SORRY," Petunia answers because she's far too tired and distracted to concentrate on chess at the moment. She's never wished for a telephone so badly in her life.

When a few moments pass and Petunia hasn't said anything, Hestia asks, "YOU OKAY?"

No, Petunia thinks, but she writes, "YES."

"LIAR," comes through a second later, and Petunia is almost offended, but can't bring herself to be too angry when she is, in fact, lying. "GET DRESSED."

"WHY?" she asks, frowning.

"BECAUSE IT'S COLD OUTSIDE." A few seconds later that message disappears and is replaced with, "I'LL BE THERE IN 5 MINS."

Petunia stares at the board in shock for a moment, then hurries back to the bedroom to get dressed.

Chapter 43

Chapter 28 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and janus for Brit-picking!

Contemplating Hestia's message, Petunia digs through her things to find a warm coat. She can't imagine where they can possibly be going; Hestia had said it wasn't safe to leave. They're not even supposed to step out the front door if they can avoid it. But Petunia's not going to argue, either. She's been inside this house for five and a half months now; even a walk to the corner and back sounds worth the risk.

But when Hestia taps lightly on the door and Petunia opens it, they don't head outside. Instead, Hestia instantly starts up the stairs, motioning for Petunia to follow her. Not wanting to wake Vernon because she just can't handle dealing with him tonight, she silently allows herself to be led to the attic.

"What are we—" she begins to say once she's closed the door behind her, but then she gets to the top of the stairs to find Hestia climbing through the small attic window and the question dies on her lips. "Have you lost your mind?" she asks once she's found her voice.

Hestia just laughs. "Oh, come on," she says through a giggle, stepping up onto the windowsill, and a moment later the tree outside the window shakes as she climbs onto it and disappears from sight. Hurrying to look, Petunia's heart nearly stops when she doesn't see Hestia anywhere, but a clump of falling snow causes her to look up and she sees Hestia's head peaking out over the edge of the roof.

"Climb onto that branch," Hestia says, pointing at a thick tree limb that looks miles away from the window, "and then onto the one above it. You can just step right onto the roof from there."

"I can't even reach that," Petunia protests, still convinced that Hestia's gone mad.

"Don't be silly. I've been doing this since I was five. Besides, you're what, half a foot taller than me? If I can reach it, you can." When Petunia opens her mouth to refuse, Hestia adds, "I know you've got to be dying for some fresh air...."

And she's right. Petunia would trade her right arm for a day spent lying on the grass at this point.

"One minute," she answers, disappearing back into the house. She digs among her clothes and finds a pair of gloves—not as thick as she'd like, but they'll do in a pinch and keep her fingers from completely freezing—and pulls them on before going back to the window.

Petunia can barely remember the last time she climbed a tree. She was very small, only six or seven years old. She'd only even done it then because Lily had gone up first and then got stuck. Petunia had been about to get their mum, but Lily had started crying when her sister mentioned leaving. So Petunia had gritted her teeth, gathered every ounce of courage she had in her, and climbed up so that she could help Lily get down.

Back then, being so young and loving her sister as she had, being brave had been almost easy. Now, looking out the window and seeing the ground so very far below, she's dizzy at just the idea of leaving the safe, sturdy floor to balance on icy tree limbs in the dark.

"I'll fall," she tells Hestia, who's still watching her from above.

"You *won't*. And if you do, I'll catch you," Hestia promises, draping one arm down over the eave of the roof, wand in her hand. "Come on. You can do it, I know you can."

Petunia takes a deep breath and nods, more to herself than to Hestia. Then she climbs onto the window ledge and steps out onto the tree, clutching the branches above her as if her life depends on it—which is fitting, she thinks, since her life *does* depend on it. Hestia's reassurances that she'll catch her are comforting, but Petunia doesn't want to take any chances, either. It takes all the bravery she has left to step up onto the higher branch, and she pointedly avoids looking down.

"One more step," Hestia says encouragingly, reaching out towards her.

Petunia releases her grip on the tree and grasps Hestia's hand, then cautiously steps onto the roof.

Chapter 44

Chapter 29 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading and janus for Brit-picking!

"See, that wasn't so hard," Hestia says with a grin, and Petunia lets out an incredulous laugh.

"No, easiest thing in the world," she mutters, edging along the roof to a patch of exposed roof. *Hestia must have cleared it*, she thinks. And done something to it with magic—the bare spot is pleasantly warm, despite the snow that's falling even now. Shifting around trying to get comfortable on the steep roof, she pulls her coat more tightly around herself. Hestia sinks down beside her.

"You're sure this is safe?" Petunia asks because even though she doubts Hestia would take such an unnecessary risk if there were any real danger, she wants to be sure. "I thought going outside was a bad idea?"

"The protection charms only extend a couple feet beyond the front door," Hestia explains, "and a couple feet above the peak of the roof. But if we stay down here by the edge, we're invisible. The only place anyone could possibly see us is the tree, and since it's in the back of the house and it's one a.m., there's not much chance of that."

Finding at least a little comfort in that reassurance, Petunia closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. The air is crisp and icy cold, and snowflakes are gathering on her shoulders and bent knees. Petunia thinks that this may be the best she's felt in months. "If I live through this war, I'm spending the six months that follow it lying outside," she says very matter-of-factly. "I'll even sleep there, if it's warm enough."

"I just might join you," Hestia says, and despite her smile, she sounds weary, her usual cheerful excitement subdued.

"Why couldn't you sleep?" Petunia finds herself asking.

Hestia just shrugs. "Long day," she answers after a moment. When Petunia continues to watch her expectantly, she goes on, "More people missing, more people dead. So many are out there fighting and doing something to try to end this war, and I spent my day sitting, warm and comfortable at a desk, listening to my boss congratulate Death Eaters on capturing their latest victims." She sighs. "I know that I need to stay right where I am—I'm one of the only people the Order has left inside the Ministry. But I just feel so incredibly... *useless*."

"You're not useless," Petunia says softly. "Trust me—I'd probably have lost my mind entirely a long time ago if it weren't for you."

Hestia gives her a weak smile, her gaze drifting up to the dark sky. It's cloudy, and when Petunia looks up, she can't find the stars.

"I used to love my job," Hestia says wistfully. "Did I ever tell you what I do?"

"No, just that it involves paperwork."

"Before the war, I was an admin for the Auror office. I know that probably sounds like the most boring job *ever*, but I loved it. After my parents and my brother died, I decided I wanted to do whatever I could to make sure no one ever got the chance to do something so awful to anyone else. But... well, I was never really the best at magic."

"But you're a witch," Petunia interjects. "I thought magic just... happened?"

"It does, sort of. I mean, I could do magic, it just wasn't very strong, and it always seemed to take ages for me to get a spell right, even if everyone else mastered it in a day or two. I always caught up eventually, but it was very, very clear to me—and everyone else—that I would never be an Auror or anything like that. So when I finished school, I talked my way into a job doing the next best thing—helping the Aurors. Then they could spend their time saving the world instead of being holed up in some office doing paperwork all day."

"That's how I ended up in the Order," she adds. "I met Kingsley at work, and he told Dumbledore that he thought I'd be sympathetic to their views. I couldn't imagine what help they thought I could possibly be, but I wasn't about to turn them down. Granted, at that point the war was over; all I had to do was attend the very occasional meeting and keep my eyes open. But still... it was what I'd always wanted to do. Help make a difference."

"And now?" Petunia prompts when Hestia doesn't go on. "You said you were an admin before the war. What do you do now?"

"Now... well, now the Ministry isn't so concerned with Aurors filling out their paperwork correctly. These days, I'm a record keeper." She says 'record keeper' as if the very words disgust her, and Petunia waits for her to elaborate. But instead, Hestia shifts around until she's facing Petunia, tugging her hands inside her cloak to keep them warm. When she speaks again, it's to say, "Enough about my day. Tell me what's going on with you."

Chapter 45

Chapter 30 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Pyjamarama for beta-reading!

I'm not sure that anyone will have as much fun reading this as I had writing it, but I've now posted [Missing Spaces](#) to TPP. It's a missing scene of sorts from Filling in the Spaces, told from Hestia's point of view. I hope everyone enjoys!

With the distraction of trying to get onto the roof without breaking her neck and then Hestia talking about her day, Petunia had nearly managed to put her *own* concerns out of her mind. Now the feelings of hopelessness come rushing back, and it's all she can do to not start crying again.

She doesn't know what to say, or if she should say anything at all. Hestia faces the threat of death every day; how can Petunia burden her with her own problems? "My husband hates me," sounds so ridiculous when compared to, "I spend my day talking to Death Eaters and hoping no one kills me." *So pathetic*.

"It's not important," she says instead, looking away.

"Whatever's going on, it's obviously bothering you," Hestia argues. "That makes it important."

Petunia opens her mouth to respond, but nothing comes out. She's never talked to anyone about anything like this before. She's not sure she even knows how. Vernon was always the one she talked to about her worries or problems. Anything she couldn't discuss with him has been so carefully locked inside her for such a long time that the idea of telling another person is terrifying.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," Hestia says after a moment. "I don't mean to push you. It's just... sometimes talking helps."

Swallowing hard and firmly focusing her gaze on the snow-covered trees barely visible in the faint glow of the moon, Petunia finally manages to say in a choked-sounding whisper, "I've ruined my husband's life."

"Why on earth would you think that?"

Sniffing and using the back of her glove to wipe away tears that she can't quite seem to keep from coming, she laughs humourlessly and answers, "Pick a reason. Or don't; Vernon seems to be fine with blaming me for all of it." She sniffs again, and Hestia reaches out over the edge over the roof and breaks a small twig from the tree, Transfiguring it into a handkerchief before passing it to her. She accepts it with a quiet, "Thanks."

Hestia frowns, pursing her lips. "I'm sorry, I know he's your husband and you love him, but he's an idiot."

Petunia shakes her head. "No, he's *right*. He had to leave Grunnings—he's been working there since before I even met him. We very well may have lost our home; I don't even know if it's still standing at this point. And it's all because of me. He hates me." Dabbing at her eyes again with the handkerchief, she goes on quickly because now that she's started talking, she feels like she can't stop.

"And you know... I know this probably makes me an awful wife, a terrible person, but... I could live with that. I could manage until we get out of here, and things will go back to normal after that. I can survive a year or two of nearly anything. I could...." Her words give way to a small sob, and Hestia continues to listen silently. Petunia can't bring herself to look up; she just hugs her knees closer to her chest. "But *Dudley*... he shouldn't have to deal with this. He shouldn't *see* this. He's just a little boy," she finishes.

"He's *not* a little boy," Hestia says quietly. "He's seventeen.... In my world, he'd be considered an—"

"He's not from *your world*," Petunia argues in a watery voice. "He's *my son*."

There's the sound of shifting around, and then Petunia feels a hand rest on top of hers and Hestia's head lean on her shoulder. "Yeah, I know," she answers. After a moment, she adds, "I'm sorry things are such a mess right now."

Petunia sniffs quietly, squeezing Hestia hand. "It's not *your* fault."

"No, but... still. Sorry."

Feeling suddenly self-conscious, Petunia gently reclaims her hand, wiping the last few tears from her face. "We should probably go back inside. Your hands are freezing, and I can't feel my nose anymore."

"I could cast a warming charm or two," Hestia offers.

"No, it's... well, I think I'd like some tea," Petunia quickly answers, shaking her head. She can handle being around magic, she's sure of it, but the idea of having a spell cast on *her* is mildly terrifying.

"Okay. You want to go first, or should I go so you can see how?" Hestia carefully stands and shuffles along the roof, waving her wand to clear the snow and ice in her path.

Petunia follows her, peering cautiously over the edge. The tree sways ominously in the icy wind. "Two steps," she says more to herself than to Hestia. Eyeing the nearest branch, she takes a deep breath and reaches for it. *I can do this*, she tells herself. And besides, she suspects Hestia can see her more easily from above than from inside the house, and if she falls, Hestia's magic will have to catch her. "I'll go first," she says unnecessarily, wishing she could manage to climb down without looking actually *looking* down.

Exactly forty-six seconds later, safely back in the attic and decidedly not dead or injured, Petunia can't help but feel a little bit... proud.

Chapter 46

Chapter 31 of 31

During the second war against Voldemort, Petunia Dursley spent nearly a year in hiding with her family. This is her story.

Author's Note: Sorry for the long delay! Between the holidays, being incredibly sick for half of January, and work, I didn't write a single word for weeks. But I'm back now, and will try to update more quickly from this point on! :)

Many thanks to Pyjamarama for her fabulous beta work!!

A knock at the bedroom door wakes Petunia the next morning, and she gets out of bed, rubbing sleep out of her eyes and blinking wearily into the darkness of the room.

"Petunia?" Vernon's voice calls, and then the door swings open. "Are you ill?"

She frowns, lighting the candle on the bedside table. "No. Why? Is everything all right?"

"It's after ten," he says, turning and disappearing down the dim hallway.

In disbelief, Petunia reaches for her watch where she'd left it on the table, tilting the face toward the candle so that she can see the hands. It's closer to eleven than ten,

and she nearly leaps out of bed. It probably shouldn't surprise her that she's overslept; after all, she and Hestia had been talking until four-thirty, when they'd both finally glanced at the clock and realised that Hestia had to be to work in less than four hours. But still, Petunia's been up by six every morning for nearly twenty years, and that hadn't changed even though her alarm clock had sat in a box since the day they'd come to this house, useless due to the lack of electricity.

Pulling on her dressing gown, she hurries out of the room, rushing through her normal morning routine. She pauses in Dudley's doorway on her way downstairs, and he glances up over the top of his Game Boy.

"I'm sorry I overslept," she says, and he shrugs. "Did you eat breakfast?"

"I was going to make toast, but... did you know that we don't have a toaster?" Dudley asks, pausing his game and setting the Game Boy down on the bed.

Petunia suppresses a smile. "I'd noticed, yes."

"Dad didn't know how to make toast without a toaster either, so he made eggs." He wrinkles his nose. "They were kind of... gooey."

"Your father cooked?" Petunia asks in surprise, already dreading what her usually-immaculate kitchen must look like if Vernon has been in there.

"He said maybe you weren't feeling well 'cause you never sleep so late unless you're ill." Dudley looks her up and down critically, hints of concern in his eyes. "You're not, are you? Dad says the wizards don't know anything about medicine, and that if anything happens to any of us, they'll leave us to die."

Carefully keeping the exasperation with Vernon out of her voice, she answers, "I'm fine, sweetie. I was just up too late. Besides, Hestia wouldn't leave us to die. And wizards know plenty about medicine; they have their own hospital and doctors and everything." Even as she says this, though, she wonders what would happen if any of them *did* fall ill or get hurt; they can't go to a wizarding hospital any more easily than they can go to a Muggle one, and the books Petunia's read didn't actually state whether or not wizarding medicine will work on Muggles in the first place. She resolves to ask Hestia the next time she sees her.

"Can we have lunch early?" Dudley asks. "I didn't really eat breakfast...."

She nods, shaking her head and smiling as her son's attention drifts back to his game.

Making her way down to the kitchen, she pauses in the doorway, surveying the scattered pots and pans and food with a sigh. How on earth such a mess could have been created by simply making *eggs*? She has no idea, but there really isn't any point in complaining. If nothing else, Vernon had tried to let her sleep, which is a marked improvement from his general attitude toward her lately, and not something she wants to discourage in any way. Besides, cleaning will give her something to do for the rest of the day, since Hestia will no doubt opt out of their usual evening chess game in favour of collapsing into bed and making up for the lost sleep from the previous night.

Gathering up the dirty dishes and cooking utensils, she dumps them into the sink before beginning to clean the countertops, trying to clear a space where she can begin making lunch.