

Slices of Thirty

by Terra

Turning thirty means change is in the air. Six different times Draco Malfoy might've celebrated his thirtieth birthday with the woman of his past, present and future.

Winner of dramione_idws Round Seven.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Love Again

Before

She quotes some poncey bloke, "'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."

He grits, "Who the hell takes consolation advice from a *poet*?"

Hermione leaves their wasteland of a bedroom with things he'll never look at the same way again:

1. conch seashell (foot-cutter and awkward conversation-starter)
2. pressed red roses ('How cliché,' she said on their first date. 'I'm traditional,' he replied, chucking chocolates in a nearby flowerpot.)
3. greasy takeaway menu ('Of all the stupid...screw this,' he muttered. 'Don't be so ethnocentric, they're only chopsticks,' she sighed.)
4. cracked snow globe ('He called me a Mudblood to my face. You just stood there!' she yelled, throwing the nearest object. 'I don't know how to change him. He's my father,' he whispered, ducking.)
5. paper bracelets ('Seriously? Glued-together paper is proof we paid?' he asked. 'Stop stalling. I'm queuing up for the rollercoaster with or without you,' she said with a grin.)

After

She and Tennyson can pontificate all they want on love, loss and the linearity of time. What he remembers is not the slow burn of falling in love in spite of himself but a scratchy jumper scrunched around slender shoulders, hitching up with every step to reveal the mole above her hip he'll never kiss again as she walks out into a life without him.

Now

"What are you doing in Belgium?" she asks, bewildered.

Striking a casual pose, Draco takes in the amusement park with one sweeping look, pausing on a signpost. "Wizzy en Woppy*Really?*"

Hermione frowns. "Yes, it's the..."

"Name of a deformed house-elf?"

She scowls. "What do you want? What happened to being too good for 'backpacking, hostels and homeless people sandwiches'?"

"You said this was your continental tour." He sheds any pretense of composure and grips her elbow, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Our last chance at youth before we have to be parents."

"*Parent*. As I recall, your idea of fatherly delight was gaping, then disappearing for three days and showing up blacked out in the foyer. Not so much father of the year material."

"You expected me to rejoice in knocking you up?"

"No. I expected you not to cut and run."

"I came back, didn't I? But you were already on your way out."

She sighs. "Why are you here?"

"After you left, I... tried to sleep in my bed, read in my favorite chair, take tea in the garden, but none of it was...everything felt off." Draco glances at a blond boy tugging his parents to a rollercoaster. "I'm a year older today. I still don't know if I'm ready to be a parent or *parents* with you, but I do know that while you've been hitchhiking God-knows-where, I'm the one who's felt homeless. No offense to your poet but I'll take the third option. It's much better to love, lose and love again."

Hermione laughs and cups his face. "Trying to improve upon a classic? How typical."

Year Eight

Autumn

They claim it's for inter-House unity and remembrance. But he knows they only remember the relics of his cowardice and ambition when they saddle him with Granger as overseer and spy. Draco trips over her everywhere he goes. In Potions, Slughorn partners him with the Head Girl in a demented attempt at symmetry, declaring the arrangement 'quaint.' He has a year of schooling on her...if that hellish seventh year counts as schooling...while she roughed it in the wild, fighting and Dark Lord-sabotaging, and still she bests him in everything.

She even has the gall to spell dormitory rules to his door.

No House-Elves is quickly followed by *No Girls in Common Room* (he scribbles: thank god, see you never);

No Sharing Hair Products (he scratches: it was once!);

Make Your Own Damn Sandwiches (he points to *No House-Elves*);

Crookshanks, Not Pincushion (he retorts: get the furball a leash);

and *CLOSE YOUR DOOR!!* (he leers, walking Pansy out).

Winter

Sometimes she stares openly, shrewd gaze raking over his face like sandpaper, and sometimes just out of the corner of her eye while he's perching lazily on their windowsill or when he steals her ink then catches her peering through a door crack, mouth curved as though his stealthy thievery amuses her. She's an infuriating show-off with the social skills of a gnat, and he's the object of amusement?

He returns every scurrying glance scornfully until at last she looks away, and then he takes vengeance by watching her. He laughs when she trips over his chair leg (it's possible he scooted back) and topples onto the floor, scattering the million books stacked in her arms. He sneers when she parades about in pink robes and misshapen slippers, squelching with each step (her tumbleweed hair hangs in wide rebellious loops, tempting a man to twine them around his fingers). He revels when his stack of Christmas presents dwarfs hers until she snaps, "And how many aren't from your parents?"

Later, she dashes off: *No Fisticuffs*.

Spring

He's observed do-gooder Granger in her natural habitat, cataloguing all her rhythms and whims, so he knows how she takes tea (no sugar), likes to read (on her stomach, chewing a quill), eats snacks (tomatoes with honey, sliced like oranges), and insists on flossing for twenty minutes every night (ignoring threats to blow the bathroom door off its hinges). Worse, she's a foot-tapper and hair-twirler. His fingers itch to cast a Body-Bind Curse. He misses those days when chambers had secrets, snakes climbed plumbing and petrified girls didn't fidget.

On patrols she hums, walking with a slight bounce. He wants to grapple her shoulders and shake loose all the reasons she's so damn happy, like sitting her NEWTs is a treat instead of a bleeding nightmare. Six years of taunts, seven months of cohabitation, and still she confounds him.

He scrawls: *Smiley people are asking to be hexed*

Summer

"Why do you stare?" she asks.

Disbelief chips his voice jagged. "Why do I stare? A bit pot-calling-the-kettle-black, aren't you?"

She frowns. "What?"

"Denial's not a flattering look on you, Granger. You've been watching me since September."

"No... Malfoy, I stopped ages ago. After I realized you weren't planning to poison, curse, strangle or annoy me to death."

Abruptly, he knows she's right. He hasn't felt scrutinizing brown eyes following him in months. "Well, damn," he says.

"Yeah," she agrees. "Bit awkward, isn't it?"

He walks to his door and writes: *No Staring*.

Taking his quill with a smile that makes him shiver, she adds (*roommates excepted*). "Or you know, just me, really."

Love Letter

Hermione,

This is not a love letter. I did ghastly things to convince the owl this even *was* a letter.

You're probably squinting at this napkin, ready to chemical test it to its last fiber to find my location. Don't bother. Go with your gut instinct. The reason it smells like eau de tar, lime and salt is because I'm on my seventh tequila shot and the stripper bartender has chimney breath.

By now, you know I'm missing. Relax. This isn't a ransom note either. I've nipped out and gone on holiday. If you're reading this, you've finally cajoled or threatened your way into my French villa. Whatever my sins, I trust being bloody spectacularly obvious isn't one of them. If I were drunk enough to believe you wouldn't search my villa after I'd strutted around for weeks crowing over outbidding that bastard Phillipe for it than I'd be in urgent need of medical assistance instead of writing this love *not* love napkin.

I'm not returning until you owl back. I heard from those wankers W... and P... (whose identities the male code of bonding-over-sexcapades-and-cigars forbids me to reveal) that you planned to celebrate my birthday by proposing. Woman, I realize upending centuries-long cultural traditions is just Wednesday for you but you should know I am an emeralds man. Diamonds and I wouldn't suit, tempted though I am by the prospect of your impassioned, footnoted speech proposal forever memorialized in pictures that would April Fools prank my father right into his grave.

But I digress. As I can't stop you, I must needs go first.

Marry me? (circle one)

Yes

No

Seething; will RSVP.

Draco

NOBODY IN THEIR RIGHT MIND WOULD ASK YOUR HAND IN MARRIAGE, YOU POMPOUS ARSE. I'M POSING IN SCANDALOUS, BARELY THERE LINGERIE FOR YOUR BIRTHDAY! GET BACK HERE. I'M COLD.

-Your fiancé

Venice

The sky didn't fall down; how strange the sensation of feeling that selfsame thudding in his chest.

There she was crossing a bridge in Venice right out of a postcard or maybe a child's dream, warm and brimming with larger-than-life characters ~~sher~~. The years had not been kind to either of them. Starbursts of laugh lines carved familiar paths in the corners of her eyes when she bought a handful of grapes. Then she faced him fully and he saw that she was thinner now, cutting a sharper figure than the hazy image he'd carried in his mind as though she were that last crinkled, yellowing photograph everyone had of some relative in their unimaginable youth.

He wondered if he stood still, she'd walk past and never see him, never know that one summer day in Italy, her ex-husband had stood on planks and watched her part the crowd like a montage in a lazy romance. But he didn't stand still and she didn't walk past. The grape on her lips slowly lowered, and that was the only indication she'd spotted him. Somewhere else, in some other time, she had learned understatement.

"What are you doing here?" she asked softly, ignoring the tourists jostling around her.

It shouldn't have but it made the unbearably damp air on his cotton shirt cool, and he shivered. "Taking a walk," he replied.

Her gentle expression turned wry. "To Italy? You must be exhausted."

"Someone littered a brochure on my doorstep. It was a whim."

"Is that what you do now? Whimsical things?" she said, a rueful smile crooking her lips.

He shrugged, knowing he read too much in her wistful tone. "Sometimes."

"Not always," she reminded.

"No. I've changed some."

She hummed. "Everyone does."

Their shoulders touched when he turned to walk her way. When she bumped him again, he smiled.

Enough

What do you give the man with everything?

You remember Draco's half-mast gaze beneath luminous chandeliers in a fancy restaurant too rich for your taste...bureaucrat on good days, indentured secretary the rest.

You remember surreptitious glances at his hands, trying to mimic his guileless motions; outside in, use the salad fork first. These small, nonsensical things are what carve

the chasm between you and him: a rift you resent feeling because middle-class Hermione Granger is *not* class conscious, not after 'Mudblood' and war and winning.

You remember his father's sneer at the contrast between his manners, not sophisticated, not overbearing, merely graceful in a way you can't imitate, and yours. His parents hate you...*why* did he want you there?

It's almost midnight. He reclines on your lumpy sofa, and you wonder how he slouches so attractively. That part of you which begrudges and envies wants to smear him with lint and inexplicably spell-resistant hair you're always plucking from jumpers.

He cracks open an eye. "Why are you staring like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you want to feed me to something with lots of teeth."

Voicing your thoughts would make you sound insane, so you clear your throat instead. "Just wondering if there were any eleventh hour birthday wishes."

His grey eyes drift over your cramped flat. "No, I used them up years ago."

"Oh?"

A sleepy smile crinkles the corners of his mouth, as though this is ancient news. "I promised never to make another wish if I didn't have to be alone anymore. And the Birthday Santa or God or whoever gave me you."

He's watching you in that squinty way you thought meant he was getting nearsighted, but now you know he's really asking *this is us, can you see it?* You can, and seeing is joy that sings. The fancy restaurant, you remember, was for your anniversary; he even let you pay half because that's who you are. After, his mother whispered that you're the first of his girls she ever met...which meant love had been in every moment, every word, everywhere, so you know that *you* are what you should give the man with everything.

You are enough.

Twelve Years

On rainy days, he liked to stand on tall things, shouting words unutterable in polite company while it thundered.

He pretended it was his voice that shook weathervanes and sent children scurrying, that change was in the air, that swollen clouds hid more than the acid which invariably rusted roofs and balconies and the tall things he liked, that perhaps the tension in the wet breeze meant his interminable stalemate with the girl (woman now) who had called him true and unbearable things, who he'd run out on, might end someday.

"This is my favorite weather," she'd once said, "because it feels like something's about to happen."

"Yeah. Rain."

"No, nothing so mundane!" She laughed, tilting her face to catch the first droplet on her cheek. "Everything's suspended with people holding their breaths, glancing nervously at the sky, waiting for something to snap."

"So?"

"So, this moment right before it rains...it's a window for someone somewhere to throw caution to the wind and ~~to~~ something. Something spectacular."

Draco thought this was a bit melodramatic for overcast skies, but she smiled and said, "But you grew up with dazzling magic. You don't see it in the simple things anymore."

Their romance came and went, transient and merciless as the rain. His need for her had bruised in those pulse-rioting, postwar days; eventually they'd cracked under the crushing reality that for all the 'opposites attract' swill romantics always preached, relationships built under duress were flimsier than grass in drought. They gave way to the inevitability that the first person you loved was almost never the last. And yet, despite the imprint left by a dozen ensuing years, he still thought of her when it rained, her head flung back awaiting something irrevocable, or perhaps merely improbable, to begin. In his mind's eye, she was always somewhere near, thinking of *him*, both of them inhabiting the same space by virtue of sharing the same thought.

Footsteps sounded behind him. "Malfoy?"

He watched Granger pause by the chain-link fence cordoning off the Ministry's roof. Somewhere a cloud must have splintered because an orphan sunbeam clung to her staid robes and flushed skin. In the stark light, he saw that she wasn't indifferent to him; the strange pressure in his throat eased. "I've been working up the courage," he said.

"What?"

"To do something so out-of-character you'll forgive it as a birthday fancy." Draco ran his fingers along the nape of her neck, savoring her shiver. "It's been hell having you as a co-worker, you know that?"

"No," she said, unflinchingly honest.

"You think no one notices you disappearing on rainy days?" he murmured. "I do. I've been waiting."

"Why?"

He laughed. "Because you're *my* right-before-it-rains moment. I want to do spectacular and foolish things around you."

"Like what?" she breathed.

"Like believe in second chances."

The cloud cover broke. Rain beat on their skin, drenching them. He leaned, she pulled, and somehow, they met in a kiss twelve years in the making.