

There is Another Sky

by Terra

Four years, five months and twenty-three days. Ginny feels the weight of every minute with no regrets because each second has dragged her that much closer to Draco Malfoy.

Part One

Chapter 1 of 2

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You know that moment when time stands still and you're suspended above everything, catching all the angles? And somehow you know this here, this now matters?

Yes.

May 10, 1998.

It does not rain the morning they bury Fred.

There's not a cloud in sight and the sky is blasphemous blue. Everyone drips black in mourning robes, standing out like specks of dirt on white linen. Mum's face scrunches up, a sniffing pretzel, determinedly not crying and more *not crying*, while her brothers have never looked so much like brothers, faces identical with loss. Only George looks on with muted anger no one else notices. Ginny does. She was sheathed in the same indefatigable rage five years ago and knows its every groove and taint.

Dad scoops dirt on the coffin and steps back, knuckles white and taut around the shovel he clutches to his chest. She wants to tell him it's no good as a shield; not when there's nothing to ward off and no one to fight; what's the point of clinging when all the hurt's inside? Finally, goodbyes are said and the leave-taking begins. The air buzzes with sympathetic murmurs and anecdotes, a humming nest of hornets. The guests swarm over, determined to prove, as if such a thing needed proving, that they knew Fred, *no really truly deeply*.

Ginny wants to tell them, *no, I believe you*, but they're too busy recollecting the past to think about her present. Harry draws her into a tight embrace, silent with understanding. Grief and anger fight for supremacy, and ultimately shame overlays the lines of his face. He alone among their friends knows there are no words. From the corner of her eye, she sees Hermione do the same for Ron. Then the absurd ceremony is over, and it's a pity it was all a sham. The corpse in the ground is *not* her brother not Fred of the groan-awful puns, ready quips and frenetic grace. The body is too still, too quiet, too young when he had died a *man*; there is nothing left of the brother, who had been unbearable without George to take the edge off, in the gentle and pallid face.

They are Forge and Gred. An elegant sum, perfect in its geometry. What is y without x?

What is she one brother less? An irrational number.

A light breeze sweeps over them, soft as a whisper, the kind that is always a harbinger for sprawling picnics and crowded skies. Ginny craves air so viciously it is a dull ache. When no one is watching, she takes flight and it is years before she looks back.

June 5, 1998.

Prison, that unceasing orbit of lights-on and lights-off, is the worst place to remember you've become a year older.

It's what they call dramatic irony or some shit, he thinks.

His stint in Azkaban drives the last nail in the coffin of any fond memories he had for Hogwarts. They taught him nothing~~nothing~~, to prepare him for this place. Lock-up is avoiding the deranged gazes of your cellmates; lock-up is knowing when to beg; lock-up is *thank fucking god* you've already lived through one reign of terror. His one consolation is that at least Mother isn't in this hellhole. Draco used to think chivalry and honor were medieval bullshit, the fantasies of saccharine sonnets and poncey poets. But when the chips are down and he's all-in, a subterranean streak of that much-vaunted noble brute claws the insides of his chest, and he thinks he finally knows what everyone's been waxing so much rhapsodic about.

He is a believer now. There's something inescapably *worth it* in knowing a woman waits for you in a house the two of you can make a home. He imagines Father feels the same wintry hope beneath whatever despairing layers he's cottoned around himself. The fact of the matter is that Father has it so much worse. A minor resorting to Unforgivables in hysterical desperation is somehow different from a grown man doing the same. Fucking hypocrites.

He wants to roar, claw through chipped wood and knock out the bars on his only window, sullen reminders of the world outside, roiling blue as far as the eye can see. *Something else exists*, screeches a voice in his head. One day he's going to dive into that ocean and push Hades behind him with each clipped stroke and shrink this bastion of the damned into a grain of sand. So he counts down the granite-long days, his minute hand ticking with each droplet of rain and the hour hand, meals pushed through grates. And so time flies.

One indistinguishable morning, they parade him in front of robed men with ancient faces, and he tries not to stare at the empty seat where Dumbledore once sat. "On the charge of attempted murder, how do you plead?" they ask.

"Not guilty," says Draco.

"On the charge of casting an Unforgivable Curse, how do you plead?"

Ah, there's Rosmerta waiting in the wings. Katie Bell can't be far behind. "Not guilty," says Draco.

"On the charge of aiding and abetting known Death Eaters, how do you plead?"

Beneath paper-thin eyelids, he sees craven dark wood, gleaming once he was done and broken cabinets, *so broken* it threatened to swallow him in despair until he relives the feeling of air gushing into joyful lungs and the swell of so much *pride*. "Not guilty," says Draco.

"On the charge of attempted kidnapping, how do you plead?"

Of course, Potter would swoop in, bugging war hero, to save the poor straggling Death Eater wannabes who were stupid enough to try and shackle and parade him in front of the Dark Lord for glory, vengeance and fear. He remembers fire, hot and relentless, licking at his heels and a friend he never thought *was one* until he was a pile of streaking ash. "Not guilty," says Draco.

By which he means, guilty on all accounts.

I learned more about you from the one time you didn't know I was looking than in six years of sharing the same spaces and hot meals.

And hexes. Don't forget hexes.

September 12, 1998.

The position of Chaser is as good as hers, but she wants more.

Hasn't she deserved it? For three slick mornings, her broomstick moist with dew and sweat, she navigates Gryffindor's brutal tryouts. Now that war and all that death nonsense are over, people flee back to the blissful and artless in droves. In the end, Ginny prevails and proves to all and sundry that she's earned the mantle of Captain and Seeker, even though afterwards, she forgets why she wanted it so badly.

Everywhere, she is the new Harry. His fame...*glory*?...wafts about her like perfume, pleasant from a distance, but all too discernible to reporters and biographers and sleazy tabloid writers who flock to her faster than Rita Skeeter can say, "Quick-Quotes Quill?" Ginny doesn't know why they think she'll crack and reveal how she "snared" the Boy Who Lived Again, and when her blank stare and scarlet cheeks aren't sensational enough to print, they call her arrogant and entitled. She laughs about it over fish and chips when her friends' lives pause long enough to intersect.

Harry and Ron are on the Auror fast-track, little wonder when they've got more experience battling Dark wizards than half the remaining Aurors combined. Hermione spends her days haunting the library, preparing to sit her N.E.W.T.s. It's not enough to be the cleverest witch of her generation; she wants tangible proof of it. Ginny wonders who she's trying to impress, these invisible critics only Hermione seems to see. Not that Ginny's immune to all the attention.

Sometimes, and it's always an exercise in self-chastisement when she catches herself, she basks in it. After all, she's a war veteran; she's Harry Potter's girlfriend; she's a Quidditch star; and she's only *seventeen*, for God's sake. But all it takes is one cuppa with Luna for the glamour to lose its luster. She doesn't know how Luna has remained so untouched, not a single blemish from all the ruin and revolution. Somehow she's managed to retain it all, every bit of her wonder and oblivion. Maybe that's why she is Ginny's go-to person when she needs some scraps of perspective.

Ginny is on her way to cool her head after a morning of being hounded by Harry's Hufflepuff fan club when she finds Luna in the dungeons having tea with Draco Malfoy. In less than two breaths, she's drawn her wand, perching on the balls of her feet, ready to dash.

But Luna doesn't sound the least distressed. "...didn't know Professor Snape very well but I don't think he'd mind you having his Potions set," she says.

Malfoy leans closer, as though proximity would make her words true. "That's the problem with Snape. No one knew him."

"So maybe you shouldn't be so hard on yourself."

He narrows hard, grey eyes at the crystal flask beside them, tapping its smooth rim. "Why not?" he sneers at his reflection.

"Well . . . can anyone really know another person?" ponders Luna. "I think we like to pretend we do, but we're just carrying around ideas of other people, cobbled together with memories and stories we've heard. We're always looking for patterns, explanations, a why for every what. Then we wrap up our answers and call it knowing. But I don't think that's all it is."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's more comforting not to know. And maybe," Luna smiles gently, "you should ask the person who knew him best."

"Yeah, and who's that?"

"Professor Dumbledore, of course. We had tea last week. It was lovely."

Malfoy flinches and then forces himself rigid. "Dumbledore?" he says, thin mouth curved in a harsh smile.

"Oh, yes. He asked me about you once. He hasn't forgotten you, you know."

Judging by the narrowing of his eyes, it doesn't look like Malfoy's forgotten *him*, either. "What did he want to know?"

"Just if I'd seen you. Someone told him about me being locked in your dungeon. He thought there was a good chance I'd see you one of these days. And he was right."

"Damn him," whispers Malfoy. "I thought I was through being their pawns."

"You have an awfully suspicious mind." She tilts her head with a thoughtful expression. "If you ask me, I think he was just hoping you'd visit."

"And what? Bond over chamomile and crumpets?"

Her answering smile is serene, her soft grey eyes alit with mirth. "You could paint him a tea service."

"Paint him a tea..." he pinches off the rest, blond brows arched in astonishment.

"There were some drawings in my cell. Your aunt thought they were just rubbish," she says. "But I liked them."

"They were," he snaps. "Rubbish, I mean."

"I don't know about that. I liked the one of your mum cheering you on at Quidditch."

"I made it up," he mutters. "She never came to any of my games."

"Well, I don't have a mum anymore," says Luna. "She never got to hear any of my commentary, either."

Malfoy stares at her for a bleak, bewildered second and then snorts, shaking his head. "It's just as well," he says faintly. "Your play-by-plays had nothing to do with the game."

She laces her fingers and props them under her chin, pinning him with wide wry eyes. "That's what Blaise was for/was the entertainment."

"Is that right? Let me tell you something, Lovegood, the man's got the restraint of saint. Don't know how he put up with you. I came close to bomb-diving the stands a time or two when you unilaterally decided Gryffindor had won."

Luna hums. "Who says I didn't do it just to see the look on your face?"

His lips twitch. "If you're trying to make me sorrier, it's working."

"I don't think I'm trying anything," she says slowly. "Except maybe passing on Professor Dumbledore's invitation."

"So you say." Malfoy rolls the teacup between his fingers, throat working tightly, staring at the inside of his left arm. "I used to think that if he'd ever favored me . . . like Potter, things would've been different."

"But you were a bully, Draco. And Harry has always been nice."

He slants a lightning glance at Luna. "Have you always been so blunt, Lovegood?"

"You would know if you hadn't spent all those weeks hiding from me in your house."

"Hiding." He laughs, and it vibrates the crisp air, acerbic and self-deprecating. "Noticed that, did you?"

"It was nice to be fed, but you didn't have to pitch the trays at us and stomp so much. We could've been friends."

"Friends," he tastes the word like it's a foreign vintage. "You wanted to be friends with your jailer?"

"Well, by then, I think you knew you were in over your head. That didn't make you a . . . good person exactly, but it mattered to Mr. Ollivander and me that you weren't a fanatical volunteer."

"*Volunteer?*" he repeats with scorn. "I stopped being a volunteer the day he took my family hosta...well, never mind. The point is, go ahead and put that check in the draftee column. Suicide missions aren't exactly my idea of a hobby. Tattoos get a lot less cool when you aren't allowed to leave the clubhouse."

"I thought so," says Luna, pleased. "When you're locked up, it's nice to know that at least one of your jailers doesn't want to kill you."

Malfoy's hand tightens around the cup. "Yes, it does."

In the companionable silence, Ginny doesn't know what to do, what to make of this strange, stilted conversation between two people with enough history to warrant blows. Malfoy makes the decision for her when he abruptly rises to his feet. Before he can spot her, she turns the corner and doesn't stop sprinting until she's out of the dungeons. Pinpointing all the things *wrong* with Luna and Malfoy having a tea party would take hours, and it feels a little like the world's careening around her. Or maybe turning without her.

Ginny didn't even know he'd been sprung from Azkaban. But she does know one thing. She doesn't buy his subdued repentance for a second.

October 31, 1998.

There are Dementors and even Grim Reapers this year.

The past three Halloweens, the sight of black robes and white masks usually incited terror, and not the folksy, good-natured kind. But not this year, not since Potter vanquished wizardkind's big bad and allowed black and white to make a comeback. The certainty that the Dark Lord was *gone* is so sweet and cathartic this might as well be a festival for costumed witches and wizards to dance on his grave. Draco doesn't see guleless celebration, only shadows slithering too close to home.

Tonight is another tepid affair, this time in honor of the reconstruction of Hogwarts. All donors are welcome. Naturally, the Malfoys are the top benefactors, the official donation request being neither request nor donation, just extortion, pure and simple. Since Draco let the Death Eaters in, and didn't fight it when they stayed, he could bloody well pay reparations, they claimed. That was fine by him, and he would have paid until his pockets were to let if it would've meant his presence would never be demanded again. But it is demanded...look how tamed and harmless ex-Death Eaters are!...and so he comes.

The evening is a farce, a way to make the humiliation complete. At the first opportunity, he slips out. His aimless meandering takes him to the Quidditch pitch, vast and quiet and dark. He doesn't expect to see the Weasley girl scooping air, but there she is, coppery red hair unmistakable in the moonlight, darting about in some inexplicable

dance. Of all the absurd things, he thinks that she's throwing something over her shoulder after each loop. Looking around, the empty stands proclaim him the only spectator. It all seems fanciful and mad until she swoops one last time into a dive and the sky blazes in her wake.

Night explodes into splashes of color bright halogens and burning embers. Each fleck of light igniting another and another until the chain reaction sets off a nova of fireworks. It swallows the inky blackness and converges into a flaming 'W.' The curly shape of the letter is familiar, and it finally comes to him as the hues start to die. The 'W' is the same one he's seen on countless joke products, Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, and he slowly comes to understand that the lightshow is a tribute to a brother lost, a way to commemorate a holiday he'd notoriously enjoyed. It means he's intruding on a private moment, but he can't bring himself to leave.

This beacon, so bright it burned his eyes, is a symbol of love and loss and life so vivid it feels like the opposite of watching a train wreck, enthralling in its simplicity: just grief and a girl. When the snowing embers fade, she slowly drifts back to earth. Draco watches her waning freefall, flying farther and farther until she is only a moving speck in the distance. Somehow he knows this moment should matter.

That night, he visits Vincent's grave.

He doesn't bring elaborate pyrotechnics or even flowers. What do you give a man who's already dead? The staples of his giving...money, favors, companionship...are worthless in this here and this now. He sits on the wet grass and talks instead. More words than he's spoken in weeks spill out, confidences and fears and hopes. There's a chance that Vincent's listening somewhere, isn't there?

"I was a right git to you," he hears himself say. "I thought you were just another dumb brownnoser a piece of the furniture, really. But all that time, you were counting on me, weren't you? Like how I looked up to my father. I counted on him, too. Guess both of us let you down. I thought you were all muscle, no brains, but you saw me drowning, didn't you? You knew I was a goner and utterly useless for protecting you and Greg, so you stepped up. And I let you die for your trouble. Some future leader of men, huh?"

He hears wind whip the naked trees above, and even though he knows it isn't, he takes the rustling for an answer.

For a moment all is quiet, then his stomach rumbles, loud and persistent, and the absurdity of it all breaks his solemnity. He laughs and laughs and realizes in that ridiculous moment that he hasn't eaten all day. It's the first spark of longing he's felt since men proclaiming to be wiser than he cast him out of the knowing dankness of cells into the uncertain world outside.

"Sorry, mate," he says and laughs some more.

Draco tells the smooth marble gravestone, "I hope wherever you are, they've got your favorite kippers and pudding. I can never look at the stuff without thinking of you. And another thing, you won't have to fuss about Greg anymore. I won't let him down again. I guess...maybe in a perfect world, I'd have a brilliant, heartfelt speech all ready, but this isn't and I don't. So just . . . thanks for looking over my shoulder all these years. I was never good enough to you. For you. But Vince...I'm still your friend. Always."

His throat clogs and his eyes are warm. "I'll be seeing you."

Our first reunion was a bit of a disaster, wasn't it?

Only because you were too bullheaded to ask for help.

June 15, 1999.

The leaving banquet is oddly tame this year. Maybe everyone can somehow sense it's the end of an era.

Ginny supposes the jittery feeling at the pit of her stomach is relief. Since the moment she first drew blood, these hallowed walls have felt too narrow. Someone went through a lot of trouble to decorate the shore, even erecting a pavilion over long tables cluttered with all the staples she's grown to love over seven long years. Cradling a plate of meat pie and roast potatoes, she ducks out before any more people can clap her heartily on the shoulder and commit her to keeping in touch. The future is too uncertain for such promises.

The letter she received that morning is burning a hole in her pocket. The Holyhead Harpies' signet is over the flap, and it's straddling that line between being thin enough to be a courteous rejection and just the right thickness to be a succinct acceptance. When she sees that her friends have mostly trailed off to clump under the trees or sit on the beach as they jabber and laugh and eat, she clenches her plate in one hand, tucks the crinkling parchment securely in her pocket with the other and makes for the creaky old swing-set at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

She's not ready for exuberant congratulations or too-hearty condolences yet. *This beginning of the rest of her life* still feels too foreign, too private to be shared. She thinks she'd rather just know, no flash or pizzazz. But when she crests the hill, the world alive with the palpating beat of her anticipation, she finds her favorite reading spot occupied.

Ginny can't begin to wrap her head around why *Draco Malfoy* would be draped over the chair swing, seemingly asleep. The picture is completely lopsided. For one, he isn't just lying down; he's scrunched up on his side, hands tucked against his chest and long, sinewy legs flung out carelessly, tipped halfway to the ground. For another, he has a streak of brown paint cradling his cheek and dried flecks beneath his fingernails. It's an altogether bewildering spectacle.

Ginny doesn't realize she's hovering over him until she lets out a too-audible breath. That's when his eyes snap open, jaggedly alert, and he's a blur of frenzied motion, jumping to his feet and tackling her to the ground in the same frame of time it takes her to gasp. When the world reorients itself, a line of trees into palling sky, he's straddling her and crushing her throat and hefting the fork she dropped from her plate above his head like a dagger. She doesn't move, doesn't even dare to breathe. She stares open-mouthed into his fear-smearred face, knowing she has less than a minute before the world becomes fringed in black. The clenched fork falls an inch, and then Malfoy tilts lower, eyes scraping over her as if he can't quite place her, tense and panting.

And it's enough. Feeding on a burst of adrenaline, she uses that one instant of hesitation to arch her back and snatch the wrist clutching the fork, rolling with everything she has. He digs bony fingers into her shoulder fighting to keep his balance. Gasping, she knees him in the groin.

He snarls and falls to his side, crumpled in agony. She flies to her feet, grappling for her wand, fumbling once, *twice* ~~do~~ many times, before finally getting it pointed in the right direction. "Malfoy, you fucker," she croaks, each syllable wrenching her throat against the stranglehold of phantom fingers.

He stares at her drawn wand with an expression of hatred, mouth twisting into a serrated smile *Go ahead*, she reads in his dark face. Slowly, his panting subsides and he shakes himself, grinding fingers into his temple. Frowning, he says, "Oh. It's just you."

"Just you," she repeats, disbelieving. "What the hell does that even mean? You attacked me!"

"I thought you were...that I was still somewhere else."

Without a doubt, this is the most incoherent admission of guilt she's ever heard. "I'm *Ginny*. This is Hogwarts. You apparently took exception to my breathing too loudly. Does any of this jog a memory?"

"Shit," he mutters, rubbing a hand viciously over his face. "I was dreaming."

Her arm begins to tremble from how tightly she grips her wand. "That's...I can't even...what kind of explanation is that supposed to be?"

Malfoy barks harsh laughter. "Inadequate? Mental? Take your pick."

"What is going on? What are you *evendoing* here?"

He stands up carefully, hands outstretched in the universal gesture of surrender. "It's the leaving feast." A sardonic smile wrenches his lips. "Congratulations all."

Their encounter has been a confounding sequence of *hand around her throat* and *grey eyes dark with terror* and now *painfully quirked smile*, and Ginny just doesn't understand what's happening. Keeping her wand on him, she backs away until the swing bumps against the back of her legs; nowhere left to run. She searches him for any warning he's going to attack and finds herself staring at the oddest bit of all: a smear of brown across his jutting cheekbone. "You've got paint on your face," she hears herself say.

"What?" Malfoy arches a thin brow, throwing her a judgmental look that makes her bristle, and scrubs his cheeks with his palms. "Better?" he jeers.

"Not much of an improvement," she snaps. "Since you're determined to stay mum on the subject, let me guess. You chickened out on gate-crashing the feast."

"And if I did?"

"Then it makes you a coward in addition to attempted murderer."

"Believe me, Weasley, if I'd wanted you dead . . . ," he leaves off with a sneer.

Weary fury sings her veins. "God, what is the *matter* with you?" Her wand wavers from exhaustion. "It's over. Done. Finished. You lot lost. Get over it!"

His face twists with hate. It's a perfect imitation of his father's expression when they hand down his life sentence, the only trial Ginny works up the nerve to attend never again after that. Bile rising in her throat, she fights the instinct to retreat another step.

"That's just a crock of fantasy your side dreamt up. It's never over," he rasps. "So long as someone...anyone remembers."

"Is that why you're here? To h-hurt us?" she whispers.

He stares at her like he's only just realized they've been speaking past each other in foreign languages. *Hurt* you? How dare...what makes you think I want..." he swallows the rest, eyes slit in remembrance, jaw clenched. "I could never. Not since Vince. And my parents and the Carrows. I could *never*."

This new intensity and teeth-gritting conviction frightens her more than the thin fingers of pain around her throat. "Okay, let's say I believe you." She swallows hard, unable to look away from this new tension coiling inside him. "You'll have to excuse my skepticism. You did just get done trying to strangle me."

"I told you already. I thought I was somewhere else."

"Oh, you thought you were somewhere else. That's all right, then!" says Ginny sharply. "How does that explain anything? Where is this mythical place where *attacking* people is acceptable?"

Pale-faced, he crooks up one corner of his mouth. "Azkaban," he answers. "Not a nice place. Inhospitable even, it could be said."

"Last I checked, that was kind of the point. It's not supposed to be a weekend at the spa."

"Is that the point? Is it? Is that the reason for wide open courtyards and showers and gyms? Who needs cover? We're just scum circling the drain, right? Why not let us work out our frustrations on each other...no one out there gives a shit, anyway."

Whatever she expected, this isn't it. "Out there? Malfoy, you are out there . . . *outhere*."

"Yes. And isn't it just fucking hilarious. They forget to tell you that once you're out," he runs his tongue over the word, "the illusion breaks."

"What illusion?"

"That anyone ever gets out. It's easier to believe in freedom when you're surrounded by steel bars and oceans. Harder when you get it and it's hollower than biting into water."

She shakes her head in disbelief. "Are you saying you've been attacked? But what about the warden a-and the guards!"

"It's a funny job, being a jailer," he muses, eyes slanted in sleepy malice. His lips pull back to bare teeth. She thinks that for all his sweeping generalities, he's talking about someone in particular, memories dark across his face. "You've got to have the right temperament, and that's hard to come by. Must be why Azkaban attracts sadists like flies to honey."

"That's terrible," she says softly.

Ginny isn't sure if she means his gruesome cynicism or the unvarnished truth she can't help believing, at least a little. And maybe it doesn't matter what she believes, not when he was in the throes of a nightmare and she was the unlucky bystander, her presence triggering the feral instincts long, vicious months thrashed into him. A small part of her protests this too-quick acceptance of his explanation, the same sliver of distrust born from her own long, vicious months of loving, sick dependence on Tom Riddle. Familiar fear swells and warns her not to fall for gilded, too-plausible answers. But watching the faint jerks of Malfoy's bony frame as he sways in clothes too big, she decides to heed the part born of seventeen years of love and compassion.

"I need to sit," he mutters, running a hand through bone-white strands matted with sweat. "This always happen after the night terrors. Damn it, I thought I was better."

Taking one tentative step forward, watching for lurking rage and finding only pallid exhaustion, she takes another and then another. Pocketing her wand, she braces his elbow and leads him to the chair swing. He collapses heavily on its sun-bleached planks and grips its hardwood back with white-knuckled fingers. She sits beside him. "Is this better?" she asks.

"Yes. And before you offer, no, I'd really rather not throw a tea party and gab about my hardships." He clamps his eyes shut. "If you'll hold off shrieking for a minute or two, I might even manage not to faint from this blasted migraine."

"You do that," she says tartly. "I'd hate to explain to Headmistress McGonagall what we were doing that ended with you in the Hospital Wing."

"Shouldn't be too difficult to come up with a believable story. Malfoy sneezed and I hexed him, Professor," he mocks, peering at her beneath fingers fanned over his face. "Malfoy said 'hullo' and I tried to decapitate him. Malfoy was taking up too much room in the swing so I blew a few bits off."

"*All right*. So I'm a little hex-happy. You're clearly feeling better if you're back to hurling insults every other breath."

A hoarse chuckle sounds from his throat, and his gaze takes on a queer intensity, swiping up and down in a scrutiny that felt like a touch of calloused fingers. She fights down the impulse to fidget or look away. His eyes falter on the bit of envelope peeking from her robe pocket. "Haring off to read a love letter, were you?"

"Hardly," she says, cupping a protective hand over it. "It's my acceptance...or rejection...from the Holyhead Harpies."

Malfoy leans back with slow unwinding tension. "The captain's a cranky bitch. Even you could do better."

If that's meant to be an insult, Ginny chooses not to get it. "Well, I may have to. I don't know what it says yet."

With a sharp snort, as if she's vindicated everything he ever thought of her, he shoots her a look like she's off her trolley. "Then open it and find out. The decision's already been made. Not knowing isn't going to change the outcome. Well, besides burning out brain cells worrying, and it shouldn't bear mentioning how valuable those are where your family's concerned."

"If it shouldn't bear mentioning," she tells him with mocking sweetness, "stop mentioning it. You are quite possibly the least comforting person in the world, you know that? In the history of the world even. Haven't you ever *heard* of tact?"

"Sure. Tried it once or twice, got bored and tossed it out with my moral compass," he replies with a shrug.

"Tossed it out is right," she mutters. Scowling, she pulls out the letter and tears open the flap. In the filmy heat of anger, she forgets to be nervous. Two sheets of parchment slide out, and she makes it no farther than 'I'm writing to congratulate' before letting out an earsplitting, "Yes!"

Malfoy winces and squeezes his eyes shut. "Damn it, Weasley. Any higher and you could be mistaken for a dog whistle."

"I made it!" she shouts over him. "They're going to make me a first-string Chaser!"

"Really. Hm, always thought you'd try out for Seeker. Is this your consolation prize?"

"No. I didn't want to aim too high right away. I mean we're not kids on brooms vying for the House Cup anymore. It's the real thing. I've got to prove myself first," says Ginny, eyes bright and thrumming from anticipation.

"What is it with you people? Is there a new species of spunky mold growing in your common room? Drugs you're not sharing? It has to violate some law of nature for you lot to be so relentlessly gung-ho for years on end."

She wrinkles her nose. "That's disgusting. And if by gung-ho, you mean capable of experiencing human emotion, then I can certainly understand *your* difficulty."

A wry smile touches his lips, smoothing the crinkles around his eyes, and he's almost a doppelganger of himself a before and after photo for some life-changing procedure or an inspirational advert. Ginny doesn't understand how one sliver of a smile can transform gaunt bitterness into youth and the barest hint of good looks. He'll always be too pointy to be handsome, but right now, his face full of laugh lines and not the battering marks of time, he looks almost approachable. Whatever he sees in her expression smoothes the arch of his mouth into something bordering on intimacy, a look that includes her.

After a long pause, he tells her, "I was painting."

"What?"

"Someone suggested I visit an old man and paint him a tea service. I thought it was a lunatic idea at the time. Then this leaving fest crept up and it occurred to me I would've finished today if I'd been allowed back. It was . . . a badly needed reminder that I'd been living in limbo."

He has no idea I know who he's talking about, Ginny thinks. "How did you end up here of all places?"

Malfoy gives her a speaking glance. "Before you commandeered it, this was my reading spot."

But the second and the third and the fourth times we met...those weren't so bad. Educational, even.

That's true. A bit miraculous, actually, all things considered.

February 29, 2000; 10:12 PM

The engagement party is a smashing success.

After every bite of crust and swig of margaritas is consumed, the crowd sweeps from the Burrow to the Leaky Cauldron where Hannah announces all drinks are on her. Three hours into this renewal of festivities, Ron is slurring incomprehensibly and Hermione is flushed a radiant pink. Shot glasses and tankards of beer litter the bar; the atmosphere feels stuffed from the crush of all their friends. Ginny sits with Harry in the booth by the door, face tingling from hours of ceaseless grinning. The intimate glances her brother trades with Hermione when they think no one is looking plugs her throat up a little. They say that first loves are brilliant flashes at the beginning of a tunnel-long life, blazing fireworks ending all too soon. Tonight, Ginny knows that the rest of the cynical, winter world is wrong.

When she catches Harry following her gaze, she asks him, "Bit sickening, isn't it?"

Harry grins and makes for the peanuts on the table before getting sidetracked and absently entwining her fingers with his. She loves this about him: He's always unconsciously touching her, little brushes without artifice. "Your mum pulled me aside yesterday. She hinted very, uh, strongly about the...how did she put it...perfection and quaint grace of double weddings."

"Oh, *Mum*," she groans, heat lapping up her cheeks.

"Well, your whole family's wedding-mad. First Bill and Fleur, then Percy and Audrey. Suppose it's only natural to expect us to catch the bug and hitch up next."

She arches an eyebrow. "Is that a proposal, you devastating romantic?"

"Hm," he says noncommittally. "Throwing out feelers, maybe."

Through the smoky haze and the fuzz of more than one tequila shot, she wonders if the staccato thudding in her chest is joy or anxiety she only knows it's *pure something* with one hell of a kick. She blinks the edges of his face sharply into focus and lingers on the note of anxiety in the quirk of his mouth.

"Feelers duly noted," she tells him wryly. "The way Mum prattles on, you'd think marrying off one lone daughter was a type of siege warfare. Still, no matter how eager she is to chuck me, I don't think it'd be right to make Ron and Hermione share their day of bliss."

"Well, I'm in no rush," says Harry. "This whole thing's *mad* is what it is. After Ron dragged me to the jeweler's, every woman in a ten-mile radius honed in on us with samplers and fabrics and wedding plates. What's wrong with regular plates?"

"Until you learn the answer to that question, Mr. Potter," she teases, "I guess we'll have to keep being what we are."

"And what's that?"

Grinning, she sashays to her feet and leans in, running a finger along his jaw line. "Uncomplicated," she whispers in his ear and seals the vow with a kiss.

February 29, 2000; 11:51 PM

His memory of the last leap year is a blur of smuggled Firewhisky and his first fumbling attempts at sex with Pansy funny now to remember how youth gave rule-breaking a forbidden appeal, gone now that nothing is off-limits. He remembers that the night didn't go well.

In the morning, he recalled only the feel of things: smooth shapely limbs and drunken pawing narrowing into a pinpoint of clammy, thudding lightness that ends with him leaving a puddle of sick by the bed. Strangely, Pansy clings only harder after that, as though making her the object of his aborted first try at sex is some kind of promise ring. It isn't. His first time would be with Daphne Greengrass the following summer, though that too is an almost-accident. He only visited because Daphne's sister is breathtaking and only stayed the night because she's too young.

This year, on a day that shouldn't rightly exist, a day he convinces himself he can shuffle into some nonexistent black hole tomorrow, perhaps literally if he has any more to drink, he returns from another forgettable night with someone going by Carla in Knockturn Alley. It's funny how names work. They're everything and nothing at once. Carla is a shard of fantasy he sometimes cuts himself on; he insists she try on a different name each night, slipping from one into another as though names are only undergarments and garters. When she is all of them, fully clothed in it, he realizes that carlalucysarahevangelinejuliette is just as much tissue paper as dracoabraxasmalfoysonofluciusandnarcissa.

Maybe that's why he's learned to keep so many faces, because if he ever stops pretending, his selves will slip off like wet tissues, and isn't it fucking ridiculous how all the names that anchor and drag him down are no more or less than words he can smash into a run-on sentence, inert and weightless? It means the crazy is in *him*, a figment of his bloody imagination, perhaps even possession if he's feeling particularly melodramatic. If that's so, he wants a goddamn exorcism, please.

Draco doesn't realize he's unconsciously made the familiar turn toward the Leaky Cauldron, which is inexplicably lit up like it's Christmas, until he's near enough to feel music pounding the chilly air. It's impossible not to recognize the people framed in the window, everyone from his other life dancing and clanking cups, half his year crammed into a foggy space, lively and warm and *wrong*. He's turning on his heel to flee before anyone can spot him when the door swings open and Ginny Weasley falls out, clutching a carton of fags and a match.

Brows shooting up in surprise, she nearly slips on the patch of ice beneath the overhang. Grabbing for a handhold, she drops her match and anchors herself on the rusted metal railing beside the door. Steadied, she darts him an indecipherable look and utters only: "Malfoy."

It comes out as neither a question nor a statement. He hasn't seen her in months; he might've seen her just yesterday.

"Weasley," he responds. When she only stares at him, white puffs of breath tangling the space between them, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a match. "Light?"

"What? Oh. Yes, thanks."

She slaps the smokes against her palm and offers him the first one out of the carton. He pauses, unsure what he's even doing here before deciding that maybe he doesn't care and maybe it doesn't matter, and accepts. He masks his hesitation by lighting the match, a pinprick of warmth he cups while she bends down, cigarette between rouged lips, to catch its spark. Draco takes a long drag, surprised to find that it isn't the menthol ultra light kind he knows girls like. It's not as strong as he prefers it...he's a cigar man...but it'll do.

He tilts his head towards the celebration. "What's the occasion?"

"Engagement party," she says, cheeks rosy. "Ron and Hermione's. It's all *avery big deal*. Very. And uh, you?"

"Wanted a drink." The lie slips out like it could be truth. "Didn't realize the place'd be overrun with gingers."

"Oh, sod off," she says with a slight slur, and he realizes she's drunk.

"Last I checked, the bar wasn't a smoke-free zone. And a hell of a lot warmer. Playing the truant?"

"A bit, maybe. Hermione doesn't like smokers. I may have . . . neglected to mention the new habit or two I brought home from Quidditch training."

Draco wonders if he's really going to ask the next logical question: And how's Quidditch? That would make this the most inane conversation he's had in weeks, and whatever he's thought of her throughout the years, *inane* isn't it. He opts for companionable silence instead. For a few minutes, they savor the soft burn in their lungs, hot and cold from the tart air, and exhale in hazy spirals. He watches the casual way she grips the fag between two slim fingers; she brings her hand up for another drag, and tracing its curve, he notices there isn't a ring.

"Still can't bring Potter up to scratch, then?" he drawls.

She snorts and her eyes laugh at him. "Are you serious? Don't tell me beneath all those swirling cloaks and dashing haircuts you're just another gossipy old woman."

"Ah. Bitterly disappointed, then."

"Hardly. In fact, Harry brought the idea up himself tonight."

"Brave man."

"I implied I wasn't ready," she says, giving him an arch look. "And that was that."

Chills begin to creep up his ankles, so he steps out of the slush. Resting his weight on the rail beside her, he murmurs, "Oh? I thought you Weasleys were all about snatching up your first loves and begetting broods."

Her thin shoulders shudder but not from the cold. "Not me," she tells him. "I've had enough of being packed like a canned sardine and made to spill my guts about everything, because no one knows how to mind their own business. It's like a double-edged sword, being so crowded and hovered over. A stray word's enough to get us all snarling at each other. I wouldn't change a thing about the way I grew up, but big families sure don't make it easy to breathe."

"I wouldn't know."

"No." Her bright brown eyes flick over him. "I guess you wouldn't."

Draco remembers their last conversation, and it's a little funny and a little pitiful how awkward they still are around each other, two people who've shared the same space for years and years and are no less remote than the barest of acquaintances, which is funny, because in a way, he feels like he knows her. He recognizes a crack of artificiality in her manner, an almost too-aloofness he sees in himself when he forces himself to look in mirrors. Yet he's still standing here, not leaving, not making his usual excuses to amble off into the night.

"I saw you playing a few months ago," he says instead.

"Oh? Ha! I knew you were all talk, Malfoy. No red-blooded male in their right mind could loathe the Holyhead Harpies. If nothing else, we ladies make good calendar centerpieces."

"No, not anymore," he concedes. "Not since you thrashed Puddlemere United."

"Ah...you were at *that* game." She nods her understanding. "Brutal and fantastic, wasn't it?"

A small smile curves his lips. "The Harpies may have gone up a notch or two in my estimation."

She sighs. "Only a notch or two? Everybody's a critic. Wait. What were you doing in Puddlemere, anyway? Come to think of it, ~~what~~ do you do with yourself these days, Malfoy?"

He shrugs. "I'm about a rung above being chained to a desk. I hunt down Dark artefacts mostly for a private contractor. Sometimes, I get loaned out on cases the Ministry can't handle."

"Well, I suppose there's a certain kind of logic to that. It takes one to know one, right?" she hums. "Need to find a Dark artefact? Who better than a collector to do the job? You lot already know all the best hiding places."

Draco slants her a wry glance, lingering on the boneless way she slumps against the railing. "What makes you think I still collect them?"

"Oh, I don't know...let's just say, I've got more faith in old habits than people spontaneously turning over new leaves."

"Cynical," he notes. "I approve."

She laughs, a lilting crack of sound, dissonant against the rhythmic bass of the dance music wafting from the bar. "Careful. I might take that as a point for the optimists. Can't have you approving of me. The world'll stop turning."

"Is that right?" he says with a small smile. "Shows how little you know. If you'd just drunk more and shrieked less in school, I would've bestowed it sooner."

"Oh, please. You were always too caught up in making life miserable for Harry to notice anybody else. Admit it. You only knew my name because everyone and their pet toad knew I had a mad crush on him."

"Who said I knew your name?" he asks dryly.

She squints up at him in a facsimile of a glare and tosses her head, flinging rebellious red curls over her shoulder. "Wow. This really isn't an act for you, is it?"

"What isn't?"

"Being such a wanker. There is nothing put-on about it. At all."

April 1, 2000.

For the hardest Quidditch fans, to whom the game is a quasi-religion, there is a solemn tradition of pranking their rivals on April Fools' Day.

Draco navigates a labyrinth of exploding streamers and people lobbing smelly globs until he finally finds his seat in the top box, best in the stadium, his bookie claims. The Harpies are playing the Wimbourne Wasps on their home pitch, and no one thinks they've got a snowball's chance in hell of winning. The signal is fired, and the Harpies slip into formation. In a daring opening gambit, Weasley zips through her team's protective hoops, buffered for those few precious seconds from the other team, to sink the first Quaffle of the game. It gets downright nasty after that.

By the time the Snitch is caught, three players have been knocked off their brooms, thirty-two fouls have been called and the Harpies' Seeker is levitated off the pitch after crashing in a bravado ploy to catch the Snitch. The Harpies lose, as is expected, but it is a very near thing, which is not. Weasley gives a helpless shrug to her groaning fans in the stands...*what can you do?*...before disappearing into the locker rooms, but not before he sees her hang her head. He doesn't stop to say hello.

That night, when someone taps him on the shoulder at the hotel bar, the last person he expects to see is Weasley. "What are you doing here?" he asks. The team staying across town is the only reason he chose *this* unassuming bed and breakfast.

"Someone decided they couldn't express their sense of humor without tossing dungbombs in the air vents," she says sourly. "It stunk. We left. And now, I need a drink."

Lingering on her scowl, he forgets why it was so imperative to avoid her. Her unexpected intrusion into his nightly routine should bother him, but it doesn't. It feels a little like slipping back into a conversation that has lulled. He raises his glass of scotch in salute. "And the rest of the team?"

"Calista and Gwen are over there," she points at two blond women wrapped around each other, murmuring sweet nothings on the loveseat, "and the rest are out partying or salvaging our things."

The bartender, a stately old man, makes a sympathetic noise and pushes something called a Faery Elixir into her hands. She nods gratefully and tips it back in one swallow. "I'd do something about the name, but whatever this stuff is, it's *wonderful*."

Eyes closed, she rolls the tension from her shoulders, slumping crookedly on the bar. After she orders another and downs it...an impressive maneuver...he ventures to comment, "Tough break for your Seeker."

"Tough is right. It's the third one she's bungled this year," she mutters. "No way management will keep her on."

"You might get your chance after all."

Her brows quirk in surprise, and he isn't sure if his picking up a tangent of their months-old conversation astonishes her or it's something else. "I'll certainly push for it, but it's by no means a sure thing. She might have an in with management. That's what I've always thought, anyway," she says with a grimace. "Far be it for me to wish a teammate ill...it might not bother you overmuch, Malfoy, but not all of us think of knocking out a teammate as advancement."

Draco drains his glass and helps himself to the bottle of Ogden's the bartender left by his elbow. "Then you've still got a thing or two to learn about team sports. Now, I know a thing or two about having ins and holding them over people. Nothing she's got up her sleeve'll be good enough after today. A child can see you're five times nimbler on your broom than that lummoX of a woman. She'll stay on the roster only if they're blind, lumbering idiots."

"Gosh, Malfoy," she says with a wide-eyed look, feigning a swoon. "You'd better stop while I'm still conscious. If you give me any more compliments, I won't know which way is up."

He chuckles. "Don't take it so personally, Weasley. I'm just looking after my bracket."

"Of course. Personal gain." She turns her eyes heavenward. "So I'm guessing you didn't come just for the game. Artefact hunt?"

"Yes. The Aubreys. They've been hoarding quite the stash for some years." A wry smile brushes his mouth. "They were convinced it would be their nest egg. We got them when they tried to fence a few . . . rather unique pieces."

"Can't imagine why they'd take the risk. It's hardly like they need any *more* money. I mean, haven't they got a wing at St. Mungo's? They're only what...one of the richest families in England?"

"You say that like it's ever possible to have enough. I assure you, the first thing you learn when you hit the big time is that the rich people need more. There's nothing harder than maintaining the status quo. It's a sinkhole of expenses you'll spend forever trying to fill."

She slings back another shot and turns watery, amused eyes on him. "Over-identify much?"

"I thought 'it takes one to know one' was my job qualification?" says Draco dryly, drumming long pianist fingers on the bar.

"Oh God, did I say that? I can't remember what we talked about that night. I suppose," she sighs, "that does sound an awful lot like me."

"Yes," he agrees.

She clears her throat. "So. Seeing as you're here in this backwards, country slosh pit...sorry, still a bit bitter about the game...I'm guessing you travel a lot, huh?"

"Sometimes. For some reason, paranoid rich folk like to squirrel away their goods in obscure summer homes."

"Probably the smart thing to do if they've got something to hide," she comments.

"Not really. There are far fewer places to hide in a cottage or whatnot. They'd be better off sticking them under the staircase at home."

"Straight out of the Malfoy Handbook of Secrecy, I take it? Don't tell me you actually hide *your* shiny trinkets in the stairs."

"I'd tell except for the whole cursed to secrecy thing. You wouldn't fancy talking to me sans a limb or two."

"Hm, serious business," she says.

"Very."

"Still, no matter how tough it might be for you rich people to figure out what to wipe out all your money on next, it can't compare to poverty. Leagues apart on the hardship spectrum."

Draco orders another scotch on the rocks, sliding a stack of coins across the bar. He bites back a barbed comment when he catches her eyeing the size of his tab. Cocking his head, he says slowly, "I don't know about that."

"Oh, this ought to be good. How do you figure?"

"I'll admit to the odd fantasy...delusional moment, really...every now and then."

"Do tell," she coaxes. "Well, unless it's too lurid. Not sure I want to know all your creature habits or demented inner workings."

"You can rest easy," says Draco wryly. "It's very bland. Vanilla, even. Just me cast out on the street with only the clothes on my back. No money, no name, no history, nothing. It doesn't seem so awful."

"Sure. Except it *is*." Her voice becomes almost imperceptibly sharper. "You shouldn't ever romanticize poverty. It's not."

"Is that what I'm doing?"

"It doesn't seem so awful," she parrots his words back at him. "Well, you know what there's nothing glorious about having nothing. It's not all ill-fitting clothes and homemade Christmas presents. It's that look in people's eyes that somehow you deserve it, that you've done something wrong," her calloused hands tighten around the empty shot glass, "or digging through the ninety-percent-off bin in the wrong season and people treating you like what's on the outside, the battered books and secondhand brooms, are all you'll ever be. It's not just panhandling or skirting starvation...we've never been that badly off. It's the way so few people'll give you a chance, and all you can do is grin and bear it and wait them out."

"Christ, Weasley," says Draco. "That's why I called it a delusion. I was one of those people you're talking about, who'd written your family off, remember?"

"Perfectly," she replies, frowning. Her brows furrow at this fluid admission, delivered so simply in his cultured tones it sounded rehearsed even to him. *Was* one of those people?"

He turns on the bar stool to face her, and he doesn't understand why it's important that she should know this, but it is. "I'd be irredeemably stupid to still believe it, what with your Quidditch stardom and your brothers' millions."

"Very astute, Malfoy." Ginny Weasley laughs, a rueful smile curving her lips. "Congratulations. Better late to the reality party than a no-show, I suppose."

This is my theory: We've got to meet the wrong people so we'll know when we meet the right one.

That is the worst excuse I've ever heard for the number of notches on your belt.

June 5, 2000.

As far as birthdays go, his twentieth is barely memorable, and he finds he likes it that way. A little cognac goes a long way on rainy days.

Draco's mother used to make an elaborate fuss over the passage of every year, but that was before the war and its shivering steel aftermath. Now, she spends most months of the year commuting between safe, distant France and bitter, barren London where the crowds and guards make her swallow shame on every supervised visit with her husband. She never stays long afterwards. Draco usually wakes up to a pile of presents, all the tags French.

Daphne's little sister is finally old enough to fuck and so beautiful it hurts him to meet her again; she is the last remnant of teenage fantasies from a time when such things were still possible, when he dreamt of her thighs and pouty lips, when he slept full nights and none of the Golden Age he'd been promised, silky crooned lies from a snake bastard, looked like fool's gold. It's a fucking disaster, of course. The youngest Miss Greengrass expects to come first, and for a few weeks, he humors her. In the end, she breaks it off and slashes him with *selfish* and *empty* and *not worth it*. He wants to pick up the scraps of her bitter accusations and spread them over her skin, scorch them into her with teeth and nails and fingers until she admits there is no truth to them.

But of course, there is.

August 11, 2000.

Nineteen. The 'teen' means she's still a teenager, not yet an adult.

At least that's what Mum tearfully reminds her, after exchanging a sidelong glance with Harry over the entirely too creamy...fairly bursting with tooth-aching sweetness...lopsided cake her entire family shares. Even Charlie, all hard edges and sleek grace, makes it back in time from wherever it is in Romania he spends most of the year lurking. They have to take the party outside, what with all her brothers paired off, except for smiling-too-brightly George and eternal bachelor Charlie. Their spouses flit about delegating all the tasks Ginny used to be responsible for. She supposes it was only a matter of time. She's no longer Mum's lieutenant; there's Hermione and Fleur and Audrey for that now. The kitchen that was stuffed to chaotic proportions all her childhood is no longer enough, not now that their family has swelled.

Maybe that's what growing up means, she thinks. It's about making room and expanding your heart until the muscle's fit to burst and not daring to breathe until this pain-that's-not-pain feels normal.

Part Two

Chapter 2 of 2

Four years, five months and twenty-three days. Ginny feels the weight of every minute with no regrets because each second has dragged her that much closer to Draco Malfoy.

September 21, 2000.

She has a few knickknacks clumped here and there pictures on the nightstand, a few posters and a clock Dad cobbled from Muggle gears and glued together with magic. But for the most part, her flat is functional rather than decorative.

And it makes sense, really. It takes *living* in a place to make it look lived-in, and Ginny spends three-quarters of the year at Quidditch boot camp or jostling around the country with the team. If anything, that's the way she likes it: smooth lines, empty walls and wide spaces. Her flat began as someone's swank art studio before she splurged her entire advance from the Harpies on it. It's the first impulsive buy of her young adult life, and all she knows is that the bay windows open to the sunrise and there are no sharp edges, only walls that curve endlessly. She overrode a lifetime's miserly habits for this place, but her childhood was cluttered with so many things and people and memories she can't escape, not when her family was present for all of them and never fail to remind her of this or that embarrassing incident, and the novelty alone makes the exorbitant price tag worth it.

She loves the feel of the sheer empty *space* around her, the same reason she loves to fly; there's no freedom like true, untethered freefall.

When Harry suggests that he can keep the place feeling lived-in while she's away, she doesn't understand at first. "Er, that's nice of you. But haven't you got Grimmauld Place to worry about? Every time I see it, it looks like it's going to collapse in on itself."

"Actually," he says, "if I have to choke down any more fish and chips, I'm going to croak from culinary blandness. It's about the only thing I can plop out of a pan un-charcoaled and halfway edible. Getting half the meal out of a bag helps."

"So . . . you want me to cook for you?" she asks, uncomprehending.

Harry clears his throat. "Well, not *just* for me. We could, uh, cook together."

"But...how would that work if you only want to stay here while I'm gone?"

"Well, when I said house-sit, I didn't mean actually house-sitting. More like living," he coughs, "here."

"Living *here*?"

"Or not," he blurts out. "Only a suggestion. A horrible, horrible suggestion."

She feels a little dazed by all the careening turns in this conversation. "Hang on...this is about moving in, then? Since when have you wanted to, Harry?"

"Just hint a bit and she'll take it from there. Brilliant," he mutters, imitating Hermione's unmistakable cadence under his breath. "I ought to box her ears. Worst advice ever."

Ginny laughs at the disgruntled pinch of his face. "Wait a minute. Of course, you can move in. If that's what you want, Harry. I mean, I hadn't really thought about it, but it makes sense, right? This is what couples do next, isn't it?"

He takes her in his arms, knotting his warm hands behind her waist. She tips back instinctively, resting her palms on his hard, ridged shoulders. With a sheepish expression, he continues, "Okay, so the hinting plan was a bit of a disaster, but I am ready if you are. I don't want to rush things. But you know I already think of you as family, as *my* family. I don't know about other people or what they do, but *Ido* know Grimmauld Place is too big and too damned drafty by half, and what's worse, you're not there to fuss over me, make me wear socks or come up with ways to keep me warm. So yeah, I do want to move in. No pressure or anything, though. We can pretend this word vomit never happened if it's all moving too fast."

"Too fast?" she repeats, threading her fingers around the nape of his neck. "Are you kidding? I've only been in love with you since I was...what? Ten? It's about bloody time is what it is."

September 23, 2000.

He notices it less and less as time goes on. At first he wonders how people spot him in crowds, when he's little more than a pebble on a beach, and why they make way for him, sometimes in disgust, occasionally disdain, but mostly unconsciously what makes *him* different? Eventually, he decides there's no point in trying to unravel other people; image and reputation are mercurial, unfathomable things.

"You've changed," Pansy tells him one drizzling afternoon when they're sitting on her terrace, breathing in the mist of fine rain.

He slings one arm over the back of his gilded side chair. "Oh?"

"I can't put my finger on it," she says. "Maybe it's that bruised look you have when you take someone's measure. Very . . . puppy knocked on the nose by a newspaper too often."

"*What*?"

Pansy sighs and rests a delicate elbow on the table, cradling her chin between her fingers. "Like you've seen things, Draco, and you'll never be caught unawares again."

He gives a careless shrug. "You, on the other hand, haven't changed at all. Still mistaking real life for one of your bodice-rippers. Why so dramatic, Pansy?"

"You think so?" She curves a haughty eyebrow. "You're wrong, you know. I'm not like you. I haven't become a more intense version of myself. I've become someone new, better. Now that I've found someone worth giving it my all."

"Not me, I hope," returns Draco easily. "Otherwise, you'll have to excuse me if I conjure up a hasty appointment or two and dash."

She hums a soft, amused sound. "Not you for a long time. You're ancient history, Draco." There's no malice in her voice, and somehow he knows she doesn't mean he's in *her* past; he's in everyone's past, anyone who used to matter. "It took me years but I finally found her."

"Her?"

Whatever she sees in his face makes her throw her head back in laughter. Pansy shakes the raindrops from her darkening hair with a satisfied smile. "I meant me, you idiot."

September 29, 2000.

Susan Bones takes one look at him lingering at the edge of the Home Charms aisle at Flourish & Blotts and hugs her books to her chest, white-knuckled.

He watches her watching him, caught between flight and pride. Then her nostrils flare...not worth it, he reads in her hauteur...and she whirls around and disappears, the train of her robes slapping the bookshelf in her haste. Draco thinks about following her and dragging her back, shaking her until she spills out her grievances against him, because by God, he is tired of tiptoeing around survivors and hunching in crowds, trying to be less visible, less blond, less tattooed, less everything that distinguishes him. It's been two years and he was six-fucking-teen and terrified; he's already been beaten enough shades of blue and green and all the fucking House colors by old comrades for being such a fuck-up he couldn't off a wandless old man and having a mother who saved Potter, who'd had to save *his* sorry arse when it came down to it, and you know what, he's *done* scurrying away at their every accusative look; they can take their righteous bullshit and *shove* it.

Draco darts after her, but when he careens around the corner, it's Harry fucking Potter he nearly crashes into, his arm slung around Ginny Weasley, and no doubt, soon-to-be Potter. She slowly lowers her hand from flattening Potter's hair. "Hey," she says, and Draco doesn't miss the way she squeezes Potter's arm when he only gapes.

"Malfoy," says Potter. "Er, shopping?"

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Draco has imagined this meeting, cradling the fantasy during the darker nights how it would take place in neutral territory where one or the other would have to step aside or be made to move. He thought he'd played out all the possible scenarios. How he'll react if he's hexed or cursed out or more likely, simply ignored; he's run all the permutations and mapped it down to a breath. But none of those daydreams ever included Ginny Weasley, and she ruins this moment, this long-awaited-for encounter, because he's not looking at Potter or dredging up any of those terse opening lines he's tucked away for just this instant. No, he's thinking about the possessive circle of Potter's arm around her waist and cataloging the glow that is this simple, everyday, hero-worshipping girl in love and not drunk or scared or angry Ginny Weasley when *not* with him.

"Yes, shopping," he replies dully.

"A bit of light reading?" she asks, eyes laughing, slanting her head to read the cover cradled in the crook of his elbow. *Gardening for the Consummate Homemaker*. Don't tell me...should we be congratulating you?"

From the corner of his eye, he sees Potter blink at her teasing tone. "It'd be somewhat redundant by now," he responds. "You can't miss her. Tall, willowy, blonde. Likes to go by Mrs. Malfoy."

"Knew it," she says mournfully. "It's always the sullen, mysterious men who are secretly mama's boys. Aren't they just, Harry?"

Potter shifts in discomfort as they both glance at him. "Uh, yeah," he answers, then falls silent with a nonplussed expression, his unease snaring them in that vacuum of silence near-strangers can never entirely avoid.

Draco gives them a clipped nod and turns to leave, a strange tightness in his throat. But she calls out, "It's the Kestrels next Saturday. Aren't you going to wish me luck?"

"I only wish luck to people who need it," he tells her over his shoulder, and she lights up with a grin.

Even beneath all your masks, I think I always knew you for exactly what you are.

Yes. Yes, you did.

October 7, 2000.

Being a Seeker is the best worst position in the world. Today, it's the *worst* worst position.

They were so close, and they only needed *her* to seal the deal, to catch the damn Snitch, *the only fucking job she has* and she couldn't do it. The bloody thing was between her fingers, and if she were less reckless or even half as good as she promised to be when they finally gave her the position she'd coveted for so long, she might not now be responsible for her team's cloying disappointment and blown-to-bits hopes. But she wasn't good enough. Wordless blame pins her down, digging a granite block into her stomach; there's too much gravity in her legs.

"You tried," says Gwen softly, laying a hand on her swollen shoulder. "It wasn't your fault the Bludger got you when you caught it. We should've guarded you better."

Ginny shakes her head, salty pain prickling the backs of her eyes. "Thanks. But we both know I shouldn't have let my guard down. I should've been watching for it."

The game was close, neck-and-neck to the very last, and for one glorious second, she thought they have it in the bag. But when it comes down to it, Ginny Weasley, new recruit fresh out of Hogwarts who talked her way into becoming replacement Seeker, chokes under the pressure. They say that in moments of crisis, time slows and you clip along, millisecond by millisecond, painstakingly aware of everything; they're wrong. When the Bludger bears down on her, there is no violent pounding heart or eerily silent world; no, it's short and vicious and there's no getting around the fact that she froze up, a flutter of hesitation that cost them the game.

The rest of the team files into the locker room without a word. Ginny has never wanted a hot bath and a good cry more in her life. Losing friends and family on a battlefield is a cold pain that dulls everything; this is a hot agony that spikes every fleeting thought, an eternity of what-ifs and why-nots. *Failure, failure what good are you* rings in her head, and there's nothing so brutal as knowing that she's let down not just herself...what does *she* matter after all?...but everyone who *does* matter, her friends and teammates, her family away from home. They carried their load of the dream, and she fumbled hers.

It's nearing on midnight when she floos to her flat. For a heart-wild instant, she thinks it's the wrong address. Then she realizes the hills of boxes and shadowy piles in the dark living room belong to Harry. Over the weeks, he's slowly filled in the free spaces; on Tuesday, it was a Muggle movie poster for something called 'Dr. No,' and by Thursday, his flannel pyjamas have snaked their way over her towel on the handrail. Tonight, she spots his Quidditch trophy on the mantel by a framed photo of the team his fifth year, everyone crowded around him, *congratulations Harry*, fluffing his hair, laughing and cheering over and over. The sight of it scrapes the back of her throat. Bone-deep fatigue and rippling, tugging warmth hook into her shoulders and drag until she has to fight down bile.

Perfect, universally adored Harry if nothing else, he never, ever let anyone down. It's why she loves him so much, she thinks hysterically. So *why* couldn't she be more like him? She hears a thud in the bedroom then his groggy voice calling her name. She leaps back into the fire before he can find her lurking, tear-stained and ashamed, in the dark.

The sitting room of the Leaky Cauldron is vacant this time of night. Swiping at her eyes, she drifts into the hall towards the soft clinking of glasses. There's no one at the bar

but Hannah, hefting a tray of glasses over her shoulder. Ginny waits until she sets it down before murmuring her name.

She whirls around. "Ginny! You scared me half to...what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Just been a long day. I was hoping to, um, cool off my head for a while."

"Of course! That is, I heard," Hannah hesitates, mouth furrowed in worry, "on the radio about the game...Ginny, you're shaking! Come over here and sit down. I'm going to bring out the leftover toffee pudding and some tea. You look like death bowled you over. Don't go anywhere, all right?"

"All right," she promises with a stiff nod.

The old grandfather clock slouching in the corner of the room emits a groaning, unsteady gong. Ginny's eyes drift closed; she presses her cheek to the smooth wood of the bar. That fractured moment of loss is burned on her eyelids, and she relives it over and over, the feel of the lithe Snitch in her fingers before the Bludger clips her on the shoulder and snatched it all away, victory and triumph slippery as smoke. The crowd from the wrong damn side roars as the Kestrel Seeker shoots past her to snap the golden ball out of the air. Over and over she views it from all angles, dissecting it into still frames single heartbeats long, and still, she knows she screwed up. Harry would've rolled or dove or done *something* to avoid the Bludger. She'd just sat there waiting for it.

Behind her, the floorboards creak. She stirs in a half-hearted show of appreciation, but when she looks up, it's not Hannah standing over her with a bemused expression. Malfoy frowns, his hair half-stuck up and tousled by restless sleep, and she's never seen him so unkempt, in a faded shirt with silk pyjama bottoms pooling over bare feet. His presence is so jarring she can't help staring. "What are you doing here?" she asks, startled.

Under her scrutiny, he unconsciously smooths the ragged edge of his shirt. "That should be my question/live here."

"You...live here?"

"When I'm not," he nods at the roof, indicating the world outside, "on the job. Yeah."

"But . . . what about the Manor?"

"Renovations," he replies, tightlipped.

His eyes look so dark in the flickering lamplight Ginny immediately drops the subject. Then she realizes what's wrong with this picture. "Wait. That means you lied to me at the engagement party! You said you were only here for a drink."

"So?"

"So," she says, angrier than makes any sense, "you're a liar."

Malfoy laughs softly and slips onto the bar stool beside her, bare ankles dangling. "You look like you crawled out of a ditch, Weasley. What's the matter with you?"

"Like you don't know!" she snaps.

"Don't tell me this is about the game." When she turns away, wiping him from her field of vision to blink back tears, he curses. "Shit, this is about the ~~game~~?"

"Not just any game! You think I'd be this cut up? It was the playoffs, Malfoy. The only one that matters! I singlehandedly knocked us out of contention for the League Cup."

When she lapses into mortified silence, choking off the tail-end of a sob, he shifts closer to catch her downcast, wet-lashed eyes. Whatever he intended to say is lost when he jerks back, slowly exhaling as if in confirmation. Tapping an impatient rhythm on the bar, he narrows his eyes in thought, shaking his head regretfully. "I hate to break this to you, Weasley," he says slowly, "but your team was never going to make it to the League Cup."

Forgetting her blurring tears and splotchy cheeks, she whips around on the stool, incredulous, hands fisted to keep from hauling him up by the ratty t-shirt until his teeth clicked together. "Are you seriously telling me this? Are you really fucking saying this to me right now?"

"Look...is this crappy timing? Yes. But let's be realistic. That's what depression and histrionics boil down to, you know, not seeing clearly. You lost your best Keeper midseason and your Beaters are shit at defense. You replaced the deadbeat Seeker, but it wasn't a bloody coincidence you were two or three goals behind the Kestrels the entire game. Even if you'd won today, this was as far as you were going to go. The Harpies have too many holes to plug. Next game, the Catapults would've chewed you up and spat you out. So . . . there's no reason to cry. You didn't sink the team. Not really."

"This is...you are the worst...what is *wrong* with you?"

"The truth is shitty," he shrugs, discomfited, "but hearing it makes things better. Eventually. What the hell else do you want me to say? You're doing that scrunching up your face trying not to cry thing, which looks terrible on a girl by the way. If you were Blaise or Theo, I'd tell you to buck up and stop sniveling, but you're not. So what...you want me lie to you some more?"

"Yes! No. I don't know! *Something*. Anyone with a teaspoon of human feeling could come up with something better than, 'your team was going to suck anyway, chin up,'" says Ginny sarcastically. "Considering your sparkling personality, I'm sure you've made loads of girls cry. I refuse to believe this is a novel experience for you."

"It's not," he mutters. "You're just the first I've stuck around for."

"Oh, that's comforting. Please. Keep going. The night's still young. Let's see if you can't goad me into..."

The adjoining door to the kitchens swings open, Hannah reappearing at last with a bowl of dessert and a teacup. "Ginny, I've got...oh, Mr. Malfoy. Ah, did I forget your sleep tonic again?"

"No, it's quite all right," he says, slanting a grimace at Ginny. "Any chance I had of getting shuteye tonight is already blown to hell anyway."

Ginny tries to smile for Hannah's sake. "Thank you, but I've lost my appetite." She gives him a dirty sidelong look. "So I think I'll just turn in for the night."

"Well, if you want to stay here, I've got more than enough room," offers Hannah.

Ginny thinks about Harry and the way he sprawls in his sleep, like he's making up for all those years of cupboard-living by engulfing all the space he can now. If she goes back, she'll have to explain why she ran out earlier. There would be questions and attempts at comfort and more tears. That decides her. "Actually, yeah, that'd be great."

Hannah plucks the first steel key from the corkboard of most empty hooks. The Leaky is nearly full-up tonight. "Room 211. Try to get some sleep. I'll have a big breakfast for you in the morning."

Ginny thanks her and takes the key, brushing past Malfoy, avoiding any contact. After a moment, he pads after her with disgruntled steps. She quells the desire to climb the stairs two at a time; it's harder to ignore the prickling sensation of his presence a breath behind her. He moves so quietly that except for the creak of the stairs, she wouldn't even know he's there, but she *does* know and his proximity narrows the tiny staircase around them, packing the air until she's desperate to escape. On the second floor landing, she takes off for her door and stabs her key into the lock. Her head lifts at his footsteps. When she turns around, he's still behind her, looking as though their

conversation is unfinished and he can't bear not to have the final say.

Pushed beyond endurance, she snaps, "What do you want?"

He gives her an arch look. "The same as you. My bed."

"So go there," she grits. "Why are you following me?"

"211." He points a long, graceful finger at her room and then leans back on the door across the cramped hall, arms crossed. "212. Funny how that works, them being next to each other."

Balling her hands into fists and ignoring the key digging into her palm, Ginny chokes out, "God, what is wrong with you? Were you born this insensitive or..."

"Actually, Weasley, the only insensitive person here is the one screeching in the hall at one in the morning." Kicking his door open, he grips her wrist, and she's too surprised by the feel of his fingers, rough and warm, and too keyed up and spoiling for a fight to realize his sudden momentum has yanked her into his room until the door clicks shut and he keeps going: "...room's warded. Yell. Scream. Do whatever you need to, to stop being such a whinging bitch."

"Oh, that's good, keep insulting me. That'll shut me right..." Ginny trails off at the sight of the rumpled bed behind him, the only *anything* askew and used in the room. The corner of a trunk peeks out from under his bed, beneath a shelf overhead with only three books. The room otherwise appears as though he only just arrived. There is more clutter in her loo than Malfoy has in the entire room. "You *live* here?" she asks again involuntarily.

"We've covered this," he says, irritated. "Yes."

"But...you must've been here for months. There's nothing here. Where's your stuff?"

"This is my stuff."

"You live out of a single trunk?"

He snorts. "Don't you?"

"Well, yes. Out of necessity. What's your excuse?"

"Why are you so obsessed with this? Maybe I like being able to pick up and leave whenever I want. Maybe I've got house-elves constantly on-call. What does it matter?"

"But you're Draco Malfoy. You're up to your ears in gold. In six years, I've never even seen you use the same quill." She throws her hands up, bewildered. "Where are all your valuables and *things*?"

"Why do you care?" he grinds out. "Maybe I'm done with all that juvenile bullshit; maybe I'm not. What business is it of yours?"

"It isn't. I just...I'm curious. You're . . . I don't know how to deal with you. I mean, you're not easy to like or a comfortable sort of person...God knows, you're not. But I thought we were...maybe we'd become friends. Then you pour buckets of salt in my wounds. Somehow, I've ended up in your room where it looks like a ghost lives, and you're confusing the hell out of me. Who are you? Someone I found at the leaving feast looking like a starved person pressing his nose to a shop window? Someone who I can share a smoke with and not feel judged? Or are you the same jumped-up bastard I went to school with? Which is it? Because I don't...I can't understand you."

Malfoy doesn't answer. He stands so still his silence seems to deepen the tension in his body. Her breaths hitch at the way he looks at her, unerring and naked. She tries to match his statue stance. She doesn't want to miss the first break in composure that'll tell her he's ready to speak, move, *do* something. Ginny almost steps back when he smiles slowly but it doesn't touch his eyes, weary chips of slate.

"None of the above," he tells her. "I'm nobody at all."

"What does that *mean*?"

He cocks his head, cheeks implacable stone. "It means we're not friends. It means I'm not your drinking buddy or someone who'll throw you pity parties." He takes a step towards her. When she doesn't hide her flinch in time, he laughs. His noiseless strides eat up the distance between them in an instant, and he comes to a rest slapping a hand on the door above her right shoulder, forcing her to tilt back, all the way back against wood, to meet his cold gaze. "It means I won't sugarcoat things with you. I lie. I lie all the time, to everyone. But I don't like lying to you."

"I don't understand."

"No," he murmurs. "I suppose you wouldn't. You're this . . . crazy person, who's so bright and alive and *right* that when I look at you, I think you'll burn me to nothing if I wander too close." Two slim, cool fingers tug at a strand of auburn hair then drift down the side of her face, leaving quivering warmth in their wake. "Even your coloring's right. A little like a flame I want to put in glass and carry around. But I'd dim you. I know you only burn for him, and that's right, too. It's how the world should work."

"What are you talking about?" she whispers.

He cups her cheek, and for a terrifying instant, she thinks he means to do more, but his hand slides down her arms and slips behind her. The door clicks open. Suddenly she's keeling backwards, off-balance and catching frantically at his arm to stop her freefall. His throat works as he glances down at the fingers pressed on his bare skin over the uneven pulse in his wrist. Ginny follows the line of his sight to her hand and immediately releases him; the feel of him scalds. But whatever noble instinct led him to open the door is gone now; he sweeps a hand behind her neck, five pinpoint points of pressure that ignites a charge in her chest, palpating awareness of his proximity, his musky scent, the light bristles on his chin.

He hauls her against him, and she sways forward, too feeble and lightheaded to resist him. Heartbeat hammering in her wrists, she clings to the fabric of his shirt, not knowing if she is pulling closer or pushing away. The motion tugs down the neckline of his shirt to reveal a slice of scarred flesh clinging to his collarbone, so faint she's never noticed it before; but they're standing so close now, closer than they've ever been, and she can't help tracing the curve of his scar, following it until it disappears beneath his shirt, a memento of a time they both want to forget.

"Another double-edged gift from Potter," he says, pressing his eyes shut.

"Another?"

Malfoy abruptly releases her. "It...and you are both reminders he'll always be better. This was a mistake. A delusion better unfulfilled."

Ginny doesn't know what to say, how to give him an answer without acknowledging the question. "I don't know what you're talking about," she says, trembling.

"I won't lie to you. If you really want the answer to your question, you'll ask again. The real one this time."

The hall echoes with her harsh breathing. When the moment drags on so long his face twists into something bitter and bleak with hope, she whirls around to turn the key to her door, slamming it behind her, lowering a wood curtain on the unbearable sight of this strange *stranger* Malfoy. No, not *Malfoy*. A different name thuds in her mind. Now that she has made the leap, it's too late; his surname already tastes foreign, and that can only mean one thing. Is he *Draco* now?

In the morning, Draco...whoever he is...is gone.

You have to love before you can be relentless.

I don't know about that. You've always been relentless.

October 18, 2000.

The first couple of weeks, she and Harry are on their best behavior. She says 'please' and 'thank you' when he passes her the sugar, and he's careful to leave the toilet seat down.

Ginny loves knowing, while thumbing through a good book, that he's only a few feet away in the wicker chair, nose in the paper, and she can share all the funny and thoughtful lines. At night, they take sweeping, breath-robbing flights to the corners of London which only end when he tumbles her onto their bed and makes her arch and soar, soaking in his blazing warmth.

She remembers daydreams in Charms doodling 'Ginny Potter' over and over on her notebooks. Somehow, their reality is even better.

November 12, 2000.

"Gin, do you ever think that names are important?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like namesakes why your parents named you this or that."

"Hm, can't say I've ever really thought about it. I hated *my* name for ages. It's a good thing Ron couldn't figure out how to pronounce 'Ginevra.' I might've been stuck with it. I've always thought it too stuffy."

"If you could change your name, would you?"

"Well, no. It's much too late now. I've made my peace with it. Would you, Harry?"

"No, not me, either."

"What's brought this on?"

"Not sure. I guess I'm just nostalgic. I was . . . rearranging things on the mantel when my parents' picture fell out of the frame. It sort of hit me...like a punch to the gut. I never got to know them, Gin. Just their names: James and Lily. Lily and James."

"By all accounts, they were amazing people."

"Yes. But you know, I've always thought that children are supposed to outlive you and then carry *you* on after you're gone. Who's going to remember them when I'm gone?"

"Well, your kids, I suppose."

"Yeah?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself. Maybe one day, Harry."

"Is that so? Just so you know, I want at least one boy and one girl."

"Oh?"

"My parents gave up so much, and they never even got to know me. I think . . . I'd like to honor them somehow. Maybe name a little boy and a little girl after them."

"Oh, *Harry*."

December 19, 2000.

There's hardly an inch of space now.

Everywhere, reminders of Harry creep up walls and drawers like lichen. She marvels that her flat was ever mostly empty. It looks so decidedly lived-in now. His packrat mentality amuses her, the way he hoards all the mementos of where they've been and where they'll go: concert tickets, the knob that fell off the stove, a fork he nicked from Dobby one late-night snack many years ago. For a man who's never had anything to call his own, any treasures he could share with someone else, he takes fierce delight in piling her flat with what he calls, 'meaningful trinkets' nothing you can replace with money; only what you can accumulate from lots and lots of hardy living.

They spend all morning wrapping presents and preparing to spend the holidays with her family. Watching Harry hang vinyl records...some daft Muggle thing...on the crowded walls, Ginny realizes as she shrinks their things into a trunk that her flat has become its own small Burrow.

January 2, 2001.

Mum takes her aside after her third helping of eggnog. "You know I don't like to interfere with your life, but your dad and I are getting worried."

"How do you mean?" asks Ginny, wary.

"Well, the thing is . . . Harry asked your dad," she wrings her hands, "for your hand last year. At your birthday party. Of course, Arthur said yes..."

"What!"

"Don't raise your voice," admonishes Mum, as though there were eavesdroppers lurking about. "Now, your dad and I don't know why the two of you are waiting, but Harry told us last night he didn't think you were ready yet. Which is ridiculous because you're certainly not getting any younger..."

"Of course, I'm not ready! I-I'm not even twenty!"

"I hope I've taught you better than to lead someone on, Ginevra Weasley. All this playing coy and dragging your feet won't end well," says Mum, disapproving.

Ginny stiffens, stung. "I've got a career, something I'm *good* at that's got nothing to do with Harry or being one of those Weasleys. I don't want...I can't settle down yet. It's too soon."

Mum softens her tone. "What are you afraid of, love?"

"I don't know. I just know it's too soon. If I say yes...I think if I said yes, if I agree, I'm going to get swallowed up by him," she whispers. "Don't you see? It's always been him

and about him: putting him first, waiting for him. His marriage, his future, his parents' names for *his* kids. I spent years pining and aching for him, Mum. Can't it finally be his turn?"

January 7, 2001.

The sky bloats with rain. It puts her in one of those melancholy moods where Harry's absence throbs like a slow-bleeding cut.

An inexplicable peak in Dark wizard activity steals him from her at the cusp of the New Year, and she's restless. Puttering about her *their* flat, she starts flinging clothes into her trunk. Quidditch boot camp is tomorrow, and even if she's only a second-string Seeker now, nothing will stop her from proving she'll never, ever choke again. She and Harry have never talked about it. Her shame is too fierce, too private to be shared with someone so close. It's less real this way; unspoken is unfelt.

Every now and then, she thinks about the one person she did tell. The remembrance comes unprompted; she'll be doing something domestic, dishes or laundry, or something completely unrelated to Quidditch when the expression on his face, caught in that slice of a second before she slammed the door shut on any possibility of wanting to know another man like she knows Harry, drifts into her mind. Over time, he has become darker somehow; for all his bone-white shocks of hair and rugged pale skin, in her mental image, he's always shaded. It's strange that she prefers him that way, like looking into the too-bright, too-harsh sun through tinted glasses.

January 10, 2001.

His head pops out of the fire, hair askew and glasses fogged over. "I'm going to have to travel a bit. New assignment. Very hush-hush."

"All right. Remember to stay safe. No reckless heroics if you know what's good for you," she warns him, but his face is tilted to the side, listening to someone unseen.

After a moment, Harry turns back, flashing an apologetic smile. "Have to dash. Duty calls and all that."

The fire goes out before she can say goodbye.

January 29, 2001.

A snow-coated owl lands on her bed and shivers, scattering snow all over her comforter. Ginny unties the letter and feeds him an owl treat. She opens the water-logged parchment and reads:

Ginny,

We've caught their second-in-command. Only a matter of time before we get their leader. Can't give out too many details. The case's still confidential. Wouldn't want the public to get wind of it and panic.

You've still got that scrimmage tournament on, right? Give them hell!

Love,

Harry

The scrimmage ended two weeks ago. She refolds the letter slowly and sinks onto the bed, staring out the open window. Flecks of snow drift into the room but she doesn't notice.

February 12, 2001.

Even though she heard from Harry only yesterday, she feels in the aching joints of her exhausted, wind-battered body that something has changed.

There are no more twice-daily Firecalls. Now she's lucky if she catches him before bed or when he sheepishly checks in the next morning. He's about to break a big case, and she's so, so close to redeeming herself on the pitch. At the end of the day, neither of them has enough mental stamina to do more than murmur goodnights and sweet nothings.

February 14, 2001.

Valentine's Day begins brilliantly and ends knife-twistingly wrong.

Harry takes her to a posh restaurant, so she dresses glamorously for the occasion. Their place settings are impeccable, the atmosphere is romantic and the food is to die for. What makes it all shrivel into ash is seeing Draco Malfoy walk in with a svelte redhead on his arm and saunter into a private dining room. Not even the smallest acknowledgment when Ginny knows he saw her. It makes no rational sense that such an insignificant slight should simmer her blood and pepper her cheeks red, but it does, and she can only hope Harry doesn't notice the reason she's upset.

She jumps him the moment they're back in the flat. He stiffens in surprise and then melts with her into a furious tangle on their living room floor. There's nothing wrong with the sex. But when it's over and they're tucked into bed, she can't remember a single thing they said to each other that day.

March 23, 2001.

Ginny believes she's finally put a finger to the pulse of their problem.

She and Harry are too eager and not eager enough. Her vacation times are sporadic and too short; when they both manage to be home during those brief stays, the pressure to make every moment *special*, fine china for dinner and rose petals on the bed, hikes their expectations beyond reason. She walks in, they make small talk, quip over the latest anecdotes the other has missed and then attack each other. The sex is frantic, but their physical intimacy is no salve for the scripted nature of their reunions: dinner, wine, sex while talking about everyone but themselves.

April 1, 2001.

The Harpies soundly defeat the Chudley Cannons, whom Ron has finally given up on account of family loyalty or so he claims, loudly and often. He waves merrily at her as the team does another victory lap. Most of the family sprawls on the top stand, eager to witness her return to the pitch as Seeker. Even George chortles whenever she does something right and fires off fireworks when she catches the Snitch. A birthday party awaits them at the Burrow, with one cake they'll eat there and a second they'll bring to Fred's grave where they'll celebrate all the ways he's touched their lives until well into dawn.

Ginny does one last sweep of the stadium. She looks. She always looks, but she never sees Draco.

May 20, 2001.

This, she thinks, is what it must be like to be married.

She and Harry make sure to talk once a week, even if only for a snatch of minutes. They both owl all the splinters of the Weasley family regularly, even Percy and Audrey, but when it comes time to put quill to parchment for each other, the words don't flow. They agree it's better not to write at all than to exchange terse, awkward snippets. There are only so many times she can deliver the same lines about how tough practices are, how ragged the captain's run them all or hear the latest updates on cases that

are a blurring line of dominos Harry knocks over one after another.

She knows that married life or whatever approximation of it they're currently living can be banal and humble. Earthshakingly passion can't be sustained indefinitely, or at least that's what she reminds herself, trying to temper her expectations and disappointment. But the gulf between them, exacerbated by time and space, seems deeper than the exigencies of a long-term relationship. And that's what they're in. Ginny doesn't understand what's happening; she spent years chasing Harry, longing for him like a parched flower in cracked desert rock. Now she finally *has* him; and he *loves* her; what's wrong?

July 31, 2001.

They spend Harry's birthday at the Burrow and barely have a scrap of a moment alone together. A small part of her is relieved that her family and friends act as buffers, so there's no room for stilted silences or "work" dinners with case files strewn about the dining table. But there's no wild beat drumming in her wrists or heated glances stolen across crowded rooms, either. And yet, he's become more a part of her family than ever. Ginny can no longer imagine any birthday or Christmas or New Year's without him to split eggnog or play impromptu Quidditch or laugh over horrid Weasley sweaters with. It confuses her that the closer he is, so inextricably tied to every meaningful facet of her life, the stronger her impulse to move, to imagine being farther away.

It's ridiculous, she reassures herself. She's been in love with the man since the moment they met. There *isn't such thing* as feeling too much like family.

August 12, 2001.

The morning after her twenty-first year in the world, she drifts sleepily into the warm kitchen, pours out a cup of tea and accepts a battered slice of yesterday's cake from Harry, who's already dressed, shaved and thrumming with queer anticipation. "Ugh, morning people," she mutters, pressing a sloppy kiss to his cheek.

Ginny stabs the cake with a fork and flops onto the only unoccupied chair, stifling a yawn. That's when she notices the kitchen is packed. There's nothing unusual about her brothers waking at the crack of dawn to shred open presents on their birthdays, but it was *hers* yesterday, and this is already tomorrow. Why is *everyone* staying at the Burrow crammed into the kitchen? George and Angelina at the end of the group are nearly pushed out the door.

"What's going on?" asks Ginny, confused.

Hermione's smile is too wide and Ron's face is bright red, not meeting her eyes. She follows his line of sight to her plate. Beneath the frosting and crumbs is a glint of something that doesn't belong. It looks like gold. "Oh, my God," she says faintly, nudging apart the slice to reveal a gold band studded by a single teardrop diamond.

The ring is wrenchingly beautiful. Ginny swivels to face Harry, dizzy from the whiplash of it all, but she needn't have bothered because he closes in on her and bends down on one knee. "H-Harry," she stammers.

"Ginny," he says, gripping her slack hand. "Will you marry me?"

She doesn't know how long she gazes at him, only that it must've been too long. Nervous tension wires the room; all the worried looks exchanged means her silence is *much too long*. "I thought we were waiting," she finally manages.

His brows crease, the first hints of hurt. "We are. We did. I've been waiting for a year."

"You asked permission only...Mum said my last birthday," she says, throat dry as sandpaper, darting a look at Ron and Hermione's shocked faces. No doubt they expected her to leap with joy, accepting her shiny diamond shackle with a flying tackle. "Harry, I'm I'm only *twenty-one*."

He slowly rises to his feet. "What does your being twenty-one have to do with anything?"

"What does...it has everything to do with everything! I mean, we just moved in together. And you can't pretend things have been perfect..."

"Okay," cuts in Hermione, with her arms full of Weasleys. "I think this is a private conversation. Let's, ah, leave them to it."

Her family stampedes out of the kitchen Charlie throwing her a look of support, Ron blinking dumbstruck, Dad looking bewildered, Mum frowning in anxiety. Ginny forces herself to meet Harry's green eyes, dull with pain. "It's not that I don't love you, Harry...you *know* I do. But this is all happening too fast. We've both been so busy. I've hardly seen you in weeks."

"That's the point. All this distance," he swipes the air between them, "won't matter once we're married."

The bruising edges of a thought she's buried again and again finally slip out, unstoppable as a waterfall behind a cracked dam. She cries, "But...but how will marriage fix anything?"

"We'll be a family, a real one," returns Harry as though reciting a definition. "With unbreakable bonds. We'll never have to worry about losing each other. Whatever petty fights we have will just be petty fights. We'll know here," he slaps his hand across his chest, fingers splayed over his heart, "that that's all they are. And it won't matter when we don't see each other. We'll be married."

"But . . . first of all, I don't even know if that's true. And even if it is, none of those are reasons to get married. They're...Harry, those are ~~at~~ars," she chokes out.

A desolate conviction slowly collects in his ramrod straightness, and she can no longer cram the thought she's been denying for months back into its mental vault.

She's always known that for Harry, family is a mythical and perfect phenomenon, a construct he's cobbled together from all the tales of his parents' tragic love and her own family's seeping intimacy never mind that Ginny isn't ready to be Mrs. Potter, even if there's nothing that sounds more *right*. She isn't someone given to introspection, but after long months of clutching whatever scraps of him she can hoard, of living in her own head because they keep passing each other like ships in the night, all the loneliness has built and built into this brutal truth. Harry means this ring to be a salve, a patch for their leaky raft of a love, to pave over the leagues they've drifted apart and haul them forcibly together, as if none of this...the silences, the jagged way their lives don't match, their emotionally stale dances at night...will matter once 'I do' passes her lips.

But he's wrong. Every moment of these ten months has been a preview of the rest of their lives. Ginny can no longer refuse to see down the tunnel-long years: bearing Harry's children, all named after his sanctified parents and his dead heroes; keeping house and home for him while he bustles up and down the span of England in a job with no end; and losing her one last sliver of independence the day she becomes too old for Quidditch. She will spend a lifetime swathed in the mantle of Mrs. Harry James Potter, dwarfed by his birth and victories and calling, and always, in the eyes of the world, the woman at *his* side and never the other way around.

"No," she tells him, her grief splintering until she is numb from its shards. "I can't."

Turning him down was the hardest easy thing I've ever had to do.

So what does that make me?

Giving into you was the easiest hard thing I've ever done. You've never exactly been in our good books, you know.

August 13, 2001.

His things are gone. That's all Ginny sees when she opens the door to her flat, twin beats of anticipation throbbing in her wrists. Harry is gone, too.

No more meaningless, meaningful knickknacks; no flannel pyjamas on the towel rack; no motionless posters lovingly preserved in glass frames. Only vast, vacant space remains just like she wanted, only this is the first time each unsteady (*steady*) breath has seared from a wish granted.

September 19, 2001.

The merrily wrapped birthday present...a book, of course...feels slick between her sweaty palms. Trying to brace herself for the inevitable, she hesitates on the doorstep of Ron and Hermione's new home, bricked and painted and beautifully ordinary. They're all (*her family*) waiting inside; she can hear their voices buzzing through the oak door.

Someone clears his throat behind her. Ginny startles and ceases everything breathing, movement, surely even her heartbeat. Harry looks up at her from the bottom of the stairs, thinner than when she saw him last, green eyes swiping over her once, twice, and then settling somewhere on the vicinity of her throat.

"Hullo," he speaks softly, shifting his weight to tuck his unevenly taped gift securely in the crook of his arm.

Salty warmth burns the back of her eyes. Her throat unknots just enough for her to say, "Hi."

December 24, 2001.

"Mum!" Ron hollers. "He's at it again."

He is Teddy who scampers after his Unka Ron, changing his hair into iridescent shades and a spiky shape that could vaguely be a spider. Mum totters into the living room, levitating a tray of dancing biscuits ahead of her. She pivots her head to follow Teddy's shrieking form dart madly around the living room and sighs. "Teddy, you're scaring your Uncle Ron."

"I'm not scared," he sputters. "It's just . . . freaky, is all."

Grinning like the mischievous monster he is, Teddy does one more Medusa imitation and then hares off to the stack of gifts under the tree. For one discordant, fleeting moment, a wobbling heat pounds her chest as she realizes that one day all her married brothers will have children, and they'll stay here...in *her* childhood home...on holidays and birthdays, all the ordinary and special days. She will be their emergency babysitter whenever her brothers want to take their wives out, and their children will think of her as that maiden aunt who spoils them rotten. After all, here she is again, sitting alone on a lumpy couch by the fireplace sipping eggnog because it's what she's always done, year after year for twenty winters.

She sneaks a glance at Harry, sandwiched between Hermione and Fleur, writhing in vain to escape them wrestling a Santa hat on him. He notices her staring and crinkles his eyes in a resigned *I-look-bonkers-don't-I?* expression, its aching familiarity catching her off-guard.

Swallowing hard, she nods, mockingly solemn, and cracks a smile that quivers into a laugh at the red stripes on his cheeks as the women beside him crow in victory.

January 10, 2002.

He's never put much stock in New Year's resolutions, partly because the number of things in his life that need fixing is staggering, but mostly because he doesn't think he'll follow through.

There have already been so many; he can't bear to fail at yet one more thing. Not when the wizarding world is so damned small, a microcosm of the most judgmental, interfering slice of humanity, he sometimes thinks. These days few people stare anymore, most simply oblivious to his continued existence. That isn't the problem. The problem is that he can never see even the barest snatch of red hair...strawberry, copper, auburn; it doesn't matter...without whirling around for a second glimpse. It's worse than a double take because it's always some other woman, never *her*.

Once, he nearly collides with Molly Weasley as she is walking to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, a lunchbox tucked beneath her arm. "Excuse me," he mutters and then stops dead, tracing the edges of her lined, plump face, lingering on the same bright brown eyes she'd gifted her daughter.

The gentle curl of her mouth smoothes into a frown. Her eyebrows pinch together in thought, and she blinks as though trying to place him in no doubt the encyclopedia of her acquaintances. After all, that's what Weasleys do: befriend everything that moves. At last recognition dawns; she says slowly, "Draco Malfoy."

He gives her a clipped nod. "Mrs. Weasley."

This is followed by a hitch of silence, tension swooping in to compact the air between them. Briefly, she glances longingly at the entrance to her son's shop, her hesitation palpable. Then she pivots fully to face him, the set of her shoulders bespeaking resolve. "How are you, Draco?" she asks kindly.

Startled, he can only manage monosyllables. "Fine. And you?"

"I'm doing very well, thank you." Mrs. Weasley smiles, transforming her wrinkly, freckled face, a countenance that hooks claws into the back of his throat. He would've given an arm as a boy to uncover this soft tenderness in his mother's cordial indulgence. "How is your how is Narcissa these days? I don't believe Arthur and I have seen her in years . . ."

Since I killed her sister and we imprisoned your father, he can almost hear the unspoken words. Draco clears his throat. "Mother lives in France with my grand-maman. She's in good health."

Mrs. Weasley arches to peer up at him, fully aware that he didn't answer her question. Somehow, the movement makes her more approachable; even were he to slouch, she would only come to his shoulder. "Well, that explains it. She can't have seen you recently." She pauses then continues, lowering her voice. "You look like skin and bones. Mark my words, the first thing she'll do is feed you a good Sunday roast or two."

An image of his mother whizzing about the kitchen with oven mitts and a spatula flits involuntarily across his mind. He laughs, deep and hard. "Mrs. Weasley," he says when she begins looking flustered. "Can you imagine Narcissa Malfoy in an apron and elbow-deep in roast beef and potatoes?"

"Perhaps not," she admits.

"But I'll take it under advisement," he tells her. "There's only one house-elf left at the Manor and she's getting on in years, so I've been avoiding her meals."

"Well, if you that is, if you wouldn't mind some plain home-cooking," she hesitates, appearing surprised at the invitation on the tip of her tongue, "you're welcome to come to the Burrow for dinner."

A spasm of longing clenches his chest. Curling his left hand into a fist, he answers haltingly, "Thank you. I would . . . it's very kind of you to invite me."

Having issued her invitation and committed herself, she reaches out to squeeze his elbow. "Good, that's all settled then. Arthur and I'll expect you one of these days."

June 5, 2002.

It takes him nearly six months to make a New Year's resolution.

The grove behind the Manor was once an exemplar of manmade beauty. Walking through it now, he wonders why he finds the frenzied bushes and shrubs and flowers bursting in his absence, radiating across the paved path and springing up trees and benches, more beautiful than the perfectly trimmed garden, his mother's pride and joy. Roses and bluebells and flowers he has no names for have migrated from their designated plots and rooted into new territory. The sight of them thriving in a dizzying field of greens and blues and reds tugs at a different place inside him than mere appreciation of beauty. Malfoy Manor, his childhood home, the residence and source of nightmares past and present, the place he is finally returning to after years resonates in this *other*, deeper place inside him.

All living things move on, he thinks. They have to. Moving is living.

October 21, 2002.

For some reason, the fundraising banquet Hermione spends nearly three months putting together becomes a masquerade when all is said and done.

To hear her tell the story, her superiors marched into her office, a little room tucked in the nook of an obscure hallway next to the even smaller Office of House-Elf Relocation, and ordered her in no uncertain terms that she would make the function "fun" and "hip" and ply all potential donors with liquor, sparing no qualms to employ every non-magical means of persuading partygoers to part with their hard-earned gold. She would do this, they added, if she really cared about finding a cure for lycanthropy. Predictably this fires her up as would any aspersion cast on her enthusiasm for her sociopolitical agenda. No more staid, straight-laced political affairs the *Prophet's* always panning, she promises them.

"You're a celebrity," says Hermione when Ginny asks why *her* attendance is mandatory.

"So ask Harry."

"I did."

"He said yes?" asks Ginny, taken aback.

"Well . . . not in so many words exactly."

"In *what* words exactly?"

Fidgeting with the sleeve of her jumper, Hermione mumbles, "He might've mentioned...hinted really, something about coming only if you'd go divert the crowd."

"Brilliant," she mutters. "Traitor."

Hermione feigns deafness. "It's a costume ball," she continues. "Wear masks. No one'll even know who's who until midnight."

"I'm warning you right now that I'll come as a ghost, the Muggle kind with a bed sheet..."

"Er, well . . . about that. So it might be a Regency-style masquerade..."

"*Might?*"

Hermione begins backing toward the door, deftly avoiding a collision with Mum who breezes into the kitchen, a load of beets inexplicably slung over her shoulder. "Corsets, ball gowns and dominos," she says quickly. "Ron and I'll see you there. Oh, hullo, Molly. Just on my way out!"

Mum blinks at the door swishing from Hermione's momentum. "In a hurry, wasn't she?"

"Rotten cheat," says Ginny, sighing.

October 31, 2002; 9:26 PM

He loves flying: the feel of being cradled by razor-cold wind and the knowledge that no matter how far he flies...flees, falls, soars...or wherever he goes, *always*/ways there is another sky.

Tonight, that sky swells with heaviness. Draco feels it in the marrow of his bones, those long weeks in wet, dank Azkaban having left an aching legacy in his joints, a dull pain that flares before musky rainfall. When he tilts back to the Manor and dips down into the ramshackle courtyard where overgrown hedges and ravenous weeds cling to the fences, he spies a woman in a fancy ball gown through the wide, ivy-draped windows: Pansy pacing in his foyer. Shaking his dusty robes out, he unlocks the window and steps inside.

"There you are!" she snaps.

Hackles raised, he intones, "At your service."

"If only that were true." Pansy glances at her diamond-encrusted wristwatch. "We should've left half an hour ago."

Draco twirls his broom idly. "Left for where?"

"The Ministry Masquerade, of course! The one I've been telling you about for weeks?" At the faint crease of remembrance in his brow, she darts a silent plea skyward before stalking over to the armchair draped with clothing: breeches, dress shirt, waistcoat, a grey cutaway coat and layers he doesn't recognize. "Strip. We might still be fashionably late."

Looking down his nose at her, he tosses off his robe and begins unbuttoning his shirt. When her only response is to huff at him, he shrugs. "Just following orders."

Pansy eyes him with pursed lips. "I've seen better."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night...is this a *cravat?*"

The offending white neck-cloth leaps out of his hand with a flick of her wand, winding itself around his throat into the most complicated knot he's ever seen. "Too tight," he croaks, reaching up to loosen it.

"Don't touch!" She fires a Stinging Hex at his hand. He levels a glare at her, sucking on his stung knuckle. After another flick, air rushes back into his windpipe. "I practiced for an hour before I could figure out how to tie one of those infernal things. I don't want to see one, not *one* wrinkle in it tonight."

Draco catches his reflection in the ornate mirror by the fireplace and scowls. "You wasted your time. I look ridiculous."

"You look fashionable. Get your skinny arse into these breeches and you'll be the perfect Regency gentleman ready for a night out on the town."

"What the hell is this flap?"

She smirks. "I'd leave that alone unless you don't plan to make use of your plumbing at any point tonight."

Cursing, he tugs the breeches on and shoves his feet into the boots she holds out with sadistic glee. "And now for the final touch," she declares, draping a dark grey cloak over his shoulders and a mask on his face. "There. Evening dress, domino, mask. My goodness, you might even look presentable, Draco."

A muscle jumps in his cheek as he grinds his teeth. "What is this blasted masquerade for? And why can't I just write a cheque?"

"I'm bored so I'm calling in one of the twenty-six favors you owe me. There'll be dancing. And no one'll stare because they won't know who we are!" she replies airily. "The whole thing's a benefit for curing lycanthropy or something like that."

"Well, *that* makes it all right then. You're onto me, Pansy. Everyone knows how close werewolves are to my heart."

October 31, 2002; 10:49 PM

"I can't breathe," hisses Ginny, pulling futilely at the laces on the back of her taffeta silk gown.

Hermione grins behind her feathered eye-mask and suggests, "Think of it as being authentically *period*. None of the debutantes in the nineteenth century got to breathe much, either."

"Hang being period! Have I thanked you yet for stuffing me into *arib-crushing* corset?"

"Not yet, but I suspect you will. Get out there. It wouldn't kill you to enjoy yourself." With a flirty wave, Hermione melts into the crowd, abandoning Ginny to a grotesque potted fern.

Flinging her dark green domino back, she hauls up her skirt and dashes through a part in the dancing couples for the terrace. The glass door doesn't budge. "God hates me," she mutters when the handle jams. Pulling out her wand from her beaded reticule, she taps the brass handle with a whispered *Alohomora*. When nothing happens, she does it again and the window snaps open. She hurriedly slips through, rushing to the railing to gulp in the chilled air.

"I locked that door for a reason."

Ginny whips around, her wand aimed at the black-masked man resting on his elbows against the end railing of the terrace, light from the ballroom casting a silken halo on his pale hair. She slowly lowers her wand. "Sorry. I . . . didn't know anyone was out here."

He shifts to his feet in one sleek motion. "Obviously."

"Well, there's no reason we can't share," she says, bristling. "It's not like I'm taking up that much space."

"No," he agrees, a lazy half-smile hovering on the corners of his mouth. "If your waist were any smaller, you'd be two-dimensional."

"I'm I'll have you know that I'm being authentically period. All the girls had to endure corsets in their day."

He laughs. The crisp sound snaps the night air and makes her shiver. "Granger dressed you, didn't she?"

"So? Wait. You know Hermione?"

"Not particularly. I'm mostly acquainted with the back of her hand."

"With the back...Dra...*Malfoy*?"

"Guilty," he answers, taking off his mask to reveal cheekbones sharp enough to cut granite and bone-white hair windswept around his temples, a sharp departure from the perfectly slicked-back style of their school days.

Lowering her glittering eye-mask, she sighs. "How did you know it was me?"

Stepping fully into the light streaming from the window, Draco doesn't stop until they're almost touching, leisurely perusing up and down her body. "Some things are impossible to miss," he says and threads a gloved hand into the coiffure her mum spent two hours fashioning.

"Don't...!"

But it's already too late for protests; he pulls out the pins and her hair tumbles down in kinked waves. "Better. You look like you're on fire."

Trying simultaneously to flee and sway closer, Ginny stays motionless, trying to ignore her tingling scalp and skin his fingers brushed. Her cheeks burn with heat as she asks unsteadily, "A-Another crack at gingers? You never change, do you, Malfoy?"

His face turns dark, the soft admiration in his eyes sharpening into bladed grey. "You believe that? You do. I can see it," he says softly, and she has the fleeting impression that he's disappointed. "You're wrong. Everyone changes."

"Not everyone."

"Haven't you? Because where's Potter? I don't see him anywhere." Draco tilts his head to the ballroom of swirling masked dancers cloaked in dominos of every shade and color. She stiffens, but he continues, "You outgrew him. I wondered when you would. Though it's taken longer than I expected."

She frowns, her eyes raking over his face because she can't have heard him correctly. "Than you *expected*?"

"Make no mistake, I'm not saying you two don't deserve each other. When you're both swimming up to your ears in virtue. But what we deserve and want are so rarely the same."

"Are you actually trying to pass yourself off as some expert on relationships? You can't even keep up with your own date. She's been flirting up a storm since the moment you got here."

Draco shrugs casually. "Pansy's enjoying her anonymity. Even ex-Death Eaters and Slytherins deserve a reprieve."

"Which, last I checked, doesn't exactly qualify you to dispense advice *to me*. Have you ever even been in a long-term relationship?"

"No. But I've also never tried to force my first-love fantasy into reality."

"Are you saying being with Harry was a *fantasy*?" she grits.

"I shouldn't have to. You should already know it. The problem with you, Ginny Weasley, is that you love freedom too much to be shackled to someone who'll always overshadow you, who has no ambitions, who only wants to preserve the status quo and marry into a ready-made family so he can stop being an orphan."

Ginny flinches, nails digging into her palms as each aloof word battered against her. "You don't know anything about me..."

"I know you well enough to know you broke it off. He did something to force more commitment on you. Moved in, bought a pet, wanted children, proposed. Something that scared you."

Anger churns in her blood at his presumption, but it's fear, a thin slice of cold through her abdomen, that makes her shove him. He barely moves, taking the impact of her violence like he's been waiting for it. When he moves even closer, she falls back against the brick wall, desperate to put distance between them. "Just stop...you have no right...who do you think you are? We're not even friends! I've seen you once in two *years*. You disappeared in the morning without a word, and when Hannah told me you never came back, I stopped waiting. You don't get to make me miserable with your cryptic bullshit then vanish and show up out of nowhere to pick a fight. You are nothing to me!"

"Then why are you so angry?" he asks softly.

"Because you got lucky and guessed one thing right..."

"Which one?"

"Harry proposed but that was *not* why..."

"You really said no?" he breathes, as though he hadn't believed his own words until this very moment.

"Of course, I said no! I'm too young..." she shouts.

Draco leans in until the wind-trembling strands of his hair brush her cheek. Her shoulder blades already digging into the wall, she sinks her fingers into the bricks to stay composed when there is nowhere left to run. He whispers in her ear, "When you were sixteen. If he'd asked you to marry him then, would you have?"

Ginny opens her mouth to tell him off; her lips are curving to form a smile when she suddenly remembers how lovesick she once was for him. The sun didn't rise or set on his say-so, but it was a very near thing only she eventually wised up and learned never to let him see how deep her feelings ran. If he'd proposed then, she would've thought it an overwhelmingly romantic gesture. In the climate of war and death and lives disrupted, she might've said *yes* if only because their time together was so finite. "I'll always love him," she speaks shakily instead. "Always."

He reads the truth in her face, and then his air-constricting, pulse-provoking presence abruptly lifts as he retreats a step back and then another. "I see," he says, a queer flatness in his voice.

Draco stands nonchalantly, framed in an aureole of candlelight like some stained glass religious martyr, with his feet tipped casually apart, weight distributed evenly, his arms motionless by his sides, as if he only just happened upon her; and their paths crossing is no more than mildly surprising. He's looking at her as he would any stranger, without any of the quiet intimacy she's taken for granted from the moment she found him asleep on a swing, so there's no reason why the sudden absence should pinch her throat with regret or make her heart stutter in remorse. "Malfoy, what...tell me what you *want*," she pleads.

But his face remains dark and closed, as inscrutable as if he were still wearing his half-mask. "Want?" he repeats with a touch of scorn. "Why should I want anything from you?"

Because not a minute ago, you were drinking me in like a shipwrecked sailor in an oasis, she thinks. "I don't know," she murmurs. "For a few months, it felt like I'd lost an anchor when I rejected Harry's proposal. He was a reference point for so much of my life that I didn't know what to do when I was finally free. Once or twice, I even thought about asking him to take me back. That's how much I missed being burdened by him."

"Why didn't you?" asks Draco, tone polite and disinterested, tapping his gloved fingers against his thigh.

Ginny swallows hard, intuitively sensing that despite his abrupt apathy, this is the answer he wants most to hear. "Because I didn't want to be a coward."

"Not good enough," he says coolly.

"I loved Harry for so long he was the definition of love for me. And I didn't know it was possible for that definition to change until he proposed. I realized I love him, and will always, but I had stopped being *in* love with him some time ago."

She watches his drumming fingers crumple into a fist, his only reaction to her confession, to the words she's never spoken aloud. His blasé attitude lights a reckless fire in her chest, and she's moving forward before she can even form the conscious thought. She shoves him again, and this time, he stumbles back, eyes wide. "You know what? The only coward here is you! You want me to make sweeping gestures and grand statements and share my secrets, but now that you've heard me out, you've decided to get cold feet? Man up, Draco! Two years ago, I asked you who you are and you said nobody. But everyone is someone; we don't get a choice in that, so who are you? And who do you want to be to me?"

For an air-crushing moment, she thinks he won't answer. Then slowly, ever so slightly, he looks away. "I'm . . . cold," he says. "Cold-blooded maybe. By myself, I've always felt inadequate. I look for warmth from other people, so I can imitate the things they do. So that maybe one day, I'll figure out how the rest of you stay so *right*, even when you're alone and haven't got anyone to prop you up or define you. I'm always reacting, taking cues from everyone else so I know what my place is. Pureblood, Muggle-born. Slytherin, Gryffindor. Potter, the Dark Lord. Rich, poor. Wizard, Muggle. Because I'm not . . . right or strong. I haven't been in a long time; maybe I never was." Ginny starts to reach for him instinctively, but he lifts a hand to forestall her. "Don't. This isn't me looking for commiseration. I don't want you to feel sorry for me."

"I'm not. I don't."

He smiles bleakly. "In school, whenever you and your family were around, I felt this acidic envy which ate its way into every thought of you. But after Azkaban, after learning to survive, to live, I realized how pointless envy is. It's been quicksand for me for so long. Jealous of Granger, of Potter, of Theo and Blaise. Then you showed up. I'd always thought..." Brushing the fringe of his hair viciously from his eyes, his face keeps still and tense, like rock being grinded into dust. "Fuck. I don't know how to say this...you know you're beautiful, Ginny. You have been since fifth year. I knew it, too, intellectually, could even appreciate it aesthetically. But until the leaving feast, I'd never *wanted* you. I'm attracted to strength because I-I'm weak so much of the time, and that day, I knew instinctively that you're one of the strong."

"I didn't know. You...you've got a hell of a poker face."

"Considering you were shackled to Potter," he says caustically, "I thought I'd spare myself that mortification."

"Then, is this what you wanted to tell me that night at the Leaky Cauldron?"

His mouth turns upward in a self-deprecating smile. "I'd hoped for more eloquence but yes, these are the essentials."

"And what are the . . . nonessentials?" she asks.

Draco laughs, and the coarse sound hurts her to hear. "Still haven't had enough? But remember, you asked for this."

"Go on," she urges, not knowing why it's important she listen to everything, empty him out entirely, but only knowing that *it's*.

"You're not just beautiful enough to make my throat hurt...no, karma's not nearly so lenient. When you're near me, I'm drawn to you. I want to talk to you, to sift through all your thoughts, to bask in you until I stop shivering. That night, with you standing in my room trying to provoke me, I'd never wanted anyone so much in my life. But I knew

you didn't want me, so there was no point. I feel more alive, more aware of everything; alcohol burns more around you, the ground feels harder under my feet; you're a little like flying. Senseless, risky, but what I'll crave even when I'm old and decrepit and toothless."

"You're wrong." She lowers her head to stare at the stone floor. "About my not wanting you that night. I did. And it scared me because I can't...I'm not someone who can live with being unfaithful. So I told myself to forget it, that it was a fluke. I was vulnerable and you were there."

"Was it?" he asks, tugging her chin up, forcing her to meet his eyes. "A fluke?"

"No. I'm . . . very attracted to you," says Ginny with a small, helpless smile. As soon as her words are smeared in the space between them, the oppressive weight on her lightens, as though all along, she only had to admit what was until this moment a horrible, traitorous truth. Now it is the truest form of true, undeniable. "I wanted you then. And I want you now."

"Because I don't suffocate you?"

"Yes. And because I feel free around you. There are no ruts to fall in. You're this unpredictable, reckless person who challenges me, shakes out all my lines in the sand. I don't wonder what other people think when I'm around you. I just *am*. And I want you to show me things I've never thought of or done or seen. But most of all, I want to fly with you."

"Is that right?" he says gently, his artificial indifference evaporating like smoke. He cradles a hand around the nape of her neck, pulling until there's nothing left between them.

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The night air bites her cheeks, but she's too busy hanging onto his shoulders for dear life to care, *finally* kissing his acerbic, wicked, taunting, kind mouth. His left arm wraps firmly around her waist, the other steering the broomstick into a dive she never wants to end.

"Where are we going?" she murmurs into his neck.

"Nowhere, everywhere. We might even make a pit stop for a Sunday roast or two."

When Draco kisses her back, hard and warm, Ginny hopes that if she holds on long enough, they'll never break this freefall.