# The Changeling

**by Annerb**

**Summary**

Ginny is sorted into Slytherin. It takes her seven years to figure out why.

**Notes**

A quick note about the archive warning. The non-con warning is for an off-screen event that is discussed but not described and appears in chapter three.
“Slytherin!”

It feels, for a moment, as if the entire world has ended as the Sorting Hat’s voice rings out through the Great Hall. Not even the heavy cloth down around Ginny’s ears can muffle the sound of four horrified gasps, each familiar enough to her as to be distinguished merely by pattern of air.

*There must be some mistake,* she thinks, once in confusion and a second time more forcefully, as if compelling the hat to take it back.

The hat doesn’t deign a response, Professor McGonagall (*not* her head of house) sweeping it off her head in one brisk motion. Ginny perches uncertainly on the edge of the stool, McGonagall’s steely eyes already moving to the next frightened eleven year old.

“Miss Weasley,” she says crisply. “Your table is on the end.”

Ginny glances at the dark sea of green and silver at the far end, the way the entire table seems tucked into the shadows of the edge of the hall. No. No way. This is a mistake.

She turns her head to the Gryffindor table, meets the wide-eyed, horrified stares of her brothers, and stupidly waits for George to crow that it’s just a joke, and wasn’t it impressive that he could pull a prank this convoluted on her? He’d spent all summer making a fake hat!

George just shares a glance with Fred, faces identical all the way to the pale shock of their cheeks.

“Miss Weasley,” McGonagall repeats, her voice no longer sharp. There’s a buzz of sound building in the room, people turning and whispering to each other as Ginny refuses to give up her seat.

*Move,* she orders her frozen limbs. *Just get up and move.*

She finds her feet, tries to lift her chin as she walks the great distance to the far table, but the faces waiting there for her are closed, hostile. They whisper behind their hands as she approaches.

She perches on the very end of the table, and doesn’t let her hands tremble. Much.

She doesn’t remember much of the feast after that.

Later as she settles into her dormitory in the deepest hidden depths of the castle (not a tower, not a nice roaring fire nor a fat lady to welcome them), she gives herself a mental shake and reminds herself that it’s just a house. She reminds herself of this again when the girl in the next bunk turns her nose up at Ginny’s secondhand things and the other girls follow suit.

*Just a house.*

That doesn’t explain why she feels sick in the green tinged depths. Wrong. As if the lapping waters of the black lake above are pressing down on her. She tugs the curtains tightly closed around her bed and tries not to hear the voices of the other girls.

She lies in her bed that first night staring at the delicate silver embroidery wrapping around her bed. The beasts and dragons seem to swirl and move, creeping in on her in the dark. She firmly keeps her imagination in check, teeth biting down in the inside of her lip. She’s never been afraid of the dark and she isn’t going to start now.
When the other girls fall quiet, their rhythmic breathing filling the chamber, Ginny shoves back her covers and lifts open her trunk at the foot of the bed. On top is a red and gold scarf knitted by her mother. Ginny grabs it and shoves it down into the deepest recesses of the trunk. It’s down there at the very bottom that she finds an unfamiliar book.

Pulling it out, she sees that it is a thin black diary, the cover made of smooth leather. She thinks this must have been a hidden gift from her mother like the scarf, only this one much more fitting. She blinks back tears and picks up the book, opening it to the first page.

*Ginny Weasley*, she writes carefully. She considers the words for a while before picking up her quill again.

*Ginny Weasley*, she writes, *is a Slytherin.*

Her heart pounds as she stares at the words. Splotches of ink drip from the quill where it hovers uncertainly over the page.

No.

Ginny scribbles across the damning words, quill slashing and obliterating.

*Take it back, take it back, take it back*, she writes beneath it, over and over again.

For the first time that day, something finally cooperates. The ink sinks back into the page, leaving nothing but quiet, creamy expanses as if the words never existed in the first place.

She lifts the quill to the surface again and asks the one question that’s been echoing in her mind all day—*What did I do wrong?*  

The words slowly bleed away.

For a moment, she almost wishes the diary could answer.

She wakes the next morning with no great answers, no simple fix. Out in the halls, Fred and George drape their arms over her shoulders and say it’s no big deal, but she’s been living with them her whole life and knows when they’re lying.

It *is* a big deal.

She doubts she has ever begun to understand all the ways in which it’s a big deal, just knows it is. Even Percy thinks it, judging from the way he pats her arm awkwardly and solemnly shakes his head back and forth as if to a dirge.

Ginny has never before realized just what a prig he is.

She shares this thought with her diary and wonders if this is viciousness. If this is why she’s here. Did the hat see something in her?

She watches the ink sink in and disappear, like an act that never happened. She imagines it makes her feel lighter, just a little bit.

The first time Errol labors his way into the Great Hall with post from home, Ginny thinks her mother’s tone is strained. Just words on paper, but she imagines her mother’s confusion. Pansy Parkinson, voice perfectly pitched to carry as far down the table as possible, notes she’s never seen a more decrepit and pathetic looking owl in her entire life. Did it have some sort of disease?
Ginny lowers her head and forces bone dry toast down her throat.

During the day, she has classes to fill her moments. There’s no one to sit with but quiet Smita, the housemate who was unlucky enough to get stuck with Ginny. They don’t speak except when Smita needs Ginny to pass her eye of newt, and Ginny doesn’t bother trying for anything more.

She learns instead to focus down on the feeling of a wand in her fingers made for her and her alone. If she tries hard enough, this is one place things can bend to her will, work out the way she expects them to. Magic makes sense.

She excels. While Fred and George and Ron are all ease and laughter, surrounded by friends and immersed in the luxury of just sliding by, she pulls marks her mother had begun to give up hope for in her younger brood. It makes Ginny wonder just what Percy and Bill and Charlie and their top marks might have been running from.

At night, she pours her frustration and confusion into the only place she can—her diary. She writes each and every word she thinks but doesn’t dare say during the day. Every doubt, every dark feeling, and sometimes it feels like it’s the quill moving and not her.

One day it answers back, and it’s the most natural thing in the world.

*You aren’t alone, Ginny.*

His name is Tom. He’s her only friend.

She rises from bed the next morning feeling empty, floating like a ghost.

It’s easier.

Mid-way through the first term, Bill sends her a letter. ‘Slytherin, eh?’ he says by way of greeting, and she appreciates this lack of coddling. No easing in, just going for broke. ‘I went to Madame Puttifut’s with a Slytherin girl in my fourth year. We had quite the snog.’

Her hands clench, paper crinkling in her fingers. *It’s no big deal.*

‘Not that you should go around snogging feckless Gryffindors. Certainly not until well after your fourth year.’

Ginny chokes back a laugh, the feeling foreign and forgotten, a smile threatening to crack her face in half from disuse. Mum liked to complain about it, but Bill has always spoken to her like an adult, someone things don’t need to be hidden from.

‘I know everyone’s telling you it’s just a house, but I think it’s more important that you remember you’re a Weasley, and that’s the one that matters.’

She sets the letter aside, folding it carefully and pressing it into the pages of her diary.

The problem is that red hair aside, she’s beginning to doubt she’s really a Weasley. The Weasleys have been in Gryffindor for four generations after all, and the Prewetts another three. She begins to wonder if her mother made some sort of pact with a fairy to have her—the precious only daughter, and this is the unforeseen price.

Maybe she’s a Changeling.

She reads about it hidden in the back of the library at lunch, unable to face a table of strangers. Only
the books tell her a Changeling child should have untold strength, and she doesn’t feel it.

In the end, it’s only Tom who understands.

*You don’t need anyone else.*

She walks around with ink-stained fingers and learns to breathe through the airless moments, to keep walking when she wants to do nothing more than disappear. She could run home, leave this all behind, but she hasn’t walked away from a challenge since she was four years old and broke into Bill’s trunk to stow away to Hogwarts.

This is her dream, being here. She just never imagined it like this.

“Ginny?” Smita says once during potions, something almost like an inquiry, but when Ginny turns, the girl’s face is all hard angles and disapproval.

*She doesn’t think you’re worthy. But I do.*

Ginny feels her gut clench and thrusts the bowl of eviscerated flobberworms towards Smita.

They finish the lesson in silence.

When the black outs begin, she feels a strange sort of relief. Waking up with blood on her fingers and no memory seems a fitting thing for a Slytherin. Isn’t it?

Only then people start getting hurt.

*What’s going on?* she scribbles in the pages. *What is happening to me?*

Tom always has the answer. *You’re stronger than you know, Ginny.*

By the time she begins to suspect, to work it all out in her increasingly fuzzy mind, there’s no one to tell.

She approaches Ron once, the brother who won’t even meet her eye anymore, but it’s Harry who actually notices her.

“Ginny?” he asks, his flitting attention all too quickly distracted as he frowns at a group of Hufflepuffs deliberately crossing the hall so as not to walk too close to the supposed Heir of Slytherin.

If only they knew.

She can’t tell if she wants to laugh or throw up.

In the end she says nothing, not wanting to see the blame there in Harry’s eyes. The sense of, ‘*I knew it.*’

Slytherin.

She shakes her head and walks away with the diary burning against her thigh.

When Tom takes her down to the deepest dark spaces of Hogwarts, she thinks maybe she’ll just be able to disappear, judging by the way her body seems to melt into the stone. Only that isn’t what she’s here for, she realizes all too late. She isn’t here for punishment. She’s bait.
He’ll come.

Ginny has her doubts.

She lies, more dead than alive it seems, lies there and watches Tom try to rewrite the pastfuturepresent. Does absolutely nothing to stop it.

Maybe if she’d been a Gryffindor, she would have been able to.

She’s still surprised to wake up and find Harry there. There was a time that might have meant everything to her. He’s injured, nearly died for her, even as life begins to rush back into her flesh, not pins and needles, but knives and mallets. There’s no point in stopping the tears, the pints and pints she’s been collecting all year long.

“It’s all right,” Harry says, patting her shoulder awkwardly, clearly more comfortable with basilisks and evil wizards than hopeless little girls. “Riddle’s gone.”

What does that fix, really? She stares down at the ruined diary bleeding ink across his lap. Her words —her secrets—blurred and tarnished as they ooze out on the floor.

She shakes her head, pulling her legs hard into her chest. Harry never should have come down here. Not for her.

“Ginny,” he says, bewildered concern weighting his tone.

“I’m a Slytherin,” she mumbles miserably into her knees. Just like Tom. Just like Pansy and Malfoy and every dark wizard who has ever fallen.

More than anything she wants to hear Harry say, ‘So what?’, to tell her it doesn’t matter. But he just stares back at her, confusion furrowing his brow. For the first time he doesn’t look like a hero, but rather a scared little boy. She isn’t sure what to make of that.

Aberration, comes Tom’s dying whisper, thorns still dug in and holding despite the fact that he should be gone. You don’t fit his careful columns of good versus Slytherin. And yet he was the one they all suspected.

Ginny wants to shake the voice away, claw it out of her skull. There’s painful anger here over something she does not understand, things she’s too young to grasp, just knows that for all she poured into Tom, he poured some things back.

These are not the sorts of things a little girl is supposed to feel.

Try as she might, she can’t see Harry Potter in quite the same light ever again. Maybe he’s still a hero, but she’s never going to be a princess. (Was the hat right? Is this who she really is?) Her silly crush doesn’t stand a chance against the weight of all that.

She lets Harry lead her out and save her and explain away her failings to her waiting family, but knows she’s leaving something behind she’ll never get back. Innocent little Ginny Weasley never leaves that Chamber.

The greatest irony is that her disgrace makes her a proper Slytherin at last.

In the common room everyone vies for her attention, sidling up next to her and asking what it had been like, to have such a beast under her control, to know she had the ability to kill and destroy, wash this place of mudbloods, if only she hadn’t been caught in her own trap.
She thinks of Hermione Granger and her frizzy mane, the way she smiles at Ginny in the halls, kind, but guarded. The way that even she, the smart one, is not completely sure of Ginny out of the context of Gryffindor.

“How did you get away with it for so long?” her housemates want to know.

She doesn’t know what to say, how to explain to them about victims and lack of choice and pouring out precious secrets and feelings to someone who didn’t deserve them. Doesn’t know how to risk speaking without betraying her weakness. She may not know much, but even she already understands the danger of weakness. She needs to speak, to find the perfect lie, but her throat freezes and betrays her.

Only somehow her silence does not condemn her.

This is how she unexpectedly learns the power of silence. The power of not acting, when all she’d ever been raised to know was running blindly ahead.

When they demand a recounting, Ginny presses her lips together in a thin line, looking sideways at her housemates. She lets them fill in the blanks with whatever they need.

It holds her long enough to survive the last few chaotic days of the term, to keep herself together until she can finally slip away. She doesn’t like to think of it as running, but she’s grateful all the same for the sheer distance from Hogwarts and the relentless memories that her family’s impromptu trip affords.

The harsh sunlight of Egypt burns into her skin, her family pressing in on all sides. Maybe it will be enough to make Tom fade, like a picture left too long in direct light.

She hopes.

Out on the sandy dunes, Bill steps up next to her, hand mussing her hair with distracted affection. A few feet away, the twins are trying to shove Percy into a tomb. It’s all so startlingly normal, like the last year never happened, that Ginny finds it a little hard to breathe.

Bill squeezes her shoulder. “Your first year in Slytherin and you already faced off with You Know Who and derailed his plans, eh?”

That isn’t exactly the way it happened, but Ginny doesn’t have the heart to correct him (or perhaps her mouth has learned too well to keep its secrets). Maybe it doesn’t matter anyway. The only other person to know the full truth of what happened down there is Harry, and he’s thousands of miles away with no clearer understanding than her own.

Bill leans in closer, grinning mouth near her cheek like a conspirator. “What a disappointment you would be to good old Salazar.”

She smiles because it’s expected. But also because proving to be a poor Slytherin is supposed to be a good thing, right?

He tugs on her braid. “Weasley,” he says, an affectionate accusation.

Ginny leans into Bill’s side, thinking that maybe she’ll let herself believe that.

Just for a little while.
Year Two

This year is going to be different.

Or so Ginny tells herself over and over again on the train.

She’s proven right, in a way, when dark-garbed demons climb on mid-way to Hogwarts. That’s different in a whole new way (horrrifying), but one that only manages to suck out any optimism she may have been clinging to. She can’t quite explain it, the way every tiny bit of warmth is leech’d from her body as they pass, gliding silently just a few inches above the floor. They pause, the empty places where a face should be turning towards her compartment. Ice frosts the glass and a buzzing builds in Ginny ears.

*Aberration.*

She’s transfixed, trapped, until the demons move on, departing as quietly as they appeared.

Ginny shivers and pulls her worn robes more closely around her body. The entire train seems subdued for the rest of the ride, timid whispers about the guards of Azkaban and an escaped prisoner tripping down the halls.

Dementors. They were something she grew up hearing about in her brothers’ twisted idea of a bedtime story, but had never seen. She never wants to see one ever again.

Luckily, the floating horrors don’t follow them inside Hogwarts, staying outside the school gates, but she still thinks she can feel them hovering. Or maybe it’s just that after a summer bundled up in the boisterous chaos of her family, Hogwarts feels cold. She doesn’t remember it being so still, so quiet despite the press of students. It could just be Slytherin’s hushed spaces under the lake that are dreadful. Too much like the Chamber, hard stones under her bones…

She avoids the common room as much as she can, sneaking up onto the grounds. Not towards the gates and those *things*, but always away.

The grass around the lake is tall and soft, too long left untrod during the summer holiday. Her trainers wear a path day after day as she walks. She lingers in a spot within sight of Hagrid’s hut and the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Sometimes she wonders about the things hiding in there.

Mostly, she just stands on the edge of that hill and stares.

Sometimes she lets gravity win just to see what it feels like—wind and adrenaline and heat in her muscles. Her feet trip down the steep hill towards the trees, momentum keeping her right on the edge of losing her footing once and for all. Then she hits the flat, legs buckling, and she falls hard to her knees, feeling her flesh bruise and split. Twisting onto her back, she gasps great breaths, her chest burning, face flushed with exertion as she stares up at the clear summer sky.

She gets up, climbs the hill, and does it all over again.

* The notice appears on the bulletin board the third week of school, hard crisp edges around angular black writing:

*Trials for House Quidditch Team will be held Saturday at 9.*
Someone jostles Ginny from behind, people shouting to each other across the room. She lets herself get elbowed to the back of the pack. She can’t forget the words anyway, not now that she’s seen them.

She knows what she wants. Wants more than anything.

She’s only a second year, but she doesn’t think on that. She just remembers the breathless press of wind and gravity working against her as she tumbled down Hagrid’s hill. She doesn’t consider that maybe she just wants to be a part of something, once and for all.

(Over the summer her father told her, “You have to make of this what you can, Ginny.” Her mother had simply said, “You can always come home.”)

Ginny has no intention of running home.)

The day of tryouts dawns crisp and clear, the first taste of autumn in the air. There was a time she might have taken that as a good sign.

“Hey,” someone calls as she walks out on the pitch with her pathetic borrowed school broom. “I think you’re in the wrong place, girlie.”

The speaker is Terence Higgs, returning chaser. He’s got at least a foot and half on Ginny, but she thinks with silent derision that ‘girlie’ is probably the best insult he is capable of. That kind of undoes a lot of the intimidation. A chaser is about more than height.

She’s prepared for them to give her a rough time, to try to tell her she can’t try out, but there aren’t any rules against second years having brooms, or trying out, and more importantly, she knows she can do this, size and age and experience notwithstanding.

In the knowing is the power, she tells herself.

Only then the captain, a troll of a boy called Marcus Flint, looks over at her, his face hardening. Before he can tell her to get lost, Ginny hops on the broom and streaks up towards the stands as smoothly as the wobbling hand-me-down can manage.

The sound of voices and harsh laughter follow her, riding along on the wind, but it’s the crack of a bat that she’s really listening for, the telltale whiz and whine that follows it. She holds her trajectory until the last possible second before shifting her weight, letting the broom drop away under her in a daredevil move that would have given her Mum heart palpitations if she were here to witness it. For a full beat of her heart she’s falling, completely weightless.

Ginny’s left thigh burns with exertion, but digs in hard against the broom, swinging her body completely around just in time to see the Bludger streak by less than half a foot above her head. She does not flinch away, even as her hair flutters in the breeze of the close call. She does not yell, just hovers, meeting the stares of the boys still on the ground. She ignores the boy with the bat in his hand and instead watches Flint, daring him.

She feels the impatient vibration of the broom under her hands, but knows that to budge now is to surrender. (Fred and George and Charlie and Ron…they taught her this one miniscule skirmish at a time.) All she’s asking for is a chance.

Eventually Flint looks away, waving his arm. “Okay, you lazy wankers. Get your arses up on your brooms.”

With surprising efficiency and authority (though peppered more often than not with obscenities),
Flint runs them through a vigorous series of drills. All except Malfoy, that is. He seems content to float above all of them, drifting aimlessly on his shiny, top of the line broom.

His contribution: his father’s bountiful wealth.

Ginny sighs with disgust. Distracted by her thoughts, she doesn’t notice the Quaffle coming until it’s slamming into her solar plexus. She manages to snatch it up against her chest and refuses to let it stun her, just takes great swallowing breaths while she weaves and dodges for the goals in the distance. She nearly loses her head to a vicious Bludger from behind, but manages to swivel hard around and fling the Quaffle into the lower right ring.

She focuses relentlessly after that.

What she lacks in size she makes up for with speed and agility and a reckless sort of nerve that serves her well as chaser. Flint makes her run drills longer and harder than anyone else, but if he hopes to break her with harsh conditions, he’s chosen the wrong tactic. She feels a fire burning in her stomach, something familiar but almost forgotten, like for the first time she feels a little like she did before Tom. Before Slytherin.

Up in the air, it feels like anything is possible.

She’s still nearly trembling with fatigue when Flint finally lets her get her feet on the ground. He gives her a long hard stare, maybe checking one last time if she’ll just give up. She doesn’t.

As he passes her by, he smacks her hard on the back, nearly planting her exhausted body face first in the dirt. “Just don’t mess this up, Weasel.”

She leans heavily on her Cleansweep and hopes he doesn’t notice. “Excuse me?”

He doesn’t stop walking, talking back at her over his shoulder. “Practice on Mondays and Thursdays at 4.” He points to a shiny, only slightly used Nimbus 2001 leaning against a wall. “Don’t be late. Or I’ll change my mind.”

She watches him walk away, waiting for the punch line, the vicious ending to what must be a joke. The pitch is dead silent though, and she’s all alone. It’s the arrival of the Ravenclaw team that finally pushes her to exchange the Cleansweep for the smooth handle of the Nimbus. It seems to hum against her skin in recognition.

She’s on the team.

She gives herself one long moment to revel in it—she will have all night to scrutinize every last inch of the broom in her hands. For now she simply imagines the looks on her brothers’ faces. Then she takes a measured breath, props the broom up on her shoulder, and reminds herself that she still has a lot to prove.

She smiles, just a little, as she walks back up to the castle. Her hand rubs across her stomach. She’s not sinking quietly into the stones this time.

Never again.

*

Word travels fast through the ranks—little Ginny Weasley stealing her way on to the Quidditch team. Her housemates size her up in the common room. She hears half swallowed whispers of ‘heir of Slytherin’ from time to time, nestled in right next to ‘chaser’.
It’s not what she ever thought her life would be, but maybe that’s okay.

Even Malfoy deigns to speak to her, most of the younger students following suit. (The older ones ignore her like they ignore all the young ones, too involved with OWLs and NEWTs and sneaking out onto the grounds to snog.)

“Ginny,” Malfoy will say, drawling her name out long, arm thrown over her shoulder.

She knows what she wants to say (your father gave me that diary), but that is never what she can say. Because for a bit, belonging is so much nicer. This is her house, her life, and she needs to make of it what she can. And Slytherin can’t be so bad as they say, not if she ended up here, right?

She practices with the same abandon she shows her lessons. Given something to focus on, she refuses to do anything less. She will not give Flint a single moment to regret his decision.

He just ends every practice with a slap to her back and a warning not to screw up. She grows to appreciate the predictability of it.

She watches the first match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff with anticipation tingling in her fingers, cataloging each and every move used by the chasers—the good to emulate, the bad to avoid. Her absorption is so complete that she doesn’t notice the Dementors have wandered out of bounds until the chill shudders across her skin, a hated voice ghosting in her ears.

People scream and push to their feet, fingers pointing at a black blur plummeting towards the ground.

Not so special after all, Tom mocks.

Harry Potter is falling out of the sky.

Ginny’s heart drags up into her throat, her hand pulling out her wand before she realizes she has no idea how to save him, no way to return the favor.

The boy who went splat.

“No,” Ginny says. (Screams? She doesn’t know. Tom is still just laughing.)

Then Dumbledore is there, face pale and furious and energy crackling from his entire body like a silver explosion that forces the Dementors back. Harry hits the ground a fraction of a moment later with barely a sound, as if the entire world’s been turned into soft downy pillows.

Ginny’s knees buckle, dumping her back on her seat.

If she were more fanciful, she might have taken that as a sign of things to come. But she’s not. Her heart gradually settles back where it is meant to be, her pulse calm. Three days later she’s able to climb on to her broom with no more trepidation than before.

She forces herself to forget all over again that sometimes gravity wins.

* 

They win their first match.

Sure, Ravenclaw is nothing to worry about really, but Ginny scores seven goals, even after getting her shoulder grazed by a Bludger two minutes into the game. If she gave herself a moment to think about it, she might wonder at the accuracy of that Bludger coming from the wrong end of the field, only she doesn’t, because her team is smiling at her and reliving their greatest moments from the
match as they stream back up to the castle in one huge group. It feels like maybe she’s actually a part of something for the first time since she came here. She thinks they may finally accept her, now that’s she’s proven what she can do.

She’s never felt quite so alive as she did on that broom, screaming crowds on all sides.

The common room is loud and boisterous and somehow warmer that night. The heat of bodies and ringing sound of raised voices clear the chill from the space, and when they pass around a bottle of something not quite named, she sips it along with everyone else despite the taste.

She doesn’t notice when the others stop, when they begin to slap her on the back and urge just one more swallow, Malfoy’s voice close to her ear.

Things get fuzzy really fast after that.

Later she will have vague memories of saying yes to the tattoo, to feeling no pain at all as they grouped around her and called her one of their own. She will not allow herself to remember that she alone has a jagged little green line of a snake twisting across the inside of her wrist.

She does this because this is *belonging*. And it’s good.

She still wakes up the next morning feeling like death hovering on the edge of a bridge. She pulls back her curtains with a groan. The lamplight sears into her eyes and for once she’s actually thankful that their dormitory is underground. Sunlight just might kill her.

“You look terrible.”

Ginny squints up to find her roommate Smita standing next to her bed, holding a smoking goblet.

Ginny frowns. “Gee. Thanks.”

Smita doesn’t seem to take her chilly tone as a hint to leave her the hell alone, instead holding out the goblet.

Ginny eyes it warily. For all she knows, Smita has decided to poison her for lack of anything else to do this weekend, but she’s too miserable to worry out motivations. Reaching for the goblet, she takes a hesitant sip. It burns down her throat, bringing tears to her eyes, but before she can yell in protest, it settles in her stomach like a warm golden glow pulsing through her body. It softens all the edges, and Ginny doesn’t hesitate to swallow the rest down.

By the time she empties the cup, she almost feels human again.

“You look terrible,” Ginny says in a rush, peering up at her roommate a little more closely. Is it just her aching head or does Smita look slightly less mean today? Ginny tentatively smiles at her.

Smita does not smile back. She simply nods her head once and turns on her heel and leaves.

So much for that theory.

Ginny lowers her head carefully back to the bed.

“Someone wake me up when it’s Monday,” she mumbles to the empty room.

* 

Ginny arrives at the Great Hall a few minutes late for breakfast. Her brothers step up on either side of
her before she even gets a foot in the hall.

“Where did you learn to fly like that?” George demands.

Fred scoffs loudly. “Clearly from watching us all these years, George.”

Ginny rolls her eyes and decides not to spill her secrets. All they ever did was turn her into a thief. They didn’t teach her Quidditch. They taught her perseverance. Daring.

She thinks in some ways those are way more important anyway.

Shaking her brothers off at the Gryffindor table, she crosses the room to her own table.

“Morning, Six,” Bletchley says, nodding to her. “How’s the head?”

Ginny gives him a wry smile, feeling her cheeks flush. “Still attached. Barely.”

They all laugh, Flint tossing her a piece of toast.

Ginny smiles wider and reaches for the pumpkin juice.

After breakfast, Malfoy walks out of the hall with her, Pansy and Goyle and Crabbe silent sentinels on either side.

Malfoy is still single-mindedly reliving their victory. “Did you see the way I grabbed that snitch from under his nose?” he says, arm reaching out as if to reenact the play.

That’s not exactly the way it happened, but Ginny smiles nonetheless, tucking her books into her chest and nodding along.

She’s one of them now. Really and truly. And being one of them means having people to walk with in the halls, and sit with at meals. And after classes every day, she has a shiny, expensive amazing broom to ride, one she knows her brothers are jealous of down to the bone. It’s more than she ever could have hoped.

Still, when she passes a poster of Sirius Black in the halls one day, she finds herself staring at him screaming out silently from a tattered page. She wonders what it was, that final straw that made him break, that made him kill. A year ago she would have looked away, unable to face it. Now she’s mesmerized and doesn’t know why.

But none of that really matters, because she has Quidditch. It emboldens her, the cold fingers of air in her hair, gravity pulling and fighting for control of her flesh. She is its master. She doesn’t believe in the fall, only the climb.

She and Smita even talk sometimes now, about more than simple potion ingredient requests. It’s… nice.

Nice is enough. She’s tired of being alone.

Laughing along with Malfoy and his friends as they walk in the halls, Ginny keeps her eyes straight ahead when she passes a poster of Sirius Black.

She knows what she’s doing.

*
She’s climbing down into the common room after a potions lesson when she hears familiar voices floating up the stairs.

“What’s going on with you and the Weasley girl, Draco?” Pansy asks, voice shrill with disapproval.

Ginny comes to an abrupt stop, her school books bumping against her hip.

“You’ve got her trailing around after you like a house elf.”

Ginny waits, stupidly, for Malfoy to defend her. To point out that she’s on the House Quidditch team. That she’s valuable. That she’s one of them.

Instead, he drawls, “I know. Isn’t it pathetic? You spend five seconds being nice to her and she falls all over herself to be your best friend.”

Ginny feels her stomach plummet into her toes as the harsh laughter echoes into the stairwell.

“Did you see the tattoo?” Pansy asks. “I can’t believe she let you do that. She must be desperate.”

They all laugh again, Malfoy’s sniveling sound right in the middle of it.

“Let me guess, Draco,” a high, nasally voice Ginny identifies as Blaise Zabini says. “You have plans for her.” She can’t see his lecherous smile, but it’s all there in his voice.

“Can you imagine?” Malfoy responds with a scoff. “Snogging Weasel’s tiny baby sister? It would destroy him.”

There’s more laughter ringing throughout the space, and Ginny abruptly turns, wanting to slap her hands to her ears. She feels like sliding down the wall, collapsing onto the steps, but knows that if she does that, she may never get back up again.

She supposes this is what gravity winning really feels like.

Smita touches her arm, and Ginny jerks under the touch. She doesn’t need the reminder that her humiliation has an audience. The hand only grows more insistent though, so Ginny forces herself to look up.

Smita looks straight at her. No pity, no amusement. “I’m hungry,” she says like this is just another boring History of Magic class. “You?”

Ginny stares back at her in utter numbness.

Smita’s hand tugs at her arm, and Ginny lets herself get pulled away.

They eat in silence.

* * *

Quidditch isn’t fun anymore, and that’s the biggest insult of all.

Malfoy still drawls her name in the halls, winking at her on the Quidditch pitch, and she’s ashamed to admit she doesn’t do anything about it. She doesn’t stop to talk like she would have before or anything, but neither does she tell him off.

She doesn’t let herself think too hard about why.
Instead she puts on a brave face during the day and carries on like nothing has changed. At night, she learns to swallow her tears like another weakness. Learns to swallow them and not choke. She finds herself reaching for her trunk sometimes, for pages that aren’t there and only ends up hating herself even more for the impulse.

She never wanted to feel like a ghost again, no matter how much easier it might be.

“You know,” Smita says one day while she’s pounding a tentaculus pod to paste with a steady *thud, thud, thud*. Her voice is as close to sharp as Ginny has ever heard it. “Lucius Malfoy was sacked from the Board of Governors over the summer.”

Ginny’s eyes swivel to her, her fuzzy brain trying to figure out just what that is supposed to mean. What does she care about Lucius Malfoy?

Smita shrugs. “I’m just saying.”

At dinner, Ginny sits a few spaces down from Malfoy, close enough to watch, but not close enough to talk. She watches his normal calm assurance, his inherent aura of superiority, but she thinks there’s something right underneath. Something that makes her think of those screaming posters of Sirius Black again.

She watches him laze his way through practices, but hears the way he constantly brings up the brooms, his father. Brings them up far too often.

She notices a lot of things now that she’s bothering to look.

In potions, Ginny turns to Smita, pulling up her sleeve to bare the green stain on her wrist. “Do you think you could help me get rid of this?”

Smita gives her a long assessing look. Eventually she nods. “Yeah. I can try that.”

Ginny considers that maybe she’s had an ally she never noticed before.

Despite everything they come up with though, they can’t remove the tattoo. It remains stubbornly inked in place. Like a reminder, Ginny thinks.

But Smita does help her learn to magic the alcohol from her cup before drinking it without saying a single word. (“NEWTs level magic,” Smita says with a hard gleam in her eye that Ginny is beginning to find intensely comforting.) The team simply begins to compliment her on her ability to handle her drink.

She smiles and tugs her sleeve down lower over her wrist.

*

Most days Ginny can’t decide if she’s more angry with Malfoy or with herself. How stupid has she been?

At practice, she imagines flinging his father’s precious broom to his feet as if it is nothing to her, a mere trifle. She would raise an eyebrow, hand on one hip like an old friend returning to roost. “There aren’t enough brooms in the world, Malfoy,” she imagines saying, the rest of the team looking on.

She is too good to dismiss, she reminds herself. She is too important to victory, and this is another sort of power. She is a much better chaser than Malfoy is a seeker. And it’s with that realization that she begins to understand that Malfoy’s sudden acceptance of her had as much to do with her
Chamber of Secrets fame as his father’s loss of position. Malfoy needs her, not the other way around.

He wouldn’t be able to do anything about her rejection, his face burning scarlet as they walked out onto the pitch.

She closes her eyes and imagines it with triumphant clarity.

Only she doesn’t do any of those things. Instead, when the time comes for their next match, she waits until the rest of the team has shuffled outside and carefully places her Nimbus 2001 back in the equipment trunks. There is a sharp little pain in her chest as she lets the shiny, smooth handle go, but she forgets it quickly as she plucks up an old familiar Cleansweep, the wood rough under her palm.

This weightlessness she feels has nothing to do with broom-make.

Ginny scores twelve goals and watches with grim satisfaction as the Hufflepuff seeker flies circles around Malfoy. Fancy brooms are not all they are stacked up to be, it seems.

She tosses a startled Cedric Diggory a brilliant smile as she steaks past and laughs loudly into the wind. This is better than belonging. It might even be better than winning. Ginny swerves towards the goal posts, determined to do her best to keep them ahead.

In the end though, it’s Diggory who grabs the snitch while Malfoy is dawdling on the wrong end of the pitch.

Ginny touches down as the stands empty out. Hufflepuff celebrates loudly in the middle of the field.

“Great flying, Ginny,” Harry says as he passes by with a gaggle of Gryffindors.

She’s got mud in her teeth and sweaty hair plastered to her neck, but she doesn’t much care. She’s not a little girl with a butter dish on her elbow anymore. “Thanks,” is all she says.

He doesn’t linger. The next match is between the two of them for the championship, after all. And Ginny has no intention of losing that too.

Fred and George stop by as well, but mostly just to ask her if she’s lost her bloody mind, willingly giving up a Nimbus 2001 for an old school-owned Cleansweep. She just smiles and lets them think what they want. She doesn’t expect them to understand. How could they? Their lives have always been exactly what they expected them to be.

She supposes that makes them lucky.

Malfoy is smart enough to notice something has shifted, that his gift has been thrown back in his face, even if only metaphorically. But as she suspected, he can’t do anything about it. Not when he’d failed to catch the snitch and she’d nearly single-handedly made up the difference.

Still, he and his cronies start sneering at her across the breakfast table. At least it’s honest, she thinks.

She smiles back at them like this is nothing and helps herself to a second plate of eggs. Flint flops down next to Ginny and starts arguing with Bletchley over what new drills they are going to have to integrate into practice if they are going to beat Gryffindor. Double practices all next week, he declares.

“What do you think, Six?” he asks her.

They don’t seem to care what broom Ginny flies, as long as she keeps scoring. She lifts her chin.
“I’m up for it,” she says.

Still, nothing feels quite the same anymore. She can see the cracks now, hear the hollow ring of people only saying what they think people want to hear.

She convinces herself this is a lesson well learned.

*

They don’t win the match against Gryffindor.

It’s strange to look across the pitch and see two brothers and an old childhood crush on the other side. She thinks, before her first few goals, her brothers may have been going easy on her. That didn’t last after the first time she unerringly slammed a Quaffle home past Wood.

Still, in the end it comes down to the simple fact that Gryffindor outplays them. And Harry Potter once against claims the snitch while Malfoy plays the fool.

The Gryffindor are in a triumphant dogpile in the middle of the pitch, Harry lost somewhere under the tangle. Malfoy is glaring at them a few feet away, brushing his hair back from his face with jerky motions. Defeat doesn’t look good on him.

He catches her watching him, his expression hardening and she raises one eyebrow at him, her eyes deliberately straying to his broom. The insult is clear. His face flushes, and Ginny turns away, falling in step with a cursing Flint.

Losing sucks. Ginny can’t deny it. But she thinks as Smita meets her at the edge of the pitch, that at least she’s beginning to see things for what they really are. That has to be worth it. Right? (But, oh, does it have to hurt this much?)

“Sorry you lost,” Smita says in that particular way of hers (not cold, Ginny is realizing, just steady).

Ginny shrugs. “There’s always next year.”

Smita nods and mentions a rune she thinks Ginny might be able to carve into the handle of her broom for better rapid deceleration.

Ginny smiles. This time, she thinks she may actually mean it.

*

The rest of the term passes in a flurry of exams and farewells and a mass murderer breaking out of the castle (on a hippogriff, of all things, if school rumor is to be at all believed). Ginny wonders sometimes just how close she’d come to finding herself face to face with Sirius Black in a dark corridor, what she might have done in that situation.

She gets a sick little thrill in her stomach at the thought. She’s still pretty sure she has questions, just no idea why she thinks he may have the answers.

Ron is back out of the infirmary before she even gets a chance to go visit him. When she does manage to track him down in the halls between classes the last day, he, Harry, and Hermione are even more tight-lipped and inscrutable than usual.

She’s risking making them all late for class by flagging them down, but it’s not like Ginny can just pop on down to the Gryffindor common room to make sure Ron is okay.
“What?” Ron complains, impatience clear in his voice. Annoyance at his stupid kid sister.

She holds back her flinch, hand compulsively pulling her sleeve down lower over her wrist. (Oh, *Merlin*, one of these days she is going to have to wear a short sleeve and then life is going to get really loud if Molly Weasley has anything to do with it.)

“I’m just glad you’re okay, Ron,” she mumbles in a rush, tucking her books into her chest and turning back down the way she came.

She hears the solid smack of hand against flesh and a disgruntled “Ow!” from Ron, but doesn’t turn back to look.

Ginny spends the train ride to London sitting next to Smita. A few first year Slytherin girls sit across from them, their eyes nervous as they goad each other with silent communication. Clearly they are here on a dare of some sort. The bold one of the group finally manages to speak about an hour into the trip, and Ginny braces herself for inquiries about Malfoy, about the Chamber, about her stupid Gryffindor brothers.

“You’re the first girl on the Slytherin Quidditch team in over a decade,” the girl says in a rush.

Ginny frowns. “Really?” She hadn’t actually even noticed. If she had, she wonders if she still would have had the nerve to try out.

The three girls nod in unison, staring at her, not like a freak or an outsider or even a *girl*, but like she’s a…hero.

“Well,” Ginny says, swallowing against the discomfort rising in her throat. “It’s probably about time that changed then.”

“Yes,” the bold one says with a glimmer in her eye that Ginny recognizes all too well.

Next to her, Smita’s shoulder casually bumps against hers. “Hey,” she says, nodding towards the passing trolley, the tiniest hint of something that only on Smita would be considered a smile. “I’m hungry. You?”

Ginny bites the inside of her lip. “Yeah,” she agrees. “Me too.”

The rest of the trip does not pass in silence.

Maybe, Ginny thinks, this is what belonging is really supposed to feel like.

*

Back at the Burrow, Ginny kneels on the edge of her mother’s garden. The sun is warm on the back of her neck, her hands cool in the dark soil.

A shadow falls over her, and she looks up to see Ron standing over her. She lifts an eyebrow, surprised to see him. Of all her family, it’s always been with him that she feels the greatest tension, the greatest distance, like he can’t quite bring himself to forgive her for the treasonous act of being sorted a Slytherin.

But now, in the summer sun, he kneels next to her in the dirt and says, “How are you, Gin?” in a soft, confused voice that makes her ache in unexpected places. He may not be the most emotionally enlightened boy in the world, but he’s the sort to always rectify things when he finally figures it out, not matter how much it costs.
“I’m good,” she says, partly because she believes it will be true someday and partly because she knows this is what he needs to hear.

Ron nods, yanking up a marigold in his distraction. The tension hasn’t quite left his shoulders yet. He hasn’t talked much about what happened that day he broke his leg, the day Sirius Black escaped from Hogwarts, no matter how much Fred and George harass him for details. She has some ideas though, what that might have been like.

“I’m sorry about Scabbers,” she says.

Ron’s face blanches, but it’s not grief, rather something a bit like disgust. He recovers after a moment, clearing his throat. “Yeah, well, he was old.”

She’s long since learned to see through his bluster to the affection hidden underneath—a little sister’s prerogative—but this is something different than indifference towards a careworn hand me down.

She stops him from mangling another of their Mum’s beloved marigolds. “Ron?”

He looks at her, blinking slightly as if surprised to still see her there. He grimaces, shaking his head. “It’s just… It’s strange the way things aren’t always what they seem, innit?”

It’s really the last thing she expects to hear from him, but so close to her own thoughts these days that she can’t help the feeling of kinship.

“Except Malfoy,” she says, a peace offering of sorts. One thing they can agree on.

He doesn’t react right away, as if expecting a trap, but then a smile slowly spreads over his face. “Yeah,” he says. “He’s pretty much exactly the git he seems.”

They laugh together, and for a moment it’s like that last year when it was just the two of them left at the Burrow. His shoulder bumps hers, and she kicks her feet out, leaning back on her arm next to him. They sit like that for a while, just enjoying the sun, chore momentarily forgotten.

Ginny glances up at the white ball of fluff that is never far from Ron’s side these days, much to his seeming annoyance. He still hasn’t explained how the bird managed to just randomly adopt him.

“Have you named your owl yet?”

Ron glances up, automatically scowling at the owl. “No.”

She peers at the owl for a moment, pretending to think hard. “Pigwidgeon.”

“What?” he asks, frowning at her.

“Pigwidgeon,” she repeats. “It’s perfect.”

The owl chirps and loops above Ron’s head in approval.

“Pigwidgeon?” he repeats in horror. He glances up at the owl nearly vibrating with pleasure above them. “Bloody hell, Gin!”

Ginny laughs, pushing to her feet and tripping down the slope of the garden, the newly christened owl hooting in her wake.

She doesn’t stumble.
Year Three

Chapter Notes

There is only one week left of summer when Molly Weasley finally notices her daughter’s tattoo.

Ginny has just begun to feel like maybe she got away with it. She made a trip down to Ottery St. Catchpole at the beginning of the summer, wandering into the Muggle cornershop with a stolen handful of her father’s Muggle currency. Foundation, the potion-like substance was called.

She’s grown complacent, between her long sleeves and the sticky flesh-colored substance. The weather has turned hot though, the sheen of sweat on her skin betraying the green lines as she reaches for the butter.

All movement at the table stops until Molly Weasley shrieks, “Ginevra Weasley, what is that?”

Fred and George are the first out their seats, sending her awed looks back over their shoulders as they go, as if she has pulled off the greatest single piece of misbehavior ever. Percy clucks his tongue in dour disapproval and goes straight upstairs, mumbling something sanctimonious about cauldron thickness as he flees. Only Ron hesitates, as if their newly forged truce requires it, but no amount of sibling accord can stand in the face of Molly Weasley at full volume.

He shoots her an apologetic glance and ducks out into the garden after the twins.

Ginny doesn’t see any purpose in bluffing at this point, lifting her chin and letting her sleeve fall further back. “It’s a tattoo,” she says calmly (or petulantly, more like, the words tumbling out as if saying that only an idiot wouldn’t know that).

Her father’s eyes narrow at her tone, but Mum jumps in before he can get a word in edge-wise. The ear-splitting complaints range from unladylike and long-term consequences to irresponsibility and had she completely lost her mind?

Ginny lets the rant wash over her, reflecting that Howlers really have nothing on her mum. She takes a moment as her ears ring to be thankful for the acres of space around their house, and the fact that neither Hermione nor Harry have arrived yet. The last thing she needs is an audience for this.

It only becomes unbearable when she makes the mistake of glancing at her father, finding him staring at her pale-faced as if she is a stranger, like she has disappointed him in some fundamental way she doesn’t even understand.

Her own expression falters, bravado leaking away. She blinks back against the unexpected prick of tears, tugging at the edge of her sleeve. The words are on the tip of her tongue now, the it wasn’t my choice and you don’t understand.

Ginny looks away. She’s not going to blame someone else for it, not when it had been her own damn fault.

“You are staying home from the Quidditch match!” Mum yells.
Ginny’s mouth drops open, discomfort forgotten. “Mum!”

Only Dad’s hand on her shoulder keeps Ginny from beginning to shriek in indignation herself. They can’t not let her go to the World Cup. They can’t!

“Ginny,” Dad says, voice quiet and infinitely calm in the face of Mum’s ringing anger. “Please go outside while your mother and I discuss this.”

Ginny stomps outside, leaving her parents to discuss their most wayward child. With an irritated huff, she sinks down on the top step.

Ron comes to stand next to her after a while, staring out over the pasture. “Who?” he asks.

Ron may be stupid and clueless about a lot of things, but he’s close enough in age to know that second years rarely come up with the idea of tattooing themselves on their own.

Ginny folds her arms around her knees, pulling them tight into her chest.

Ron’s mouth tightens, pressing into a thin line, and she knows she doesn’t even have to say the name. “Right,” he says.

He goes back inside, closing the door with enough careful deliberation that Ginny winces.

She can’t help but think she’s thrown another log onto an already raging fire.

* * *

There’s no more talk of tattoos and punishments, but only because Hermione arrives the next afternoon.

Ginny is relieved to see her. Not because they are close friends or anything, but because Hermione’s brought her parents along the first evening, so Ginny knows there won’t be any more scenes. Her mum can continue to slam food down in front of Ginny and level her most disappointed stares, but she won’t yell. They have to be pleasant in front of the nervous Muggles, prove that leaving their daughter here for the rest of the summer isn’t a completely crazy idea.

It’s Hermione’s first time here, so while the adults have tea in the parlor, Ron takes Hermione on a tour. Ginny watches him as he leads her around, his eyes wary as if scared of what she’ll think of the place. Right up until Hermione nearly crawls into a bush trying to get a closer look at a garden gnome. Then Ron shove his hands into his pockets as he watches Hermione, shaking his head in seeming exasperation. Ginny doesn’t miss the smile hiding underneath.

At dinner, Ginny ends up sitting next to Mr. Granger. In many ways he looks exactly like she’d expect a Muggle to. He’s wearing a nice suit and button up shirt that manages to not look anywhere near as fussy as Percy’s ministry getups these days. He cuts his food into small, even pieces and chews thoughtfully, even when he’s trying to pretend he hasn’t seem Mum float more rolls over from the pantry.

Ginny would expect her father to keep Mr. Granger busy with an endless litany of embarrassing questions, but tonight he’s oddly quiet. Enough so that Mr. Granger looks a little lonely with only his plate to entertain him. Ginny takes a careful sip of water and asks Mr. Granger what exactly a dentist is.

Mr. Granger smiles and explains his job in simple terms, not like she’s stupid, but more like he’s gratified by her curiosity. He tries to make a joke that goes way over her head, though to judge from
Hermione’s expression, it probably wouldn't be funny even if it hadn’t. Ginny smiles anyway, noticing the way Mrs. Granger looks at her husband with exasperated affection, something she’s seen on her mother’s face her entire life.

Ginny decides that Mr. Granger is probably a pretty good father.

When it’s time to clear the table, Ginny takes Mr. Granger’s plate, finding Dad watching her as she does.

Later that evening, he pokes his head in Ginny’s room as she and Hermione are going to bed. “Do you have everything you need, girls?”

“Yes,” Hermione says. “Thank you, Mr. Weasley.”

Dad smiles at her, patting the foot of the camp bed a bit awkwardly before moving over to Ginny’s bedside. His fingers fiddle with her covers, and Ginny wants to remind him that he hasn’t tucked her in for years, but lets him do it all the same.

He sits on the edge of her bed and lowers his voice. “Your mother and I decided that you can still go to the match.”

Ginny’s heart leaps up into her throat. “Thank you!” she says, throwing herself at him and hugging him. “Thank you, thank you!”

His arms tighten around her.

* * *

Ginny Weasley is at the World Cup.

The World Cup. Watching the final match between Bulgaria and Ireland.

It’s the most exciting thing that has ever happened to her. (She supposes there was a time she would have thought first laying eyes on the famous Harry Potter was more exciting, but she’s not quite that young and silly any more. And besides, he’s standing next to her, gaping around at the stadium with as much awe as she feels.)

She never thought she could be lucky enough to see the Quidditch match to end all Quidditch matches in person. Bill and Charlie are no doubt still green with envy, stuck as they are abroad. They were even more jealous when they heard their seats are in the top box along with the ministers. (This is the part Percy seems to care the most about, Quidditch a mere afterthought. Ginny can’t help but think that Charlie would have appreciated it all so much more.)

As for Ginny, she would have been content to sit on the grass far, far below and break her neck trying to squint up at the distant players streaking above. Anything just to be near this match and these players. The box and its illustrious inhabitants are more distraction than bonus.

“It’s bigger than the bloody Burrow,” Ron mutters, tinkering with the set of Omnioculars Harry bought him.

“I imagine most things are,” a snide voice remarks.

It seems they are to have company in the top box. Ron, Harry, and Hermione turn on the newly arrived Draco Malfoy almost as a unit, and it’s hard to say which face betrays the greatest amount of animosity among the four of them.
Draco hasn’t come alone, however, his parents a few steps behind.

Ginny feels her body go cold.

Lucius Malfoy’s eyes sweep across them, not lingering on Ginny as he makes some snide remark to her father that she can’t quite make out over the buzzing building in her ears. When Mr. Malfoy does turn his attention away from her dad, it’s only to stare at Hermione like she’s a bug, a disgusting smell he just walked past.

*Mudblood.*

Ginny flinches, but Hermione holds firm, refusing to look away from the frank stare Mr. Malfoy is giving her.

Ron and Harry have already tensed, ready to jump into the fray, but it’s Ginny who finds herself shuffling closer to Hermione as if to shield her somehow. (Like she could do anything against a full-grown wizard, and an evil one at that.) She really accomplishes nothing more than drawing attention to herself.

Mr. Malfoy’s eyes land on her like he’s only just noticed her, like it even takes him a minute to figure out who she is. She is nothing to him. Less than that. It’s a painful realization, this evidence of just how casually he condemned her to Tom Riddle’s ceaseless whisper years before without giving her a second thought.

“Ah, yes,” he says, eyes glacial. “The youngest Weasley. You play Quidditch with Draco, if I recall.” He glances up at her father. “In Slytherin.” His lips curl as if this fact fundamentally proves something.

Ginny wonders if it does.

Her Dad’s hand presses down on her shoulder, warm and comforting. “We’re very proud of her,” he says, an edge of fierceness under his calm tone. “She’s said to be the best player on her team, despite her age.”

Draco flushes, his father’s lips pulling back from his teeth with distaste. She wonders if he is more pained by the slight to his son, or the fact that he can’t really defend his woeful Quidditch skills.

Harry unexpectedly pipes in. “She’s brilliant,” he agrees, though it’s probably more a dig at Draco than a compliment to her.

Ludo Bagman blunders in then before things can become more tense, his glistening, child-like face split wide with excitement.

“Let’s get the match started!” he says with a clap of his hands.

Ginny turns and blindly heads for the front of the box, leaning hard against the railing. Staring down over the writhing crowd, she lets the swoop of vertigo shake the crawling itch of the Malfoys’ presence off her skin.

“Ginny?” Hermione asks, appearing next to her and looking for all the world as if there aren’t people who hate her standing a few feet away. Ginny wants to know how she can do that.

“Here come the mascots,” Ron shouts, pointing.

In the rush to get the best view, Ginny ends up wedged in between Harry and Hermione, enveloped
in the group. It feels surprisingly nice.

Once the match starts, the noise of the crowd is deafening, even in the top box. Ginny forgets Malfoy’s glare boring into her back in the face of the glitter and energy and soaring excitement of the two best Quidditch teams in the world squaring off against each other. She won’t let them ruin this.

The Bulgarian seeker drops in a dive unlike anything she has ever seen before, and she and Harry are plastered up to the rail side by side, knuckles white.

“Did you see that?” she shrieks.

Harry lets out a whoop. “I know! That was amazing!”

His shoulder remains pressed against her the rest of the game, the hum of excitement from his body like the feel of a broom under her palms. Hermione occasionally grabs Ginny’s other arm, tugging on it with an excited squeal.

Ginny bounces on her toes and lets out a shout as Moran swoops and feints, sliding the quaffle home with an aching sort of grace.

Yes, Ginny thinks. One day this will be me.

The moment the match ends, everything becomes a blur of Quidditch stars and trophies and celebrations.

They talk it out for hours after, just how Krum pulled off that move, how he had been brave enough to end the game on his own terms. Hermione looks on with bemusement while Fred and George dance triumphant jigs around Ron. Harry leans across Ginny, his hand cutting a tight arc through the air as if to work out the specifics of a new technique. He half-trips over a root in his eagerness, and Ginny laughs as she grabs his arm to steady him.

“You may need to work on that one,” she comments.

Harry shoots her a sheepish grin and joins in with Fred and George’s mocking serenade of Ron.

Leaning her head back to look at the stars, Ginny thinks this must be one of those perfect moments that should be bottled up in a little glass jar and kept forever.

Too perfect.

She’s barely managed to close her eyes and dream of heart-stopping dives and the feel of a warm arm next to hers when screams and chaos shatter the night, sweeping them all up into a nightmare.

Wedged between Fred and George in the pitch-black, Ginny feels just how small she is, the sweep of panicked crowds on either side as the faceless wizards torture the Muggles like a little kid pulling the legs off a spider. She grips her wand in her pocket, but knows her small catalog of hexes won’t save her.

She stares up at the skull and snake floating in the air like a stain and tries to remember to breathe.

Even when dawn comes, everyone safely back home and away from the danger, it feels like something has changed, like the chaos was a signal the grown-ups were just waiting for.

Death Eaters.

Ginny feels it in the way they look at her.
There’s never been a witch or wizard who went bad that didn’t come from Slytherin.

They’re all thinking it. They just aren’t brave enough to say it. (And isn’t that ironic?)

She takes the stairs two a time and disappears up into her room.

* * *

Ginny’s room feels like an oven. It’s like the weather is doing its best to add to the already tense atmosphere. In some small attempt to cool down, she’s wrestling her hair up into a pony tail.

Hermione eases into the room like she’s going to apologize yet again for taking up some of Ginny’s precious space, a dance they already played the first night. Everything feels reset though now, like nothing can be taken for granted.

Ginny isn’t so stupid not to know why.

She’s finally worked it out, that horrified stare her father gave her upon first seeing her tattoo, finally understood as she stared up at a green stain in the sky with screams of fear on all sides. She knows why he watched so closely as she spoke to Mr. Granger.

Even if she could somehow manage to forget it, here it is again on Hermione’s face as she stares at Ginny’s exposed tattoo.

Ginny drops her arms, cursing that she didn't think to wear long sleeves despite the crushing heat.

Hermione doesn’t say anything, slipping into her camp bed.

Ginny douses the light and follows suit.

They don’t say goodnight. Ginny isn’t sure how much time passes, just feels thoughts and unspoken words heavy in the air between them.

“I don’t agree with them,” Ginny blurts when she can’t stand it any more. She keeps her eyes trained on the anemic flutter of the curtains above her. “Just so you know.”

Hermione doesn’t ask what she doesn’t agree with, or even whom. Slytherins? Death Eaters? Are they the same? Ginny’s scared to look for differences and not find any. The memories of careless and cutting words are far too clear.

Sticks and stones, she thinks.

Hermione still hasn’t said anything, and Ginny begins to hope that maybe she’s asleep and they won’t have to have this conversation. She chances a glance. Hermione’s eyes are wide open as she stares at the ceiling, sweat plastering strands of hair to her forehead.

“I didn’t assume--,” Hermione starts to say. “I mean, it doesn’t--. Really, it's not--.”

Ginny flinches with each unfinished, fractured thought.

Hermione lets out a frustrated breath and swings her feet to the ground. “It’s hot,” she announces, like this is root of all the world’s problems.

Ginny feels the bizarre urge to laugh, biting down on a snide remark about the brilliant deduction. Did you read about that in Hogwarts: A History?
Hermione gives Ginny a wry glance. Ginny has to remember that Hermione is perfectly familiar with the Weasley temperament.

“I could braid your hair,” Ginny says.

Hermione looks surprised.

“It would be cooler,” Ginny explains.

“Okay,” Hermione says, holding her gaze, and it feels like more than a simple agreement.

They sit in the windowseat, bodies turned towards the non-existent breeze. Ginny clumsily works through plaits of Hermione’s hair and waits for Hermione to speak. She swears she can hear the thoughts clanking around in Hermione’s head.

“I don’t like brooms,” Hermione announces after a while.

Ginny frowns. She leans to one side, noticing that Hermione is staring hard at her poster of Gwenog Jones. It’s possible she’s trying to apologize for not being as into Quidditch as the rest of them are. Harry and Ron must give her a hard time about that from time to time.

“I see,” Ginny says. Lack of interest in Quidditch may be unfathomable to Ginny, but it’s hardly a capital offense.

“Do you?” Hermione asks, turning her head. She doesn’t so much look embarrassed or apologetic as determined. “I’m supposed to be brave, aren’t I? But I’m terrified of brooms.”

Ginny feels her chest tighten, like someone just chucked a Quaffle into her solar plexus.

“Ginny?” Hermione asks, trying to turn further around and wincing.

Ginny realizes her fingers have tightened in Hermione’s hair. She forces her hands to relax.

“Well,” Ginny says, swallowing past the thickness in her throat. “While we’re confessing things, there’s something about me you should probably know.”

“Yeah?” Hermione says warily.

“Yeah. I’m rubbish at braiding.”

Hermione blinks, looking like an owl, before she laughs.

Breathing out, Ginny finishes Hermione’s terrible, crooked braid.

They sit on the sill together until the moon rises up and out of sight, a cool breeze finally fighting its way up over the pond.

* * *

September the first is always a day of chaos in the Burrow.

Mum is flitting back and forth between rooms and the kitchen and the washing lines out in the yard as usual. But as Ginny packs the last few things in her trunk, Mum is moving around her room, straightening her bedding even though it’s already been made and remade twice. Ginny recognizes hovering when she sees it.
Fred and George come in to help Hermione get her trunk down the stairs, leaving just Ginny and her still fiddling mother.

“Mum?” Ginny dares to ask. Things have been less frosty between them since Ginny almost got herself trampled by dark wizards, but no less strained.

“What?” she says, seeming surprised to find them alone. “Oh, yes.” She compulsively straightens the pillows on Ginny’s bed again.

“I’m almost done,” Ginny says.

“Good.” She looks like she wants to say something more, but instead pulls something out of the pocket of her apron. She presses a cool jar into Ginny’s hand. “Secrecy Salve,” she says, looking awkward. “It will work much better than that Muggle makeup.”

Ginny wants to say she’s sorry, but she doesn’t even know what she’s apologizing for any more.

Mum gives her a brief squeeze and disappears out into the hall.

Ginny tucks the jar safely into her trunk.

* * *

Hogwarts.

She’s glad to be back, ready to throw herself into things that are simple and predictable, like classes and Quidditch. Even the confusing minefield that is her House’s common room offers a sort of familiarity at least. This she can handle.

Only then Hogwarts decides to do to her what it does best: pull the rug out from under her feet. There isn’t going to be any Quidditch this year. Just two more classloads of strangers to be wary of and an archaic tournament she can’t participate in anyway.

Honor and glory? She’s more interested in surviving.

Next to her, Flint’s fist smacks the table, goblet of pumpkin juice jumping. “What a fucking waste.”

Ginny flinches, but reminds herself that this is even worse for him in some ways, being a seventh year and the team captain. That would piss her off too. “I take it you aren’t going to put your name in the Goblet,” she says.

He glances over at her as if surprised to see her. He lets out a humorless huff of air. “Yeah, Six. I think that’s pretty safe to say.” His brow furrows, and Ginny can feel herself changing in his eyes from chaser to useless third year.

He pushes to his feet. “See you around, Weasley,” he says, moving down to the table to talk to some other seventh years.

Just like that, she’s back to square one. Another first night spent lying in bed staring at her curtains with a long year stretching ahead of her.

Only then Smita climbs up on the foot of Ginny’s bed, clearly not willing to be put off by the black cloud hanging over Ginny’s head. She’s cut her hair, the dark strands now curling just below her chin. “How was your summer?” she asks.

Ginny shakes her head, only able now to think how it ended, the good days faded from memory. “A
disaster. You?”

Smita’s nose crinkles with distaste. “Cousins. Lots of them.”

They stare at each other a moment, expressions perfectly mirroring long-suffering annoyance. Then Smita’s lip twitches, and Ginny starts to laugh. Laughs long and hard until her stomach begins to ache with something other than disappointment.

They draw the curtains and sit in the cocoon of Ginny’s bed, talking until the wee hours of the morning, Smita’s weight heavy against her legs.

Ginny decides that maybe square one won’t be quite so bad after all.

* * *

For a while, classes and new subjects are substitute enough for Quidditch. Smita is still trying to convince Ginny that Ancient Runes was a much better choice than Care of Magical Creatures. Despite how much she’d love to be outdoors, Ginny is convinced enough when other students in their year start appearing back in the castle with singed fingers and sooty faces. At least Professor Babbling’s lessons rarely lead to physical injury. Besides, as much as Ginny hates to admit it, runes are pretty interesting.

In exchange, Ginny strong-armed Smita into Muggle Studies for their second elective. Probably because she knows it will make her Dad happy and she’s looking forward to having things to write to him about. Things he can relate to.

Professor Burbage pulls her aside at the end of the first day of class. “You’re Arthur Weasley’s daughter, aren’t you?”

Ginny looks up into her smooth, kind face and nods. “Yes, Professor.”

She smiles. “Would you tell him hello for me? We did a great deal of work together on the Muggle Protection Act. He’s a very dedicated, very kind man.”

“Of course, Professor,” Ginny says, feeling her face flush. She knows her father isn’t a Ministry big shot. Far from it, really. She isn’t embarrassed by that, she’s just heard her mother complain far too often over the years that he doesn’t get the credit he deserves. Dad doesn’t seem to care, but it still makes Ginny feel warm inside to hear someone say such nice things about him, to see the things Ginny admires in him.

Burbage touches her arm. “I’m glad you’re taking my class, Miss Weasley.” She says this like she knows exactly why Ginny is here, knows it has less to do with her father than she’d like to think.

Ginny gnaws on her lip, and mumbles something about not wanting to be late for her next class.

Burbage doesn’t single her out again, or treat her any differently than any of the other students, and Ginny’s glad. She decides she likes Burbage, who talks about Muggles not like they are the enemy or even wayward pets, but people. (Though Ginny still isn’t convinced those aeroplane things Muggles travel around in can possibly be safe. She’ll stick to brooms and floo powder, thank you very much.)

There’s only one other Slytherin in the class with them, a boy called Tobias. Despite the fact that Ginny and Smita have had all their classes with him since first year, they’ve never spoken. In the end, he’s the one to approach them. Class has just ended, the typical chatter of post-lecture freedom filling the room.
Tobias leans a hip against the edge of Ginny’s desk, his sandy hair falling into his eyes. “They all want to know what the Heir of Slytherin is doing taking Muggle Studies, in case you’re wondering,” he announces.

Ginny’s trying to figure out if he is mocking her or if people honestly still associate her with the Chamber. She glances around at the other students, most of them looking hastily away. She feels her face flush. “What, this isn’t the class where we learn how best to season Muggles before we eat them?” she snaps.

A few heads nearby whip around so fast that Ginny worries for their necks. Tobias simply looks surprised, his eyebrows lifting. “No,” he says. “I think that must be some other class.”

Ginny blinks at him, wondering what his problem is. It’s annoying to realize she’s just as confused by his presence in this class as the others are about hers.

“What other elective are you two taking?” he asks. “The care and tenderizing of magical creatures?” His lips twitch, and Ginny realizes he’s trying really hard not to laugh.

“Merlin,” Ginny curses, shaking her head and letting out a breath.

Smita’s eyes widen. “She didn’t mean--.”

“He knows, Smita,” Ginny says, touching her arm. “He’s just having a nice go at us.” Teasing her, really. And not the vicious kind she would expect. It’s kind of confusing.

Tobias presses his hand against his chest like he’s taking some sort of oath, and she’s beginning to wonder if she’s capable of taking anything seriously. “I would never.” He jerks his head towards the door. “Come on. Maybe we’ll learn something useful about basting in Potions.”

Ginny rolls her eyes, but grabs her books and follows Tobias out into the hall. “I suppose we are all going the same place.”

“That’s the spirit,” Tobias says, holding the door open for Smita. “We poor, outnumbered Slytherin need to stick together, after all.”

Ginny frowns, wondering what he means by that, but his attention has already turned to asking Smita if she thinks Muggle pets can really be as useless as they sound.

To Ginny’s surprise, Smita quirks her head and starts telling them both about a dog her father had as a child that her Muggle grandfather had taught to carry in the newspaper each morning.

She isn’t quite sure which shocks her most, that Smita isn’t a pureblood (aren’t all Slytherin supposed to be purebloods?), or that she’s talking with Tobias. Chatting, even.

When they get to Potions, Tobias leaves them to join his friends across the dungeon, and Smita notices the look on her face. “What?”

Ginny stows her bag and pulls out her cauldron, a grin playing at her lips. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

* * *

The weeks begin to slide by with greater and greater speed. Ginny still misses Quidditch more than she can properly express, feels a little lost without it. But she likes her classes and she has Smita to talk to. Even Tobias is pretty amusing from time to time, when he isn’t being a complete berk.
Though by the time the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students arrive at the end of October, Ginny is already sick of the Triwizard Tournament. It’s all people have been talking about for weeks, and she thinks if she hears the phrase ‘honor and glory’ one more time she’s going to lose it.

Though seeing her brothers get knocked back by the Goblet’s Age Line sporting matching grandfather beards is almost worth all the fuss and bother. Almost.

Only then things take a turn for the worse.

Sitting in the Great Hall on Halloween, Ginny thinks that she should have seen this coming: Harry Potter getting himself swept up in the middle of everything, rules be damned.

For about half a second she believes it. Believes Harry Potter has been stupid and brash and arrogant enough to bend all the rules to his fame, but then she turns to stare at him like everyone else. She sees it, the way he flinches back as if wishing he could melt into the very woodwork itself. This isn’t guilt, Ginny recognizes, having seen more than her fair share of it growing up. It’s something more like…terror. It makes her think of a battered boy staring across ink-stained stones at her, the feel of a shoulder against hers as brooms sped through the air.

Harry sends a panicked look to Ron as he flounders, but her brother is looking at the floor, his ears tinged red enough to be seen all the way from where Ginny is sitting. Hermione has to shove Harry to get him moving.

He looks so small, walking up the aisle towards Dumbledore between the rows of fully grown Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students. Ginny bites down on her lip and watches his progress, trying to pretend that she doesn’t see that Dumbledore looks more worried than a wizard of his power and position has the right to.

Once Harry disappears out the door after the other champions, the hall erupts into chatter, Harry’s name floating above the din with varying levels of sharpness and venom.

Cheater, they call him. Glory hound. Full of himself.

Even Rita Skeeter talks about him like that in the papers.

They don’t know the real Harry, Ginny thinks, remembering the boy tripping over his own feet in his excitement over something as simple as Quidditch, the way his eyes still grow large over things she’s long since learned to take for granted. He may be a lot of things, but she can’t quite picture him doing this on purpose.

Over the next weeks, she watches from afar as Harry is ostracized, turned into a walking pariah. She watches the way he tries to pretend it doesn’t bother him, knowing with absolute certainty that the other students’ vicious scorn is nothing to him next to the desertion of her stupid brother.

She remembers the look on Ron’s face as he first showed Hermione around the Burrow. His utter dismay at moldy old dress robes as Harry stood nearby with a brand new set. She’s always silently wondered what it would be like, having someone like Harry Potter as a best friend.

Oh, she understands her brother perfectly well. Well enough to know that no word from her will change anything, or make him understand that abandoning his best mate because of his festering jealousy doesn’t make him a hero, just a wanker.

So Ginny doesn’t talk to Ron, just walks in the grounds with Hermione occasionally, letting her vent her spleen about the stupidity of boys. She looks exhausted, spending all her time running back and forth between Harry and Ron like an overworked owl. So much so that Ginny wants to smack some
sense into both boys. Or hex them. She still hasn’t decided.

“I worry about him,” Hermione confesses once between classes.

“Ron?” Ginny asks, thinking of her brother’s pale and set face, the way he walks around like he’s beginning to suspect he wandered down the wrong path but refuses to admit it.

Hermione shakes her head. “Harry. I think he’s terrified, but refuses to admit it. Any more than he’ll admit that he misses Ron like an amputated arm.” She gives Ginny a shaky smile. “They’re rather pathetic without each other.”

Ginny tries to smile back, thinking that Hermione isn’t any happier herself.

Two days later, Draco’s stupid badges appear, and Ginny’s had enough. She tells Smita that she’ll catch up with her and slips down a different hallway. It doesn’t take her long to find him, particularly with the swath of open space that seems to float around him these days.

When she gets close enough, she makes a grab for Harry’s sleeve. She tries not to notice the way his eyes track to her robes as if expecting to see ‘Potter Stinks’ blazoned there. She can’t blame him for that, not really. It hasn’t been all that long since she walked the halls trailing after Draco, forced laughter on her lips.

“Ginny?” he asks, eyes guarded. (Trained to expect the worst from all sides, she thinks.)

She takes a careful breath, jaw tightening. “Ron’s a prat.”

Harry’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise, as if this is the last thing he expects to hear from her.

“But he’ll figure it out eventually,” she promises. He always does. This is what she needs Harry to understand. That her brother, for all his stupidity, is also honorable to a fault.

Harry tries to smile, but it’s just a grimace, and she doesn’t blame him. “You think so?” he asks, the tiniest painful bit of hope hiding under his forced humor.

Inexplicably, she feels the urge to give him a slap get replaced with the bizarre impulse to hug him. He is rather pathetic. Instead she squeezes his arm, giving him a bracing grin. “Good luck on the first task. I know you’ll do brilliantly.”

He doesn’t seem quite as optimistic, but still manages a grateful look. “Thanks, Ginny.”

She watches him go, knowing she hasn’t fixed anything, but hoping maybe he feels a tiny bit better. That maybe Hermione won’t have to worry quite as much.

“Aw,” a mocking voice drawls. “I think little Weasley has a crush.”

Ginny turns, colliding with Draco. Her face flushes, half with anger, half with the embarrassing memory of a stupid little girl struck speechless and clumsy by the very sight of Harry Potter.

Draco seems to take this as all the confirmation he needs. The Weasley’s support of Harry is no secret after all. His eyes dart down to her robe, something flinty and frightening taking up residence there. “You’ve forgotten your badge.”

“No, I really haven’t,” Ginny snaps. She moves to shove past him, but Crabbe and Goyle step across her.

Draco fingers his wand. “Maybe you’d like something a little more permanent?” He grabs her right
hand, twisting to expose her wrist. “A matching pair, perhaps?”

Her first year, as unspoken head honcho of the younger students, Draco mostly ignored her. She thinks maybe that was a matter of demonstrating daily that she wasn’t even worth his notice. Her second year things changed, her mystique rising in tandem with the Chamber of Secrets scandal and her position on the Quidditch team. But when she had subtly shown that she was not going to be in his pocket, the silent war had begun.

This year, Draco does not seem content with the silent part. She doesn’t have Quidditch to lord over him any more, and he’s more than aware of it.

All term he’s been talking loudly about Ginny’s poor family and Muggle-loving father, his stage whisper echoing through the common room. Did everyone hear that she’s taking Muggle Studies? Pathetic.

And what has she done about his verbal attacks? Nothing.

Ron, Fred, George…even Harry, they would have already drawn their wands, flown across the room to shut Draco up any way they could. She hasn’t.

She isn’t her brothers. That probably makes her a coward. (Not a Gryffindor, at the very least.)

Draco’s hand tightens around her wrist. “What do you say, Weasley?”

She wrenches away from him as hard as she can, his nails raking against her skin as she escapes. Ducking her head, she dives into the swarm of students, the sound of their laughter following after her.

* * *

“Ginevra,” a voice drawls. “Is that a love letter?”

Ginny looks up from her dad’s latest letter describing a new plug he’d found at something the Muggles call a ‘Swap Meat’. (Though what meat has to do with elektricity, she still doesn’t know. She’ll have to ask Burbage.) Tobias, sprawled on the Common Room floor with acres of notes spread around him, is wagging his eyebrows at Ginny.

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, yes. It’s from Heathcote Barbary. He wants to take me on tour with him.”

Tobias snorts. “Thought you had better musical taste than that.” Looking back up over his shoulder, he nudges Smita on the couch behind him. “How can you be friends with her?”

Smita bites her lower lip like she’s fighting off a smile and buries her face in her runes book.

Tobias and Ginny share a grin. It seems to have become one of Tobias’ greatest ambitions, trying to get Smita to laugh. Ginny wishes him luck with that insurmountable task.

Turning back to her letter, Ginny is interrupted yet again when a badge flies across the room, bouncing off her chest before landing on her lap. ‘Potter Stinks,’ it announces. She feels her smile fade.

Draco has been quieter in the common room since a seventh year grew tired of his heckling and told him to shut it. But that just means he’s always finding new ways to torment her.

Ginny brushes the button off her lap and goes back to her letter as if nothing happened.
Smita sighs. “I wish he’d just...give it up.”

Tobias picks up the badge, turning it over in his fingers. “Yeah, well,” he says, the badge disappearing into his pocket. “A bloke’s gotta have a hobby.”

Ginny wishes he’d find a different one.

“Anyway,” Tobias says, scooping up the papers and getting to his feet. “Thanks for letting me look at your notes, Smita.” He passes her a giant stack of parchment covered with her careful writing.

To Ginny’s endless fascination, Smita’s face flushes the slightest bit red. “Sure,” she says. “Any time.”

Tobias smiles at her, one of his hands scratching at his neck. “Yeah, well, I don’t plan on getting the firepox again anytime soon.”

The blush on Smita’s face deepens, her mouth dropping open. “Oh! I didn’t mean--.”

Tobias’ grin widens. “Course you didn’t.”

Ginny snorts, both of them turning to look at her.

“What?” Tobias says.


Tobias’ eyes narrow at her, promising later retribution. Ginny just smiles pleasantly back.

Tobias shakes his head in defeat. “See you later,” he says, abandoning the girls for his more macho guy friends, no doubt.

She watches him cross the common room, her eyes straying over Draco.

He leers at her, and Ginny lifts her letter, the words swimming in front of her.

* * *

At the first challenge, Ginny has to rethink her indifference to the Triwizard Tournament. It may still be a giant imposition and nowhere near as important as Quidditch, but it isn’t a total joke. Not to judge from the four enormous dragons waiting to eviscerate the champions.

“They can’t be serious,” Ginny says, trying very hard not to think of how small Harry looks from the top of the stands.

“Brilliant,” Tobias breathes, looking positively giddy at the prospect of carnage.

Smita doesn’t offer a comment, just clenches her hands against her mouth, eyes wide over her knuckles.

Despite Ginny’s misgivings, Cedric and Krum and Fleur do credible jobs. There are only two or three times she’s certain someone is going to lose an arm. (She’s only slightly disappointed not to see the glamorous Beauxbatons champion lose some of that shiny perfect hair of hers in a stray flash of dragon-breath.)

By the time it’s Harry’s turn, Ginny’s posture closely mirrors Smita’s.
Fortunately, Harry doesn’t get torn apart or reduced to a Harry-shaped column of ash, but instead faces his dragon (the biggest, meanest one, she’s sure) with a blinding sort of courage that she can’t help but admire, almost as much as she admires the way his broom becomes an extension of his body.

(She wonders if he misses Quidditch too, or if he’s too busy with the not dying and people glaring at him in the halls to bother.)

She sees Ron and Harry later, arms slung across each other’s shoulders, hands thumping each other’s backs in that jubilant way boys have. Like there’d never been a breach between them.

Hermione walks a few paces behind them. Ginny raises an eyebrow at her, and Hermione rolls her eyes in exasperation at Harry and Ron, the censure softened by the brilliant smile on her lips. *Boys,* she seems to say.

Ginny shrugs her shoulders in commiseration and turns back to Tobias and Smita, who are still debating the scores assigned by the judges.

Tobias throws his arms up. “No way Potter should have gotten that many points. He used the simplest spell ever!”

“No one else thought of it though, did they,” Smita counters. “Besides, you have to admit he flew very well.”

Tobias frowns. “Yeah. I suppose so. But I still say Fleur had the best…technique.” He gets a stupid grin on his face.

Smita doesn’t glare exactly, just gets this look on her face like maybe she wishes Fleur had gotten a bit more singed as well.

Ginny slows her steps and lets them get ahead of her as the crowds stream up towards the castle. Smita’s never said anything, but Ginny isn’t stupid.

This is how she ends up alone when Draco ambushes her. He shouts a spell she doesn’t know, something hitting her in the back like a gong, vibrating unpleasantly up her spine. It doesn’t particularly hurt, so she doesn’t immediately panic. Not until she tries to turn and face her attackers and realizes she can’t.

She’s completely immobilized, from toes to throat, her body frozen as if encased in ice.

It’s the worst thing she has ever felt.

Draco circles around in front of her, standing much too close. “You think you can pull one over on me, Weasley?” he hisses, holding up a badge. In her panic, it takes her eyes a while to adjust to what he’s trying to show her.

The badge no longer says *‘Harry Potter Stinks.’* It’s now stuck saying *‘Draco Malfoy is an inbred tosser.’*

Her eyes widen, not so much at the insult as the livid lines of Draco’s face as it occurs to her that she’s utterly helpless. She never wanted to feel this again.

**Pathetic.**

“Is there a problem here?”
Ginny’s tormentors look up to see Professor Snape approaching, and Draco drops his wand. Ginny feels her limbs soften and relax and wants to cry with the relief of it.

“Just practicing for Charms,” Draco lies, clearly comfortable in his assumption that their Head of House will choose his side.

Sure enough, Snape gives him an indulgent smile that makes Ginny’s teeth ache. *I’m in your house too*, she wants to say.

Snape’s eyes flit over her, catch, and then almost linger. “Is there something you wish to add, Miss Weasley?”

Draco gives her a threatening glance from behind Snape’s back.

She clenches her jaw, not sure which of them she hates more in that moment. “No, sir.”

Snape nods, black eyes glittering. “Then why don’t you move along.”

Draco and his cronies saunter off, and Ginny watches them go, willing her heartbeat back to a normal rhythm. She’s not sure if it’s fear or anger that is making her legs shake, but with Snape still there watching her, she forces herself to start walking, legs be damned.

Snape follows a few paces behind her all the way back up to the castle, as if he doesn’t even trust her to do that properly.

“Miss Weasley,” he says as she splits off in the entryway.

She turns back to look at him, not bothering to hide her blazing anger. “Yes, sir?” she asks, clipping the words short.

He looks taken aback, as if he hadn’t expected that sort of a response from her. But then his face clears, settling back into cool, uncaring lines, and she’s sure she imagined the glimmer of something almost…sad in his eyes.

His chin lifts. “No loitering in the halls.”

It takes her a moment to understand that he’s chastising her, when he’d been the one to stop her in the first place. “Yes, sir,” she says again, spinning on her heel and disappearing down the steps.

She can feel his eyes on her back as she goes.

“Ginny,” Smita says as she enters the common room. “Where did you--?”

But she must look almost as bad as she feels, because Smita stops talking mid-sentence and steers her to their dorm.

Her hands are still shaking.

Ginny spends the next thirty minutes calling Draco and Snape every dirty word she can think of.

“I didn’t even do it!” she exclaims, hands slapping down on her quilt. It’s the most galling part, not that Draco had done that to her, but that she hadn’t been brave enough to think of pulling the prank he’d been getting revenge for in the first place. She *should* have thought of it.

“It was Tobias,” Smita says, eyes wide and horrified.
“What?” Ginny asks.

Smita bites her lip, shooting her an uncertain look. “The badge. I’m sure he never meant for you…”

Ginny shakes her head. Lying down on the bed, she wraps her arms around her pillow. “It doesn’t matter.”

Smita curls up on the foot of the bed with her, her hand tight and comforting around Ginny’s ankle.

Ginny starts awake the next morning with Smita’s weight heavy across her legs and a voice ghosting her ears, fading dreams of ink stains and pulling strings and limbs moving without her control.

“Ginny?” Smita asks, blinking sleepily up at her from the foot of the bed.

“Cramp,” Ginny lies, pulling her legs up to her chest and rubbing at her calf.

“Sorry,” Smita says, sitting up and grimacing as she stretches her back.

The other girls in the room are stirring, and it’s time to get dressed and go down for breakfast and go to class like everything’s normal.

Normal.

* * *

In the weeks leading up to the Yule Ball, Ginny is careful never to be caught out alone in the halls. She isn’t sure what Smita has told Tobias, but the two of them seem to slip into an unspoken sort of buddy system.

Part of Ginny wants to make a caustic remark that Slytherin aren’t supposed to care like that, but it seems stupid and petulant and this is Smita she is talking about. Even Tobias seems sobered by what happened.

_We Slytherin need to stick together, after all._

She feels like there’s supposed to be a joke in there somewhere, but she doesn’t much feel like laughing.

In Potions, she looks up from time to time, almost certain she’ll find Snape watching her. He never is. Why would he be?

The night of the Yule Ball, Ginny sits up waiting for the older girls to return, wanting to listen to their stories of dancing and dresses and gossip. Maybe dream a little of a day she will be the one out late.

Only the bustling group of girls returning from the party are not laughing or yawning with weary satisfaction. They sweep into the common room in a frenzy of agitation and high-pitched voices, one of their numbers cocooned in the middle.

“He deserves to die,” one girl puts in.

Even from her hiding spot, Ginny can see the angry bruises rising on the skin of the girl standing in the middle, streaks of tears on her face. Tom cloth. It takes her a moment to put it all together, to work out the pronouns against the colors. When she gets it, she feels a prickle of fear work its way down her spine. She remembers not being able to move, being completely under someone else’s power.
Ginny can’t help but consider how fragile it is be to be a girl sometimes.

“Suffering is so much better,” another girl counters, seemingly not so much disturbed by the hypothetical murder as the limited opportunity for punishment.

The other girls chime in, plans swirling around the room. How they can get on the boat, sink it, curse the doors shut for all time, each idea more vicious than the last.

“Yes,” Theodora cuts across, the seventh year’s voice silencing all the others. She isn’t particularly tall or loud or even beautiful, isn’t technically Head Girl, but Ginny has seen the way everyone defers to her. The way she is in charge in all the ways that matter. “It will have to be public. Everyone needs to learn what happens when they try to take from a Slytherin.”

Things are quickly organized after that. One girls casts a charm on everyone’s faces. They aren’t transformed, just blurred. Try as she might, Ginny’s eyes keep sliding away from their faces like a raindrop down a window pane. With the dark hoods pulled up over their heads, they look enough like Dementors that Ginny feels a thrill of fear streak down her spine.

Ginny turns to find Smita sitting right next her, face a bit paler than usual, but calm all the same.

“I’m going,” Ginny decides, knowing somehow that she needs to see this unfold.

Smita swallows. “Okay.”

“You don’t have to…,” Ginny starts to say.

“If you go, I go.”

Ginny slips her hand into Smita’s, giving it a squeeze.

Hogwarts has taken a lot from her, including Quidditch, but following out after the older girls feels a lot like flying.

By the time they catch up with them, they’ve spirited Gregor out of the Durmstrang ship. They frogmarch him forward to stand in front of Liza, only recognizable by the torn hem trailing out of her robes.

“Is this him?” one of the girls (Ginny suspects Theodora) asks, her voice harsh and distorted.

“What?” Gregor tries to protest.

One of his keepers whips out her wand, snarling, “Petrificus totalus.” Gregor’s body snaps upright, only his eyes still wildly swiveling.

“Is this the boy?” Theodora repeats.

There’s a rustle of cloth that Ginny thinks may be a nod. “It is.”

“Did you tell him his attentions were unwanted?”

Liza’s hand flinches towards her shoulder. “Yes.”

“Did he listen?”

“No.”
“Do you swear upon your magical blood that this is true?”

“I do.”

“Very well.”

The circle of girls closes around Gregor.

Ginny is thirteen when she sees her first Unforgivable Curse up close. She knows she should be horrified, knows the punishment for these terrible crimes is a life in Azkaban, but watching the Durmstrang boy writhe and babble, beg for forgiveness, doesn’t seem so much evil as well deserved. What is more unforgivable, a nasty spell or the crime this boy committed?

Right?

*Might is right*, Tom reminds her, voice cruel and cutting.

Ginny and Smita watch as the girls force Gregor to write out a confession, his hands clumsy under the Imperius Curse. The girls then enlarge and copy and slather the walls with his words. It’s only when they bind him, a rope around his neck that Ginny shifts forward, her heart in her throat. Surely they wouldn’t--.

Ginny surges forward as they stand him up on balcony above the entrance. Smita grabs her arm, trying to hold her back, but Ginny shakes her off. Gregor goes over the edge with a muffled squeak.

Ginny must have made some noise of protest because they all turn to look at her, faces still warped and twisting, a ghostly layer hanging over their features like mist. For the tiniest moment, Ginny thinks, *This is it. I’m next.*

But the one Ginny suspects is Theodora raises her hand, the group of girls parting as if inviting Ginny to inspect their handiwork.

She isn’t sure how she gets her feet moving, just swallows hard against the tightness in her throat and steps quietly through the ranks.

There’s a whisper as she passes, a cool breeze fluttering across her face. It takes her a moment to register that someone has disguised her. To protect her or themselves, she doesn’t know. She leans over the ledge, her fingers pressing hard against the cold stone.

Gregor stares up at her with wide eyes, swaying side to side from a harness tied around his waist. Terrified, but very much alive.

She thinks maybe she should be horrified, that she should disapprove of this form of Slytherin cruelty. But all she feels is a grim beat of satisfaction, the corner of her mouth lifting.

When she turns back around, all of the girls have disappeared. Only Smita stands in the hall, hands pressed to her mouth.

Ginny scrambles over to her, grabbing her arm. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.” It wouldn’t do to be caught so close to the scene of the crime.

Smita doesn’t argue, letting Ginny drag her away.

* * *

Gregor’s body is found swinging over the entrance of the Great Hall the next morning, his eyes wide
as he screams soundlessly against his gag. And above him, written in his own hand, is his confession.

*I am a pervert and a thief. I tried to take from a Slytherin what she was not willing to give. For this I deserve to die.*

They’d made him believe it too, right up until the moment the rope around his middle stopped his fall—safe, but shaken. If there needed to be any more evidence of his fear, all one had to do was look at the suspicious puddle collected right underneath him.

It takes the professors almost an hour to figure out how to get Gregor down. It’s another two weeks before the signs fade. Long enough for every student at the school to witness the spectacle first hand.

As the days pass, the girls watch Ginny, eyes following her, and she suspects they are waiting to see if she is going to turn them in, go running to Snape or Dumbledore. They’ll have a long time to wait. She still doesn’t understand what happened that night, or how she feels about it, but she’s not going to run to a teacher. Not Snape, not McGonagall. She suspects they don’t have all the answers the way they want the students to think they do.

In the end, there’s no one to punish, not even after Gregor regains the ability to speak. He can only babble about faceless wizards in robes. This is yet another part of what it means to be Slytherin, Ginny learns. Just because they are willing to do the task doesn’t mean they are willing to take the fall for it.

It doesn’t keep the boys of Hogwarts and Durmstrang alike from sliding the Slytherin girls wary glances. Ginny feels it as she walks down the hall, the green of her uniform like a brand, a warning. For weeks, Ginny can’t think of that night without a strange swooping sensation unsettling her stomach. She doesn’t think it’s fear, but something else entirely. Something new and strange and somehow…incredibly right.

She wonders what that says about her.

In her dreams at night, Tom laughs long and hard, victory trilling in the sound.

* * *

The second task isn’t quite as exciting as the first, though no less tense. It’s just the entire school on the banks of the lake, standing around staring at the surface of the water until one by one the champions resurface, their hostages in tow.

Harry’s done well again (despite his best efforts to let his brain be overruled by rash bravery yet again), and as usual Draco seems to take that as a personal insult. But Harry is surrounded by admirers and well-wishers (funny how quickly things can change) and less well-wishing reporters (and how some things don’t), and Draco can’t touch him. Instead it’s time for his second favorite game.

He walks a few paces behind Ginny all the way up to the Castle, muttering insulting things under his breath the whole way. She’s tense in her shoulders, but not particularly worried as they are surrounded by other students.

Draco doesn't appreciate being ignored though, eventually stepping across her, opening his mouth as if to lay into her yet again.
Only nothing comes out. He just sort of croaks, one hand lifting to his throat. Like maybe he can’t breathe.

Ginny frowns, wondering what is going on. Before she can think better of it, she half-reaches for him to see if he’s okay.

He jerks back away from her, glancing down at her wand hand, still hanging empty and useless down by her side.

Ginny spreads her hands wide. Whatever this is, she hasn’t done it. He may try to blame it on her, but there are more than twenty witnesses to the fact that Ginny never even pulled her wand.

Draco starts panicking in earnest then, Goyle clawing at his throat as if to free him from something.

Just when she’s beginning to worry he’s going to suffocate, whatever has a hold of him seems to let go, Draco gulping in giant lungfuls of air as he hangs between Crabbe and Goyle.

Above the crowd, Ginny notices one of the Slytherin girls from the night of Yule Ball walking away, her long black ponytail jaunting behind her as she goes. Antonia, Ginny remembers. A fifth year. Not sparing a glance for the still gasping Draco, Ginny follows after her.

She catches up just as Antonia reaches the common room. “Did you…did you do that?”

Antonia’s eyes widen with fake innocence. “Do what?” Continuing ahead, she glides down the steps. Glides, like she’s incapable of doing anything less than elegantly, her entire life choreographed.

Ginny isn’t going to be put off that easily though, elegant exit or not. She’s convinced now that Antonia had been behind whatever happened to Draco. The why of it is much more confusing, but she can’t quite imagine asking Antonia why she’d bothered to help her, so instead she asks, “How did you do that?”

Antonia turns to Ginny like a conspirator, like she was just waiting for the question. “You know the best part of that little spell? It’s utterly untraceable. Even if someone were to inspect your wand, check prior spells, it only shows up as Accio.” She laughs, flourishing her wand. “It’s brilliant.”

“Is that…legal?” Ginny asks.

Antonia’s eyebrow lifts like this is the most ridiculous question Ginny could ever ask.

Someone else decides to answer the question. “I don’t think that’s what you’re really trying to ask.”

Ginny turns to see Theodora reading near the fire, her blond hair pulled back in a glossy, tight ponytail. Ginny glances at Antonia to gauge her reaction to this uncharacteristic interjection by the seventh year. She rarely lowers herself to the conversations of others.

Antonia just smirks at Ginny, a bit like oh now you’re in for it.

“What…” Ginny’s voice falters and she clears her throat. “What am I trying to ask?”

Theodora presses a finger to a line in her book to keep her place. “You didn’t seem to have an issue with legality the night of the Yule Ball.”

Ginny feels her stomach lurch. No. She really hadn’t. She had her chance to turn them in, to raise the alarm, to do anything other than simply watch and stay silent. But it’s still not the same as participating.
Isn’t it?

“You don’t really want to know if it’s legal or not,” Theodora says, eyes lifting to Ginny’s face as if asking a question.

Ginny gnaws on the inside of her lip. “I want to know if it’s right,” she says.

“They aren’t always the same,” Theodora says, something just slyly superior enough in her tone to put Ginny’s teeth on edge.

Ginny frowns. “And who decides that? You?”

Ginny hears Antonia suck in a surprised breath behind her, but doesn’t dare look back. It’s very possible she’s pushed too far, miscalculated, but she’s not going to turn tail and run, even if she should. Her back straightens, chin lifting.

Theodora surprises them both by smiling, something broad and faintly patronizing, but amused all the same. “That’s the interesting part,” she says, snapping her book shut and pushing to her feet. She steps closer to Ginny, towering over her by a good five inches. She’s only four years Ginny’s senior, but at this moment feels as if it might as well be five hundred.

Theodora reaches out towards Ginny’s face, and despite herself, Ginny flinches, not sure what to expect. Theodora’s smile broadens, her fingers pausing before sliding down a strand of Ginny’s hair. Leaning into Ginny, Theodora says, “You’re stuck deciding that for yourself.”

Ginny frowns, wanting to ask more questions, but Theodora is clearly finished with the conversation. With a brief nod to Antonia, Theodora sweeps from the room, moving past a wide-eyed Smita standing in doorway.

Antonia recovers, laughing as she pats Ginny on the shoulder. “Bloody hell,” she swears under her breath, amusement tingeing the words.

“What was that?” Smita asks, watching Antonia leave.

Ginny shakes her head, her knees still trembling. She has no idea.

* * *

Charms is one of Ginny’s favorite subjects. It’s a little chaotic but productive and almost every class is spent with wands in hand actually doing something, not discussing theory for hours as in Transformation, or worse, the endless drone of things that happened long ago in History of Magic. Smita prefers numbers and theory, but that’s just her nature. Ginny has always preferred the doing.

This year they’ve settled into sitting with a girl called Luna Lovegood. She’s a blond, willowy, dreamy Ravenclaw who is somehow incredibly likable in her own bizarre way. Smita doesn’t seem to mind Luna, despite the things she says sometimes. Luna may be weird, but she’s clever and takes the work seriously unlike some of their other classmates. That’s more than enough for Smita.

Ginny likes Luna for the simple fact that she may be odd, but she’s honest. Ginny likes talking with someone and knowing with absolute certainty that they mean everything coming out of their mouth, even if it is about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks or something equally crazy. It’s soothing.

For all they like Luna though, she’s still just a passing acquaintance. They don’t talk or hang out or meet to study. So when Ginny and Smita are stuck cleaning up a catastrophic cascade of ink
splattered all over the walls by a rogue spell, Luna leaves with everyone else.

Ginny shows Smita a useful siphoning charm she picked up from her mum, so they're able to make pretty quick work of it. By the time it’s all done, the last stragglers of their class are still lingering outside.

Ginny steps out into the hall just in time to hear a voice drawl, “Loony, loony Lovegood,” in a singsong voice, laughter echoing behind the taunt.

Two boys are standing in Luna’s path, blocking her way as they tease her. Ginny recognizes the blue and silver of their uniforms, identifying them as Ravenclaw. She wonders if being in the same house as Luna makes them feel like they have the right to ridicule her.

It’s time to walk away, to leave Luna to her own. Smita has already turned, a few steps down the hall to where Tobias is waiting. Ginny’s about to follow, only then one of the boy’s wands lifts, twitching as if to deliver a hex to go with the stinging words. Ginny remembers with shuddering clarity the feel of her body totally immobilized.

Her feet move her forward without any conscious thought.

“Oi,” Ginny snaps, stepping up behind the two boys.

“What?” they say.

The first boy blanches when he realizes who he is talking to. Not Ginny Weasley, but a Slytherin. For the first time that terrified look doesn’t make Ginny feel like a monster.

“Leave her alone,” Ginny says.

The second boy looks a little steadier, crossing his arms over his chest. “Or what?”

There was a time she wouldn’t have had the guts to stand under that challenge, would have preferred to walk away. Don’t draw attention to yourself. But, dammit, she likes Luna. And this isn’t right.

Ginny takes a small step forward, lifting one eyebrow the way she’s seen Theodora do. “Do you really want to find out?” she asks, fingers toying with her wand.

It starts off as nothing but bluster, a moment of make-believe, but she realizes in that moment that she will hex him if she has to, that she has that in her. She’s had years of practicing on her brothers after all, been standing up for herself her entire life. (And why, oh why had she forgotten that? Why had she tried to be something different?)

She can do this.

But Antonia’s voice is in her head, cautioning Ginny that it would be better not to hex the stupid gits out here in the hall in front of so many witnesses. Ginny smiles grimly at the properly Slytherin reasoning.

Her smile seems to make the bolder boy falter, just for a moment. He’s not a Gryffindor, after all, not one to be fueled to stupidity by bravery. So when Smita steps up next to Ginny, Tobias by her side, the Ravenclaw boy backs away, clearly having done the maths. He scowls at her, but turns away.

Smart, those Ravenclaw.

The remaining students who have loitered long enough to see the outcome all turn to each other in a
rush, whispers and shouts echoing against the stones as they rehash what just happened.

Ginny stows her wand and turns to Luna, who has been watching the proceedings with wide-eyed placidity, as if she’s wondering just what all the fuss is about.

“Would you like to go down by the lake and work on our Charms homework?” Ginny asks.

It hurts a little bit, the way Luna beams as if she’s been given the keys to some hidden paradise. “Oh, yes. That would be lovely. I’ve been meaning to collect more wemba wipplies.”

Ginny has no idea what a wemba wipply is, just knows that no one will dare say a thing to Luna when she’s around.

Not any more.

It’s right.

* * *

Ginny grips her wand tighter and takes a cautious step closer to the object in front of her.

It’s a mirror, one of those tall, fancy oval ones Auntie Muriel is partial to. Only the glass on this one is scratched and foggy, and almost seems to creak, as if tiny faults are opening in the surface. More than anything, Ginny wants to turn away, to get as far from the sinister object as she can.

Steeling her spine, she forces herself to step closer, centering herself on the mirror. Her reflection slides into view. Only it isn’t her reflection looking back at her. Cool, angular features stare out at her from under a mop of dark hair, his deep green robes reflecting her own.

“Changeling,” he accuses, voice like a snake.

Instinctively, Ginny lifts her hand, trying to block the image, hide it from view. His hand breaches the mirror surface, grabbing her wrist. She struggles, pulling back, but he only smiles, almost as if a proud brother. “Strange likeness,” he says, fingers digging into the green ink burned into her skin.

Behind her, Mad-Eye says something in the distance, encouragement maybe, but more likely harsh instruction. Vigilance!

Ginny shakes her head hard as if to dislodge the buzzing in her ears.

*I’m not like you, Tom,* she wants to say.

Tom smiles as if he can hear her. *I made you.*

“No.”

“Weasley,” Moody growls, growing impatient. Peripherally, a whispered hum gets louder, the other students shifting around and growing curious.

Looking Tom straight in the eye, Ginny grips her wand and says, “Riddikulus.” She gives him a shock of red hair and a pair of round, black spectacles held together with white tape. He stumbles back in fury, knees caught up in the plaid skirt twining around his legs, and a laugh works its way free from Ginny’s throat, the glass shattering.

Strange likeness, indeed.
The Boggart dances back away from her, searching out a new victim to terrorize. It turns into a shark, fluid body slicing through the air like water, and Ginny steps back into the crowd of students to watch. To hide, maybe, Tom’s voice still buzzing in her ears.

Only not, because Tom is gone. She knows this. She’s always known this, despite her clinging doubts. She is the only one here any more, the one left wondering…wondering if he made her something she never wanted to be.

She glances at the Boggart, now a miniature shark doing laps in a goldfish bowl.

No.

Tom changed her, this she can’t deny. He opened her eyes to things she would not have seen otherwise. He hardened her, made her more powerful, but no longer has the ability to manipulate her. Her actions and reasons are all her own.

Her own.

“Who was that?” some of the girls want to know after Moody has wrestled the Boggart back into its wardrobe. “An ex-boyfriend?” they tease.

Ginny laughs, the wardrobe shuddering. “Something like that,” she says, feeling her cheeks flush.

She walks out of the room, leaving Tom locked in the past where he belongs.

* * *

Harry Potter comes out of the final Triwizard challenge with a dead body clutched in his arms, and just like that, everything changes.

The grounds are in utter chaos, people shoving in panic. Ginny has long since lost hold of Smita’s hand, but knows Tobias was with her. She tries to push forward to where she last caught a glimpse of Harry, searches for the gleam of familiar red hair, the comforting profile of her mother’s face.

Instead she finds herself shunted back towards the stands, forced to step into the shadow under the seats to avoid being trampled.

There’s a break in the crowd, and she sees Draco standing across the aisle.

For a moment, he looks a little lost, disconcerted among the crying, screaming crowds, the echo of Cedric and Potter and the Dark Lord gaining in intensity. Then he turns to find her watching him, his lips twisting into self-satisfaction, as if he has somehow been responsible for all of this.

She remembers the tick of fear that was there first though. Memorizes it.

Draco nudges the ever present Crabbe and Goyle, gesturing towards Ginny. It’s blatant intimidation. She pretends for a moment she’s on her broom and this is nothing more than a Quidditch match. Even with the chaos around them, he wouldn’t dare try anything on her.

Would he?

A hand closes on her shoulder, and she nearly jumps out of her skin.

“Ginny,” George says, reeling her in. Fred is next to him, wand pulled and eyes on the crowd as if not sure what to expect any more.
Ginny steals a moment to glance back across the aisle, but Malfoy is gone.

“Come on, Gin,” Fred says, pressing close to her other side. “Mum wants us to wait inside.”

They walk her back up to the Castle, veering off for the Great Hall while everyone else is still milling around outside. She can just make out the echoes of hysterical voices rising up the hill, bouncing off the stones.

Inside, they settle in the neutral middle ground, taking seats at the Hufflepuff table.

A whole year of school and somehow Ginny’s right back where everything started. Scared witless, feeling so damn small, but with her brothers pressed in on either side like a set of bookends.

Over the next hours, they watch people stream by in the entrance, students to their common rooms, ministry workers and professors, and even once when the hour is very very late, a Dementor.

Ginny draws back against George, feeling the frost ghost her skin, but for once, her ears remain clear. Quiet.

It’s maybe another twenty minutes before Mum appears in the hall with Ron.

“Is it true?” Fred asks, jumping to his feet like a spring, all those hours of sitting still snapping in a moment.

Mum gives him a stern look. “Come along,” she says, taking Ginny’s hand.

But the twins aren’t to be shaken off, not tonight. “Is You Know Who really back?” George demands.

Mum blusters and doesn’t want to burden them, but if You Know Who could find his way to Harry, he can find his way to anyone.

Ron is the one to stop, to turn back and look at them, his face pale and uncharacteristically serious. “It’s true. Harry saw him.”

Mum spins to glare at him. “Ronald!”

For once, he doesn’t look contrite, looking straight back at her like even he’s beginning to grow up a little in the face of what’s coming. “They deserve to know,” he says.

Mum shakes her head, bustling them all out into the entranceway. “Off to bed with all of you.”

As a unit they all turn toward the stairs. Ginny comes to a stop in the middle of the foyer. “Uh, Mum. My room is that way,” she says, pointing in the opposite direction.

Mum stops, one foot almost comically lifted over the bottom stair. “Right,” she says, looking flustered. Torn. She turns back towards Ginny. “Of course.”

Fred drops an arm over Ron’s shoulders and grins in a way that doesn’t even begin to travel anywhere near his eyes. “Don’t worry, Mum. We’ll see little Ronnikins back to his bed.”

“Tuck him in real nice,” George agrees, patting Ron on the head.

Ron takes an indignant swipe at George, and Ginny wants to follow them with more sharpness than she’s felt since her first day at Hogwarts.
Mum takes the time to kiss and hug each of them before letting them go up, and Ginny knows things have to be bad when they all let her with minimum fuss. Even Ron.

“Night, Gin,” Ron says. She watches him walk away with one hand shoved hard in his pocket, no doubt tight around his wand, like he’s waiting for something to jump out at him any moment.

Mum takes her hand, clearing her throat. She looks around. “I don’t actually know where--.”

Ginny nods. “This way.”

She leads her down the stairs and under the grounds towards the lake, the air becoming cooler and humid in a way that has become familiar to Ginny. Mum is quiet, and Ginny tries not to let that put her even more on edge.

More than anything she wants to hear her Mum say everything’s going to be okay, that You Know Who being out there isn’t the end of everything, but Mum looks so pale and worried that Ginny doesn’t dare ask.

“How’s Harry?” Ginny asks instead as they stop in front of the entrance to her Common Room.

Mum’s eyes are worried when she turns away from an intent inspection of the blank stone wall hiding the entrance to the Slytherin dorms. The smile she summons doesn’t quite hide it. “Of course, dear. He’s fine. They’re only keeping him overnight in the infirmary to be certain.”

Ginny gnaws on the inside of her cheek. “Will you go back and stay with him?”

Mum gives her an assessing look, like that one she uses sometimes to gauge if it’s time to buy another pair of robes for her constantly growing sons. “Do you think I should?”

Ginny nods. She doesn’t like the idea of Harry all alone in the infirmary, especially after what’s happened. She knows if it was one of them, Mum couldn’t have been forced to leave, by Dumbledore or anyone. “I think he’d like that.”

Mum gives Ginny another smile, only this one is bright with something that makes Ginny’s chest tight. She brushes her hair back from her face the way she used to when she was still a baby, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “You’re a good girl, Gin,” she says, fierce pride in her voice.

Ginny gives her a hug, lingering a second longer to breathe her in. “Good night, Mum.”

She whispers the password into the wall and disappears inside. In the common room, not too many students are still up.

She’s just turned into the hall leading to her room when she hears Draco’s voice in the distance behind her.

“Too bad it wasn’t Potter instead. Suppose it would have been too much to ask for both of them to snuff it.”

Ginny freezes as their laughter jangles discordantly in her ears.

She’s heard her brothers speak of ‘seeing red’, of reaching the end of their tether and losing it completely, but for her it’s not really like that. Nothing snaps. Her vision doesn’t change. It’s more like a giant calm welling up in her, a sense of knowing, for once, exactly what she has to do.

_You’re a good girl, Gin._
This is easy, this is concrete. Something she can fight, unlike the things that are unfolding outside, already pulling her family apart.

She turns on her heel and marches straight for Draco.

Draco pops up to his feet in surprise when he notices her—her furious pace—his companions much slower on the uptake. She doesn’t stop striding towards him until she is right up in his face, pushing him hard in the middle of the chest. He falls back down to the couch with an exclamation of protest, his goons jumping to their feet on either side.

Ginny pulls her wand, hitting Goyle straight on with a bat-bogey hex and stepping back out of Crabbe’s reach as he lunges for her. Just another Quidditch match, she tells herself. Another quick curse and she has Crabbe’s arms bound, leaving Draco sitting wide-eyed on the couch by himself. (All that misery-fed studying paying off, and, oh, does life work in mysterious ways sometimes.)

She steps closer to Draco until she’s standing over him and says what she should have the first time he laid a hand on her. “I’m not afraid of you, Malfoy. So if you want a fight, I’m more than happy to give you one.”

She can tell he didn’t expect her to fight back, to go on the offensive.

He’s stuck now though, being called out. There aren’t many people here to witness it, just a few Slytherin with no interest in spectacles or Triwizard Tournaments. (They have no idea still, no idea what has happened outside these walls, how everything has changed.) They watch on with various levels of indifference as if merely curious to see how this turns out rather than caring at all who wins. It gives Ginny the strange sensation that she’s safe in here, safe in the knowledge that her housemates aren’t blindly bound by rules.

It’s the very last thing she ever thought to feel here.

Time stretches long, and Draco still hasn’t reached for his wand, too frightened to act without his brutish friends. He seems to realize it too.

“You’ll regret this, Weasley,” Draco drawls, voice dripping with menace.

“No,” she says, wand twisting in her fingers. “I don’t think I will.”

*You’re stronger than you know, Ginny.*

It’s the only thing Tom was ever right about.

She’s no longer an easy target, and they both know it.

He proves her right when she turns her back on him—a risk, but a necessary one—and he does nothing other than sit and watch her walk away.

She passes by Theodora on her way out. Her eyes are glued to her book as if nothing untoward has happened, but Ginny thinks there is the slightest smirk playing at her lips as she reads.

*You’re left deciding that for yourself.*

Not if You Know Who has anything to say about it.

Ginny feels her own grim smile slip.

She turns down the hall and heads for her room.
A week later they all go home, whispers and rumors and lies twining and building like a gossamer web.

Slytherin’s brightest son has been reborn.

Ginny waits along with everyone else to see what that will mean.
Percy doesn’t slam the door as he leaves, probably only because it would be too undignified. The Burrow still manages to ring with his departure, the nasty things he said lingering in the air.


He’d taken all his things with him. All evidence of his existence gone, leaving his room empty like a giant ripped out hole.

Down in the kitchen, Mum is quietly weeping, Dad’s voice low and hollow as he tries to console her. Tries to pretend his middle son hadn’t just called him a disgrace and a failure.

You’re picking the wrong side.

Fred and George, eavesdropping from the stairwell, turn to each other with matching rage.

“Slimy, overly ambitious little prick.”

George’s scowl is feral. “Sorting hat must’ve had an off day, day it put that twat into Gryffindor.”

Fred huffs in agreement. “Better off in Slytherin.”

One flight above them, Ginny silently shifts up off the steps and disappears into her room.

*     *     *

Strange owls arrive at the Burrow at all hours that summer. The only thing more plentiful are the visits of various wizards at weird hours, some Ginny recognizes, some she’s never seen before. The children are told to stick close to the house, and not even Fred and George have the heart to argue with Mum over it.

They never speak of Percy.

They don’t speak about a lot of things actually.

Ginny reads the papers, pulls them out of the bin when no one is looking, but they seem normal enough to her. Forecasts and politics and coupons. She lets herself wonder for a moment if Percy had been right. Because if terrible things are happening, evil wizards reborn, wouldn’t that be in the papers?

Only then she’ll catch sight of her father’s exhaustion, the way Mum’s eyes never stray far from her clock, and remembers Ron’s face the night of the final Triwizard challenge.

It’s true. Harry saw him.

Ginny doesn’t doubt it, not really. It’s just that she always thought that if the most evil wizard of all time came back to life, there’d be big fights and stirring speeches, good lining up against evil. This seems too…quiet.
Hermione shows up on their doorstep less than two weeks into break. If Ginny really needed more proof that things aren’t right, now she has it.

“I just couldn’t sit there and pretend nothing had happened,” Hermione says, lifting a stack of clothes out of her trunk.

“What did you tell your parents?” Ginny wants to know, thinking of Mr. Granger’s pleasant face and honest discomfort with a life he will never fully understand. Never fully be a part of.

*     *     *

Hermione’s only been at the Burrow a week when Mum and Dad give them the news over supper.

“We’re leaving the Burrow,” Dad says.

Mum’s hand is in his, creating a united front. “It isn’t safe here any longer.”

This is inconceivable, the idea that the Burrow could be anything other than the safest place in the world. But there are wizards appearing in the fire in the middle of the night, special charms around the perimeter of their property that her parents probably thought they wouldn’t notice.

“Where are we going?” Ron asks, sharing one of his unsubtle looks with Hermione.

“To stay at the home of one of the members of the Order,” Dad says. “Dumbledore has arranged it.”

“Whose house?” Fred asks, picking up on Dad’s deliberate vagueness.

Mum and Dad share a glance. “Sirius Black.”

Ginny feels her stomach drop, remembering his face screaming out at them from posters.

“Sirius Black?” Fred echoes. “The Sirius Black who tried to kill Harry last year?”

“Year before that,” George corrects. “Last year it was Mad-Eye.”

Fred considers that. “Fake Mad-Eye.”

“Right. I can never keep track, who’s trying to kill Harry at any given time.”

Fred nods. “Quite the thing apparently. Like a sport club.”

“Wonder if they have blazers?”

Dad clears his throat. “Boys,” he says. If you give Fred and George any steam at all, they can go on forever.

“I don’t understand,” Ginny says, something she’s wanted to admit all summer long.

Mum reaches over and pats Ginny’s hand as if to comfort her, like a young child in danger of being hysterically confused by the adult things around her. “It’s a long story, but Sirius Black is on our side. He’s part of the Order.”
Ginny glances at Hermione and Ron, noticing that neither of them look remotely surprised. “Since when?” she asks, her voice rising in pitch.

Dad meets her eyes steadily. “He always has been. It was all a misunderstanding.”

A misunderstanding? Murdering all those Muggles and breaking out of Azkaban and trying to kill Harry and her brother too by accident? Ginny isn’t sure who, but she’s convinced someone here is cracked. Maybe it’s her.

“We’ll explain more later,” Dad says, pushing up from the table and officially ending the conversation. “For now we need you all to pack and be ready to leave for London in the morning.”

Fred and George look delighted. “Spend the rest of the summer at a deranged mass-murderer’s house in the city? Wicked.”

“Lee is going to be so jealous.”

It’s only later that they realize just how protected the location is, that not only are they not allowed to tell anyone about it, but that they couldn’t even if they wanted to. Secret-keepers and powerful spells, and Ginny is still looking for a war that doesn’t seem to be coming.

She doesn’t understand. Not why they are moving, what these meetings of strange wizards are about, why Percy left.

And still they don’t talk about it.

* * *

It’s hard to imagine a place more different from the Burrow than Grimmauld Place. Here everything is grand and opulent, a sort of elegance gone to seed like an abandoned formal garden. While the Burrow is made of hearth stone and scarred wood and sturdy tweed, patched and repaired and lovingly kept, the Black mansion is a gossamer web of marbles and velvets and fabrics Ginny can’t name, each worn thin and clogged with dust. She begins to forget what color feels like after a few days, surrounded as she is by moaning silences and stifling shadows.

It’s a place of secrets, Grimmauld Place, feels built on those shuddering foundations. Ginny supposes it’s only right that it should serve as the Order’s headquarters. Order of the Phoenix, they call themselves, and she wonders at the symbolism there, what they are rising from, wonders what Smita might say of it, these people apparently driven here by lies and truths they won’t speak of.

She tries asking sometimes, asking why the papers are calling Harry a liar and Dumbledore a fool. Mum just sends her on her way, Ron and Hermione sharing dark looks behind her back.

“Nothing for you to worry about, dear,” Mum says, over and over like she’s trying hard to believe it.

Ginny writes long letters to Smita. Some complaining about her parents and the house and the doxy bite on her finger that just won’t heal. Some about phoenixes and meetings and Fred and George whispering in the halls. Once, she writes nearly 30 inches about an imaginary summer spent at the Burrow running drills in the paddock and swimming in the river and a tiny room with a view over trees and space.

She wonders when the lies became more believable than the truths.

She even tries to write Percy a letter once, but doesn’t get any farther than, You prat…, thinking of the way he made Mum cry.
She sends Smita the letter built on make-believe and burns the rest one by one in the hearth fire with Kreacher’s beady eyes drilling in her back.

She gradually gets used to seeing Sirius Black in the halls and not have her heart beat out of her chest in fear. He’s just as worn and furious and full of fractured energy as he seemed in his pictures back when he was trying to kill Harry. (Only not, she’s been told, but not much else.) She isn’t sure what it means that it’s when Sirius smiles that she feels a true ripple of unease.

There are other wizards around too. Worn Professor Lupin and twitchy Mad-Eye (the real one). And even some young ones, like Tonks. She’s one of the only people who can get anyone to laugh any more. The others just walk past like Ginny isn’t even there.

The first time Ginny realizes Professor Snape is in the Order as well, she comes across him in the hallway. He’s standing with Sirius, the two of them sniping at each other like schoolboys who never quite grew up.

Sirius is clearly on edge, like he’s one more word away from losing his temper completely. It’s Snape who is all cool surfaces that remind Ginny uncomfortably of Smita if not for the cutting edge to his clipped words. She wonders what it would take for Smita to ever be that vicious.

She steps into the hall with heavy, trudging steps, breaking the two men apart. Sirius glances at her and with one last scowl at Snape, disappears further back into the building, leaving her alone with Snape.

“Professor,” Ginny says politely because for all she has learned to resent Snape, he’s her head of house, her teacher.

“Miss Weasley,” he says, head inclining the perfect amount like he’s practiced it.

She nods in response, and idly wonders what the Malfoys would think if they knew he was here.

“Did you say something?” Snape asks, eyebrow lifting.

There’s a slight buzz in her ear, but she brushes it off with a firm shake of her head. “No, sir.”

She slides past him, taking the stairs two at a time, and bumps right into Ron and Hermione on the next landing.

She can’t quite look either of them in the eye.

* * *

Dumbledore himself shows up one afternoon, setting both Ron and Hermione down for a serious talk about what they can and can’t put in their letters to Harry.

Ginny doesn’t consider it eavesdropping, not really. She’s just field-testing Fred and George’s latest invention: extendable ears. It has nothing to do with getting answers to things people refuse to explain.

Even so, the conversation doesn’t make anything any clearer, the three of them seeming to speak in some code she isn’t initiated in.

Dumbledore comes out first, so suddenly and quietly that Ginny is still practically standing against the door. She tugs the extendable ear, the flesh colored string disappearing up into her sleeve. She considers trying to scramble away, but has learned well enough what looks guilty and what can be
played through. Besides, Dumbledore is a busy, somewhat mental wizard. He may not even notice her.

“Miss Weasley,” Dumbledore says, his eyes unerringly finding her in the dim hallway as if he knew she were there all along.

So much for that theory.

“Headmaster,” Ginny says with a nod of her head she hopes looks innocent and respectful.

He doesn’t seem particularly interested in scolding her, so she expects him to move on, to walk past her like all the other Order members do, but he surprises her by lingering. “How have you found your holiday thus far, Miss Weasley?”

It’s a polite inquiry, and she knows she’s supposed to say something like, “Fine, sir,” or “Pleasantly free of homework, sir,” but all she can think of are secret meetings, closed doors, and furious whispers. The way people here have conversations that seem to be about anything other than the actual words said.

So instead, Ginny frowns and says, “Confusing.”

Both of Dumbledore’s eyebrows lift, eyes sparkling behind his glasses as if this were the most brilliant thing to say and not something stupid and childish.

He nods, leaning slightly towards her like a conspirator. “I am pleased to know I am in such good company.”

Ginny stares back at him, not sure if she should find the idea of someone like Dumbledore confused comforting or simply terrifying.

“Perhaps the rest of the season shall be more elucidating,” he says, smiling and taking his leave of her.

Ginny feels a shiver travel down her spine. Somehow that that possibility seems as unsettling as confusion.

*     *     *

Harry arrives three weeks into their stay. In many ways it’s like a storm long on the horizon finally breaking, his anger snapping through the gloom as his voice shakes the walls of Grimmauld Place. She envies him his temper tantrum, just the littlest bit. He rages and slams and demands the very answers she’s wanted all along.

She thinks she may finally get some of them too, as they all sit in the kitchen and listen to Sirius explain why everyone thinks Harry is a liar. She watches Harry’s expressive face harden to stone and remembers what it feels like to have the entire world spin against you.

Mum sends her away though, when Sirius finally starts talking about the Order and their secrets. Sends her to bed like a little girl. She doesn’t go with any sort of grace, dragging her feet, silently raging.

She doesn’t know whether to be insulted or satisfied that Mum takes the precaution of locking her in her room. She clearly knows about the eavesdropping. She at least has the presence of mind not to say, ‘This is for your own good.’
Ginny sits in her room and fantasizes about grabbing a broom and slipping out the window and never bothering to come back.

Too bad fantasies never amount to anything.

“Tell me,” Ginny says into the dark later that night, knowing Hermione isn’t really sleeping.

There is a pause. “Tell you what?”

Ginny rolls over to look at her. “All of it.”

She pretends not to see the uncertainty flicker across Hermione’s face, the moment of doubt. Doesn’t let herself analyze if that is concern for her tender age (as if), or if this is something else entirely. Like maybe distrust.

“Please,” Ginny says, hating herself for the pleading in her voice.

Hermione starts to whisper.

* * *

Harry quickly settles in with the rest of them, alternating between fruitlessly trying to spy on the Order and even more fruitlessly trying to avoid having to clean. With all the bedrooms done, they’ve moved on to a strange collection of seemingly purposeless rooms. Ginny supposes the rich need to invent something to do with all the extra space.

It’s only an hour or so after lunch when Mum gets pulled away to speak with someone in the Order. She hasn’t been gone for all of a minute when Fred and George disapparate back to their rooms with a pop, leaving Ginny, Ron, Hermione, and Harry to clean the dingy solarium on their own.

“Wankers,” Ron mutters.

Ginny grunts in agreement, thinking she’s really going to like being seventeen and able to use magic whenever she pleases.

Ron rather carelessly flips up the cover on a rickety roll top desk.

Hermione smacks his arm. “Careful! We have no idea what might be in there!”

“Yeah,” Ron says dismissively, picking up an old-fashioned fountain pen. “Real evil, these manky old things.”

The pen explodes in Ron’s face.

Ron howls in complaint, glumpy ink streaming out of his eye. Ginny and Harry rush to their feet, but Hermione is already there, pressing a handkerchief to Ron’s face even as she scolds him. Ginny’s torn between laughing and being concerned, rather unsuccessfully hiding a snort in her sleeve when it’s clear Ron isn’t in imminent danger of anything other than looking ridiculous.

“We should take him downstairs,” Hermione says, heaving Ron to his feet and pulling him towards the door.

Harry glances back at Ginny uncertainly. “I’ll stay,” he says, probably deciding that leaving Ginny alone with a room full of things with the potential to explode in her face is not such a great idea. Still, his tone makes it clear enough that he’d rather not be stuck here with her. Of course, she’d pretty much rather be anywhere else in the world herself right about now, so she supposes she can’t really
take it personally.

Hermione nods, steering Ron out into the hall, the echo of his moaning trailing after them.

Ginny sits back down, flicking an embroidered cushion towards the bin. “Safety in numbers,” she barks, channeling Mad-Eye.

Harry jerks around, looking at her with surprise.

“What?” she asks, shaking a cobweb off her fingers. This place is disgusting.

“You sounded just like him.”

Ginny shrugs. “You should hear my Madam Pince.”

He gives her strange look like maybe he’s amused against his will. Ginny rolls her eyes and goes back to cleaning.

They work in silence except for the occasional “Yuck” or sound of something crashing into the dustbin. Kreacher wanders in once just long enough to pin Ginny with beady eyes and mumble something about the youngest blood traitor mongrel.

Ginny stares back at him with her best icy, Theodora-inspired glare.

Once he’s gone, Ginny pulls a small dusty chest out of the rotting armoire. It’s an ugly little thing, really, the outside rusted and faded and she can’t quite even tell if it’s wood or metal. It just feels wrong in her hands. As she moves to put it aside, her thumb brushes the front clasp, and the lid springs open without a sound.

Ginny traces the fine scalloped edge with a finger, her eyes drawn to the rich red velvet lining the inside. Blinking slowly, she sits back on her heels, a hum building in her mind. It’s beautiful and soft and so easy, her body relaxing, limbs feeling boneless.

It’s all so nice. The space between thoughts growing longer and softer and--.

The lid slams shut, Ginny jerking awake.

Harry is standing over her, his hand on the back of the box. “Ginny?” he asks, peering down at her. “Are you okay?”

She swallows hard against the bitterness at the back of her throat.

“You were just kind of…staring.”

She nods. “I think it’s cursed,” she says, hating the slight wobble in her voice. She lets Harry take it from her, set it aside for someone else to deal with. It occurs to her how stupid it is to be doing this without Fred and George here, seeing as how neither of them can even use their wands.

She wipes her clammy palms on her jeans as if to rid herself of the feel of rusty metal. It’s not that the trance was so terrible as much as how familiar it had felt, like a ghost walking on her grave. It’s the one thing she hasn’t let herself really think about, the fact that Voldemort being alive again means that Tom is alive again too.

Ginny’s heart stutters in her chest.

Harry has gone back to work, but keeps sending her concerned looks back over his shoulder. She
forces herself to move on to the next shelf, tipping a collection of dusty buttons and thimbles carefully into a bag.

“Looking forward to Quidditch this year?” Harry asks after a while, clearly trying to lighten the mood.

Ginny nods, thankful for the change in topic. “More than you know.”

“I suppose we’ll both have new captains this year.” Oliver Wood and Marcus Flint had graduated at the end of the last year.

Ginny can only pray that Bletchley will get it, because if the badge goes to Draco, she doesn’t have a chance in hell of getting on the squad again.

She groans, dropping her face in her hands. Harry may be a shoo-in no matter who is captain of the Gryffindor team, but Ginny knows just how close she’d been not to making it in the first place.

“What?” Harry asks.

She shakes her head. “I haven’t been able to run any drills this summer. Trials are going to be a disaster.”

“You’re the highest scorer on your team,” Harry says. “It would be completely mental not to keep you.”

Ginny turns, looking at Harry in surprise.

He shrugs. “Wood kept statistics on everyone. Made us all memorize them.”

“Of course he did,” she says with smirk, remembering all the stories the twins used to tell about the obsessive Gryffindor keeper.

Harry smiles. “Well, you know what Mad-Eye would say.”

Ginny thinks she might. “Know your enemy?”

Harry’s smile fades, his eyebrows drawing together. “Something like that.”

“Ginny?” Mum’s voice travels up the stairs.

Ginny’s heart lurches. “Oh, no.”

“What?” Harry asks, looking around for another malicious item.

Ginny tosses a mysteriously stained tea cloth into the bin. “Mum,” Ginny clarifies, glancing at the wardrobe and wondering if it would be big enough to hide in, or if it might just vanish her a convenient distance away. “She’s been trying to give me knitting lessons all summer.”

“Knitting?” Harry echoes, looking torn between amusement and confusion.

She nods, horror welling in her chest.

Mum appears in the doorway, hands on her hips and disapproval in her eye. “There you are, Ginny. You were supposed to come help me half an hour ago.”

Something Ginny had worked hard to conveniently forget yet again. She’s not sure she’ll be able to
get away with this time. Where’s an exploding pen when you need one?

“Sorry, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry interjects, eyes wide. “It’s my fault. I thought it would be safer if none of us cleaned alone.” He darts a glance at Ginny. “Safety in numbers, you know.”

Mum’s expression softens, and it occurs to Ginny that Harry is more than aware of his effect on Mum, and clearly isn’t above using it. “Oh! Of course, dear. That is a very wise precaution. Ginny can help me later.”

She beams at Ginny then, for her seeming forethought of keeping Harry safe.

All in all, rather brilliantly done.

Still, Harry looks just a little too pleased with himself after Mum leaves, so Ginny can’t help it. Pressing one hand to her chest, she says, “My hero,” in a breathy voice.

Harry blinks back at her, looking seriously disturbed, until Ginny can’t hold it in any more and starts to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Ron demands, reappearing in the doorway with Hermione. He’s still got one hand slapped to his eye, the skin around red as if from fresh scrubbing.

“Nothing,” Ginny says, dismissing him with a wave.

Ron frowns, sitting down on a moth-eaten chaise. “I really hate this bloody house.”

Ginny turns back to the armoire. “Constant vigilance!” she barks.

Behind her, she hears Harry snigger.

*     *     *

The rest of the summer settles into a mind-numbing sort of regularity as they conquer the house one dusty, dangerous room at a time. Judging from the equally dangerous bangs and smells emanating from the twins’ room, their own secret projects are progressing as well.

Soon enough, their letters arrive and it’s time to pack for school.

Ginny decides to clean out her trunk properly, something she hasn’t really done since the first time she packed for Hogwarts. Cleaning has apparently become second nature after all these weeks. Mum would be so proud. Even if Ginny still hasn’t been trapped into a single knitting lesson.

Tonks is helping her, partly to amuse Ginny with her favorite funny faces, but also because she just broke something in the kitchen, and Mum had not so politely asked her to be anywhere that was not near her. It’s nice to know Ginny isn’t the only one Mum finds to be lacking in domestic usefulness.

Digging into her school trunk is a little like excavating her life at Hogwarts. Clothes, books, potion supplies, quills, and parchment on the top. Midway through, her Quidditch gear. Ginny refolds them carefully and sets them aside with a painful sort of yearning. It’s only at the very bottom of her trunk that she finds the Gryffindor scarf Mum had made her first year. Pulling it out, Ginny can see a black ink stain spread across the yellow and burgundy stripes.

Tonks takes the scarf from Ginny, siphoning away the stubborn ink with a few jerky pulls of her wand. She tries to give it back, but Ginny shakes her head.

“Put it with Hermione’s things,” Ginny says. It’s not like she’ll ever have a use for it.
Tonks tucks it into Hermione’s disturbingly organized trunk without comment.

Ginny watches as Tonks scours out the bottom of the trunk and then starts piling her stuff back in.

“My mother was in Slytherin,” Tonks remarks.

Ginny looks for censure, for motive, but Tonks just stares back at her with this fact floating between them like the unmatched pair of socks currently being more tortured than folded under the guidance of Tonks’ wand.

“Yeah?” Ginny says, tucking her green scarf and gloves into her cauldron.

“Yeah.” Tonks flicks her wrist and the socks zoom into her trunk.

“Was she disappointed?” Ginny asks, tripping over the words in a belated attempt to be delicate.

“That I was sorted into Hufflepuff?” Tonks finishes for her.

Ginny doesn’t manage to hide her flinch. “Yeah.”

Tonks shakes her head. “Why would she be? It’s just a house.” Screwing up her eyes in concentration, she makes her hair run long and silver, the sheen of green woven in.

If only it were really that easy.

*     *     *

At King’s Cross, they all pile on to the train together, Mum making a slightly bigger deal of hugging and kissing them all repeatedly. Once on board, the twins take off with Lee immediately, Hermione and Ron splitting off to their special prefect compartment with apologetic glances at Harry.

Harry looks like he’s trying to ignore it, but still seems a little lost without the other two. Added to that, other students are openly staring, whispering as they pass, and Ginny hesitates taking off in her own direction. She doesn’t know why she bothers, it’s not like Harry’s going to follow her to the Slytherin section even if she offered.

Harry spots another boy in his year then, looking relieved when he lifts a hand in honest pleasure to see him.

“I’m going to…,” Harry says, gesturing down the train.

Ginny smiles. “Of course. I’m off myself,” she says, canting her head in the other direction.

“Oh okay then,” he says. “See you around.”

Only they both know probably not.

Ginny drags her trunks down past a couple compartments of Ravenclaws, but doesn’t see Luna among them, so doesn’t pause to say hello. Almost to the front of the train she starts seeing more familiar faces of people in her house, waving every once and a while. She passes Draco’s crowd in silence.

She sees Bletchley just long enough to catch sight of a gold captain’s badge on his chest and breathes a giant sigh of relief.

Further down, Smita appears out of a compartment. “Ginny.”
“Hey,” Ginny says, drawing the other girl into a hug. “How are you?”

“I’m fine,” she says, pulling back and giving Ginny a speculative look. “Curious, mostly.”

“Curious?” Ginny asks, reaching down to lift her trunk up on to a rack.

“Yeah. About whatever it is you really did this summer.”

Ginny freezes, almost losing hold on her trunk. Smita steps up next to her and helps her settle it. Ginny had sent the letter full of lies because she couldn’t very well have told the truth. If she’d sent nothing, Smita would have worried. It seems she needn’t have bothered.

“That obvious, huh?”

“Well,” Smita says, lips twitching, and somehow it’s like no time has passed since they’ve seen each other. “You’re never that cheerful.”

Ginny laughs. “Dead give away.”

Smita nods, eyes sparkling with mirth. “Definitely.”

The compartment door slides open. “Oi. You birds going to spend the entire trip out here gossiping?”

Ginny turns to see Tobias half hanging out in the hallway. “Why, are you feeling left out? We know how much you love gossip.”

He glares at her, and she smiles back as if he hadn’t, and that’s pretty much a fitting enough welcome after a summer apart.

“We’ll be right in,” Smita says.

Tobias waggles his eyebrows at her and ducks back inside.

“We can talk about your mystery summer later,” Smita says.

Ginny nods, feeling relieved and not knowing why.

Inside the compartment there’s a collection of fourth and third year boys in the middle of a rather pitched game of exploding snap. They’re swapping more insults than cards, not rowdy like her brothers might be, but methodical and cutting. Ginny thinks the real skill being admired here is who can weave the most subtle insult rather than the turn of a card.

None of them look up from the game, so Ginny doesn’t bother saying hello, instead sitting down with Smita near some other girls.

“Hi, Ginny,” one of the third year girls says.

Ginny smiles. “Hey, Caroline. Have a nice summer?”

Caroline pulls a face before straightening back up as if automatically expecting a rebuke. “It was fine, I suppose.”

The girl sitting next to her touches Caroline’s knee as if in comfort.

“Tori got a new instrument this summer though,” Caroline says, brightening and turning to her companion.
Astoria (apparently only Caroline can get away with calling her Tori) darts a glance at the boys, but
they are still paying the rest of them no attention at all.

Late at night when the Slytherin dorm was quiet, sometimes you could hear the deep vibration of
cello coming from somewhere, like the rich tenor of a human voice in the darkness. Ginny’s heard
rumors about Astoria and her musical talent, even if it is rarely acknowledged outside the safety of
the dorms.

“What sort of instrument?” Smita asks, leaning in and lowering her voice.

Astoria pulls open a small case, no larger than a lunch box, letting them look inside. Ginny can just
make out the golden glint of a bowed spine, taut strings plunging down into the bottomless space
below.

“A harp,” she says, eyes sparkling. “My father brought it back to me from the continent.”

“Oh?” Smita asks. “Was he traveling?”

Astoria’s delicate skin flushes ever so slightly. “On business.”

There’s just enough of a hesitation for Ginny to know she’s lying, but not enough to know why.

Ginny smiles. “I can’t wait to hear you play it.”

“Oh, no,” Astoria says, shaking her head. “I’m still just learning.”

They move on to more innocuous topics then, Ginny spinning her own tales of long afternoons spent
on a broom in the orchards. Smita lets the lies slide by, Caroline looking on in rapt envy.

Maybe she’ll show up at trials his year, but Ginny somehow doubts it. Apparently Caroline’s mum
doesn’t think Quidditch is appropriate for girls. Ginny still remembers Caroline as a first year, eyes
wide with wonder as she stared at Ginny, the first girl on the Slytherin team in a decade. It’s a sad
reminder of just how quickly things can change.

At the other end of the compartment, the boys’ card game ends in a shower of sparks, money and
goods and insults changing hands.

Tobias drops down between Caroline and Astoria, hooking his arms over their shoulders. “And what
are we talking about?” he asks, looking flush with victory.

Astoria turns her cool eyes on Tobias. “New curses we learned over the summer.”

Tobias laughs, carefully removing his hand from Astoria’s shoulder one finger at a time. “Roger
that.”

“Stupid berk,” Ginny mutters with amusement.

“Now, Ginevra,” Tobias says. “Don’t be jealous. I’d let you curse me anytime.”

The girls all roll their eyes.

And just like that, she’s home.

*   *   *

The Sorting Hat is on a roll this year. Ginny doesn’t think she’s ever heard it sing a song quite so
long before. The first years shift nervously as everyone else’s stomachs growl.

“Get on with it,” Tobias grumbles.

For her part, Ginny is actually more interested in what the hat is saying than she has been before. (It’s possible she still hadn’t quite forgiven the hat, as childish as that might be.) Mostly because the hat seems to be wandering into new territory this year.

Oh, know the perils, read the signs,
the warning history shows,
for our Hogwarts is in danger
from external, deadly foes

And we must unite inside her
or we’ll crumble from within
I have told you, I have warned you...
let the Sorting now begin.

Ginny glances around, wondering how the other students will take this rather unexpected warning, but most of them are glassy-eyed by now, or whispering to friends they haven’t seen in long months. This warning of dire peril seems to have gone over their heads entirely. She supposes she can’t really blame them for that.

Eventually the last student is sorted, and Tobias is rubbing his hands together in anticipation of the feast. He’s going to have to wait even longer though, because the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor strong-arms her way up to the podium, an amused Dumbledore looking on.

“Oh, come on.” Tobias complains.

She’s wearing all pink and her voice sounds exactly like someone swathed in pink should sound like, all giggles and squeaks and talking to them like they are toddlers. She blathers on about change and pruning and improving, and after a while Ginny starts looking to Dumbledore for a reaction, but he’s as serene as always, bouncing a little on his heels like he might be humming to himself.

Umbridge eventually trails off, pausing expectantly as if for applause. There’s a polite smattering from the Hufflepuff table, Tobias starting at the noise as if being woken from a trance.

“What was that?” Smita mutters.

Ginny shakes her head, just as confused as Smita.

The food appears then and they quickly forget the insanity that is Dolores Umbridge.

Happily stuffed and sporting ten new first years, the Slytherin work their way down to the dorms. She passes near Draco and his cronies, just close enough to see them with their heads lowered together and their eyes hostile, occasionally glancing in her direction. Ginny knows Draco’s days of openly tormenting her are over, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t going to have to watch her back.

She glares right back at them and refuses to look nervous. It’s all she can do at this point.

As they near the dorms, Ginny feels tension building up in her neck, her steps seeming to drag slower and slower. She braces herself as she steps into the common room.

It looks exactly the same.
“Ginny?” Smita asks, turning back to look at her.

She’s not sure what she expected, giant banners and dark marks, secret hand signals and whispered meetings. Really, what could be more ridiculous?

Ginny shakes her head and follows Smita into their room.

* * *

Ginny wakes every morning and checks the board in the common room. There’s no announcement for trials the first week. Other than saying ‘hi’ once when they nearly bumped into each other in the hall, Ginny hasn’t spoken to Bletchley. It’s making her a little crazy.

She does go down to the pitch every day after classes and run through a series of drills on her broom, trying to blow the dust off of a long year and summer with no Quidditch. She pushes herself until her stomach growls in protest, and slides into the Great Hall just in time not to completely miss dinner.

In the evenings, Ginny tries not to fall asleep from exhaustion and slugs through the piles of homework the professors are gleefully piling on them.

Near the end of the first week, Tobias nudges her in the ribs. “I hear Potter lost it in Umbridge’s class.”

Ginny squints down at her essay on Switching Spells, not really keen on splitting her attention. “What?”

He nudges her in the ribs again, clearly looking for a riveted audience. “Started shouting about the Dark Lord being back and killing Diggory.”

Ginny looks up at Tobias. “Really?”

She remembers the look on Harry’s face as Lupin and the others explained why everyone thinks he and Dumbledore are nutters. She isn’t really surprised that he’d lost it. She just isn’t sure that’s the best tactic.

“Mental,” Tobias says, shaking his head.

“What did she do?” Smita asks.

Tobias waves his hand dismissively. “Oh, gave him a zillion hours of detention, writing lines, apparently.”

They laugh, knowing that can’t be fun, but at least it isn’t going into the Forbidden Forest or scrubbing toilets.

“But I heard she lost her temper too,” Tobias adds, looking thoughtful. “Would have liked to have seen that.”

Ginny makes a vague sound of agreement. She has more pressing interests than pink dressed professors and Harry Potter’s detentions.

* * *

Finally on Saturday, the announcement goes up on the board. Quidditch trials will be held on Wednesday afternoon.
When the time comes, Ginny lines up with all of the other Quidditch hopefuls, trying to ignore how much taller most of them are. Bletchley gives her a weird look as he walks out onto the pitch, but she doesn’t really have any attention left to give it, too focused on the task at hand, on refusing to be intimidated.

Bletchley starts by putting the few people trying for reserve keeper up in front of the rings. “Weasley,” he calls out.

“Yes?” she says, stepping forward, trying not to look like he’s startled her.

He jerks his head up towards the far rings where the prospective keepers are hovering. “Give ‘em each five shots.”

She nods, ignoring the grumbling around her, scrambling up onto her broom. Up in the air, everything is easier. She gives each keeper a tentative first shot, just to sweat out their weaknesses, increasing the difficulty with each shot. Few of them stop her second shot, and only one her third. None of them even get a hand on her fourth or fifth.

By the time she’s done, there is a trickle of sweat running down her back, and all she wants is more.

Bletchley calls them back down, taking the position in front of the goal himself. He gives each of the prospective chasers five shots, stopping most of them easily. A few times he has to stretch all the way out, barely batting down a shot. One of them was thrown by Warrington, but Ginny’s always known he is good, when he actually focuses his mind properly. A few others are a bit of a surprise, and Ginny does her best to keep an eye on them.

When it’s time for her turn, Ginny doesn’t bother with the tentative shots, varying the angles and approaches and speed with each turn. Bletchley has to be exhausted by now after going through ten series already, which probably explains the two shots she manages to sneak by him.

A few of the other players give her nasty looks, talking behind their hands as they wait for the rest of the trials to finish.

The beaters are a predictable group of brutes of various levels of clumsiness. Disappointingly, she can’t see any that have any sense of finesse or cleverness that can be a huge asset at that position. Still, there are a few with promise, even though it is pretty clear that Bletchley is going to go with Crabbe and Goyle. There has to be some benefit to being friends with Draco after all.

Ginny carefully refrains from making any faces when she realizes that there won’t even be a trial for the seeker position. Draco and those damn brooms.

Bletchley comes up next to Ginny at the end of the trials. “So what do you think, Six?”

She thinks back to the keepers she’d run drills against. None of them had been that great, few of them even managing to stop one of her shots. Not that it matters as long as they have Bletchley. She shrugs. “Martin and Gilbert could be good in a few years.”

Bletchley gives her a look like she’s being stupid. “For the other two chasers, nit.”

She stares back at him in surprise, but not for long, forcing herself to answer the question despite the part of her running around in her brain jumping up and down in pure excitement. Other two chasers.

“Thompson,” she says, the decision perfectly clear to her. He’s two years older than Ginny and has been on the reserve team for a while. He’s not flashy, won’t ever play professionally, but he has a steady head on his shoulders and, even more importantly, doesn’t seem to resent Ginny the fact that
She apparently has Bletchley’s ear.

He nods, looking thoughtful. “And Warrington?”

“Yeah.”

She’s still a little surprised to find that he actually follows her advice when the team roster goes up on the board in the common room. Glancing at the list, she would have hoped for a better seeker and maybe some cleverer beaters, but as it is, the team does have a promising sort of balance.

Maybe this will be their year.

Ginny smiles.

*     *     *

Everything seems just a little more doable, now that her Quidditch fate is decided. It’s been her anchor before, and she’s thankful to have that again. If there had been some other reason to cancel Quidditch this year, Ginny might have lost it.

Ginny’s on her way out to practice when Hermione waves her down. Her hair is flying about her head, and she’s slightly out of breath like she’s been running around the castle.

“What?” Ginny asks, surprised by the intent gleam in her eye—the one she usually reserves for trying to talk Ron out of mischief.

“We’re going to have a meeting at the Hog’s Head next Saturday,” she says, voice hushed and eyes darting back and forth.

The Hog’s Head? What was this, a dare? “What kind of meeting?”

Hermione’s voice lowers even further. “We want to start a defense club.”

Ginny’s eyebrows shoot up.

“Well,” Hermione says waspishly, “we all know Umbridge’s class is useless.”

“True,” Ginny is forced to admit. But she’s not sure taking on more work in their free time is really the answer. It’s just like Hermione to start an academic club in the face of an incompetent teacher. She must be worried about her OWLs.

Hermione leans in closer to Ginny, expression hardening. “You know why this is important.”

Ginny’s lips press together, knowing exactly what Hermione is trying to refer to. The only problem is that Ginny isn’t sure she does know why this is important. All she knows is what Hermione shared that one night, vague inferences about secret weapons and Order members taking shifts guarding Harry. A Dark Lord supposedly returned from the dead but completely absent.

Things at Hogwarts are ever as they have been and shouldn’t that mean something?

“I’ll see you then?” Hermione asks, her attention already distracted by trying to unobtrusively wave down a fifth year Hufflepuff girl.

She doesn’t linger to hear Ginny’s agreement. Ginny watches her go, gnawing on her lip a moment before shaking herself out of it. She doesn’t have time to work out Hermione’s quirks right now.
There are more important problems afoot, like being late to Quidditch.

* * *

Ginny pretty much ignores Educational Decree number 23 when it appears all over the castle. What does she care about a High Inquisitor?

Maybe if she had paid it a little more attention, she wouldn’t have been surprised to see Umbridge sashay into Professor’s Burbage’s classroom during their Muggle Studies lesson. (Muggle banking systems and making money appear from nothing and disappear from people’s pockets. She thought Muggles didn’t believe in magic.)

Umbridge arrives late, and that’s annoying, but maybe something even more since Burbage does her best to pretend Umbridge isn’t even here, her spine straightening and voice rising.

Umbridge is undeterred though, clearing her throat with that annoying little *ahem* that Ginny is going to enjoy practicing later.

“As High Inquisitor,” Umbridge says, speaking over Burbage, her sickly sweet voice somehow managing to drown her out, “I am evaluating all of the professors.” She smiles. “We must make sure educational standards are being met.”

Burbage sucks in a breath and nods. “I received your note, Dolores. Now may I continue?”

Umbridge’s smile slips, her head lowering down to the clipboard in her hands. She jots down a note of some kind, seeming to take a long time doing it. Only after a protracted couple of minute pass, during which the students are all glancing around at each other in wonderment at the turn of events, does Umbridge finally nod and say, “Proceed.”

Burbage’s gaze sweeps across the classroom, the students falling silent again. Burbage isn’t MacGonagall by any means, but they all like her enough to instantly be on her side in what seems to be some sort of strange battle.

“Now,” Burbage says, “Where were we?”

Ginny can see it now, under the uncharacteristic stiffness—Burbage is shaken.

Tobias raises his hand, a rare enough occurrence. But he’s always had a soft spot for Burbage. “You were talking about the machines the Muggles use to keep their money in.” He gives Smita an exaggerated nudge, lifting his hand to his mouth in an elaborate aside. “Sounds safer than dealing with Goblins.”

The class titters nervously, but Tobias playing the ass has the effect of breaking the tension.

Burbage smiles, some of her typical warmth and good humor appearing again. “Thank you, Tobias. Though we must remember that like Muggles, Goblins have their own unique culture that is often misunderstood by wizards.”

Abnormally loud sounds of scribbling echoes from the back of the room. Ginny glances behind her to see Umbridge shaking her head and furiously writing notes.

Having recovered her poise though, Burbage seems to refuse to let Umbridge unsettle her again. She pushes ahead with every appearance of ignoring the intrusion entirely, and the students do their best to follow suit.
“All right, students. Good work today,” Burbage says at the end of the hour. “Remember that you owe me ten inches on Muggle credit and lending practices next class!”

In noisy rush, the students gather up their things, giving Umbridge wide berth. Umbridge approaches Burbage, and together they disappear into the office attached to the side of the classroom.

Ginny pretty much thinks that’s the end of it until she hears Burbage’s voice raised in what sounds like outrage. She deliberately slows in the packing up of her things, but Tobias isn’t as subtle, simply getting up and pressing his ear up against the door. The door is too thick for casual eavesdropping though, to judge from Tobias’ curse.

Ginny pulls a few long thin strands out of her bag, holding them out to Smita and Tobias.

They star back at her in confusion, and not a little alarm.

“A Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes prototype,” she whispers, holding one end up to her ear and sliding the other end under the door.

Smita doesn’t hesitate to copy Ginny, stepping up next to her. Tobias looks dubious, but his curiosity wins out.

His eyes widen as the conversation becomes completely clear. “I’ll take twenty,” he mouths to her.

Ginny smiles, her attention quickly diverted by Umbridge’s sickly sweet voice.

“I wonder in your defense of Muggles and Goblins if you aren’t doing your students a great disservice, making them think they are harmless and not to be taken seriously.”

Burbage’s voice is hard. “I would never paint the issue so one-sided. Though I think teaching them intolerance would be the greater sin.”

“I see,” Umbridge says in a tone that betrays a great deal of disapproval. “We must be careful, don’t you think, not to put the wrong information in the children’s heads.”

“The wrong information?” Burbage repeats, sounding nonplussed.

“Yes,” Umbridge says. “We are the grownups. We must decide what they should and should not know. We wouldn’t want them to become…confused.”

There is a protracted silence, the scratch of a quill the only sound. “No,” Burbage eventually says, her voice sounding flat and completely unfamiliar. “We wouldn’t want that.”

“I will look over the rest of your curriculum for the year and give you my notes. But I really think there won’t be any need to talk so much about Muggle art.”

Hearing the shuffle of papers and the finality of that last statement, they pull back from the door, and scramble out of the classroom.

*     *     *

In Defense Against the Dark Arts the next day, Ginny watches Umbridge.

She’d thought it was kind of a lark, copying out of the text those first few weeks in DADA. Stupid, but something that gave her time to think about Quidditch, to come up with new formations and drills. Only now that’s she’s really paying attention does it register just what a colossal waste of time DADA is going to be this year.
Twenty minutes into another lesson spent copying out of the droll text, Ginny is about ready to start yelling herself. She has a tiny bit more sympathy for Harry’s infamous outbursts now, even if she still questions his methods.

She carefully shades in mustaches on the beaming faces in the illustrations of her text. Don’t be a sneaker, go tell a teacher! They try to glare at her from under their new inky hairdos, but their faces seem stuck in perpetual pleasure, giving them a sort of demented look.

It should be funny, but it’s really just frustrating. Her hand feels empty, sitting in this classroom without a wand.

You know why this is important.

* * *

Back in the common room, Smita and Ginny are getting a little work done before dinner while Tobias has his nose buried in a book. At least Ginny is trying to get some work done. Her attention just doesn’t want to stick, the scene in Burbage’s classroom running over and over again in her mind.

She sighs, abandoning her quill. “Why is Umbridge here?”

Smita looks up from her essay. “Well, obviously not to teach us defense,” Tobias says, coming out from behind his book. He says it like this is a no-brainer, and Ginny feels a bit stupid, that she’d let herself get so wrapped up in Quidditch that she hadn’t seen any of this.

She presses on. “But then why?”

Smita shrugs. “Maybe Dumbeldore couldn’t find anyone better.”

But that didn’t sit right with Ginny. Seemingly cursed position or not, Ginny doesn’t think Dumbledore would be careless enough to leave them with someone useless like Umbridge, not this year of all years.

The year Voldemort is back.

That can’t just be a coincidence. Can it?

But that reasoning leads her down a path where Umbridge is somehow working for Voldemort, and it’s a ridiculous thought. Tom would dismiss her as completely ludicrous.

Tobias shifts forward, his posture belying the casualness of his words. “Why does it matter why she’s here? Just another bad teacher, right?”

He is staring at her, his gaze penetrating, and she can tell there is a completely different question right there on the tip of his tongue. The same one that has been poised there all year. One the general code of privacy has kept him from asking.

No one here gives information away for free.

“Just say it,” Ginny pushes. As much as he wants to ask her, she needs him to ask. She thinks maybe she’s needed it for a long time.

“Is Potter telling the truth?” he says, voice low. “About the Dark Lord?”
For a moment, Ginny imagines asking Tobias why he calls him the Dark Lord. Because his parents do, no doubt. It all gets so confused in her head sometimes that she just finds it easier to think Voldemort. But maybe that’s because she’s never been able to separate him from Tom. He isn’t some vague threat to her; he’s real.

“I think he is,” Ginny says, and it all seems to hit home as she admits it out loud—the confusion and fear that she has been doing so much to ignore and pretend doesn’t exist.

She nods, voice growing firmer as she forces herself to think on it, on Hermione’s whispered words in the dark, on the grave lines etched into wizards’ faces as they passed through Grimmauld Place. “He is back.”

A war has begun, no matter what Umbridge tries to say otherwise. It isn’t even about believing Harry; it’s about what she’s seen. About a secret organization of wizards, strained conversations in the halls. About Dumbledore and her Mum and Dad, and the way Percy left. It’s all of it.

She’s been playing make-believe as much as anyone else, and she’s sick with it, with the breaking of that promise she made to herself as she scrubbed ink off her hands at the end of her first year. A promise not to take the path of least resistance just because it was easiest.

Smita flips their useless DADA text closed with a thump. “And now Umbridge is High Inquisitor.”

_We are the grownups. We must decide what they should and should not know._

“Yes,” Ginny says.

She still doesn’t know what that means.

An hour later, Ginny is walking alone down to the Great Hall for dinner when Antonia falls into step next to her, arm winding through hers.

Ginny looks over at her in surprise, but keeps walking, knowing better than to try to fathom the intentions of Antonia.

“Power,” Antonia eventually says.

Ginny frowns, feeling yet again like she’s walking into the middle of a conversation.

“Power,” Antonia repeats, looking bemused by her confusion. “It’s why Umbridge is here.”

Ginny doesn’t even bother to try to be surprised that Antonia has obviously heard their conversation. She should know better than to talk about private things in the common room.

“Power,” Ginny repeats. She thinks back on Umbridge in Burbage’s classroom. Being late, writing loudly, making Burbage wait for her permission to start. Is that what power really looks like? And to what end? To take Burbage’s job? Umbridge is already a professor, what would she care? Maybe she wants to be Headmaster? Or something more?

Ginny is pretty sure she’s still missing something, but at least now she has someone she can ask. “Whose power?”

Antonia smiles approvingly as if Ginny’s question is impressive when it’s really just born of confusion. “Dumbledore says the Dark Lord has returned. The Minister of Magic says he’s a liar. Only one of them can be right.”
“Or seem to be right,” Ginny muses.

Antonia laughs, her hand squeezing Ginny’s arm. “You’re finally starting to catch on.”

Ginny scowls, but doesn’t let her annoyance derail her. The Minister of Magic. Ginny hadn’t made that connection. Umbridge isn’t here for herself. This isn’t about school or students or even who is Headmaster. This is about Dumbledore and Harry and Voldemort and the people who say they are liars. It has been all along, just not in the way she thought.

Ginny glances at Antonia. “What does the minister think Dumbledore is going to do?”

She shrugs. “Doesn’t know, does he? And that’s the problem.”

No, he doesn’t know. The only way he could know would be to plant someone here, to plant someone who could decide what the students should and shouldn’t be taught. To make sure Dumbledore doesn’t make a move against the Ministry.

“Umbridge,” Ginny says, everything circling back to the beginning.

Not just teacher, but inquisitor.

“It’s a misstep,” Antonia says, arm slipping out from Ginny’s as they approach the hall.

Ginny looks at her in askance.

“To mistake control for power. One never has as much control as they think.” She lifts a book to her chest, clutching it there for a second before turning away from Ginny. Just long enough for Ginny to work out the runes pressed into the worn leather cover.

**Advanced Defensive Magicks**

They never have as much control as they think.

* * *

Ginny is wearily trudging back from a prolonged catch up homework session in the library when she turns around a corner and runs smack into someone.

She jerks back, putting a hand out to the wall to steady herself, already apologizing, just to have the other person speak over her.

“Sorry. Are you okay?”

It’s Harry, looking nearly as bleary as Ginny feels. “Yeah,” she says. “I’m fine. I should have been looking where I was going.” She smiles in apology, only to notice that Harry has one hand cradled to his chest, the white cloth tied around it seeping red.

“Merlin,” she breathes. “Are you okay?”

Harry starts, shoving his hand behind his back. “It’s nothing. Just a little accident.”

His face is red though, and she thinks that’s not just the lie he is so clearly is telling her, but something of anger and embarrassment too. Ginny leans back slightly to look down the hall behind him, and there it is, a door with a shiny plaque bearing the name Dolores Umbridge.

It takes a moment to all come together, his hand, Umbridge’s office, joking about his detentions.
Gave him a zillion hours of detention, writing lines.

Ginny reaches for Harry’s arm, ignoring his protest, ripping the handkerchief off his hand. Under the oozing blood, she can just barely make out the words. *I must not tell lies.*

She stares down at Harry’s bleeding hand and begins to understand that maybe this is what war really looks like. Not stirring speeches and two armies lined up with opposing uniforms, but pain and lies and evil hiding in plain sight.

War is about secrets. She should have known that, should have understood. Hadn’t she spent the summer in the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix? She was too busy feeling left out and scared and small, when she should have just been *paying attention.*

Harry recovers enough to snatch his hand back, wrapping it back up with furious jerks. “This isn’t any of your business, Ginny.”

Maybe not, but he’s just another person telling what she shouldn’t know, what she can and can’t understand.

*They never have as much control as they think.*

She squares her shoulders, but doesn’t apologize, the decision finally making itself. “I’ll see you on Saturday, Harry.”

Because she knows why this is important.

* * *

On Saturday, she bundles up and trudges to the Hog’s Head. It’s easy to shake off Tobias, and Smita’s always been one to understand the need for space.

Of course, when she arrives, it’s not quite the small gathering of students she expects. She tells herself she’s prepared for the way heads turn and gazes bore into her skin with suspicion. She tugs on her green scarf and ignores them.

Fred and George greet her with self-satisfied smirks as if taking her presence as proof of her blood. She can’t explain why exactly that grates, just turns away from them and moves towards Luna and her vacant smile of welcome instead.

“Ginny,” she says, pleasure blooming in her cheeks. “If you have no where else to sit, you may sit by me.”

Ginny plops down next to Luna. “Sure you want to be seen with me?”

She looks confused, almost a little stricken, and Ginny immediately regrets the joke.

“Never mind,” Ginny says as others continue to file in, sliding dark looks in her direction. “Is that a new necklace?”

Luna spins off on some tale about her father’s research and not for the first time, Ginny wonders what it must be like, seeing the world through Luna’s eyes. It’s a welcome distraction.

The Hog’s Head is nearly at capacity by the time Hermione stands up, clearing her throat.

Ginny watches as Harry gets more and more indignant as it becomes clear that most people are here for the freak show, the inside scoop on what really happened at the end of last year. Some of the
students are still looking for proof of the coming dangers, others just want to know why Harry, of all people, should be the one to teach them.

It’s probably inevitable that a list of Harry’s mad adventures come out. Philosopher Stones and Triwizard Tournaments. But also Ginny’s own sordid past.

“Didn’t you kill a basilisk with that sword second year?” someone interjects.

She very carefully doesn’t look at Harry.

He hedges his answers and tries to make it all sound like no big deal, but he knows what it’s like, this uncertain world they are heading into, and the other students in the room aren’t so stupid not to realize that.

At the first mention of keeping secrets, heads not so discreetly turn in Ginny’s direction. One of the Hufflepuff girls leans over to whisper in the ear of the boy next to her, the sibilance of Slytherin hissing around the room like an accusation.

Ginny surges to her feet, some of the students nearby flinching away at the unexpected movement. Even Hermione looks a little wary, like she’s wondering what Ginny is about to do. It occurs to her that even they don’t really know anything about her. Not really.

Ginny paces up to stand in front of the table. Harry meets her eyes over the piece of treasonous paper.

Picking up the quill, Ginny signs her name—big, bold loops and unapologetic slashes.

“Who’s next?” she asks, holding up the quill.

* * *

The next morning Educational Decree Number 24 appears, banning all student clubs, and there is no way that can be a coincidence. The entire hall is buzzing with it. Ginny watches the less clever of the students from the Hog’s Head yesterday try to swarm the table where Harry and Hermione and Ron are eating. Hermione’s face nearly turns purple with frustration as she tries to subtly signal them away.

So much for keeping the club a secret.

Terry Boot and another Ravenclaw get up from the table next to Slytherin’s, looking like they may be heading that way too. Ginny pulls her wand, pointing it back under her arm as they pass. She whispers a Trip Jinx, both boys stumbling into each other in a heap.

A clamor erupts, the fallen boys protesting, other Ravenclaw jumping to their feet, and the nearby Slytherin enjoying a good laugh. Everyone is looking around trying to figure out what has just happened.

Under cover of the chaos, Ginny gives each of the boys a pointed look. She thought Ravenclaws were supposed to be clever.

They glare at her, but when they get back to their feet, they walk off in a different direction, away from Harry and the rest.

“Gits,” Ginny mutters under her breath. She glances around the Hall, glad to see that the commotion provided enough time for everyone else to come to their senses. At the Gryffindor table, Ron is
frowning at Ginny, but Hermione looks relieved.

Smita slides Ginny a look, like she’s wondering where Ginny’s sudden interest in picking fights with other students came from.

Ginny gives her a tight smile. “They were giving Luna a hard time yesterday.”

Across the table, Tobias’ eyebrow shoots up. “Ginny Weasley, school crusader. I didn’t even see you get that curse off.” He sounds impressed.

“Practice makes perfect,” Ginny mutters, trying to ignore the unpleasant gnaw of something uncomfortably like guilt in her stomach.

_We have to be able to protect ourselves._

“Ginny?” Smita asks.

She’s saved from coming up with another lie when Bletchley slaps a hand on her shoulder. “Extra practice this afternoon, Six. Poor Gryffindors haven’t gotten their team approved by Umbridge yet.” It had been the no doubt unintended side effect of the new decree—all Quidditch teams had to get permission to be reformed.

“You already got ours?” she asks.

“Yeah,” he says, waving a hand. “It was a breeze. So I snagged Gryffindor’s pitch time.”

“Great,” Ginny says, forcing herself to smile. It sucks that Umbridge is making them all do this, but they can sure use the extra practice.

Gryffindor’s woes aren’t her problem.

* * *

Two days later as Ginny leaves the Hall after lunch, she spots Hermione hovering in the corridor.

“Give me a minute,” Ginny says to Tobias and Smita.

They give Hermione a curious glance, but don’t hesitate to continue on without her.

Hermione lowers her head towards Ginny. “First meeting is tonight, 8pm.”

She nods. She’ll barely have time to finish practice and grab a bite before, but she knows this is important.

“Meet on the seventh floor. You know the Barnabas the Barmy tapestry?”

Ginny frowns, being familiar enough with that part of the castle to know there aren’t any classrooms or anything up there, but Hermione has already strode off, so she can’t really ask.

Sure enough, when Ginny first gets to the corridor that evening, her hair still slightly damp from the shower, at first glance there’s nothing but stone walls. Then, as Ginny approaches closer, a metal door seems to almost…bleed into place. It looks fortified and impenetrable, but opens easily under her hand, like it recognizes her. It closes silently behind her, leaving her standing in a large classroom full of pillows and strange contraptions on the wall.

Most of the students from the Hog’s Head are already there, heads turning to glance at her and then
quickly away.

Her brothers barely notice her, already embroiled in mischief, and Hermione just gives her a distracted smile before sticking her head back in a giant bookshelf. In the face of such indifference and outright hostility, Ginny is beginning to lose her nerve, especially when Harry has everyone pair up to practice.

Luckily before she can do anything stupid, a boy she recognizes from the train walks up to her. He looks about as sheepish as Ginny feels.

“Uh, do you, um, have a partner?” he asks, some of the words swallowed and awkward to the point of intelligibility.

Ginny swallows her anger and discomfort and takes a leap. “Not unless you’d like to be my partner.”

He smiles, looking relieved enough to almost fumble his wand. Ginny wonders what she may have gotten herself into. “Great,” he says, holding out his hand. “I’m Neville.”

His palm is a little sweaty when she takes it. “Ginny.”

“Yeah,” he says, nodding enthusiastically. “Ron’s sister, right?”

“Yeah,” Ginny says, used to being known as one or another of her brothers’ sister for her entire life.

They start out pretty simple, learning and perfecting basic protection spells, but Harry is thorough and endlessly patient. She’s surprised by it and more than once has to remind herself that she doesn’t actually know Harry Potter all that well.

As for Neville, he’s a little hopeless, but determined, never giving up no matter how many times he fails. He relaxes around her after a while, like maybe he’d been waiting for her to hex him when he wasn’t looking, or say something nasty about his questionable wand skills.

He pauses once after his spell has done little more than make some of Ginny’s hair stand on end, looking down at his wand as if wondering if it has forsaken him. “My Da’s,” he explains, a world of hidden currents in the simple words.

Ginny used (stole) her brothers’ wands a few times here and there over the years, just to try them out, but nothing has ever felt as right in her hand as her own wand.

Neville straightens his shoulders. “Let’s try it again.”

Ginny nods.

Hopeless, but determined. She can admire that.

*   *   *

Ginny stifles a yawn and tries not to panic about just how far behind she’s getting in her studies. Between Quidditch and the DA, she’s bound to fail at least one of her courses. Runes, probably. They all look exactly the same this late at night.

Tobias and Smita have the nerve to look completely relaxed and caught up. Gits.

Tobias casually turns a page of the book he’s reading. “Muggles,” he says with a shake of his head. “They can be deliciously twisted.”
Ginny glances at the title, something about a prince called Machiavelli. She’s halfway through another book Tobias lent her, all about the Muggle art of war. It’s more useful on the Quidditch pitch than she initially expected. Technically they shouldn’t be reading either of the books, but Tobias smuggled them in after letting his curiosity drag him into a Muggle bookshop over the summer.

It’s strange what counts as contraband at Hogwarts.

Officially, Muggle books have to be carefully vetted through the school, the professors and Madam Pince deciding what is and isn’t appropriate for the students. But it’s not like that’s ever stopped a Slytherin before. Ginny’s heard rumors that Antonia has an entire closet of banned ancient books somewhere in the dorms.

She glances over at the sixth year sitting near the fire, wondering if she might ever let Ginny take a look.

“Before all else, be armed.” Tobias looks up from his book. “Clearly Umbridge has never read this.”

Ginny snorts, the thought of prim and proper Umbridge reading something not ministry-approved completely ridiculous.

Tobias nudges their DADA textbook with the smiling, vacant student faces beaming up at them. “But maybe it can be used as a shield somehow?”

“It’s dense enough,” Smita comments.

“Who are you calling dense?” Tobias quips.

Smita doesn’t rise to the bait, simply shakes her head and tries not to look amused.

“Well,” Tobias says, stretching his arms above his head. “Maybe copying out of the text over and over again will increase the strength of my wand arm.”

“A fat lot of good that will do if you don’t know how to do anything with it,” Smita counters.

Complaining about Umbridge, or any professor, really, is just par for the course around the common room, but with these two it’s more than just mere boredom. Ginny can see their hands twitch with restlessness—powerlessness. Not so different from her own.

She thinks of an evening with Neville, learning to protect herself, and feels that unbearable twinge once again, finally knowing exactly what it is: guilt.

“Would you be…interested in doing something to change that?” Ginny asks, face still buried in her runes text.

Tobias leans forward and hooks a finger over the spine of her book. “What exactly are we talking about?”

Smita is just giving Ginny a look like it’s about time.

Ginny gnaws her lip. “It’s dangerous,” she says, just so they know what they are getting into. “And has to be kept completely secret.”

Rather than being put off by that, Tobias only looks more interested.

Ginny glances around the common room. “I can’t really tell you more now.” She looks at Smita. “But I will.”
Smita nods, putting a hand on Tobias’ arm when he might push further.

“Okay,” he says, gathering his things up. “But I’m holding you to that.”

Ginny scribbles an ending to her Arithmancy essay and vows to do better next time. Pushing to her feet, she trudges blearily towards her room.

“You know,” Antonia says as Ginny passes by, not looking up from her book. “You’re getting a lot more interesting this year.”

Ginny isn’t sure what to say to that.

* * *

Ginny slips into Potions at the last possible moment thanks to a whispered conversation with Hermione out in the halls.

Her potion partner Bridget sends Ginny a slightly scandalized look, but is kept from saying anything by the arrival of Snape. His eyes sweep the students, lingering on Ginny for just a second longer, as if he knows she was almost late. Ginny meets his gaze squarely.

“Open your texts to page 57. Today we will be testing your skills at a Wit Sharpening Potion.” Snape’s eyes stray to the Gryffindor in the classroom. “Though I fear not even a potion can sharpen what is nonexistent in the first place.”

Some of the Slytherin snicker appreciatively while the Gryffindor just glower silently, knowing better than to protest. Ginny glances across the room, catching Colin Creevey’s eye. They’d met at the DA meeting last week. He’s cheerful and earnest almost to the point of annoyance, but far from witless. Not that it should bother her.

She doesn’t smile, and neither does Colin.

She glances away, only to find Snape standing over her desk. “Is there something wrong, Miss Weasley?” he asks.

Her book is still unopened in front of her.

“Trust me, Professor,” Tobias butts in, filling the awkward silence, “her wit is already sharp enough to cut.” The boys near him snicker, nodding along in agreement.

“Silence,” Snape says, but his lips are curved in that indulgent amusement he always reserves for his House.

Ginny takes advantage of the distraction to flip open her text to the correct page, pulling out the needed ingredients.

“You have one hour,” Snape says, giving Ginny one last long glance before moving back to his desk.

“Are you okay?” Smita asks out of the corner of her mouth. On the other side of Smita, Bridget sniffs loudly in disapproval.

Ginny sees Tobias move back towards the cupboards. “We need more wartcap powder from the stores,” she mutters, getting to her feet.

Tobias gives her a wary look as she approaches, like he thinks she’s going to tell him off.
Ginny finds the jar of wartcap powder, carefully siphoning out a small amount onto a piece of paper. “That thing I promised to tell you about?” she whispers.

Tobias’s eyebrow lifts. “Yeah?”

“Tonight, after dinner. Meet me by the sticking step at 7:30.”

Stepping away before he can pester her any further, Ginny feels the guilt in her stomach twist into something almost worse. She keeps walking.

* * *

Later that night as they linger in the hallway one corridor down from the Room of Requirement, Tobias frowns when he catches sight of Harry coming towards them, but doesn’t say anything. Ginny’s incredibly thankful for that. She’s been feeling his patience draw thinner and thinner as they stood out here. He’s still convinced this is some sort of prank she’s concocted.

“Stay here,” Ginny says to Tobias and Smita, moving down the hall to intercept Harry. “Harry.”

“Ginny?” he asks, looking up as if surprised to see anyone here as early as him.

Ginny blows out a breath, fairly blurting the words. “I know more people who want to join.”

“Yeah?” he asks, one eyebrow lifting.

“I haven’t given them any details yet,” she says. After all, she’s certain that was no simple piece of paper they’d signed. (She knows the dangers of paper and ink more than anyone.) Besides, even if Harry is rash enough to damn the consequences, Hermione is too smart to let him.

Ginny glances over at Smita and Tobias standing just out of earshot.

Harry follows her gaze, his expressive face not hiding his moment of shock. From his reaction, one would think she just asked him to train a bunch of Death Eaters.

“They want to learn,” she says through gritted teeth.

Harry doesn’t seem to buy that, giving her a look like she’s missing the big picture. “They’re Sly--,” he starts to say, biting off the word as he realizes just who he’s speaking to.

Know your enemy.

Ginny stares back at him, feeling a weird sort of calm come over her. It feels like a relief to admit the truth—she isn’t at all surprised. She knows this is why she hadn’t told Tobias and Smita about the first meeting in the Hog’s Head. Because she must have suspected this very reaction even then.

“Ginny,” Harry says, trying to backpedal. “I didn’t mean--.”

“Yeah, you did.” She lets out a huff, shaking her head in irritation, or maybe just annoyance with herself for ever hoping for something different. “You, who talk about banding together, protecting ourselves, finding strength in unity.”

“I don’t have a problem with you joining, Ginny,” he’s quick to say, as if this small gesture absolves him of the larger crime. She knows the only reason he’s willing to accept her is because she’s a Weasley. He thinks he knows all about Weasleys.

Not this Weasley.
“You’re such a hypocrite,” she says, voice flat and matter of fact, but he still flinches back as if she’d yelled it. She wonders if that’s the horror of a Slytherin having the audacity to question his vaunted moral position. The memory of him staring back at her in the Chamber comes rushing back, Tom’s voice whispering in her ear.

_Do not fit his careful columns of good versus Slytherin._

Ginny steps closer to Harry, anger thrumming in her veins. “There’s one thing you should remember, Potter. _I’m_ a Slytherin. Not an aberration, not a mix up. A Slytherin. So if you’re writing them off, you’d bloody well better write me off as well.”

He stares back at her, stunned, maybe by her words, by her gall. She doesn’t really care. Spinning on her heel, she strides away from him, making a nice dramatic go of it.

“Come on,” she says to Tobias and Smita, both of them following her without comment when they see her face.

Back in their common room, Tobias flops down on a couch.

“He wouldn’t let you tell us,” Smita surmises, rightly putting all the pieces together.

“No,” Ginny confirms.

“Did he have a reason?” Tobias demands, voice fairly dripping with aggression.

Ginny just looks back at him, leaving the words unspoken.

“Of course.” He pushes back to his feet. “Sainted Potter--,” he spits.

“Don’t,” Ginny says wearily, her own anger already draining in the face of pure exhaustion.

Tobias spins to look at her. “Why the hell not?”

Ginny sighs, that uncomfortable burning sensation back in her stomach. “He’s in the wrong here, I know that. But just…don’t.”

Tobias gives her a long, sharp look that is no less painful than Harry’s had been. After a while his jaw tightens, but he nods, seeming to accept that she has her limits.

Smita watches Tobias go without comment.

“Bugger it,” Ginny swears, dropping her head back to the couch and slapping her hands over her face.

“You’re disappointed in him,” Smita observes.

Ginny doesn’t know which boy she means, and isn’t sure she wants to.

In History of Magic the next day, Ginny watches Smita trace complex runes on the edges of her parchment, her attention clearly a thousand kilometers away from the Goblin Wars.

Ginny smiles fondly, absentely thinking Smita and Hermoine might be friends if they ever had the chance to meet.

Except.
Ginny’s smile fades.

* * *

Ginny has more than enough to do between homework and Quidditch to keep her blissfully busy the next week. She doesn’t bother giving Harry Potter and his bloody club a second thought. Not until Hermione pulls her to a stop in the halls.

“There’s a meeting tonight,” she whispers, watching Ginny closely. “Will you be there?” Clearly she noticed her absence from the last meeting.

Ginny shakes her head. “I can’t.”

Hermione’s eyes narrow. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” Ginny says, not surprised Harry hasn’t told her about their fight. He probably never gave it a second thought. “Nothing’s happened. I’m just really busy right now.”

The lies are easy. It’s nice to be on this side of them for once.

Or so she tells herself.

She tries not to pay attention to the clock that evening, but despite the load of homework she has to lose herself in, she becomes increasingly short-tempered as the clock ticks towards eight. Both Tobias and Smita have long since wandered off to leave her to her sulk.

It’s stupid, really. What does she care about the stupid DA or what Harry bloody Potter might think of her?

Right before eight, a shadow falls across the book she isn’t reading.

“Come on.”

Ginny looks up, surprised to see Antonia standing over her. “What?”

Antonia gives her an impatient look like she’s dropping the ball. “Astoria’s going to play her harp.”

Ginny frowns, sure that Astoria has never publicly played before. She could be in the choir if she wanted, or in the musical chorale. But most Slytherin aren’t big on participation.

Antonia raises one perfect, dark eyebrow at Ginny when she continues to do nothing but stare. “Well?”

There are a million reasons to keep sitting here pouting, but all of them suddenly feel rather stupid. Besides, Ginny is big enough to admit she’s always found Antonia fascinating. Ginny quickly shoves her books back into her bag and gets to her feet.

Antonia leads her to what Ginny had up to now always assumed was a broom closet. The older girl taps the doorframe with her wand, murmuring something under her breath. When the door opens, it reveals a narrow staircase leading downwards.

Ginny peers down into the dark space. She may find Antonia fascinating, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t also find her scary as hell. “Where are we going?”

Antonia rolls her eyes. “Stop being a ninny.” She gives Ginny a little shove down the stairs.
Ginny lets herself get propelled down the small spiraling staircase. There are torches every half twist, and by the time Ginny gets to a doorway at the bottom, she’s a little dizzy. The door opens out into a large, comfortable room. She has just long enough to pick out an array of instruments on one wall, cases full of books on another, and in the back what looks like chalkboards or easels, before she becomes aware that every person in the room is staring at her, most with varying levels of suspicion.

There aren’t many people, all girls, including Caroline, Astoria, the Carrow twins, and a few older girls, but all Ginny can think of is being thirteen years old and surrounded by a crowd of tall, masked girls—Gregor’s silently screaming face.

Antonia appears then, winding her arm through Ginny’s. “Shall we get started?” she says, something like a challenge in her voice.

The rest of the girls exchange glances, but seem to accept Ginny’s presence for now. At the center of the room, Astoria settles down with her harp, the rest of the girls sitting on the rich, comfortable couches arranged around her.

Ginny quickly takes a seat next to Caroline, thinking the less attention she draws to herself right now, the better. As Astoria tunes the harp, doing a few runs of quick notes, Ginny tries to surreptitiously get a better look around the room. There’s a full potions station tucked in a dark corner she hadn’t noticed at first, and next to it, a strange contraption made of tubes and glass beakers, a clear liquid quietly collecting in a large bottle.

She’s squinting to make out the writing on one of the various chalkboards nearby when Astoria begins to play. Ginny quickly loses any interest in the room.

She’s never been a huge music fan. She knows the most popular stuff, suffers silently through Celestina Warbeck during the holidays. Astoria’s music is nothing like either of those. Not catchy or boring, but completely absorbing.

Haunting, really.

Ginny manages to forget everything while Astoria plays—this strange room, her homework, stupid Harry, Tobias’s anger, secrets too big to keep, and Smita’s quiet disappointment. It all just fades in the face of the sounds being coaxed out of the strings.

Before Ginny realizes it, thirty minutes have passed, Astoria quietly standing up from the harp and the other girls offering a few words of praise before moving off to do other things.

Ginny is still sitting rather stunned on the couch when Astoria joins Caroline, arranging her robes carefully as if they are in the most elegant of concert halls.

“That was…beautiful,” Ginny says. Maybe not in the traditional, comfortable sense, but beautiful all the same.

Astoria smiles, clearly pleased but trying not to show it.

Ginny’s always thought of Astoria as rather cold, like a perfect porcelain doll. She thought maybe that was why Caroline hung out with her, hoping a little of that polish might rub off on her and make her mother happy. But Astoria with her harp is an entirely different being, someone incredibly more understandable. She comes to life.

Caroline and Astoria lower their heads to talk to each other, and Ginny gathers enough nerve to get up and give the room a closer look. She’s examining some of the chalkboards in the back when Antonia appears by her side.

Ginny tries not to look surprised that so much has been going on right under her nose without her realizing, but Antonia’s got an annoying smirk on her face all the same.

Ginny moves further towards the back of the room, peeking at some canvases leaning against the wall. They are covered in dark swirling images, eyes and faces peering out of the darkness.

“Don’t touch those,” a voice growls.

Ginny turns to find Milicent Baulstrode uncomfortably close, her face twisted with malice. Ginny draws back with a start, her hand brushing against the comforting weight of her wand in her pocket. She darts a look over Milicent’s shoulder to Antonia. The older girl merely looks away, clearly not willing to come to her rescue. Not that Ginny really expected her to.

“I’m sorry,” Ginny says, taking one careful step back. “I was just curious. Did you do them?” Like Astoria’s music, the images are far from comfortable, but still clearly very good. She doesn’t really know how to put that into words, and doesn’t get a chance to.

Milicent glowers at her. “None of your damn business.”

Ginny puts up her hands, perfectly able to believe Milicent capable of violence. “Understood.” She retreats as quickly as she can without looking like she’s fleeing.

“Wow,” Ginny says when she gets back to Antonia’s side. “What a thoroughly unpleasant person.”

Antonia flicks something off her sweater. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Maybe?” Ginny echoes incredulously.

To her surprise, Antonia looks disappointed.

“What?”

Antonia rolls her shoulders in a move far too elegant to be called a shrug, her face now indifferent. “I would have thought you, of all people, would understand that things aren’t always as they seem.”

With that, Antonia moves off to talk to other girls, leaving Ginny standing there feeling like she’s failed some unspoken test. They mill about for another hour, and Ginny slips away as soon as she can. No one seems to notice.

“You went to The Parlor?” Smita asks later that night, looking impressed. Ginny can hear the capitalization in her voice.

“Yeah,” she says, wondering now why she’d never heard of it before since it is clearly a big deal. Not that it really matters. “Something tells me I won’t be asked again though.”

Smita raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t ask.

Ginny nudges her with her elbow. “Wouldn’t want to leave you with no one but Tobias to hang out with, after all.”

Smita shoves at her, still trying to pretend the idea doesn’t appeal to her.

Ginny doesn’t sleep well that night, dreaming of Milicent Baullstrode playing a cello with a Dark
Mark floating above her head.

She looks straight at Ginny, her bow dragging with a groan across the strings. “Hypocrite.”

* * *

Solitude is a habit Ginny has never shaken since her first year. She loves hanging around with Smita and Tobias, being in the middle of things, but sometimes she just wants a minute to herself, a place to retreat to. When she does, she comes here, to her secret hiding place. The odd little cloister is one of the few things she learned from Tom that she has claimed as her own.

It appears open to the sky above, sunlight radiating in, even though Ginny knows there are at least five stories of castle directly above. It feels like it once used to be a vast courtyard that was slowly squeezed and run over by the expanding castle. Now it is crowded with warped and twisted columns, moss and various plants growing across large broken blocks of marble lying on their sides. There’s a soft trickle of water coming from somewhere, but try as she may, she’s never been able to find the source.

It feels ancient and forgotten, and somehow completely her own.

Which is exactly why Ginny can’t explain how Harry finds it. Hearing a noise, Ginny glances up to see him barely visible through the tiny sliver of space that serves as the entrance. She knows he can’t have seen her yet, and seriously considers ducking out of sight.

He taps a piece of parchment with his wand before tucking it away into his pocket. Taking a few steps out into the cloister, he comes to a stop, eyes skimming the space as if looking for something. It takes a moment for him to locate her among the intricate columns, his eyes settling on her as if he had fully expected her to be there.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hi,” she echoes, voice completely devoid of either welcome or censure.

He seems heartened by the fact that she hasn’t hexed him though, stepping between the columns and scrabbling over blocks to get closer to her. She petulantly doesn’t bother pointing out the clear path to one side.

“What is this place?” he asks when he finally reaches her.

She shrugs, glancing around. “I’m not sure.”

He makes a big show of looking up at the lattice of marble above them, but Ginny gets the sense he’s just stalling. He looks back down to find her watching him. “Charms homework?” he says, gesturing at her book.

She lifts an eyebrow at him. Does he really think she’s going to believe he came all this way to find her just to talk about homework? Because it’s clear now that this is his goal here. She isn’t sure what to think of that.

He grimaces, hands disappearing into his pockets. “Look. Are you coming back to the DA?”

She’s missed two meetings now, and she can only think of one reason that would bother him. “If you’re here because you’re worried I’m going to tell Umbridge…”
“No,” Harry interrupts. “That’s not--. I don’t think you’d ever do that, Ginny.”

She closes her book, giving him her full attention. “Why not?”

“What?” he asks, looking flustered.

“Why don’t you think I’d tell Umbridge?”

“Because…you just wouldn’t.”

She tilts her head to one side. “Because I’m a Weasley?”

His mouth opens and closes a couple of times, like he’s learned it’s best to think his words through when he’s talking to her, but can’t quite decide what’s safe to say. Maybe she’d find that funny if she weren’t so annoyed.

“But unfortunately Smita and Tobias aren’t. Is that it?”

Harry shifts, having the grace to look uncomfortable. He drops down on a marble block next to her like he’s run out of steam. This conversation is clearly not going anywhere near where he expected it to.

“Malfoy,” he says, letting the silence stretch long like this one word is an explanation.

“Is a wanker,” Ginny supplies for him.

Harry looks at her in surprise.

She shrugs. “It’s not like that’s a secret. But neither does it have anything to do with this.”

“Doesn’t it?” he asks, his gaze sharpening like he’s decided he’s not going to let her get away with anything either.

“He isn’t Slytherin,” Ginny says. It’s the same mistake she’d made, in the beginning. The same mistake she keeps making, if she’s honest.

And that, more than anything, is why she finds it harder to be angry with Harry today. She’s too busy being angry with herself. She knows why she really lost her temper with him. Because he’d dared to say out loud what she’d hated herself for thinking. For suspecting. There was a reason she didn’t take Smita and Tobias with her to the first meeting at the Hog’s Head, wasn’t there? A reason she’d actually hesitated to tell Smita about her summer, her real summer.

She’s just as guilty as he is.

It really pisses her off.

She takes a breath, looking over at Harry. “Have you ever considered that blind hatred of Slytherin isn’t really any different than Draco’s hatred of Muggleborns?”

Harry frowns.

Ginny picks at the edge of her parchment. “Look. I think the DA is important. I want to go back.”

“But?” he prompts, apparently not quite so hopelessly dense as her brother.

“But not if the only reason you let me join is because I’m a Weasley. And not without Smita and
Tobias.”

This whole thing has been about being able to protect themselves, and Ginny just isn’t willing to leave her friends out of that. Not any more.

She gets up, carefully piling her books and quills and parchment back into her bag. Harry watches her without comment.

She doesn’t know him all that well, not really. She doesn’t know if he’s going to think about anything she’s said. But he’d bothered to come find her and talk about this when there wasn’t any reason to, and she thinks that must mean something. Like maybe he really is more than just a name.

She pulls her bag over her shoulder. “Just think about it, will you?”

Harry nods.

She leaves him sitting alone in the cloister.

*     *     *

The next day, Ginny stifles a curse as her bag hits the ground with a thump and clang as she gets shoved from behind. She looks up from her belongings sprawled all over the busy hallway floor to find Harry Potter standing next to her.

“Oops. Sorry,” he says, not sounding remotely apologetic.

She glares, wondering if this a sign of how things are going to be between them now. Antagonistic. Clearly she’d been overly optimistic, thinking he might take her words to heart.

Before she can formulate a response, he’s on the floor, corralling all her things back into her bag. Frowning, she drops down next to him, swiftly snatching the embarrassingly chewed quills from his hands.

“I’ve got it,” she snaps.

He doesn’t argue, stacking up the last of her books.

She’s about to push to her feet and stalk off with an appropriate air of menace when he touches her elbow.

“You forgot these.” He presses something into her hand. She glances down, catching the glint of gold between her fingers before tightening her fist. She thinks she’d know if she had a small fortune in gold rattling around in her bag. What crazy new game is this?

Harry just smiles back at her, and it occurs to Ginny that he’s amused, like he’s enjoying her confusion.

“Tonight at eight, okay?” he says, voice barely audible.

Rolling the coins around her palm, she carefully counts. One, two, three.

Three.

She feels an absurd smile rising on the warmth bubbling up in her chest. But she also notices that people are beginning to stare. Jamming her fist into her pocket, she nods at Harry, giving him a pleasant smile.
Then she shoves him.

He sprawls back on his arse, a stupid look of surprise on his face. He frowns as he rubs at his chest, and Ginny thinks she enjoys seeing him look confused too.

Raising her voice, she pushes to her feet, flicking imaginary dust off her sleeve. “Watch it, Potter,” she says, standing over him. “Next time I won’t be so forgiving.”

She doesn’t give him another glance, her step light and springing as she hums to herself.

*     *     *

Ron, Harry, and Hermione meet them in the hallway in front of the Room of Requirement just after eight. It just looks like a plain stretch of wall at the moment, and she knows Tobias still thinks this is an elaborate prank. Getting him here at all had been an even bigger challenge than convincing Harry.

“We need you to sign this,” Hermione says, giving them a hesitant smile and holding out the piece of parchment Ginny recognizes from the Hog’s Head, her signature sitting right at the top.

“Why?” Tobias demands, crossing his arms over his chest.

Hermione’s smile falters.

“Because she told you to, you git,” Ron snaps.

Tobias glares at Ron, but doesn’t rise to the bait. Ginny can practically see him filing away the insult for future retaliation. “What is it?” he asks, digging his heels in out of sheer perversity.

“It’s your promise that you won’t tell anyone what we’re about,” Hermione explains.

“What, we can’t just pinkie swear?” Tobias sneers, clearly well into his total wanker mode.

Harry gives Ginny a pointed look.

“Just shut up and sign it,” Ginny says, shoving a quill at Tobias.

He gives her a mutinous glare.

Smita, quiet up to now, is the one to calmly take the parchment from Hermione, her fingers skimming down over the surface. Nodding as if in approval, she lifts her wand, murmuring an incantation. Harry, Ron, and Hermione flinch, their hands flying for their wands.

A writing desk appears in the middle of the hall with a small pop.

Smita eyes the Gryffindors’ wands as if to say, ‘What did you expect?’ They aren’t barbarians after all.

Ginny has to bite on her lip not to laugh.

“May I?” Smita asks Ginny, gesturing for the quill.

Ginny hands it over with a small flourish. “Certainly.”

Sitting down at the small table, Smita signs her name at the bottom in compact, careful letters. “Tobias?” she asks, holding the quill out for him.
Tobias makes a show of grumbling, but sits down in the vacated seat and signs his name as well.

Smita collects the parchment and vanishes the desk with a flick of her wand. Stepping over to stand next to Hermione, she hands it to her. “This parchment’s cursed,” she observes.

Hermione blanches.

“It’s what?” Tobias bites out, voice low and dangerous. Ginny touches his arm.

“Cursed,” Smita repeats, clearly unconcerned by this fact.

Harry gives her a speculative look. “Yet you still signed it.”

Smita nods. “I would have cursed it too. It’s a wise precaution.

Ginny can’t lie. She gets a lot of amusement out of how discomforted Hermione and Harry look to get Slytherin approval of their underhandedness.

“What spell did you use?” Smita asks, stepping closer to Hermione.

Hermione’s mouth opens and closes a couple of times, her eyes still a little panicked.

“You’re right,” Smita says, tapping the side of her nose. “It’s safer not to let anyone know.”

Should we go inside?” Ginny asks, trying to hide a strangled laugh behind a cough.

“Right,” Harry says, moving to pace in front of the wall.

Despite himself, Tobias looks pretty impressed as the doors to the Room of Requirement appear. “Just what the hell have you gotten us in to, Ginevra?”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione walk through the doors, Tobias trailing slightly behind.

“Enjoying yourself?” Ginny whispers, threading her arm through Smita’s as they follow.

Smita nods. “Oh, yes. Immensely.”

Ginny laughs at the sparkle in Smita’s eye. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

This, at last, feels right.

Inside, stillness invades the room as everyone notices the newcomers in the doorway. A Ravenclaw boy leans over to whisper in the ear of a Hufflepuff girl.

Ginny’s jaw clenches.

Harry glances at her, and clears his throat loudly. “We have two new members today. This is Tobias and Smita.”

Not exactly gushing, but she appreciates his matter-of-fact tone. He isn’t going to justify their presence to anyone. Except maybe to himself.

Harry waits another beat, like maybe he’s waiting for someone to greet them. The tension in the room only seems to grow though, until Luna steps forward.

“Oh, hello!” she says, floating over to their side.
“Hi, Luna,” Smita says.

Their familiarity with Luna only seems to cement their weirdness with the other members, muttering breaking out all over the room.

Harry gives a smart blow on the whistle hanging around his neck. “Okay, let’s get to work. Pair up and let me see how your disarming practice is going.”

Neville crosses over to Ginny. “I’m glad you’re back,” he says.

“Thanks,” she says, turning to Tobias and Smita. “This is Neville.”

They only nod in return, Tobias still bent out of shape and Smita shy as always.

Ginny smiles at Neville to soften the blow. “Would you mind being my practice partner again?”

Ginny asks, leaving Tobias and Smita to work with each other when she sees Harry approach them to help catch them up.

The rest of the meeting goes relatively smoothly, barring the time one of Neville’s spells goes awry and makes one of Tobias’ legs go numb. Neville looks horrified, Tobias indignant, but then Smita is leaning over him, looking concerned and Tobias seems to forget all about Neville. Stupid berk.

At the end of the meeting, Ginny pretends not to see the way people swarm around Harry. Demanding, no doubt, to know what the hell he was thinking, letting a bunch of Slytherin in. Tries to pretend Fred and George aren’t right in there with the rest of them.

Neville gives her an apologetic look, Luna happily unaware of the undercurrents.

Ginny forces a smile on her face and gets Tobias and Smita out of the room as quickly as possible.

Back in the common room, Ginny eyes Tobias, who is clearly fuming. “Are you more angry because of the way they treated us, or because Harry is actually a good teacher?”

Tobias lets out a sigh, dropping an arm over Ginny’s shoulders. “Can’t I be angry about both at the same time?”

Ginny smiles. “It will get better,” she promises.

It has to.

*     *     *

It doesn’t get better. Well, it does for a little while. The others slowly get used to seeing them there, particularly after Tobias stops glaring at people and Smita’s quiet competence becomes clear. Only then the first match of the Quidditch season looms closer and closer, and things in the halls outside get nastier and nastier.

Members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team keep ending up in the infirmary, and Ginny isn’t so naïve not to know why.

She’s in the library studying when she notices Bletchley eying Alicia Spinnet over his books, his wand twisting in his fingers under the desk.

Ginny crosses the room as if looking for another book, bumping Bletchley from behind just in time for the jinx to dong harmlessly off a table leg.
Bletchley spins around in surprise. “What the hell, Six?”

Ginny nods her head back over his shoulder. “Pince was watching.”

Bletchley looks back in that direction, but doesn’t see the librarian. Probably because she’d never been there in the first place.

“I don’t want you to get caught with the match coming up. We need you too much.” She stares guilelessly back at him, willing him to call her bluff. She tries to remember those weeks after the Yule Ball last year.

Like everyone else, Slytherin boys tend to be wary of Slytherin girls.

Bletchley shrugs and goes back to his books.

Alicia turns, catching Ginny’s eye. Giving her a suspicious look, Alicia gathers her book bag and leaves.

The sooner this first match is over, the better.

* * *

Ginny takes it back. The match itself is even worse than the build up.

She prepared herself for a dirty match, but not for Draco’s idea of amusements.

_Weasley was born in a bin…_

She can see Ron’s red ears all the way across the pitch. Goyle and Crabbe are snickering, Katie and Alicia glaring back at them with the power of a thousand curses.

Ginny just clenches her jaw and tries to focus down on the match, noticing a similar expression on Harry’s face when they pass. She ignores the singing coming out of the stands as best she can, too busy dodging bludgers and trying to keep their score up. Fred and George are long over any hesitance at trying to knock their baby sister off her broom.

The extracurricular antics are distracting Warrington. The song, the clearly one-sided commentary blaring out over the field, Ginny doesn’t know nor care.

“Oi,” she bellows as she flies by him. “Get your head in the game!”

She’s worked too damn hard this year on offensive drills and plays to fall short now. The only way to win this is to go up enough points before Harry catches the snitch. She can’t depend on Draco.

Besides, not giving Ron enough time to think is probably the nicest thing she can do for him.

Ginny signals Thompson to get in formation and makes another run on the Gryffindor goals.

Despite Ginny’s best efforts and even Ron’s abysmal goalie performance (she ruthlessly smashes down any sympathy), they can’t keep the score up enough. Harry has the snitch and the game is over.

Ginny only has enough time to curse under her breath and petulantly fling the now useless Quaffle to the ground before she sees the triumphant Harry get nailed from behind by a bludger. Ginny winces as he hits the ground.
She’d fly over and give Crabbe a piece of her mind, but Madam Hooch seems to be doing a bang up job, and frankly Ginny is too tired to deal with any more shit at the moment.

“Idiots,” she mutters under her breath, landing near Warrington and Thompson.

“Sorry, Ginny,” Thompson says. Even Warrington looks a little sheepish, but as usual doesn’t bother to apologize for their less than stellar coordination.

Ginny sucks in a breath and tries to smile bracingly. “We’ll do better next time.” Particularly after she makes them run enough drills to give them nightmares about it.

There’s some sort of commotion happening at the other end of the pitch. Ginny glances over with very little interest just in time for Draco’s voice to echo perfectly across the distance. “Or perhaps you can remember what your mother’s house stank like, Potter, and Weasley’s pigsty reminds you of it--.”

The words barely begin to register with Ginny when George and Harry launch themselves at Draco, fists flying.

Ginny automatically moves towards the fray—that smug, talent-less, ridiculous arsehole.

Before she can move a step, Thompson grabs her arm. “Don’t.”

“Excuse me?” Ginny snaps, tugging at her arm. If he thinks she’s just going to pretend--.

His grip doesn’t lessen. “Let it go.”

She turns to him, her mouth dropping open with indignation.

“I’m not telling you to forget,” he says. “Just let it go. For now.”

McGonagall and Madam Hooch are already sweeping in at this point, and Ginny blows out a breath. She knows Thompson’s right, damn him.

He still doesn’t let go of her arm.

She gives him an arch look, and he smiles sheepishly. “Just trying to make sure you aren’t going to curse me the second I let go.”

Ginny huffs a reluctant laugh. “No. But by the time we’re done running drills next week, you might wish I had.”

“Oh, great,” Warrington complains.

Thompson lets go of her, and against everything screaming in her head, Ginny quietly follows them off the field.

* * *

Harry, George, and Fred banned.

Part of Ginny knows they earned it, letting their tempers get the best of them. Draco is a wanker, but they were just words. If she was going to be pissed about something, it would be Crabbe’s late bludger. That was stupid and dangerous.

She mostly wants to yell at George and Harry for making it so damn easy for Draco.
“Did you like my song, Weasley?” Draco asks, blithely calling her out in front of the entire common room.

For a moment she feels it, her blood boiling up with anger. Everyone knows that song isn’t just about Ron’s Quidditch skills, but about her family, her parents. With effort, she swallows the rage back down. Draco isn’t going to score any more points off of this. Not with her.

Ginny shakes her head, looking calmly back at him. “Can’t say I heard it. Must have been too busy watching you not catch the snitch yet again.”

Draco’s face flushes, a few people nearby snickering behind their hands.

She stands staring at him another moment, to see if he has anything to follow up with, if he’ll be stupid enough to pull his wand. (Please, oh please, she secretly hopes. Just give her a reason.)

She isn’t really surprised when he does nothing more than glare at her. Just a little disappointed.

Giving him one last contemptuous glance, Ginny spins on her heel, carrying on as if he’d never interrupted her. She sinks down in a chair, pulling her Charms text up close to her face.

“Well done.”

Ginny looks up over the edge of her book to see Antonia in a nearby chair.

“I’m letting it go,” Ginny says, remembering Thompson’s advice. “For now.”

Antonia nods like this makes perfect sense. “Plenty of time for other things later.”

Ginny’s eyes narrow. “Like what, revenge?”

“Not revenge,” Antonia says, her smile patient and a little predatory. “Reciprocity.”

Watching Antonia disappear back behind her book, Ginny isn’t sure she understands the difference.

*   *   *

It’s only been a week since the disastrous match when the galleon in Ginny’s pocket heats up, the numbers changing to reflect the time of the next DA meeting. She looks up from her essay to find Tobias and Smita sharing a dubious glance, hands on their pockets.

The question of whether to go to this next meeting doesn’t seem as easy as it did the week before.

Ginny’s still able to see the difference between Draco and Crabbe being arseholes and concluding that all of Slytherin is evil. She’s not so sure about the rest of DA though.

Still, she’s not ready to concede her hard won ground. “I’m up for it,” she says.

Tobias shrugs, looking over at Smita. “One way or another, it should be exciting.”

Smita nods her agreement. “I say we go.”

Ginny tries to tell if Harry looks surprised or annoyed by their presence at the meeting later than night, but he’s surprisingly stone-faced for him. She bites down on the ridiculous urge to apologize. Other than being on the same team as those berks, she hadn’t done anything.

Of course, to a Gryffindor, inaction is probably sin enough in itself.
She moves over to stand by Neville, and he seems happy enough to see her. He’s not so clueless not to notice her discomfort, the occasional nasty look slid her way by some of the Gryffindor.

“You didn’t do anything, Ginny,” Neville says quietly as she squares off in front of a practice dummy.

“Maybe I should have,” she says. “Maybe I should have punched Crabbe in the face.”

Neville grimaces. “Then you could have had a lifetime ban as well.”

“Would I?” she asks, taking aim at the dummy in front of her. “Or would I have just gotten lines?” She isn’t stupid. She sees the way things work and don’t work by house. She can see the benefits next to the limits.

Neville sighs. “You have to live with them, Ginny. Everyone knows that.”

Ginny’s hand tightens on her wand. “Reducto.”

The dummy explodes.

* * *

Things slowly thaw and simmer down as Christmas nears, everyone getting ready to go home. Ginny still occasionally catches snippets of that rude song in the common room, but has become expert at ignoring it. It’s hard though, trying to look like they aren’t getting to her when all she really wants to do is knock heads together.

Instead, she learns to pretend she’s a glacier; Antonia’s approving looks the only gauge she has to tell how she’s doing.

It takes more than a song to crack ice.

Even the animosity directed towards them at DA meetings slowly drops to barely noticeable levels, but that may just be everyone’s excitement over the holidays. Or the shared amusement over an ornament with Harry’s face on it that Padma found under one of the cushions. Ginny thought a nice engorgement charm and a willing volunteer to stick it in Harry’s bed would be a worthy endeavor.

Smita and Tobias bemoan their general lack of access to the Gryffindor common room.

Around them, the room has emptied out, students disappearing in twos and threes.

“We should probably go,” Smita says into her ear.

Ginny looks back over her shoulder to see Cho lingering by the bulletin board, Harry taking an inordinately long time to put away the cushions. Which, considering how much of his attention is riveted to Cho and not the chore, is understandable.

“Ah,” Ginny mock whispers back.

They head for the door, Tobias unable to resist. “See you later, Harry!” he says brightly.

Harry jumps a little at the too loud farewell, his cheeks burning red as if being caught doing something wrong. He waves vaguely at them, more a desperate shooing motion.

Ginny looks back over her shoulder one last time as they leave to see Cho crying, Harry looking panicked.
She shakes her head with a snort. Boys.

* * *

“Miss Weasley.”

Ginny wrenches open her eyes to find Professor Snape standing over her bed, face eerily lit by the tip of his wand. She’s pretty sure she’s had this nightmare before.

She rubs hard at her eyes to dispel the image.

Only his face still lingers. “I need you to get up and come with me,” he says.

Ginny frowns. “Sir?”

“There’s been an accident.”

She sits up so quickly they nearly bump heads. “Who?” She has so many people to worry about, her brain flying through the list at dizzying speeds.

Snape doesn’t seem to be in a cooperative mood, his face giving nothing away. “Come along.”

Deciding obedience will get her answers the quickest, she does little more than slip on a robe and shove her feet into her slippers, her heart pounding away in her chest.

Smita pokes her head out between her drapes, her face creased with sleep and confusion. “Ginny?”

Snape’s head whips around in her direction. “Go back to sleep, Miss Gupta. This does not concern you.”

Smita frowns, but does as she’s told after darting Ginny a glance that seems to demand an explanation at some later time.

Ginny follows Snape through the dark halls with nothing but the tip of his lit wand to guide them, and tries not to think how eerie the castle feels like this, full of shadows and hidden things. Still, it’s easier than thinking about what waits for her at the end of this walk.

Their destination turns out to be the Headmaster’s office and that just can’t be good. Up in the circular, bizarre office that normally Ginny would have loved to have taken the time to poke about in, her brothers are all already there with Harry. Harry looks like someone has drained all the blood from his body and for a second she thinks he may be the one who was hurt. But then why would she need to be here?

“What’s going on?” she asks, making a beeline for the twins.

They mutely shake their heads, watching Harry almost warily.

Fred shifts over to make room for her between them. “Something with Dad,” he says under his breath as if he’s trying not to draw Snape or Dumbledore’s attention.

“What?” Ginny says, barely more than a gasp, her heart dropping into her stomach.

George drapes a tense arm over her shoulders. “Just wait,” he says. “We don’t know anything yet.”

Across the room, Harry glances up at them and then just as quickly away again.
Dumbledore eventually smuggles them out to Grimmauld Place, but there’s just more waiting and trying not to panic once they get there. Ginny thinks it must be one of the longest nights of her entire life, sitting there waiting, swallowing her words and fears until she feels like she may explode.

It’s nearly dawn when Mum finally appears, looking a bit like death herself, but with a smile plastered on her wan face. “He’s going to be fine.”

Around her, everyone erupts into whoops of joy. Ginny lowers her head, wanting to weep, but the tears just won’t come.

* * *

What’s left of the night passes in fits and starts, time seeming to drag and then speed up at unbearable rates.

Ginny’s dead on her feet, but still manages to help Mum get breakfast on the table. The tension hasn’t really left them yet, and she knows it won’t until they can see Dad for themselves. Luckily no one tries to make them wait any longer than it takes for the hospital to open for visitors.

Part of Ginny doesn’t really let herself believe he’s okay until she finally lays eyes on her dad. Then she really starts to breathe again, and instead of crying, now all she wants to do is laugh, the pressure of giddiness building against her ribs. He looks awful, body covered in bandages, face bloodless, and there is absolutely nothing to laugh about, not even the way Mum is playing out her relief by scolding him like a child. But still, the pressure won’t leave. She doesn’t even mind getting shunted out into the hallway when the conversation turns to Adult Things.

He’s okay.

Besides, the twins came prepared as always, pulling out Extendible Ears for them all, their faces seeming to reflect the giddiness in Ginny’s chest.

They gleefully listen in from the other side of the doors, all of their smiles goofy with lack of sleep and sheer relief. Most of what the adults in the other room are saying isn’t even registering, until Moody’s voice growls out above the rest.

“Oh, obviously Potter doesn’t realize what that means, but if You-Know-Who’s possessing him--.”

Harry pulls back from the door with a jerk.

Ginny remembers it all too clearly in that moment—the way Tom can shove his way back in when you least expect it.

* * *

Ron is moping in the kitchen.

He’s been there all morning. Harry must still be freezing him out, Ginny assumes, the same way he ignored all of them yesterday on the ride back from hospital. He’s been in his room since then. Hiding, pouting, who knows?

Mum’s beginning to look pinched, probably disturbed that it has been almost 24 hours since she was last able to feed up Harry. The lunch tray she’s prepared for him looks like enough for a small army.

Ginny’s had just about enough of this. Her dad nearly died two days ago, and even if Harry is the one who seems to have saved his life, he doesn’t have the right to add more worry to her mother’s
overloaded plate. Plus, Ron is driving her nuts.

“I’ll take it up,” she says before anyone can protest.

Balancing the tray of food in one hand, Ginny knocks on Harry’s door. There’s a long silence, and she’s forced to knock again, louder and more persistently to let him know she isn’t going away.

“I’m not hungry,” he finally calls through the door.

Too bad, she thinks, opening the door. He looks surprised by her nerve, swinging up to a seated position on the bed. She sees him take a breath like he’s trying to rein in his temper.

“Really. I’m not hungry,” he repeats.

The trunk by the end of his bed is open, stuff haphazardly thrown into it like he was packing in a hurry and then changed his mind.

Putting the tray down, Ginny closes the door behind her.

“Ginny,” he says, the word a warning.

She ignores it. “Ask me.”

He pushes off the bed, the anger nearly radiating off of him now. “I want to be left alone.”

She takes a stubborn step forward. “Ask me…” She breaks off, swallowing. “Ask me what it’s like to have Voldemort take over your body.”

Harry stills, and she knows in that moment that he’s been lucky enough to forget, to forget why he almost died in that chamber so many years ago.

She takes another step forward, her voice hardening. “Ask me.”

All the anger and bluster seems to drain out of him, leaving him looking painfully uncertain.

“What…what was it like?”

Ginny licks her lips, dragging back up the memories she has done everything to forget for so long. “It’s like…everything is soft, cushioned, dulled. Like the effort it would take to actually feel an emotion is too much to even contemplate. Like you’re fading so much that people only look through you until you start to think that disappearing forever would be the best thing that could happen to you. Best for everyone.”

“Ginny,” he says, his jaw clenching.

She swallows impatiently back against the tears she refuses to let fall. “There were long black periods that I still don’t remember. Time I have no idea what I did, or who I hurt.” She looks him in the eye. “Has that ever happened to you?”

“No.”

She nods. “I didn’t think so.”

Harry sits back down on the bed like all of his strings have been cut, dragging a hand through his hair.

“You didn’t hurt our father, Harry. We all know that. So stay up here and hide if that’s what you
want. But don’t do it because you think you’re protecting us.” She turns to leave.

“I’m so angry,” he says. “All of the time.”

She pauses with her hand on the doorknob. It’s been radiating off of him all year, the anger, but she hadn’t known if that was just normal for him, if he is always like this, or if it was something new.

She peers back over her shoulder at him. “That’s probably a good thing, don’t you think?”

He frowns. “How do you figure?”

She shrugs, remembering those long days floating through the castle like a ghost. “You wouldn’t be angry if you didn’t care.”

Tom never cared about anything or anyone. Only himself.

She opens the door.

“Ginny?”

She pauses. “Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

She hoists a shaky smile on her face. “Yeah. Just let Ron back in, will you? He’s driving us all spare.”

He huffs, not quite a laugh, but on its way.

She leaves him picking at the tray of food, passing the newly arrived Hermione on the stairs.

“All yours,” Ginny says.

*     *    *

Christmas creeps into Grimmauld Place like an uninvited guest. Sirius attacks the holiday with a manic sort of energy that does nothing to make it feel right. It’s a bit like sticking an icicle on Kreacher’s forehead and calling him a unicorn.

Still, Mum is trying her best for them all, and Ginny figures she owes it to Dad to at least try. So when George and Fred decide to trim a tree, she pitches in by suggesting transmogrifying Kreacher’s predecessors into shiny baubles. She really mourns that ornament with Harry’s face that must still be sitting in the room of requirement.

She even overhears Harry say to Hermione, “Still better than Christmas with the Dursleys.”

Unfortunately, Grimmauld place is still Grimmauld place, even under all the tinsel.

Dad isn’t home yet either, so Christmas breakfast is a bit subdued even with everyone’s new brightly colored sweaters. There’s one more unopened package sitting under the end of the table that Ginny pretends not to know is meant for Percy. To judge from the set lock of Mum’s jaw, he’d had the unmitigated gall to send it back. She wonders if he even cares that Dad is in hospital. That he’d almost died.

But thinking of Percy only makes Ginny want to use her Reductor curse on something, and Mum doesn’t deserve that on top of everything else today. So instead she tucks in and does her best to let
Sirius’s obvious glee at having them all here not feel weird.

Soon enough it’s time to go back to school, still not knowing why or how Dad ended up nearly dead by giant snake attack.

Ginny thinks it will be relief to have her wand back in her hand.

* * *

Hogwarts in the snow is widely accepted as one of the most beautiful sights in the world.

Ginny couldn’t be less moved.

“Merlin’s beard, did you dimwits forget everything over Christmas? It’s like a drunken band of Muggles out here.” She hears the other two chasers’ feet hit the ground slightly after her, but doesn’t bother turning to look at their reaction to her diatribe.

She considers throwing her broom down in disgust, but isn’t willing to let her emotions out on her equipment. It would be far more practical to take them out on Thompson and Warrington’s stupid heads. Gripping her broom tightly, she stomps off the field.

She hasn’t made it far when a wet, soft ball of snow hits her on the back of the head, the slush working its way into her collar.

She spins to find Warrington unapologetically brushing snow off his hands. Her mouth drops open, turning to the nearby Bletchley.

He just shrugs and says, “You pretty much deserved that, Six.”

Next to Warrington, Thompson nods in agreement.

So maybe she was a little harsh. Worked up, even. She just really wants to win their next match. Don’t they get that?

Warrington raises an eyebrow at her, probably waiting to see if she’s going to pull her wand.

She lets out a breath, forcing her shoulders to relax. She waits just long enough for Warrington to relax too. Then she says in a mild voice, “You understand, of course, that this means war.”

Warrington’s eyes widen, and Ginny ducks to scoop up a handful of snow. She launches it towards him, but he dodges out of the way at the last moment, and the snowball catches Thompson square in the face.

Ginny lifts her hands to her mouth in horror.

Thompson flicks the snow out of his eyes and shrugs. “All in.” Then he dumps two handfuls of snow down on Warrington’s head.

Ginny chokes on a laugh, looking back over her shoulder at Bletchley.

He lifts a hand, backing away. “Don’t you dare--.”

He doesn’t get to finish, Ginny’s next snowball exploding on his chest.

After that, all bets are off. The four of them scramble for cover, wands appearing and snowballs beginning to sneak up behind people at strange angles. Through her laughter, Ginny reflects that this
is actually pretty good practice for evading bludgers. Bletchley, she knows, would never admit they were doing this for any other reason.

She sees Crabbe and Goyle sniggering together near the stands, but doesn’t think anything of it. Thompson is making a valiant attempt at flanking her, so she’s got more pressing things on her mind than Crabbe and Goyle’s snide remarks about their childish behavior.

Then she gets hit from behind by something much faster and harder than a mere snowball could possibly be. She goes down like a sack of potatoes. Despite the press of snow around her, the slush working in through her robes, her arm is on fire and she knows something is seriously wrong.

“Oh, suck it up, Six,” Bletchley calls out, peering up over the rise as if expecting a trap.

Ginny doesn’t reply, her jaw clenched tight against the moan of agony she refuses to let out.

“Gin?” Thompson says, dropping his snowball as he approaches. Warrington takes the opportunity to dust him again, but Thompson just brushes it off. She must look as bad as she feels.

“Bletchley,” Thompson says, picking up what looks like a solid ball of ice nearly the size of a bludger.

“Son of a––,” Bletchley swears, looking up from Ginny to find Crabbe and Goyle laughing uproariously over by the stands. “Stupid sods.” He disappears from Ginny’s vision, no doubt off to give the idiots a piece of his mind for endangering their win against Ravenclaw.

“Shoulder?” Thompson asks, kneeling down next to her.

Ginny nods, biting down on her tongue.

“Let’s get her inside,” Warrington says.

Thompson slides an arm under her knees and one behind her back. Ginny hisses in pain, letting out a curse. “I can walk,” she snaps.

Bletchley reappears. “Shut up and let him carry you.”

The way up to the castle takes forever, and she’s nearly frozen through by the time they get there.

“Bludger accident,” Bletchley succinctly lies to Pomfrey in the infirmary.

Ginny doesn’t bother contradicting him. They can’t get Crabbe and Goyle in trouble. They need the stupid morons for their game.

Pomfrey mutters a few words over Ginny, her fingers unerringly digging in right on the tender bits. “Collarbone is broken.”

“You can fix that, right?” Bletchley presses. Ginny would feel warmed by that if she didn’t know his concern is for the match.

Pomfrey gives him a stern look. “The bone, yes. But the tissue damage will take longer to heal.”

“How long?”

She presses her lips together. “Four weeks to heal completely.”

Four weeks? Their game against Ravenclaw is in less than one.
Bletchely swears, Madam Pomfrey giving him a scandalized look.

“I can play.” Ginny says. It’s only her left arm, thank goodness. She only needs that to stay on her broom, not score.

“No you can’t,” Madam Pomfrey contradicts.

“There’s almost a week until the match. I’ll wear a sling, I won’t use it at all, I’ll stay lying here the entire time if you want, drinking any potion you can think of. I just have to play. Please.”

The rest of the team is nodding along.

“Please,” Ginny repeats, giving Madam Pomfrey her most pathetic look.

Pomfrey’s lips press together. “One week of total and complete rest. And then I will check you again. If there is any lingering pain, I won’t allow you to play.’’

It’s not perfect, but she’ll take it. “Deal.”

*     *     *

DA meetings are decidedly less interesting when all you can do is sit and watch. Still, Ginny is good to her word, sitting off to one side with her arm in a sling.

She’d gotten more than a few curious glances when she arrived, people clearly interested in how she’d been injured. She hasn’t changed her story, just says, “Bludger accident,” anytime anyone asks.

Most of them take that at face value, even with Tobias rolling his eyes with disbelief each time. (Ginny hadn’t even bothered telling Tobias and Smita anything; just let them draw their own conclusions.) Fred and George frown at her story, but don’t push.

Ginny is even more annoyed with her injury when she realizes that Harry is finally going to introduce the patronus charm. Sitting up a bit taller, she watches in awe as the silvery stag leaps to life, its bright light filling the room. It’s not just light either, but something tangible, something that seems to make everything buoyant, warmer. When it fades, disappearing into wisps, Ginny has the foolish thought that everything is slightly less cheerful in its wake, the dull ache in her arm intensifying. Nearby, she hears one of the Ravenclaw girls sigh as if with disappointment.

Harry lowers his wand. “With practice, a patronus can serve as a barrier between you and a Dementor.”

“It’s so beautiful,” Lavender sighs.

Harry coughs, looking embarrassed by the girl’s breathy enthusiasm. “I’m not going to lie to you. They’re wicked hard to produce, but are the only thing that can save you from a Dementor.”

“It’s pretty,” Angelina admits. “But how does that protect you?”

“It’s made from happy thoughts,” Harry explains. “The same things that Dementors seek to drain away from you, but the patronus can’t feel despair. Ultimately, that much pure happiness and goodness simply drives the Dementor away.”

There’s a smatter of whispers at that, many remembering what it had felt like to be near one that one year on the train.
Smita raises her hand. “What determines the shape a patronus takes?”

Harry frowns. “I’m actually not sure.” He automatically turns to Hermione.

She doesn’t disappoint. “Some theorize that it reflects the caster’s personality, or something tied to the happy memory used to produce it, but no one knows for certain.”

Smita nods, sharing a look with Tobias that Ginny can’t quite interpret.

Someone behind them mutters something about Slytherin not having any happy memories to pick from.

Tobias shoots a menacing glance back over his shoulder. Fingering his wand, he says, “I know how I could make some happy memories.”

People laugh, a few more nervous than amused, but Ginny thinks not even that would have happened before the DA.

“Okay,” Harry says. “Let’s give it a try.”

* * *

At the end of the week, Ginny is able to sit perfectly calm through Pomfrey’s examination, betraying not so much as a grimace no matter how times she pokes her. Of course, that’s really only thanks to a nice potion Smita brewed for her. It isn’t really cheating, exactly. Not when the situation is so dire.

Pomfrey still looks suspicious, giving Ginny one last hard, unexpected poke. Ginny flexes her stomach, managing to hold in a groan at the pain in her arm. She breathes carefully and lets her face soften into a smile. “See? Right as rain.”

Pomfrey sniffs. “All right. But if there is permanent damage because of this, don’t come back crying to me.”

Ginny feels a twinge of worry with that, but quickly shoves it aside, focusing instead on the match. Her team doesn’t stand a chance without her and they all know it.

Saturday dawns hard and cold, with heavy grey clouds glowering above. Not exactly promising, but Ginny doesn’t need sunshine, just another hit of Smita’s amazing potion.

As they get ready to head out onto the pitch, Bletchley grabs Draco’s shoulder. “Catch the damn snitch,” he growls. “And sooner rather than later.”

Draco scowls, shaking off Bletchley’s hand. Crabbe and Goyle follow him out, still looking faintly amused by the situation. Too stupid to understand the impact of what they’ve done.

Bletchly sighs, but doesn’t bother pressing further. He must know a losing battle when he sees one. He doesn’t bother to ask Ginny if she is okay, and she wouldn’t expect him to. One thing they have always implicitly agreed on is how much Quidditch matters.

He does reach out to punch her in his normal pre-game ritual, ending up changing last moment and patting her awkwardly on her head.

Ginny rolls her eyes and calls him something profane.

Bletchly grins, knuckles digging into her scalp.
She shoves him off, shoulders her broom, and walks out onto the pitch.

As the two teams line up on the field, there’s no visible sign of recognition when Ginny stands across from Cho, no sign that they are both in the DA together. Not surprising.

The match starts off okay, the pain manageable, but as the match stretches on and on and no one finds the snitch and the cold starts seeping in, it takes everything Ginny has just to stay on her broom.

After a half hour in, Bletchley calls a timeout, and Ginny has to wonder if she’s begun to look green from the pain. He doesn’t speak to her though, instead yelling at Draco to get the damn snitch and for the beaters to do their bloody jobs.

Smita slips into the clutch of players with a steaming goblet in her hand, blithely ignoring the yelling. “For the record,” she says, handing the goblet over, “this is a really bad idea.”

Probably, but Ginny still downs the contents of the goblet, feeling a flush of instant relief.

Ginny does her best to run up as many points as possible while the potion is still strong, and Warrington and Thompson step up their game accordingly. Luckily the Ravenclaw keeper is not very good, even if Cho is still flying circles around Draco. Draco seems incapable of doing anything more than getting in Cho’s way from time to time, relying on his thuggish friends to fire bludgers in her direction.

Still, it does afford the chasers time enough to build a lead. Just enough to ensure that even if Cho gets the snitch, they can still win.

A late, stupid, stupid, stupid foul nearly destroys their precious lead. Crabbe, of course.

Ginny manages to fling one last quaffle home right before Cho grabs the snitch.

Victory.

Stepping off her broom in the midst of her cheering teammates, Ginny almost collapses to the ground. Thompson steps up as if to slap her on the back, his arm sliding carefully around her back. “You, Weasley, are one of the craziest, stubbornest, most foolhardy people I know,” he says, helping her get back to the locker room. “It’s kind of amazing.”

If she wasn’t in so much pain, she might punch him for that.

“I just hope it’s worth it,” he says.

So does she.

*  *  *

The next morning, Ginny feels pretty close to death, the price, she knows, for the temporary reprieve Smita’s potions provided. As much as she wants more potion, she thinks food might be order. Food and then more bed. For like a week.

After breakfast she sits in the common room with Tobias and Smita. Her head is pounding away, she’s overwhelmingly behind on her homework, and the last damn straw is Crabbe sitting in the common room, flicking little paper wads at Millicent. Her shoulder, the song, the late bludger, the look on Millicent’s face as she pretends it doesn’t bother her…it’s all just too damn much.

Unbidden, Neville’s voice rises up in her head.
You have to live with them, Ginny. Everyone knows that.

No, Ginny thinks. Neville got it wrong.

They have to live with her.

“What are you thinking about when you look like that?” Smita asks, voice wary.

Ginny’s eyes narrow. Shoving her books aside, she gets to her feet, marching across the common room. She passes Crabbe without pause, catching a snippet of the barely coherent, nasty things he’s not bothering to whisper about Millicent.

“Antonia,” Ginny says when she nears the older girl’s chair. “I was wondering if you could help me with something.”

Antonia takes one look at Ginny’s face, a lazy smile spreading across her face like a cat presented with a bowl of cream. “I thought you’d never ask.”

* * *

Just to be extra careful, Ginny decides to belatedly take Pomfrey’s advice, keeping her arm in the sling for another two weeks. She doesn’t use it at all, too worried about what Pomfrey had said about permanent damage now that the match is over. Not that she regrets it. Quidditch is a serious business. Which is exactly why now that she has the time, she is going to get her recovery done right.

The lack of Quidditch practices even allows her to finally get caught up in her studies again.

At the DA meetings, they have finally begun trying to produce their own patronuses, with minimal success so far. Mostly they manage nothing more than shooting short bursts of glittery mist at each other. But even the mist has the effect of endless smiles and giggles. Even sitting on the sidelines, Ginny’s arm hurts far less.

The whole group is in high spirits, swapping insults and tall tales. Fred is relating their latest prank on Filch, Lee Jordan doing a credible impersonation of the caretaker clutching his blue dyed tongue.

“I hear Crabbe is in the infirmary,” George cackles, not bothering to hide his malicious pleasure.

“Stupid git fell down the stairs,” Tobias supplies, ever happy to jump in with well-timed gossip.

“Too thick to remember the sticking step, poor sod.”

They all laugh.

Ginny looks up to find Harry watching her from across the room.

She meets his gaze unblinkingly.

He calls an end to the meeting, the wisps of light dissipating.

The room feels a little darker than when they began.

* * *

In February, the newly cobbled together Gryffindor Quidditch team loses bad to Hufflepuff.

From the stands, Ginny winces, and tries to remind herself that Gryffindor losing to Hufflepuff is a good thing for Slytherin’s chances. Still, it’s painful to watch.
The only good thing is that no one dares to sing Malfoy’s stupid song anywhere near her. She doubts anyone will ever again.

She glances over at Malfoy and Goyle, looking a little lonely just the two of them.

Biting her lip, she turns back to watching the game.

Off the pitch, things have begun to ramp up. Starting with Harry’s interview for the Quibbler and Umbridge’s more and more over the top attempts to control the school, sacking teachers and belittling them and trying to make it look like she rules the school and not Dumbledore.

It would almost be impressive if it weren’t so damn annoying.

Smita rushes up to Ginny one evening after dinner, her face pale.

“Smita?” Ginny asks, glancing across the room at Tobias. “What’s wrong?”

“Umbridge is purging the library of all non-wizard materials.”

This is probably the last thing she expected Smita to say. “What?”

She nods as Tobias joins them. “Everything by Muggles, or Goblins, or Centuars. She has Pince boxing them all up.”

Ginny really wants to say, she can't do that, but knows very well that she can. This must be about Firenze and Trewlawny. About Umbridge feeling the need to reassert her power again in the face of Harry’s interview and all the things she can’t control.

“Madam Pince was actually…crying,” Smita says, looking seriously disturbed. She looks up at Ginny. “We’re going to do something, right?”

“Of course we are,” Tobias says, disgust clear in his voice. If there is one thing he won’t tolerate, it’s someone trying to separate him from books. “Nicking them should be easy enough. Pince would probably help us. We just need somewhere safe to keep them.”

“Room of Requirement?” Smita asks.

“No,” Ginny says, glancing towards the non-descript door that doesn’t lead to a broom closet. “I think I might know somewhere even better.”

She walks over to the door, Smita and Tobias trailing behind her. She isn’t sure whether she should try the door handle, knock, or what.

It should surprise her, the way Antonia materializes, languidly strolling around the corner, but Ginny has long since stopped wondering the limits of the girl’s powers.

“Yes?” she says, stepping in front of the door as if to protect, or bar entry.

Ginny tries to smile. “If we were to…liberate some books, could you help us find someplace to keep them?”

“I could,” she says, paying more attention to a hand of perfect fingernails than Ginny’s proposition. “But why should I?”

Ginny is taken a little aback, not expecting obstructionism from Antonia. She wonders if she’s been getting a little too comfortable with thinking she actually knows the older girl.
“Because Umbridge is going to destroy them,” Smita blurts from behind her. Ginny glances back to see Smita looking stunned at her own daring.

Next to her, Tobias nods, taking a bold step forward. “Plus, they’re forbidden. Education Decree number bazillion should be telling us so any minute now. Don’t know about you three, but it makes me really want to read them.” He winks at Antonia, but she remains stone-faced and silent. As the moments pass, for possibly the first time Ginny’s ever seen, Tobias seems discomforted, dropping his eyes to his toes and shifting his weight.

“Because no one has the right to tell us what we can’t read,” Ginny says, finally recognizing this for the test it is.

Antonia is silent for another long moment, her gaze finally shifting to Ginny. “No,” she agrees. “No one has that right.”

Ginny holds her gaze.

Antonia finally nods. “Bring them to me, and I’ll take care of the rest,” she says, disappearing down into The Parlor.

“Merlin,” Tobias breathes as soon as Antonia is out of sight. “I think a basilisk could probably take lessons from her.”

Probably. But that’s another worry for another day.

“Come on,” Ginny says. “We have plans to make.”

*   *   *

The disappearance of dozens of forbidden books from the library remains a secret only known to Umbridge, Pince, and the perpetrators. But secret or not, Umbridge continues to ratchet up her attempts to control every aspect of the castle the more things slip through her fingers. She sets up an Inquisitorial Squad. A group of students given the power to patrol and generally snitch on their peers. It’s probably unsurprising that most of the members are Slytherin boys, with a few Ravenclaw sprinkled in here and there.

If Percy were still here, Ginny has no doubt he would have been the first to sign up, Gryffindor or not.

They still have the DA though. Just another secret reminder that Umbridge doesn’t control things as much as she thinks she does. For many of them that knowledge is like a nice warm little patronus in their pocket.

The Room of Requirement is full of them these days, bright glittering animals of various shapes and sizes.

At the time, Ginny hadn’t really been sure what Smita was getting at, wanting to know what determines the shape a patronus takes. Now, watching the other students laugh and stare at their patronuses in awe, she wonders how none of them can see it, see how much they are revealing of themselves.

Smita, Tobias, and Ginny share glances, their patronuses remaining nothing but spits of mist. Better to look incompetent than to give away so much information for nothing.

Harry works his way over to Ginny’s side. “What’s going on?” he asks, voice lowered so it doesn’t
She glances up at him. “What do you mean?”

He gives her a look as if to remind her he’s not an idiot. “I’ve seen your Reductor curse,” he reminds her.

She smirks a little, remembering the sheer destructive energy that spell had unleashed.

“You aren’t trying,” he accuses, lifting her wand arm slightly like he’s adjusting her technique.

She isn’t sure how to play this, go with fake indignation or maybe just feign ignorance. Could she still blame her shoulder injury somehow?

“The truth,” Harry presses, like he can see the lies she’s considering.

“No,” she admits. “I’m not trying.” She glances at Ron’s terrier trotting past. “Are you really surprised?”

He frowns, but before he has time to work it out, a loud crack nearby distracts him. Ginny expects to find Seamus has blown something up, but instead a small house elf stands next to Harry, his hands wringing anxiously in front of him.

“Dobby?”

It takes precious moments to get the news out of the elf as he tries to simultaneously punish himself and speak, but the words are finally free.

“Umbridge is coming!”

There’s horrified silence, the patronuses blinking out of existence, and it isn’t until Harry bellows at them to scatter that it really sinks in.

Tobias grabs for Ginny’s arm, already heading for the exit when Smita breaks away, heading further back into the room.

“Smita!” Ginny snaps. “We have to go!”

Smita sprints for the bulletin board against the wall, her wand jabbing in the direction of the piece of parchment hanging in with all the clippings and photos. Ginny has just long enough to see the names on the list bleed and morph incomprehensibly underneath the blatant lettering of DUMBLEDORE’S ARMY.

“Let’s go!” Ginny shouts, dragging Smita out into the hall.

They are easily the last students out into the hall, complete sitting ducks for Umbridge and her enforcers.

Tobias gestures up the first staircase they reach. “Owlery,” he says.

They’ve only made it halfway up the distance when they hear feet pounding behind them.

Tobias’ hand on Ginny’s elbow lurches her to a stop. “No time,” he hisses, shoving them both against the wall just in time for two of the student goons to round the corner. They’re Slytherin, a year younger than themselves.
“Oi,” the taller goon says. “You lot seen any students running around out here?”

Tobias looks up as if bored. “No,” he says, his hand tightening on Ginny’s waist. “But I haven’t exactly been paying attention either now, have I?”

The boys glance at Smita and Ginny, their hair still askew from their run, and guffaw loudly.

Tobias smiles, slow and lecherous. The two goons are still laughing as they turn back in the other direction.

Once they are out of earshot, Ginny punches Tobias in the arm.

He yelps, rubbing at the spot. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Brilliant,” Ginny says, shaking her head. “But disgusting.”

Tobias grins.

A triumphant bellow echoes down the hall. “I’ve got him, Professor! I’ve got Potter!”

It only takes a moment to identify the voice as Draco’s. Ginny moves as if to push off the wall, Smita’s hand stopping her.

“There’s nothing we can do.”

Ginny stops, knowing Harry wouldn’t want them to even if they could.

The walk back to the dorms is quiet with expectation. Tomorrow everything will be different.

*     *     *

The next morning the Great Hall is buzzing with Dumbledore’s abrupt departure, with Umbridge’s elevation to Headmaster. Things seem to have gone from bad to worse. And all because of their little rebellion.

All the DA members are eying each other, their suspicious regard lingering more on Tobias and Smita than anyone else. Someone must have betrayed them.

Ginny waits for the stupid gits to finally realize that there is only one DA member missing from the hall, and she’s not a Slytherin. Cho looks slightly embarrassed by the obviously empty seat next to her, the one her friend and reluctant DA member Marietta normally would have occupied.

It’s not until the next day that she reappears with thick red bumps blazed across her face. “SNEAK.”

It’s awful and perfect and Ginny can’t honestly say how she feels about it other than righteously absolved of everyone’s biased suspicions about the Slytherin.

Smita gazes as Marietta as she passes, a puzzle piece seemingly to finally fall into place. “So that’s the curse Hermione used. Impressive.”

Tobias snorts with derision, probably more pissed that he almost got caught than the fact that the DA was betrayed. “Got what she deserved if you ask me.”

Ginny glances down the table, her eye caught by Millicent sitting on her own. “Yeah,” she agrees distractedly.

Ginny meets Harry’s grim stare across the hall. He eyes Smita and Tobias next to her and nods. She
thinks this is all the acknowledgement she will probably ever get. It’s enough.

* * *

If Umbridge thought destroying the DA and Dumbledore in one swoop would solve anything, she didn’t bank on two things: Fred and George Weasley. There is hardly any part of the castle that doesn’t feel the effects of their reign of terror. It’s blatant and over the top and stupidly brave, and Ginny knows her brothers are loving absolutely every moment of it.

It’s not long until Ginny’s galleon heats up in her pocket again, only this time not for a DA meeting, but rather for a coordinated prank.

Fred, George, Ron, Harry, Neville, Luna, and a mulish looking Hermione are all already gathered in the empty Charms room when Ginny shows up, Tobias and Smita in tow. “What’s going on?”

Fred nods in welcome, face grave as it only is when serious mischief is afoot. “We need to get Harry into Umbridge’s office.”

They all glance at Harry, and Ginny notices for the first time that he looks a little grim. This is more than a lark, she can’t help but think.


Ginny smiles, glancing at Smita and getting a small nod. “I guess we’re in.”

Fred and George lay out their plan to turn an upper level into a swamp. By the time they are finished, Tobias is less enthused.

“What?” Ron asks, voice tinged with animosity.

Tobias ignores it. “Seems a bit of a dodgy plan.”

Hermione perks up, nodding along as if finally glad to have someone agreeing with her. “Better not to do it.”

Ron glares at her before turning his annoyance back to Tobias. “What, too scared to get caught?”

If he expected Tobias to take that as an insult, he clearly has no idea who he is talking to. Caution isn’t stupid, opening yourself up to pointless punishment is.

“Ron, don’t be a prat,” Ginny says. “He’s just saying that if we are going to do this, we should do it right.”

Smita nods. “There’s no need to rush ahead and get caught.”

Fred and George look like they are speaking a different language.

“The swamp is a good start,” Ginny says, walking around the table. “We just need a few other obstacles to make sure no one walks in on Harry in her office, or the twins laying their trap.” She taps the map in a few key spots. “Keep Peeves distracted, professors out of the corridors, that sort of thing.”

The Gryffindor have gone silent, Luna’s soft humming the only other sound in the room.

“What you really need is someone with a bit more cunning,” Tobias points out.
“And subtlety,” Smita adds, glancing at the bright jumpers worn by her brothers.

Ginny bites back a smile.

Ron is still staring at them with his mouth hanging open, but Fred is looking at them with narrow, assessing eyes. “You volunteering?”

Tobias drops a courtly bow. “Why don’t you just let us do what we do best.”

George peers at him. “Be a sneaky git?”

Ginny crosses her arms over her chest. “Exactly.”

They all know the only reason they didn’t all end up in detention after the DA was busted was because Smita kept her head.

The plan comes together easily enough after that, though she can tell it’s not quite as by the seat of their pants as the Gryffindors might have preferred. But why get caught or be punished if you don’t have to?

They have all agreed on the timing and are splitting off their separate ways when Fred drops an arm over Ginny’s shoulders, holding her back. “You always were the sneakiest of us all, weren’t you?” he says in her ear.

“Finally catching on, are you?” she asks like her heart isn’t pounding away in her chest. She wraps an arm around her brother’s waist and squeezes as hard as she can.

He laughs, dropping his chin to rest on the top of her head. “My hero,” he says.

Ginny isn’t sure if she wants to laugh or cry.

Of course, things don’t quite go to plan (they never do when Gryffindors are involved). Harry manages to get in and out of the office unobserved, but Fred and George get themselves caught. She can’t quite be sure that wasn’t their intention all along. Bloody brave fools.

Either way, she isn’t sure she’s ever been more proud to be a Weasley than the day she watches her brothers streak out of Hogwarts on their brooms, the crackle of fireworks exploding in their wake.

Tobias bumps her arm, awe on his face. “Now that is an exit.”

Ginny smiles.

*   *   *

One would think that with the departure of Fred and George, troublemakers extraordinaire, things might quiet down in the castle. But Peeves and the remaining members of the DA instead seem to be working very hard to fill the gap left behind. Helped a great deal by the fact that the professors are doing their best to constantly look the other way. They seem to have had their fill of Umbridge’s reign as well.

Still, the constant bang of explosions and stink of foul potions and pranks can wear on a person after a while. Ginny starts making a habit of spending every Saturday morning in the blessed quiet of her hidden cloister. This morning though, it’s not quite as empty as it usually is. Harry is sitting in her favorite spot, staring down at a piece of parchment in his lap.

He looks up at her.
“Oh,” Ginny says, deciding Harry must have wanted to find some of his own solitude. “I’m sorry.” She starts to back-pedal, but Harry stops her.

“No, it’s okay.” He gestures at the parchment in his lap. “I saw you coming.”

She frowns. “You did?”

He waves her over, holding the parchment out for her to see. It takes a moment for her to make sense of it, the intricate lines, the small moving dots.

“It’s Hogwarts.”

He nods.

She locates the cloister, seeing two little dots called Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter. At least that explains how he found the cloister in the first place.

“No wonder you get away with as much as you do,” she says.

Harry huffs with amusement that doesn’t really seem to reach his eyes.

She glances sideways at him. She doesn’t want to press, but there’s something almost…expectant about him right now. “Harry?”

He flips to the map over to the library, sitting there for a moment watching students studying. “I saw something I wasn’t supposed to,” he admits.

“You did?” Ginny asks, pulling her eyes away from the Patil twins’ dots hovering in a strange part of the library stacks.

He nods. “It’s why I wanted to get into Umbridge’s office. To talk to Sirius.”

Clearly talking to Sirius didn’t fix anything though, to judge from how miserable he looks. It reminds her a bit of the last time they talked alone, that dark morning in Grimmauld place.

Harry rubs at the back of his neck. “I saw one of Snape’s memories from school. Back when Sirius and my parents were here.”

She doesn’t ask him how he accidentally saw something like that. He looks sheepish enough for her to suspect curiosity played a large part in it.

“My father bullied him,” he says in a rush, like the words are painful to get out. “They all did. For a lark.”

“Snape?” Ginny asks, feeling something tight building in her stomach.

Harry nods.

She thinks of Snape and Sirius sniping at each other in the hallway at Grimmauld place, Antonia’s voice in her ear.

Things aren’t always what they seem.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Harry says, voice bitter. “That they were just kids.”

Ginny frowns. “So are we.”
He’s clearly surprised by her response, turning to look at her straight on, eyebrows lifting. “Exactly. If he knew what that was like…”

“Did he?” People have always talked about James Potter like a golden boy, and she doesn’t know if that is all respect for the dead or something grounded in history.

Harry considers that, his lower lip caught between his teeth. “No, I don’t think he did.”

Harry doesn’t talk much about how he grew up, certainly not to her. She just knows bits and pieces from Ron and Hermione, things her parents have said about the Dursleys in passing. James Potter never could have comprehended that. There was a time Ginny wouldn’t have been able to either.

And maybe that, more than anything, was Antonia’s point.

“I just…never thought I’d feel sorry for Snape.” He glances quickly at her, like he’s belatedly realized she might feel protective of her head of house.

“Yeah,” she says. “Me neither.” She thinks of Snape, cool and pointed, his eyes full of hatred as he picks on Gryffindors. It’s enough to make her wonder where viciousness really comes from, but she thinks she may already know. “Everything always looks different from the other side.”


He’s still staring at her with something like reluctant regard, and it isn’t embarrassing as much as feeling that she doesn’t deserve it.

Reciprocity.

Ginny glances away, her eye caught by the parchment still open on Harry’s lap. “So this map…,” she says, thinking fast.

“Yeah?”

“It could probably confirm something for me that I’ve been wondering about for a while.”

Harry’s brow furrows at the change in topic. “Possibly.”

She flips the folds of the map until she can see the grounds, her finger tapping on a row of buildings. “I’ve heard Flitwick spends far more time in the greenhouses than is proper,” she says, waggling her eyebrows in an impersonation of Tobias at his most suggestive.

Harry lets out a startled laugh. “I hadn’t noticed,” he says. He leans in closer as if imparting a great secret, his shoulder bumping up against hers. “But I can tell you that Madam Pince does on occasion actually sleep in the library.”

“I knew it!” Ginny says.

They laugh, chatting a bit more about various people on the map, eventually settling into silence, spending the rest of the morning catching up on their homework.

It doesn’t occur to her until much later that with that map, Harry could have easily known her Saturday morning schedule. That he might have expected her.

Just another mystery of Harry Potter, she decides.

* * *
The thawing snows and clearing skies gradually reveal the grounds of Hogwarts again. Her arm finally completely healed and once again as strong as it was before her injury, Ginny throws herself back into practice. They have one last match left this year. It’s just against Hufflepuff, but a big enough win would almost guarantee the Quidditch Cup for Slytherin. Even Snape seems excited by the possibility (as much as he seems excited by anything). The week leading up to the match, he lets the entire Slytherin team off their homework.

Ginny’s gaze lingers on him as the students work on the day’s potion. Despite all of the revelations about Snape she’d learned from Harry, it’s comforting to see that he’s still predictable. Still, when Ginny meets Snape’s gaze over the potions table one day, she finds herself looking just a little closer, surprised to find the animosity she’s built up against him soften a little.

“Is there a problem, Miss Weasley?” he asks, voice as hard as his gaze.

“No, sir,” she says, turning her attention back to her cauldron.

He paces back across the classroom, sniping at Colin for the abysmal color of his potion. “ Completely hopeless,” he declares, siphoning the potion out of the cauldron. “Start again. And try not to blow us all up with your incompetence.”

Soon enough it is Saturday, the Quidditch pitch glorious in the warm spring sunshine.

Waiting for the balls to be released, Ginny glances around at her teammates, checking their positions. She catches Crabbe watching her, his expression unreadable. He’s the first to look away. She doesn’t feel as satisfied by that as she thinks she should. Still, at least she knows there won’t be any late or stray bludgers this game.

That should mean something. Shouldn’t it?

She’s scared that it doesn’t.

The whistle blows, and they are all off.

After the tense match against Gryffindor and the sheer agony of the Ravenclaw match, Ginny almost feels like she has too much time to think against Hufflepuff. Her game is seriously off, but they still win handily.

Hufflepuff’s new seeker has big shoes to fill, after all. Draco manages to do the seemingly impossible and actually catch the snitch.

Just like that, they’ve won. Gryffindor would have to beat Ravenclaw by near 800 points. Considering what a tough time of it the Slytherin team had with Ravenclaw, the gutted Gryffindor doesn’t stand a chance.

Glancing up at the professor’s box, Ginny catches sight of Snape speaking with McGonagall, almost looking smug as if he’s just asked for her to get ready to hand over the cup.

McGonagall, for her part, looks rather pinched around the face.

Thompson slams into Ginny then, hugging her tight, and she tries to forget anything other than the win.

*  *  *

Ginny is moping.
There really isn’t any other word for it as much as she would like there to be. She’s sitting in the common room, listening to the waters above, the occasional distant groan of a merperson’s horn resonating in the walls. She isn’t thinking how familiar has all become, how comforting, but rather concentrates on the heavy feeling in her stomach that she just hasn’t been able to shake.

She tries to tell herself this is about the Quidditch season being over, about the DA being disbanded, Fred and George being gone, but deep down she knows this is about something else entirely.

Coming into the Common Room the day before, Ginny had reached the doorway the same time as a first year boy. He’d quickly stepped out of her way, but not before she’d seen it there on her face: fear.

That look has settled deep into her stomach and refuses to leave.

Her thoughts keep spiraling back to Snape and feeling sorry for him and hating herself for it all at the same time.

Antonia had tried to warn her when she’d gone to her for help with Crabbe, with her reciprocity. Antonia had tried to warn her that there was a cost.

There is always a cost.

You just have to be willing to pay it.

Ginny had been too angry to really listen. Too filled with self-righteousness. But here she sits, paying the price all the same.

“I’m going to do a reading,” Antonia says, her voice almost gentle as she appears over her shoulder. “Want to come?”

Ginny looks up at her and remembers the way she completely blew her first chance in The Parlor, and has to acknowledge how much that actually bothers her. Down in that mysterious room is a collection of girls not willing to be dictated to, to be told what they are capable of. Ginny knows she has a lot to learn from them.

And here Antonia is, giving her one more chance.

It occurs to Ginny that Antonia is one of the few people in her life willing to let her make own mistakes. Willing to let her figure out how to fix them, and not hold them against her.

“Yeah,” Ginny says, still feeling that weight, but refusing it let it hold her down forever. “I would really like that.”

* * *

The rest of the year seems to pass in a blur. The seventh and fifth years disappear under massive piles of homework and revision for OWLs and NEWTs. She suspects Fred and George really let themselves get caught just so they wouldn’t have to bother taking them.

She misses the DA, but she’s still meeting with Smita and Tobias sometimes, sharing spells and tricks Harry hadn’t covered, ones she thinks he probably wouldn’t approve of. Passing on things she’s learned from Antonia.

And in the mornings now as she leaves for class, she passes by Millicent like she does every day, but now takes a moment to pause.
“Hi, Millicent,” Ginny says.

She looks up, brow furrowed and eyes wary. “What?” she practically snarls.

Ginny smiles and keeps walking.

Tomorrow she’ll try again.

*   *   *

In June, Gryffindor faces off with Ravenclaw, and maybe because they have nothing to lose, Ron doesn’t do half bad. She suspects he just needs a little confidence in himself. (And a much better team to play with. Ginny doesn’t like to be uncharitable to other players, but the replacement Gryffindor Seeker and Beaters are really, really terrible. Yet another reason it is probably a blessing Fred and George aren’t here anymore.)

Still, eking out a win isn’t enough to take the lead from Slytherin, and just like that, the cup is theirs. Bletchley jumps around the common room like he’s deranged, Ginny laughing with Thompson. Draco predictably struts around the place like he’d single-handedly pulled off the victory, but Ginny’s too happy to care.

Ginny starts to daydream about the presentation of the cup, the hall festooned with green and silver.

She has to put all of that aside for a while as her own finals loom.

Ginny has just finished sending an owl off to her father when Smita lifts an arm to stop her. Voices are echoing down the hallway, what sounds like Hermione and…Umbridge? They quickly step back into an alcove just in time to see Umbridge holding Harry and Hermione at wand point, marching them towards the grounds.

“What the hell is going on?” Ginny mutters to Smita. Neither of them is foolish enough to try to take on Umbridge, but Ginny is already spooling out the implications.

“We need to tell someone,” Smita points out. She’s read the Quibbler, she understands the kinds of things that are happening around Harry.

Ginny automatically thinks of the Order, of Grimmauld place. For all she knows, that’s where Dumbledore is living. “Umbridge’s office.”

Smita looks up at her, quickly doing the maths. “You know who to contact?”

“Yes. Let’s go.”

They walk down the corridor as casually as possible, hoping not to run into any Inquisitorial Squads. They usually get a free pass as Slytherin, but there is no reason to push it with so much clearly going on right now.

Ginny slips an extendible ear under the door.

“From the sound of it, Draco, Crabbe, Goyle, Montague, and Pansy. With Ron, Luna, and Neville.”

“Bad odds,” Smita says.

Ginny frowns, considering all of the options. She shuffles through them, trying to find the best one with the least chance of getting caught. Or of giving Draco and his henchmen yet another reason for open hostility.
Why couldn’t Umbridge have taken some of her squad with her?

Ginny straightens. “I have an idea.” She lifts her wand to Smita’s face.

Smita eyes Ginny. “They can’t really be this thick.”

“Oh,” Ginny says, “I think they can be. Ready?”

Smita nods, her face and clothing seeming to float and blur. Ginny reminds herself to thank Antonia later.

Lifting her hand, Ginny bangs her fists against the door. “Boys,” she bellows, voice pitched just so. Commanding but sickly sweet. “Come out here at once!”

The door just barely opens when the sound of choking echoes from inside, a few spells ricocheting off the walls. Luna yelping.

Smita shoves the door open, curse taking out Pansy while she has her hand still on the door handle. Ginny takes in the scene before her, but has little to do other than stun the moaning and writhing Goyle on the floor.

Ron, Neville, and Luna lift their wands, pointing them at Ginny and Smita.


Smita waves her wand, the enchantments melting from their faces.

Neville looks relieved, but Ron is still glancing around. “I heard Umbridge.”

Ginny smiles. “I will have order!” she snaps, in a pretty great impersonation if she says so herself.

“Merlin, Gin,” Ron says, looking freaked out and impressed.

“Shall we go after Harry and Hermione?” Luna asks, stepping over the prone form of Draco.

Ginny gestures towards the fire. “Shouldn’t we tell someone?” she asks, trying to give Ron a significant glance.

Ron shakes his head, gathering up all the wands. “Harry tried already. There’s no one there.”

“What is going on?” Ginny demands, her head spinning with everything that has happened.

They step out into the hall, Ron pulling her close. “Harry thinks they have Sirius.”

Ginny blanches, but refrains from asking any more questions as they rush out into the grounds.

They run into Harry and Hermione coming out the forest, both looking incredibly worse for wear. They’re covered in what looks like…blood.

“How did you--?” Harry starts to ask, his eyes falling on Ginny and Smita.

“Ginny and Smita broke us out,” Neville says.

“Ron nearly had it done on his own,” Ginny says, giving her brother a grin.

Ron shrugs. “Ton-tongue toffees.”
“Never take candy from strangers,” Smita says with a solemn nod.

Ron startles them all with a loud laugh. “Sorry,” he says, looking sheepish.

Smita suppresses a smile. “So where to now?”

Harry blusters and very nearly insults them all, but in the end has to capitulate.

They are going to the Department of Mysteries. Together.

* * *

Thinking back on what happened in the Department of Mysteries, it’s mostly a giant horrifying haze. Ginny remembers the terrible feel of flying on nothing but faith that there is animal you can’t see. She remembers the hard cold masks of the death eaters, the shattering of glass under her Reductor curse, Ron being attacked by brains (can that memory be right?), but most of all, Smita falling. Falling, falling, falling.

The way Smita didn’t get back up.

There had been Death Eaters and a wand at Ginny’s throat, and in a blur the Order members sweeping in to the rescue. Ginny getting thrown back by a curse, slamming into the benches.

Sirius falling oh so quietly. Barely a whisper and then gone.

Harry bellowing and running and everything sliding black.

Then she’s waking in the infirmary, safe and sound and tucked back in at Hogwarts as if the night had never happened, if not for the screaming pain in her side and the smell of potions and astringents in her nose.

Smita.

Ginny sits up with her heart in her throat, her eyes scanning the infirmary. She sees a shock of red hair that can only be her brother, and next to him, the bushy brown of Hermione. Down at the far end she finally locates Smita. Her eyes are open, her lips moving even if Ginny can’t hear the words. She’s sinking back into her own bed with relief when she realizes someone is sitting in a chair next to Smita’s bed.

Tobias.

He has his head low over her, her hand clenched tightly in his. Pale and drawn as if he’d been part of the fight even when Ginny knows he wasn’t. What is he doing--?

Ginny gets her answers as he presses his lips to Smita’s forehead, Smita leaning into the touch.

Madam Pomfrey draws the curtain, blocking them from view.

Ginny barely thinks anything more than here we go before sinking back into oblivion and away from the pain.

* * *

Ginny hears a slight shift of air, like leaves rustling, and looks up to find Harry pulling off a cloak, that worn piece of parchment once again in his fingers. She feels a beat of relief seeing him, apparently whole and sound. Somehow, against all odds, they’d all made it back out.
She feels her gut clench, remembering a dark arch and the empty space beyond.

Almost all of them.

“Harry?” she says, her voice a hushed croak. It must be day by now, or maybe even night again, to judge from the low light and quiet in the infirmary.

He seems surprised to find her awake, looking back over his shoulder and pulling the curtain tightly closed behind him. “They said you were all okay, but I…”

“Wanted to see for yourself?” she says, shifting up slightly in the bed. She grimaces when the movement pulls across her ribs. Oh, Merlin. Moving is not good.

“Ginny?” Harry asks, stepping further into the cubicle.

“I’m okay,” she gasps, biting back against the pain flaring in her side.

He picks up the goblet on her bedside table. “You didn’t finish your potion.”

She pulls a face. “It tastes like feet.”

His lips twitch. “Yeah. But it will make you feel better.” He hands it to her.

She takes it, but doesn’t drink it. She seems to remember it being warm, the metal cup now dull and cool against her fingers. “How is everyone else?” she asks, stalling.

He eyes her. “Sleeping.” As she should be, is the unspoken part. Mum would be proud.

“Okay, okay. You win,” she says, pinching her nose and downing the tepid, slimy potion in one go. Harry trader her the empty goblet for a glass of water. She chugs the whole glassful, but it still doesn’t completely wash away the disgusting taste in her mouth.

She shudders with distaste, handing the glass back to Harry.

She expects him to leave as soon as she drinks it, but he lingers, looking awkward and uncertain in the enclosed space. Maybe exhaustion has finally taken hold. He stares at the curtains in the dim light as if they might hold some hidden answer.

“Harry?” she asks, already feeling warmth spreading across her ribs.

He blinks, refocusing on her. “Can I ask… Do you think…” He trails off.

“Do I think?” she prompts.

He looks like he might lose his nerve for a second, but this is Harry Potter, brave to the point of stupidity, no matter how exhausted and worn he looks. “Could you kill? If you had to?”

Ginny feels her gut clench, the potion roiling unpleasantly. “What?”

Harry shakes his head, stepping back as if to leave. “Forget it,” he says.

She makes a clumsy grab for his sleeve, keeping him there. Things are moving too fast for her poor potion-addled brain, so she says the first thing that pops into her mind, something she feels like she somehow knows deep down in her bones. “You aren’t a killer, Harry.”

He closes his eyes, and she can’t tell if that’s what he wanted to hear or not.
She thinks about his rage tonight, the way he tore after Bellatrix like a wild thing. Is he scared of what he might have done to her, given the chance?

Could you kill?

Ginny thinks sometimes (worries) that maybe she could. Worries what that makes of her. But Harry? No. She doesn’t have a doubt. She’s watched him this last year, has gotten to know him as more than just her brother’s friend. She’s paid attention to the things he has chosen to teach them and the things he has not. And now that she’s seen him actually in that moment, those rushing, terrifying moments where there is no time to think or remember ideals, he’d still lived them.

No, he’s not a killer.

Her hand slips to his wrist, the potion working its way up her limbs. “I’m sorry,” Ginny risks saying, her voice slow and dull. “I’m sorry about Sirius.”

Harry looks away, his jaw clenching and eyes blinking rapidly. “Yeah,” he says, voice rough.

Ginny’s eyes drop closed, her body beginning to feel feather light.

She feels Harry place her hand back on the edge of the bed with almost undue care. “Ginny?” he whispers.

“Hmm?”

“Do you think maybe I could just…sit here for a little while?”

She nods her head, her cheek pressing into the pillow.

She falls asleep to the sound of Ron’s snores and the feeling that Harry is sitting nearby.

* * *

They are all released from the infirmary the next day, to a castle alive with whispers and changes and everything being different and yet exactly the same.

Ginny and Smita sit together on a couch in the common area.

“So,” Ginny says.

“So,” Smita agrees, cheeks red.

They glance at Tobias across the room with the other boys in their year.

This will be different.

* * *

Loading up on the Hogwarts Express is bedlam like always, made even trickier by Tobias’ absolute refusal to let Smita lift anything, particularly her heavy trunk. They all three know how to do a locomotor charm, but Tobias has been in a particularly strange and annoying mood ever since Smita was injured. He’s trying to heft both his own and Smita’s trunks up onto the train. Ginny tries to intervene, but it’s Neville who appears from nowhere to lift the other ends of the trunks.

Tobias scowls something fierce, but doesn’t complain.
Somehow in Tobias’ twisty mind, he has decided that the DA is responsible for what happened to Smita, for the danger she’d thoughtlessly put herself in. Ginny wonders how much of that is anger that he hadn’t been there himself.

She smiles at Neville in thanks when Tobias doesn’t bother to.

Walking down the train together, they pass by a compartment full of DA members.

Neville pulls open the compartment door, giving the three of them an awkward wave. “See you, Ginny. Smita. Tobias.”

Tobias nods stiffly, Smita smiling slightly. They move on down the hall, Smita’s hand tucked firmly into Tobias’.

“Have a good summer, Neville,” Ginny says, glancing at the DA members one last time.

From inside, Harry looks up, but it almost feels like his eyes don’t quite connect, like he’s distant from everything around him.

_Could you kill, if you had to?

Ginny shivers.

Turning for the Slytherin compartments, she follows after Smita and Tobias. Leaving the DA and Umbridge and the Department of Mysteries firmly behind her.

She doesn’t look back.
Fifth Year

Chapter Notes

A/N: If you’ve been following this story, I promise you aren’t having a strange case of deja vu. After I finished writing the fifth chapter, I realized that the last scene of chapter four really belonged at the beginning of chapter five. So I moved it and slightly reworked the end of chapter 4. Apologies for any confusion! Special thanks to TimeShifter for the beta, and Zip for being a sounding board.

Trigger warnings: canon character death, depictions of minor violence, injury, and PTSD

Fifth Year

Going home to the Burrow for the summer is like time travel, returning somewhere they expect her to be exactly as she was even though she’s seen things, done things that can’t ever be taken back. Ginny’s not a little girl anymore, no matter how appealing it might be to pretend. Dolores Umbridge and a dark night in the Department of Mysteries sometimes feel like the least of it.

It’s even worse than Umbridge’s class, back to being wandless and spell-less, only now she knows, knows first hand what is out there.

Her parents either don’t understand this, or simply don’t want to believe it. As if something like housework could possibly matter when people are dying and taking sides and not even Hogwarts feels completely safe.

She can’t really hide in numbers any more either. It’s just Mum and Dad and Ron and her, a parenting ratio she’s rarely faced.

Ron walks through their nearly empty house like nothing has changed, even as the scars on his arms tell a different story. She wants to ask how he can do that, just go on like the world hasn’t changed, like they are still children.

He’s annoyed by Mum’s hovering, just as much as ever, but never does anything more than roll his eyes or sneak out of the house just to avoid her.

Ginny is the one bristling with heat, her mouth getting ahead of her cool in a way she didn’t dare allow at school. Dad’s not around much, and Ron is smart enough to avoid it. It just leaves Mum in her path, so different from Antonia and Smita and Burbage, bustling around her little house as if any of this matters. As if perfect biscuits and knitting could have helped Ginny in the Ministry, could have helped her deal with the fact that people like Umbridge are real.

It’s why every answer out of Ginny’s mouth erupts with a sarcastic twist, a barb pressed home with ruthless accuracy. She sees the way her mother tries to pretend it doesn’t bother her, this sudden brittleness between them, and the attempt only makes Ginny angrier.

She’s pissed off at her mother and can’t even say why.
It only takes a week for the storm to reach the breaking point. Ginny doesn’t even remember what she said exactly, just the look on Mum’s face, the terrible silence at the table after.

“Ginny,” Mum says, voice betraying a calm that is a thousand times more shattering than her familiar bellow. “I would like you to leave this table.”

Ginny glares over her half-eaten meal, and barely resists the urge to sweep the plate to the floor. Dad’s face is set, his eyes not on her, but on Mum. She thinks he must be holding her hand under the table.

Ron’s staring at her like she’s a stranger.

Ginny stands up without a word and walks out to the front porch. She storms up and down the creaking boards, her breath rushing in and out like she’s just finished a race. She has the craziest urge to slam her fist into the porch column.

*Would probably bring the whole giant mess of a house down*, she thinks viciously, as if she didn’t love every worn and familiar inch of this place. What the hell is wrong with her?

It’s her father who finally joins her, sitting her down on the steps and taking her hand in his. He ignores it when she tries to tug away, to snap something stupid like, “I’m nearly fifteen, Dad.” Not a child any more. Just acting like one.

Her classmates would heap scorn down on her for it.

It’s only once she’s calmed, once they’ve sat unmoving for who knows how long that he starts telling her quietly about a girl named Molly Prewett. A girl with fire and spirit and a stinging hex that no one ever forgot. A girl who could have gone anywhere and done anything, a woman who lived through war only to see it come around a second time.

Ginny feels angry tears pressing at the back of her eyes.

Dad leans in closer, like imparting some great secret. “There’s a difference between not having power, and choosing not to use it.”

Ginny closes her eyes, forcing herself not to hold on tighter when his hand slips from hers.

He leaves her sitting out there to think about it, the sun dragging slowly down below the trees lining the pasture.

Hours later when she slinks back inside, there’s a plate with a perfect warming charm waiting for her on the table.

She sits and eats.

Ginny spends the next two days watching her mother as she moves through the seemingly mundane routines of her life—the swish of her arm with each little spell, the tension of muscles and restraint in the snap of her wrist. She imagines herself a stranger and takes a second, third, fiftieth look at Molly Prewett Weasley.

Ginny considers that subtlety is its own sort of power, one not easily mastered.

Blowing out a long breath, Ginny follows her mother outside into the overgrown yard.

Together, they peg up the laundry.
“English food,” Fleur says, her perfect pert nose crinkling with distaste, “it is so heavy.”

From across the table, Ginny wonders if she’s just imagining that she can hear the grinding of Mum’s teeth. Dad makes no comment, and Ron just looks at Fleur the way he always does, like he’s staring at the sun and even though it’s burning his eyes, he can’t look away. It’s been a lot quieter around here with Ron almost constantly struck dumb.

From the other end of the table, Hermione glares at Fleur.

Ginny mostly wants to shrug. She isn’t particularly moved by Fleur’s thoughtless remark, just one prick among hundreds since Bill dropped her off with a kiss and his half-careless curse breaker smile.

Dad makes a bumbling attempt at restarting the conversation, telling a convoluted tale about a Muggle fire hydrant bewitched to chase dogs down the street that he already told them yesterday.

Fleur sighs, fork clanging listlessly against her plate.

* * *

And so summer settles over the Burrow. The weather is much more temperate this year, but that doesn’t mean it lacks in discomfort. Fleur’s arrival only a few days after Ginny and her mum tentatively reached a sort of unspoken truce only added yet another layer of tension to the already volatile situation. Ginny isn’t exactly happy to see Mum so worked up, but every time Mum is pushed to the edge of losing her temper by something Fleur says or does, the petulant part of Ginny wants to smirk and point out the irony of the situation in her most acerbic tone.

She doesn’t though, because she’s trying dammit.

Of course, a lot of things are more difficult this summer than they should be.

Biting her lip, Ginny stares down at the piece of parchment in front of her. So far all it says is ‘Dear Smita’ with nothing but creamy emptiness below. She has no idea where all her words went.

Determinedly, she picks up her abandoned quill. It hovers unused for a beat too long, a bead of ink dripping onto the surface. Ginny stares down at it, only realizing after a few long dragging seconds that she’s waiting for it to sink in and disappear.

She swipes at the glistening blob with her thumb, smudging it across the parchment where it dries and stains. Better.

Just a letter.

Smita is back in St. Mungo’s after an unexpected relapse. Apparently the curse she’d been hit with in the Department of Mysteries was even more serious than originally thought. She is going to be fine, or so her last letter assured Ginny. So Ginny reminds herself at least ten times a day. Smita just has to take a rigorous series of daily potions for a while. And maybe a little less often for longer than that.

Like maybe for the rest of her life.

Ginny’s quill presses down, a circle of ink expanding larger and larger.

“I hate her,” Hermione announces as she storms into the room, the door closing with a resounding whoomp behind her.
Ginny looks up, not bothering to ask who. Hermione has been bristling at Fleur’s every word and look since the moment her parents dropped her off this morning. A lot like Mum. But hate is a strong word.

“Why?” Ginny asks.

Hermione spears her with a look like she’s completely insane.

Maybe she is. Fleur just doesn’t get on her nerves the way she seems to get on everyone else’s. She feels familiar, to be honest. More familiar than Hermione some days.

Hermione is muttering something about Veelas and hair and the stupid French as she gets ready for bed.

“Because she’s beautiful?” Ginny guesses, remembering that Hermione’s glares have been equally shared between Fleur and Ron. Stupid befuddled Ron.

The deepening scowl on Hermione’s face tells Ginny she’s hit the mark.

“It’s not really something she got to choose,” Ginny reminds her.

Hermione snorts. “She never lets any of us forget it either though, does she?”

Ginny doesn’t bother responding to that. For a clever girl, sometimes Hermione could be thicker than a tome.

Turning back down to the ruined parchment, Ginny balls it up and tosses it away with a sigh.

*     *     *

When Ginny goes downstairs the next morning, Harry is sitting at the breakfast table. Ginny has long since gotten used to the way Ron’s friends inevitably appear. It’s almost like having triplets for older siblings, and the three of them are still far less trouble than the twins.

Fleur is sitting next to him, beaming and chatting brightly about Gabrielle while she butters some toast for him. Mum stands a few steps behind, looking put out that she can’t butter Harry’s toast herself.

Forgetting herself for a moment, Ginny snorts with amusement, everyone’s attention swinging to her.

“Good morning,” Ginny says, taking a seat opposite Fleur. “Hi, Harry.”

He seems a bit surprised for a moment, staring at her. Still shaking off the effects of Fleur first thing in the morning, she imagines. “Hi, Ginny,” he says, eyes sliding away from her.

Ginny frowns, taking in the slump of his shoulders and the poorly slapped on smile he has returned to Fleur. Sirius, she thinks, her mind unwillingly going back to that strange room, to whispers and shadows and Smita crumpled on the floor.

She is going to be fine.

Ginny’s heart is beating fast now though, a rush building in her ears. Mum drops a plate down in front of her, snapping her attention back. She focuses gratefully on the toast and eggs, forcing a slow breath out.

“Thanks, Mum,” she says, her voice still a little strange to her ears.
Mum doesn’t necessarily seem to notice though, her frown temporarily easing at her daughter’s unusual politeness. Not that she looks any less wary. There have been far too many angry words between them. “You’re welcome, dear.”

Ginny nods, looking up from her plate to find Harry watching her.

Before she can say anything, Ron thunders down the steps, Hermione close on his heels. “Harry, mate! When did you get here?”

They embrace, beating each other on the backs like they’re trying to see who will wince first. Hermione follows, her hug more controlled but no less eager. When she pulls back, Ginny can tell she’s looking at Harry closely, gauging his mood and his health.

“Later,” Harry says in an undertone to his friends before they can ask any questions of him.

They eat in heavy silence until Harry casually mentions their OWL results arriving today, and then there is just Hermione burning up all the air with her ceaseless worry.

Predictably, the owls wing their way in and all three have done well enough. Hermione nearly better than both boys combined, but that isn’t really a surprise to anyone. In a whirlwind, all three disappear upstairs.

Fleur, sitting forgotten at the table, watches them go.

Ginny considers her unfinished letter upstairs.

“Would you like to walk down to the village?” Ginny asks Fleur.

Mum shoots Ginny a grateful look, like she’s just thrown herself in front of a curse for the benefit of all. Ginny presses her lips together against a scathing remark fighting to be free.

“I suppose,” Fleur sniffs, getting gracefully to her feet. “There is nothing else to do.”

“Great,” Ginny says, teeth aching a bit with the pressure of holding her temper. She really just needs to get out of the house for a while.

Outside, Ginny breathes deep, feeling the tension leave her body as her pace lengthens, the Burrow left behind. It’s a beautiful morning, the sun just beginning to beat back the cool shadows. Fleur keeps up without a word, though Ginny likes to think she looks a little relieved to be outside as well.

After a while, Ginny slows her pace, giving them both a chance to actually take in their surroundings. She holds a hand out over the tall grasses lining the path, feeling the rough tickle against her palm.

“Is there nothing at all to do here?” Fleur sighs. “Other than look at cows and drink tea?” Ginny has the bizarre thought that if Fleur were a little less elegant, she would have kicked petulantly at a stone.

“No, not really,” Ginny says. There are, in fact, plenty of other things to do, but Ginny suspects there is something more at play here than simple boredom. She isn’t sure why, but for some reason Fleur is a tempting puzzle. Far less dangerous that Mum or Smita…

Ginny presses her lips together.

Fleur lapses back into silence rather than respond, almost peevishly, as if she’s annoyed she hasn’t managed to start a fight.
“Tell me about your home,” Ginny says after they pass another few minutes in silence.

“My home?” Fleur echoes, voice brusque. Ginny wonders if she’s imagining the slight edge of wariness. Like she’s looking for a trap.

“Where you grew up.” Ginny sweeps an arm around them, indicating the trees and the pastures and the smell of dirt and hay. “Was it like this?”

“Oh, no,” Fleur says, hair glinting almost blindingly in the sun with the shake of her head. “My home is…soft and green and full of flowers in neat straight rows. There is a lazy, wide green river, shaded by the chestnut trees, and the village children have boats to row in the summers. There is one long lane through the village with shops on each side, and on the weekend mornings the market spills down the street. We buy delicate sweets and sit by the river and Gabrielle points to the birds and knows all their names.”

Fleur snaps her mouth shut as if something has crawled into her throat, or she’s realized just how much she has said and how quickly.

Ginny is still catching up, shifting carefully through all the particulars. “It sounds…” Familiar. Comfortable. Not lonely. “Lovely,” she eventually decides on. “I’d like to see it someday.”

Fleur turns to her with one eyebrow raised as if she suspects Ginny of humoring her. Or more likely, just thinking that even if Ginny did visit, she wouldn’t really be able to appreciate it. But Ginny also remembers the way Fleur was with Harry this morning, chatting away, but more like clinging to him like a lifeline.

Ginny takes a long moment to look at Fleur, really look at her. Not the shine of her hair or the perfection of her features, but rather for any sign of the girl underneath. To her credit, Fleur looks straight back with something almost like relief tangled into her aloofness.

It makes Ginny wonder how many people actually bother to look for Fleur and not just the Veela. If that is how Bill loves her.

For the first time it occurs to Ginny how brave Fleur is, even being here. Coming to a foreign place, falling in love with someone, letting him dump her alone in the countryside with his large family. She considers that actively making them dislike her may seem a better strategy than letting them decide to dislike her on their own.

No, that doesn’t quite sit right. It isn’t all an act. There may be fear or loneliness twisting her words, but this is who Fleur is. And Bill loves her. She thinks that’s more than enough reason for them to try a little harder to know her. To accept her.

“I’m glad you came to visit,” Ginny decides.

Fleur looks too surprised to answer.

Ginny turns and continues up the path.

Fleur catches up after a few steps, her fingers tweaking the end of Ginny’s ponytail. “Your hair,” she says, her voice a bit breathy. “It could actually be pretty with some help.”

Under this seeming insult, Ginny finally registers it—the way her fingers tug with the feel of I miss my sister.

Ginny turns to her and smiles. “I’ve never had a sister.”
Fleur nods as if this explains it.

* * *

“Mum,” Ginny asks the next morning after breakfast, moving to stand next to her at the sink. “Do you know any French recipes?”

Her mother’s hands tighten, face indignant as she turns to look at Ginny. “So now I’m supposed to cater to her?”

Ginny pauses to let the inevitable surge of annoyance fade. Then she touches her mother’s arm, voice soft and only slightly chastising. “Mum, she’s homesick.”

Mum blinks a few times, finally pressing her lips together as her natural compassion rises. “I think I might have a recipe for Vichysoise somewhere,” she says, fingers drumming on the counter. “Can’t say it will be good enough for her.”

“Maybe not,” Ginny says. “But it’s worth it to try.”

Mum gives her a long look, like she’s trying to decide where this all fits in with Ginny’s bizarre moods this summer.

Ginny bites down on the inside of her cheek on the cutting retort she’d like to make. Give your mum half the chance you’re giving Fleur, she reminds herself. “Can I help make it?”

Mum nods.

Later that night, the whole table seems to hold its breath as Fleur takes a sip of Mum’s soup, only Harry looking on as if unsure of what exactly is happening around him.

“It is not quite right,” Fleur eventually says.

Mum tenses, Ron’s eyes going wide as if he’s got front row seats for the fight of the year. Mum seems to take a moment to breathe though, her shoulders eventually dropping. “Perhaps there are some other recipes you could share with me?” she asks, voice not quite warm, but not nearly as brittle.

Fleur shrugs. “I suppose.”

Ginny wonders if she’s the only one who notices that Fleur finishes every last drop of the soup.

* * *

Growing up in a small house with six siblings, you learn to seek out and ruthlessly protect any opportunities for solitude. The Burrow is not nearly as full as it has been in years past, but Ginny still rises early each morning, just for a chance to breathe and be. Inevitably, she ends up out at the paddock, an old broom from the shed in hand.

Nothing centers her like time spent on a broom.

The trees around the paddock are nearly thirty feet tall, providing good cover from any Muggle eyes. There are rudimentary goals rigged up at either end that have been there for as long as Ginny can remember. It’s not exactly regulation, but it works well enough.

Ron has never been an early riser, so she usually has the space all to herself. About a week into Harry’s stay however, he starts bringing his broom down about a half hour after Ginny. He finally
looks rested and well fed, and it’s enough to make Ginny wonder just what his Muggle relations do to him each summer. Or maybe he is just finally starting to climb back out of the loss of Sirius.

Ginny doesn’t know and doesn’t bother to ask, far too aware of the way Harry looks at her these days. Like she’s some wild animal that he’s just waiting to turn on him and attack. It’s almost enough to make her think that night in the infirmary never happened.

When they do talk, it’s about Quidditch—which drills are best, the merits of certain techniques.

It’s the language they best understand.

* * *

“What did you do to your hair?” Mum shrieks when Ginny appears one morning at the table for breakfast.

Ginny lifts a hand to her shortened locks. Fleur had been true to her word, suggesting removing some of the heavy length, adding some soft layers here and there. Ginny never before realized just how much extra weight she’s been lugging around.

“I would have thought that was obvious,” Ginny says, forgetting her pledge not to talk back to her mum. But honestly, it’s just hair. She hadn’t realized that is one of the things she’s supposed to ask permission about.

“But it was so nice and long! How could you--,” Mum says, really beginning to work herself into a lather, the dishes in the sink starting to rattle.

Hermione jumps in, her voice high, “I think it looks nice, Ginny.”

Ron grimaces around a mouth full of sausages when Hermione elbows him. “Yeah,” he sputters. “Real nice.” As if he cares at all about his sister’s hair.

Ginny rolls her eyes. “Fleur helped me do it last night. And I really like it.” She sits down as if that is the end of it.

Mum harrumphs, turning back to the stove. Hermione, for her part, suddenly looks like she’s not as keen on the haircut now that she knows Fleur had a hand in it.

_Merlin_, Ginny thinks in exasperation, _the people around me._

Ginny looks at Harry sitting next to her. “And you?” she asks, still heated with annoyance. “Apparently everyone gets to have an opinion.”

Harry looks up from his plate with something bordering on horror at being dragged into this particular conversation. She might feel bad if she weren’t in such a perverse mood.

“It’s uh…,” he sputters. “Ni--.”

“Don’t you dare say nice,” Ginny says.

Harry glances around the table in alarm, but Ron just shrugs unhelpfully. Ron is a lot of things, but he’s in no way stupid enough to put himself in the middle of this.

Ginny props her chin up on her hand, beginning to enjoy Harry’s panic. “My mother thinks I shouldn’t have cut it.”
Harry’s face scrunches up like he’s thinking really hard, really fast. “Well, it’s, uh, your hair, isn’t it?” he says, darting a wary glance at Mum, like he’s trying to decide which of them to be most afraid of.

She beams at him. “Why, yes it is. Thank you, Harry.”

He blows out a breath, as if he’s managed to dodge a nasty curse.

Mum drops a plate down in front of Ginny. “You’ve made your point. Now leave the poor boy alone and eat your breakfast.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ginny says, giving her a little salute.

Mum mutters under her breath as she walks away.

Next to her, Harry looks like he’s trying to make himself as small as possible while still managing to shovel food in his mouth.

Ginny sighs, reaching across him for the butter. “Sorry about that.”

He shakes his head, nudging the dish closer to her. “S’okay.”

She smiles at him. “Just part of staying at the Burrow. You have to deal with the Weasleys and all our insanity.”

He glances around the kitchen, something passing behind his eyes. “Small price to pay.”

Ginny digs into her food, deciding that there are layers there she would never be able to pick apart, even if she wanted to try.

“Must you eat like that?” Hermione complains to Ron, the ensuing snipe fest easily filling the silence of the breakfast table.

“I do like it,” Harry says quietly after a while, clearing his throat awkwardly. “Your hair.”

Her eyebrows lift. “Yeah?”

He nods, glancing over her hair. “It’s kind of…” His hand flaps. “Floaty.”

“Floaty?” Ginny repeats, trying valiantly not to laugh.

His face tinges the slightest pink. “Like you just finished playing Quidditch or something.” He frowns then, like he’s realizing that might sound like an insult.

She takes mercy on him, smiling widely at him. “Much better than ‘nice’.”

Fleur comes down the stairs then, clapping her hands when she sees Ginny. “So pretty!” she coos. Her fingers are in Ginny’s hair even before she takes a seat, tugging this way and that. “But you did not brush it quite right. I will have to show you again or you will look a fright!”

* * *

It’s been two weeks since Ginny received Smita’s last letter, and she’s still working on writing a response.

Almost by default she starts out by asking how Smita is feeling, if she’s getting better, but guilt starts
welling in Ginny’s stomach and the words are just all wrong.

*I shouldn’t have dragged you along with us that night. I shouldn’t have taken you to the DA in the first place.*

*I should have been able to do something….*

She wads the parchment up and throws it in the trash.

She tries a different approach, thinking to describe Fleur, but she seems to defy explanation. She gets down a couple of paragraphs about Ron and Hermione and Harry only to burn the parchment when she’s done.

Smita’s never been to The Parlor and Quidditch has never really interested her, so Ginny’s thoughts on those parts of her life are out. She doesn’t particularly want to ask about Tobias.

The visits of Order members with increasingly grim tales of Muggle disappearances and strange attacks don’t seem like the right thing to tell a girl ailing in a hospital. *Tom always did like his games.*

She tells herself she can’t be sure who is reading her correspondence these days and siphons the ink back up from the page.

She considers trying to write about the anger she brought home from Hogwarts. The way one moment everything is fine—she’s laughing, she’s calm, and then all of a sudden it all wells up unexpectedly. It’s still nearly always only ever directed at Mum. It’s almost as if every time her mum says anything, or even does anything, she’s filled with this crushing feeling of annoyance.

Ginny’s trying though, her father’s gentle chastisement never far from the back of her mind. At the very least, Ginny keeps her mouth shut and tries very hard to just do as she’s told with minimum stomping and eye rolling. It’s hard though, even with her practice at controlling her emotions from last year. It’s harder to be a glacier here where she used to be a child, that child who knew nothing, knew nothing and lived a charmed life because of it.

So it’s “Yes, Mum” all the time and it’s better than the yelling and the hurt in Mum’s eyes that only made Ginny angrier, but there are still moments of tension no one can escape.

She tries writing about that to Smita, but every time she reads it back over she ends up embarrassed by how much she sounds like a snotty, petulant child.

Another letter left sitting unfinished.

*     *     *

Early one afternoon, Ron gets it in his head that they should play two a side Quidditch. The only problem is that there are only three of them. The obvious solution seems to be getting Hermione to join them. Ron’s been badgering her all week, getting more and more obnoxious the more Hermione tries to demur.

“Don’t make Hermione do that,” Ginny sighs.

Ron looks up from where he’s harassing Hermione with an extra broom from the old shed. She wonders if he is really so dense that he can’t see the panic on Hermione’s face at the thought.

“You and the twins played as three all the time,” Ginny reminds him. His ears tinge red and Ginny inwardly smiles, knowing that playing with the twins had really just consisted of a rather nasty game
Harry looks confused. “Didn’t you play with them, Ginny?”

She notices he doesn’t bother asking why Percy never played with them.

“Of course not,” Ron says dismissively. “We had no idea she was any good.” He frowns then, turning to look at her. “Come to think of it, how did you manage to get so good?”

Ginny smiles. Little did her brothers know that she’s been stealing their brooms and secretly practicing since she was six. “A Slytherin never tells,” she says, tapping the side of her nose.

Ron rolls his eyes and calls her something profane, but Ginny is more surprised by Harry’s reaction, finding him watching her with that inscrutable look in his eyes again. Yet instead of looking disturbed, he almost looks…relieved. Like he’s glad to hear she knows how to keep her mouth shut.

Ginny blinks, thinking back over the things they talked about last year, his voice brittle—Could you kill if you had to? She considers that she may be carrying around more of his secrets than she realized.

“Hermione,” Ron says again, shaking the broom. “We need a fourth!”

“Hold on,” Ginny says, heading back up towards the Burrow. “I have a better idea.”

A short search leads Ginny out to the small front garden, where Fleur sits reading a book in the shade of an apple tree. “How are you on a broom?”

Fleur looks up with interest. “As good as I need to be,” she says, a sly smile curving her lips.

Ginny hooks a thumb over her shoulder. “Want to help me make the boys look stupid?”

Fleur laughs. “How hard could that be?”

Fleur isn’t particularly skilled on a broom, but she’s cunning and a little ruthless, both of which Ginny would expect of a Triwizard champion. Fleur chooses her targets wisely, zooming into Ron’s eye line from odd, unexpected angles, rendering him mute and useless just long enough for Ginny to get by him. Harry seems to be made of slightly sterner stuff, but one on one, they are fairly well matched. Ginny just has a better arm and far more comfort with goal shooting. He’s quick though, and makes unexpected moves that catch Ginny off guard.

The match ends in a hopeless tie, the four of them breathless and laughing as they tumble back on the grass below.

“I suppose,” Fleur admits begrudgingly, “it is not completely terrible here.”

Ginny laughs up into the deep blue summer sky.

* * *

The summer settles into a comfortable routine, and for a while it almost feels like the golden days of summers before, like the specter of Tom and Umbridge and Sirius’ death just can’t reach them.

Ginny gives up trying to write a letter to Smita. It feels like everything is too impossible to write about. All that’s left is the weather. She refuses to stoop that low.

Everything will be fine when they both get back to Hogwarts. Ginny’s sure of it.
One Sunday morning near the end of the summer, the Burrow is once again full of family. Bill is back visiting Fleur like he does most weekends, this time with the news that their new place is almost ready for them to move into. The twins are also here for Sunday brunch. Despite Bill’s far too long hair and the way Fleur hangs on his arm, Mum seems happy enough to have such a crowd in the house again.

They’ve all just finished eating when a quartet of Hogwarts owls wing their way into the kitchen, school letters attached to their legs.

A small grey owl with a white face and yellow eyes flaps down in Ginny’s plate. She feeds him a little egg before unknotting the missive from his leg. She opens the envelope below the lip of the table, already feeling the weight of something extra in her envelope, but not daring to hope.

Mum catches sight of it and practically shrieks. “A prefect badge?”

Ginny doesn’t bother trying to explain that most Slytherin actively *avoid* getting a prefect badge, that the last thing she needs is that complication in her life. Instead she takes a breath and opens her hand.

A gold Quidditch Captain’s badge sits on her palm.

Mum does a credible job of hiding her flicker of disappointment, coming over and hugging Ginny tight. “How wonderful, sweetheart. Four prefects and two captains in the family!”

Across the table, Harry holds up his matching Captain’s badge.

George and Fred look between Harry and Ginny. “We have *got* to make it to that first match.”

*   *   *

They all travel to Diagon Alley the next day, despite Mum’s worries that it is no longer safe. Ollivander’s disappearance has shaken a lot of people. Ginny’s just glad she already has her wand, wondering what all the new students will do this year.

Even having heard the stories, none of them are ready for the way people scuttle from store to store, for the reality of the charred black hole that used to be the wand shop. Florean’s is dark and silent.

By unspoken agreement, they all gather their books and supplies as quickly as possible in the noticeably quieter shops.

Passing in front of the Quidditch Supply Store, Ginny eyes the sleek, expensive new brooms in the window. Getting a captain’s badge is reason enough for her to finally get her own broom.

“Shall we go inside?” Mum asks, one hand in her pocket as if she’s weighing the contents of her money pouch.

“Actually,” Ginny says, surprising herself as much as anyone. “There’s a broom at school that works fine for me.”

“We can afford it, sweetie,” Mum says, trying not to look embarrassed. Harry conspicuously shuffles a few steps further away, the way he always does when the topic of money comes up.

“I know,” Ginny says, and she really does. She knows they would scrape and scrimp and make it happen. It’s not about that. “It would just really mean a lot to me to get this particular broom. Do you think we could buy that one?”
Mum is still frowning at her.

“Please,” Ginny says, swallowing everything else down. She really doesn’t want to have to explain that the school broom is a reminder of sorts, of what it takes to be great, of the paths she doesn’t want to go down again. She’s let herself be blinded by a fancy broom before.

Never again.

Luckily Mum doesn’t ask, eventually nodding her ascent. “I’ll write to Madam Hooch.”

Ginny smiles, taking her mum’s hands and squeezing them. “Thank you.”

“Whatever makes you happy, dear,” Mum says with that my-daughter-is-beyond-reasoning-or-understanding look in her eye that has become pretty commonplace this summer.

Ron is the one to outright call her mental.

Ginny just gives him a sugary sweet smile that makes Ron pale a shade.

Turning for the twins’ shop, they head further down towards Gringotts. There seems to be more activity at this end, Ginny seeing several familiar faces, including one tall figure more familiar than most.

“A Antonia?” Ginny asks, stopping to approach her.

The girl turns, deep emerald robes swirling about her ankles. “Ginny,” she says with a smile. She glances at Ginny’s family still heading down the alley, and if her gaze pauses at all on Harry (The Chosen One, the papers say), Ginny can’t tell. “Having a nice summer?”

Ginny shrugs. “More or less,” she says.

Antonia laughs as if she understands exactly what the ‘less’ means.

“A Ginny?” Mum calls, finally having noticed she’s lost her youngest.

The rest of her family shuffles into the twins’ shop, Mum coming back to collect her.

“Mum, this is Antonia. She’s--.” Ginny breaks off awkwardly. Antonia has been such an important part of her life the last few years, but she’s still not sure she has the right to call her a friend exactly. More like mentor, but would Mum have any idea what she meant by that?

Antonia doesn’t miss a beat, holding out a hand to Mum and smiling pleasantly at her. “I’m her housemate at school.”

“Oh,” Mum says, and Ginny knows she’s mentally thinking, A Slytherin. She awkwardly takes Antonia’s hand, shaking it. “It’s so nice to meet you. I haven’t gotten to meet many of Ginny’s friends.”

There’s far too many awkward places to go there. That Ginny doesn’t have many friends, that her friends might as well be from a different planet being in Slytherin, that Ginny is hiding things from her mum.

Ginny clears her throat. “Getting your school supplies?” she asks, trying to push past the inevitable clumsiness of her mum.

Antonia shakes her head. “Just taking a quick break from work. My family runs a bookshop.”
“Really?” Ginny says, automatically glancing back towards Flourish and Blotts.

Antonia shakes her head. “In Knockturn Alley.”

“Oh,” Ginny says before she can think better of it, the surprise clear in her voice.

“Well,” Antonia says, lips pressing together. “I have to get back. See you in a few weeks?”

Ginny watches her disappear down Knockturn Alley, once again feeling like she’d flubbed an important exam.

“Come along,” Mum says, steering Ginny back towards the twins’ blindingly bright shop. Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes is a lot like loud noise poured directly into your eye sockets.

It’s brilliant.

Fred and George are waiting from them at the front of the shop with Ron, Hermione, and Harry. They squire them around the shop, stopping here and there to show off particular products.

“Our new WonderWitch line,” George says as they near a section of the shop that is gratuitously pink.

“Subtle,” Ginny says.

A lot of the girls are squealing over pigmy puffs and love potions. Ginny notices Hermione looking a little too fascinated herself.

“It’s just really interesting magic!” she claims.

Ginny rolls her eyes and wanders off through the rest of the shop. She walks down long, crowded aisles, pausing now and again to say hello to people from school, mostly former-DA members. There’s no sign of Smita or Tobias.

She distracts herself from this by exploring the endless shelves of things dreamt up by her brothers. She considers grabbing another pair of extendible ears. Those are always handy. She peers at the headless hats for a while, thinking of all the uses for hiding your identity. Again though, a good spell would be just as effective and far less conspicuous. Not that discreet is something her brothers understand.

Near the back, there is a small section that is noticeably quieter.

“Are these Muggle magic tricks?” Ginny asks when one of the twins follows her in.

“Yeah,” Fred says. “Not huge sellers, but there is definitely a niche market. Mostly for weirdoes like Dad.”

Ginny smiles, thinking she knows another weirdo who would love them. She picks up a Miraphorus Magic Set.

She reaches into her pocket for a few sickles preciously hoarded, but Fred just waves her away. “An early birthday present,” he says when she protests.

She gives him a kiss on the cheek and calls him a softie.

He just laughs and makes her promise to tell Ron he made her pay for it.
She’s happy to see the twins doing so well at something they clearly love. The shop is an oasis of light and laughter and color in what is quickly becoming a really dark place. She can’t be sure if she should admire that or just worry.

Either way, she hugs both of her brothers very tight before she leaves, finding both of her pockets suspiciously full of skiving pills and dangerous looking candies when she gets home. She takes this as a sign of their faith in her sneakiness, and a reminder not to let Filch get too comfortable.

And if Ron suspiciously turns into a canary at supper, she certainly has nothing at all to do with it.

* * *

Hogwarts letters and trips to Diagon Alley are, as always, a clear signal of the end of summer. Everything subtly shifts as they prepare to head back to their studies, to see friends, to get out from under the sharp eyes of their parents.

But Ginny feels like something more than the simple ending of summer has shifted at the Burrow. Things have taken a decided turn to strange.

Ginny was paying attention more than enough to notice that Ron, Hermione, and Harry had disappeared from the twin’s shop for long enough that no weak excuse of just being lost in the store can explain. Added to that, Ron and Hermione are back to sharing those not-at-all-subtle looks of concern every time Harry’s back is turned. As for Harry, he’s got this intense look in his eye that Ginny doesn’t particularly like.

Honestly though, she rarely has a clue what those three are really up to and she has her own problems to worry about.

Like how to explain to Smita why she hasn’t written.

Things don’t really improve when they finally leave for the Hogwarts Express. Ministry cars and stiff-looking Aurors, all of it obviously revolving around an increasingly irritated Harry. Ginny considers that if she finds it hard to go from being a person at school to a child at home, how much the worse to go from a long summer being a person at the Burrow to a Chosen One—protected and stifled to within an inch of his already frayed temper.

Ginny does her best to just be efficient and stay out of the way as much as possible, even if she does take the time to trip Ron into the dirt for still staring at Fleur like the star-struck idiot he is. She shares a wry smile with Fleur over the sprawled body of Ron.

Fleur laughs and promises to write.

Of course, the mention of a letter just makes Ginny’s thoughts start to spiral, something tense and awful in her stomach. She at once can’t wait to see Smita and dreads it.

With all the special treatment, they get to the Hogwarts Express early. Ginny walks the length of the train, but doesn’t see Smita anywhere, eventually settling in a compartment with Caroline and Astoria. They share general pleasantries that Ginny doesn’t pay much attention to.

It’s nearly time for the train to depart when Ginny finally catches sight of Smita in the hallway. She pushes to her feet, waving her hand to catch her attention. Smita nods, pulling open the door. She barely gets a step inside when Tobias appears as well, his hand reaching for her elbow.

“Hi,” Ginny says, voice faltering.
This close, Ginny can see how pale Smita is, the dark smudges under her eyes. She’s thinner too, Ginny thinks.

Smita gives her a fleeting smile. “Hi.”

They spend a moment shuffling around the space, Ginny ending up sitting next to Caroline and across from Smita and Tobias. It’s still close enough to hear Tobias when he leans into Smita and says, “Are you comfortable?”

Smita gives him a look that makes Ginny turn her attention out the window.

“How was your summer?” Ginny asks as the train starts moving, desperate for anything to say. She regrets it almost immediately. She knows how Smita’s summer was—potions, hospital, and illness.

Tobias jumps in, giving an animated recounting of his summer, clearly full of three lies for every truth. Astoria and Caroline just roll their eyes and lower their heads together to talk about other things.

“You?” he asks after he’s exhausted the topic.

Ginny pauses, feeling the press of a million things needing to be said. “Oh, you know. Mostly Quidditch drills and chores and my brother’s fiancé.”

Smita looks up with interest. “One of your brothers is getting married?”

Ginny nods, just about to explain Fleur when a scared looking second year appears in the doorway. “Ginny Weasley?” he asks, voice trembling.

“Yes?” Ginny says, giving him an impatient look. She doesn’t like to be interrupted just as things are starting to be less awkward.

The boy’s eyes widen, and he practically shoves a note at her before darting back out of the compartment.

“Nice to see you’re still terrifying small children,” Tobias says.

Ginny sends him a profane gesture and unfolds the note.

_Miss Weasley,_

_Would you do me the pleasure of joining me for a spot of lunch in compartment C?_

_Sincerely,_

_Professor H. E. F. Slughorn_

She stares down at the note in annoyance. She’s had barely enough time to even get over the awkwardness, let alone try to explain anything real to Smita. Then again, she doesn’t particularly feel like doing that in front of Tobias anyway.

He’s like a limpet, never moving even an inch from her side.

“What is it?” Smita asks.

Ginny wordlessly hands the note to her.
Tobias reads it over her shoulder, letting out a long whistle. “Moving up in the world, are we, Miss Weasley?”

“Must be the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher,” Smita says, handing the note back.

Ginny shrugs, frowning down at the note. “But why would he want to see me?”

“Only one way to find out,” Tobias says.

Ginny sighs, knowing he’s right. Besides which, it’s not like she can really say no to a professor. “I guess I’ll be back after lunch.” She looks at Smita, trying to convey…something, and Smita stares back with that endlessly calm look of hers.

Out in the halls, she passes Antonia’s compartment on the way, a few other girls from The Parlor sitting inside. Ginny waves, Antonia giving her a rather cool nod in return.

All in all, a really great train ride so far.

Near Slughorn’s compartment—and how exactly did he manage to get an entire section to himself, she wonders—Ginny bumps into Harry and Neville.

“Hi, Neville,” she says, giving him a smile. “Have a nice summer?”

He’s the first person today to look genuinely pleased to see her. “Hi, Ginny. It was all right. You?”

She shrugs. “You know. Had to put up with this lot,” she says, gesturing at Harry.

Harry rolls his eyes.

Glancing down, she sees notes in their hands. She’s relieved to know it’s not just her, holding her own up for them to see. “Any idea what this about?”

Harry nods. “Apparently Professor Slughorn likes to…collect promising students.”

She raises an eyebrow, not particularly liking the sound of that. Too much like catching bugs and pinning their wings to a board.

“Not sure why he’s asked me then,” Neville says.

Harry frowns, looking discomforted by Neville’s trademark self-deprecation.

Ginny links her arm through Neville’s. “Well, clearly it just means he’s smarter than the last DADA teacher we had.”

Neville gives her a bashful smile. “Most people would be.”

Ginny laughs appreciatively. “Come on,” she says, tugging Neville’s arm. “Maybe we can at least get some good food out of this.”

They walk into the compartment to find that the entire space has been festooned with rich fabrics and comfortable chairs. Slughorn himself looks like the kind of man to enjoy comforts, pretty much exactly as Harry described him. He beams happily at them, urging them into chairs. One quick sweep of the room confirms that Ginny is the only girl. She finds this more than a little surprising, considering the level of ambition and talent she’s seen in The Parlor.

Despite what Ginny told Neville, Professor Slughorn’s taste in ‘promising students’ turns out to be
dubious. There’s arrogant Cormac McLaggen and slimy Blaise Zabini, who seems to regard Ginny with the same level of distaste she feels for him, though he saves his real vitriol for Neville and Harry.

The only point in Slughorn’s favor is that he seems put out when he realizes that despite his family connections, Marcus Belby is a dull-witted bore. Maybe Slughorn isn’t completely hopeless after all.

As Slughorn’s interrogations of each student progresses, it becomes abundantly clear that everyone here has famous family members, Neville included. And Harry, well, he’s *Harry.* The Chosen One. By the time Slughorn gets around to turning his attention to her, Ginny’s really wondering what the hell she’s doing here.

“And you, Miss Weasley,” he says, turning a smile on her that would almost be friendly if it weren’t so predatory. “From what I hear, you are poised to be the next Gwenog Jones!” He leans in a little closer, patting the back of her hand. “I would be happy to introduce you. I get free tickets to every game, you know.”

Ginny isn’t sure the food is worth this.

Luckily the lunch doesn’t last long, the students needing to get back to their compartments and changed into their robes before they arrive.

“Yes, yes,” Slughorn says as he ushers them out. “I will send you letters soon for our first dinner!” Though the way he doesn’t say goodbye to *all* of them tells Ginny that at least she probably won’t have to suffer through Belby’s presence anymore.

Cormac is still talking Harry’s ear off about Quidditch as they head down the hallway, Neville and Ginny following behind.

They reach Harry and Neville’s compartment first. Luna sits inside reading.

“Hi, Luna,” Ginny says.

“You’ve cut your hair,” Luna says by way of greeting. “I hope you were careful where you put the trimmings.”

“Of course,” Ginny says with a smile, knowing Luna probably isn’t just talking about the risk of Polyjuice potions.

Luna nods, turning her attention back to her book.

Harry is still standing in the doorway, his attention riveted to something down the hall. Ginny leans out just in time to see Blaise disappear into the next car.

Harry shoves his hands in his pockets. “I’m just going to…” he says, clearly distracted. His eyes land on Ginny almost as if he’s forgotten she was there. “Walk Ginny back to her compartment.” He nods to himself as if this makes perfect sense.

It doesn’t make any sense at all.

Clearly it doesn’t strike Neville as odd though, because he just waves and goes inside, leaving them alone out in the hall.

“Come on,” Harry says, taking Ginny by the arm. “This way.”
“I do happen to remember where my own compartment is, Harry,” she says, tugging her arm free.

“Right,” he says, looking sheepish, but no less determined. “Let’s go. Don’t want to be late.”

He starts walking down the hall at a fast clip. Ginny just barely refrains from asking him if he’s completely lost his bloody mind, quickening her step to catch up.

The students in the next few compartments are mostly Ravenclaw, eventually giving way to more Slytherin. They near the compartment with Blaise and Draco and their cronies inside, and Harry’s feet slow.

“I thought you were walking me to my compartment?” Ginny says, the pieces beginning to click into place. She doesn’t particularly appreciate him using her to spy on Draco.

Harry blinks at her. “Oh, yeah. Of course.”

He’s a really terrible liar.

To his credit, he does walk with her down into the next car where Smita and Tobias are still sitting like they are glued to each other.

“Here we are,” Harry says, patting her on her shoulder and immediately heading back the way he came without so much as a backward glance or a goodbye.

Boys, she thinks, shaking her head.

Steeling herself with a deep breath, she goes back into the compartment.

*     *     *

The rest of the train ride mostly consists of Tobias making an ass of himself and Ginny failing miserably to find anything of real substance to say. It’s almost a relief when the train comes to a stop.

On her way off the train, she notices Draco lingering alone in his compartment. Which is strange enough, considering he always has cronies around him. He looks up, their eyes connecting. His hand moves to his forearm, the same place he inked her so many years before.

She waits for him to notice the gold badge on her robes, for him to care or be annoyed, but he just looks away like he doesn’t have time for her.

His indifference is probably more than she can hope for at this point.

She turns and walks away.

Outside, the security at the gate is noticeably heavier, including Dementors around the fence line. Ginny’s hand tightens around her wand in her pocket. Even though she can cast a Patronus now, she’d still dearly love to never see a Dementor again as long as she lives.

The worst shock is still to come as she heads for the waiting carriages, glancing around to see where Smita and Tobias have disappeared to.

Ignorance is kind of blissful, she thinks, staring at the skeletal forms of the thestrals hooked up to the carriages.

Luna appears at her side. “Come along,” she says, gently guiding Ginny to the carriage. “They’re really quite nice.”
Even if they are, Ginny would still prefer they had remained invisible.

* * *

The feast is the usual utter chaos of Sortings and reunions and piles of food.

Harry is noticeably late. Mostly because when he walks in, his robes and face are covered in blood. Her eyes narrow as she hears Draco crowing over something at the other end of the table, Harry’s name clear in the taunts.

Walk her back to her compartment, her arse. She catches Harry’s eye, crossing her arms over her chest to make her disapproval clear. Frankly, whatever happened to him, it seems like maybe he at least partially deserved it.

He scowls and looks away.

The rest of the feast continues without incident. The only interesting bit is when Dumbledore introduces Slughorn as the new Potions teacher. Not Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. That is to be Severus Snape. Up on the dais, Snape looks like Christmas has come early, which is disturbing on many levels.

“This should be interesting,” Tobias comments around a mouthful of treacle tart.

No doubt.

* * *

The high spirits of reunions follow them back to the common room, the space full of voices and antics and the chaos of unpacking. It’s late by the time everything settles down, the other girls in their room quieting.

Ginny feels like she may finally, at last, get her chance.

She sits down on the edge of Smita’s bed, incredibly relieved to finally have a moment together to talk. It’s time to try to explain, to justify the lack of letters.

Ginny has barely sat down when Smita pushes to her feet. “I have to go to the infirmary,” she says.

Ginny looks up in dismay. “What?”

Smita gazes back at her. “To take my potion.”

Ginny grimaces, wondering if she is ever going to stop feeling guilty. “Oh. Okay.”

Smita gives her a tight smile.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Ginny blurts, getting to her feet.

“No, it might take a while.” At the door, Smita pauses to look back at her. “But thanks for offering.”

Ginny moves back to her own bed. She lies there, staring at the old familiar hangings, telling herself that she will stay up all night if she has to.

She’s asleep long before Smita returns.

* * *
Lessons start the next morning. They get to begin with Defense Against the Dark Arts, the first students to experience Professor Snape teaching his supposed favorite subject at long last. It’s a new subject and a new classroom, but Ginny still doesn’t expect any great transformation.

Then Snape starts with an impassioned speech about the Dark Arts, the subtlety required for circumventing and undermining attacks against your person. It’s not that he wasn’t like this in Potions, but it seems clear that he loves this subject. Ginny has the absurd thought that it feels a bit like seeing the real Snape for the first time.

Then he has to go and completely ruin everything by saying the most dreaded words of any class: “Put everything away but a quill.”

Many of them had clearly hoped to actually *do* something in DADA this year.

He walks down the length of the classroom. “Your education in Defense Against the Dark Arts thus far has been patchy at best. You have been saddled with a coward, a monster, and a traitor among other things.”

Ginny wonders which category Umbridge falls under.

“Catching you all up will be a nearly impossible task, but one I take seriously. And you shall as well.” He stops to sweep the classroom with a gaze that makes clear he will not accept any less.

“Aren’t you worried about the curse, sir?” someone asks from the back.

Snape raises a cool eyebrow at the outburst, but surprisingly doesn’t punish the student. Or not surprisingly, considering every student in this room is from Slytherin. Unlike Potions, they don’t share class time with Gryffindor house for DADA. Ginny hadn’t considered what a difference that may make.

Snape moves to stand behind his desk at the front of the room. “Frankly, I’m more worried about all of you failing your OWLs and making me look foolish. Which is why we will start by establishing what you know and what you don’t.” His expression makes it clear he expects far more of the latter.

He pulls out a huge stack of papers. It’s a written test, the longest by far that Ginny has ever seen. The class collectively groans.

Snape seems unmoved. “You have one hour.”

Ginny glances over at Smita to share a look of commiseration, but she’s looking the other way at Tobias sneering at his paper.

Ginny focuses down on her test.

She knows just about everything on the first three pages. She recognizes a few things past that, at least well enough to know that they are not OWL level concepts. Ginny considers how much of her knowledge she really wants to share, lest someone want to know *where* she learned it.

Gnawing on the end of her quill as she considers, she glances up just in time to find Snape watching her. Almost like he knows what she’s thinking.

Ginny shakes her head, laughing at herself for being so fanciful. She focuses back on her test.

* * *
The rest of Ginny’s lessons that day includes a coma-inducing History of Magic, where it appeared Binns may have kept lecturing all summer without even realizing they were gone. After lunch is double Potions, where Slughorn proves that he doesn’t just play favorites in private. He fawns a bit over Ginny and spends the rest of the class with his eyes alert for any hidden potential. Like every other professor though, he piles enough homework on them to last a month.

It’s only the first day, and Ginny feels like falling asleep in her pudding.

At dinner she purposely seeks out Thompson. She’s not going to keep him in limbo the same way Bletchley had done with her. Plus, she’ll need his help. (This only has a little bit to do with the fact that she walks into the Great Hall only to stop at the sight of Tobias putting things on Smita’s plate like she’s an invalid.)

Ginny sits down across from Thompson with a groan. “How is this much homework on the first day even legal?”

He glances up from his plate. “OWL year is a killer,” he says sympathetically.

“I imagine NEWT year is even harder,” she says, giving him a speculative look. For all she can read him on the pitch, sometimes she has absolutely no idea what he is thinking off of it.

He shrugs. “It is what it is.”

She peers at him another long moment before realizing she’s never going to find out what she wants without straight out asking. “But you’ll still have time for Quidditch, right?”

He pauses, something unreadable in his eyes. “Of course, if there’s a place for me.”

Ginny breathes out, her shoulder relaxing. “Good.” She’s going to need at least one person on her side if she has any hope of pulling this captain thing off. Draco and his cronies no doubt are going to make it difficult enough on her. She pulls some of the dishes towards herself and starts loading up.

Once dinner is done, Smita is nowhere to be found. And neither is Tobias. Not in the Great Hall, and not in the common room either.

Switching tactics, Ginny scans the common room for any other familiar faces, but none of the members of The Parlor are out there. She glances over at the entrance, wondering if she’s supposed to knock or something, or if she would even be welcome. She’s been to The Parlor a handful of times now, but always in the company of Antonia.

She sits in a chair with a clear view of The Parlor entrance and waits. About fifteen minutes later, Millicent crosses the common room.

Not the perfect choice, but then again, Ginny has been working very hard to be more friendly to Millicent.

“Hi, Millicent,” she says, falling in step next to her.

She barely grunts in response, which is a step up from the open suspicion and hostility the greeting engendered the year before.

“Have a nice summer?”

Millicent gives Ginny a look that seems almost designed to remind her that they aren’t friends, and her summer isn’t any of her business.
Right, Ginny thinks.

Millicent pulls the door open, and Ginny was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she didn’t notice if she did anything special to get the door open. Blast.

“You coming down?” Millicent asks, looking back at Ginny as if she’s lost her mind.

“Oh. Yes. Of course,” Ginny says, scrambling to follow her downstairs.

Other than the couple of girls who graduated last spring, everyone is there. And no one looks surprised to see her.

Antonia looks up from her spot on a settee, and Ginny lifts her chin, refusing to look like an interloper waiting to get kicked out.

The corner of Antonia’s mouth twitches, something wry and knowing layered in there, before she turns back to her book.

Ginny breathes out and crosses over to say hello to the Carrow twins.

By the time she gets back up to the dorms, the curtains are drawn tight around Smita’s bed, the room silent.

* * *

Ginny nearly misses breakfast the next morning when she oversleeps. Bridget and Helena clearly didn’t care enough to wake her. Not surprising considering Ginny has never been their favorite person. That just leaves Smita. Knowing she has to get up really early to go to the infirmary doesn’t make Ginny feel particularly better.

All in all, by the time Ginny slides into her seat next to Tobias in Muggle Studies, she’s not in the happiest of moods.

She glances around. “Where’s Smita?”

Tobias gives her a strange look. “She had to drop Muggle Studies for Care of Magical Creatures, remember?”

“Oh, right,” Ginny says like it isn’t the first she has ever heard of this. But the truth is that Smita never breathed a word of it to her.

Tobias narrows his eyes, looking like he’s about to say something else, but Ginny turns away from him, pretending to dig around in her bag for something. It’s a weak subterfuge at best, but she just doesn’t want him to explain. She shouldn’t have to learn things about her best friend from someone else.

They don’t talk for the rest of the lesson.

The next class is Charms, and without giving it much thought, Ginny crosses over to sit with Luna.

She doesn’t look at Smita or Tobias.

* * *

If there’s ever been one thing in Ginny’s life that she can always count on to center her, it’s Quidditch. When she’s not in class or in The Parlor, she throws her every extra minute into
organizing the trials.

The second Saturday of the term, Ginny stands on the pitch with nearly a dozen hopefuls. She’s so intent on calling out drills, watching each player intently as they fly, that she forgets to be nervous. She does notice the glaring absences of certain players and knows she’s not the only one.

Draco hasn’t so much as looked at Ginny this year other than that one strange moment on the train. It seems he’s found something else to fill his time. It’s confirmed when he doesn’t show up for the trials, even his interest in lazing on the pitch suddenly gone.

Ginny had braced herself for dealing with Crabbe and Goyle, thinks she will be perfectly capable of giving them a fair shake. But she doesn’t end up having to put herself to the test, Draco’s little cronies deciding they have better things to do as well.

It’s not really a relief, she tells herself. She doesn’t have much time to think on it, to be honest, because now she has an entire team to build from scratch and it’s at once liberating and terrifying. The only returning player she has is Thompson.

Luckily she already knows who the third Chaser should be, and the trials merely confirm that. Vaisey improved a lot the year before, so much so that he already seems better than Warrington. The only other person with any promise as a Chaser is Urquhart. Ginny supposes by some measures he might be better than Thompson. He’s quicker, sure, but he’s also an arrogant arse, and this is a team, not a solo act. Thompson already knows all the plays and she needs at least someone on the team who knows what they are doing.

In tandem with the Chasers, she’s able to see that Martin and Gilbert are still the two Keepers with the most promise. In the end, Martin manages to save slightly more goals, Gilbert clearly letting his nerves get in the way. Another decision rather easily made.

The selection of Beaters is anything but easy. Usually with Beaters you want a matched pair. Not every team has the benefit of a Fred and George though. Even Crabbe and Goyle had been like two sides of a really dense coin. Physically, most of the candidates Ginny has to pick from are somewhat similar.

She looks at the beefy sixth year Tristam Bassenthwaite. He’s a bit of a thug, but not a malicious one. He flings his body around with a concentrated sort of frenzied joy and both his power and accuracy with a bat are promising. Precedent tells Ginny she should pick Bassenthwaite and then find someone else that matches him as well as she can.

But being a Beater is about more than sheer size and ruthlessness. They have to work like a seamless pair, anticipate each other’s moves. That doesn’t always just mean being the same size. She’d read in a book Tobias gave her last year about the joining of opposites. Point and counterpoint.

She keeps cycling back to the smaller third year Graham Pritchard. He has a flinty look to his eye that Ginny likes. A quieter presence to balance the boisterous Bassenthwaite. Graham is younger too, with less experience, but maybe also not so set in his ways. On paper, it seems a ridiculous pair. It’s a bit of a risk—a calculated one certainly, but Ginny’s never particularly been one for the easy path.

By the time the trials are done and she’s dismissed all the players, she’s still mulling over her options. She wanders up to the Great Hall for lunch with everyone else, but spends the entire time scribbling down thoughts and ideas into a small notebook.

After lunch, she walks back down to the pitch to watch the Ravenclaw trials. The other captains had watched her trials this morning. It’s simply logical to know exactly what they will be up against.
Sitting down in the stands, she flips through her notes, a decision beginning to form.

A while later, Harry appears, his hands shoved almost casually in his pockets.

“Malfoy’s not playing this year, huh?” he says, overly casual, like he’s trying to look like he doesn’t particularly care when it is patently clear that he does.

Ginny looks up from her notes. It’s the first time they’ve talked since his disgusting display back on the train and the first thing he wants to do is ask her about Draco? “Here to walk me back to my common room?”

Harry grimaces. “No.”

She puts a hand on her chest, eyes fluttering. “But what if I get lost?”

He closes his eyes for a moment, pinching at the bridge of his nose. “Okay. You’ve made your point.”

She huffs, turning back to her notes. “Good.”

He shifts on his feet for a moment, like he’s trying to decide just how unwelcome he is. He’s been an idiot to be sure, but as Ron’s sister, she’s more than used to boys being idiots.

“Oh, sit down,” she says with exasperation. Looking up at him is cricking her neck.

“What?”

She rolls her eyes. “You are here to watch the trials, right?”

“Oh,” he says, plopping down next to her. “Yeah.”

Ginny graciously swallows back her laughter. “Your trials are next Saturday,” she says, since he clearly wants to talk about something but is too ridiculous to come out with anything.

“Yes,” he says, looking relieved.

Ginny looks back at her notes, doodling in the margins. “Think Ron will make it?”

Harry sighs. “I hope so.”

It’s hard. She knows that technically Urquhart may be better than Thompson, but starting a whole new team from scratch is overwhelming. Knowing there is at least one person who is already up to speed is a huge relief.

“You seem to have an abundance of Chasers to pick from,” he says, almost as if he understands her struggle.

She nods. “You can have Urquhart,” she jokes.

He leans into her, peering at her notebook. Ginny has to master to urge to slap her hand over the names. Goodness knows it will be common knowledge soon enough.

“Sibazaki, huh?” he says, looking at her Seeker choice.

Ginny instantly bristles. “I know she’s not the obvious choice.”
“No,” Harry agrees. “She isn’t.” His lips twist wryly. “I was really hoping you’d overlook her.”

It shouldn’t matter what Harry thinks, but for some reason she finds it strangely comforting. That someone else agrees that little Reiko Sibazaki has potential. “Scared of a little competition?” she teases.

Harry smiles, shaking his head. “Let’s be honest. Anyone would have to be an improvement over Malfoy.” He frowns then, like he’s thought of something bothersome.

“I don’t know, by the way,” Ginny says.

Harry turns to look at her in question.

“Why Draco isn’t playing,” she clarifies.

“Oh,” he says, something hard in his expression that she doesn’t particularly like.

“Why does it matter?” she asks, more curious than anything. She isn’t blind. She knows very well that Draco and Harry have always had an abiding hatred for one another. But Harry seems almost overly keen.

Harry considers her a long moment, his mouth opening, only to shut again, as if he’s changed his mind about something. “I suppose it doesn’t,” he eventually says.

She’s almost certain he’s lying.

Down on the pitch, the trials start. They watch the other team run through drills and quietly debate the merits of various players.

“Cho is still the obvious choice,” Ginny observes.

Harry doesn’t say anything, but his face does some sort of weird grimace.

One of the potential Beaters nearly brains himself with his own bat, and Ginny grimaces.

“Clearly the perfect choice,” Harry says.

Ginny huffs. “Certainly would make our lives easier,” she agrees.

One thing becomes perfectly clear as the trials continue—Ravenclaw is going to be a fast team.

Ginny and Harry share a look, knowing they both have their work cut out for them.

* * *

The next week, Snape takes great joy in telling all of them how miserable their tests were. He doesn’t seem to care that it was one they didn’t get to study for, or that it came after a long summer with no classes. Instead he institutes a condensed remedial crash course, with a promise of another test at the end of the month.

“And this one I will not be so sanguine about,” he warns them.

Like everyone else, Ginny received a failing grade on the test, even if she may have gotten some parts wrong on purpose. Still, Snape somehow seems to know that Ginny, Smita, and Tobias are much further ahead of the rest of the class. He never singles them out, but neither does he look surprised when they are able to do a spell the rest of the class flubs.
One day during a chaotic practicum class, Snape approaches her.

“I hear you can produce a Patronus,” he says, and she understands with certainty that he knows the part she played in the DA.

“Not a corporeal one, sir,” she says, realizing there is no point in lying. “I never quite managed that.”

“I see,” he says, lips twitching. He moves on to the next student before she can be stupid enough to ask what exactly he thinks he sees.

Potions is also proving to be interesting, but for completely different reasons. Smita has always been competent, but her new ease in Potions is something far more. Ginny isn’t the only one to notice, Slughorn coming over to peer into her glistening cauldron.

Smita blinks, looking a little vacant. “Ginny taught me everything I know,” she lies through her teeth.

Ginny turns to look at her in surprise, but Smita just stares innocently back at her.

“Not just a Quidditch phenom then, Miss Weasley?” Slughorn says, actually clapping his hands with glee.

Ginny gives Slughorn a strained smile, knowing nothing she could say would make a difference. Slughorn loves nothing more than to be proven correct about his ‘collections’.

“Better you than me,” Smita mutters under her breath as Slughorn moves on to the next desk.

“You are hanging out with Tobias way too much,” Ginny complains.

Smita gives her a look she can’t quite interpret and turns back to her cauldron.

* * *

Saturday morning, Ginny watches the Gryffindor trials. Her first clue that something is amiss is the sheer amount of people waiting on the pitch. For the Slytherin trials she’s had the fairly good turnout of sixteen people.

There have to be at least forty people there for the Gryffindor trials.

Harry walks out onto the pitch, coming to a confused stop when he sees the crowd. Ginny realizes what this all about almost the same time Harry seems to, his cheeks burning red, an equal mix of embarrassment and anger.

It’s an utter mad house, full of giggling girls and people more interested in The Chosen One than Quidditch.

Harry seems in no way equipped to deal with this, ineffectually trying to gain control of the crowd. At one point he glances over in her direction, panic clear on his face, and Ginny just laughs.

It takes him a while to get rid of the girls who aren’t even in Gryffindor, shooing them back up into the stands. She hears more than one whisper behind her about love potions and the Chosen One. Ginny rolls her eyes.

The rest of the trials run without much incidence besides Cormac McLaggen uncharacteristically losing focus and letting a perfectly easy shot through the goal. It’s a relief though, because it means that Ron gets to keep his position as Keeper. Ginny’s glad for her brother and for Harry.
After lunch are the Hufflepuff trials. Harry comes to sit by her again, warily eying some of the girls still sitting in the stands behind them.

“You should watch who goes near your pumpkin juice,” Ginny says helpfully.

Harry sighs.

It’s late by the time Ginny makes it up to the castle. Shoveling some food in her mouth, she goes up to the library to knock out one of her essays.

When she finally drags herself back up to the dorms, it’s dark and silent. She pauses by Smita’s bed, but doesn’t hear anything other than soft steady breathing.

She turns for her own bed.

* * *

The end of the third week of school, Slughorn hosts his first dinner party for what people are calling the Slug Club. Ginny objects to that name on many levels.

She still doesn’t really feel like she can say no though, so when the appointed time comes, she braces herself for an evening of awkwardness and promptly arrives at Slughorn’s rooms. Unsurprisingly, they are large and well packed with comfortable-looking furniture and shelves of photographs and fine objects, like one giant showroom. A long table set with linens and candles and china sits to one side.

The first person she sees is Hermione. Ginny isn’t surprised to see she’s been added to the group. It’s not like Slughorn could fail to notice the smartest witch of the age when she’s right in front of him. Even he isn’t that dense.

Hermione looks very relieved to see Ginny. “I’m glad you’re here. I hated coming alone!”

“No Harry?” Ginny asks. Slughorn must be crestfallen to not have his crowning jewel here.

Hermione shakes his head. “Detention with Professor Snape.”

Ginny raises an eyebrow at that, but Hermione just waves it away. “Still can’t keep his mouth shut around him.”

Ginny snorts. Glancing around the room, she notices a few other absences from the original group on the train. Belby, which isn’t a surprise. And Neville, which is.

“No Neville either?” Ginny asks.

Hermione shakes her head. “I don’t think he was invited.”

Ginny grimaces. She knows how nervous Neville can get under pressure. Social pressure that is, not real pressure. She remembers far too well how much he kept it together in the Department of Mysteries. Slughorn clearly hadn’t been able to see the difference.

The door opens, and Ginny is surprised to see Antonia walk in with a tall boy in Ravenclaw robes. Not because Antonia isn’t worth watching, Ginny has always thought so. This just doesn’t seem like the sort of thing Antonia would be interested in.

Slughorn appears then, ushering a fourth year Ravenclaw towards them. “Miss Weasley, Miss Granger, so nice of you to come. Do you know Melinda Bobbin?”
Melinda Bobbin, it turns out, is charming, in much the same way a hippogriff is charming right before it eats you. Ginny stays just long enough to be polite and then carefully gives the Ravenclaw a wide berth, moving around the room to greet Antonia.

“Smart move,” the handsome Ravenclaw standing with Antonia observes as Ginny joins them.

Ginny gives him a look of confusion.

“Melinda,” he clarifies. “She’s brilliantly ruthless.” He says this like a compliment. One thing you have to admire about Ravenclaws, they never play dumb.

“And you’re not?” she asks, finding something about him inexplicably disarming.

He gives her a one sided smile that only renders him more handsome. “I’m ruthlessly brilliant. It’s quite a different thing all together.”

She isn’t entirely sure he isn’t teasing her.

He holds out a hand. “Lucas.”

Ginny takes it. “Ginny.”

He nods. “Yes. Antonia’s little project,” he says.

Antonia’s serene expression doesn’t slip. “That’s your problem, Lucas. You see everything as a project.”

He shrugs. “Not sure how that’s a problem. What is life but one endless experiment?”

Antonia gives him an indulgent smile Ginny has rarely ever seen her use on anyone. “Some of us just call them friends.”

At that pronouncement, the dinner chime sounds, and they all find seats at the table.

*   *   *

Ginny hadn’t been relieved exactly when neither Crabbe nor Goyle showed up for tryouts. If they’d proven to be the best candidates, she could have worked with them. She knows how to put the team first. But they’d chosen not to come, and her Beaters are just fine if not better, so she doesn’t give it much thought.

Only then the two thugs start spreading it around that the only reason they hadn’t tried out was because they didn’t want to be on a losing team. And with Ginny as captain, how could they be anything but losers?

It’s stupid and childish and most people well know Ginny’s skill on the Quidditch pitch. That doesn’t stop it from working its way under her skin.

She may be a good Chaser, but what does she really know about being captain?

Their first practice does not exactly go brilliantly. Which, fine. They’re a new team after all.

But then the second and third and fourth aren’t any better.

She snaps at Reiko. Calls Vaisey an idiot. They just are not gelling.
Thompson really looks like he wants to say something, and sure enough, he lingers after practice. “You’re scaring Reiko,” he accuses, like he can handle her being awful at being captain, but not upsetting Reiko.

“Reiko’s fine,” she says.

He shakes his head. “You really don’t see it, do you?”

“How terrifying you are.”

She starts to laugh, assuming he’s taking the mickey, but then she sees his face and knows he’s serious. “What in Merlin’s name are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Ginny Weasley,” he says, tone endlessly patient. “Heir of Slytherin, Quidditch captain, cunning and ruthless Parlor Girl.”

Ginny automatically shakes her head. No one remembers the Chamber of Secrets debacle, surely. Plenty of people have been Quidditch captain without being feared. And as for The Parlor… Theodora had been terrifying. Antonia too, in her own way. But Ginny is nothing like either of them. She’s just a bumbling girl who rarely has any idea what she is doing. Can’t Thompson see that?

He’s still staring at her intently, as if waiting for her to work it all out for herself.

“You don’t look scared of me,” she says dismissively, trying to get him to realize just how wrong he is.

His lips purse with something that looks almost like disappointment. “Then you aren’t looking carefully enough.”

Before she can respond to that, he turns and walks off.

Ginny is left standing in the middle of the pitch, very aware of the agitated hum of her broom under her hand, like it’s reacting to the rumble of feelings building up in side of her. Hopping up on it, she streaks up into the sky.

She flies hard and fast and recklessly until she can feel sweat on her neck, her fingers going numb from her grip on the handle.

Glancing down, she notices a lone figure standing in the middle of the pitch, watching her progress. With one last tight, fast ring around the stands, Ginny pulls up and lands on the grass.

She takes a deep breath, trying to rein in her still thundering thoughts before walking over to Harry. “I’m sorry,” she says as she nears him, forcing an apologetic smile as she wipes the sweat off her face. “It must be your pitch time by now.”

He waves away her concern. “I’m early.”

She nods, knowing he’s probably just being polite. Or possibly terrified, if Thompson is right. “I’ll just get out of your way.”

He’s frowning at her, his hand reaching awkwardly out as if to stop her. “Are you okay?”

She intends to say yes, to just lie and move past him, but she’s stopping and confessing before she’s even aware of the intent. “I’m messing this all up.”
Harry looks as surprised by the confession as she is to have said it, but doesn’t give her a disdainful look or automatically dismiss her worry like she’s being silly. Instead he gives her an intent, serious look and says, “You mean Quidditch?”

She nods. “Being captain. I’m just…I’m terrible. Someone’s made a really big mistake.”

Harry shakes his head. “You’ve always been brilliant at Quidditch.”

She gives him a weak smile. “That doesn’t mean I know anything about leading a team.”

He nods as if conceding the point. “I doubt anyone does when they first start,” he says. “I know I don’t have a clue.”

“Reduced any of your players to tears?” she asks.

She sees a flicker of surprise in his eyes. “No. But Ron was pretty close once.”

She gives him a mirthless smile.

“What’s going on?” he asks, like he actually cares and isn’t just humoring her.

“They are all good players. It’s just not…” She gestures helplessly.

“Coming together?”

She nods. “Yeah.”

Harry gives her a bracing smile. “It’s early, and you have almost an entirely new squad.”

She nods, knowing these are the logical facts. It’s just a matter of what she’s supposed to do with them. She bites at one of her nails, running everything through her head for what feels like the millionth time. “I bet Flint never would have picked Bassenthwaite and Graham in the first place. And I know Bletchley probably would have--.”

“Stop,” Harry says, cutting her off.

She turns to him in surprise.

For once he doesn’t seem sheepish or thrown, leaning towards her, his hands gesturing intently. “You can’t do that. You can’t spend all your time thinking what Flint or Bletchley would have done. You aren’t them.”

She sighs. Isn’t that the problem?

“Look, I know it’s hard. I find myself wondering that sometimes too. But I’m captain now, not them. And I’ll never be able to be them as well as they were. But I can be me better than anyone.” He frowns, as if thinking back over what he had said. “If that makes any sense at all.”

Ginny wants to smile at his muddled explanation, but she can’t because it makes too much sense. “I have to do what Ginny would do,” she says, something beginning to work itself back into place in her stomach.

“Yes,” he says with a brilliant smile, clearly glad to see that she’s following. “You were picked to be Captain. So do it your way.”

“And if I don’t have a way?”
He pats her arm. “If anyone can figure it out, it’s you, Ginny.”

She’s bizarrely touched by his confidence. “Are you sure you should be helping out the enemy like this?” she jokes. He probably would have been better off letting her crash and burn.

His smile slips, his eyes intent on her for a moment. “You aren’t my enemy.”

They stare at each other, and Ginny has the bizarre thought that Harry doesn’t seem terrified of her, no matter how closely she looks. She lightly punches him in the shoulder. “Maybe not, but I’m still going to crush you in the first match.”

Harry blinks, recovering quickly with a big smile. “In your dreams.”

“Oi,” someone bellows behind them. They turn to see Ron walk onto the pitch. “No talking to the enemy.”

Harry and Ginny look at each other and burst into laughter.

“What are you two berks laughing about?” Ron asks.

“Oh, just your face,” Ginny says carelessly.

Ron makes a rude gesture.

Ginny shakes her head, turning back to Harry. “Thank you,” she says.

He shrugs. “Anytime.”

She hefts her broom and makes to leave the pitch, only to pause. “Ron?”

“Yeah?” he asks, looking back over his shoulder at her.

“Am I terrifying?”

He doesn’t even blink. “Absolutely.”

For some reason she can’t explain, that makes her smile.

*     *     *

Determined to fix things, Ginny decides to start with Reiko. She still doesn’t know how to be captain, but she can start by acknowledging that what she’s been doing so far isn’t working. Mainly, pretending she knows exactly what she’s doing and not being willing to show any weakness.

She wonders if a little honesty might go a long way.

Spying the younger girl in the common room, Ginny walks over to her. “Rieko?”

Sure enough, when Reiko jerks around to look at her, there is definitely fear in her eyes. “Yes?” she asks, her whole body seeming to straighten in attention.

Ginny bites back any irritation, keeping her face neutral. “Do you have a little time?”

Reiko’s eyes widen. “Right now?”

“Yeah,” Ginny says. “If that’s okay.”
Reiko nods, jumping to her feet. “Of course. Do I need my broom?”

Ginny shakes her head. “I thought maybe we could walk down to the lake.”

If anything, this just makes Reiko look even more discomforted. “Oh, okay.”

They don’t really say anything as Ginny leads her out of the castle. Ginny’s just trying to work her mind around what to say.

Reiko is the first one to snap, breaking the heavy silence. “I know I’m not improving as fast as you’d like,” she blurs, hands wringing in front of her. “But if I could just have one more chance—.”

Ginny holds an arm out to stop her, frowning at the panic on her face. “Reiko. What are you talking about?”

“You’re kicking me off the squad, aren’t you?” she asks, looking miserable.

Ginny sighs, feeling stupid not to have considered how Reiko might take this sudden attempt at a heart to heart. “No, Reiko. I am not kicking you off the squad.”

“Oh,” she says, looking nonplussed. “Then what?”

Ginny shakes her head and starts down towards the lake again. “Apparently I’m screwing this up as much as I’ve screwed everything up.”

Reiko jogs a little to catch up, looking at Ginny a little like she’s just sprouted a second head. “What do you mean?”

“Look. I’ve never been captain before, and honestly, I have no idea what I’m doing. I think maybe I’ve been taking that out on you and it really isn’t fair. I brought you out here to tell you that I’m sorry,” Ginny says. “I hope you’ll be able to forgive me.”

Reiko looks horrified. “I’m the one who’s been messing up!”

Ginny wants to grimace. “No, you haven’t. You’re learning. You’ve had a lot thrown at you really fast and you’re doing a great job.”

“Really?” Reiko says, looking so heartbreakingly hopeful.

“Really,” Ginny says, thinking she should be sure to say so more often. She’s just not used to considering the effect her words have on others. But maybe that’s a big part of being a leader.

Down at the edge of the lake, Ginny turns to look at Reiko straight on. “I was hoping… Maybe we can learn together?”

Reiko stares back at her for a moment before nodding. “Yeah. I think we could do that.”

It’s a start.

* * *

The door to the Transfiguration classroom opens with a bang, sixth year students pouring out into the hall. Ginny moves into a slightly better position to watch, careful to still be mostly out of the way. She catches sight of her brother first, his red hair easy to spot in the crowd. He’s currently arguing with Hermione about something, Harry trailing slightly behind.
He glances over, smiling slightly when he notices her. She holds his gaze and cants her head to the door behind her, an unspoken question. His eyes widen a bit as he glances around, but he nods in response. Ginny only lingers long enough to see him say something to Ron and Hermione before stepping into the empty classroom behind her.

“Ginny?” he says, stepping inside and glancing around the room.

“Here,” she says.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.

She waves a hand. “Yeah. Everything’s fine.”

“Okay.” He looks a little confused, and she can’t really blame him for that. It’s not like she seeks him out very often. If ever.

“Look,” Ginny says. “I know I have no right to ask you this, and you should totally feel free to say no.”

Harry raises an eyebrow at her. “Say no to what?”

She starts pacing across the front of the room. “The thing is, I’m a good Chaser. I’ve spent a lot of time studying the position. And I’m pretty comfortable with the role of Keeper too because of that. And Beaters too, more or less.” She pulls a face. “But the thing is…I don’t really know anything about the Seeker position.” She stops, turning to look at him. “And I thought…Harry.”

He still looks a bit confused, but far more relaxed, a smile playing at his lips. “You want my help with understanding the Seeker position.”

“Yes,” she says. “I thought maybe you could recommend a book or something, or maybe some famous games to study.”

“A book?” he asks, like that is the craziest thing he’s ever heard.

“Yeah, you know, pages with words bound together?” she asks, miming a book opening with her hands.

He ignores her sarcasm (a sure sign that he has been hanging out with the Weasley clan far too much). “I never really studied it like that,” he says.

She frowns. “You didn’t?”

Harry shakes his head like it had never occurred to him. “Wood just gave me some basic pointers. The rest is just…instinct, I guess.”

“Oh,” Ginny says, not sure what to do with that. “Then I guess I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“Maybe there’s some other way I can help.”

“Like what?” she asks. Instinct isn’t really something you can share.

He looks thoughtful for a moment. “Well, I could answer any questions you have. Or talk to Reiko.”

He’s being very helpful. Almost too helpful. “Why would you do that?” she asks, peering suspiciously at him.
Harry look amused. “Are you trying to talk me out of it?”

“No,” she draws out. “It’s just…”

“What?”

She blows out a breath. “It doesn’t really serve your interests.”

He stares back at her like this is something he hadn’t even considered. “It doesn’t?”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s one thing not to be enemies, Harry. It’s another to ignore the fact that we are going to play against each other in a few weeks.”

Harry shrugs. “Ron says I have a helping people thing.” He says that like it’s something he’s completely comfortable with. Helping other people even when it costs him something.

“Somedays,” Ginny says, shaking her head, “you Gryffindor are completely unfathomable to me.”

Harry laughs. “Believe me, the feeling is mutual.”

She pokes her tongue out at him, but refuses to be derailed from the real topic at hand. “So what are we talking about here? A couple of pointers?”

“Sure,” he says. “Why don’t we all meet down at the pitch sometime?”

That is far beyond anything Ginny had expected. “Seriously?”

He shrugs. “Maybe Thursday before breakfast?”

That early there would be no one around to see, and this sign that Harry isn’t completely unaware of the implications of what he’s doing makes her feel slightly less uncomfortable.

“Okay,” Ginny says.

"Great,” he says, moving towards the door. “I’ve gotta go before Ron and Hermione wonder if I got lost.”

“Sure,” Ginny says.

She watches him walk away, but still can’t quite shake the feeling that she’s taking advantage of him somehow.

"Harry,” she says, thinking fast.

He stops, turning back to look at her. “Yeah?”

“Tell Demelza she might find Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* an interesting read. I have a copy if she’d like to borrow it.” Katie Bell may be the Gryffindor Chaser with experience, but Demelza is the one with real potential. “And tell her to stop leading with her shoulder. It makes it way too obvious where she plans to shoot.”

Harry’s surprise morphs into something flinty and thoughtful that Ginny is frankly much more comfortable with. He nods. “I’ll be sure to do that. See you Thursday?”

“Yeah,” she says, watching him leave.
Now she just has to convince Reiko.

* * *

Getting Reiko out of bed and down to the pitch at the crack of dawn turns out to be the easy part. She’s disgustingly eager to eat, breathe, and sleep Quidditch, which is just another thing Ginny likes about her. The challenge comes when she catches sight of just who is waiting for them, broom in hand.

“Why is Harry Potter here?” she asks, voice automatically hostile as if she assumes he is spying on them.

“I asked him to come,” Ginny says.

Reiko’s eyes widen like Ginny has just told her she is going to wrestle a troll. “Why in Merlin’s name would you do that?”

Ginny wills herself to be patient and points out the obvious. “He’s a really great Seeker.”

Reiko crosses her arms over her chest. “Bully for him.”

“Reiko,” Ginny says, voice chastising. “If you want to be a great Seeker, this is your chance. I can’t help you on my own.”

Reiko is still frowning. “How do we know he won’t just mess with me? You know, give me bad advice?”

Ginny smiles. “He’s a Gryffindor,” she reminds her. “It would probably never even occur to him to lie.” Or at least he never would have said yes in the first place.

“True,” Reiko admits, finally looking a little mollified.

“Come on. He’s doing me a big favor. So listen well and be nice.”

Reiko nods, but still looks a bit like she’s being led to the gallows.

To be honest, Ginny still isn’t sure herself why Harry agreed to do this. But watching him with Reiko, the way he looks so comfortable talking about something he clearly loves, it reminds her of the DA. She wonders if maybe Harry is missing it too.

He really is a great teacher. He’s patient and never condescending, and even Reiko seems grudgingly willing to admit that she learned a lot in the short half hour they spend together.

“Thanks, Harry,” Reiko says when they’re done, shaking his hand.

“Sure,” Harry says, smiling at her.

Reiko heads up towards the castle, pausing when Ginny doesn’t immediately follow.

“I’ll catch up with you,” Ginny says, waving her on.

“Sure,” Reiko says, looking between the two of them. “See you later.”

Once Reiko is gone, Ginny turns and smiles at Harry. “That was…really great. Thanks so much for doing this.”
Harry’s staring down at his feet, suddenly looking awkward. “No problem,” he says.

She touches his arm. “Seriously. It means a lot.” On impulse, she leans in and gives him a quick kiss on the cheek. She pulls back, giving him an embarrassed smile. “See you later.”

She moves as if to go back up the castle, but his hand on her arm stops her. “Ginny.”

“You?” she asks, turning back to look at him. There’s an expression on his face that inexplicably makes her want to squirm. She forces herself to stand still and wait.

Then he swallows, his hand dropping from her arm, and it’s like the expression had never been there at all. “Maybe I could run some ideas by you for helping Demelza sometime?”

She forces herself not to frown at him in confusion, instead conjuring up a neutral smile. “Of course. Anytime.”

Harry shoves his hands in his pocket. “Great.”

“Bye,” Ginny says, trying to shake the feeling that she’s not so much walking up to the castle as fleeing.

* * *

By early October, Quidditch practices finally start coming together and Ginny isn’t the only one to notice.

Thompson sidles up to her as they walk off the pitch, nudging her with his elbow. “I’m glad you finally figured it out.”

She glances sideways at him. “Figured out what?”

“That you’re brilliant at Quidditch and the perfect choice for captain.”

Ginny still isn’t so certain. But she’s trying. Harry had been right after all, she’s much better off trying to find her own way to do this than chasing the impossible aim of being like her predecessors. If she’s going to crash and burn, she wants to do it as herself.

Thompson is still watching her face, shaking his head as if he can read her thoughts. “You just get too stuck in your head sometimes.”

With that observation, he makes for the castle, leaving her staring after him.

In the evenings, Ginny makes a habit of catching Caroline and Astoria as they leave the Great Hall after dinner. With a little effort, Astoria is happy to talk about her music, but Caroline is quiet as always. It’s enough to make Ginny wonder what happened to that eager first year girl who had looked at Ginny like she was a Quidditch hero.

Back in the common room, Ginny follows then down into The Parlor for the rest of the evening. When Ginny isn’t talking to the other girls, she’s almost obsessively reading up on strategy, studying books on all of the Quidditch positions, paying close attention to the Seeker position to build upon what she learned from Harry. Usually by the time she goes back upstairs, the common room is empty, her dorm room still and dark.

“You know,” Antonia says one evening. “The Parlor means many things to many people, but most don’t just use it as a place to hide.”
Ginny looks up from her book. “I’m not--.”

Antonia cuts her off with an eloquent look. Go ahead and fool yourself, it seems to say, but don’t assume I’m that stupid.

Ginny sighs, sinking back into her chair. There is a reason she is down here all the time these days.

And it has nothing to do with Quidditch.

* * *

Charms is barely controlled chaos as always, the room surprisingly loud with the sounds of complaining crows considering they are supposed to be mastering silencing charms.

She looks out the window. The leaves are starting to turn, and Ginny sits there thinking that it’s been four weeks and she still hasn’t had a serious conversation with Smita. Ginny glances across the room where Smita is sitting with Tobias and Terry Boot.

“Have you ever just known you’ve screwed something up, but didn’t know what to do about it?” Ginny asks.

Across from her, Luna twitches her wand, the crow in front of them going mute halfway through a caw. The crow stomps its foot, trying again, its mouth open and neck straining, but nothing coming out. Ginny can relate.

Luna remains concentrated on the task for so long, Ginny begins to assume she isn’t going get an answer.

Then Luna sort of owlishly blinks over at Ginny. “If you already know what you did wrong, why don’t you just fix it?”

With another jab of her wand, the spell lifts.

The crow screeches at Ginny in a way that feels accusatory.

“Oh, shut up,” she mutters.

* * *

It takes three more days for Ginny to gather her nerve. But on Sunday morning she marches straight up to Smita at breakfast and says, “Will you walk down to the lake with me?”

Smita looks surprised, fork stopping halfway to her mouth.

“Just the two of us,” Ginny clarifies, sliding a look at Tobias when he opens his mouth. He snaps it back shut, not looking so much offended as wary.

Smita is still staring rather contemplatively at her half-eaten meal.

“Please,” Ginny says, because having come this far, she doesn’t really care how pathetic she looks.

“Okay,” Smita says, carefully folding her napkin in even thirds. “Twenty minutes?”

Ginny nods. “I’ll meet you by the main entrance.”

Less than half an hour later, they are walking down to the lake together, and it’s even more awkward
than Ginny thought it would be. Gathering her nerve, she knows there is only one way to do this.

“What have you been up to?” Ginny asks in a rush.

Smita shrugs, and for a moment Ginny thinks she’s just going to foist her off with some vague answer about homework. But instead she takes a deep breath and blurts, “I’m helping Madam Pomfrey,” as if this is something she has been holding back for far too long.

This is not what Ginny expected to hear. “What?”

Smita nods, her cheeks burning slightly red. “I spent a lot of time at St. Mungo’s over the summer.”

Ginny is more than aware of that, the tight feeling in her chest again.

Smita pushes on, her words gaining in momentum. “I learned a lot, at first because I just wanted to know what was happening and later because I was bored. But I was surprised how interesting it all is.” She shakes her head, as if she finds herself a little ridiculous. “I just feel like I finally found my thing, you know?”

Those are probably the most words Ginny has ever heard Smita say at once, and that, more than anything, is telling.

Ginny hasn’t been able to see past the marks of illness on Smita. How has she missed the obvious light in her eyes? How alive she looks? Or was she just being dumb, assuming this was all about Tobias?

Smita’s never been a bad student, nor a particularly great student. Just rather indifferent except the few cases where it served her interests. But now Ginny sees it, that spark that marks a passion. It explains a lot. Why she dropped Muggle Studies, where she spends all her free time, her sudden aptitude for potions. Ginny stops, turning to look at Smita straight on.

“I wanted to tell you,” Smita says.

Ginny knows she never gave her the chance. “I am so sorry I never wrote.”

Smita looks away. “Why didn’t you?”

Ginny shakes her head. “I just didn’t know what to say.” She thinks at the very least, Smita deserves the whole truth. “I couldn’t find a good enough way to say I was sorry.”

Smita frowns. “For what?”

“For the curse!” Ginny says, feeling it all welling up in her, the helplessness, the anger, the never-ending gut-wrenching fear. “For not stopping it, for dragging you along in the first place. All of it!”

Smita seems to only become calmer in the face of Ginny’s outbursts. “What happened at the Department of Mysteries wasn’t your fault, Ginny.”

“How can you say that?”

“Easily enough,” she says, something in the set of her jaw telling Ginny that she’s angry. “I don’t do anything I don’t want to, Ginevra Weasley. And I’m perfectly smart enough to know the risks of my choices and to learn to live with the consequences of them.”

Ginny rocks back on her heels, feeling a bit like she’s been slapped upside the head with a realization
even uglier than the one she’s been trying to avoid.

“Merlin,” she breathes, “I somehow twisted this all around to be about me, didn’t I?”

Not what Smita’s been going through, not what all this means to her, but what it’s meant to Ginny, how she’s been unable to deal with it.

Smita regards her for a long moment. “I guess somehow you did.”

Ginny paces a few steps away, again finding herself at a loss for how to apologize for being so blind. She stares out at the lake for a few minutes before crossing back over to Smita.

“Tell me everything,” she says.

They end up sitting under a tree down by the lake, talking for almost an hour before they fall back into a comfortable silence. They cover everything. Smita’s mediwitch training, Quidditch, their families, her illness, The Parlor. All of it.

Except one.

“And things with Tobias?” Ginny asks, knowing this is the dragon in the room both of them have been dancing around.

Smita flushes again. “Good.”

“Yeah?” Ginny asks.


Ginny watches Smita’s face, finds every tiny sign that she is clearly happy. “I’m glad.”

Smita eyes her. “Are you?”

Ginny grabs her hand. “Yes, I really am.”

They look at each other for a moment, and Ginny knows they are both aware how much her relationship with Tobias has changed things, and how that is just going to have to be part of things from now on.

Ginny smiles. “Just don’t let him sweet talk you into doing his homework.”

“Ginny,” Smita says reprovingly. “You should know better. I sweet talked him into doing mine.”

They laugh, shoulders bumping as they lean back against the tree.

“Once a month,” Ginny says, voice suddenly fierce. “At the very least, once a month we take the time to do this together. No matter how busy or crazy everything else gets.”

“Once a month,” Smita pledges, squeezing Ginny’s fingers.

It will be enough.

* * *

Things don’t automatically go back the way they used to be with Smita, but everything is at least easier with the air cleared between them. Of course, that just means that when Smita suggests turning
the first Hogsmeade trip into a double date of sorts with one of Tobias’ friends, Ginny can’t find it in her to say no.

This is how Ginny ends up sitting next to Kieran Harper in Madam Puddifoot’s.

As if being in a place that looked like pink lace threw up all over it weren’t bad enough, Ginny’s suspicions about her date are proving to be completely true.

Kieran Harper is an idiot.

Ginny can’t honestly say why he even agreed to this date, considering he very obviously still has a lot of hard feelings over not getting the starting Seeker position. Ginny is only feeling more justified in her choice the more he talks. Or rather the more his hands stray towards her person while he says stupid things.

Across from them, Smita and Tobias are engaged in a quiet, easy conversation, leaving her to field Harper’s growing attentions with little help.

The things she does in the name of friendship.

An hour into the painful debacle Ginny looks up to catch Tobias watching them with something bordering on glee.

A dawning sort of realization settles over Ginny.

Tobias chooses that moment to push back from the table. “Why don’t we have a walk outside?”

Outside, Smita pulls Ginny aside. She’s so happy and vibrant that when she checks in with Ginny with a “Having a good time?” Ginny just smiles and lies through her teeth. “Of course. This was a really great idea.”

She’s pretty sure she hears Tobias snort under the guise of sneezing into his sleeve.

Then Smita and Tobias ditch them. Ginny is left walking down the street with Harper, wishing herself anywhere else in the world. She tries to subtly and increasingly not-so-subtly shake him off, but he seems too stupid to take a hint.

She sees Thompson pass by with a Ravenclaw girl she doesn’t know. When he gets close enough, she catches his eye and mouths, “HELP ME.”

And Thompson, the boy she trusts implicitly to watch her back on the pitch, just smiles and abandons her to her fate.

Berk.

She only finally escapes Harper after a long slog back up to the Castle, and not without him trying to eat her face. (She isn’t charitable enough to call that atrocity a kiss.)

She’s not sure what Harper thought she owed him, because they went on a date or because she didn’t pick him for Seeker, but now he has one more reason to have a problem with her—her powerful hexes and a total lack of fear of using them.

She steps over his prone body and heads towards the Great Hall for dinner.

The room is buzzing with a different sort of gossip when she gets there, something about Katie Bell getting cursed by some dark object on her way back up to the castle. Ginny glances over at the
Gryffindor table to see a grim-looking Harry whispering animatedly to a stubborn-looking Hermione.

Harry attention isn’t on Hermione though. He’s staring hard at Draco.

Smita and Tobias finally appear, looking a little flushed. Ginny graciously ignores that and quickly fills them in on the latest buzz.

“Who would want to curse Katie?” Smita asks.

Despite herself, Ginny can’t help but think of all the terrible pranks that had led up to last year’s Quidditch match against Gryffindor. She dismisses the thought just as quickly. Her team is different. They may be devious, but they aren’t ruthless.

No one would almost kill someone else over a Quidditch match. Something else is clearly afoot.

After pudding, Smita leaves them to go up to the infirmary. Tobias glances across the table at Ginny and makes an inane excuse about going to the library.

She smiles back at him as if she believes it. As if she isn’t perfectly aware that he’s running away from her.

After giving him a small head start, she follows him out into the hall. He is definitely not heading for the library. She follows him down a corridor, and deciding the area will serve as well as any other, Ginny hits him with a trip jinx from behind, watching him collapse into a graceless heap.

“You total berk,” Ginny says, standing over him.

Some other students look at them with passing interest, but no one offers to help Tobias. They aren’t that stupid.

Ginny jabs her wand at him. “I cannot believe you did that to me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Tobias says, which would be more believable if he weren’t doubled over more in laughter than pain.

“You’re not even friends with that wanker, are you?” she accuses.

He shakes his head, holding his stomach as he pushes back to sit against the wall in helpless laughter. “Harper? Merlin, no. He’s an idiot.”

As pissed as Ginny thinks she should be, she can’t really argue with that. “He really, really is,” she agrees, lowering her wand.

That just makes Tobias laugh harder, and thinking about what it must have looked like from the other side, Ginny gives in and starts laughing too. She slides down the wall to sit next to him.

“Merlin,” Ginny breathes out when she finally gets control of herself.

“For the record,” Tobias says, wiping his eye, “you totally deserved that.”

"Yeah,” Ginny admits. “You’re probably right.”

He nods.

She nudges him with her elbow. “ Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t watch your back for the next little while.”
Tobias manages to look scared and pleased all at once.

Ginny sighs. “Next time, could you at least pick someone who knows how to keep their hands to
themselves?”

Tobias’s smile slips. “What did that little--.”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle,” she says, waving away his misplaced indignation. He’s not the one
who got groped, after all. “I just hope you’re more of a… Well, I would say gentleman, but I think I
just mean decent human being.”

His smile completely disappears, leaving him as serious as she’s ever seen him. They stare at each
other for a long moment, unspoken things passing between them.

Ginny looks away first. “I already told Smita, but I should have told you too. I’m happy for you
two.”

“Good,” he says. “But even if you weren’t...”

She nods. “It doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

"No. It doesn’t.”

They sit there shoulder to shoulder for a while, until Ginny finally shoos him off. “Go find Smita and
have a snog or whatever it is kids these days do.”

She doesn’t know why she expected Tobias to be embarrassed by that. Instead he salutes her as if
taking a direct order and sets off with a bounce in his step.

Wanker.

*     *     *

By the time Ginny has been to a handful of Slug Club events, she has to admit they aren’t all that
bad. She got to meet Gwenog Jones. She’s made friends in other Houses she probably never would
have met otherwise.

Don’t get her wrong, she understands why Harry avoids the dinners like the plague. She isn’t stupid
enough not to see Slughorn’s motivations, his manipulations and ‘collections’. But at the same time,
many of the best and the brightest students are in this room. If the DA taught her anything, it’s that
too many people let Houses and colors stop them from crossing the lines.

Despite that, she is surprised to see Hestia and Flora at the next meeting.

“Hi,” Ginny says, crossing over to stand with them.

“Hi, Ginny,” Flora says.

“What are you guys doing here?” Not that they don’t belong here, but they have done a pretty stellar
job of avoiding getting collected up to this point. Ginny has no doubt they wouldn’t be here unless
they wanted to be.

“We need a few specialized supplies for the last phase of our project,” Hestia says. “Slughorn seems
the most expedient way.”

Ginny smiles, loving the idea that for all Slughorn is using them, many of the students are using him
right back. “Sounds like a good plan.”

“And you?” Flora asks, snagging an hors d’oeuvres off a tray.

Ginny frowns. “I’m sorry?”

She gives Ginny a patient look. “Why are you here?”

Ginny takes a deep breath. “Honestly? I haven’t quite figured that out yet.”

The twins nod as if this makes perfect sense.

Ginny sees Antonia enter the room, and she’s embarrassed to say it’s the first time she’s really considered it. “Why do you think Antonia is here?” Up until now, Ginny just assumed that it was the spectacle of it all. Antonia loves being in the middle of spectacle.

The twins share a look. “We would have thought that was obvious.”

Ginny sighs. “It’s always the obvious that I seem to have the most difficulty with.”

Flora smiles, patting Ginny on the arm. “We know.”

* * *

Time seems to speed up as the first match nears. Ginny has to fight the impulse to start yelling again, to break down into panic at the thought of the first game and this team she’s been hobbling together.

She really doesn’t want to fail them.

The morning of the match, she notices that Ron looks positively green. She can’t really blame him. She doesn’t linger at breakfast, instead going down to the changing rooms for a few moments to herself.

Thompson shows up first, and rather than break the silence or try to give her a bracing pep talk, he just sits down next to her and waits.

“Okay,” she says after a few more minutes. “Let’s do this.”

Thompson punches her in the arm the way Bletchley and Flint used to, and she shoots him a glare that’s probably completely ruined by the smile in her face.

The rest is a blur of getting into uniform and warming up and doling out last minute pieces of advice.

Out on the pitch, she walks forward and shakes Harry’s hand. Neither of them smile, but she feels the way his hand squeezes hers.

“Good luck,” he says.

She manages, somehow, to give him a bracing look. “You’ll need it.”

He looks startled only for a moment before he laughs.

She smiles back, and then they are walking away and jumping up on their brooms.

The whistle blows and they’re off.

The Snitch turns out to be very fast, which is a benefit for Gryffindor. At the same time, the Slytherin
Chasers are far superior. Losing Katie right before the match had been a tough blow to absorb, leaving Gryffindor with three inexperienced chasers. The score quickly reflects that, Slytherin pulling ahead as the match progresses. Ginny would take more comfort in that if she weren’t perfectly aware that as good as Reiko may be someday, she’s still a rookie and Harry is indisputably one of the best Seekers in recent years.

Luckily, the Snitch seems to be particularly stubborn in addition to being fast. No one even sees it for the first thirty minutes. When Harry does seem to catch sight of it, Reiko does an amazingly believable feint that makes Harry doubt himself just long enough for the Snitch to disappear.

Ginny shouts praise to her as she darts past on her way to the goals, seeing Vaisey perfectly in position up field. She doesn’t even need to look around for Thompson. They’ve been playing together long enough that they have reached a comfortable sort of symbiosis.

Surprisingly though, Ron is doing very well blocking their attacks, especially considering how ill he’d looked at breakfast. He has some absolutely brilliant saves, but as the match stretches into one hour and then another, they start to poke holes in his defense, enough so that the next time Harry actually catches sight of the Snitch he’s forced to let it go because of the score.

The crowd below quiets, not so much because of boredom, but exhaustion. Ginny can hear McLaggen’s voice from time to time as he continues to criticize Harry and the Gryffindor team between reporting scores and the play-by-play. McGonagall seems to have given up trying to control him.

It’s a long ruthless battle to keep the score in their favor, the Gryffindor team throwing everything they have at trying to close the gap just enough for grabbing the snitch to push them over. Every time they manage to pull the score within reach, Ginny feels a breathless rush to do everything she can to get more goals, one eye on Harry and Reiko for any telling movement.

Gryffindor manages to get a few goals in, just enough to make winning possible when Harry makes a sudden dive. The crowd, abruptly attentive again, gets to their feet, the roar nearly deafening.

“Dammit,” Ginny says, dashing towards the goal parallel to Vaisey. He lobs the Quaffle to Ginny.

Right before Harry gets to the Snitch, Ginny lays out one last daring shot to take the lead that Ron somehow miraculously manages to block even as he nearly falls off his broom.

And just like that, the game is over.

Gryffindor wins.

Ginny really wants to throw her broom down and curse, but Reiko looks disappointed enough in herself that the last thing she probably needs is Ginny’s regret on top of it. Taking a deep breath, she shoves her own feelings aside.

Looking at the glum, exhausted team milling on the pitch, she motions them closer.

“Tough loss, guys,” she says. “I think we can probably all come up with more than a few things we could have done better. And, yes, we’ll work on those. Believe me.”

The Beaters grimace at the thought, Martin slapping a hand over his face.

“But for now,” Ginny continues, “we just finished playing one of the longest matches in years against a really strong team. And we did a hell of a lot of things well.”
Ginny takes the time to tell everyone at least one great thing they did. Reiko’s fake out on Harry, an awesome goal stopped by Martin, well-placed Bludgers, a perfect formation.

“Okay, who’s up for a hot shower, a warm meal, and sleeping for a week?”

Through the grit and mud and exhaustion, her team nods back at her.

As the team disperses into the crowd, Ginny glances up in time to see Harry approach Reiko. He says something to her that clearly startles her for a moment before she laughs. He mimics a dive with his hand, Reiko nodding along.

Ginny spies Ron, crossing over and giving him a petulant shove from behind before laughingly demanding to know just who he sold his soul to for that last save.

His face turns an alarming shade of red, but a crowd of Gryffindor fans catch up with them before she can ask, sweeping Ron into a celebrating mass as they loudly sing, “Weasley is our King”.

Fred and George appear at her side, watching the mass of students surge up to the castle. “Now that was an exciting match,” Fred says. It takes a moment for Ginny to realize that while Fred is decked from head to toe in gold and red, George is wearing all silver and green, including his hair.

She must be staring agape at them because Fred says, “Wouldn’t do to show favorites.”

George nods. “Besides, green looks good on me.”

Ginny blinks back against what she refuses to acknowledge are tears. “You stupid berks.”

George smiles. “Love you too, sis.”

* * *

The week after a match is always a bit of a letdown, but Ginny has more than enough homework to keep her focused. OWLs are officially her least favorite things ever. When she’s not in The Parlor, she’s in the library. Saturday morning finds her in her secret little cloister, trying to wrest a few moments of peace to clear her head before her team’s last practice before Christmas break. She plans on giving them a lot to think about.

She’s been there for nearly an hour when she hears someone at the entrance. There’s really only one person it could be, so she doesn’t bother looking up from her book.

“Here to rub it in?” she scowls when Harry makes his way over to her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she can see him stiffen in surprise, and she can’t help but smile.

He sees that she’s teasing and relaxes. “You definitely made us earn it.”

She sighs with long suffering. “Someone has to keep you honest.”

He huffs with amusement.

She looks up at him, her expression shifting. “I’m sorry about Katie. Losing her must have been tough.”

He shrugs, but the sudden hardness in his eyes belies any casualness on his part. “Certainly didn’t help.”
“Oh, well,” Ginny says as if it wasn’t a crushing loss she’ll be nitpicking over for weeks. “I’ll just have to squash you twice as hard next year to make up for it.”

“I look forward to it,” he says.

She laughs, seeing that he really means it. He really is the strangest boy. She rests her arms across her book. “So what’s up?” she asks, knowing he must be here for a reason.

He swings his bag off his shoulder. “You don’t mind if I study here for a while, do you?”

“Let me guess,” Ginny says, giving him a knowing look. “Ron and Lavender?”

“God, yes,” he says, dropping down on a low marble bench near her.

“It’s truly revolting,” she says, having seen the spectacle of Lavender perched on Ron’s lap first hand this morning. “And not just because it’s my disgusting brother.”

Harry shifts, like he doesn’t want to say anything disloyal but totally secretly agrees. He pulls out a book from his bag, a worn and ragged Potions manual.

Ginny looks down at her own book, picking at the edge of a page. “How is Hermione doing?”

Harry lets out a breath. “She’s…” He trails off as if he isn’t quite sure how to put it into words. “Pretty much what you’d expect.”

Ginny nods. “Did she really set a flock of rabid ravens on him?” she asks, not sure how much to trust gossip, but also in no way willing to doubt Hermione’s skills.

“More like a small group of songbirds,” Harry says. “But with very sharp little beaks.”

Ginny sighs. “Poor stupid, stupid Ron.”

“You think he’ll figure this one out eventually too?” Harry asks.

Ginny gives him small smile, remembering far too well the last time they had this conversation about her idiot brother. “Yes. Though whether or not that will be before he loses an eye is anyone’s guess.” She frowns, remembering Lavender. “Or suffocates.”

Harry snorts in agreement, flipping absently through the pages of his book, all of which seem heavily marked with notes. Madam Pince would have a heart attack if she saw it.

“It’s good that Hermione has you, Harry,” she says, reaching over and giving his arm a quick squeeze.

He gives her a fleeting smile in return.

“Not that you don’t have the right to hide every once and while.”

“Thank goodness,” he says.

They study in silence for a while, or rather Ginny does, as Harry seems to equally split his attention between his Potions book and sending Ginny glances that she dearly hopes he doesn’t think are subtle. She’s about to snap and ask when he finally opens his mouth.

“How are things with you?”
Ginny looks up. “Things?” she asks, noticing that his ears have gone a little pink.

“Yeah,” he says with stubborn little nod. “Anything interesting happening down in Slytherin these days?”

She stares at him for a long moment, having no idea where this is coming from. Or, honestly, where to even begin. Slytherin House isn’t exactly something they’ve ever talked about before. “You know how it is,” she says. “Same old, same old.”

“Yeah?” he asks, still sounding overly interested.

She shrugs. “People being idiots more often than not.”

They fall back into silence, only now it’s strangely awkward. She decides to throw him a conversational bone. “Did you hear about Smita and Tobias?”

His brow furrows, and she can tell this isn’t what he’d been fishing for. “What about them?”

“They’re…together,” she says for lack of a better way to describe it.

He looks confused for a moment before his eyebrows lift. “Oh,” he says. “I hadn’t heard.”

“Yeah, well, not everyone feels the need to spend every moment snogging in public.”

Harry grimaces. “And you’re…okay?”

“Me?” she asks, wondering if her tone had been that obvious. “Sure. I’m mean, I see Smita a lot less these days, which kind of sucks.” It feels rather liberating to actually admit that out loud, and with Harry looking at her in that earnest way he has, it’s surprisingly easy to open up. “It’s hard to be resentful when they’re clearly both so happy. Or at least I’m trying not to be resentful.” She pulls a face. “I’m sorry. I sound peevish and stupid.”

Harry shakes his head, gesturing at himself. “I think I know my way around peevish and stupid.”

She laughs. “I forgot. You are best mates with my brother, aren’t you?”

His forehead creases, like he’s uncomfortable with the reminder. “Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

“Meh. I just needed to realize that things change. There’s nothing you can really do about that.”

“You know,” Harry says, fingers picking at the edge of his book, “some people always assumed you and Tobias…”

Ginny can’t help it, she laughs out loud. “Me and Tobias? Ha! I’d kill him in under a week. If he didn’t poison me first.” She makes a mental note to tell Tobias about this. He’ll get a kick out of it.

Harry frowns, like maybe he’s imagining the fallout of a war between Ginny and Tobias. “You’ve been going to Slughorn’s dinners, right?”

“Yeah,” Ginny says. “They aren’t even all that terrible, to be honest.” She gives him a look. “If you actually showed up, Slughorn would probably faint with joy.”

He grimaces.

“Harry, m’boy,” she says in a very bad impersonation of Slughorn, punching him jubilantly in the arm.
He pulls a face. “That one needs work.”

Ginny laughs. “Definitely.” Glancing down at her lap, she catches sight of her watch.

“Merlin,” she swears. “Is that really the time? I have to get ready for practice.” She starts shoving books in her bag.

Harry pushes to his feet when she does. “Already?”

“I have a bunch of new drills to set up. Otherwise I risk those gits forgetting everything over break.” She smiles at him, squeezing his arm. “Have fun hiding.”

“Sure,” he says, giving her a smile that seems a little forced.

She doesn’t have time to think about it really, but she swears that as she leaves, she hears him muttering to himself.

* * *

Time is running out on the term, which is great other than the fact that Slughorn’s Christmas party is also rapidly approaching. A party all Slug Club members are supposed to bring a date to. Ginny considers the options open to her. Antonia already snagged Lucas. She considers asking Neville, but he’s never been very comfortable with Slughorn’s parties in the first place. She could go alone, but wonders if that might just make her look a little too pathetic. Inviting Ron would be worse than not going at all. If it had been a year ago, she would have just made Tobias go with her.

It seems a hopeless task.

“Why are you staring at me?”

Ginny blinks, becoming aware that her fork is tapping against her plate as she stares unseeing at Thompson on the other side of the table. Now there’s an idea.

Her mercenary thoughts must be a little too obvious though because he leans back away from the table as if contemplating strategic retreat.

She stabs her fork at him. “Would it be an abuse of position to demand that you go to Slughorn’s Christmas Party with me?”

Both of Thompson’s eyebrows lift. “Yes.”

Ginny sighs. The last few times she let Smita talk her into doubling with one of Tobias’ friends, she had to nearly hex her way out of the end of the night. A date’s friendly indifference would have been a nice change.

Thompson crosses his arms. “But if you promise not to make me run extra drills or curse me if I say no, then I think you could at least ask me with no conflict of interest.”

She looks up at him in surprise. “Really?”

He shrugs. “Only one way to find out.”

She barely resists rolling her eyes, but dutifully asks, “Would you go to Slughorn’s Christmas party with me?”

He seems to consider it. “Only if you call me Sean.”
“Sean?”

He looks calmly back at her. “Yeah, you know, my name?”

Ginny shakes her head, finally losing the battle with rolling her eyes. “I’ll do my best.”

“Okay then,” he says. “I guess it’s a date.”

Ginny smiles, glad to have one less thing to worry about. It’s about time something in her life was simple.

* * *

Things get less simple when Ginny lets Antonia talk her into letting her do her hair and makeup. Once Mum sent a set of dress robes by owl, Ginny assumed this Christmas party would require ten minutes of prep tops.

Upon hearing that, Antonia just gives Ginny an indulgent smile and says, “It takes time to look this good.”

Ginny has no doubt it does, but she’s never aimed for being as beautiful as Antonia. When Ginny isn’t sweating her way around the pitch or getting ink on her face doing homework, she pretty much settles for not being a total disgrace.

Antonia just tut-tuts under her breath and starts pulling out alarming-looking potions and utensils that seem better suited for torture than beautification.

What feels like hours later, but couldn’t have been more than twenty minutes, Ginny stares back at her face in the mirror, barely recognizing herself. It’s not that Antonia completely overwhelmed her face with makeup. It’s just a little color on her lips and a smoky, kind of golden shade around her eyes. It makes her eyes look bigger, her normally dull brown eyes brighter. Antonia also manages to get her hair to lie the way Fleur always insisted was right, even if Ginny’s never been able to duplicate it.

Downstairs, Thompson waits for them in the common room. He looks a little stunned when he catches sight of her, and Antonia doesn’t even bother trying to pretend not to be smug.

Lucas is waiting for them in the hall, looking even more impossibly handsome in a dark, perfectly tailored set of robes. Thompson can’t help but instantly look a little rumpled in comparison.

“Ladies,” Lucas says, giving them a slightly absurd courtly bow. “You are looking exceptionally beautiful tonight.”

Lucas and Thompson already seem to know each, not surprising since they are in the same year.

Antonia takes Lucas’ arm, and Ginny has to admit that they make a dashing couple. Feeling a little foolish herself, she awkwardly takes Thompson’s arm, smiling up at him.

They arrive at Slughorn’s rooms to find the party already underway. Ginny shouldn’t be surprised by the general splendor of the room after seeing what Slughorn referred to as his comforts during the dinners. Thick rich fabrics hang from the walls and ceiling, giving the space the feeling of being a luxurious tent. Lights hover overhead, filling the space with a warm glow.

Antonia and Lucas drift off to speak to some other friends, leaving Ginny and Thompson to look around the room. She isn’t sure she’s ever realized just how quiet Thompson can be until she relies
on him for her conversation. On the pitch they mostly communicate through gesture and eye contact. This sort of event seems to require more than that.

She chats aimlessly for a while, a sort of running commentary on the special guests Slughorn has trotted out for the occasion. Thompson nods along, occasionally allowing a smile at one of her more clever comments, but rarely offering one of his own.

Across the crowd, Ginny notices Luna peering suspiciously up at a beribboned strand of mistletoe. She’s never seen Luna at one of these things before, but if Slughorn actually thought to collect her, he’s going to go up a lot in her estimation.

Ginny tugs on Thompson’s arm. “I want to say hi to Luna.”

“Loony Lovegood?” he says, looking around in interest.

Ginny stops, giving him a hard look. “Luna. My friend.”

“Got it,” he says, hands lifting. “No need to hex me.”

She gives him another glare, just to make sure he’ll behave himself.

He rolls his eyes. “Come on,” he says, taking her hand and leading the way. “I’ll play nice.”

Luna looks up at them as they approach, eyes wide and probing as always. “Hi, Ginny.”

“Hey, Luna. You look really nice.”

Luna absently twists her hips, the hem of her robes floating around her knees. “I’ve never had so many people comment on my clothes before. It’s curious.”

Thompson gives Ginny a look, eyes wide.

“This is Thom--,” Ginny starts to say, stumbling when Thompson clears his throat. “Sean.”

He pats her on the shoulder. “I’m amazed you remembered.”

“Why would she forget?” Luna asks, peering up suspiciously at the mistletoe again.

Thompson smiles at her. “She takes a lot of Bludgers to the head,” he teases, clearly not realizing that things like that always go over Luna’s head.

“That is a strange thing to find amusing.” Luna gives Thompson a contemplative look before turning to Ginny. “He’s a bit odd, isn’t he?”

Thompson laughs, probably at the irony of Loony Lovegood calling him strange.

“You have no idea,” Ginny says.

Harry appears at Luna’s elbow then, drinks in hand. “Here you go, Luna.”

“Harry asked me to come with him,” Luna announces, taking the drink. “As a friend.” She beams as if this is nicest thing to happen to her in a while.

Thompson lets out a cough that sounds suspiciously like a chortle.

Harry, for his part, glances at Luna, shaking his head slightly, not with exasperation, but rather real
affection. So maybe Slughorn wasn’t smart enough to collect Luna, but at least Harry is smart enough to know a good idea when he sees one.

“He couldn’t have picked better,” Ginny says, squeezing Luna’s arm. She glances over at Harry. “I’m just surprised to discover he has good taste after all.”

“Hello to you too, Ginny,” Harry says, voice dry.

She smiles at him, giving an exaggerated curtsy. She’s actually kind of relieved to see that he hasn’t fallen prey to one of the many, many girls who are clearly obsessed with the idea of dating the Chosen One. As if being the Chosen One is some great mark of attraction. Thinking of Harry in the infirmary after the Department of Mysteries fiasco, his face drawn and troubled, Ginny can think of few things less romantic than the burden Harry is forced to carry.

He doesn’t deserve a reputation-hunting girl on top of all of that.

“You look nice,” Harry says, bringing Ginny out of her thoughts.

She lifts an eyebrow. “Nice?” she says, unable to resist teasing him.

He smiles. “Floaty?”

“Better,” she says, smoothing a hand down the midnight blue velvet. They’re the nicest robes she has ever owned. Mum must have wanted to make up for not buying her a new broom.

Thompson drops an arm over her shoulders, giving her a fond smile. “Yeah. I hardly recognized her off her broom. Who knew she’d clean up so well?”

Ginny digs him the ribs with her elbow.

He grimaces, holding the ribs. “Okay, now you look familiar.”

“Berk,” Ginny laughs.

Harry’s face is a little tight, like he’s uncomfortable about something. He sticks a hand out to Thompson, and Ginny realizes she’s failed to make introductions. “Harry,” he says.

Thompson takes his hand. “Sean.” There’s a little beat of something there that Ginny can’t quite read, and she wonders if Thompson is maybe surprised that Harry doesn’t assume people just know who he is.

Luna peers back and forth between them. “Strange time of year for gnargles to be breeding,” she observes.

“Indeed it is,” Thompson says, dropping Harry’s hand and smiling down at Ginny.

“Is Hermione here?” Ginny asks, glancing around.

“Yes,” Harry says, his face contorting like he’s not really pleased. “With Cormac.”

“McLaggen?” Ginny says, no longer surprised by his expression. Why in the world would Hermione agree to come with him?

Harry gives her a look like she’s missing something obvious.

It only takes a moment for Ginny to make the connection. Ron really is an idiot.
“So,” Thompson says, looking down at Ginny. “Should we actually try to dance?”

She glances at the small crowd of people swaying precariously to the Weird Sisters. “Only if you’re more graceful on the dance floor than you are on your broom.”

“Ouch, Gin,” he says, pulling her away. “Way to stab a guy where it hurts.”

She laughs, waving goodbye to Harry and Luna.

They dance for a while, proving to be far less in sync on their feet than they are on the field.

“Okay,” he says after he steps on her foot for the fourth time. “That’s enough of that.”

Ginny nods enthusiastically in agreement, gingerly stretching her toes inside her shoes to check for permanent damage.

“Want something to drink?” Thompson asks.

She smiles at him. “Yeah, thanks.”

She hasn’t been waiting more than a few minutes when there’s a ruckus near the entrance. She can just make out Draco, and by his side a rather gleeful Filch. It looks a lot like Draco has been caught trying to sneak into the party.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

When Filch passes by, dragging Draco forward like a pathetic little interloper, Ginny inexplicably finds herself moving in tandem, stepping up next to him and sliding her hand into the crook of his arm just as they approach Professors Snape and Slughorn. She can’t really say what makes her do it, other than the fact that Draco looks so pathetic and she knows it will kill him, the thought that he might in any small way be indebted to her. So it isn’t all altruism or anything, but she’s strangely fine with that.

“You’re late, Draco,” she says, smiling pleasantly at Snape and Slughorn as she squeezes Draco’s arm.

“Oh,” Slughorn says, looking pleased to have any unpleasantness so easily cleared up. “You’ve been asked to escort the daring Miss Weasley, have you?” His voice makes it clear that he thinks Draco has lucked out, being clearly out of his depth with Ginny. The Malfoys are in disgrace after all and thus of no use to Slug.

Draco flinches as if to pull away, practically radiating his fury at her interference.

“I don’t need rescue, Weasley,” she imagines him thinking.

She merely digs her nails into his arm with unapologetic ruthlessness and smiles wider, because it may have been an impulsive act, but once she picks her course, Ginny Weasley does not stray. The music behind them swells, and she pulls on his arm.

“I do so love this song,” she sighs with fake reverence.

Slughorn smiles broadly. “Go, go!” he says. He leans in towards Snape. “We must not keep the young ones from their entertainments!”

Snape does not seem to harbor the same sentiment, but doesn’t say anything as Ginny drags Draco away.
“What the hell do you think—,” he starts to bluster once they are out of earshot.

“Shut up and dance, Malfoy.”

To her surprise, he complies. She almost misses his bite, the days when he was a worthy adversary to set her sails against. These days he just looks haunted.

Looking over his shoulder, she catches Harry watching them, something hard in his expression. She ignores him, stepping slightly closer to Draco. She studies his face, and this close it is clear that he is not doing well.

“You look like death,” she says.

He glares at her, but doesn’t seem to have any ready comeback. Not even a single freckley git insult for her.

She frowns, leaning in closer. “Are you okay?”

He stares back at her in surprise, something terribly painful in his eyes for a moment before he shakes his head, pushing her out of his arms like she’s something disgusting he’s been forced to hold. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, Weasley,” he hisses. “But keep me out of it.”

He slips back out into the hall, Snape quick on his heels. She tries to pretend she doesn’t see Harry follow out after them, the silver sheen of a robe in his hand.

That isn’t her battle to fight. It never has been.

“That looked like fun,” Thompson says, appearing at her elbow.

“One of these days I’m going to learn to ignore my more perverse urges,” she says with a sigh, taking the drink from him.

He smiles. “And take away all our fun?”

They spend another hour mingling among the guests, listening to Slughorn’s previous protégés compete for the prize of most stuck up. Or creepiest date, she thinks, watching the vampire out of the corner of her eye.

At some point near the end of the evening, Hermione passes by, her hair rumpled and expression wary like she’s trying to escape something. Hestia sniffles quietly by the punch bowl, fingers tight in the grip of her sister’s hand.

Whatever allure this party once held is long past.

“Ready to go?” Thompson asks.

Ginny nods. “Definitely.”

They duck out into the halls, wandering slowly back to the common room, the dark halls nearly deserted.

“This was fun,” she says.

“Do you have to sound so surprised?” he asks.

She smacks his arm. “The last few ‘dates’ I’ve been on have been rather…trying.”
He raises an eyebrow in question.

“Boys are dumb,” she says by way of explanation.

He doesn’t bother denying it, probably because he knows it’s true.

She smiles as they near the common room door. “Well, thanks for making the great sacrifice of coming with me to this.”

Thompson gives her a look she can’t quite interpret. Then he shakes his head, his hand reaching for her elbow. “Girls are dumb too.”

Pulling her in, he leans down and kisses her.

Ginny is surprised, holding stiff for a moment, but then remembers who this is, someone who’s always been on her side. Someone she trusts.

His lips are warm and pleasant on hers and she thinks, why not? and kisses him back.

* * *

The Burrow is buried in white, Christmas morning dawning quiet and cozy with the softest whisper of snow against the windowsill. Ginny pushes back her blankets, crawling over to the pile of gifts at the foot of her bed. Pulling out a large soft package, she rips the paper off, pulling the thick emerald green jumper up over her head and snuggling into its warmth. She makes quick work of the rest, including some new products from Fred and George, a new broom kit, some sparkly barrettes she’s not sure she’ll ever find a use for, and a slightly used Muggle paperback called *A Wrinkle in Time*.

She can hear the sounds of people moving around the house now. Shoving her feet into a thick pair of socks and pulling her hair back into a quick ponytail, she thunders up the stairs, barging in on Ron’s room. “Happy Christmas!”

Ron and Harry are both sitting on their beds, Weasley jumpers already pulled on. Ron squeaks in alarm at her sudden appearance, moving as if to hide something. He isn’t quick enough though, Ginny’s mouth popping open.

“What,” Ginny says, staring at the golden monstrosity hanging from Ron’s fingers, “is that?”

Ron stares gob smacked at her while Harry seems very intent on not laughing, even if he isn’t quite loyal enough not to say, “Lavender,” under his breath.

It’s then that Ginny realizes it says *My Sweetheart* in giant sweeping letters.

Ginny takes a breath and bellows, “Fred, George, get in here immediately!”

The unholy glee in her voice must be clear, because the twins appear with a crack, quick enough that Ron doesn’t even have time to stow the necklace.

“Ronnikins!” George crows as Fred pounces, grabbing the necklace out his hand. They dance around him, offering to stick the necklace in various places for all time with a well-aimed sticking charm.

Ron’s ears are violently red. “Yeah, well,” he shouts, “Kreacher sent Harry a bunch of maggots!”

Ginny glances over at Harry, and he shrugs.
“So,” Ginny laughs, “all in all a season of abundance.”

“What is going on up there?” Mum hollers up the stairs.

“Nothing!” they all chorus together.

Ron rather rudely shoves them all out his room a few minutes later, muttering that all he wanted for Christmas was to get a different family.

Ginny makes kissy faces at him. “I’m sure Lavender would be happy to adopt you.”

Ron slams the door in her face.

“Rude,” George declares before both twins disappear with a crack, a startled shriek sounding from downstairs a moment later.

Ginny makes her own way down the stairs to find Mum happily reaming the twins for almost ruining breakfast, and Dad calmly reading the paper at the table. Fleur is standing to one side looking a little overwhelmed by the sheer chaos around her.

“Happy Christmas,” Ginny says.

Fleur turns to look at her, and it’s only then that she realizes she has a huge tome hugged it to her chest as if she’s scared to let go of it. It says *The Complete Illustrated Birds of England*.

“Your idea, I take it?” Fleur asks, hand splayed across the book.

Ginny glances at all the other presents spread on the chair next to her, every one of them light and airy and elegant. She shrugs. “It felt right at the time.”

Fleur beams, leaning in to kiss her cheek. “*Merci, ma cheri,*” she whispers.

Ginny playfully tugs at the pale lavender Weasley jumper she wears with a white flower carefully stitched on the front. “Don’t you mean *ma soeur*?”

Fleur’s tinkling laugh fills the space. “Soon enough!”

“Breakfast!” Mum shouts, and there’s a general scramble to the table.

Bill catches Ginny’s elbow. “Thanks, Gin,” he says, folding her up in a hug.

“Hey,” she says with a shrug. “You’re the one with the good taste. Though how you convinced her to marry you, I’ll never know.”

Bill laughs, tripping her into a headlock and playfully digging his knuckles into her scalp.

“Mum!” she yelps, swatting ineffectually at him.

“Tattler,” she hears Ron and the twins call.

Bill eventually lets go of her, patting her head with a smile. Ginny sticks her tongue out at him and takes a seat at the table.

Harry is already sitting on the other side of the table, watching her with obvious amusement.

She pats at her hair, now standing up in a million directions. “A madhouse,” she complains.
“Yeah,” Harry agrees, only instead of being disturbed, he looks as happy as she’s ever seen him.
Clearly proof that he’s just as mental as the rest of them.

*     *     *

Things settle down as much as they ever do by the time dinner rolls around, mostly out of sheer exhaustion.

Remus Lupin, looking even more careworn than usual, comes to dinner, disappearing into the parlor with Harry and her father for an intense looking discussion that seems to please no one by the end of it, Harry least of all.

Halfway through dinner there’s a knock at the door, revealing that Rufus Scimgeour, Minister of Magic, has more gall than the average wizard. He brings Percy with him for the thinnest veneer of respectability.

Mum doesn’t seem to register that Percy is clearly only here as a beard for Scimgeour, too ecstatic to see her erstwhile son on Christmas. It occurs to everyone else though, particularly the twins, if their expression is anything to judge by. They are already nudging each other under the table, clearly working on something.

Ginny clears her throat, giving them an arch look when they acknowledge her. She wants in.

She waits expectantly until George gives her a signal.

Pushing to her feet, Ginny heads towards her brother. “Percy!” she shouts. “I’ve missed you so much!”

He’s clearly thrown by the unexpectedly warm greeting, but doesn’t seem suspicious. He hasn’t been around her enough the last few years to know how afraid he should be.

Percy leaves the Burrow ten minutes later with parsnip stuck in places he probably never thought possible.

*     *     *

The post-Christmas doldrums settle over the Burrow in the week that follows. The twins are back at their shop for the post-holiday sales, such as they are, and Bill and Fleur leave to visit Aunt Muriel for a few days. Most of the time Ron and Harry are off somewhere talking about whatever boys like them find interesting. Even they don’t like to be in each other’s pockets every moment though, so sometimes Harry wanders in to sit with Ginny. Mostly he doesn’t say anything, just sits reading obsessively in his worn Potions book, his mood noticeably dark and brooding since Remus’ visit.

Ginny is diligently writing Smita a letter one evening when Harry sits down at the other end of the couch after giving her an awkward smile. Sometimes it’s like this, him seeking her out to say absolutely nothing. They aren’t friends really. Only sometimes…it’s almost something like it.

It’s almost as confusing as it sounds.

“Ginny,” he says.

She glances up at him. “Yeah?”

He looks like he wants to ask her something, rubbing at his forehead. Of their own accord, her eyes
find his scar.

He shakes his head, turning back to his book. He gives her a fleeting smile, looking sheepish, but right underneath, almost angry. It frightens her, this tense energy he’s carrying around these days. Like he’s one step from doing something completely reckless.

*Could you kill, if you had to?*

“Harry?” she presses, touching his arm.

He snaps his books shut. “Never mind.”

Picking up his book, he leaves her sitting alone on the couch.

She hates the feeling that she’s done something wrong without even knowing it.

* * *

In the end, it’s a bit of a relief to board the train back to Hogwarts. She’s had just about her fill of Celestina Warbeck and moody, indecipherable boys. Even having to watch Smita and Tobias’ reunion after an entire two weeks apart is preferable.

“Thanks for your letters,” Smita says once she’s able to wrench her attention away from Tobias. “Though six did seem a little excessive.”

Ginny shrugs. “I have an exciting life, what can I say.”

Smita smiles. “I really would like to see that necklace of Ron’s though.”

Tobias perks up. “Necklace?”

They spend the next ten minutes abusing Ron, until the compartment door slides open, Thompson sticking his head in.

“Hey, Ginny,” he says.

Ginny is almost certain her cheeks flush. “Thompson,” she says deliberately, just to see his reaction.

He lifts an eyebrow. “Back to that, are we?”

She shrugs, her lip twitching despite her best efforts. “I’m forgetful, remember?”

He stares at her for a long moment, his eyes intent on her face as if he’s searching for something. She feels her skin flush further. Eventually he smiles, clearly pleased with whatever he sees. “I’m looking forward to reminding you.”

She bites her lip, feeling unaccountably discomfited by something in his expression.

Somewhere nearby, someone clears their throat.

Thompson blinks, whatever expression had been there suddenly disappearing. He glances past Ginny to Tobias and Smita. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Smita says.

Ginny looks over in their direction to find Tobias staring with his mouth hanging open. Smita, as
always, looks completely composed, her hands folded quietly in her lap. Only her eyes seem to promise the intense amusement she plans on getting out of this later.

Ginny winces.

“Well,” Thompson says, hand tapping against the doorjamb, “I’ll see you later?”

Getting a hold of herself, Ginny turns her attention back to Thompson, a little relieved to find him back to looking at her just like he always has. She smiles. “Yeah.”

With one last lingering look, Thompson disappears out the door.

“Okay,” Tobias says the moment the door closes, something like unholy glee in his voice. “Just what the hell was that?”

“I think,” Ginny says wonderingly, “that may have been my boyfriend.”

Tobias stares at her for a long beat before falling back against his seat in hopeless laughter.

*  *  *

Despite Tobias’ teasing and Smita’s much more subtle and kindly intended mocking, Ginny quickly finds that she rather likes being part of a pair.

It’s not that having a boyfriend really changes anything really. She just eats some of her meals sitting next to Thompson. Sometimes he’s there waiting for her after her last lesson of the day so they can wander about the castle together for a while. Of course, the snows keep them inside more often than not, and it begins to feel like an elaborate game, trying to find some abandoned corridor where he can pull her into an alcove and kiss her, keeping one step ahead of the eerily omniscient Mrs. Norris, who can apparently sense a snog from two corridors over and three floors down. Those are the times that leave her breathless and laughing, and maybe a teensy bit more understanding of her brother. Maybe. Slightly.

Mostly though, it’s just someone to sit next to, someone to talk to, and it only occurs to Ginny as she sits on a couch in the common room with Thompson and rattles on about her day that she’s maybe been more lonely this year than she’s realized. Being captain puts her above her teammates, separates her a bit. She is getting on more and more with the other girls from The Parlor, but sometimes that still feels like something that only happens in that space. Smita and Tobias are…well, they have their own thing. This is something that is hers and hers alone.

She doesn’t treat him any different on the pitch, and he doesn’t seem to expect it, which had been Ginny’s one fear. They work just as seamlessly together in the air as always.

It’s nice.

*  *  *

DADA has quickly become one of Ginny’s favorite subjects of the year. It’s not just that the topics are interesting and important, which they certainly are, but also because of Snape, surprisingly enough. She’s drawn in by the way he talks about the skills they study, like the magics are living, breathing things that are complex and illusive and forever challenging.

They spend the first part of the new term studying dark arts aimed at influencing people’s minds in various ways, many of which there is no direct protection against other than awareness.
“Today,” Snape says, pacing down the length of the classroom, “we will discuss the most dangerous and invasive form of dark magic: Legilimens. It is a highly focused skill that is regulated quite closely by the Ministry, much like the use of Veritaserum.”

He goes on to explain the legal restrictions on Legilimens, emphasizing that the mere rarity and illegality of the practice does not preclude the chance of having it used on them someday.

“It’s best to be prepared. The only defense against Legilimens is Occlumency, a skill even more complex and difficult than Legilimens.”

He walks down the length of the room.

“Questions?”

Ginny raises her hand. “Why would Occlumency be so much more difficult? If it’s just a matter of putting up a mental wall to block the intrusion, that seems like it would be much more straightforward than trying to dig into someone’s mind.”

Snape shakes his head. “Keeping the truth from an invading mind is one thing, Miss Weasley. Seamlessly supplanting the truth with believable lies is another altogether.”

She considers that, gnawing on the inside of her lip. “Because the very lack of access is proof enough that you are keeping something from them.”

His eyebrow lifts, clearly surprised by her answer. “Exactly.” He paces back to the front of the classroom. “As I said, few if any of you will ever be able to achieve that level of skill. Nonetheless, it is an important defensive spell that all witches and wizards should at least have a basic background in.”

He tells them that he will spend the next few weeks wordlessly casting Legilimens on various students as they fill out a series of practice OWL exams and review earlier concepts.

It is important, he explains to them, that they be able to recognize when someone uses the spell on them, because if you don’t even know it’s happening, how can you ever hope to counteract it? They are supposed to raise their hands when they think they detect the spell being used on them. For the first few days the students jump at every wayward sensation, but eventually they settle down and begin to forget that Snape is trying to break into their minds.

Almost two weeks after the first lecture on the topic, Ginny is filling out a comparative chart on various dark creatures when she registers the faintest sensation, nothing more than the slightest breeze on the back of her neck. Innocuous, really, if not for the instantaneous feeling of disquiet that fills her brain with a sort of soft buzz, the accompanying rush of adrenaline in her system that has her back in the Department of Mysteries scrambling for her life in an instant. She’s on her feet, wand in hand and spell on her tongue before she even gives it conscious thought.

The nearby chairs and tables rattle with the force of the protective spell she barks into life. She barely registers the squeaks of alarm of her fellow students, too caught up in the pounding of her heart in her ears, the taste of bile on her tongue.

“Miss Weasley.”

It takes her a moment to register Professor Snape standing in front of her. She has her wand raised, pointed at him.

He doesn’t seem overly concerned by that. “Congratulations, Miss Weasley,” he says once he seems
sure he has her attention. “You are the first student to detect the use of Legilimens.”

She lets out an unsteady breath, seeing Smita and Tobias cautiously approaching from one side. “I am?”

Snape nods, something almost like a smile on his lips. “I’d say five points to Slytherin are in order.”

Lowering her wand arm, she feels the shield charm dissipate, her knees weakening as the adrenaline leaves her system. She lowers herself back to her seat, Smita sliding into the one next to her, a quiet form of support.

The rest of the class warily turns back to their work.

“Miss Weasley?” Snape says, and it’s only then she realizes he is still standing next to her table.

“Yes, sir?” she asks, pleased to find her voice is back to almost sounding normal.

“Perhaps next time you could just raise your hand.”

She lets out a shaky laugh.

Once the fear wears off, Ginny is mostly left with embarrassment. Smita and Tobias understand of course, and the rest of the students seem more wary than amused, but Ginny is still humiliated to have lost her composure so completely.

“What did it feel like?” Smita asks.

Ginny shakes her head, not really sure how to put it into words. “I don’t know. It didn’t exactly feel like anything. I just suddenly knew something wasn’t right.”

“At least you just went for a protective spell,” Tobias points out as they settle in the great hall for lunch. “You could have pulled out your Reductor curse. Would have blown half the classroom apart.”

Smita sends him a glare when Ginny simply pales another shade at the thought.

“What?” he says. “I’m just trying to find the bright side.”

Thompson drops down into the empty seat next to Ginny. “What’s this I hear about you almost taking Snape down with a wicked defensive spell?”

Ginny groans, dropping her face into her hands.

“What I’d say?” Thompson asks.

Ginny just shakes her head, having the feeling this is going to become just one more thing she’ll never live down.

* * *

As January quickly bleeds into February, Ginny finds she has a lot more sympathy for Smita.

It’s hard to balance it all—schoolwork, Quidditch, Parlor, friends, Slug Club, and boyfriend. Sometimes it feels like she doesn’t even have time to breathe, and she’s always a little scared that she’s ignoring any one part of her life for any other part.
She’s happy though, despite the challenges.

Quidditch practices are going well, and she splits her evenings between studying with Thompson in the common room and The Parlor. The Carrow twins, it seems, are very close to their goal now, lending a palpable excitement to the air.

In classes, Ginny sits with Smita and Tobias and catches up with them as much as she can under the distraction of spells and tests and lectures.

One day in DADA she’s laughing with Tobias about a prank someone pulled on Kieman Harper. Ginny wipes a tear from her eye. “I would have liked to have--.” She stops talking mid-sentence.

Smita frowns. “Ginny?”

Ginny takes a breath and puts her hand in the air.

“Excellent, Miss Weasley,” Snape says from the front of the classroom.

She feels the unsettling sensation dissipate and relaxes back into her seat.

Quite a few students have managed to pass Snape’s Legilimens detection test by now, but Ginny still seems to be a favorite target of his.

Tobias pats her arm. “Good job not blowing everyone up.”

Rubbing at the back of her neck, she takes a shaky breath and tells Tobias where he can stuff his wand.

*     *     *

As their match against Ravenclaw approaches in mid-February, the pressure begins to ramp up. She starts to feel everything but Quidditch slipping, but doesn’t care, too focused on proving that her team can win.

The rash, scared part of her wants to double up practices, but her more rational side knows that exhausting her team before the match is stupid. She’s analyzed Ravenclaw’s game, their strengths and weaknesses, and spent the last month adjusting their own strategies accordingly. They have all the tools they need to win, to be successful. At this point, it’s all down to execution. So instead of pushing, Ginny puts on a face of utter confidence, knowing that her team is always looking to her. They just need to believe.

Saturday of the match dawns cold and cloudy. There’s still snow thick on the ground, and the threat of more in the air. Not ideal, but sometimes these conditions make it easier to see the Snitch. She has a brief conversation with Reiko about the implications of the weather, the younger girl nodding along.

At breakfast, Ginny forces herself to eat with a casualness she doesn’t particularly feel, laughing at Bassenthwaite and Graham’s antics as they burn off their nervousness.

As she’s leaving the hall, Ron catches up with her, giving her a scowl. “For the record,” he says, “I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to forgive you for this.”

“What?” she asks, wondering what she could possibly have done to piss him off considering she’s barely seen him the last month.
“You’re making me root for Slytherin,” he says, face twisted up in disgust. It’s only then that she notices he’s holding the tiniest green flag she’s ever seen.

Ginny rolls her eyes. “Don’t hurt yourself on my account.”

He dismisses that with a wave of his hand. “You’re my sister. Besides, those Ravenclaws are a shifty lot.”

Ginny stares back at him for a moment, torn, as always, between punching him and hugging him. “Prat,” she says, voice thick.

Ron grins. “Kick their arses, Gin.”

She gives him a little salute. “With pleasure.”

*   *   *

As Ginny predicts, the pace of the game is much faster with Ravenclaw. It’s a blur of brooms and bodies and Bludgers. The scores climb on both sides, with Ravenclaw pulling a slight advantage. Martin has been struggling with confidence in the goal, but there’s nothing Ginny can do about that in the middle of a match, so instead she focuses on scoring herself.

Between runs on the goal, Ginny keeps an eye on Reiko. Cho has been shadowing Reiko, the two of them taking slow leisurely loops of the field.

About twenty minutes into the match, Reiko takes a spectacular and sudden dive. Ginny sees the start of it out of the corner of her eye, wondering if Reiko’s finally grown tired of having a shadow. Even Cho seems to assume the move is a feint, choosing not to follow. Everyone saw how Reiko duped Harry in the last match after all.

Except at second glance Ginny notices something different about the way Reiko moves, her hand stretching out in front of her.

She’s really caught sight of the Snitch.

Cho finally sees it too, darting after her.

Ginny comes to a complete stop, hovering on her broom, her heart in her throat as Reiko lays flat out mere yards above the snow. With a jerk, her broom pulls back up, climbing rapidly in altitude.

For a moment Ginny thinks the Snitch has escaped, only then Reiko levels out, her face beaming as a small golden ball flutters in her outstretched hand.

Below them, the crowd erupts.

Slytherin wins.

Ginny nearly slams her broom into Reiko’s in her excitement. Reiko laughs, the beaming smile on her face almost better than the win.

Maybe, Ginny thinks, this captain gig might be for me after all.

*   *   *

For at least a week, Ginny feels like she’s floating around on a cloud. Tobias declares her completely unlivable, and instead of cursing him, she just smiles at him and moves as if to hug him.
“Ugh,” he complains, slapping her away.

Ginny and Smita share a look, laughing as Tobias runs away in disgust.

Luckily for Tobias’ sanity, it only takes a week or so for the weight of ignored homework and looming OWLs to get Ginny back to normal—meaning more likely to hex than hug. Added to that, a few nasty rumors start trickling through the castle about her. Happening so soon after their decisive victory over Ravenclaw, Ginny can only suspect Crabbe and Goyle, considering the things they were happy to say about her earlier in the year.

This tells her two things. One, she must being doing a really good job as captain to be annoying them so much. Two, Crabbe is still too scared of her to do anything other than talk behind her back. She has a much easier time with one of these truths than the other.

Ginny comes up from The Parlor late one evening to find Thompson still sitting in the common room. She feels a little warmed by the idea that he may be waiting for her.

She sits down on the couch next to him. “Apparently I am sleeping with the entire team,” she informs him.

“Are you really,” Thompson says, eyebrow lifting. “Reserve squad too?”

Ginny sighs. “Probably.” According to the rumor, there is no other way she would have gotten the captain position.

His other eyebrow lifts. “Even little Reiko?”

Ginny rolls her eyes.

“Sounds exhausting,” he says, returning his attention to his book.

She gives him an arch look. “Shouldn’t you be, I don’t know, offended on my behalf or something?”

He shrugs. “Mostly hurt to discover you’re holding out on me.”

She stiffens, her face flushing.

He looks over at her, putting his book down when he sees her face. “I was teasing, Ginny.”

“I know,” she lies, embarrassed to have reacted that way. She just suddenly really, really doesn’t want to talk about this with him.

He shakes his head. “Sometimes I forget.”

“Forget what?” she asks, even though she’s not certain she wants to hear the answer.

“How young you are.” It’s more matter of fact than patronizing, but it still stings. Like being seventeen makes him so much more worldly.

She forces herself to smile, to shrug it all off. “Not much I can do about that,” she says, voice deliberately light.

“How young you are.” It’s more matter of fact than patronizing, but it still stings. Like being seventeen makes him so much more worldly.

She forces herself to smile, to shrug it all off. “Not much I can do about that,” she says, voice deliberately light.

“How young you are.” It’s more matter of fact than patronizing, but it still stings. Like being seventeen makes him so much more worldly.

She forces herself to smile, to shrug it all off. “Not much I can do about that,” she says, voice deliberately light.

“Gin,” he says. She’s probably just imagining the way his tone seems to say, Stop being such a little girl.

“It’s fine.” She gives him a quick peck on the lips. “See you tomorrow.”
She shifts up off the couch. He doesn’t stop her.

* * *

Things remain a bit strained between Ginny and Thompson. It’s not like they are fighting or not speaking to each other, nothing so dramatic. Not that she would ever expect anything different. Thompson has always, as ever, been one of the steadiest parts of her life. He’s the one who taught her to keep her cool, on the pitch and off.

Still, as they sit next to each other at breakfast, Ginny doesn’t talk as much as she usually might have, and Thompson sends her looks every once and a while that she can’t quite interpret. They were supposed to go to Hogsmeade together today, and if she’s honest, she can admit that she’s a little relieved to hear that the trip has been cancelled.

Katie Bell still hasn’t returned to the castle after all, so no one has forgotten she almost died on the last Hogsmeade trip.

Of everyone, she imagines it’s Ron who will be the most upset. She cranes her neck, trying to catch sight of her brother at the Gryffindor table.

“Looking for someone?” Thompson asks.

Ginny turns back to her breakfast. “My brother. It’s his birthday.”

“Must be hard to keep track, what with six of them.”

She nods. “Yeah. Sometimes it feels like we are always celebrating something.”

They eat in silence for a while longer, Ginny frowning down at her toast. “What about you?” she eventually asks.

“What about me?”

“Do you have any brothers?” It seems a strange thing for her not to know.

He shakes his head. “Just two older sisters.”

They finish the rest of the meal in more comfortable conversation, swapping stories about siblings. She can’t help but consider though, how little she really knows about him. She knows he hates eggs (weirdo). She knows he likes Quidditch. And her, apparently. But that’s about it. She’s not sure how it happens. Either they are silent, she’s talking (usually about Quidditch), or they are snogging. It was kind of restive at first. Coming from a chaotic family, she isn’t really used to getting anyone’s undivided attention.

But after a while, she finds herself watching him, wondering what he’s really thinking. Then he’ll turn and look at her, give her a smile and hold her hand, and she’ll decide it doesn’t really matter.

But none of that changes the fact that she’s never seen him angry. Or sad. Or flustered. He’s as steady as the earth. She stares at his face and wonders what he may really be feeling under there. She knows she isn’t anything like an open book herself, but still… This feels ever as they have always been, teammates. Only now with the occasional snog.

She shrugs. Maybe that’s what it’s supposed to be like.

They’ve just finished breakfast when Harry enters the hall, hesitating only slightly before bee lining
straight for the Slytherin table as if approaching a blast-ended skrewt.

He stops next to Ginny, his face a bit flushed, his eyes worried enough to make her stomach clench.

“What’s happened?” she asks, already halfway out of her seat. Misfortune, after all, seems to follow Harry Potter around like a loyal pet.

“It’s Ron,” he says.

Merlin, no. Not stupid, wonderful Ron. She can barely hear Harry’s explanation that he’s been poisoned over the buzzing in her ears.

“But,” she hears herself saying, “it’s his birthday.”

And Harry, who has every right to laugh at her or shake her for saying such a stupid thing, just nods solemnly. “Yeah.”

She takes a breath. “Can I see him?”

He shakes his head. “Promfrey won’t let anyone visit yet. But Hermione and I are going to wait anyway.”

Harry’s eyes dart past her, and she belatedly remembers Thompson. She glances helplessly over at him, but he’s already shooing her. “Go,” he says. “I hope he’s okay.”

Harry fills her in as she follows him up to the infirmary. The love potion (she’ll laugh about that later, she will), Slughorn’s antidote, a birthday toast with tainted mead.

“Why is it always Ron?” she says without thinking.

Harry looks away, but she knows too well that he must be blaming himself. All part of being the best mate of the Chosen One.

Hermione is sitting impatiently outside the infirmary door when they get there. “Ginny,” she says, popping up.

Ginny pulls her into a hug, partially to comfort her, but mostly to have something to hold on to.

Sitting in the hallway, Ginny holds Hermione’s hand while Harry alternately paces and sits in brooding silence. He’s clearly trying to work out who the poison was really intended for, and how it made its way to Slughorn only to almost kill Ron.

They’ve been there for about an hour when Smita shows up.

“I just heard,” Smita says. “Is he going to be all right?”

Ginny feels it all bubbling up, tears pressing at her eyes. “Promfrey won’t let us in.”

“Right,” Smita says, peering at the closed door for a moment before nodding her head with brisk efficiency. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

Harry and Hermione share a look as Smita disappears inside.

“She’s been assisting Promfrey all year,” Ginny says, something like fierce pride building in her chest.
Another half hour passes before Smita reappears.

“The bezoar neutralized the majority of the poison. There are some small traces left that are being counteracted with specific potions, but for now it’s really a matter of waiting and watching for any unexpected adverse reactions.” She glances at Harry and Hermione. “It’s the first six to eight hours that are the most crucial.”

“The metabolizing rate for the most common noxious amalgamates,” Hermione says, her voice rushed and trembling.

Smita smiles, sitting down next to Hermione. “Yes, exactly.”

They talk for a while, their heads close together as they discuss the foundational theories of poisons and treatment. Hermione is clearly desperate to be distracted, and now Ginny has another reason to be thankful to Smita. Ginny stops listening to the words, just letting the sound of their voices lull her.

In the afternoon, Thompson shows up, bringing a heaping plate of sandwiches and a flask of pumpkin juice. “I thought you might all be hungry.”

It’s a welcome distraction, though Ginny notices that most of them do little more than nibble a little bit. Hermione just tears hers into little pieces.

Thompson sits next to Ginny, putting an arm around her shoulders.

She leans into him. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” he says, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

Both Smita and Thompson leave a while later. It’s not until nearly eight that Pomfrey finally lets them in to see Ron.

“God,” Hermione says, when they get their first glimpse. “He looks terrible.”

Pomfrey clicks her tongue. “He’d look a lot worse if it weren’t for that well timed bezoar, Mr. Potter.”

The doors open again, Fred and George spilling into the infirmary. Ginny almost finally loses her control a little in the face of her brothers’ comfort, but Fred just holds her tight and doesn’t take the mickey, his own expression open and troubled.

“We were down in Hogsmeade for a birthday visit,” Fred explains. “What happened?”

Harry fills them in, still staring down at Ron lying unconscious on the bed.

“Not his best birthday, all told,” George says.

Mum and Dad come in after talking to Dumbledore. Ginny gratefully accepts hugs from both of them.

There’s far too many people in the infirmary now though, Pomfrey shooting them all stern looks, so Harry and Hermione get up to leave. Ginny follows them to the door.

She gives Hermione a quick hug. “Get some sleep, yeah?”

Hermione gives her a shaky smile.
She turns to Harry next, putting her arms around him too, hugging him tight. “Thank you,” she says. “Thank you for saving my stupid idiot brother. Thank Merlin you were there.”

After a beat of hesitation, she feels his arms around her, hugging her back. “You’re welcome.”

Pulling back, she smiles at him. “That’s three of us Weasleys you’ve saved now. You seem to be making a career of it.”

He huffs, clearly exhausted on his feet and beginning to feel a little punchy. “I’d prefer it if you Weasleys would just get better at avoiding trouble all together.”

Ginny smirks. “Unlikely. I guess we’ll just have to keep you around instead.”

His expression seems to run the gamut from appreciation for being a defacto member of the family to endless, painful guilt like it’s his fault they are in danger in the first place. It’s almost dizzying to watch. “Deal,” he says.

“Now go to sleep,” she says, giving him a little push. “You look like death.”

He rolls his eyes at her. “Night, Gin.”

She watches him go.

* * *

Thompson is still waiting up for her when she finally makes her way back to the common room. She walks up to him and lets him fold her into a hug.

“All right?” he asks against her hair.

She isn’t. She isn’t all right at all.

She wants to confess how afraid she was, wants to lean into his shoulder and cry big ugly tears, wants to just stop holding everything together and just be for once.

She wants all of these things, but all she can think of is how carefully Thompson always keeps things in control, the way she can never tell what he is feeling, the way he looks at her when she says something wrong.

Stop being such a little girl.

She sucks in a steadying breath and nods against his shoulder. “I’m all right.”

* * *

Ginny visits Ron in the infirmary a lot the next few days, even if it becomes a bit of a challenge trying to avoid any time that Lavender may be there.

She gets there once to find Ron asleep, but before she can turn around and leave, he pops one eye open. “Oh, it’s you,” he says, suddenly wide awake.

She narrows her eyes at him. “Who did you think I was?”

“What?” he asks, playing stupid, and really, that’s not much of a stretch.

She shakes her head. “You really are an idiot, you know that?”
“Yeah, yeah,” he says, waving the insult away. “What did you bring me?”

“Homework,” she lies, waiting for his face to fall into petulance before she tosses a chocolate frog on his lap. “Wizard chess?”

“Yes, please,” he says.

He never makes it through a complete match, lingering evidence that there is a reason he is still in the infirmary. Not that he isn’t above faking being sleepy just to get out of losing to her. (“As if,” he says when she calls him on it. “You’re crap at chess.” Only she isn’t, because what is chess but a Quidditch match played out on a board?)

When he conveniently falls asleep, she always ruffles his hair and drops a kiss on his head as she leaves, and only partly to see him grimace and give away his subterfuge.

* * *

Near the end of the week, they’re in the greenhouses with Ravenclaw for a Herbology lesson. The plants have been getting more and more dangerous, requiring various forms of protection and thorough concentration.

“How’s your brother doing?” Tobias asks.

Ginny glances up from the plant in front of her. “Okay. There’s been some lingering side effects, but he’s slowly getting better.”

Tobias shakes his head. “It’s still so hard to believe that someone would poison him.”

“You’ve never had to live with him,” Ginny quips.

Tobias snorts. “I suppose I’ve wanted to poison you from time to time.”

Ginny sticks her tongue out at him.

“Remember,” Professor Sprout calls out, “you need to persuade the plant. You can’t force it!”

Ginny sighs, glancing down at the plant in front of her.

Smita has already successfully harvested two sprouts, clearly being more persuasive than Ginny and Tobias. “And how are things with Sean?” she asks.

Ginny has really begun to dread that particular question. It’s as if dating someone suddenly gives everyone the right to pry, no matter how little they know her. It’s even worse when it’s Smita asking. Mostly because she knows she won’t be able to get away with a mysterious smile and a simple, “Good.”

So instead she settles for something like the truth. “It’s…nice.”

Smita looks up from her work, forehead creasing. “Did you just say ‘nice’?”

Ginny lifts her chin. “What’s wrong with that?”

Smita shares a glance with Tobias, something unspoken there, just enough of a spark to make Ginny think they would never call what they have nice. Probably aggravating and exciting and certainly never dull.
“I like him, I really do,” Ginny feels the need to say. She isn’t sure why it sounds like she’s trying to defend herself.

“But?” Smita prompts.

Ginny shrugs. “It’s just…easy, I suppose.”

She gets a double eyebrow raise for that one.

She sighs, shoving away the Chinese Chomping Cabbage she’s trying to convince to let her harvest a sprout. It snaps at her, a tiny splat of puss barely missing her hand. “It’s totally ridiculous to think it’s too easy, right?”

Tobias looks over at her. “I dunno. You’ve never really struck me as a girl who likes easy.”

Ginny drops her head down on the table. “Maybe that’s the problem.”

Smita pats her consolingly on the back.

* * *

That weekend, Gryffindor loses bad to Hufflepuff. And by bad, Ginny doesn’t just mean by score. With Ron still in hospital, Cormac McLaggen plays Keeper and proves that he’s an even worse teammate than he is a Christmas party date. His crowning moment is when he manages to knock his own teammate unconscious. Knock Harry unconscious, to be precise.

It’s a horrible moment, Harry taking a bat directly to the head. It’s like that terrible day with the Dementors all over again, Harry plummeting from the sky. This time it’s the Gryffindor Beaters who manage to grab him before he hits the ground, but only just.

Ginny doesn’t even know she’s on her feet until she feels Thompson’s hand on her arm as they cart Harry off to the infirmary. “They’ve got him,” he says.

She nods, sitting back down. She forces herself to smile and look back over her shoulder at Martin. “You ever so much as look at a Beater’s bat, and I’ll make you wish for a concussion.”

Bassenthwaite and Graham snicker.

Martin lifts his hands in front of him. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“What an utter disaster,” Reiko says, half-horrified, half-gleeful.

Ginny shoots her a look, but she just shrugs. Reiko may like Harry all right, but this inevitable loss opens up a lot of doors for their team. Most importantly, a chance at the Quidditch Cup.

The rest of the match is a blur, the heavily one-sided game not particularly interesting despite Luna’s commentary. It’s almost a relief when Smith finally grabs the Snitch.

* * *

Later that evening, Ginny sits in The Parlor and watches Flora and Hestia successfully transform into a crow and a beaver with a quiet pop.

Everyone erupts into applause. Four long years of effort and study finally paying off. It’s wonderful to see.
Most people might assume identical twins would turn into identical animals, but anyone who actually knows Hestia and Flora would know better. Hestia is slightly more independent, the one to drive many of their explorations. Flora is the one with a calmer head and a slightly softer heart.

“Which is more trustworthy, the head or the heart?” Ginny asks a while later.

Antonia looks up from her book. “Neither particularly in my experience.”

Ginny purses her lips. “Well, that’s incredibly unhelpful.”

Antonia laughs. “It is, isn’t it?”

Ginny supposes it’s nice to know Antonia doesn’t have all the answers.

“I guess I put more trust in instinct.” She has a look on her face like this is something she has spent a lot of time thinking about.

“Instinct,” Ginny muses.

Antonia shrugs. “What is instinct if not something that tells you when your heart or head is being stupid?”

Ginny laughs. “So you can know which one to ignore?”

“Sure,” she says. “Or which one to listen to.”

Ginny chews on that for a while, watching Astoria and Caroline talking with the twins.

“We haven’t seen you much recently,” Antonia observes, voice mild.

Ginny nods, acknowledging the truth of it, but not bothering to try to excuse it. “You know what Lucas would say. Sometimes experiments can take up all your time.”

Antonia gives her a long, assessing look. “I suppose he would.”

He’d also say that all experiments eventually have to come to an end.

* * *

On Sunday, Ginny asks Thompson to brave the last of the snow and go for a walk with her. As they near a tree, he pulls her off the path, backing her up against the trunk.

“Sean,” she says before he can kiss her.

Her tone must be telling, because he stiffens, pulling back, his expression wiping clean almost in an instant. If she’d wanted any more evidence that this is the right decision, there it is.

He’s always been the one to say sometimes she gets too caught in her own head. She knows what her heart thinks.

Who she is on the Quidditch pitch is just one persona. It’s not all of her. She wonders sometimes if that version of her is the only one he’s really interested in. Not the messy, confused girl she is most of the time. And it’s not just what he expects of her. She keeps wanting him to react differently, to be different, and that isn’t fair at all. Not to either of them.

“Does this really…feel right to you?” she asks, vaguely waving a hand back and forth between them.
He stares at her for a moment, and she couldn’t define what he might be feeling if her life depended on it. Thinking back to the lesson on Legilimens, she considers what it would be like, if she could just look in his head and read everything in there. It’s far more tempting than it should be.

“No,” he eventually says, voice perfectly even as he lets go of her. “I guess not.”

She relaxes, pushing out a breath. “I just… You’re great. You’ve always been such a great friend. And I don’t want to ruin that. But I’m not sure being more than that is…working.” She tries not to wince, knowing she sounds like an idiot, exactly like the lost little girl he accused her of being.

Thompson stands there for a moment. “So,” he eventually says. “Friends.”

She’s so blindingly relieved to hear him seemingly so easily agree, that she stupidly playfully touches his arm.

He jerks back away. “Just...give me some time, okay?” There’s the slightest tic near his eye.

She feels her stomach clench, but knows well enough that she owes him that. “Yeah,” she says, stepping back away from him. “Of course.”

He walks away.

*    *   *

Ginny does her part to respect Thompson’s request by staying away from the common room and not lingering on the Quidditch pitch. Instead she’s in The Parlor, but most often in the library or in her hidden cloister, because they hadn’t been kidding when they said OWLs are serious business. There’s so much to know and so much homework on top of revision that she feels like she might drown in it all.

She’s spending a Saturday cramming in the cloister when Harry finds her. It’s been a few weeks since the ill-fated Quidditch match, but this is the first time she’s seen him.

“How are you?” she says. “No lasting damage other than my pride.”

She winces. “I’m sorry about Cormac. That’s bad luck.”

Harry scowls. “No, just bad skill.”

“Bit of a berk, isn’t he?” she says, thinking of Hermione at the Christmas party.

“Among other things,” Harry says darkly.

Ginny nods, looking back down at her book. When Harry just keeps standing there, she asks, “Did you…need something?” knowing he probably wouldn’t come all this way for nothing. She immediately feels stupid though when Harry gives her a startled glance. “I mean, if you just came here to study or something--.”

“No,” he says. “I came to see you.”

“Oh. Okay,” she says, embarrassment quickly morphing into inexplicable apprehension.

He sits down next to her, putting his backpack down, fiddling with the straps for a moment as if stalling. Or building up his nerve. Neither does much to make Ginny feel less anxious.
Eventually he straightens, looking at her. “Can I ask…?”

She leans forward as he trails off. “Yeah?”

“Malfoy,” he blurs.

Despite herself, Ginny is momentarily taken aback, physically straightening up. Which is stupid, because this is exactly what this has always been about, isn’t it? How are things in Slytherin? he asked her once. And at the time she’d been enough of an idiot to think maybe that had something to with her, not just Draco Malfoy.

This is Harry bloody Potter offering to walk her back to her train compartment all over again.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“What about him?” she asks, her voice hardening.

He definitely notices it, his lips pressing together. “Have you ever…”

She frowns, honestly having no idea where Harry is going with this, but no longer feeling inclined to help him along.

“What is he doing?” he demands, like a rubber band finally snapping after being stretched too far.

Ginny blinks, not particularly caring for the hostility in his tone. “What do you mean?”

Harry pushes to his feet with a sound of frustration, pacing around the small space. “You’re in the same house. You were dancing with him. You must have some idea.”

“Some idea of what?” she snaps, beginning to feel her own temper fray.

He stops, turning to look at her. “He’s a Death Eater.” A statement of fact. No hesitation, just utter conviction.

For the tiniest moment, she’s forced to remember seeing Draco on the train, his hand on his forearm, but a pulse of pure anger quickly overrides the memory. “Why, because he’s in Slytherin?”

Harry huffs with impatience. “This isn’t about--.”

She doesn’t let him finish, pushing to her feet. Feeling reckless in a way she rarely indulges any more, she steps up to him, lifting her arm. Pulling back her sleeve, she bares the green snake inked on her skin. “Because he has a tattoo?”

Things like that aren’t always about choice. Hers hadn’t been. Maybe Draco’s wasn’t either. He’s just a kid, after all. They all are. Has Harry forgotten that so quickly?

He’s staring down at her tattoo like it’s a personal insult. She sees it, the moment it takes him to shake it off, to remember who she is and not what.

He pushes her arm down, his expression hardening. “He’s up to something, I know it.”

Ginny recognizes that look, has seen it on Draco’s face over the years: a completely irrational hatred that has wandered far off whatever real foundations it may have once had. She hates that it hurts to find it here, on Harry. What does she care what he thinks?

Feeling that old anger from the summer rising up in her throat, she knows she’s terribly close to
completely losing her temper. It’s time to end this conversation before she says something she’ll regret. Snatching up her bag, she makes to leave.

“Ginny,” Harry says, blowing out a breath. He grabs her arm when she doesn’t stop. “Wait.”

She swings back around to look at him, nearly stumbling into him, her heart pounding, heat flooding her skin. “What?”

He’s clearly surprised by her tone, by the visceral anger she is no longer able to control, but doesn’t back away. His eyes travel over her face, his hand firm on her arm. He just stands there staring at her, and she has the unsettling sensation of standing on the edge of a really tall cliff.

“Harry?” she asks.

He jerks, dropping her arm and taking a deliberate step back from her, and for some reason that hurts more than everything else. She folds her arms across her chest.

He drags his hand through his hair in frustration. “I just…I need to know what he’s doing. It’s important.”

He doesn’t sound angry any more, just desperate, maybe even a little sad, but it doesn’t change anything. Doesn’t change anything at all.

They stare at each other a long moment, a gulf of misunderstanding between them. She has to wonder if she told him she didn’t know anything about Draco if he’d even believe her.

“Do you remember when we were little, Harry?” she asks, even as every bit of self-preservation is screaming at her to just shut up. She blazes on. “When I couldn’t even speak when you were in the room because I was so in awe of you?”

He shifts, looking pained. “Yes.”

She wonders if as a Gryffindor she would have always seen him that way, as some amazing hero who could do no wrong. She doesn’t mourn that the way she should.

She shakes her head in disgust, at him, at herself. “Just… Go back to your bloody house, Harry.”

She turns and walks away.

* * *

Ginny is brooding.

There’s no other way to describe sitting in Antonia’s room nursing a cup of the latest miraculous concoction from Tilly’s still with a scowl on her face that already scared away the less steady of Antonia’s roommates.

What it really boils down to is that Ginny’s angry she got so angry. It’s become so rare these days for her to ever really let it get out of control like that. But she’s also angry with Harry. For the way he pushed her. For the way he’s letting his hate make him so bloody stupid. But mostly…mostly she’s pissed at him for the way he looked at her when he saw her tattoo…like…

Ginny knocks back a gulp of her drink, enjoying the way it burns on the way down. It’s unusual enough for Ginny to drink, even if she weren’t doing it in the dorms, but Antonia doesn’t say anything about it—ever willing to let people make their own mistakes.
Ginny stares down at the remaining liquid in her glass. With a sigh, she forces herself to admit that what she’s really angry about is the fact that she’d thought Harry had actually seen her as a person after all this time, and not just a tool to be used. Another avenue to help feed his prejudices.

She sighs. The disappointment is almost worse than the anger.

Merlin, she is sick of herself right now.

She forces herself to tune back in to what Antonia is saying about a letter she just received from her parents. Apparently some wizards came by their bookshop to get her family to pay a “protection fee” in these unsettled times. Common enough in Diagon and Knockturn Alleys these days apparently.

Antonia scoffs. “They didn’t count on my Auntie Victoria.”

Ginny huffs. “Probably were just hoping your family would be too scared to do anything,” she says scathingly.

“Fear is the weakling’s power,” Antonia says, sash drawn dramatically across her chest.

“More like power is the weakling’s ambition,” she counters.

Antonia looks at her in surprise, delicately penciled eyebrow crawling up under her fringe.

“What?” Ginny demands, shifting uncomfortably under her gaze.

Antonia smiles then, a dazzling spread of red lips over perfectly white teeth. “So you’re learning at last.”

Ginny scowls at her, not liking to be spoken to as if an unruly child, even as she knows Antonia has a valid point. Ginny hadn’t understood when she first met Antonia, mistaking ambition for maliciousness, unconventional thought for something as simple as evil. There is no easy corollary to be found between ordinary—normal?—and good. An entire world of nuance and subtlety and extraordinary exists in the spaces between.

She can see that. She just wishes other people could too.

“Don’t pout,” Antonia admonishes, her thumb pressing into Ginny’s chin before she sweeps down and presses her mouth to Ginny’s. Ginny stiffens in surprise, catching only the barest hint of lips that are dry and warm on hers, before Antonia spins away with a laugh, eyes back on her own reflection in the mirror.

It isn’t Ginny’s first kiss, not by any means, but somehow it feels like the most important.

She imagines vanilla and smoke burned into her skin like a form of approval.

“Come on,” Antonia says, moment already forgotten. “We mustn’t keep my adoring fans waiting.”

Ginny abandons her glass and follows Antonia down into The Parlor.

* * *

Ginny isn’t actively trying to avoid Harry. Not that she would have to. Their paths rarely cross, and if she maybe doesn’t linger after Quidditch practices and doesn’t spend any time in the cloister, that is more because she is far too busy with other things. Besides, Harry has that bloody map and will be able to do a much better job of avoiding her than she can.
After all, she isn’t really even angry anymore. Just…tired. Tired of all of it.

Of course, she doesn’t count on him actually showing up at the next Slug Club dinner.

She does a pretty good job avoiding him in the milling crowd, until he finally marches straight for her, touching her elbow and pulling her off to the side. She considers resisting, but doesn’t particularly want to make a scene.

It’s also possible that a tiny part is curious what he might say.

A very tiny part.

“Ginny,” he says, enough stubborn bravado on his face that she suspects he is honestly going to try to question her about Draco again. She feels something in her chest go very cold.

"Yes?" she asks, voice clipped.

His expression falters. “Look, Ginny,” he starts to say, but then a delicate chime is ringing to let them know it’s time to sit down for dinner. Ginny watches Harry for a beat longer, but when he still doesn’t manage to come up with anything to say, she walks away.

She takes a seat between Lucas and Flora. It’s easy to avoid talking to Harry, looking at him even, because there are plenty of interesting people here who aren’t him.

Between the first and second courses, Lucas leans into her ear and whispers something perfectly cutting about Blaise Zabini. She tilts her head back and laughs.

Harry doesn’t try approaching her again.

She tells herself she’s relieved.

* * *

One thing Ginny definitely isn’t doing is watching Draco.

She has no interest in Harry’s suspicions. Sure, Draco happens to look even more terrible than he did when he crashed Slughorn’s party, but what is that to her?

Still, one afternoon when she sees him slink down a deserted corridor, she follows him without giving it much thought. She glances around the corner just in time to see him go into a bathroom.

A girl’s bathroom.

What in the world is he up to?

Not that she cares.

She still inexplicably lingers in the hall. After fifteen minutes pass with Draco still not coming out, Ginny decides there’s really only one way she’s going to find out.

She’s just a girl trying to use a bathroom.

Inside, she discovers probably the last thing she expects.

Draco is sitting on a small ledge by the sinks. He’s crying, a heartbreakingly desolate kind of crying that shakes his entire frame. Myrtle looks up at Ginny from where she floats near Draco, frowning at
her before disappearing back into her stall.

Ginny lets the door close behind her with a thump, and Draco looks up at her in panic. “What the hell do you want, Weasley?” he demands, getting to his feet and swiping at his face.

He always calls her Weasley, never Weasel like he reserves for her brothers. She wonders if even Draco feels a small sliver of loyalty towards other Slytherin or if his maliciousness is simply all saved up for Ron. And Harry.

She’s spent the year watching what she can only acknowledge now as Draco and Harry letting their obsessive hatred drive them into the ground, but seeing him here, she can only think of joking about Draco out in the backyard with Ron that summer so long ago. He’s pretty much exactly the git he seems. She decides they’d gotten it wrong. Even Draco isn’t quite what you see at first glance.

She steps forward, and he lifts his wand.

She stops. “Are you going to curse me, Draco?”

His back stiffens, arm straightening, his robe falling back from his wrist.

Her eyes dart to the shadow of ink barely visible on his forearm. “Or maybe something worse?”

His entire body jerks, and he tugs his robe back into place, wand dropping. “Kill or be killed,” he says, voice hard and deadpan and completely free of irony.

She swallows against the burning in her throat. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s what I know.”

There’s always a choice, she thinks.

He sneers at her like the thought is apparent on her face. “Let me guess, Weasley. You’re going to lecture me on good and evil?”

She used to think it must be easy to live that way, everything split neatly in two, black and white, just like it is for Harry. But she’s beginning to see the inescapability of it, when you don’t have any grey.

“Get out of here, Weasley,” he says, but the edge is gone from his voice.

“It’s the girl’s bathroom,” she reminds him.

He drops down to his seat again, apparently resigned to her presence. He swipes angrily at his face. “If you tell anyone--,” he starts to bluster.

“Shut up,” she says, sitting down next to him. He’s a bit beautiful in his desolation, and even though she can’t fix this, doesn’t even really understand what is happening, she figures she can at least sit with him for a bit.

The tears continue for a while, and she just stares straight ahead, listening to the drip of Myrtle’s broken toilet.

He’ll hate her for this, she knows. Will always fear that she is simply waiting to use this against him.

She won’t though.

Because there’s a difference between not having power, and choosing not to use it.
In the middle of April, Antonia starts spending a lot of time in the common room. Ginny notices her sitting there on her way back to her room after Quidditch practice. It’s odd to see her there, and it only occurs to Ginny then how little time Antonia actually spends in their common room. She’s either in the library, The Parlor, or chumming it up at Slug Club events. Definitely not just sitting reading a book.

Ginny watches her for a couple nights, carefully remembering how often Antonia had always seemed to be there whenever Ginny turned around. Or at least she had been for a while, when it mattered. It takes her a bit to finally connect the dots.

The next evening, Ginny sits down next to Antonia without a word and reads a book. Or at least pretends to be reading a book. Just like Antonia is clearly only pretending to read a book. Her eyes are more often on the students surrounding them. Ginny tries to see what it is Antonia is looking for, because it’s abundantly clear now that Antonia is looking for, because she’s interested in. Theodora either.

Ginny looks around the room herself with fresh eyes. What would Antonia be interested in? Or who more likely. Ginny quickly dismisses all of the boys. Antonia never lacked for dates whenever she actually seems inclined to want one. And unlike many other girls at Hogwarts, Antonia never flirted or flaunted or giggled the way Lavender used to with her brother all over the castle. (Gag.)

So Ginny is left to focus on the girls. Smita is conspicuously absent. Possibly in the infirmary or greenhouses, if not for the rather conspicuous absence of Tobias as well. Ginny drops that train of thought as quickly as possible.

A few first year girls are lumped together in one corner swapping sweets or secrets, and Ginny tries not to think of her own complete lack of easy camaraderie her first year. A few other girls are studying in small groups. Some older girls are hanging on Zabini and the senior boys, laughing unnaturally loud and flipping their hair like a gnargle has gotten caught up in it. Ginny snorts in derision.

Honestly, nothing looks remotely interesting or out of place.

Ginny decides the best thing to do is simply tackle this head on. “I’ve always wondered exactly what it is you look for,” Ginny says.

Antonia glances over at her, a look of supreme boredom on her face. “I’m sorry?”

“In the people you pick.”

Antonia continues giving her a blank look, but Ginny has finally tied it all together in her head. Looking back, it’s so clear that Antonia, possibly even Theodora before her, had been watching Ginny long before she even knew what The Parlor was.

Ginny sits back in her chair. “What makes one person worthy of an invitation and another not?”

Instead of dissembling again, Antonia eventually nods her chin in Pansy Parkinson’s direction—prefect, center of everything, from the outside appearing to be at the front of her house, and definitively not a member of The Parlor. “What do you think her ambitions are?”

“Her ambitions?” Ginny echoes.
“Yes. What do you think she is trying to get? What does she want more than anything?”

Ginny doesn’t have the slightest idea, not having ever given Pansy much thought. Glancing back over at the girl, she watches as she touches Blaise’s arm, looking up at him through lowered lashes. When his attention wanders to someone else in the group, she glares daggers at the other person.

“She wants to be liked,” Ginny says. “Wants to be important and in the center of things.” Pansy seems to be deliberately ignoring Blaise now. “And apparently really really wants Blaise to think she’s good looking.”

Antonia nods. “Pretty much what every girl is raised to believe is important. Popularity. Attractiveness. Attention.”

Ginny frowns, wanting to argue but not sure she actually can. “Not the…ambitions you are looking for.”

Because if ambition is all Antonia’s looking for, there is more than enough to be found here. Slytherin is a house of ambition—dreams both big and small, with the tenacity, skills, and, some might say, arrogance to achieve them.

“And Nicola?” Antonia asks.

Ginny glances around, not actually sure who Nicola is.

Antonia juts her chin at a blond second year studying with a small group of other girls.

Ginny watches her for a while, the girl far more mysterious than Pansy. “I’m not sure.”

Antonia nods, patting Ginny on the shoulder. “Well, let me know when you figure it out.”

She walks off without another word, but Ginny is still perfectly aware that she’s just been given an assignment.

*   *   *

The first week in May they play their last match against Hufflepuff.

In many ways, the match feels like everything finally clicking together, a quiet coming together of everything they’ve been working on. Hufflepuff is by no means an easy team to play against, but it just seems like from the first moment of the game they can’t gain any traction against Slytherin.

It’s almost effortless.

The Snitch is slightly trickier, and Reiko isn’t the first to catch sight of it. Summerby starts the chase, but flubs a grab, giving the much lighter and quicker (and much more determined) Reiko a chance to catch up with him. They spin and spiral around the pitch, in and out of the stands executing tight cuts up and down with the movements of the frenzied Snitch. This time Ginny is disciplined enough to not stop and watch, trusting Reiko to do what needs to be done.

Ginny tucks the Quaffle into her chest and executes a daring last second drop right under one of the Hufflepuff Chasers. He may have been braced for a full on collision with Ginny, but what he gets instead is the Bludger that was on her tail.

There’s a grunt and a reaction from the crowd when he gets hit, but Ginny keeps moving towards the goal, winging the Quaffle to Thompson. He forwards it to Vaisey, who drops it into Ginny’s hands
far below as she sweeps underneath and flings the Quaffle into the unattended lower left ring.

Cheers sound again. They’ve no more than regrouped for a defensive effort when the crowd roars to its feet, and Ginny whips around to see Reiko triumphantly clutching the Snitch.

Next to Ginny, Vaisey whoops and then dives after Reiko.

Ginny hangs there a moment, eyes on the field and the crowd with her heartbeat pounding in her ears. Her team did this, the one she created and groomed.

By now they are hugging and celebrating down on the field and she drops down to join them.

As a group, they jump around and smack each other on the back and punch arms. It’s utter chaos. Ginny gives Martin a giant hug and dances a little jig with Reiko. Then she turns around and there is Thompson. She hesitates, holding back, but he steps forward and pulls in her into a hug. “You did it,” he says, and she knows he means the victory, but also the team, being captain.

She leans into him, because as much as she knows she made the right decision, she still misses him, misses her friend. “I never could have done this without you, Sean.”

“I’m pretty sure you could have,” he says. “But I appreciate being given the chance all the same.”

Like always, he’s making this easy for her. She thinks she probably didn’t appreciate that the way she should have.

Behind her, someone loudly clears their throat. She pulls back from Thompson to see George, Fred, and Ron all watching, their eyes narrowed.

Ginny curses under her breath.

Fred glares at Thompson. “Well, hello, little sister.”

Unsurprisingly, Thompson seems supremely unaffected by this pointed comment from her brother. He keeps his arm wrapped around her waist as he turns to regard them.

“Is this the boyfriend?” George asks Ron, fingers playing with his wand.

“Ex-boyfriend,” Thompson says carelessly, giving Ginny a quick squeeze before abandoning her to her relations. “See you later, Gin.”

The twins manage to instantly change from looking like they are trying to scare him off to deliberating if they need to defend her honor or something. She considers telling them that she’s the one who broke it off, but frankly, it’s none of their business.

Ron opens his mouth to say something, but Ginny cuts across him. “Don’t you even dare. Not when you spent the majority of the year with Lavender attached to your face.”

Ron scowls at her, the twins effectively distracted by making kissy faces at him.

She doesn’t even notice Harry standing with her brothers until he steps up behind her and says, “You were brilliant, Ginny.”

By the time she turns around to look, he’s melted back into the crowd.

*     *     *
With the Quidditch season pretty much finished, Ginny starts following Nicola around in her spare time. It’s hard to do without seeming creepy. Antonia had always just appeared strangely omniscient.

The picture of who Nicola is slowly gets clearer and clearer though, as Ginny notes the electives she’s taking, the books she checks out from the library. The doodles in the margins of her school notes. (What? Ginny needs this information and happens to possess of a bevy of sneaky skills learned from six older brothers.)

Once, Ginny notices her tuck away an elaborate diagram of what looks like a clock or some sort of gadget, each component carefully rendered.

Ginny even talks to her once or twice under the pretense of needing a spare bit of parchment or knocking the younger girl’s book bag to the ground. Nicola is generally polite if not slightly frosty. Ginny can’t be sure that’s not just discomfort, remembering her own early years here.

Mostly Ginny just sits in the common room as if this is something she does a lot. Sits and pretends to read while she is really eavesdropping on Nicola and her friends. She watches the way Nicola is mostly only pretending to be interested in the things her friends are talking about. The way her mind seems to be on something else entirely. The way she never speaks of the things that Ginny has learned are actually of interest to her, except once. One time she mentions the mechanics of a vanishing cabinet, her face lighting up with passion in a way that reminds Ginny so much of Smita, how she’s been since she finally discovered something that is just for her. Nicola’s friends just look bored though, one of them saying something cutting and stupid like, “I don’t care how it works! No wonder no one wants to date you!”

As the girls giggle at their friend, Ginny has to remind herself to just watch. But she’s finally beginning to realize just what Antonia saw, what made her start watching Nicola.

The next afternoon, Ginny tracks down Antonia in the library. “Want to go for a walk?”

Antonia raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t comment, grabbing her robe and following her outside. It’s finally firmly spring, even as a cool wind still sweeps up the mountain with the last lingering ghost of snow on its breath.

“You’ve finally decided about Nicola,” Antonia surmises, chin tucked down into her scarf.

Ginny glances down at soft new flowers pressing up through the dirt. Another week and the hill will be a riot of color. “Yes.”

“And?”

Ginny stops, not meaning to be reticent, just still trying to wrap her mind around something lingering just out of reach. “I think you should invite her.”

Antonia pauses a few steps ahead of her, looking back. “Why?”

This is the hard part, trying to put into words what she’s been weaving together the last few weeks. “Because…” Ginny lifts her chin. “She deserves to know she isn’t alone.”

“Alone?” Antonia asks, one eyebrow lifting.

Ginny swallows. “In wanting more.”

Antonia’s face doesn’t betray anything, and for a painful moment Ginny thinks she’s gotten this completely wrong. Only then Antonia smiles, looping her arm through Ginny’s and pulling her up
along the path.

Antonia leans her head towards Ginny’s. “Theodora used to say, ‘The world isn’t kind to girls with strange ambitions.’”

Ginny processes that for almost half a loop around the lake, all of the girls in her life cycling though her head. She considers what might be defined as strange and what isn’t. She thinks particularly on Pansy and her eternal search for attention, Hermione and her hatred of Fleur.

“It isn’t particularly kind to girls with expected ambitions either,” she observes.

“No,” Antonia agrees. “But for some people The Parlor wouldn’t mean anything other than status. For others…”

Ginny nods. “It could mean everything.” Give them the chance to blossom into something totally unexpected.

Antonia’s hand tightens on her arm. “Yes.”

Ginny looks at Antonia, wondering if The Parlor had somehow saved even her. Antonia stares right back, and Ginny finds she can’t quite imagine her as anything less than completely comfortable in her own skin. But, Ginny can never quite forget that they were all once bewildered little eleven-year-old girls.

“Next Wednesday,” Antonia says as they finish their loop around the lake. “Tilly is going to unveil her latest creation.”

Ginny nods. “How will you do it?”

She laughs, letting go of Ginny’s arm and heading for the castle. “I won’t. You will.”

Of course she will. This whole thing, after all, has always had the feeling of a test. A test for what, Ginny still isn’t sure.

But it’s one she desperately wants to pass.

*     *     *

Ginny passes Nicola in the halls the next day, stopping long enough to give her a nod of acknowledgement. “Nicola.”

The girl’s eyes are a bit wide to be given obvious attention from an older student, and an older student who is associated with The Parlor to boot. Nicola manages to nod back in response, her chin lifting just the slightest bit as her friends blatantly stare.

Ginny smiles to herself as she continues on down the hall.

When she rounds the next corner, she nearly smacks straight into Hermione. Ginny ruefully shakes her head. The universe always seems to be waiting to knock you down a peg the moment you start feeling too important.

“Ginny!” Hermione says, grabbing her arm for more than just settling herself.

“What’s wrong?” Ginny asks, not liking the sheen of desperation in Hermione’s eyes.

“Have you seen Harry?” she asks.
“No,” Ginny says.

She wrings her hands. “I can’t find him anywhere,” she says, beginning to sound panicked.

Ginny frowns, not so much at Harry’s disappearance as Hermione’s panic. “What’s going on?"

“I don’t know. Something with Malfoy and Snape.”

Ginny feels a beat of foreboding, remembering the last time she’d seen Draco, worn thin and on edge, and Harry, brittle and at the end of his temper. Add Snape to the mix and it sounds a lot like worst-case scenario.

Hermione isn’t finished. “Malfoy’s in hospital.”

Merlin. “But you can’t find Harry?”

“We’ve looked everywhere.”

Not everywhere, Ginny thinks. “Sorry,” she says, shrugging.

Hermione crumples a little, as if Ginny had been her last hope. Ginny waits for Hermione to walk away before turning and heading straight for the cloister.

She reminds herself the entire way there that she doesn’t care. She’s still annoyed with him after all.

She still keeps walking.

He’s right where she knew he would be. She isn’t sure what she expected—maybe angry pacing, broken things on the floor, Harry’s face flushed with indignation—but not this, Harry sitting staring vaguely at his hands. There’s a Potions book sitting open on the ground near his foot, only this one is clean and new.

“Harry?”

He doesn’t respond, his shoulders lifting heavily as if he’s having a hard time catching his breath.

“Everyone is looking for you,” she says.

When there is still no reaction from him, she crosses over to him. It’s only then that she notices a smudge of something on his hands that looks disturbingly like blood. She crouches down in front of him, her eyes sweeping his body for injury. He looks unharmed, if not completely panicked. Without a second thought, she whispers a spell, wiping his hands clean.

He stares down at them as if they are still stained.

She frowns, unease settling like a heavy stone in her stomach. “What’s happened?”

He just shakes his head.

Shifting her weight, she reaches out, tentatively taking both of his shaking hands in hers.

His fingers squeeze around hers, almost painful. “Ginny,” he breathes.

She leans in closer, thankful to hear him speak. “Yeah?”

He looks up, his eyes meeting hers and holding, almost as inescapable as his grip on her hands. “Tell
me again that you don’t think I could ever kill anyone.”

She feels everything inside of her go cold and hollow at his words, the way they are almost a plea.

“Tell me,” he insists.

She finds, in that moment, that she doesn’t have any reassurances to give him. So instead, she shifts forward and wraps her arms around him. He’s still for only a moment before he grabs her back, pulling her tight against him.

She feels his face turn into her neck, feels him breathe in deep. “I’m sorry,” he says, and she doesn’t know what he’s apologizing for. For the blood, for their fight. “I’m sorry.”

She should still be angry with him, but she’s never been able to do what she should around him. So instead she squeezes her eyes shut and holds on with everything she has.

* * *

Word makes it around the castle that Harry almost killed Draco in an illegal duel, rumor made only more rife when Draco emerges from the infirmary looking paler and more worn even than usual.

When Ginny passes him in the common room, he looks at her with hatred in his eyes, like this is somehow all her fault.

She wonders if somehow it is. She feels strangely besieged from all sides and it’s a great comfort to know that she has The Parlor to go to. Somewhere she isn’t judged or whispered about, but just allowed to be. She wonders how selfish it makes her that she never considered how much other girls could benefit from that as well.

On Wednesday evening, Antonia waits by The Parlor entrance as Ginny approaches Nicola in the common room. She touches her shoulder.

Nicola looks up, her eyes darting momentarily past Ginny to Antonia.

“Are you ready?” Ginny asks.

Nicola looks down at her hands for a moment, seeming to take a deep breath. When she looks up at Ginny again, her eyes are bright. “Yes,” she says, voice steady even as her hands are twisting in her lap.

Ginny smiles. “Then come with me.”

They walk together to The Parlor door, and Ginny has the strangest moment of deja vu, everything wrapping back around to the first time Antonia let her through this door. Of course, Ginny had no idea what she was getting into at the time. Nicola, to judge from the look on her face, knows something incredibly special is about to happen. Ginny almost envies that.

Antonia taps the door with her wand, the door opening onto the dim staircase twining downstairs. Ginny gestures for Nicola to go first.

Down at the bottom of the stairs, the girls all turn to look, taking in the newest member to their group. Nicola pauses like her nerve may be failing her, and Ginny puts a gentle hand on her back and guides her towards the complicated contraption at the rear of the room.

Tilly stands in front of her still, explaining her latest concoction and the alchemic theories behind it.
She passes around a tray of small glasses.

They all sip in wonder at the airy drink. It’s almost more gas than liquid, a sparkle on Ginny’s tongue before it slides down her throat like silk.

“Outdone yourself as usual, Tilly,” Ginny says, feeling the light press of giddiness.

Tilly gives Ginny a distracted smile as she bites contemplatively at her thumbnail. “It still isn’t quite right.”

“Oh?” Ginny asks.

Tilly frowns at the still. “Something with the vapor inlet.” She shakes her head. “Equipment construction has always been my weak point.”

Next to her, Nicola looks surprised, like she’s not used to anyone openly admitting their weaknesses. She glances at Ginny as if looking for direction, and Ginny just looks back at her as if to say, Well, what are you going to do about it? She doesn’t remember Antonia ever making anything easy for her. It’s one of the kindest things she ever did for her.

Nicola bites her lip. “I don’t know much of anything about alchemy, but I’m pretty comfortable with machines.”

Tilly looks up at her in surprise. “Yeah?”

Nicola nods, her cheeks flushing. “Can I take a closer look?”

Ginny watches them walk off to the still, Nicola pointing to things and Tilly explaining.

It’s clear that there’s something bright and brilliant trying to get out of Nicola. Ginny sees how easy it might be for all of that to fade if it’s ignored and suppressed for too long.

“IT feels good, doesn’t it?” Antonia asks, stepping up next to Ginny.

Ginny nods. “She seems a natural fit.”

Antonia gives her a sharp look, but doesn’t press. They walk over and find seats on a settee.

“I’ve been thinking about Smita,” Ginny admits.

“Your friend,” Antonia says. “The quiet one who wants to be a mediwitch.”

Ginny doesn’t bother to be surprised that Antonia knows about that. She feels like there is very little that happens in this castle that Antonia doesn’t know about.

“I was thinking about her being part of The Parlor,” Ginny says in a rush, feeling at once presumptuous and guilty for not having said anything earlier.

Antonia doesn’t seem offended, instead giving Ginny a long look. “Do you think she needs it?”

Ginny blinks, her brain tripping a bit over what seems an obvious question. She thinks about Smita’s passion, the people she has bending over backwards to help her make it a reality—Pomfrey, Hagrid, Snape, Slughorn, Sprout. A mediwitch is a noble and difficult profession, but there’s nothing strange about a girl wanting to be one. An ambition, yes, but not an unusual one.

“No,” Ginny admits, slumping back in her seat. The only reason to bring Smita here is to make
Ginny’s own life easier, not hers. She sighs.

Antonia touches her arm. “Sometimes you just can’t hold on to people, no matter how hard you try.”

Ginny nods. “I think I’m finally beginning to get that,” she says. “Even if it’s more tempting to just keep being petulant.”

Antonia laughs. “I know exactly what you mean.”

Ginny peers over at her, something in her quickening. It suddenly feels like time to ask the one question she’s always held back. “Did you need it?”

Antonia’s eyes widen. “The Parlor?”

Ginny nods.

Antonia stares over at the other girls for a while. “Desperately,” she admits, and for the first time, Ginny sees the shadow of it in her eyes, the doubt Antonia has lived with, has worked to conquer. Still works on.

Ginny wraps her hand around Antonia’s.

“You know what’s strange?” Ginny says. “I’m only now realizing that you never would have invited me to The Parlor if Quidditch was my only ambition.”

“No,” Antonia says, that mysterious smile playing about her lips again. “I wouldn’t have.”

Ginny glances around the room. “Caroline,” she says, her eyes coming to a rest on the younger girl where she sits with her hands pale and aimless in her lap, as always sitting in the shadow of Astoria and her parents’ expectations.

Antonia nods, a worry line appearing between her brows. “Sometimes it can only mean so much.”

*     *     *

In the middle of May, Gryffindor faces off against Ravenclaw in the final match of the season.

They play without Harry, who is still serving detentions with Snape for almost killing Draco. As far as Ginny has heard, he hadn’t tried to fight it, and she doesn’t know if that is all guilt over what he did, or just another sign how wrong things are with him, that Quidditch just doesn’t mean that much to him anymore.

She hasn’t had a chance to talk to him again, so she just doesn’t know.

Without Harry, Gryffindor soundly loses. Ron’s new confidence in the goal doesn’t mean anything in the face of a last minute replacement Seeker. The much more experienced Cho easily gets to the Snitch first.

The only blessing is that the match is short.

In the stands next to Ginny, Reiko is slowly squeezing the life out of her arm. “We did it, we did it, we did it,” she says, almost chanting under her breath.

“Yes,” Ginny says, staring down at the Ravenclaw team celebrating down on the pitch. “We did.”

The Quidditch Cup is theirs.
Vaisey picks Reiko up with a whoop. Thompson puts an arm over Graham’s shoulders, ruffling the kid’s hair.

It’s not exactly the way Ginny wanted to win it, but she’s careful not to let that show. Soon enough her teammates’ enthusiasm is enough to let herself get swept up in the celebration. Literally so when Bassenthwaite tosses her over his shoulder and carries her up to the castle.

Ginny curses at him and threatens him with a dire end, but he just laughs and starts singing Weasley is our Queen under his breath as they lead the charge up to the castle, the rest of their triumphant house trailing behind.

Destined for Mungo’s special wards, her team, each and every one of them. Mental.

Down in the common room, Bassenthwaite finally puts Ginny down on a large winged chair in front of the fire. Someone must have raided the kitchens because food is starting to appear.

As head of house, Snape puts in a quick appearance. The celebration has barely begun, still quite tame all things considered. Snape brings with him the cup that usually sits in his office, the one that will remain there for yet another year. He places it carefully on the table in front of Ginny’s throne.

“Well done, Miss Weasley,” he says, smug in his delight almost to the point of smiling. “Clearly you were the right choice.”

She’s taken aback, feeling her cheeks warm, but recovers quickly. “Does this mean no more homework for the rest of the term?” Ginny asks, arching an eyebrow at him.

He gives her an indulgent smile. “No, it just means I expect nothing less than an Outstanding on your OWL.”

“Ugh,” Ginny complains, slouching back in her chair as she imagines even more homework than before.

Snape’s eyes linger on her for a moment. “I have every faith in you, Miss Weasley.”

She’s strangely touched. “Thank you, sir.”

He really has been a great DADA professor. She’s about to tell him so when something seems to catch his eye, his face falling serious and hard once more, so quickly and completely that she wonders if she imagined his openness before.

“Just...mind the curfew, Miss Weasley,” he says, voice once again brisk and cold.

She watches him walk off. “Yes, sir.”

Snape has barely left the room when mysterious flasks start appearing. Ginny smiles. Tilly’s bound to make a small fortune tonight.

She’s just going to make sure no one ends up with any unwanted tattoos.

*  *  *

The rest of the term flies by in a flurry of revision and cramming and even more homework. The only blessing is that there are no more Quidditch practices, which means more free time, but that just makes Ginny even more tense, lacking any escape on her broom.

She’s already counting down the days to the start of the next season, scribbling ideas down in a
notebook when she should be studying. She won’t ever really feel completely accomplished until she beats Harry fair and square. Next season will be her last chance.

She’s in the common room studying with Smita and Tobias one evening when she feels inexplicable heat in her back pocket. The burning sensation is so unfamiliar that for a moment she wonders if some rogue spell has caught her. Only as she pops to her feet in surprise does she finally remember.

Pulling the galleon out, she holds it out flat on her palm. The DA hasn’t met in over a year now. She can’t explain why she’s still carrying it around like it means something.

She doesn’t miss Tobias’ hand straying towards his pocket as if maybe he’s felt a little heat as well.

Peering down at it, Ginny can see that the serial numbers around the edge have changed, asking the DA to meet now.

Ginny automatically starts stowing her books back in her bag. “Ready?”

“No.” Tobias is still sitting, arms now crossed over his chest.

Ginny frowns in confusion. “What?”

“I’m not going,” he says.

Ginny doesn’t have time to argue with him, turning instead to Smita. She starts to shift up and off the couch, Tobias’ hand stopping her.

Tobias shoots Smita a sharp glance. “The last time you helped them you nearly died.”

Ginny wants to ask when the DA became them and not us, but it’s a naive question. They had never really been a part of the DA, or at least not completely accepted. A year of walking past each other in the halls like strangers hasn’t done much to repair that.

“You don’t owe them anything,” he says.

Them? Ginny can’t help but think, Or me?

Smita’s eyes are wide, darting back and forth between Tobias and Ginny as if this were an exam she hadn’t been allowed to study for. It’s painful to see the normally steady Smita so uncertain.

Ginny lifts a hand, plastering a smile on her face. “It’s fine, Smita. You stay.”

“Ginny--,” Smita protests.

“Really,” Ginny says, reaching out and squeezing her hand. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

She turns and walks away.

*   *   *

Ginny’s late by the time she makes it to the meeting point.

Hermione looks incredibly relieved to see her, her hair a frenzied halo around her head. “Ginny, thank goodness.”

Ginny frowns, reaching out to touch Hermione’s arm. “What’s going on?”
Hermione’s hands flap with agitation. “Harry’s left the castle with Dumbledore, but he’s absolutely convinced that Malfoy is going to try something tonight.”

Ginny feels her jaw clench, but holds her tongue. She’s made way too much of a fuss about wanting to help the DA to slouch back to the common room now just because she doesn’t want anything to do with Harry’s mad Draco paranoia. She’ll just see this out and give Harry a piece of her mind when he gets back.

Because he will be back.

“Take this,” Hermione says, shoving a flask with no more than a single drop of potion into her hand. “If something happens, take it.”

Ginny lifts the glistening liquid to the light. “Is that--?”

“Liquid luck,” Hermione confirms. “Let’s pray we don’t need it.”

Two hours in, it seems incredibly unlikely that she’ll ever need the potion. Doing watch duty on an empty stretch of hallway seems to require little to no luck. Just something to keep Ginny awake. She paces down the hallway, smiling at Neville as she passes.

The total blackness that swallows everything seems to come from nowhere.

“Ginny?” she hears Neville say.

She reaches for him, but before she can make contact she hears a thud and a crash, feels the shift of air from bodies moving swiftly nearby.

At the first echoing scream, Ginny gropes for the flask in her pocket and downs the potion without a second thought.

In her attempt to be free from the stifling darkness, she gets separated from Neville.

She turns a corner to see what takes her several moments to identify as members of the Order facing off with what can only be Death Eaters. Here. In Hogwarts.

There are a million questions swirling in her mind, but they seem to float away, leaving behind the protective curses that she thinks of just the moment she needs to.

One of the Death Eaters doesn’t look right, the way he holds his body, the sounds he makes. He stops in the midst of the fighting, eyes latching on to Ginny down the long hall. She understands in that moment that he isn’t fully human, his face twisted and feral. A slow predatory smile spreads across his face as he looks at her.

Ginny takes a step back.

The beast is unnaturally fast though, Ginny’s hand fumbling for her wand. Her brother Bill appears almost from nowhere, stepping in front of Ginny, bellowing at her to get back. Ginny barely gets a chance to glance at Bill and the impressive swish of his wand before she turns and runs.

She finds Luna, stands side by side with her against a Death Eater, nothing but a wisp of luck keeping them on their feet. Eventually the luck runs out though, a curse catching Ginny and half-burying her in rubble. Or more likely the luck is still holding, because she’s pretty sure that curse should have killed her. She ends up with some bruises and a pretty solid blow to the head, but is still breathing. That’s lucky enough.
Before she can completely extricate herself from the rubble, she sees Draco dart by, his face terrified. For a second she doesn’t understand what’s happening. Snape is only a few steps behind. She stumbles up to him, one hand still pressed to her bleeding head.

“Professor?” she asks, thankful to see someone she can trust in all this chaos.

He slows only long enough to look her over, his jaw tightening. People are yelling in the distance. She turns slightly at what sounds like Harry bellowing, but she can’t quite make out the words. When had he returned to the castle?

Her eyes widen as Snape points his wand at her, his curse hitting her in the chest and pushing her back out of the way. Her luck still must be holding a little, because she lands with inexplicable care, not slamming into the debris behind her, but clearly out of Snape’s way.

Still, her head is woozy enough that she must black out, because when she next opens her eyes, the dust has settled, the castle ominously quiet around her. She staggers out into the main hall to find students streaming out the front doors, barely a whisper between them.

Everything seems to slow as Ginny exits the front doors, following the flow of bodies. People melt out of her way, and soon enough she has an unobstructed view of the sick tableau.

It’s wrong, so wrong on every level her tired brain can function on. Albus Dumbledore was never meant to look so…broken.

Harry sits at Dumbledore’s side, the two of them frozen like statues. Her feet carry her across the distance even as everything in her revolts at the idea of being anywhere near the wizard who is now just a body.

Up close Dumbledore looks almost strangely peaceful, if not for the grotesque twist of his leg up under his body.

There’s whimpering in the crowd around them, faces lifted away from the body towards something she hadn’t noticed in the face of Dumbledore’s gory death. In a haze, Ginny follows their gazes up to the sky.

The Dark Mark hovers over the Astronomy Tower like a green stain.


Dumbledore dead.

Draco.

Kill or be killed.

Ginny clutches her stomach, feeling the acrid burn of bile in her throat.

Harry is still just sitting next to Dumbledore’s broken body like he may never move again. She kneels down next to him, tentatively touching his shoulder. “Harry?”

He doesn’t respond, but she can see his face now, completely desolate as if his entire world has been ripped away.

The whispers around them are getting louder, people pressing closer, and Ginny is filled with the
urge to get Harry away from all of this. “Come on, Harry,” she says gently, wrapping an arm around him.

He doesn’t protest, letting her urge him to his feet like his body is just going through the motions. She carefully guides him through the crowd and up to the entryway. They don’t talk on their way up through the castle, just hold on to each other as they climb around debris, step over spots of what looks suspiciously like blood. She thinks Harry’s body next to hers may be the only thing that keeps her moving.

“You’re bleeding,” Harry says as they near the entrance to the hospital wing, the first sign that he even knows she is here.

The circumstances are horrific and surreal enough that it takes Ginny a moment to understand what he’s talking about. She swipes at the blood now mixing with tears down her cheek—when had she started crying? “I’m okay,” she says, voice hoarse.

He regards her for a long moment, as if his brain is taking a bit of time to process something. Frankly, she’s relieved to see him beginning to come back into focus. She drops her arm from his back, assuming he doesn’t need her help any more. He surprises her by catching her hand as she tries to step away.

“Harry?” she asks.

He touches her face, a ghost of sensation just below her injury. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

She nods, her throat feeling thick. “I was lucky.”

He looks like he wants to say something more, but instead closes his eyes for a moment, taking a breath like he’s gathering himself up to do something.

With one last squeeze of her hand, he lets go of her and walks into the infirmary.

She follows him inside.

Everyone is crowded around a bank of beds, Neville and someone else Ginny doesn’t recognize lying injured.

Mum sweeps her up into a crushing hug before she’s fully in the room. “Ginny! No one knew where you were!”

“I’m fine, Mum,” she mumbles, her arms nonetheless hugging her back. “Is everyone…” She looks around, and it’s only then in the awkward silence that she recognizes him, Bill lying in that bed, his face a mess of rips and tears. Remembers the sound of a werewolf’s cry as he stepped in front of her.

She makes a rough sound of protest, crossing over to the bed and grabbing onto Fleur as she nears.

Harry is still standing in the doorway, waiting to deliver the devastating last blow. “Dumbledore is dead.”

The words cut across the room like a sword.

“No,” someone protests.

“It’s true,” Ginny says, voice thick with tears.

Professor Sprout sits down with a heavy thump, Hagrid bursting into noisy tears.
But Harry isn’t done. “Snape killed him.”

Ginny’s head lifts with a jerk. Harry steadily meets her gaze like this is something important he needs her to understand.

“Malfoy let the Death Eaters in,” he says, “but he couldn’t… Snape did it.”

The room dissolves into a mix of denials and cries of distress and adults looking more lost and confused than they have the right to look.

And Bill…her big brother, her protector, sitting in that bed looking like…

Ginny feels herself sway on her feet.

Pomfrey touches Ginny’s shoulder. “Let me look at you, dear,” she says, cheeks wet with tears.

Ginny, filled with an unnatural listlessness, lets herself be pulled away.

* * *

Dawn creeps over the sill of the infirmary window. Nearly everyone from the Order has left, out in the world scrambling to figure out what to do next.

Pomfrey easily knit the gashes and erased the bruises from Ginny’s body, but the ache is still there. Ginny’s glad. It feels like it’s the only thing keeping everything sharp and focused.

Dumbledore is dead and it’s hard not to think this means Voldemort has all but won.

If not for Harry. The one last person standing in his way.

She thinks that is more weight than anyone has the right to ask a sixteen-year-old to shoulder.

Ginny wishes she could say she’s surprised with the way everything has turned out, that Dumbledore’s crumpled body at the base of the tower is something completely beyond the realm of her imagination or understanding of the things swirling all about them. Instead she feels a sort of settling as if she’s just been waiting, as if they all have been.

Like it’s finally all beginning.

Gingerly climbing out of bed, she crosses over to sit next to Bill. Fleur sleeps in the next bed, lying still enough for Ginny to wonder if Mum had been forced to slip her a sleeping draft.

Bill stirs in his sleep, sounds caught in his throat. Taking his hand in both of hers, Ginny leans in close to his ravaged face and whispers, “Weasley,” an affectionate accusation.

He stills, his hand tightening around hers.

Sometimes it really is that simple.

* * *

The Parlor is subdued.

Ginny found Antonia waiting for her in the common room once she was released from the infirmary. She followed Antonia downstairs, looked at the faces of the girls waiting down there, and felt something inside her ease in a way she would be hard pressed to explain.
No one pushes her for details. They are just here, each of them somberly taking a glass from Tilly.

Antonia stands, fine crystal goblet raised in her hand. “To the fallen.”

There’s no talk of who or what’s happening, simply an acknowledgement of lives lost, of the lives that will be lost.

They lift their glasses.

Ginny takes a small sip, trying not to choke against the tightness in her throat that feels like it will never go away.

Soon after, The Parlor empties out, no one having the stomach for late night projects or frivolous conversation.

Ginny gives Nicola a tight smile when she stops by to say goodnight.

She lingers, glass twisting in her fingers, thoughts twining and building and struggling. She gazes at the light caught in the crystal, the patterns it casts.

Staring unseeing, it takes a while for her to focus on the green faded stain of ink of her tattoo under the play of light. She’d long since stopped bothering to cover it up. She doesn’t even remember when anymore. Somehow it has just become part of her. Not a mistake, not even a reminder. Almost as if it’s always been there.

Looking at the tattoo, she finds herself thinking about Draco. She isn’t sure how she should be feeling. Embarrassed to have defended him, horrified that he let those killers in. But mostly she just remembers him crying in the bathrooms and the grim beat of something like satisfaction she’d felt when Harry revealed that Draco hadn’t been able to kill Dumbledore, hadn’t been able to strike that final blow, no matter how much depended on it. *Kill or be killed.* It was very un-Slytherin of him to put something ahead of his own survival.

Or, more likely, their definitions have been the weak things.

Pushing to her feet, Ginny walks over to Millicent where she works at an easel, seemingly the only one able to settle to any activity. Millicent shoots her a withering glare as she approaches, and Ginny ignores it, letting her eyes roam over the painting taking shape. It fills her with something vivid and aching, as if the painting understands exactly the things swirling around inside her head.

“I was wondering if you could help me with something,” Ginny says.

Millicent ignores her, continuing to add painful, tense lines to the growing composition.

There was a time Ginny probably would have been put off by that. Now, she’s content to let Millicent be Millicent. She lifts her arm into Millicent’s eye line.

Millicent frowns down at the sloppy green lines on her arm. Ginny wonders if she is most offended by the artlessness of it. “You want me to get rid of it?” she asks, voice incredulous.

“No,” Ginny says. “I want a new one.”

Millicent is clearly surprised, brush lowering. “And you want me to, what, design it?”

Ginny looks at the canvas, strange, powerful feelings filling her as she does. “Yes. If you’d be willing to.”
Millicent stares back at Ginny.

Ginny lifts one shoulder, not wanting to pressure her. “Maybe just consider it over the summer.”

After another long moment, Millicent nods.

Ginny gives her a weak smile in thanks and walks back across the room, very aware that Antonia is watching her over the rim of her goblet. It feels as if Antonia has always been watching. “I’m going to bed.”

Antonia gets to her feet. “Me too.”

She follows her closely up the stairs. At the top, she puts a hand on Ginny’s arm to stop her. “Give me your hand.”

Ginny gives her a dubious look. “What?”

Antonia smiles, the one that means things are about to get really interesting. “Don’t you trust me?”

Despite the smile, Ginny does trust Antonia. Probably more than anyone else here at Hogwarts. Reluctantly, she holds out her hand.

The knife appears in a flash, the blade drawing across Ginny’s palm before she can even pull back.

“What the hell, Antonia?” Ginny says, blinking against the vicious sting of pain.

Antonia has a firm grip on her hand, staring down at the blood welling on Ginny’s palm. Her lips are moving, the words inaudible. Ginny stills completely, finally realizing the importance of what is happening, the kind of spell that requires a blood price.

Antonia slaps her bleeding palm up against the door, blood smearing the surface. She murmurs the incantation Ginny has heard her say only twice before, only this time, with Ginny’s palm against the surface, a line of runes light up in the wood.

And Ginny understands. She’s just been given membership to this sacred space. She feels humbled by it, but also incredibly thankful.

Like everyone else down there, Ginny has been saved by The Parlor time and again.

“I don’t envy you these next couple of years,” Antonia says, her face more grave than Ginny has ever seen it. “But if anyone can handle it, it’s you.”

Antonia takes Ginny’s face in her hands, pressing her lips to her forehead like a benediction. “Take good care of them.”

The next morning, Ginny wakes to the sharp pang of pain in her hand. She can heal the wound easily enough, but she doesn’t want this to be easy. Easy was never the point of anything that happened in The Parlor. Instead, she wraps her hand in clean gauze and waits for it to heal on its own.

She catches some of the other girls eyeing her, maybe as if wondering if she’s somehow forgotten how to use magic, but other people’s judgments don’t really seem to matter anymore. The whispers and glances that follow her just flow off.

* * *
In the wake of Dumbledore’s death, all examinations are cancelled. There is briefly talk of sending all of the students home immediately, and many students do disappear in the days following, but most have been allowed to stay for the funeral.

Ginny spends her free time visiting Bill.

One day as she sits next to a sleeping Bill, Smita appears with a tray of sandwiches. “He’ll be asleep for a while,” she says. “Let’s have some food.”

Ginny lets her lead her out into the hall. They sit nibbling sandwiches for a while when Smita blurts out, “I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

Ginny frowns at her. “What do you mean? You’ve been great, helping with Bill.”

“No,” Smita says, dropping her sandwich back down on the plate. “Not about Bill.” She looks determinedly up at Ginny. “About not going with you that night.”

Ginny’s mouth pops open in surprise.

“I should have been there,” Smita says.

“No,” Ginny says. “You shouldn’t.”

Smita looks back at Ginny with more open confusion and sadness than she can ever remembering seeing before. “Why not?”

“As much as it pains me to ever say this, Tobias was right.”

Ginny remembers Smita lying unconscious on the floor of the Department of Mysteries far too well. Tobias doesn’t even really know, doesn’t comprehend how close it actually had been. And that night in the castle, it had been worse. Ginny knows with absolutely certainty that the only reason she’s still alive is thanks to her brother and a tiny drop of brewed luck.

“Just don’t tell him I said that.”

Smita gives her a watery smile. “Wouldn’t want to make him even more difficult to live with.”

“No,” Ginny agrees. “We wouldn’t want that.”

Ginny grabs her hand, squeezing it tight. She feels the twinge of pain in her palm. A reminder.

*Take good care of them.*

Even if that means letting go.

Ginny has tried to pretend a few Sundays at the lake would be enough to keep things as they were between them, but the truth of it is sitting right here in front of her. It has been all along. Ginny misses Smita, and their lives have taken off in different directions, but Smita is clearly happy. And so is Ginny.

There’s nothing to be sorry about.

“Thank you,” Ginny says.

Smita shakes her head. “For what?”
“For being here now.”

Together, they sit and finish their sandwiches.

* * *

Dumbledore’s funeral is held on a day that is otherwise perfect. Blue skies, slight breeze, the tiniest hint of summer in the air. Ginny sits near the back with her family, Bill reclining stiffly in a chair with a cane in one hand, Fleur sitting tall and beautiful and immovable next to him—his rock.

Ginny is certain she has never seen so many dignitaries and important-looking people in all her life. They seem to take forever to solemnly file in, and Fred and George take the time to recount every brilliantly mental thing they’ve ever seen Dumbledore do.

Neither Mum or Dad try to quiet them, and Ginny’s glad. Hagrid’s noisy crying and the twins’ carrying voices feel real, and Ginny thinks that Dumbledore would approve of that a thousand times over in comparison to the stuffy fake solemnity of some of the people filing by. Ginny meets each of their scandalized looks with a steady stare.

She sees Harry sneak in from the side with Ron and Hermione, as if refusing to become part of any spectacle that might detract from why they are all here. He looks composed and calm, but when he scans the crowd, catching her eye, she somehow knows exactly how much he is struggling to appear that way. She holds his gaze for a long moment.

She has no idea what he may see in her face, but he gives her a tight smile and takes a seat, disappearing into the crowd.

The program begins a few minutes later, various people talking about Dumbledore, what a hero he was, and none of it sounds much like the wizard who caught Ginny eavesdropping in Grimmauld Place or who liked to talk nonsense during the Great Feasts.

She wonders if it’s always like this at funerals, rewriting people after the fact.

In the lull afterwards, she turns to her dad and asks, “What happens now?”

Dad looks straight ahead, his face pinched. She wonders if he is thinking of the last war. Of how many funerals he’s already attended. Of how many more there might be.

He turns and looks at her, holding her gaze. “Now we go home.”

And see what move Tom makes next.
Sixth Year - Part One

Chapter Summary

if i stumble, they’re gonna eat me alive

The Burrow is quiet. For all the people packed inside, it’s the land around that is stifling in its stillness. The wards and magics protecting them keep out everything, even belligerent gnomes and innocuous songbirds. Anything can be a weapon.

There is nothing harmless left.

Ginny feels like she is living inside a suspended breath—everyone waiting, waiting, even as they refuse to discuss what. (She’s too young, let’s not worry them, it can’t be like last time, it can’t--)

Ginny escapes outside as often as she can, and not just to avoid Fleur’s obsessive wedding plans. She walks into the trees and brush until she can feel static rising on her skin and knows she’s nearing the limits. The wards enclosing the property are the most powerful things she has ever felt, a hum in her flesh that part of her admires even as she resents them.

She wonders who built them. Once, she would have assumed it was Dumbledore (his body crumpled at the bottom of the tower, Harry leaning over with tears unashamedly on his face). She shakes her head and forces herself to mentally run through the list of Aurors Harry Potter has at his beck and call. None of the names stand out though, and there’s something of the flavor on her tongue that makes her think of Molly Prewett.

Holding out a hand in front of her, Ginny touches the field of energy marking the boundary, feeling the tingle build in her flesh.

“Ginny.”

She starts at the sound of Harry’s voice, but doesn’t turn. She’s a bit surprised he’s followed her. It seems like he’s been avoiding everyone since he was brought here by the Order.

Since Mad-Eye fell out of the sky.

Her fingers curl, the ward crackling against the intrusion.

Harry pulls her back before her hand can burn. “Careful,” he admonishes.

She wants to laugh. A Gryffindor telling a Slytherin to be careful. The irony is painful.

She folds her tingling fingers into a fist. “I hate feeling trapped like this.”

She misses the freedom of her broom and the wind in her hair, but most of all being at school where she feels like a person and not a daughter to be protected and caged and not trusted.

Harry’s fingers tighten on her shoulders briefly before he lets go. “I’m sorry,” he says, and she can hear it, the guilt dragging on his words.
Ginny sighs. She would have been part of the detail escorting him here herself, had she anything resembling a choice. But part of being the Chosen One seems to be absorbing all the blame, so she doesn’t bother correcting him.

*Not everything is about you,* she wants to say. Only right now, she thinks it may actually be.

“They’re going to wonder where you are,” she says instead, turning to look at him. Worry is more like it. Mum has barely let Harry out of her sight since she heard of their plans *(we’re not going back to Hogwarts)*.

“I know,” he says, tugging at the bottom edge of his shirt, the gesture jerky with guilt and frustration. “I just needed to--.” He breaks off, shaking his head.

Almost seventeen or not, she can’t help but see a little of that lost boy in him right then.

“Yeah,” she says. “I get it.”

“You always do,” he says, focusing intently on her like a tricky piece of charmwork.

“What?” she asks, her heartbeat taking an unexpected uptick.

He shakes his head, gesturing at her. “Are you hurt?”

“Oh,” Ginny says, lifting up her hand. Her fingertips are the slightest bit red.

Harry darts a quick glance at her face before taking her hand. For a moment he seems to just be checking her for injury from the ward. But then he turns her hand over, and she realizes he’s staring down at her wrist, at the green form inked into her skin like a brand.

She’s vividly reminded of thrusting her arm under his nose like a dare, the way he looked at her. He’s frowning slightly now, and she waits for their fight to take off right where they left it.

But Harry merely tilts his head to one side, his fingers barely brushing over the tattoo. “The Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin,” he says.

Ginny’s entire body stiffens, her eyes riveted to his fingers on her arm.

There’s a terrible jumble of feelings rising in her chest all at once. Anger that he never said anything sooner because just a single word from him could have made an eleven-year-old Ginny just a little bit less lost, this idea that she wasn’t so very different from a boy she thought of as a hero. Annoyance that he has the nerve to tell her now when it doesn’t mean nearly as much. When it shouldn’t.

But another part of her is trying to imagine it, to imagine Harry down in those murky spaces, navigating a world of unspoken rules and expectations.

Her eyes snap back up to his face, and she isn’t at all sure he could have done it. Not on top of everything else he’s being asked to do. Which makes her consider for the first time that maybe she has a strength he doesn’t. Is that why he’s here, once against dropping a confession at her feet?

“Is this what I am?” she asks, pressure building in her chest. “Your secret keeper?”

He blinks, pulling slightly back. “What?”

It seems so clear, the way he comes to her when whatever he’s carrying is too heavy for him. Something too dark to be shared with anyone else.
“You keeping telling me all of these things,” she says, her voice quiet and still, like Mum’s at her most dangerous. “And I just…I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with them.”

He frowns, staring down at her arm still clasped in his. He doesn’t deny it though. How could he?

He’s been raw and rough since he arrived at the Burrow, since Mad-Eye and Hedwig and George’s ear paid the price for his safe arrival. She thinks he’s beginning to realize just how high the toll will be, what people are willing to pay for an outcome he can’t even promise to deliver. He’s threatening to topple, and maybe he’s here because she’s supposed to somehow hold him together, him and his dark places he doesn’t dare speak of to anyone else.

“I suppose that’s better than just being an inside source on your enemies,” she says, and she knows he can hear it, the bitterness in her voice.

He winces, but at last seems to find his footing. “You were right. I never should have tried to use you to get to Malfoy.”

She forces herself to shrug like it doesn’t mean anything to hear him say that. “It’s not like you were wrong.”

“Yes,” he says, reaching for her other elbow and pulling her around until she’s facing him straight on. “I was.”

Ginny supposes it’s ridiculous to prefer Harry’s anger to this strange intensity he’s radiating, but for some reason she thinks fighting with him would be far less frightening.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says. “We should probably--.”

But Harry only tightens his grip on her arms and says, “It matters.”

Ginny feels an inexplicable surge of frustration with his stubbornness. “Why?” she demands. “Because we’re friends?”

He hesitates, and that says more than anything he could ever put into words. Because the truth is, they have never really been friends.

It shouldn’t hurt. But it does. More than it has a right to.

Ginny tries to pull back, to head back to the house, and Harry’s expression shifts from conflicted and uncertain to focused and intent, like he’s made up his mind to do something reckless and utterly foolish and nothing on this earth is going to stop him.

“No,” he says. “Not because we’re friends.”

She barely has time to even be hurt by his blunt admission because for some reason he is leaning closer and--.

Harry. Is kissing her.

It’s little more than a firm press of his lips to hers, too brief to give her time to react, let alone try to understand the tingle of something like energy ghosting over her skin. Her brain seems to be stuttering, unable to comprehend what is happening.

His cheeks are flushed when he pulls back almost as quickly as he leaned in. He’s watching her like he’s bracing himself for a slap or a hex, and maybe she should, maybe that’s what she’s supposed to
do. Isn’t it? But there’s something else layered in the way he’s looking at her. Something that makes it just a little hard to breathe.

She wonders how long he’s been looking at her like that. How could she never have noticed?

His fingers tighten on her arms. “Please say something.”

It’s only then that she realizes she is just standing there staring at him, one hand pressed to her lips. She needs to think of the right thing to say, to consider what this means, but for once she’s tired of thinking and planning and considering, and her lips are still tingling.

So instead she reaches for his face and kisses him back.

He’s startled only for a moment before he’s kissing her back, and it’s tentative and clumsy, but somehow that doesn’t seem to matter. She presses closer, letting the kiss linger and build, and Harry slides his hand up into her hair. It’s nothing like the other kisses she has experienced; not cloying or aggressive, or even mysterious and confusing, but warm and thoughtful, like she’s some precious thing. But also something more…something like friction and diving dangerously on her broom and laughing up into a clear summer sky.

They haven’t moved, still stuck to the spot under a shady tree, but she feels it as his mouth moves against hers, gentle but gaining confidence—a burn just as fierce as the wards against her skin.

* * *

The sun is just beginning to dip down towards the horizon when Mum presents Harry’s birthday cake with a flourish, the thick icing glittering gold.

Staring down the long table, Ginny smiles at Harry’s obvious pleasure in something as simple as a birthday cake and knows this is one of the things she has always liked about him, the way he doesn’t take anything for granted. It makes her ache a little for all the birthdays he must have had with nothing.

He catches her eye, and she realizes she is watching him just a little too obviously. She bites her lip and turns away, forcing herself to ask Fleur about wedding details. Listening to that should be punishment enough for the lapse.

The evening is warm, but softened by a gentle breeze carrying the sounds of frogs up from the pond. It’s a nearly perfect moment stolen from the fear and flurry of preparations, something like a calm breath hidden in a small glass vial.

Ginny thinks they all deserve this, Harry most of all.

She no more than finishes the thought when Scrimgeour appears, sucking away any happiness Harry may have managed to conjure. Harry, Ron, and Hermione follow the Minister up to the house, leaving the rest of them outside to wonder what to make of the request for a private audience.

They all sit tensely in the garden, Mum and Dad sharing looks, until raised voices in the house bring them all to their feet.

They charge inside just in time to see Scrimgeour with his wand pressed to Harry’s chest. Ginny stares horrified at the hole burned by the point of contact and wonders if there is anyone in the world Harry can’t push beyond reason. But she also sees the way he doesn’t back down, despite who holds the wand on him.
Long after the Minister leaves and they share all about the bequests from Dumbledore’s will, the house settles back into the hushed expectancy that has characterized the Burrow all summer long. Ginny roams from room to room, unsettled and fidgety.

“Things have got to be bad at the Ministry,” she hears Bill comment to Fleur as she passes through the kitchen. “Scimgeour took it way too far.”

“Dad,” Ginny says, catching him in the sitting room. She cants her head towards the porch, a request for permission.

He nods, knowing the wards will keep her safe and close, and as always, respecting her need for space. It’s the one small thing he can actually give her these days.

She smiles at him in thanks and slips out off the front porch. She doesn’t go far, just out of sight of the house, feeling tension leech out of her shoulders as the shadows swallow and hide her. She walks into the orchard, letting out a long breath and turning her face up towards the branches silhouetted against the starry sky.

“Long day.”

Ginny spins on her heel, one hand flying to her chest, the other to her wand.

“Whoa,” Harry says, lifting his hands where he sits in the shadows at the base of a tree.

“Merlin, Harry,” she swears, lowering her wand. “You scared me.”

“Clearly,” he says, eying her wand. He nods as if in approval. “Nice reflexes.”

A teacher to the bitter end. “You’re lucky I didn’t hex you,” she says, stuffing her wand back into her pocket. “I thought you were upstairs.” She winces inwardly, knowing how much that sounds like she’s been tracking his movements. They’ve been awkwardly circling each other for days, being careful to never catch each other alone, and she doesn’t want to think too hard about why.

“Hermione’s repacking again,” he says like facing that is the greatest torture in the world.

It’s a reminder too, though. That he’s seventeen now, officially of age, and free to leave. To just walk past the wards and never look back. Never come back. And once the wedding is over tomorrow, there will be nothing left to hold him. To hold any of them.

Something of her thoughts must be visible on her face, because Harry grimaces, looking down at his feet. She can tell he’s been feeling guilty, been working his way around an apology for days. And maybe that’s really why she’s been avoiding him.

“Ginny,” he says, voice heavy.

Part of her just wants to walk away from this conversation, but the stubborn part holds her ground and refuses to dance around this. “Do you want to take it back?”

He looks up at her, startled by her bluntness perhaps. She’s not all that sure where it’s coming from either, just acknowledges that Harry always seems to make her forget herself, her caution.

She thinks that should frighten her more than it does.

Harry is still warily regarding her, seeming to struggle. “No,” he eventually says, and Ginny hates
the feeling of relief that weakens her knees.

He blows out a frustrated breath. “But I should lie and say yes. It feels selfish. If anyone found out…”

“Found out what?” she asks, trying for flippancy. “That you kissed me once?”

It isn’t a big deal. Is it?

He gives her a look like he knows exactly what she’s trying to do. “That all I think about these days is kissing you.”

She feels her cheeks flush and hopes it’s dark enough that he can’t see. “I imagine my brothers would have something to say about that.”

“Ginny,” he says, slightly chastising. “This is about way more than your brothers, and you know it.”

“There are six of them,” she reminds him.

He gives her an impatient look.

She lets out a breath. “You mean Tom.”

His body tenses, maybe not liking the reminder of just how well she knows the wizard who is hunting him.

“Yes,” he says, his jaw tight. “If he knew…”

They all know that Voldemort has no boundaries. He would use anyone or anything to get to Harry. It’s the reason Hermione and Ron have gone to such lengths to protect their families. But Ginny isn’t worried for herself. For all she knows Tom inside and out, she doesn’t even exist to Voldemort.

“He never will,” she says.

He can’t his head to one side. “A Slytherin never shares her secrets?”

She folds her arms across her chest. “Exactly.”

He sits up a little taller, like he’s finally getting to the part that really bothers him. “I can’t stay.”

“I know,” she says.

He looks thrown off for a moment, like he expected anything other than this easy acceptance. “Aren’t you going to ask me why? Where I’m going? What I’m doing? If I have a plan?”

She almost smiles, imagining how much her parents and the rest of the Order have doubtlessly been pestering him. Even the bloody Minister of Magic. Shrugging, she says, “I guess I figured that if you could tell me, you would.”

That may be presumptuous of her, of this new, tenuous thing between them, but it’s how she feels.

Harry looks down at his feet, shaking his head.

“What?” she asks, wondering if she’s misread the situation.

Then he looks up at her, his gaze warm with something she’s scared to call affection. “You think I
would be used to you surprising me by now.”

She relaxes. “Not what you expected?”

He shakes his head. “No. I thought you’d be…”

She can guess. “Angry.” It’s what she does best around him, after all.

“Yes,” he says. “I just…kind of can’t stand it when you’re mad at me, especially when I know I deserve it.”

She huffs under her breath. “Well, I hate to be the one to tell you this, Harry, but I have no doubt I will get mad at you again. Probably a lot.”

His smile slips, his expression painfully serious in an instant. Ginny feels dread drop down into her stomach like a rock. She’s filled with the urge to turn and walk away from whatever it is he’s about to say.

“It has to be me, Ginny,” he says, voice heavy and almost apologetic.

She very carefully swallows. “The Chosen One.”

He regards her for a long moment before nodding. “Yeah.”

She turns slightly away from him, looking out into the trees. It’s not like she hasn’t suspected Harry’s place in all of this. People have been speculating for years. But to hear it confirmed, that this will all come down to Harry and Voldemort, it leaves her feeling winded.

_Could you kill if you had to?_

She can feel his gaze on her, like this is the real reason he thinks he had no right to kiss her. Like he’s waiting for her inevitable anger. But she isn’t angry.

She wishes she could be.

Biting her lower lip, she forces the hardness back down her throat and turns to look at Harry. Crossing the space between them, Ginny lowers herself down to sit next to him. She leans back against the tree, their shoulders touching. “Okay.”

She can feel his shoulder relax. They sit for a while, quiet in the dark as a soft breeze rustles the branches.

“Are you scared?” she asks, voice barely a whisper.

His foot scuffs against the dirt. “This is where I’m supposed to puff up my chest, be heroic, and say ‘No’, isn’t it?” he says, his voice the tiniest bit bitter.

She watches him, the way his head is tilted just so that his eyes are hidden behind the surface of his lenses. It must be exhausting, always having to pretend.

“No,” she reminds him. “This isn’t where you do that.”

His hand fumbles for hers in the dark, still hesitant, but gripping tight when she doesn’t pull away. “Then yes, I’m scared.” He looks down, and there is just enough light that she can make out his profile. “Out of my bloody mind.”
She’s not sure she’s ever heard someone sound at once so frightened and so determined.

She squeezes his hand, leaning into the warmth of his body that she thinks could, perhaps, feel familiar some day, if she ever got that chance. “Me too,” she confesses.

Lifting his arm over her shoulder, he pulls her close. She wraps her arm across his waist, her head resting on his chest. She feels him press his face into her hair. More than anything, she’s struck by the way this just feels right.

It scares the hell out of her.

“Ginny?” her father’s voice floats out.

Harry’s arm tightens around her.

Ginny lifts her head. “Coming, Dad,” she calls.

She turns her face back to Harry’s chest, sitting there a moment listening to the thud of his heart. She wants to ask him to promise to come back. Wants him to tell her how this will all end.

He can’t though, and she can’t bring herself to demand it of him.

So instead she lifts her face and presses her lips to his cheek, lingering there just long enough to feel him turn towards her. “Happy Birthday, Harry,” she whispers.

Pushing to her feet, she heads back inside, leaving Harry sitting alone out in the dark.

* * *

The Burrow is humming with activity long before dawn. Mum is shouting and ordering everyone about. Fleur and her mum and sister are locked away in one of the upstairs rooms. Most of her brothers are outside putting up the tent.

Ginny isn’t sure if all weddings are like this—utter bedlam—or if this one is a special case. International relations pouring into a country with a psychopathic killer on the loose could lend a certain edge to things.

“Ginny,” Mum shrieks as she comes into the kitchen. “Why haven’t you started getting ready yet?”

Ginny decides not to point out that it was Mum’s idea to have her arrange flowers for the table by hand in the first place. Any hope of being underage and thus wandless as a reason to get out of a million wedding chores was abandoned days ago.

“There’s plenty of time,” Ginny says, trying to calm her.

Mum’s face just seems to get redder.

“Best just to comply, I think,” Dad says quietly as he passes near.

Ginny throws up her hands and does as she’s told, stomping up the stairs. She runs into Mrs. Delacour in the hall upstairs.

“Dress first,” Mrs. Delacour says, not even slowing down as she strides by. “Then the hair!”

Ginny is left standing in the lingering cloud of her perfume.
She is more than pleased to find her room empty. She isn’t sure where Hermione is, but doesn’t particularly care at the moment. Pulling the bridesmaid dress out of the closet, she gives it a critical glance. It could be much worse, she knows, even if gold isn’t exactly her color. Gabrielle, of course, looks amazing in gold. Though unlike Gabrielle’s dress, Ginny’s is rather daringly low cut.

“You are a woman, not a child,” Fleur said when it first showed up, a gleam in her eye.

Despite the neck line, Ginny can’t help but feel like a child when she realizes she can’t even use her wand to do up the ridiculously small buttons lining the back of the dress. She manages to wrangle the lower portion of them into place before she gives it up as a lost cause.

“Ugh,” she says, pulling her door open in hopes of finding Hermione. Of course, the only person in the hall ends up being Harry.

He’s at the top of the stairs, his eyes a bit wide as he catches sight of her. He makes an awkward little half step as he stumbles to a stop, halting his momentum down the stairs.

Ginny clutches the dress a bit tighter against her chest, keeping her cheeks from flushing by sheer force of will. They stare at each other another long beat before she pulls herself together.

“Come on, Potter,” she says, forcing her voice brisk. “Make yourself useful.”

“What?” he asks, looking adorably confused.

She turns her back on him, gesturing at the buttons.

“Oh,” he says.

She laughs. “Yes. Bloody ridiculous, isn’t it?”

She pulls her hair out the way, ready to point out that at least he has a wand to make quick work of it when she feels him step up behind her, his hands on her dress.

She swallows. “Not sure who designs a dress with so many tiny buttons.”


His fingers fumble a bit, and she tries not to think about the feel of his fingers on her skin. It seems to take forever, and she doesn’t know if that is because there really are a million buttons or if she’s just imagining it.

“There,” he eventually says, patting her awkwardly on the shoulder.

She lets out a breath, testing the constraints of the bodice. She supposes it probably isn’t tight enough to make her pass out. “Thanks,” she says, turning around to look at him. “You’re my hero.”

He rolls his eyes. “Yes. I’ve saved you from a terrible fate.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “Walking down the aisle half-naked?”

Harry clears his throat. “Um. Yes. That.”

Letting her hair fall back down over her shoulders, she smooths her hands down the dress, tugging the sleeves into place. “So what do you think?”

Harry’s attention seems to have drifted, his eyes snapping back up to her face. “About what?”
She smiles at him, taking a small step back. “About the dress, numpty.”

“Oh,” he says. “You look--.”

But she never gets to find out how he thinks she looks, because Hermione appears on the landing looking nearly as frazzled as Mum. “Harry, it’s time for the Polyjuice potion.”

He jerks around to look at Hermione, nearly tripping over his own feet. “Oh. Sure. I was just…” He glances back over his shoulder at Ginny.

“I’m sure you’ll make a great redhead, Potter,” she heckles. “Now, out of my way. I’m off to get coiffed.” Lifting her skirts, she trumps up the stairs, suddenly feeling in a much better mood.

*     *     *

Despite Mum’s fears, the ceremony manages to begin on time with nothing more unpleasant than Auntie Muriel’s presence to mar it. Looking at Bill and Fleur though, it probably wouldn’t have bothered them if niflers started falling from the sky the way they are so wrapped up in each other.

Once the ceremony is over even Mum relaxes enough to sit with Mrs. Delacour, the two of them laughing over glasses of champagne.

“Conspiring about grandbabies,” Charlie reports.

Ginny pulls a face. “What, already?”

Charlie just shrugs, frowning over his shoulder when he gets bumped from behind by someone reveling a bit too much.

She gives him another twenty minutes before his loyalty to Bill is trumped by his hate of crowds. He’ll no doubt step outside and disappears for hours if history is anything to judge by. “Well,” she says, “I’m afraid no one else seems interested in dancing with me, so you’ll have to do.”

Charlie smiles. “I’m pretty sure Bill threatened every bloke under the age of eighty.”

“You’d bloody well better be joking,” Ginny says.

He laughs, leading her onto the floor. “I don’t think we’ve done this since you were seven and you stood on my toes the whole time.”

“No promises I’ve improved any.”

When they’re done, Charlie hands her off to Lee Jordan who regales her with tales of the behind the scenes at the shop. She spends more time laughing than actually remembering any of the steps, but Lee doesn’t seem to mind.

She doesn’t manage to snag a dance with either Fred or George, as both of them are far too busy with the Delacour cousins. Ron is similarly occupied with watching Hermione and trying to pretend he isn’t.

She does get asked to dance by none other than the Viktor Krum, amazingly enough. She never would have imagined it three years ago as she watched him in the World Cup. Of course, as with most fantasies, reality is a bit of a disappointment. He trumps her toe, has zero interest in talking Quidditch, and spends most of their dance not so covertly watching Hermione as well. It’s a good thing he’s such a good Seeker, because he’s a terrible dance partner. She’s more than a little relieved
when it’s finally done.

After a dance with one of Fleur’s much more charming cousins, Ginny collapses down in a seat next to Luna. “A bit of a crush, isn’t it?” she says, fanning herself.

Luna nods serenely, her fingers tapping absentely along to the music. “Harry doesn’t seem to be having a very good time.”

It takes Ginny half a second to remember that no one is supposed to know Harry is here. “Harry isn’t here, Luna,” she says. “It would be too dangerous for everyone, including him.” She gives Luna a stern glance, just to reinforce how serious she is.

Ginny would say Luna doesn’t notice, but it’s probably more likely that she just doesn’t care. “He should stop frowning like that then.”

Ginny follow Luna’s line of sight, and sure enough a few tables over her ‘cousin Barney’ is scowling down at his glass in a distinctly Harry way.

“Looking cheerful would be a much better disguise,” Luna says.

Despite herself, Ginny lets out a startled laugh. “Maybe I’ll go check in with cousin Barney.”

Luna nods. “He would probably listen to you.”

Ginny isn’t quite so sure, but gets up and crosses over to him all the same. Lowering herself into the chair behind Harry, she leans in to speak near his ear. “Luna thinks if you looked happy it would be a much more effective disguise.”

He startles, turning to look at her. “Ginny.”

She regards him, the red hair and unfamiliar face of a local Muggle boy staring back at her. “That is so weird.”

He grimaces. “Not as weird as it is for me. This bloke is a good four inches shorter than me. I keep tripping over my own feet.”

“That’s too bad,” she says with a sigh. “I suppose it means you can’t dance with me.”

He looks at her sharply. “I’m pretty sure I could manage.”

“Yes?” she asks, trying not to smile at how eager he sounds.

He grabs her hand, pulling her to her feet. “Definitely.”

With her heels, she’s taller than him. She gives him a little triumphant smile, and he rolls his eyes.

Once they are on the floor, he comes to a stop, frowning as he listens to the music.

Lee jitterbugs by, his elbows akimbo as he spins an attractive girl around the floor.

“I think I forgot something important,” Harry mumbles.

“What’s that?” Ginny says, bouncing a bit to the beat.

He looks pained. “That I can’t dance.”
They laugh, because there are so many levels of awkwardness here that it is impossible not to. Luckily for both of them, the music changes, smoothing out into something slower and far less dangerous. The crowd presses close, the lights dimming, and all they really have to do is sway.

“Think you can manage this?” she asks.

He reaches for her, his arm slipping behind her back, his other hand taking hers. “I can certainly try.”

She tries to smile, but their bodies are very close now, her hand coming to rest on his shoulder. It would be wonderful, really, if only he looked anything like himself.

After a few awkward turns, she closes her eyes, trusting him not to let her crash into anyone.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“It’s easier this way,” she says. “Remembering that it’s you.”

His hand tightens on her back, pulling her closer. “I never got to say, but I really like your dress,” he says. “You look…”

When he doesn’t manage to finish his sentence, she opens her eyes to find him watching her intently.

She feels her skin flush. “I’m pretty sure you aren’t supposed to look at your cousin like that, Barney.”

His lips quirk, and it is so quintessentially Harry that for a moment, it’s almost enough to forget everything else. The crowd around them, his unfamiliar face. She slides her hand up his shoulder, her fingers brushing the back of his neck.

“Ginny,” he says, drawing her closer, and even though it would be spectacularly stupid on many levels, she can’t help but feel her heart beat faster at the thought that he may kiss her.

But before either of them can be that rash, someone shrieks, and they pull back from each other with a jerk.

A silvery animal streaks in through the roof of the tent, coming to a stop in front of her dad as people scatter out of its way. Kingsley’s voice fills the tent.

*The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming.*

There is half a beat of horrified silence before someone screams. The crowd surges, people pushing into them, the tent echoing with the cracks of people Disapparating.

Harry pulls her tight against him, his wand drawn as they get pushed off the dance floor.

Lifting up on her toes, Ginny can see dark-cloaked figures appearing, bone white masks covering their faces. Death Eaters. There can only be one reason they are here. Craning her neck, she locates Ron and Hermione near the back of the tent, both of them looking frantically around.

A curse passes overhead, a flower arrangement exploding in flames, Ginny and Harry dropping down into a crouch.

“You have to go,” she says.

“Ginny,” he protests, his hand tightening on her arm.
She presses her lips to his in a reckless last kiss before pushing him towards Hermione and Ron. “Go!”

She doesn’t wait to see if he complies, taking off in the opposite direction, pulling her wand out. She gives herself half a second to wonder if she’ll ever see him again before turning her attention to the scene around her.

He’s on his own. They both are.

The tent is utter chaos, filled with the noise of guests leaving in a flood, the wail of children being swept up into protective arms. Remus is wrestling Tonks out the back of the tent, and Ginny remembers that Harry isn’t the only one the Death Eaters are after.

Dad stands near them. “Go!” he urges.

Near the front of the tent, Bill, Fleur, and the twins have started fighting the Death Eaters, hexes flying in every direction.

Fleur’s cold fury does nothing more than add an icy edge to her elegance, the complex swish of her arm like a dance as she faces off with a Death Eater. Her opponent stumbles back under her onslaught, clearly unprepared for her skill. Fleur swears loudly at him in French as he loses his wand and scrambles back out of the tent.

A curse splinters a chair next to Ginny and she realizes with a jolt that she is just standing, a still target, watching everything happening around her. She pushes into motion, but feels strangely flatfooted. Her hands itch for her broom, and while she’s used to the speed and shutter of a Quidditch match, this is like playing against a team she’s never studied with no set rules. Spells seem to disappear from her brain.

The fight lurches around her, a blur of chaos she has a hard time understanding. She forces herself to stop focusing on the particulars, on each individual danger to her family, and instead darts back, watching it as a whole. Movement that Ginny knows needs to be ordered and contained.

Crouching behind a chair, she notices the long carpet still stretching across the tent. Muttering a spell, the carpet jerks back, rolling up in a tight ball, the Death Eater standing on it stumbling. Bill presses his advantage, his stunning spell hitting him square in the chest.

Glancing over at Ginny, he gives her an approving smile, but there’s another coming up behind him, and she pushes to her feet, aiming Expelliarmus at him. The Death Eater just manages to hang on to his wand, and now she’s got his attention.

She barely manages to throw up protection spells fast enough to counter his curses as he advances on her. It’s all she can do to react in time, no room at all for offense. She feels sweat beading on her brow, her heels catching the train of her dress.

She falls, her wand caught up in the fall and this is it, she thinks.

Only for some reason the Death Eater pauses, sneering down at her as if there isn’t a battle going on around them. “Is that all you’ve got, little girl?”

Ginny rolls, wrenching her wand free and throwing out the first spell that her terrified mind latches onto, one taught to her by Antonia.

It’s a childish hex at best, but it hits him squarely in the chest, his entire body rigid as he gapes, his hands going to his throat. She watches in grim fascination as he vainly tries to draw in a breath,
falling to his knees. In his desperation, he swipes at her, Ginny scrambling back away.

He falls to the floor, his eyes rolling wildly as he writhes.

Ginny is frozen, thinking of Harry and Mad-Eye and Dumbledore’s broken body.

She jerks when a hand touches her shoulder. It’s Fred, crouching behind her.

“Gin?” His eyes widen as he glances at the Death Eater.

His face is turning blue.

“It’s the first spell I thought of,” she says.

Fred jabs his wand at him, the hex ending. The Death Eater only has enough time to suck in a great gulp of air before Fred stuns him unconscious, scooping up his wand and pocketing it.

The table nearby rattles with the impact of a curse.

“Come on, Ginny,” Fred says, dragging her to her feet.

She nods, turning away from the prone form, throwing herself back into the fight.

For every Death Eater they manage to take down, there seem to be three more. In no time at all, they find themselves vastly outnumbered. Especially once Dad catches a stunner, George loses his wand, and Bill goes down in a pile of ropes.

“Enough!” one of the Death Eaters bellows, some sort of magical wave seeming to echo out with his voice. Ginny feels it hit her, and it doesn’t hurt, just makes her catch her breath for a moment, her spell dying in her throat.

In the ensuring silence, the tall one says, “No more magical blood needs to be spilled. We just want Potter.”

“He isn’t here,” Mum yells, her wand flashing, something enormous shaking the tent. It’s utter chaos then, Ginny’s wand moving as fast as she can make it until she feels something hit her shoulder like a gong, reverberating through her entire body.

The next Ginny knows, she’s lying face down on the floor, her body sluggish. There are voices around her, but she’s having a hard time understanding any of them.

When her vision finally clears, she turns her head to find her family in various states of binding and consciousness. Dad is half lying in Mum’s lap, blood tickling down his face. Fleur sits next to them, looking like she could murder them all just with a glance for all that she is bound and gagged tightly along with her new husband.

“Check the house,” someone behind Ginny orders.

In the distance, she can hear someone cast Homenum Revelio. “It’s empty,” a voice calls back.

“Where is Potter?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny can see her wand poking out from under the closest table. She slowly stretches her arm out, trying not to draw attention to herself.

“As you can see,” Mum says, “he isn’t here.”
Ginny has almost reached her wand when someone steps down hard on the back of her hand. She gasps, looking up into the masked face of a Death Eater.

“Someone’s awake,” he says, the heel of his foot grinding down into her hand.

Ginny bites down on her tongue, feeling the prick of tears.

“Good,” another voice across the tent says. “Maybe she’ll be more forthcoming.”

She looks up in alarm.

Two of them drag her to her feet, shoving her outside the tent, her family yelling after her as she goes.

She tries desperately to focus, to think about what they want from her. For her to be terrified enough to tell them anything they want. She doesn’t need to pretend to be afraid, her heart pounding away in her chest.

They shove her down to her knees, three of them standing above her.

The short one seems to be in charge, his eyes dark glinting behind his mask. “Where’s Potter?”

She cringes back, trying to make herself as small as possible. “I don’t know.”

“Was he here?”

She shakes her head. “N-n-no. I swear.”

“Then where is he?”

“I don’t know! With those Muggles, maybe!”

“No, he’s not.”

She closes her eyes. “Please.”

“I doubt she knows anything,” another Death Eater comments.

“Probably not,” he concedes. “But her family might, if we can convince them it’s in their best interest to share.”

The curse seems to come from nowhere and everywhere, an aching, burning pain like her bones are all broken, grinding against each other. She screams, and there is no need at all to pretend, to force the tears that are pouring out over her cheeks.

The curse leaves as suddenly as it came, leaving her shaking and cramping in residual pain.

“Please, please, please,” she says once she has breath enough. “He was never here, I swear.”

They hit her with the curse again, and it’s even worse than the first time. She can’t speak, just sobs with relief when it finally stops.

The short one kneels down on the ground next to her, his face up close to hers. “You’re not trying to be a hero, are you?”

She shakes her head, arms wrapped tight around her torso. “I don’t believe in heroes,” she whispers.
through her tears.

Another wizard reaches down, grabbing his shoulder. “The boy isn’t here. She would have told us if he was.”

He still stares at her.

“We don’t have time for this,” the other wizard scoffs. “We need to get to the next location.” With a crack, he disappears.

The remaining Death Eater grabs her hair, twisting it as he forces her face up to look at him. “If I find out you’re lying… I won’t just come back for you.” He jerks his head back towards the tent. “I’ll take out your whole blood traitor family. And I’ll enjoy it.”

He lets go of her, Ginny falling forward to the ground. She flinches at the crack as he Apparates away, her arms protectively wrapped around her head. She stays crumpled in the dirt for long moments, trying to breathe through the remnants of pain and fear.

She eventually becomes aware of her family calling her name.

She lifts her head, trying to get to her feet, but immediately falls back down, retching into the dirt.

“Ginny!”

*Get up, Ginny, she tells herself. Just get up.*

Pushing to her feet on shaky legs, she somehow manages to stagger back inside the tent. She finds her wand under the edge of the table, picking it up. She feels bile pushing at the back of her throat, but makes it to Bill’s side before her legs give out. With trembling arms, she lifts her wand, cutting the ropes.

Bill wrenches the ropes away, his face thunderous. He touches her shoulder. “Gin?”

She nods at him, waving him on.

He stays looking at her for another moment before finally pushing to his feet, finding his own wand and cutting the rest of the family free.

“Ginny,” Mum says, appearing next to her and pulling her into a hug. Ginny gratefully leans into her.

She can hear her father and brothers discussing things dimly in the distance, but she feels utterly drained.


She nods, giving Ginny another squeeze before pushing tiredly to her feet.

Dad puts an arm around her back. “Up we get,” he says.

She gets to her feet, letting him lead her back inside the Burrow. She sits on the couch when he tells her, lets him wrap her in a blanket and it’s only then she realizes she’s shaking, her teeth nearly chattering. She doesn’t understand what’s wrong with her.

Dad sits next to her, putting an arm around her, crooning softly under his breath. Ginny leans into his warmth, but it’s *summer*, why is she so bloody cold?
Nearby her brothers are speaking with Mum, faces dire. Ginny just stares at the ragged hem of Fleur’s dress in sick fascination. It’s been roughly ripped off just at the knee, too completely to be accidental damage.

The wedding seems a thousand years ago. The laughter and music and Harry—. She squeezes her eyes shut, nausea rolling in her stomach.

“You should let them know we’re okay,” she says.

They all turn to look at her, this being the first she’s spoken.

She peers up at her dad. “You know he’s exactly the kind of idiot to charge recklessly back here if he thinks we’re in danger.”

Dad touches her hair, giving her a tight smile. “Good point.”

Her father’s Patronus streaks out into the night.

“Ginny,” Mum says, voice tentative as she kneels in front of her.

“I’m okay,” she says. “Really. I barely even feel like throwing up anymore.”

“Christ, Gin,” Bill says, shaking his head.

She looks up at him. “Are they…coming back?” she asks, hating the way her voice trembles.

“No tonight,” Dad promises.

She nods.

Bill and Fleur look at each other. “We’re staying.”

Mum shakes her head. “Go to the cottage.”

Bill opens his mouth to protest.

Mum touches his arm. “This is still your honeymoon.” She reaches for Fleur’s hand, who squeezes her hand back. “Don’t let them take that from you.”

“You know what will happen,” Bill says.

Dad nods. “The less people who are here, the better.”

“But what about…,” he looks at Ginny.

She lifts her chin.

Dad says, “We run now, we can’t stop.”

Bill gives a grim nod.

Fleur drops down in front of Ginny, taking her hand in hers.

“Sorry I ruined the dress,” Ginny says, looking at her dirt stained knees.

Fleur shakes her head, brushing a strand of hair back from Ginny’s face. “Gold isn’t really your color, ma soeur.”
“True,” Ginny says, too tired even to smile.

Fleur presses a kiss to her forehead before getting to her feet.

Bill kneels down next, dragging her into a hug, his face near his ear. “You held your own, Gin. You held your own.”

It doesn’t feel like it. It feels like she was a little girl playing at things far beyond her.

Long hours later when she finally climbs up to bed, her room is bare and empty as if Hermione Granger never existed. Above her, she can hear the distant sounds of Dad and Charlie wrestling the ghoul into Ron’s room. All their lies seamlessly in place.

The next morning they come with official papers and probable cause, as if they weren’t the same people who came the night before with curses and violence. They all pretend though, pretend that her father is inviting them in of his own freewill, pretend that the government officials aren’t trying to find Harry to serve him up to Voldemort.

“I hear there was a bit of a ruckus here last night,” Rookwood says.

Dad shakes his head. “Just a misunderstanding.”

They find Ron’s pox-ridden ghoul, but don’t get close enough to question it, even though Dad makes a big show of giving his permission.

Rookwood looks at Ginny, and she does her best to pretend his is a voice she’s never heard before.

*     *     *

The greatest shock comes on Monday morning.

Dad stands in the kitchen in his work robes, kissing Mum goodbye. She’s seen this scene countless times before.

“You’re going in to the Ministry?”

“Yes, Ginny,” her father says, a warning in his tone.

“How can you do that?”

“It’s my job.” Like the entire world hasn’t fallen apart already.

“So we just carry on.”

“Yes, Ginny,” her father says, something just the slightest bit hard in his tone. “We just carry on.”

_We run now, we can’t stop._

Mum is distracted all day, her eyes constantly straying to the family clock, which is still rather unhelpfully stuck at _mortal peril_. Ginny knows what they are really waiting for is for Dad to come home, for some sign of how things are unfolding at the Ministry.

Mum lets out a breath when he walks in the door, but other than that small sign, dinner goes on as always.

In the evening after they think she’s gone to sleep, Ginny sits in the stairwell and listens to her
parents talk.

“Is Ginny okay?” Dad asks.

Mum sighs. “It’s hard to tell with her. I think mostly she’s angry. Angry they made her afraid.”

“They made me afraid too,” Dad says.

They are silent for a long stretch.

“I have a cousin, you know, that one who married an accountant. Maybe…”

She feels her stomach clench at the idea of being sent away to live with Muggle relatives she’s never even met.

“She’d be defenseless,” Dad says.

She doesn’t turn seventeen for another full year. Without a wand or any wizards around her, she’d be a sitting duck.

“How are Andromeda and Ted?” Mum asks.

“Shaken up, but no…permanent damage. The Death Eaters weren’t happy they didn’t know anything about Harry or Remus or Tonks’ whereabouts.”

Ginny’s left to imagine what their displeasure may have looked like. Though she has a better idea today than she would have last week.

“Ted left,” Dad says.

“What?”

“He went into hiding. There’s talk of a registry.”

“It’s monstrous,” Mum says, fury shaking her voice.

Dad sighs. “I’m afraid it’s only the beginning.”

It’s a strangely empty week, no one coming by the Burrow, no heads in the fire, not even silver Patronus messages. Everyone seems to understand that the Burrow is marked. Ginny’s seen the people loitering out on the road, watching.

As if Harry would ever be stupid enough to come back here. Or rather, as if Ron and Hermione would let him, she amends.

At the end of the week, Dad brings home a poster. Undesirable Number One. *10,000 galleons on his head.*

Harry stares out of the poster, his face half in shadows, expression set.

And Ginny finally begins to understand just how dangerous that kiss out in the woods truly was. Just how vulnerable she’s made herself.

A week later, she sees Dolores Umbridge on the front cover of the Prophet, proud Ministry official, in charge of the Muggle-Born Registration Commission.
Harry a criminal, Dumbledore a liar.

They’ve been here before.

*     *   *

Her sixteenth birthday is a quiet affair.

Early in the day, an owl comes from Smita.

It’s a birthday card. *Hope your birthday blooms with joy!* it reads. Ginny stares at it for a long time. The frilly border, the flowers twining around the edges. It’s bright and cheery and completely unlike Smita.

It’s not until the fourth time she looks at it that she finally sees the runes nestled into the petals and twisting vines.

Taking out a quill, Ginny carefully copies the runes onto a fresh sheet of paper. She swaps the order around, using an old trick they devised during long History of Magic lectures.

*By the time you read this, we will be far away. I won’t tell you where. Just please don’t worry. Keep yourself safe. And keep an eye on Tobias for me. I’m not sure he’ll understand.*

No, he won’t. But Ginny understands. All too well. Smita’s mum’s research makes her important enough to be contained, or destroyed. As for Smita’s stepfather… He’s a Muggleborn.

But it’s okay because they are away and safe.

She reminds herself that she should be relieved. One less person to worry about.

She’s not sure she believes it.

At dinner, the twins come with tales of Diagon Alley. Rather than presents, they bring bags full of her school supplies.

“Happy birthday, sis!”

“Wonderful,” she says, voice wry.

Fred leans into her. “I think you’ll find your new copy of *Hogwarts: A History* particularly interesting.”

She lifts out the book in question, very cautiously lifting up the cover. After all, she’s spent her whole life navigating the twins’ increasingly complex pranks. But rather than blowing up in her face, the book opens up to reveal an impossibly large interior space, packed to the gills with various Wheezes.

“There’s a few… special prototypes, you might say, in there as well,” Fred says, giving her a wink. “After all, wouldn’t do to send you back to Hogwarts without proper supplies.”

“What am I going to do with all of this?”

Fred lifts a shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll think of something. After all, we know where you learned your sneakiness.”

She looks up at him, and for a moment they regard each other, and Ginny can’t help but think of that
moment in the tent, what he saw her do, what she almost did. She tries not to think about the wedding, and only part of that is because of what was done to her.

She still doesn’t know if she would have let that Death Eater die. If she was simply frozen, or if she wanted it. Wanted it to happen.

All Fred does is squeeze her arm. “Happy Birthday, Gin.”

If her smile is a little wobbly, he doesn’t comment.

“Floean’s gone,” George reports during dinner.

“What?” Mum says, eyebrows lifting in alarm.

George nods. “And it doesn’t look like he went willingly.”

They all absorb this. Diagon Alley is more boarded up than not these days.

“Have you considered closing up the shop?” Mum asks.

Fred and George look at each other. “We’re going to keep it open,” Fred says.

George nods. “As long as we can.”

Mum looks like she’s going to protest, but Dad just squeezes her hand.

The next week, the Prophet comes out with Hermione’s face on the front cover as a person wanted for interrogation.

When the news reaches them that Hogwarts has been declared compulsory for all magical children, that Snape will serve as Headmaster, they don’t talk about what this will mean.

Dad simply says, “Be careful.”

Ginny doesn’t bother telling him that careful is what she is made for.

*     *     *

Platform 9 ¾ is strangely quiet. Sure there’s still a gaggle of students running around, owls hooting, carts crashing. It’s all the same. Except the way everyone is side-eying each other even as they are trying to pretend they aren’t. Who’s here? Who isn’t?

There’s a moment after Ginny and her parents step through the barrier that everyone seems to hold their breath, like Ron or Harry or Hermione may follow after them at any moment.

But no one watches them more closely than the ‘Aurors’ who are here providing security. The Minister of Magic was assassinated after all, and they are meant to believe that the rogue element responsible for it is still out there, a threat to the wizarding world.

_We’re here to keep you safe._

And somehow they are also supposed to believe that threat wears the face of Harry Potter. As if he has ever done anything other than try to protect these students for years, more than once with his very life.

Ginny lifts her chin and keeps her cart moving forward.
Ginny passes Seamus as he stares hard at the entrance. She considers stopping to tell him that Dean isn’t coming, but she’s pretty sure he already knows.

Near the train doors, Mum pulls her into a tight hug. “Don’t forget to write.”

Ginny pulls back like she isn’t scared in the deepest reaches of her mind of never seeing her parents again. “Of course,” she says, voice just loud enough for anyone who’s interested to hear. “Ron’ll be bored out of his skull otherwise.”

She knows her role in all of this.

Dad hugs her. “I love you,” he says.

She tightens her arms around him. “Love you, too.”

The whistle blows, and she forces herself to step back.

“See you at Christmas.” She gives them both the brightest smile she can manage and climbs up on the train.

The Hogwarts Express is full of new faces, not just first years, but also older students being forced into compulsory education. For every new face there are others missing, and not just Ron, Hermione, and Harry. There’s Dean Thomas, the Creeveys, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Smita, Graham, and any other Muggleborn students.

She barely makes it through the first compartment before Neville appears, looking incredibly relieved to see her.

“Ginny,” he says, rushing up to her.

“Hi, Neville,” she says, voice pleasant. “Have a nice summer?”

He blinks back at her in confusion. “A nice summer?” he echoes as if he clearly thinks she has lost her mind.

Ginny continues on as if she hasn’t noticed. “Mine was a bit chaotic. With Bill’s wedding and all.” She looks past him to see Luna standing a few steps behind. “Hi, Luna.”

Luna looks her over. “Hello.”

“Where’s Ron?” Neville presses, clearly out of patience for pleasantries.

“Spattergoit,” Ginny replies easily. “He’s stuck home for the term. Looks a nasty fright, let me tell you. Of course, he never looked that great to begin with.”

He looks back at her, clearly nonplussed. “And Hermione?”

Ginny meets Neville’s gaze steadily. “How would I know? She’s Muggleborn, isn’t she? Who knows where she could be. Hopefully somewhere far away.”

“You really expect me to buy that.”

“Honestly, Neville,” she says, very aware of just how many people are listening. “I couldn’t care less what you believe.”

What exactly does he want from her? He wasn’t there, he can’t possibly know.
But Luna was. Ginny meets her gaze.

She takes Neville’s arm. “Come along, Neville. Let’s go back to our seats.”

With another confused glance back at Ginny, Neville complies, heading down the corridor.

Luna lingers another moment, looking back at Ginny. “Your disguise is much better,” she says, voice quiet. “But still not very believable.”

With that, Luna follows after Neville.

Taking a careful breath, Ginny turns down the hall in the opposite direction. In the next car, she finds Tobias sitting in a compartment.

He looks up as she enters, almost immediately looking past her.

“Tobias,” Ginny says, voice slightly chastising.

He leans back in his seat, looking out the window. “I know.”

The Death Eaters pretending to be Aurors walk by the window, peering in at them. Ginny looks calmly back at them, not allowing herself to wonder if either of them were the men at the Burrow. After a moment, they move on.

Ginny settles in the seat across from Tobias. “Just like old times.”

Tobias’ lips twist, his eyes completely devoid of humor. “Just like it.”

There’s no exploding snap or tall tales, just endless stretching silence as they steam northwards.

*     *     *

The castle looks the same, other than Death Eaters and Dementors on the perimeter, but by now those are beginning to feel normal too. Ginny considers that she’s had a bit of a bizarre school experience.

In the Great Hall there is a Sorting, a feast, with McGonagall meeting the first years on the steps like every year before. It’s all proper and right, like a thin veneer of normality pulled across everything as if to remind them all of the game they are playing. Prefects and Head Girl and Boy, Flitwick and Sinistra and Trewlawny and Hagrid sitting up at the staff table like nothing has changed. But not Burbage, which shouldn’t be as much of a gut punch as it is.

Ginny glances at Tobias and can tell he has noticed as well.

Only when it’s time for the Headmaster to say a few words, it’s Snape who stands in that spot that used to be Dumbledore’s.

There’s a hiss from the Gryffindor table, a rumble of angry whispers.

Snape’s frigid gaze falls across the tables. “Welcome back to Hogwarts. I will introduce our new faculty shortly. But first I wish to address important, pressing matters. The state of education in these hallowed halls has for far too long drifted. The days of mismanagement and leniency are now done. You will take your educations as seriously as I take them. Much will be asked of you, and as you owe this institution, your predecessors, your blood, you will strive to achieve these goals. Failure will not be tolerated. Misbehavior will be...swiftly punished.
“Under my guardianship, the education of our magical youth will take precedence. In that vein, Muggle Studies is now a required course for all students, and an extra block of time has been added to the schedule to accommodate this.”

A short, stocky witch stands.

Snape gestures to her. “Alecto Carrow, who has been kind enough to come to us from the Ministry, will undertake your education in this area. She will also serve as my deputy Headmistress.”

Ginny darts a glance at McGonagall to see how she feels about being pushed out of her long held position, but it is clearly no news to McGonagall, her face tight and pale but unsurprised.

“Your new Dark Arts professor will be Amycus Carrow,” Snape continues. A wizard who can only be Alecto’s twin nods at them, his expression an equal mixture of boredom and disgust.

Snape leans forward on the podium. “Despite the chaotic forces outside, inside these walls you and our ways are protected. And we will persevere.”

Ginny eats as if the food doesn’t taste like ashes on her tongue.

* * *

Back in the dorms, Ginny finds herself alone with Bridget and Helena. The two girls are eying Smita’s empty bed.

“Serves her right. Her blood traitor mother marrying a filthy Muggle.”

The words seem to fall off her tongue like something too big for her to understand, like a toddler blindly mimicking her parents. Ginny suspects that very well may be the way of it. But is it really any different than what she’s doing?

We just carry on…

“It’s about time this place had some standards,” Bridget sniffs. “Though they could probably be raised a little higher. Still a bit too much riffraff around here for my taste.”

Ginny knows this is for her benefit, but pretends not to hear.

The door opens and a young witch walks in, hair covered in a scarf and dark eyes wary.

Bridget and Helena give the girl nothing more than a dismissive glance as she crosses over to the closest empty bed.

“Hi,” Ginny says, straightening up from her trunk. “I’m Ginny Weasley.”

The wariness in the girl’s eyes doesn’t leave. She nods her head slightly. “I am Nadira Shafiq.”

“Shafiq?” Bridget says, interest clearly piqued.

The Shafiq family is part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. Gloriously, thoroughly pureblood going back generations, but also one of the most reclusive. A Shafiq hasn’t attended Hogwarts in decades.

Helena crosses over to Nadira, brazenly sitting down on the edge of the bed. Smita’s bed. “So,” she says, leaning back on her arms and crossing her legs. “What’s your story?”

Nadira seems to consider her for a long moment. Then, with a confident flick of her wand, the other
girl slides off the bed and onto the floor with an undignified squeak.

“None of your business,” Nadira says. With another wave of her wand, the curtains close around the bed and the girl with a smooth snap.

“Well,” Helena sniffs and she scrambles back up to her feet, cheeks red. “I never.”

It’s on the tip of Ginny’s tongue to say something. You mean like think before you speak? We all wish you would.

But the castle isn’t the same place anymore, and neither is this room, so Ginny swallows the words down and pulls the curtains shut around her own bed.

*     *     *

The first week they don’t have Dark Arts class or Muggle Studies. Instead, all of the students are individually dragged in to speak to the Carrows.

Entrance interviews, they are officially called.

Despite what they are called, no one fails to notice that some students quickly disappear into detention, many walking gingerly the next few days, Neville chief among them. The grim, determined look on his face is frighteningly familiar.

Even more frightening, a couple of students never come back at all.

Ginny’s turn is near the end of the week, which is both good and bad. She’s had a lot of time to think about what may happen.

At the appointed time, Ginny leaves her Transfiguration class, Tobias giving her a grim nod.

The Carrows have offices down in the dungeons. The room she enters seems designed for maximum intimidation. It’s dank, with thick stone walls and no windows, just a plain heavy table in the middle of room. The walls are covered with various types of tools and weapons.

Pretty much the opposite of subtle.

Amycus Carrow sits at the table with a book in front of him, while Alecto Carrow restlessly prowls the space behind him.

“Ginevra Weasley?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Sit,” he orders.

Ginny lowers herself into the hard chair, eying the chains clanking threateningly on the arms.

“Blood status?” Amycus asks, lifting his quill.

It’s on the tip of her tongue to tell him to mind his own fucking business. She has learned far too well these years how not to let her temper rule her though, how to look five, ten, twenty steps ahead. So instead she bares her teeth, lets them see it as a smile, and says, “Pureblood,” like it actually means anything. Like it should.

Tom is a half-blood after all, and as far as Ginny’s concerned it’s the human part that makes them all
idiots equally—foolishness bred into flesh and bone.

Amycus writes a note in the book. “Your mother’s family?”

“Prewett.”

“And her mother?”

“A Black.”

It goes on in this vein for a while, Amycus seeming to triple check that she has no Muggle blood back for three generations. Apparently satisfied, he closes his book. But rather than dismissing her, he pulls out a sheet of paper, laying it on the table in front of her.

“We’re aware that Harry Potter, Undesirable no. 1, often spent time at your home during the summer.”

“Yes,” Ginny says, carefully keeping her eyes averted from Harry’s face. “As if already having six brothers weren’t bad enough.”

Amycus smiles, offering her a glass of water.

Ginny is in no way stupid enough to drink it, but she does take it, lift it to her lips. She thinks of Smita teaching her to vanish her alcohol from her cup without speaking back in their second year, never realizing at the time just how useful that would turn out to be.

“Did he visit your family this summer?”

“No,” Ginny says, putting the glass back down. “Ron didn’t seem to know where he was. With his horrid Muggle relations, I would imagine.”

“And where is your brother?”

“At home. He has Spattergoit.”

“Nasty,” Amycus says.

Ginny nods. “It really is.”

“And Hermione Granger?” he asks, putting her picture down on the table.

Ginny picks up the picture as if it in no way affects her. “She never had much use for me,” she says, canting her voice with just the slightest edge of dismissal. She lays the picture back down. “The feeling was…mutual.” She carefully chooses that moment to brush a nonexistent strand of hair back from her face.

The Carrows don’t miss the green snake childishly inked on her arm.

She watches them share an indulgent smile like it finally all makes sense, this daughter of a blood traitor family who escaped to Slytherin to play at Death Eater. She’s a role model for all. She remains silent and lets it work for her, the Carrows patting her indulgently on the head and sending her back to her lessons.

If she feels physically ill as she leaves that dark dungeon behind, she chalks it up as a necessary evil. The castle has become unfamiliar ground. She needs whatever protections she can find, and if playing into the Carrow’s assumptions gives that to her, she’ll take it.
After all, people’s assumptions have been working against her for years. It’s time she put them to work for her.

* * *

On Monday, the castle wakes to whispers of Harry breaking into the Ministry. Copies of the Quibbler are everywhere, miraculously disappearing the moment either of the Carrows near. It’s the only media source still openly speaking out against the Ministry, peeling back the lies being fed to them.

“What would he be doing there?” she hears two young Gryffindors discussing in whispers as she leaves class, voices tight with excitement. With hope.

They look up at her as she passes, and she can see it there, a question on their lips. She averts her eyes and keeps walking.

Ginny doesn’t read the article, refuses to speculate. She honestly can’t think of a reason compelling enough to outweigh the foolish risk.

**What are you doing?**

On her way back into the common room, she comes face to face with Draco. They both come to a stop in the doorway, eyes meeting.

She’s surprised to see that he looks even more paper-thin than he had last year. There’s no denying that events have aligned themselves in his favor. In some ways, he has every right to traipse around like he owns the place. Only he hasn’t been. Not that she’s seen.

They look at each other, and for just a moment his expression is almost vulnerable before being replaced with ragged belligerence like somehow she’s the bully, and he’s the victim.

She doesn’t know if she wants to reassure him that she’s the last person he needs to worry about, or just punch him in the face for what he let happen to her brother, for letting that monster Fenrir Greyback into their school.

For Dumbledore.

She does neither, mostly because she can’t afford to, but also because she begins to imagine he’s just as trapped as the rest of them. There’s no heroes or villains here. Just scared little children.

She looks away, sliding past him without touching.

The common room is nearly empty, most people already at dinner. Glancing across the room, her eye is caught by the rough wooden door half lost in shadows. A door she hasn’t seen a single girl move towards in the week they have been here.

Ginny’s hand tightens into a fist, and after another long moment, she manages to get her feet moving, carrying her over to the door.

Gingerly, she reaches for the handle.

Hard, aching disappointment wells in her stomach when the handle doesn’t move under her hand. She pushes harder, the handle rattling, but not budging.

“Foolish,” she whispers to herself.
Down in her dorm, Bridget and Helena aren’t there and Nadira’s curtains are pulled tightly shut. Ginny climbs onto her own bed, pulling out her Runes homework. She stares unseeing at it for a long time.

Ripping off a small piece of parchment, she picks up her quill, giving in to the persistent itch for ink and words like the release of a pressure valve.

*Dear Harry,* she writes, her mind clogged with questions she can’t voice. *Where are you? What’s happening? What am I supposed to do?*

The words remain stubbornly inked in place long after she writes them and she isn’t sure if she’s supposed to be reassured or disappointed. There’s no way for her words to reach him, no way to get an answer. No Harry, no Ron, no Hermione, no Fred and George, no Smita, no Antonia, no Tom. There’s no one left to answer for her.

She writes, *We do what we must.*

* * *

Muggle Studies is held in one of the largest classrooms in the castle, one with sweeping tiered seating. Every student in her year is crowded into the space. On each table are two books. One titled *When Muggles Attack* and another thicker tome called *The Origins of the Muggle.*

Glancing around the room, she can see more than one student staring down at the books in horror. Six people are given detention the first day, many of them Gryffindor.

At the end of the lesson, Alecto approaches her, student heads swiveling around to watch. Ginny feels her fingers twitch towards her tattoo, but manages to stop the telling movement.

“I see you were in this class already,” Alecto says, an indulgent smile on her face.

From what Ginny’s been able to glean, Alecto isn’t particularly bright. A few subtle critiques offered by more circumspect students seem to have gone over her head even as she pounced on the obvious resistance of other students. Frankly, she appears far more interested in hearing what she wants than looking for underlying motivations.

Mouth service to her seems like a small enough price.

And if Ginny also thinks of being down in that dungeon, of her father putting on his robes and going to work, she tells herself it doesn’t matter. *We just carry on.*

She nods. “My father made me,” she says. “He wouldn’t let me play Quidditch otherwise.”

Alecto seems to swallow this lie without hesitation. “And what did you think of Burbage?”

Ginny lifts one shoulder in a shrug as if she doesn’t feel something deep and heavy lodge in her stomach. “Fine, I suppose.”

Alecto crosses her arms over her chest, her wand absently tapping against her shoulder. “What did she talk about?”

“Mostly art.” She tilts her head to one side. “Did you know that Muggle art doesn’t even move? It just *sits* there.”

Alecto laughs, patting Ginny on the shoulder before moving off.
She blows out a breath, leaning down to collect her things, only to find Tobias staring at her like she’s a stranger.

*     *     *

Dear Ron-

We all have to take Muggle Studies now. It means extra lessons. You should be glad you’re missing it. Burbage isn’t here anymore. We have a new teacher called Alecto Carrow. Her brother teaches the Dark Arts class. A new year, a new Dark Arts teacher. It seems things are ever as they were here at Hogwarts! Slughorn is my new Head of House as Snape has become Headmaster. We rarely see him. I guess he’s busy.

Well, enjoy your lounging around, you great lazy oaf, and don’t let the puss get you down.

-Ginny

*     *     *

Saturday morning, Ginny holds trials for Quidditch. They’re pretty straight forward, almost her entire team returning. Almost.

While she misses Thompson more than she can say, the more painful opening is Graham. He should be here. He should be here with Bassenthwaite and instead he is just one among dozens of students who have disappeared without a trace, leaving only whispers in their wake.


Like maybe they’ve all become the same thing.

Instead of thinking about that, she focuses on picking a replacement Chaser for Thompson. Vaisey seem close enough with Urquhart that she should probably just pick him. He’s the best talent she has, as much as she doesn’t like him. Just part of the job, she tells herself.

At least there is joy to be found in Reiko flying circles around Harper.

As all the hopefuls file off the field, Ginny calls Bassenthwaite back. “What do you think?” she asks.

“About what?” he asks.

She rolls her eyes. “The other Beater.”

He looks at her with surprise.

She lifts a shoulder. “You’re the one who is going to have to work with them.”

He considers that. “Rosier.”

Ginny lifts an eyebrow.

“I know,” he says. “He’s a bit of a prick. But I can work with that.”

It’s more than him simply being a prick. The Rosiers are part of the Sacred 28, indelibly, carefully pureblood and proud of it. He already not so casually name-dropped during the trials, as if being in tight with the Carrows and Snape is going to make her more likely to pick him. But not selecting him because of that is almost as rash, and certainly hard to explain.
“Okay,” Ginny says, ignoring the uneasy feeling in her stomach. “You want him, you’ve got him.”

*  *  *

The weeks quickly fall into a pattern of classes and lies and fear, and Ginny just does her best to keep her head down.

She spends most of her time with Tobias, the two of them an uncomfortable duo. Tobias rarely smiles anymore, Smita’s absence like a giant hole. They don’t talk much, like there are no safe topics left anymore. But even sitting with Tobias in silence is better than sitting alone, or having to face the scrutiny of other people.

Tobias has nothing but hard glares to give anyone these days, and that has its uses sometimes too.

Nicola has tentatively approached Ginny a few times, but every time Ginny sees her, all she can think of is a locked door under her hand. She’s been watching the door to The Parlor, but hasn’t seen anyone so much as approach it. Instead, most of the girls seem to be sitting in the common room.

“I’m going to bed,” Tobias says, scooping up his work.

“Night,” Ginny says.

Not long after Tobias disappears, Millicent drops into his vacant chair.

Ginny gives her a wary glance. “Hi.”

Millicent ignores the greeting. “You understand that we’re waiting for you, right?”

Ginny feels a painful clutch of pressure around her chest.

“To open the door,” Millicent clarifies as if talking to a hysterical toddler.

Ginny opens her palm, staring down at the thin scar. “I can’t.”

Millicent snorts, her hard eyes raking over Ginny. “Antonia must have seen something in you. But personally I think you’re a bit thick.”

But this, on top of everything else, is just one too step too far. “How the hell am I supposed to know? I’m not--.” She sputters a bit in frustration. “You all keep forgetting that I don’t come from here. I wasn’t born to any of this. You keep forgetting that I’m--.”

Millicent gives her a piercing look. “An outsider?”

Ginny opens her mouth only to close it again, feeling like there’s no right answer.

Millicent shakes her head, getting to her feet. “Maybe she was wrong.” With one last dismissive look, she walks away.

Ginny glances around the room, many of The Parlor girls looking away just as her gaze touches them. Only Tilly holds her gaze, giving her a bracing nod.

After everyone has gone to sleep, Ginny approaches the door. Trying the handle again, she pushes, but the door stays stubbornly shut.

Taking out her wand, she taps the door, trying to repeat the incantation she heard Antonia use only a handful of times. She wishes now she paid slightly more attention.
Nothing.

Almost as if it knows she is unworthy.

Hesitantly, she stretches out her hand, pressing her palm with the thin scar against the hard wood. She holds her breath for a long moment, waiting for what, she can’t say.

Nothing.

She almost laughs at herself then, wondering what she expected. Leaning forward, she rests her forehead against the door, her fingers curling into the wood.

*Who are you?* a voice demands, echoing loudly in Ginny’s mind.

She jerks back away.

* * *

Ginny doesn’t sleep well, that deep fathomless voice following her into her dreams.

*Who are you?*

On her way to Muggle Studies the next morning she sees Reiko walking down the hall, her face set and books tucked tight into her chest. Very close behind her walk Crabbe and Goyle, faces full of hard amusement. Goyle reaches out and swipes at the back of Reiko’s robes, saying something that makes Reiko’s face burn.

Reiko comes to a sudden stop, spinning around and shoving both boys back as if they aren’t easily twice her weight. She says something to them.

They laugh, saying something else to each other, nudging each other in the ribs. Reiko hurries away from them, and they don’t follow her.

Ginny falls into step next to the younger girl. “Are they bothering you?”

Reiko looks less than pleased by her interference. “They’re just stupid gits. I can handle them.”

“I’m sure you can,” Ginny says, looking back at Crabbe and Goyle. They shoot her hard leers, but don’t dare do anything more. Too scared to come after her still, which is good, because Ginny can’t afford to be that careless again.

Unfortunately, they are clearly not above finding other ways.

“You’ll let me know if that changes?” Ginny murmurs.

Reiko rolls her eyes. “Yes, Mum.”

Ginny is distracted during Muggle Studies, her mind too busy thinking of Reiko and that fathomless voice that has set into her brain like a fever. She tries to calm her mind, to remind herself that she just needs to keep carefully putting one foot in front of the other.

Keep your head down. Carry on.

*Carry on.*

She’s so stuck in her head that it takes far longer for her to notice Tobias’ growing agitation than it
should. They are walking back from their lesson when he seemingly reaches his limit.

“‘You know,’” he says, voice cold and hard, “‘you could at least pretend that it bothers you. That she’s not here.’”

They never say Smita’s name, like she’s become a thing between them even more dangerous than Voldemort.

“‘Don’t be stupid,’” Ginny says. Not thinking about Smita is the only way she survives it sometimes, the ache of loneliness in her stomach. Can’t he see that?

He pulls her to a stop, leaning into her. “‘Do you even care that it’s your fault?’”

Ginny pulls back, staring at him like he’s lost his mind. “‘What are you talking about?’”

His fingers tighten on her arm. “‘Everyone knows you dragged her along on that insane Department of Mysteries debacle. The stupid DA and their ridiculous sodding notions.’”

They both know the DA has nothing to do with it, but it’s far easier than the truth. Tobias needs something to be mad about, and Voldemort will never be a safe target. She gets that, even if it pisses her off.

“‘I’m not having this conversation,’” Ginny says, trying to push past him, put enough distance between them to give him a chance to cool off.

He refuses to let go of her though, his voice rising in volume. “‘Do you really think you’re fooling anyone?’”

She spins on her heel, her ponytail nearly smacking the side of his head as she leans into him. “‘Lower your goddamned voice.’”

He does, but just barely. “‘Do you honestly think anyone here doesn’t know whose side you’re really on?’”

She feels the dig of that deep down, like he’s taken a painful swing at her teetering foundations. “‘And whose side are you on?’”

He flushes at the implication. “‘The side I always should have been on. Mine.’”

“How blindingly altruistic of you.”

“‘Hey,’” he snaps, jabbing his finger into her sternum. “‘I didn’t bring the Dark Lord back. But I’m not stupid enough to think I can change it either.’”

“‘You know what?’” Ginny says, voice going cold and hard. “‘I’m glad she isn’t here. Now she won’t have to see what you really are.’”

She might as well have hit him, the way he goes still and pale, completely motionless for the beat of a second. “‘Fuck you, Weasley.’”

She laughs, something high and artificial and utterly unlike herself. “‘Is that what this is really about?’” she accuses, wishing she could take it back almost the second she says it.

His mouth opens and closes a couple of times, and then he just turns and walks away.

Ginny takes a breath and forces herself to walk calmly back across the quad, right past a small clutch
of Ravenclaw girls.

“Trouble in paradise?” one of the girls asks.

Ginny forces herself to smile, relaxing her shoulders. “Some boys just can’t handle rejection gracefully.”

They all smile and snicker appreciatively, and Ginny lets herself get swallowed up by the easy talk of the immaturity of boys.

Her smile never slips.

*   *   *

In all of their classes the next day, Tobias deliberately sits as far away from her as he can.

She tells herself it’s a relief. They both need time to cool down. It still doesn’t stop the feeling that there is an ever-widening space around her.

It’s probably better that way.

Even with her Quidditch team she feels strangely apart. She knows this is partly from being captain. But she was captain before. Only then she had Thompson. And if she really needed help, she had… She cuts herself off, refusing to let her mind wander in that direction. Some things feel too dangerous to even think about these days.

In the evening, she studies in the library well into the evening. She is very well aware that she is hiding, avoiding Tobias and the battleground that is her dorm room, but also the scrutiny of The Parlor girls waiting for her to get her shite together.

It can all get to be just a little too much.

She considers, for about half a second, retreating to the cloister, but just can’t face it.

So the library it is.

She’s just finished packing up her things to make it back to her dorm before curfew when Hannah Abbott walks into the room at a fast clip, her eyes skimming the space and falling on Ginny with something like palpable relief.

Ginny frowns, slinging her bag over her shoulder and moving for the exit.

At the door, Hannah puts a hand on Ginny’s arm. “Can I talk to you?”

Ginny sighs, not really in the mood for this at the moment. “About what?”

Hannah glances around, biting her lip. “Not here.”

Ginny lets the other girl pull her into a nearby empty classroom.

“What is it?” Ginny asks, closing the door behind her. “It’s nearly curfew.” When Hannah doesn’t do anything other than warily stare, Ginny blows out a breath. “You came to find me, remember?”

Hannah’s face is bright pink. She opens her mouth, but doesn’t manage to get anything out.

“Great,” Ginny says, turning on her heel to leave. “Now that we’ve cleared that up.”
“Wait,” Hannah squeaks. Her hands twist in front of her as she blurts out a stream of smushed together words. “I think Neville’s about to do something really stupid, and I couldn’t get him to listen to me. I thought maybe he’d be more willing to listen to you.”

Ginny frowns, but isn’t really surprised. Neville has already spent more time in detention than anyone else. It was really only a matter of time until he did something stupid. “What is he doing?”

Hannah shakes her head. “He mentioned something Harry needs. Something that the Ministry refused to give him even though Dumbledore wanted him to have it.”

“That stupid wanker,” Ginny says, realization dawning.

The sword of bloody Gryffindor. How the hell he had learned about that, she doesn’t know. His grandmother, maybe. What matters now is keeping Neville from doing something spectacularly stupid.

She’s already moving for the door, the hard chill of foreboding filling her chest. “Where is he now?”

Hannah spreads her hands wide, voice trembling. “Seamus said he’s not in Gryffindor Tower. And he hasn’t been anywhere else I’ve checked.”

“And Luna?”

Hannah’s eyes widen. “No, I haven’t seen her either. But she could be in her dorms. I could find Michael and ask.”

“Don’t bother.” She won’t be there if Ginny’s growing suspicion is at all correct. He’ll need Luna’s help. “Go back to your common room. I’ll take care of this.”

Hannah steps across her. “N-no.”

Ginny looks at her in surprise.

Hannah’s chin lifts. “I’m coming with you.”

Ginny shakes her head. “Seriously, this is going to be dangerous. Detention would probably look fun next to what this could cost us.”

Hannah grabs Ginny’s arm, pulling her to a stop. “I’m not a coward.”

“I never said—,” Ginny sputters.

“Maybe not, but I know what you all think of Hufflepuffs.” Hannah’s face hardens, tears in her eyes. “They killed my mother. Killed her.”

Ginny reels back.

It’s common knowledge that Hannah was pulled out of classes at the beginning of last year when Death Eaters murdered her mother. Ginny wants to argue that her mother’s death doesn’t have anything to do with this, but it would be a lie.

People are dying, many for little more than getting in Tom’s way. They have been for a while now.

Hannah drops her arm, swiping at the tears on her face. “I’m just going to follow you anyway.”

“Okay, you win,” Ginny sighs. “But I need to know that if I tell you to do something, you’ll do it, no
questions asked.”

If being given orders by a younger girl seems to sit strangely with Hannah, she doesn’t show it.
“Okay.”

“Well then. We’re going to the Headmaster’s office.”

Hannah’s eyebrows shoot up, but she doesn’t change her mind.

Together they race back up through the corridors, all of them deserted. Curfews are taken a lot more seriously these days.

At the top of the spiral stairs, the door stands slightly ajar, proof of Ginny’s horrible suspicion. Luna stands next to the door, chatting with a gargoyle.

“Oh, hello,” Luna says, seeing them.

“Is Neville in there?” Ginny ask.

Luna nods. “It was quite an interesting challenge, getting the door open. Gilbert has been telling me all sorts of fascinating history. Did you know that a Headmaster in the 16th century had a Sphinx guarding his door?”

The gargoyle nods sagely.

“Fascinating,” Ginny says, pushing past her into the office.

Inside, Neville is rather precariously balanced on a chair, pulling the Sword of Gryffindor from its case on the wall.

“Neville,” she says.

He starts, almost losing his balance. “Merlin, Ginny. You scared me.”

Scaring him is the least of what she plans to do to him. “Have you completely lost your mind?”

He frowns at her. “Look, I know it was a bit of a risk…”

“A bit of a risk?” Ginny repeats, her voice shrill. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Helping Harry,” he says, stepping down with sword in hand. “Someone has to.”

She ignores the sting of that accusation, forcing herself to admit that shutting down Neville had never been a great strategy to begin with. “And how do you plan on getting a sword to him? By owl?”

Neville has the grace to flush. “I’ll find a way.”

“And say you do? Say you could manage to find him when every wizard in the country is already searching. You could lead them right to him! Use your head!”

“She’s right, Neville,” Hannah says from right behind Ginny.

Neville gives her a look like she’s betraying him.

Ginny steps closer, refocusing his attention on her. “This isn’t bravery, Neville, it’s recklessness.”
Harry—"

"Is gone," Ginny says, the words seeming to rip out of her chest. "And for all we know, never coming back. Getting yourself killed isn’t going to change that."

Something in Neville’s expression seems to soften. "You’re afraid."

Ginny thinks she almost liked it better when Neville fumbled with his wand and was more likely to look at his toes as challenge anyone. "This isn’t a war, Neville! Do you see anyone fighting? So stop pretending!"

"Pretending what?"

"That Voldemort hasn’t already won!"

It feels awful finally saying it out loud, her greatest fear. The words ring between them.

"Ginny," Neville says, voice horrified. "You don’t mean that."

She shakes her head, pulling her wand. Someone has to save him from himself. "So help me, Neville. I will curse you if I have to."

Hannah’s eyes go wide, but she doesn’t interfere.

Neville looks enraged, but in no way willing to call Ginny’s bluff.

Stepping forward, she wrenches the sword from Neville’s hands. "Hannah, get them out of here. I’ll put the sword back."

She pauses only a moment before bustling Neville out of the office.

Ginny stands there holding the sword, feeling its weight. She’s honestly a little surprised it didn’t disappear the moment she touched it with her Slytherin hands. She indulges the fantasy of walking it out of the castle. Walking out and never looking back.

She crosses the room and carefully puts the sword back in place.

As she turns to leave, she thinks she sees the slightest movement out of the corner of her eye. When she looks, there’s a portrait of Albus Dumbledore slumbering in his frame. Just seeing his face is like a punch to the gut.

People are dying.

"Sir?" she asks, feeling stupid, but unable to resist.

Dumbledore continues to slumber.

Shaking her head at her whimsy, Ginny runs for the door. She jerks it open only to slam headlong into Snape. She bounces off his chest, his hands on her shoulders the only thing keeping her from falling.

It’s the first time she’s been this close to him since he cursed her and escaped. Since the night…

You killed Dumbledore, she wants to say.

“What are you doing in here, Miss Weasley?” he demands, forcing her back into the room.
She stumbles away from him, feeling his mind push up against hers, *recognizing* it this time. She tries to feed him exactly what he wants to see. Pulling a harmless prank. Hijinks and teenage stupidity.

Snape almost smiles, just the tiniest bit. He walks around her to stand behind his desk. “Detention, Miss Weasley.”

“For how long?” she demands.

His eyes narrow, no doubt because of her less than apologetic tone. “For as long as I deem necessary.”

Ginny clenches her jaw. “And what exactly does that mean?” she says, forgetting herself in her utter frustration, the unexpected burn of betrayal she feels just looking at him, this man she’d been foolish enough to trust.

Snape makes a small sound of what might be disgust, sitting down at the desk. “A true Slytherin never lets their emotions undermine their control,” he lectures, and from anyone else that might have sounded like a warning, a caution, but from Snape it’s just yet another criticism.

Ginny dares to let her eyes dart past him to the slumbering portrait of Dumbledore, just for a moment, but more than enough for Snape to take note of it. “Don’t you mean self-preservation? *Sir*?”

She doesn’t know what she expects from him, a flash of guilt or triumph or even sadness, but all she gets is the slight lifting of one corner of his mouth. “I see we understand each other, Miss Weasley.”

“Perfectly, sir,” she says, voice crisp and frigid and revealing none of the lava flowing right underneath.

He nods. “You’ll begin Wednesday night at eight. Report to the dungeons.”

Ginny feels a fission of fear under her skin, but is careful not to let it show. She’s heard rumors of what passes for punishment these days. The Carrows apparently have a particular flourish for creativity that even Filch may have balked at.

She forces herself to turn and walk away, each step measured.

“Miss Weasley,” he says just as she reaches the door.

She pauses.

“Don’t *ever* speak his name again,” he says, voice vicious.

*Voldemort.*

She doesn’t dare let her confusion or fear show, just nods and flees.

* * *

Ginny feels like everyone should be staring at her, whispering behind their hands, but everything seems to carry on exactly like before. There are no rumors about Ginny’s attempted ‘prank’, no long looks from McGonagall or Flitwick or Slughorn. No warnings to be more careful.

Her first instinct is to talk to Tobias, to tell him what happened, but things between them are still frosty at best. Which, really, is better than the unpredictable burn of rage.

Instead, she keeps her own council, trying not to think about what her detention may look like.
“Well,” she says on Wednesday evening. “If you’ll excuse me, I have detention.”

“Oh really,” Reiko says, looking interested.

Ginny forces herself to shrug. “Homework is far less interesting than Quidditch. But I guess not everyone sees that.”

Reiko laughs.

The air is stale and noticeably cooler as she descends into the ancient dungeons to serve her first detention. She isn’t sure where she is specifically meant to go, but only one door in the long hallway is open, a faint glow of light spilling out.

Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she walks into the room.

She’s not sure why she’s at once horrified and relieved to see Snape waiting for her instead of the Carrows. Maybe because he’s a known entity, but only if she fools herself into thinking she really knows anything about this man—a murderer and a traitor.

Unlike the room the Carrows held their interrogations in, this room is nearly empty and small enough that a single brace of candles fills the space with light. A worn table and a couple chairs are the only furniture.

She steps up to the table, scuffing her feet slightly. “Headmaster.”

He looks up. “Miss Weasley. Take a seat.”

She complies, noting that this chair doesn’t come equipped with chains. She isn’t sure if this is a good sign or not.

Once she’s seated, Snape pushes a thick tome across the table to her. “You will copy this text cover to cover, word for word.”

She blinks in surprise, because hand cramps and the occasional paper cut seem like nothing in comparison to the stories already circulating the castle, even if this particular book may take the rest of her life to copy. Then again, she hasn’t forgotten how Umbridge corrupted something as innocent as writing lines.

“With my own quill, sir?”

His jaw seems to flex for a moment before he replies. “Yes.”

Leaning down to dig through her bag, she pulls out a quill and ink and a piece of parchment. The whole time, she watches Snape out of the corner of her eye, trying to work out the variables of the situation. She wants to ask why she is having detention with him, why she is only having to write lines, but something tells her it would be a dire miscalculation on her part to actually speak the words.

He stares back at her with hard black eyes and a face so blank it may as well have been carved of stone.

She eases the cover of the book open, bracing herself for a million possibilities all at once. The pages sit still and steady.

She starts copying.
A few sentences in, she frowns as the words finally register, flipping the cover closed to glance at the title. Rubbing her thumb across the worn leather, she can just barely make out the faded gilt letters.

_Occlumency and Legilimency: An Exhausting Primer_

“Is there a problem, Miss Weasley?”

She looks up at him, questions hovering on the edge of her tongue. She swallows them back. “No, sir,” she says, flipping the book back open.

Despite the setting and the man sitting across from her, Ginny finds herself engrossed in the words in front of her, the weaving of lies and truths and protections and the grey places in between.

For a while, she lets herself get lost in the magic of secrets.

*     *     *

It’s nearly midnight by the time she returns to the common room. Her arm and hand ache, her eyes are blurry, but none of these compare to the painful tumble of thoughts in her mind, as if she’s on the edge of putting a particularly crucial piece of information into place.

She’s so distracted that she almost walks straight by Tobias where he sits near the low-banked fire.

For a long moment they just look at each other. Tobias’ gaze drops as he looks her over, and with a jolt she wonders if he stayed up for her, if he heard about her detention. If maybe he wanted to know she was okay.

“It was just lines,” she says.

“What?” he says, jerking slightly like she startled him.

“I only had to write lines.”

“Oh,” Tobias says, one shoulder lifting in a shrug. He pushes to his feet, gathering up his papers. “What’s that to me?”

He pushes past her.

“Tobias,” she says with a sigh, sitting down on the arm of a chair.

There’s no response, and as the silence stretches on, she assumes he went down to his room.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” he says.

When she turns around, he’s gone.

*     *     *

Thursday afternoon, Ginny is heading to the pitch for practice when Neville runs down the lawns to catch up with her.

“You didn’t tell me you got caught!” he exclaims, more than loud enough for anyone to hear.

She glances around them before grabbing his arm. She drags him off towards the Forbidden Forest. Once they are safe inside the branches, she turns to look at him.
“Neville, what the hell--.”

He doesn’t let her finish. “People are saying you had detention, with Snape.”

Ginny sighs. “I did. So what?”

“So what?” he echoes. He shakes his head, he pushes past her. “I’m going to tell him.”

She stops him. “Tell him what exactly? That you and Luna broke into the Headmaster’s office to steal an ancient relic that happens to be important to Harry bloody Potter?”

Neville hesitates. “Yes. They must already know. The portraits would have told him.”

“Don’t you think that if they had, you’d already be in detention too?” For all they know the other Headmasters have taken exception to Snape murdering his predecessor. That could put a bit of a dent in their loyalty.

He seems to consider that, his brow furrowing. But then he’s brushing it aside. “What does that matter, really? It isn’t right.”

“It isn’t right?” Ginny echoes, feeling like Neville is speaking in tongues for all she can understand him right now.

“That you’re being punished for what I did!”

Ginny blows out a breath. “Don’t be stupid. You got away with it. Just be glad.”

“I’m not thinking about myself!”

“Really?” Ginny says. “How exactly does turning yourself in help Luna and Hannah? The only thing it really accomplishes is making you feel less guilty. How is that not about yourself?”

He flushes.

“But if you won’t think about Luna and Hannah, at least think about me.”

He throws his arms up, looking utterly frustrated. “I am thinking about you!”

“Really,” Ginny says. “So you’re thinking about the fact that right now, I’m having to write lines for Snape because of some stupid prank he thinks I was trying to pull. You’re thinking about the fact that he’s probably being lenient with me because of some weird sense of indulgence towards his own House. You’re thinking about the fact that if they suspected why I was really there, I would probably be down in the dungeons with the Carrows facing something much worse than writing bloody lines.”

Neville gapes at her.

“Is that what you’re thinking about?” she presses.

“No,” he stutters. “I didn’t… I mean…”

Ginny takes another step closer to him, her voice hardening. “The truth is, Neville, the greatest threat to my safety right now isn’t Snape or the Carrows. It’s you.”

He looks like she may have well slapped him, but she doesn’t have any room to feel bad about that.

“Do you get it?”
He nods. “I do. I get it.” He takes a few stumbling steps back. “I won’t say anything.”

Ginny watches him slink away from her, his shoulders hunched. She can’t help but feel like she’s kicked a puppy and it just pisses her off even more. Glancing at her watch, she sees that on top of everything she’s late to practice.

Finding her team already waiting for her just makes her mood even darker.

“Nice of you to join us,” Bassenthwaite says.

She ignores him, scrambling to get everything together. She’s leaning over the equipment box when one voice rises up above the general conversation.

“…his Mudblood father.”

To Ginny, it feels like some last slender thread snaps, everything she’s been holding back threatening to pour out all at once.

She straightens, turning to look at Rosier. “What did you say?” she asks, voice quiet and still.

He shrugs, clearly unaware of the implication of what he’s said. “About Graham?”

The rest of the team are giving each other alarmed looks, clearly more familiar with Ginny’s moods and tempers. “Yes,” she says.

“That his father is a Mudblood?” he asks, glancing around at the other players as if looking for someone else to explain what her problem is. “What’s the big deal?”

They’ve been sitting in Muggle Studies for weeks hearing Alecto casually toss the word Mudblood about, like it’s a clinical term and not a slur. She shouldn’t be surprised. But she is.

Ginny takes a few steps towards him. “The big deal is that I won’t have that word spoken.”

He huffs dismissively. “Don’t get your knickers in a twist.”

Ginny smiles, and Bassenthwaite seems to recoil in horror. She sees him put a cautioning hand on Rosier’s arm, but he ignores it.

“You can call me a bitch or a tyrant or a slag or whatever you feel like. But I won’t have that filthy hate language on my pitch.”

“Or what?” he says, pulling up his chin as if to remind her of the physical height he has on her. It’s a blatant, bullish move that really does nothing more than remind Ginny of his weakness, how uncertain he really must be.

She lets her posture relax. “Don’t pretend you aren’t replaceable. We all know you are.”

“My parents—,” he starts to bluster. He’s been happy to tell anyone willing to hear how close his parents are to Snape and the Carrows.

“You think I care?” she says. “They may run this school, but out here, I’m the only lord that matters.”

Everyone blanches, and Ginny knows she’s let her temper push her too far, even as she knows, deep down that she means every damn word.
“Run ten laps, or get the hell off my pitch and never come back.”

She doesn’t wait around to see if he complies, instead turning her attention to the rest of the team, setting them up for the first drill.

Once they are up in formation, Ginny glances down to see Rosier working his way around the pitch in a steady, if not petulant, jog.

Reiko pulls her broom up next to hers, a broad grin on her face.

“What are you smiling at?” Ginny grumbles.

Reiko shakes her head. “Just happy to see you acting more like yourself,” she says.

“Less talking and more flying,” Ginny says.

Reiko darts away with a laugh.

* * *

At breakfast, Ginny watches students covertly read the Quibbler, heads lowered together. She catches Rosier’s eye across the table, and after a moment, he’s the first to look away.

It was reckless, letting her temper get the best of her like that, but it felt good. It felt right.

It’s the first thing she’s felt other than fear in a really long time.

She isn’t quite sure what to think about that.

In Herbology, Hannah uses the cover of the general chaos to sit near Ginny.

“Are you okay?” she asks, eyes on the seedlings she is replanting.

Ginny snips a flower off the plant in front of her, ignoring it as it wails softly. “Fine.”

Hannah looks her over. “You ended up with detention.”

Ginny sighs, not particularly wanting to deal with another person’s foolish guilt. At least Hannah is being circumspect about it. “It’s fine,” she still very nearly snaps.

When she turns to look at the other girl though, there is nothing of guilt or curiosity, just a soft sort of compassion that Ginny finds really hard to face.

“Really,” Ginny says, voice softening. “It’s not a big deal.”

After a moment Hannah nods, clearly willing to take Ginny at her word. “Thank you, for what you did. It means a lot.”

Ginny nods.

They finish the rest of the lesson in companionable silence.

* * *

The weekend passes quietly enough, Rosier subdued but compliant during Saturday’s practice. Ginny manages to get caught up enough on her work not to get yelled at or assigned additional detention and it begins to feel like maybe the entire Sword of Gryffindor debacle has finally defused.
She should have remembered that things with Gryffindors are never that simple.

Sure enough, by the middle of the next week, Ginny can’t help but notice that Neville is more often than not limping into meals. She overhears the Gryffindor Beater Ritchie talking to a classmate during Muggle Studies, saying that Neville has spent nearly every night that week in detention for mouthing off in class.

She can see that it’s deliberate, like the guilty part of his brain demands he share in Ginny’s punishment, even if for a different infraction. It would almost be charmingly stupid if it weren’t so infuriating.

She feels like she’s seen this before, a boy on the edge of losing control.

Sure enough, in her next Herbology class, Hannah leans towards her and says, “I’m worried about Neville.”

“Yeah,” Ginny admits. “Me too.”

Hannah looks up at her, so painfully hopeful, but also like she doesn’t dare ask for anymore help, considering how it all turned out last time.

Ginny sighs. Someone is going to have to find a way to save Neville from himself. “Do you think you could get him to the Room of Requirement tonight?”

Hannah brightens. “I’m sure I can.”

“Bring Luna too.” They will no doubt need backup.

“At eight?”

“Make it seven. I have detention.”

Hannah regards her. “Has he said how long they are going to last?”

“Until I die, apparently.”

Hannah looks discomforted by the joke.

“He hasn’t hurt me,” Ginny says. “I don’t know why. But he hasn’t.”

Even if she were willing to spill her secrets, she doesn’t have an explanation for what is happening down in the dungeons.

“Okay,” Hannah says.

* * *

Right before seven that evening, Ginny walks up and down the hallway thinking somewhere safe, somewhere safe, somewhere safe.

When the door to the Room of Requirement appears, she has no clear idea of what the room inside will look like. The Burrow maybe, or the DA room from years past. Walking in, she sees that it is neither of these places, but instead somewhere she is least prepared to face.

Warm lighting from an unseen source softens stone walls, falling across soft, elegantly upholstered couches. A fire crackles quietly in a fireplace to one side. She breathes in, and even the air smells like
it. Like fine perfume and damp spaces.

Luna is the first to arrive, glancing around the room in interest. “Is this the Slytherin Common Room?”

“No,” Ginny says. “Just…somewhere I belong.”

Hannah and Neville are only a few steps behind.

Seeing Ginny, Neville automatically says, “I didn’t say anything.”

Ginny shakes her head. “I know,” she says. “But that hasn’t kept you from finding other ways to be punished, has it?”

Neville’s cheeks burn, but he doesn’t bother denying it.

“Neville,” Hannah says. “We’re worried about you.”

Luna nods in agreement. “You’ve clearly been infested with Cholerims.”

He looks around at the three girls. “What is this? An intervention?”

“If it needs to be,” Ginny says.

Neville sighs. “I’m not just trying to get tossed in detention out of guilt or whatever.”

“Then why are you doing it? Why provoke them?” Ginny asks.

“Because it’s rubbish!” he says, throwing his arms up. “Everyone saying Harry is some sort of criminal, trying to pretend You-Know-Who isn’t running things. And you’ve heard what the Carrows say in class. What they do. I’m just supposed to sit there and let that happen?”

“And letting them beat you somehow solves that?”

“It’s better than pretending!” he snaps.

Ginny flushes, remembering their fight in the Headmaster’s office.

Neville drags a hand through his hair. “It matters. Remember how much it meant to people, that Harry always spoke out, refused to lie no matter what they did to him to keep him quiet?”

“You aren’t Harry, Neville,” Ginny snaps, something like shame and rage and painful yearning burning up her throat.

“You don’t think I know that?” he says, voice almost despondent.

Hannah touches his shoulder, giving Ginny a hard look.

Ginny sighs, taking a breath and walking over to sit down on the couch. There’s a worn spot on the edge of the pillow that is exactly where she remembers it. She shakes her head, wondering if Hogwarts itself is trying to tell her something. If it always has been.

“That day on the train,” Ginny says. “When you came up to me. What did you want from me? What did you honestly expect?”

Neville’s face flushes. “I thought…” He shakes his head. “I wasn’t thinking. I just hoped.”
“That I would tell you about them?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I just…I don’t know what we’re supposed to do,” he says.

“And you thought maybe I could tell you?”

“If anyone were to start the DA up again, we all assumed it would be you,” Hannah says.

Ginny feels a hard pain in her chest. “What?”

They all look at each other, nodding, and Ginny can’t help but think of all the looks she gets in the halls from various former DA members.

Ginny’s hands tighten in her lap. “You really think people would do that? Follow a Slytherin?”

Neville once again looks uncomfortable, but she appreciates the honesty of it.

Luna’s the one to pipe in. “You’re a Weasley.”

Ginny knows what she means. A blood traitor. A friend to Harry and the Order. She’s wanted the Carrows to believe otherwise. And maybe she’s tried to believe it too.

Neville is watching her, so damn hopeful. But Ginny is tired of trying to be what other people want her to be, what they need her to be.

“Yeah,” she says. “I’m a Weasley. But I’m also something else.”

“What?” Neville asks.

She gets to her feet, pacing over to stand in front of the fireplace, trying to find a way to explain this. “Death Eaters came to the Burrow this summer.”

“Luna told us,” he says. “They were looking for Harry.”

Ginny nods, her jaw clenching. “You know the strange thing about Cruciatius? It’s not that it hurts. I mean, Merlin, yes, it hurts. But even long after it’s over, you can still feel it, you know? Like a tremor in your muscles. But I can never be sure if I’m just imagining that.”

She looks up at Neville, and there is naked horror on his face. For her, but also for his parents.

Hannah is touching his arm even as she stares at Ginny with teary eyes.

“You have to understand,” she finds herself saying, like she’s pleading with them. “They said that if I was lying, they would come back. Not just for me, but for my whole family. I have six brothers. Six.”

“And were you?” Neville asks. “Lying?”

Ginny glances at Luna, realizing that while she may have told them about the Death Eaters, she never told them about Harry.

“That lie about Spattergoit is the only thing keeping anyone in my family safe. So you see, Neville. You’re right about me. I am afraid. Too scared to lead some sort of student rebellion.”
How can she lead when all she can see is every tiny way this can all go so horribly wrong?

“Ginny…” he presses, almost entreating.

“No. I can’t.” She takes a breath, sitting back down.

The other three eventually lower themselves onto the couches as well. It’s Neville who drops down with a painful sigh as if he’s been denied some amazing treat.

“If you believe in this so much, why don’t you just do it yourself?” Ginny asks.

She isn’t even sure the DA is a particularly good idea. Then again, Dark Arts class isn’t as much of a joke as Umbridge’s was, but no one has failed to notice that ‘defense’ has been removed from the title. There’s nothing left of protection. Just exposure.

And at least it would give him something to focus on.

“Me?” Neville asks. Ginny can tell that he doesn’t think he’s good enough. He never has, really.

“To judge from the rumors, you’ve inherited Harry’s inability to keep his mouth shut,” Ginny points out.

“That’s why,” Neville says, his words seeming to tumble out. “You were right. I don’t think I’m particularly brave, really, but I know I’m not smart enough. I didn’t think before trying to steal the sword, and you ended up punished. I didn’t think about what trying to take the blame for it would mean to you.” He shakes his head. “What kind of leader is that?”

He stares miserably down at his hands for a moment, but then looks up at Hannah with something hopeful in his face. “Hannah--.”

Hannah is already shaking her head. “A leader probably shouldn’t cry at the drop of a hat.”

“People find me strange,” Luna says when he looks at her.

“At least they don’t think you’re ruthless,” Ginny says.

Neville’s lips twitch for all he looks like his greatest hopes are disappearing. “Or reckless.”

“I figured you’d take that as a compliment,” Ginny says, voice wry.

They all sit back, Neville and Hannah looking miserable.

Only Luna seems unperturbed. “It’s obvious, isn’t it?” she says.

“What?” Neville says. “That none of us can do it?”

Luna nods. “Not a single one of us.” She looks at Hannah expectantly.

Hannah’s eyes widen. “Of course!” A smile spreads over her face that is brilliant and bright like a Patronus.

“No need to look so happy about it,” Neville grumbles.

Hannah just smiles wider. “Don’t you get it? None of us can do it. But maybe…maybe we all can.”

Ginny frowns. “All of us?”
Hannah nods. “Yes. The four of us.” When Ginny just gives her a dubious look, she pushes to her feet. “No, really. It makes complete sense! You’ll keep us safe, Ginny. Luna will keep us smart. Neville will keep us brave.”

“And you?” Neville says.

“Hannah will keep us kind,” Luna says.

Hannah’s cheeks turn pink, but she looks no less enthused.

Neville looks at Ginny as if trying to gauge the feasibility of this plan just from her expression.

“T’ve don’t know,” she says, feeling a bit winded. It’s a terrible idea for a million different reasons.

“We can’t do this without you, Ginny,” he presses, his excitement like a blanket threatening to smother her.

She gets to her feet. “I’m not saying no. Just… Let me think about it, okay?”

Neville looks like he wants to push, but Hannah puts a hand on his arm.

“I shouldn’t be late for detention,” Ginny says, and flees the room.

* * *

“Hand forward your homework,” McGonagall says.

Ginny’s hand dips into her bag to pull out her essay on Doubling Transformations, but pauses as her fingers touch the parchment’s rough edge.

Professor McGonagall is not someone Ginny has spent a great deal of time thinking about outside of Transfiguration. She’s the head of Gryffindor, and Ginny still doesn’t like to think of that moment after her Sorting. But for some reason it occurs to her as she reaches for her essay that McGonagall is a member of the Order. That after Dumbledore, she is the greatest ally those resisting Voldemort probably have. Everybody knows that.

Everybody.

Ginny takes a moment to wonder how McGonagall could have been foolish enough to come back to Hogwarts.

Just another person carrying on as if nothing has changed? Or something more?

Bridget nudes Ginny from behind, trying to pass forward a stack of completed essays. After another pause, Ginny lets her essay fall back into her bag. She passes the stack forward.

McGonagall swiftly flips through the papers, marking next to each name on her roster. “Your homework, Miss Weasley?”

Ginny shakes her head.

McGonagall’s lips compress in displeasure. “See me at the end of the lesson.”

The class titters a bit at that, some sending Ginny a commiserating look. Ginny just crosses her arms and lifts her chin as if she is above it all.
At the end of the lesson, Ginny walks up to McGonagall’s desk, standing stoically through the expected lecture on responsibility and coursework and her future. Minus the usual threats of detention. Detentions aren’t what they used to be, and McGonagall is surely aware that she is already serving more than her share these days.

Ginny nods in all the right places. When McGonagall’s done however, she doesn’t move off, her fingers touching the edge of her desk.

McGonagall eventually notices. “Is there something else, Miss Weasley?”

Ginny gnaws on her lip, looks back over her shoulder, and weighs the risks one last time. “It’s… Professor Burbage, ma’am.”

McGonagall seems to pale one shade. Ginny thinks she probably needs to develop a better poker face if she’s going to survive.

Ginny leans closer, her voice lowering. “Do you know where she is? I mean, is she…?” Okay? Free? A prisoner of Voldemort? The possibilities seem endless, each worse than the last.

McGonagall looks ready to brush Ginny off with some well-meaning platitudes, but seems to think better of it, her eyes studying Ginny intently. “I don’t know,” she admits.

Ginny shifts, feeling impatient. It’s been a long time since she expected adults to have all the answers, but she really hoped for something more.

McGonagall seems to understand that. “The truth is, Miss Weasley, that we will likely never know. That’s how it was…last time.”

Ginny can hear it then, what McGonagall isn’t saying. They think Burbage is dead. She feels the burn of tears pressing at the back of her eyes, but uses a wall of rage to hold them in place. She nods. “Okay. Thank you, Professor.”

Ginny turns to go.

“Your essay, Miss Weasley?” McGonagall says.

Ginny glances back at her. “First thing in the morning, I promise,” she says.

McGonagall just holds a hand out and stares back at Ginny in that imperious way of hers.

Ginny considers bluffing her way along, but even she isn’t completely immune to McGonagall’s stare. With a sigh, she pulls the essay out of her bag and slides it across the desk.

“Thank you,” McGonagall says, adding it to the stack. She doesn’t say anything else, not commenting on Ginny’s subterfuge. She probably understands what a careful line Ginny walks these days. “Don’t be late to your next lesson.”

Ginny turns and walks out.

*   *   *

Passing through the Common Room that evening, Ginny notices Reiko sitting on her own. Ginny considers the girl for a long moment before crossing over and sitting down next to her.

Reiko looks up with a start. “Hi,” she says, looking wary.
“What did you mean?” Ginny asks. “When you said it was nice to see me acting more like myself?”

Reiko’s eyes widen. “Oh, no. I was just…”

“Reiko.”

She flinches. “You back to not taking shite from anyone, I suppose.”

“Is that what I’ve been doing? Taking shite from people?” Ginny wonders.

Reiko shakes her head. “No… That’s not what I…” She breaks off, gnawing at her lip, and for some reason Ginny is vividly reminded of herself flustered her way through a conversation with Theodora so many years before.

“Honestly,” Reiko says, finally regaining her natural assertiveness. “It doesn’t seem like you’ve done much of anything at all.” She lifts her chin as if expecting rebuke, all the while damning Ginny to try to intimidate her.

But Ginny doesn’t glare or hex, just nods thoughtfully. “I suppose you’re right.”

Reiko almost looks more disturbed by this easy acquiescence. “I swear, you are so weird lately.”

Ginny narrows her eyes. “Don’t push it.”

Reiko swallows, managing to look scared and pleased all at once.

“Go away, Reiko,” Ginny says.

She nods and flees.

Ginny lingers in the Common Room, watching the emerald flames and listening to the distant keen of the Merpeople. In a rare moment of weakness or exhaustion or just self-indulgence, she lets herself think of Harry, the night of his birthday, his body warm and steady next to hers.

Are you scared?

Out of my bloody mind.

But he’d still gone, still taken her brother and their best friend out into the wilds of the world and is no doubt actively working to finish all of this once and for all.

She’s the one sitting here so scared she can barely breathe. Her brain is caught on a constant feedback loop of all the ways everything can go so wrong. Dumbledore is dead. Smita is gone. Burbage was likely murdered. She’s being taught Dark Arts and Muggle hatred straight from the mouths of Death Eaters and the only thing keeping her entire family safe right now is a poxy ghoul pretending to be Ron.

It’s all so terribly tenuous. It can’t hold.

She’s let it paralyze her. She’s overthinking every step of her foot, every expression, every thought so much that she barely exists anymore.

She’s been clinging to her protections, building lies around her like a wall. But for what purpose? To what end? To survive? To be safe? Tobias stares at her like a stranger and she wonders if that is what she has become. Does carrying on mean becoming someone else?
She glances at The Parlor door.

*Who are you?*

“I don’t know,” Ginny whispers.

*     *     *

The next morning, she sits and listens to Alecto talk about the unnatural Muggle, explain their inferior brain function that is atrophied in the magical quadrants of the brain. Demonstrate how they can only use magic by stealing it from a wizard.

She sits and listens to these lies and feels grief for Burbage like a fire in her chest, burning through the fear that has kept her frozen for so long. Everything seems to shift, a blinding sort of clarity in that moment of pain and rage.

After the lesson, she waits in the halls, falling in step next to Tobias as he comes out.

He gives her a wary glance. “What?”

She touches his arm. “It’s Burbage.”

His jaw tightens. She leads him to the side of the hallway, out of the way.

He’s quiet as she tells him, his face completely devoid of any emotion as he stares unseeing at the floor. When she’s finished, he stands frozen for a long moment before finally lifting his eyes to her face. She sees it there, his utter rage, but also the blame like this is her fault on top of everything else, like this is the final straw of what he can handle.

He stands there another moment, and then he’s ripping his arm out of her grasp and walking away.

She doesn’t call out after him.

During detention that night, she reads late into the night about lies and secrets and manipulation and the tenuous ties between. She carefully writes the words as Snape watches, and thinks about Burbage and Alecto. But also Umbridge and Tom.

*We must decide what they should and should not know.*

Ginny has long been a keeper of secrets. It’s time she honed them into a weapon.

*     *     *

**Dear Ron-**

*What is it about boys and suddenly becoming utter tossers? Tobias is like some new person, someone I’ve never known. He has been, really, ever since we got back. Honestly, I don’t know how I was ever friends with him. Maybe someday if you’re able to hold a quill again, you’ll explain it to me. For now, Tobias Wanker Burke can just keep the hell away from me.*

*In better news, the squad is shaping up to be quite a force. Your precious Gryffindor team doesn’t stand a chance. I’ll be sure to give you the play by play after we’re done squashing them. Ha!*

*Love,*

*Ginny*
She’s leaving the cloister the next day when she spies Hannah walking past in a nearby hall. Ginny picks up her pace, falling into step next to her.

“I’m in,” Ginny murmurs.

Hannah beams. “Tonight at eight?”

“Yeah,” Ginny agrees before peeling off and heading down a different hallway.

The three of them are already there waiting for her when she gets there. Today the Room of Requirement looks like it did in DA meetings.

Neville beams at her, his excitement palpable, like he’s ready to start running rampant through the castle.

“If we’re going to do this, and that is still a big if,” Ginny says, not missing the way Neville’s face sobers, “there are a lot of things we have to work out long before we bring anyone else in.”

“Okay,” Hannah says. “Where do we start?”

“Well,” Ginny says, “the most important thing is going to be protection. We can’t hope a cursed piece of parchment and a scabby face will keep us safe this time.” Even if no one ever really knew officially who was a member of the original DA thanks to Smita, Snape still knows exactly where they met.

“What about the Fidelius Charm?”

They look at Luna. “It’s quite a difficult spell,” she says. “I’d like to try it. But we’ll need a secret keeper.”

“I’ll do it,” Neville automatically offers.

“Someone who isn’t the obvious choice,” Ginny says.

He crosses his arms over his chest. “And who is that?”

“Me,” Ginny says.


“Why should they?” Ginny looks at Hannah, giving her a tight smile. “I’m the Heir of Slytherin, and just like all Hufflepuff are cowards, all Slytherin are self-serving Death Eaters.”

Hannah stares back at her for a long moment. “It s-should be me.”

Ginny frowns. “What?”

“It may be obvious to them that I would be a part of a resistance. But I’m a Hufflepuff. Why would you ever make a bumbling coward your secret-keeper?”

“And if they break you?” Ginny asks because that’s why she’s here, to ask the questions the rest of them are too nice to ask. None of them can afford for her to pull her punches.

Hannah’s chin lifts. “They won’t.”
Ginny doesn’t trust her bravery as much as her loyalty. That’s what this is going to have to be, the four of them depending on each other’s strengths. To support each other through their weaknesses.

Ginny nods. Neville doesn’t look pleased, but also agrees.

“I’ll start researching the spell,” Luna says.

“So what next?” Hannah says, trying to sound matter of fact even as her hands twist in her lap.

“We need a way to communicate.”

“The galleons?”

Ginny shakes her head. “There are far too many unaccounted for. Marietta’s. The Creeveys. Even my brothers’ coins. We could never be completely certain who was listening in.” They could serve a different use under the right circumstances, just not this.

“Tobias?” Hannah asks.

Ginny grimaces, knowing their fall out has been far from private. “Him too. He thinks he knows which way the wind is blowing and he’s doing everything he can to get back in with them. To wash away the stain of being friends with me. He can’t be trusted.”

Hannah touches her arm, and Ginny gives her a grim smile.

“Okay,” Neville says. “So we need a different way.” Turning to a board Ginny isn’t at all certain was there a moment ago, he picks up a piece of chalk and writes Communication.

“We should probably also work on stocking potions and remedies for the punishments the Carrows are using,” Hannah says. “This should be a safe haven.”

Neville adds it to the list.

“Defense lessons,” he says. He looks at Ginny. “This may not be a real war, but we need to be able to protect ourselves.”

She nods, conceding the point. “An exit plan.”

Hannah and Neville turn to look at Ginny.

“Look. No one wants to be the one to say this, but this isn’t the same as under Umbridge. The stakes are higher and things could go bad much faster. We need a reliable plan for getting people out of harm’s way if we ever need to.”

Hannah agrees. “Let’s just hope we never need it.”

They brainstorm for another twenty minutes, debating details and possible pranks and what they really hope to achieve.

Neville has grown increasingly animated. He catches Ginny’s eye at one point, a rash smile nearly splitting his face. “The Carrows don’t really stand a chance, do they?”

Ginny knows he doesn’t see the obstacles, the risks. But maybe that’s okay. Because she does.

Walking up to the board, she picks up the chalk, writing BURBAGE in large letters. “We aren’t going to let her disappear.”
Hannah comes to stand next to her. “We won’t let any of them be forgotten.”

It’s a beginning.

* * *

The next evening in detention, Ginny finishes the book.

After copying the last word, she jots down a few final notes and then closes the book, looking warily up at Snape. She isn’t sure if he will just give her a different book, tell her to start all over again, or maybe just dismiss her and put an end to this bizarre ritual.

“Finished?” he asks.

“Yes, sir,” she says.

He stands, picking up his wand. “Then let us begin.”

Ginny stiffens in her chair, a mix of apprehension and anticipation roiling in her stomach. “Begin what?”

He paces away from the table. “You’ve already proven adequate at detection. But that is only the first step.” He pulls an apple out of a drawer and places it on the table between them, and never has a simple piece of fruit seemed so menacing. “I will leave the room for three minutes. You will hide this apple somewhere in this room. When I get back, I am going to take the location from you. You will do whatever you can to stop me.”

He paces from the room without another word, Ginny staring after him in astonishment.

Her mind is spinning in a hundred directions at once, trying to sort through the implications of Snape wanting to train her. Not just make her slog through a book, but teach her to do the things she has read about.

Scrambling to her feet, she grabs the apple. Turning on her heel, she looks around the room, only to settle on putting it back right where it came from in one of the drawers.

She barely manages to retake her seat before Snape returns.

He sits quietly on the other side of the table, making eye contact and lifting his wand. The look on his face makes her wonder if this really is about punishment after all. And then he is digging into her thoughts.

It isn’t painful exactly, but it is incredibly uncomfortable.

At first she tries fighting the intrusion, but it doesn’t work. He easily takes the location from her.

“Again,” he says, leaving the room.

And so it goes, time and again.

No matter how thick, her defenses always eventually crack under his onslaught. It’s a thoughtless reaction, despite everything she knows from the giant tome she’s just finished reading. It’s just that as soon as she feels him prying, she wants to throw up a wall of protection.

A true Slytherin never lets their emotions undermine their control.
Snape makes no comment, does not get angry or impatient, just seems to be waiting for her to work it out.

She forces herself to remember everything she has learned so far. How lack of access is proof enough that you are hiding something.

She tries lying next, giving him a false location. But after fighting him for so long, her lack of defenses seem to render the lie blatant, and he just pushes past it with ruthless efficiency. She tries token resistance next, but by this point her head is aching, her limbs trembling slightly from the strain.

“That’s enough for tonight,” Snape decides.

Ginny doesn’t argue, leaning back in her chair and trying to catch her breath, gather enough energy to stand and leave the room.

Snape busies himself with something on the other side of the room, and Ginny somehow manages to lever herself out of the chair, her legs wobbling dangerously.

“Headmaster?”

“Yes?” he asks, turning to look at her.

She gestures at the pile of papers on the table. “May I take my notes with me?”

He considers her, eventually nodding. “You may take the book as well.”

“Thank you, sir,” she says, picking it up and tucking it to her chest.

She slowly makes her way up from the dungeons, and despite the weariness in her bones, she feels something painfully awake just under her skin. Like a hex just passing by.

She wants this, she realizes. Wants this more than anything.

*     *     *

The students walk into the Great Hall on Monday morning to find a simple message emblazoned on the wall.

_We Stand With The Chosen One_

Ginny glances at it as she walks in to breakfast, almost smiling as she imagines Harry’s reaction. He would be mortified, but also, she thinks, the slightest bit proud. It was Neville’s idea, of course. Just a little reminder to students, he said, while they work on getting everything organized.

In the hall, it’s almost like that day at King’s Cross, everyone looking sideways at each other. Alecto and Amycus are yelling at Filch in the entryway, demanding that he find some way to get rid of it, as if the Squib caretaker has any hope of countering Luna’s inventive charms.

The only thing that keeps the entire situation from being hilarious is the presence of Snape up at the head table, his face utterly calm, his hard eyes missing nothing. How easy it would be, she realizes, for him to take whatever he wants if he just looks in the right mind.

She wonders if he will try to dig something other than the location of the apple out of her mind.

She decides, in the end, that it doesn’t matter what he may be digging around for. She has a path at
her feet now and there is no turning back.

At the other end of the table, Blaise’s snide laughter rings out. Ginny glances down to see Tobias sitting a few seats down, clearly the source of Blaise’s mirth. Blaise nudges Draco next to him, and he gives him a smile that is clearly half-hearted, as if he isn’t all that amused himself.

Tobias’ head turns, staring down the table at Ginny. He says something else that makes the students around him laugh again, and this time it’s perfectly clear that Ginny is the source of their amusement, judging from the way they all turn to look at her.

Pansy leans towards Tobias, smiling brightly at him as she says something that makes Tobias grin.

Feeling her stomach burn, Ginny looks away.

She has other things to worry about.

* * *

Neville gets loaded down with detention that week, and not because he does anything. Reviving the DA has gone a long way to calming him down. Sometimes he even listens when Ginny advises caution. Sometimes.

Still, he ends up with detention, and Ginny knows this is really an attempt to curtail the DA. Neville and the other Gryffindor are obvious targets. Keep them busy enough and maybe there wouldn’t be time to organize a student rebellion.

Just another way that Luna and Hannah’s plan is brilliant, because Gryffindor is just one piece of a much larger puzzle, and pulling one piece has no hope of stopping it.

The general mood in the castle has noticeably changed. Where there had only been fear before, a stagnant sort of waiting quiet, now there is hope and energy and expectation.

Ginny is still serving detention herself, three nights a week. Add in Quidditch practices and she’s stretched pretty thin. Still, things finally seem to be coming into focus, leaving one giant glaring hole.

It’s well after midnight when Ginny gets back to the Common Room after detention. Ignoring her fatigue and the ache of her limbs, she settles down in front of the door to The Parlor.

She’s been lying to herself, ever since she got here, trying to be something she’s not. And she thinks The Parlor somehow knows that.

She sits on the floor for long hours, focusing on letting everything fall away. All expectations, all fears, all pressures. Let it all fall away and see what she is left with. Not a persona, not an act, not other’s assumptions.

Nothing but herself.

Not an aberration. Not an outsider.

Who are you, Ginny Weasley?

She sits there all night, not moving, even as the pain sets in, even as her eyes threaten to slip closed. Around her, the room grows cold, quiet except for the groan of the lake.

Near dawn, she pushes to her feet, limbs tingling and protesting. Walking up to the door, she presses her hand flat against the wood. She is still, she is silent, and she feels it, the power, the magic, the
hum of generations. She takes a deep breath, feeling it settle into her bones.

Not a surface, but a core.

“I know who I am,” she says. “And I belong here.”

The door clicks open.

*     *     *

Downstairs in The Parlor everything is quiet. On the table is an envelope that says Ginny in Antonia’s slender script. Opening the envelope, a key on a thin golden chain pours out. She has no idea what it might be for, but the moment she slips the chain over her head, an ornate pair of oaken doors bleeds into existence on the wall almost as if from nowhere.

Ginny is unsurprised to find the key fits perfectly in the lock. Pulling the door open, Ginny walks into a large library multiple stories high. Shelves cover every available space, from floor to what she can only assume is the ceiling, disappearing up in the darkness above. The spines of the books are written in a dozen different scripts, many of which Ginny doesn’t recognize. The entire room smells of history and ancient secrets. One glass window is set in the rear wall, glowing with light despite the time of day and location of the room, depicting an armored woman standing with a sword in one hand and a scroll in the other, her hair a curly black riot around her shoulders. The spikey runes under her feet are of a kind Ginny has never seen before.

In the center of the room is a solid stone altar with an enormous tome resting on it. Above the book rests an ornate quill and the knife Antonia used to slice Ginny’s palm. She runs her fingers over the illegible words gilded on the cover of the book, and for a moment the words seem to swim and change, before eventually settling.

\textit{The Sisterhood of Nymue}

Carefully opening the book, Ginny turns the pages. The book starts in runes, shifting later to a firm square script before morphing into a spidery hand that gradually begins to resemble the language Ginny is familiar with. She feels the centuries sliding by as her fingers turn the pages.

The very last entry says: \textit{3rd of June, 1997, Ginevra Molly Weasley chosen as Mistress. May she find the strength of self-knowledge. She will steer them through troubled, treacherous waters.}

The weight of Antonia’s confidence should be crushing but instead it seems to shore something up inside of Ginny, this long litany of women to whom she belongs.

She lifts the quill and carefully writes a new entry.

\textit{16th October, 1997, Ginevra Molly Weasley opened The Parlor, eight sisters in the ranks and enemies in the castle. We will persevere.}

“We will,” she whispers.

*     *     *

The next evening after Quidditch practice, Ginny walks across the common room, aware, as always, of seven sets of eyes on her.

She sits with Tilly and Nicola. “Hi,” Ginny says.
Tilly looks at her, eyes narrowing, almost like she can tell there is something different about her today. “Hi.”

Ginny opens her mouth to ask them down to The Parlor when across the room, Bridget makes a comment that makes Helena laugh loudly, something cruel in the pitch of the sound. Ginny turns her head, and Helena is brashly commenting about the rudeness of Nadira and her siblings. Their strange clothing and accents. As if she isn’t perfectly aware that Nadira sits curled up in a chair only a few feet away, her head tucked down as she reads a book.

“Helena,” Ginny says, voice not loud, but clear enough to cut through the room. No heads swivel in her direction, but she is still perfectly aware of the weight of eyes on her, of conversations halting. “Does the irony of you calling anyone rude completely escape you?”

Helena is clearly taken aback. Or maybe just taking a moment to work out if Ginny has actually insulted her or not. Her lips eventually twist, her chin lifting. “No one asked you, blood traitor,” she snarls.

A few people gasp, no one in the room even trying to pretend they aren’t watching now, like this is an event they’ve just been waiting for.

Ginny simply smiles, draping an arm casually across the back of the couch. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you not to use words you’re too stupid to understand?”

Helena’s mouth opens in outrage, but Ginny holds the girl’s gaze, her smile hardening. Thompson called her terrifying, and it’s long past time that was useful. If these people want to see ruthless Parlor Girl, Heir of bloody Slytherin, she will give it to them.

Helena falters, clearly having a hard time coming up with a proper response, and Ginny feels no compassion at all.

“Oh dear,” Ginny says, going in for the final cut. “I suppose that doesn’t leave you with very many words at all, does it?”

Helena’s mouth snaps shut, her cheeks blazing as a few other students titter behind their hands.

Ginny lets her gaze casually sweep the rest of the room. Pansy is watching intently, but is apparently content to let Helena and Bridget dangle in the wind. She may be Head Girl, but Ginny is something more. And everyone in the room knows it.

Tobias is the one to scowl at her, but is no way stupid enough to stand against her. Instead he settles for leaning into Pansy, saying something in her ear that makes the girl smile.

Ginny rises to her feet. “Just as well, I suppose. After all, I have much more valuable things to do with my time.” She looks at Tilly and Nicola. “Shall we?”

A rather self-satisfied smile spreads across Tilly’s face. “Oh, yes.”

Ginny waits as Nicola and Tilly collect their things. Walking across the room, she touches Hestia’s shoulder as she passes.

At the door, Ginny hesitates for a fraction of a second, logically knowing the door will open, but terrified that it may not. How embarrassing would that be after making such a blatantly big show of it?

Shaking it off, she grips the handle, pushing in, and the door swings smoothly open.
Only Nicola is close enough to hear the soft breath of relief Ginny lets out.

“I knew you could do it,” Nicola leans in to say.

Ginny gives her a wry smile. “At least that’s one of us.”

Nicola laughs and gestures for Ginny to go down first. “Mistress.”

She starts down the twisting stairs, feeling nearly as breathless as she did the first time Antonia brought her down here.

“For the record,” Tilly says, as she steps off the stairs behind Nicola, “it took Antonia just as long. And Theodora, well, they say it took her almost an entire term.”

“Now you tell me,” Ginny mutters.

Tilly laughs.

Hestia and Flora and Caroline and Astoria file in next, Ginny nodding at them.

Last of all is Millicent.

“Hmph,” is all she has to say, heading straight for her easels and supplies.

Ginny watches the girls settling in to The Parlor, picking up their projects as if they never left, and feels something settle in her chest.

She will protect this place, and these girls, no matter the cost.

She will.

* * *

Luna looks exhausted, as if she’s been up all night for the last week and a half. “I’m ready.”

Ginny and Neville watch as Luna performs the incredibly complicated incantation, the secret of Dumbledore’s Army’s meeting space binding deep within Hannah’s body. The trick, Luna decided, was not to hide the meeting location, but to hide the Room of Requirement itself.

Ginny knows it has worked when the knowledge seems to seep out of her brain. No matter how hard she tries to think of the DA, of the hours and hours she spent with the group, she can’t remember where it was.

She glances over at Neville and he seems similarly perplexed.

“Well?” Hannah asks.

“Pretty sure it’s worked.”

Luna nods in agreement, because even she has been affected.

Hannah smiles. “The DA meets in the Room of Requirement. The entrance is on the seventh floor across from the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.”

And just like that information bleeds back into Ginny’s brain.

“Now what?”
Neville smiles. “It’s time to start recruiting.”

Filch and the Carrows have upped their surveillance of the entryway, hoping to catch one of vandalizers in the act. But that’s okay, because Luna comes up with an even better idea.

While everyone is eating breakfast, a clap of thunder sounds in the enchanted ceiling. But rather than rain, pieces of paper fall from the sky.

One lands on top of Ginny’s eggs.

_Dumbledore’s Army reminds you that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it. Long Live the Chosen One!_

She casually moves it aside, keeping her face neutral as Alecto begins to shriek.

* * *

In detention, Ginny continues to struggle with mastering Occlumency.

Snape has taken to using a Pensieve, which she thinks to take as a compliment until he informs her, “There are few things more dangerous than an uncontrolled, panicked child.”

She feels a flare of anger, but is nowhere near reckless enough to show it.

His lips quirk as if pleased.

At times, she feels her anger towards him soften, and that just makes her even more confused. Then again, by the end of most of their meetings, she is comfortably back to resenting him, the way her body and mind ache after his relentless attacks.

The most cautious part of her brain is always reminding her that he is the enemy, that he may very well be doing this not just to punish but to discover. She has more than enough secrets he would like to have.

He’s just looking for the apple though, she tells herself. Because if he wanted further information, he could have just as easily taken it without training her how to resist.

“Again,” Snape says each time he ferrets out a crack in her lies.

She dusts herself off and pledges never to make the same mistake twice.

Gradually, she learns not to fight, but instead to build, to direct.

Still, she always eventually ends up here, on her knees, dizzy with the press of his attack. Her hair has fallen over her face, and she brushes it back with a sound of impatience. Getting to her feet, she is already formulating her next approach, when she catches Snape staring at her, eyes drawn and surprisingly...troubled.

“Sir?”

He snaps his mouth shut, skin pulling tight across his jaw. “Again.” He lifts his wand.

She barely reacts in time, the vicious attack catching her off guard.

As she leaves that night, she catches a flash of red hair in the silver of the Pensieve, but doesn’t stop to look.
She may hate him, but even Snape is allowed his secrets. After all, she has a feeling he has spent his whole life training to protect them.

* * *

People slip into the Room of Requirement in groups of twos and threes, everyone looking around at each other, the room filled with tense expectation.

They all look expectantly at Neville as he steps up. “Thanks for coming. As you have no doubt guessed, Dumbledore’s Army is once again up and running.”

A cheer roars through the space.

“As you know, Harry isn’t here. But we carry on in his name, and the name of every other student who should be but isn’t.”

“Dean!” Seamus shouts.

“Colin and Dennis!”

“Justin!”

“Ron and Hermione!”

Half a dozen more names are called out, and Ginny feels the press of tears.

“Smita,” she says.

Neville nods. “We’re here for all of them. And we will do our part while Harry is out there, doing whatever important work he is no doubt undertaking to end this war.”

The students cheer again.

Neville catches Ginny’s eye, gesturing for her to come up. She’s perfectly content to stay in the shadows, but he has insisted that all three of them stand with him. He waits as Hannah, Luna, and Ginny step up beside him.

“We know we aren’t Harry, and that no one could ever really replace him. But the four of us are going to do our best to keep Dumbledore’s Army moving forward.”

There are some whispers in the crowd, but no arguments.

“We will be carrying on with learning Defense like before, but also have a few other important goals. Primarily exposing the Carrows’ lies, and making sure we know what is going on outside the castle. So first we’d like to give you some updates.” He turns to look at Ginny.

Ginny steps forward. “The Dark Lord’s title has been cursed. Anyone who speaks it breaks any and all protections and enchantments. It took us a while to confirm it, but we finally have. They are using it to find anyone who would stand against him. So you can call him You-Know-Who or He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named or even the Dark Lord. But personally, I think this gives him too much power. Like every one of us, he was once a child. He was once a student in this very school. And like all of us, he has a name given to him by his parents. One he hates and reviles. A Muggle name. His name is Tom.”

The students are whispering to each other loudly, talking about this startling bit of information.
Ginny lifts her hands, waiting for them to quiet down. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I like calling him by a name he hates. But let it also be a reminder that he was once just a boy. I’m not saying he isn’t dangerous, but he isn’t unbeatable either. He will be defeated.”

This gets a cheer from the crowd.

“We’re here to learn to protect ourselves. We’re here to fight the lies they are feeding us. But most of all, we are here to remind everyone that this is our school. So let’s get started.”

Soon the Room of Requirement is full of spells and laughter and determination.

None of them are alone. And if there is no one to protect them, they will protect themselves.

*     *     *

The soft pop and hiss of a muffled explosion echoes through The Parlor. Ginny glances up, seeing Nicola using her wand to put out a small fire. Her attempts to integrate certain aspects of Muggle technologies into her designs tend towards the pyrotechnic these days. Apparently the ambient magic does not play well with Muggle technology.

There’s another pop and a low grumble, and Ginny smiles, turning back to her book.

“Doesn’t that bother you?” Millicent says from the other side of the room.

Ginny shakes her head. “I find it kind of soothing, to be honest.” It reminds her of being back at the Burrow.

Millicent mutters something under her breath about the utter bedlam Ginny must have grown up in. Ginny just smiles and casts another muffling spell around Nicola’s workstation.

After roughly finishing off her Charms homework, Ginny glances idly over at the door to the Library. She’s been trying to find any spare moment she can to poke around in there.

Millicent and Nicola both seem focused on their own work, so Ginny pushes to her feet and crosses over to the door, using the key from around her neck.

Inside, it is just as quiet as the first time she entered. There are enough books here that feels like it would take a lifetime even to figure out what is in here. She pokes about for a while, looking for some sort of filing system or a reference book.

Pushing the wheeled ladder out of the way, she leans down to take a closer look at a thick tome.

“Good evening, Mistress.”

Ginny starts, spinning around to find the source of the voice. The door is still firmly closed, the space empty.

“Can I assist you in finding something?” the voice asks again.

Tracking the source of the voice, Ginny turns to the stained glass window. The armored woman bows slightly to her.

“Who are you?” Ginny asks.

“I am often called Nymue.”
Ginny’s eyebrows fly up. She’s done a bit of homework since the day she first opened The Parlor. “You mean, the Lady--.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I merely share her name. I am a guide. An echo. Of every woman who has stood where you do now.”

“Where did all of these books come from?”

“A collection of texts brought together by generations of sisters from all corners of Britannia and further. As well as a rather interesting collection of Muggle texts I believe Antonia brought here at your behest.”

Ginny always wondered where the books she, Smita, and Tobias liberated from the library before Umbridge could purge them. She’s thankful now they never tried to return them to Pince last year just to be destroyed.

“Any histories of the Sisterhood itself?”

Nymue flicks a finger, and a large tomb from a high shelf floats down towards Ginny. “I believe this would be a good place to begin.”

“Thank you,” Ginny says, the book heavy in her hands with the weight of everything she has to learn.

* * *

On her way down to the pitch, Ginny passes by two Gryffindor players. Backup beaters if Ginny recalls correctly.

They glare at her, and Ginny just looks back at them with a raised eyebrow, not particularly moved by their animosity.

She’s slightly less sanguine when she opens the door to the changing room and nearly gets beaned in the head by a shoe.

Demelza is standing inside looking livid.

When Ginny is certain a second shoe isn’t following, she leans down and picks it up. “I think you misplaced this,” she says, tossing it back to land at the fuming girl’s feet.

Demelza just glares at her, going back to muttering angrily under her breath.

As much as Ginny respects Demelza as a player, she doesn’t really have time for Gryffindor drama. “If you don’t mind, our pitch time is about to start.”

“Don’t bother,” Demelza says, jamming her foot into her shoe. “There isn’t going to be a match this weekend.”

“What?” Ginny asks.

“We’re forfeiting,” she says. “Happy times for you.”

In all her years at Hogwarts, Ginny’s never heard of a team forfeiting. Teams have played down players, been slaughtered, but no one ever forfeits. “Why would you do that?”

Her head lifts with a jerk. “You think I want to?”
Ginny is unmoved by her aggression. “Then why do it?”

She blows out a breath. “Jimmy and Ritchie have been banned from the team.”

Ginny’s eyebrow’s lift. “Your Beaters? What did they do?”

“They took exception to some of the things covered in Muggle Studies last week.”

Muggle Studies is becoming a battleground. The DA is emboldening people, and while Ginny is glad people are no longer willing to just swallow the Carrows’ lies, she does not particularly like Gryffindor tactics. Or complete and utter lack of tactics.

Ginny sighs. “What about your backup Beaters?” she asks, jerking a thumb over her shoulder, realizing now who those boys were that she passed on the way in.

“You mean my first set of backup Beaters? Apparently their homework wasn’t up to Alecto’s standards. She wants to give them more time to dedicate to their studies.”

Ginny frowns. “What do you mean ‘first set of backup Beaters’?”

Demelza gives her a bitter smile. “Well, my second set of backup Beaters were given detention all day Saturday because they came late to a Dark Arts lesson. Even though they, and everyone else in the class, swear they were early.”

Six students removed from the team? They were going to physically run out of Gryffindor students at this rate.

“And just when I was determined to put any two warm bodies up there come Saturday, Alecto decides that the Beater position on the Gryffindor team is filled with troublemakers and would be better off not being filled at all.”

“She can’t do that,” Ginny says, even as she knows Alecto very well can. Who is going to stop her?

Demelza laughs. “And who am I going to complain to? Snape?” Demelza says with a sneer. “Like he would ever lift a finger for Gryffindor.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Even if he would, I would never lower myself to ask.”

“So instead you forfeit.”

Having no Beaters isn’t like going into a game down a Keeper or a Chaser or even a Seeker. Sure, you’ll lose, but going in without Beaters is suicide. It’s asking your players to take on Bludgers completely undefended. Even a Gryffindor would never be so brazen.

“It’s ridiculous!” Demelza explodes, pushing back up to her feet.

“No,” Ginny says thoughtfully. “It isn’t.”

Demelza narrows her eyes. “Of course, I forget how pleased you must be by this.”

“I’m not,” Ginny says. “But it also isn’t ridiculous. It’s calculated.”

She frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Think about it. This is about the DA. They may be stupid enough to think that Gryffindor and the DA are the same thing. Or maybe Gryffindor just makes the best target. You lot aren’t exactly known for keeping your tempers.”
Demelza snorts.

“If you play, you not only look like rash fools, but you will get your arses beat, quite literally. Without them lifting a finger.”

“And if we forfeit…”

Ginny nods. “You’re bowing to their authority. They win.”

“They win no matter what,” Demelza moans.

“That isn’t necessarily true.”

Demelza gives her a wary look. “What do you have going on inside that bloody sneaky head of yours?”

If this were just about Quidditch, about the competition, Ginny thinks she would gladly let them forfeit. But this is about so much more. Turning the students against each other to make them easier to control, she suspects, to push that simmering animosity between house rivals into a roiling boil. How afraid the Carrows must really be of student unity.

“I have an idea,” Ginny says.

Doing this will cost her a lot. Not the least of which is the last thin veneer of protection she can claim. The Carrows have bought her lies up until now. This will probably destroy that.

But why is she really here? To survive? Is surviving enough?

“Yeah?” Demelza asks.

Ginny turns to look at her. “You’d have to be willing to trust me. Knowing I have nothing to lose, and you are risking your players.”

Like most Gryffindor, she looks ready to jump off a damn cliff. She holds out her hand. “Deal.”

Ginny takes it.

Demelza’s hand squeezes painfully around hers. “But if you’re lying to me, believe me when I say I will make you pay.”

Ginny smiles. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

*     *     *

Ginny builds her defenses, not so much to block as to direct, to distract. She erects things like a trap door over hidden tunnels radiating in all directions, each more tempting and twisty than the last. She piles haphazard information in there, innocuous things, loud things, confusing things. Piling, piling, piling. Underneath one of those piles is yet another door, firmly shut. It takes Snape a while to find it under all the chaos of thoughts, but he eventually tracks it, wrenching the door open. She struggles, resisting, and the first thought to surface in that protected space is a nasty, but completely honest thought about Snape.

*Murderer*, it screams.

She feels him stumble, just for a moment. He recovers quickly, reaching down past that hidden
thought and others like it, ripping out a memory of Ginny eating an apple, vanishing the core.

Snape pulls back, and they are once again sitting across from each other in the dungeon room. He raises an eyebrow at her in inquiry, and she shrugs.

“I was hungry.”

He eyes her for a moment, not using a spell, just considering her. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” she asks.

“Yes,” he says.

She tilts her head to one side. “Can you be certain?”

Snape smiles.

* * *

The Saturday of the first Quidditch match dawns hard and cold. The snow is still holding off, not much more than a dusting here and there. A perfectly beautiful day for a match, if not for the interference of the Carrows.

Ginny has not spoken of her plans to anyone, not even Demelza, not wanting to risk any of it somehow getting back to the Carrows. So instead she eats breakfast and gets set up as if it were any other match she has ever played in.

Only once the entire team is geared up and ready to go out, does she finally speak.


They give her curious looks, but comply, standing quietly as the rest of the team files out.

“I need you two to do something for me,” she says.

Bassenthwaite nods. “Of course.”

“I need you two to keep the Bludgers away from the players.”

Rosier gives her a funny look. “Don’t we usually?”

“All of the players,” Ginny says.

Their eyes widen.

“Each of you take one Bludger, and keep it away from the pitch. Forget the rest of the game.”

Bassenthwaite frowns at her. “What’s going on?”

Ginny doesn’t elaborate. “Not a single person will be touched,” she says. “I gave the Gryffindors my word.”

They both still look completely thrown by the request.

“Can you do this?” she asks.

Bassenthwaite and Rosier look at each other, something seeming to pass between them. Looking
back at Ginny, they nod.

“Yeah,” Bassenthwaite says. “We can do that.”

Ginny feels her shoulders relax. “Thank you. Now let’s get out there.”

They nod, heading for the door.

“Rosier,” Ginny says.

He looks back at her.

“I know we’ve…had our differences. And I know I’m asking a lot.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says.

She stares back at him, trying to read him. She always knew it would come down to this in the end. “Okay.”

His eyebrows lift. “Aren’t you going to threaten me?”

“No,” she says. “I’m going to do something worse.”

He looks back at her warily.

“I’m going to trust you,” she says.

They regard each other for a long moment.

“That’s what a team is,” she says.

His jaw is tight as he nods.

Together they walk out on the pitch.

The crowd is already abuzz with noise, everyone noticing that Gryffindor doesn’t have Beaters.

At the center of the field, Madame Hooch is speaking with Demelza, clearly trying to talk her out of playing.

“This is madness!” Ginny can overhear Hooch exclaim as she nears.

Demelza just gives her a brazen smile.

Hooch turns to Ginny as if considering asking her to at least be smart enough to forfeit.

“Don’t look at me,” Ginny says.


Ginny holds out her hand, and after only a moment’s hesitation, Demelza takes it. She squeezes it, just enough past comfortable to be a threat. “I’m trusting you,” she says.

Ginny squeezes back. “I know.”

Letting go of each other, both girls lift off up into the air. Ginny checks that everyone is in position and then turns her attention back to Hooch. Blowing a whistle, she pulls open the ball trunk, the
Snitch and Bludgers streaking off up into the air.

For a moment, everyone seems frozen by the possibilities as the Bludgers whiz through the air. One heads straight for Gryffindor’s Seeker, a slight third year. Just before it reaches him, Bassenthwaite zooms over, hitting the Bludger far over the closest stands.

Ginny doesn’t look at the Carrows, pays no attention to the crowd’s reaction, just shouts, “Go!” and scrambles after the Quaffle still held in Hooch’s hands. She snatches it away from her, flinging it down the pitch towards Vaisey. All the same, she’s a bit tense until she sees Rosier keeping the other Bludger occupied.

Gryffindor belatedly gets into the match, scrambling for the Quaffle.

It’s not the cleanest match, tempers running high. Some of the Gryffindor players seem to decide to direct their anger over the situation at Slytherin for “lording it over them.” Their impotence rankles, she knows.

Ginny puts her energy into keeping her players focused on the game, and leaves Demelza to handle her own people.

In the absence of Bludgers, there are a lot more shoves and fouls as the score climbs quickly on both sides, the Keepers pushed to their limits. It’s brutal, but nowhere near as brutal as a Bludger to the side of the head.

It’s clear that this match will come down to the Snitch in the end. Fortunately for them, Gryffindor’s Seeker still seems far too aware of just whose position he is filling. Reiko is more than sharp enough to take advantage of it. She manipulates him with ease, confusing him with feints and sharp turns.

It’s an intensely fast moving match, all things told.

Ginny makes a quick dive to catch a mediocre pass from Urquhart, getting an elbow in her ribs from her Gryffindor counterpart. Pulling hard to one side, she rams him with her hip, nearly knocking him off before rolling over the top of him and streaking down towards the goals.

She hears him curse behind her, the crowd roaring, but focuses on the rings. Right as she stretches up to take a shot, she gets hit from behind, hard enough that she’s forced down low over her broom handle, nearly smashing her nose. Her fingers fumble the Quaffle and it plummets towards the grass.

“Whoops, sorry,” shouts the Gryffindor Seeker as he rights himself on his own broom. “I could have sworn I’d seen the Snitch.”

There’s a gasp and a cheer from the other end of the pitch, and Ginny looks back. “You may want Pomfrey to check your eyes for you,” she says with a grin.

The Seeker frowns, glancing back as well to see Reiko pulling up with the Snitch in her hand.

He lets out a rather creative string of curses, and Ginny just laughs.

It’s done.

She hears one of the Gryffindors say something particularly nasty, but other than the odd obscene gesture in return, her players hold it together.

They did it. The match is over. For the first time, she allows herself to glance over at the Carrows to see their reaction. She locates them in the crowd just in time to see them gesturing to someone on the
From behind her, Rosier shouts, but before Ginny can turn to look she hears the far too familiar crack of a bat.

“Demelza!” Ginny yells, but it’s too late. The girl barely has time to turn before the Bludger is hitting her square in the chest. She tumbles back off her broom, hitting the ground with a nasty thump.

Ginny spins around, finding Urquhart holding Rosier’s bat, a triumphant grin twisting his face.

He has the gall to grin at her, flipping the bat up in the air as if to catch it.

But before he can, a hex catches him in the chest, Urquhart falling to the ground. Things quickly get out of control after that, spells and fists flying as the two teams take each other on.

Hooch and McGonagall and Hagrid wade out to stop the fight, but the Carrows just remain in their seats laughing.

Ginny throws up protective spells to keep the players apart as best she can, grabbing Reiko when she would throw herself into the fight.

She gives her a look of outrage, but Ginny just digs her fingers in. “I will hex you myself if I have to.”

Reiko lets out a really long string of abusive curses, but doesn’t seem willing to call her bluff.

*     *     *

Nearly everyone on the Gryffindor and Slytherin teams end up with detention. Reiko and Ginny manage to avoid it, even if she’s not sure Reiko will ever completely forgive her for that. Not having detention is great, not getting to have her teammate’s backs with defending themselves against ‘those bloody stupid Gryffindor pricks’ as she put it, is something else entirely.

Ginny has no regrets. Well, almost no regrets.

Because there was one other person not to get detention, and that was Urquhart.

That night, Ginny waits until everyone in her room is soundly asleep, before slipping out of the dorms. Fortunately the hospital wing isn’t far, and with a particularly helpful shortcut, she manages to avoid Filch and his bloody cat.

The infirmary is dark and quiet. Only one bed is currently occupied, and Ginny crosses over to it.

“Here to finish the job?” a quiet voice asks.

Ginny looks down at Demelza. “How are you feeling?”

She grimaces, pushing up to sit against the headboard. “Like I got hit in the chest by a Bludger.”

Ginny purses her lips. “Yeah.”

She sits down in the chair next to the bed, the two of them warily regarding each other.

“I know it probably doesn’t mean much,” Ginny eventually says, “but I kicked Urquhart off the squad.”
“Did you,” Demelza says.

Ginny shrugs. “He made a liar of me.”

Demelza laughs before wincing and pressing a hand to her chest. “And you would never stoop to lie.”

Ginny smiles, acknowledging the hit. Lying is not something that disturbs her in the least. “He ruined my plan,” she amends. “My perfectly solid plan.”

Making her look incompetent is something she finds very hard to forgive.

But if she’s honest with herself it was really her own damn fault. She never should have put Urquhart on the squad. She knew he was trouble. But she spent so much time worrying about making waves, about doing anything that might look remotely suspicious, that she ignored her instincts.

“I’m sorry,” Ginny says.

Demelza shakes her head. “As much as I’d love to pommel you, you can’t be held accountable for the actions of one slimy git. And you tried.”

Ginny doesn’t point out that she much prefers success to attempts. Attempting just means you failed to do it right.

Demelza sighs.

“What?”

She shrugs. “I just don’t like feeling like the Carrows won.”

“Did they?” Ginny asks, looking at the other girl. “We’re still here, aren’t we?”

Demelza’s eyes narrow. “Maybe I’m just waiting to hex you when your back is turned.”

“Maybe you are,” Ginny says. “But I don’t think so.”

She snorts, sliding back down to lie in bed.

“Besides,” Ginny says, getting to her feet. “We’ll find a way to get back at them.”

Demelza grins. “Now that sounds like a plan.”

* * *

When Ginny arrives at her next detention, Snape gives her a long, hard assessing look. “The Carrows believe you instigated that little stunt at the Quidditch match, but I told them you would never be so foolish.”

Ginny shrugs. “I guess I’m not a very good captain after all. Can’t even control my own players.”

“Perhaps,” Snape says, like he doesn’t really believe that for a moment. He fingers his wand. “But perhaps I should see what I can find out from you?”

Ginny merely clasps her hands casually in front of her. “You could try.”
He sneers at her. “Don’t get cocky. It’s one thing to hide innocuous information in a comfortable setting. It’s another to protect vital information that could cost you your life or someone else’s, memories fraught with emotion and intimacy and weakness.”

She really doesn’t like the sound of this.

“You’ve barely begun.”

The next two hours he sets out to prove it. There is no more apple or parlor tricks, but only full assaults on her every thought and memory.

It’s painful, and it feels for the first time that this is true punishment, as if he is reminding her of the cost of recklessness. She doesn’t get mad, she doesn’t let herself be afraid. She builds and protects and lies and lets it become second nature.

When she fails, she tucks it away to be analyzed at length later. And then she gets back up off her knees and tries again.

* * *

The castle wakes on Monday morning to the news that Quidditch has been cancelled for the rest of the year. The official line is because it is a hot bed of violence, but Ginny suspects it has more to do with the fact that the Carrows aren’t at all sure of their ability to control it.

Ginny calls one final team meeting that evening. She waits in the changing room as her team files in.

She stands up in front of them. “As you’ve no doubt all heard, Quidditch has been cancelled for the rest of the year.”

They all nod and groan, shooting each other commiserating looks.

“At least that means we won the Quidditch Cup, right?” Vaisey says, clearly trying to find the bright side.

“Technically, I suppose so,” Ginny says.

“Sweet,” Martin says, crossing his arms over his chest. “ Makes me two for two.”

Reiko snorts. “Yes, clearly you are the only reason we’ve won.”

“The rest of us could have taken a few matches off,” Bassenthwaite says.

Martin nods. “Pretty much.”

“Wanker,” Vaisey grumbles.

Martin gasps, putting his hands over Reiko’s ears. “Not in front of Reiko!”

Reiko slaps his hands away. “Oh, sod off you stupid cunt.”

Everyone nearly falls down with laughter.

Rosier, who up until now has been quiet, says, “Speaking of cunts, where’s Urquhart?”

He’s taken it as a personal affront, that Urquhart stole his bat. *If I had wanted to start a fight, I bloody well would have started it myself*, he snarled to Ginny after the match. She’s beginning to realize that...
the trust she put in him meant more to him than she thought.

“It was the last thing I did as your captain,” Ginny says. “I kicked his sorry arse off the squad.” Little more than symbolic really, but it felt good all the same.

“Well rid of him,” Reiko says, the rest of them grumbling in agreement.

“Well, as amusing as it is to abuse Urquhart,” Ginny says, “that’s not really why I asked you all here.”

Bassenthwaite eyes her. “So why did you?”

“I thought you deserved to know why I did it. Why I helped Gryffindor like that.”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Reiko says.

“Is it?” Ginny asks.

Martin nods. “The Carrows are utter twats, trying to mess with Quidditch.”

Everyone nods in agreement, even Rosier. Quidditch is far too serious to be used as a gambit.

“The thing is, I made a call, and you’ve all had to pay for it. I’m sorry for that. But I’m not sorry for what I did.” Her jaw clenches. “This is our school, not theirs. And they would do well to remember it.”

Bassenthwaite looks around at the rest of his teammates. “We understand,” he says.

Ginny nods, feeling a little overwhelmed by the trust they have put in her. “Thank you.”

They hang around another half-hour, chatting and abusing each other and it’s hard to believe it’s really over. She’s going to miss them, miss this team.

After, Ginny is walking back up to the castle when Bassenthwaite, Reiko, and Martin catch up with her.

“Now what?” Reiko asks, falling into step next to her.

“What?” she asks. “Now nothing. Quidditch is done.”

Martin shakes his head. “Not Quidditch.”

Ginny stares back at them.

“We want in,” Reiko says. “You said it. This is our school.”

“‘Want in?’ On what?”

Martin pulls a worn flyer out of his robe. Dumbledore’s Army: Still Recruiting.

Ginny leans back away from it like it’s poisonous. “What makes you think I know anything about that?”

“Does anything in the castle happen without you knowing about it?” Reiko asks, betraying a level of trust in Ginny’s omniscience that is rather unsettling.

“Maybe I don’t approve,” Ginny says, lifting her chin.
Bassenthwaite’s lips twitch. “Maybe you don’t. But I do. And the thing is, Graham was...is one of us. He should be here.” There is anger in his eyes, a burning powerlessness that Ginny is far too familiar with.

She’s trusted them this far. If she can’t trust them with this, there really is no hope for Hogwarts.

Ginny nods. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

In the Common Room that evening, she gives each of them a small slip of paper. Dumbledore’s Army meets in the Room of Requirement on the seventh floor across the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, it says in Hannah’s writing.

“How do we know when?” Reiko asks.

Ginny smiles. “Ever noticed that poster on the board for History of Magic extra tutor sessions with Binns?”

Reiko pulls a face. “Who in their right minds would want--”

Ginny touches her arm. “Look at it again sometime.”

*     *     *

Dear Ron-

UGH! They’ve cancelled Quidditch! I can’t bloody believe it. They’re paranoid, thinking there’s some student conspiracy. I don’t have time for pranks. I’m too busy serving endless annoying detentions and trying not to drown under homework. As if I could give a crap about Gryffindor. (Sorry, bro, but you lot are all impulsive prats and you know I’m right.) I just don’t like people messing with Quidditch. Oh, well. I suppose it doesn’t matter anymore anyway. Quidditch is done and at least I don’t have to try to pretend to play nice with the other houses anymore.

-Ginny

P.S. At least we kicked Gryffindor’s arses!

*     *     *

It starts with Astoria, strangely enough. Next to her, Caroline hiccups once and then twice, her face comically surprised. Astoria takes one look at her and lets out a really unladylike snort. It sets everyone else off at once, Hestia and Flora leaning into each other.

Nicola is the only one not laughing, watching them all intently without so much as a smile on her face.

For some reason, Ginny finds this unbearably funny. She taps Tilly’s arm repeatedly, poking her in the arm. When she finally gets the other girl’s attention, she points towards Nicola.

“Her face!” is all Ginny manages to get out.

Tilly nods enthusiastically in agreement. “With the—the—the eyes!”

Ginny wails with laughter, nearly falling off the couch.
A few of the now empty glasses fall to the floor with a crash when Caroline kicks her foot out, tears streaming down her face. But somehow this is only funnier, even as Nicola quickly vanishes the broken glass before someone cuts themselves.

“Oh, Nicola,” Flora says between giggles. “What would we do without you?”

Hestia nods, giving her a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

The laughter slowly dies off, all of the girls falling back onto the couches, Astoria and Caroline tangled up together in an overstuffed chair that is far too small for the both of them. Ginny leans her head on Tilly’s shoulder, feeling a big yawn stretch her jaw.

Once there is complete silence, the last giggle and hiccup fading, Nicola says, “Eight and a half minutes.”

Tilly nods. “Not bad.”

It takes maybe another five minutes for the ache in Ginny’s belly to finally fade.

“How do you feel?” Nicola asks.

Ginny lets out a breath, leaning back against the couch. “Honestly? Better than I would have thought. Relaxed.”

Hestia nods in agreement. “It’s almost like when you need a really good cry and then afterwards you feel kind of…purged.”

Caroline dabs at her running eye makeup with a grimace. “Could have done without the tears.”

Astoria gives her an indulgent smile, reaching out to fix it.

“Well, you all looked like mad fools,” Millicent observes from her corner of the room.

“Yes, well,” Tilly says, “that was rather the point.” She always tests the products out with them, claiming it wouldn’t do to ask someone to do something you aren’t willing to do yourself. “Laughter and silliness in a bottle.”

“I bet my brothers would be interesting in selling this,” Ginny says, eying the slightly bubbling golden liquid.

“You think so?” Tilly asks.

She shrugs. “You may need to get the dosage right first.”

Tilly laughs, the sound a little weak. “There is that.”

She spends a while jotting down a few notes, Hestia nodding off on the other side of the table while Astoria and Caroline continue to whisper about something.

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” Tilly says.

“What?” Ginny asks.

“Thinking about the future. After all…this.”

She knows she means The Parlor and Hogwarts, but also the war. It feels some days like there may
be no future, everything stretching so uncertain ahead of them. But as long as there is even a chance, they will prepare for all the possibilities. It’s what they do.

Ginny rolls her head to the side, looking at Tilly. “What else is there to think about?”

Tilly gives her a tight smile and goes back to dreaming up her future.

*  *  *

There is tense silence as Ginny walks into the Room of Requirement with her teammates.

Most of the Gryffindor players are members of the DA, and they all stand, their attention riveted to the new arrivals.

Ginny is vividly reminded of the first time she brought Tobias and Smita, but shoves the painful thought away.

It’s Bassenthwaite who breaks the stalemate. “You,” he booms, pointing to Gryffindor’s Keeper.

Everyone is tense as Bassenthwaite marches straight up to the guy. They glare at each other, the Keeper not backing down despite the height and weight Bassenthwaite has on him. “What of it?”

After a long moment, Bassenthwaite lifts a hand to his chin, rubbing slightly. “You have a pretty wicked left hook.”

The Keeper’s eyebrows lift. “You’ve got a pretty hard head.”

Bassenthwaite grins. “Hope it didn’t break your delicate hand.”

“I think it would take a hell of a lot more than that.”

“Come on, then,” Bassenthwaite says, slapping him on the back. “Let’s see if you can hex half so well as hit.”

Reiko almost immediately searches out the Gryffindor Seeker, cornering the poor bloke into an intense conversation.

Everyone seems to relax, Martin moving over to watch a couple students working on their Patronus Charms.

Neville and Hannah appear next to Ginny.

“Now it’s starting to look right,” Neville says.

“If the Carrows hoped to divide us, that certainly backfired,” Hannah observes.

Ginny smiles. “I have an idea for our next prank. After all, it wouldn’t do to let the Carrows think they’ve cowed us.”

There was one winner in that scuffle, and it wasn’t the Carrows.

*  *  *

Luna spends three days researching the best permanent sticking charm she can find, adding a few flourishes of her own.
Ginny is the one to write their message in clear letters below.

NOT FORGOTTEN

Above the words, a giant color photograph of Charity Burbage’s face smiles down at students as they pass.

Predictably, the Carrows go on a rampage to find who is behind it. But their loss of control only makes the students more curious, people whispering behind their hands. Emboldened, maybe, to let themselves really ask for the first time where people go when they disappear. To consider the possibilities.

It’s enough.

On her way down to The Parlor that evening, Ginny notices Nadira sitting by herself. People have taken exception to the way she isolates herself. Thinks she’s stuck up. Ginny wonders if maybe she’s just lonely.

Ginny sits down near her, opening a book on her lap. “Hi.”

Nadira lifts her head. “Hi,” she repeats back with the barest of civility before going back to her work and ignoring Ginny.

Ginny isn’t put off by that. She’s had much worse from Millicent over the years. “You’re taking Arithmancy?”

Nadira looks at her. “What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry?” Ginny asks.

Nadira seems to consider her for a long time. “Oh, I see,” she says, sitting back. “You’re trying to save me, aren’t you? Like one of your little project girls.”

Ginny feels her cheeks flush, anger rising in her chest at anyone speaking so dismissively of her sisters, of the rare gift being a member of The Parlor represents. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Nadira laughs, a harmless trilling sound belied by the hardness in her eyes. “I know what you see when you look at me. You see my headscarf and assume I was forbidden from coming here, like some trapped bird who has finally escaped her cage.”

Ginny opens her mouth to protest, but she honestly isn’t sure what she thought about Nadira and her family, what assumptions she may have made. Because she has watched Nadira all year and seen an outsider.

Nadira presses ruthlessly on, voice still quiet and calm and almost conversational as she leans in to Ginny. “Well, I hate to destroy your fantasies, but I didn’t want to come here. Because I have no interest in your version of education.”

“My version?” Ginny says, feeling completely flat-footed.

Nadira shakes her head. “You know the saddest part of all of this? That it’s never even occurred to you that it could be your world that is limited, not mine.”

With that, she stands and leaves, Ginny still sitting with something hot and tight like rage stretching
across her skin, the slight itch of what might be shame. It feels like everyone in the room should be staring at her, but the quiet confrontation seems to have unfolded without anyone noticing.

After another moment, Ginny pushes to her feet, continuing on her way to The Parlor.

Only Tilly and Nicola are down there, heads lowered together as they tinker with a project. They give Ginny distracted greetings, and she doesn’t bother them. Instead she turns for the library door.

It feels a bit like escaping, closing that solid door behind her and slinking into the silence of this space. She leans back against the door, letting her eyes close.

“What troubles you, Mistress?”

Ginny looks up at Nymue, shaking her head. “It’s nothing, I just…”

She glances helplessly around at the stacks and stacks of books. “Are there any texts on Occlumency in here?”

“No,” she says. “You won’t find any conventional magics in these books.”

“Conventional?” Ginny echoes.

“Wand magic,” Nymue clarifies.

Ginny frowns. “What other kind of magic is there?”

Nymue gives her a slow smile. “My dear, there are limitless other kinds.”

Ginny’s cheeks flush, Nadira’s scathing voice echoing in her mind. *It’s never even occurred to you that it could be your world that is limited, not mine.*

Nymue flicks a finger and a text slides out of one of the shelves. “If you have interest in the keeping of secrets, of mind protections, perhaps this book could be of use.”

The book floats over and lands on the pedestal.

Ginny crosses over to look down at the rich blood red leather cover of the text, the title embossed in gold in a language she is unfamiliar with. She reaches for it.

“Fair warning that the magics contained in these texts have been banned by many of the modern governments.”

Ginny pulls her hand back. “Why? Are they dangerous?”

“Dangerous to whom?” Nymue counters with. “To the casters? Or to the wand masters?”

“Wand masters,” Ginny repeats, brow furrowed. It’s a strange phrase.

Nymue gives her a smile that is a little hard, a little predatory. “Is anything truly without risk?”

Ginny picks up the book.

* * *

Her detentions with Snape continue three nights a week. It’s a dangerous game, learning this skill that suddenly seems too important not to have, one she feels like she’s been working on since the
first day she set foot in this school. But she’s also never unaware of just who she is, who Snape is, or the information she has that Tom would only be too pleased to know.

Ron’s ghoul. Hermione’s parents. The DA.

_Harry leaning in and kissing her, his fingers sliding down a strand of her hair._

“What’s the best way to hide specific information? Particularly information you are so intent on hiding that it may force itself to the front of your mind?”

As usual, Snape doesn’t jump with an answer, instead waiting calmly for her to work through it.

Her first instinct is bury it deep, but she knows how useful it can be to put something else there, something false, but made believable by the protections put in place. The alternative would be to put it on the surface, make it look like a lie, but that seems too dangerous, especially when even the hint of the information would be enough to put people’s lives in danger.

She tilts her head to the side. “What if I keep the memory, don’t particularly hide it or make it available, but just change enough small things to render the information useless?”

Snape nods. “Authentic emotion is often enough to sell a thought as truth. If you can tie that emotion and taste of reality and detail to a false thought, it can render the subterfuge invisible.”

She considers that. “Particularly if I make it something embarrassing to me? Or something that seems to highlight a weakness?” She’s been thinking about the kind of person who would try to use this skill and what they would be after. Information, yes, but also a way to control you.

“Or if you take truth and make it seem to point to a different conclusion. Let them assume this truth would make you one way, when it really makes you a different way.”

There’s an uncomfortable pause as that statement settles between them. This, she assumes, is what he did to Dumbledore, how he managed that ultimate betrayal. Part of her is enraged, constantly screaming at the back of her mind. The more practical part of her recognizes this as more evidence that she is learning this skill from a master.

She feels like that a lot these days, like two people existing inside the same body.

She stills as it occurs to her that being two people could be useful. One of her would never think of the dangerous things at all.

Snape watches her calmly, as if waiting to see which side will win.

But maybe neither side has to win, Ginny thinks.

“I believe I understand, sir,” she says.

*   *   *

Ginny spends most of the next afternoon trying to find Luna. She eventually finds her in the place she should have been smart enough to check first, the Room of Requirement. Members of the DA have started doing this, hanging out during off hours, like it’s become more than a just place for defense lessons.

Today the room is filled with sunlit couches and tables. Luna is sitting with a clutch of girls, homework and texts spread between them.
Ginny sits down with them, setting down her bag but not pulling out her homework. She watches the girls work for a while before turning to Luna.

“What do you know about wandless magic?” she asks.

Luna looks up from her parchment. “It’s quite advanced,” she says. “Completing spells without a wand.”

Ginny shakes her head. “I don’t mean just doing normal spells without wands, but spells that never require a wand at all. That aren’t meant to.”

“Oh,” Luna says, her head tilting to the side. “Do you mean women’s magic?”

Something seems to prickle over Ginny’s skin. “I’m not sure. Maybe?”

“Well, there were many historical periods where women were not allowed to have wands,” Luna explains.

“Were there?” This is not something they ever learned about in History of Magic.

The other girls have stopped working, clearly interested in this conversation as well.

“Yes,” Luna confirms, looking a bit mystified that they don’t seem to know this.

“Really?” Hannah asks. “Why?”

Luna gazes back at her. “It was claimed they were too delicate to wield it.”

“Bollocks,” Demelza says. “Just wanted to make them easier to control, more likely. Couldn’t fight back if they didn’t have wands, could they?”

Luna nods. “Some say that women developed their own magics, mostly protective, to compensate for being wandless. Or perhaps the magics were always there. It’s hard to say.”

Ginny can’t help but think of being powerless in front of the Death Eaters at the Burrow.

“Yes, but that sort of magic would be highly illegal,” Susan Bones points out.

“Why?” Ginny asks.

Susan looks a little taken aback to have to defend the law. Like it just is. “Well,” she says. “It’s dangerous, right? I mean, we all did stuff when we were kids before we had wands. But it was sort of…raw and uncontrolled, wasn’t it?”

Luna pulls her homework back towards her. “Yes, wands have always been about control. From the very beginning.”

They all give Luna indulgent smiles like she has started talking conspiracy theories again, but Ginny feels something painful lodge in her chest. “What do you mean?”

“I think you know.”

Ginny thinks maybe she does. “Hogwarts.”

Luna nods serenely back at her, but the other girls just look confused.
“What?” Demelza asks.

“You build an entire education around the use of wands and then decide who has wands. Adults, not kids. Wizards, not...Goblins or House Elves.”

Demelza lifts an eyebrow. “Wizards, not witches.”

Ginny nods. “Purebloods, not Muggleborns.”

Hannah looks at her wand. “I never really thought about it.”

And that, Ginny thinks, is probably the point.

That evening, she goes down and has a long conversation with Nymue.

* * *

The first week of December Ginny walks into the dungeon to find Snape sitting at the table, a small book sitting in front of him.

“You will copy the first chapter of this book,” he says.

It feels, in many ways, like everything has looped back around to the beginning. Only this time she does not question, just settles in to the exercise.

She starts writing. Less than ten minutes in, she is unsurprised to feel the barest ripple of his intrusion into her mind. She lets it slide by without reaction, her quill never pausing in her work. Her surface thoughts are for the words in the book, her boredom with the topic, her annoyance that they are back to writing lines as punishment, thinking about her runes essay she has little hope of finishing on time, wondering if Tobias misses her half as much as she misses him.

She lets herself be an open book, or at least one of her selves. The least dangerous but no less authentic one, the Slytherin with Muggle-loving parents and ruthlessness in her heart. The one who understands the importance of lowering her head and going along with whatever will keep her life preserved. Who misses Quidditch and hates History of Magic and is scared of what happens down in the dungeons. The girl who misses her best friends and is swamped by loneliness sometimes.

This Ginny has no doubts except about herself, no reservations about the lies she is being fed, no training in Occlumency. She’s never kissed Harry or mourned Burbage.

There are no edges to be found, no trap doors or defenses. Just endless depths for him to probe and dig through and feel he knows her, all of her.

She is an ocean—fathomless and swelling.

She finishes copying the chapter and looks up at Snape.

“Are we done here, sir?” she asks.

He looks back at her, his own expression as empty and innocuous as her own. “For tonight, Miss Weasley, I believe we are.”

* * *

Ginny slides the ancient tome back into its place on a shelf. She remains perched on the ladder for a long moment, breathing in the dusty smell of stone and vellum.
“Mistress,” Nymue says.

Ginny doesn’t turn, carefully climbing back down. With her back still to the window, she asks, “Is it ever possible to put it back together?”

“Perhaps. But never as it was before.”

So be it.

Back in The Parlor, only Caroline and Astoria are present. Astoria is practicing her harp, her eyes closed as her body sways and her fingers pluck out a silent song. She is wrapped in an impressive muffling charm, the room completely silent except for the ever present distant moan of the lake.

Caroline sits on the couch, unenthusiastically flipping through a magazine.

“Hey,” Ginny says.

Caroline glances up. Her dark blond hair is pulled back in a slick ponytail, large spiraling curls cascading down her back. Near her temple a stubborn piece of hair has pulled free, and there is a dark smudge near her eye, as if she rubbed impatiently at it, mussing her eyeliner.

“Skiving off?” Ginny asks, sitting down next to her.

Caroline shrugs. “Like Binns will even notice.”

Ginny huffs in agreement. She wonders sometimes if they had a history teacher who actually knew what they were doing, then maybe history wouldn’t keep repeating itself.

There’s a stack of magazines on the table. Ginny leans over and picks one up, the glossy front cover showing a scantily clad witch with perfect, pale skin and an almost impossibly small waist.

“My mother sent them,” Caroline says. “I’m supposed to pick out new robes.”

“Yeah?” Ginny asks, trying to imagine what that would be like, just opening a magazine and picking something out.

Caroline sighs. “Every holiday she has the Notts and Rosiers and anyone else of consequence she can convince to come over for a dinner party. It’s important to be presentable.”

It sounds a lot like this is something Caroline’s mother has told her many, many times. Not for the first time, Ginny wonders where that bright-faced first year girl with a dangerous glint in her eye disappeared to.

“Any contenders yet?” Ginny asks, flipping open to a page with the corner dog-eared. The robes on the page are in a soft dove grey, an elaborate train trailing behind with what appear to be pearls embroidered around the square neckline. It looks like something Auntie Muriel would wear, not a sixteen year old.

“You don’t have to do this,” Caroline says.

Ginny looks up at her. “Do what?”

She flips another page. “Pretend you’re interested.”

Ginny glances down at the magazine. “It’s not that I’m not interested, it’s that I don’t know anything about it.”
“There’s never really been money for this sort of thing,” Ginny explains.

“Oh,” she says as if just remembering that everyone knows the Weasleys are poor. Only instead of looking scornful, she flips through a few more pages, looking thoughtful. “That must be nice.”

This is pretty much the last thing Ginny expects her to say. She wonders what sort of weird fantasy Caroline may be indulging about poverty. “Nice?”

Caroline shrugs. “Not having any expectations. You pretty much don’t have anywhere to go but up.”

It’s a callous, thoughtless thing to say, but Ginny suspects she doesn’t intend it that way.

Ginny opens her magazine to a page with a set of ruby red robes, cut dramatically short in the front with a dipping neckline. “These,” she says, pointing to it. “Definitely these.”

Caroline looks at the page with wide eyes before letting out a startled laugh. “Grandmum would have a stroke.”

“At least the party would be interesting.”

Caroline lets out a distinctly unladylike snort, but Ginny doesn’t miss that she folds down the corner on the page all the same.

Later that evening, Ginny is the last to go down to her dorm. Bridget and Helena’s drapes are already tightly closed. Both of them have been doing a rather nice job of avoiding Ginny, not that they are above whispering nasty things when they are sure she can hear. She knows they are just trying to pick another fight, to find a way to even the playing field again, and she isn’t willing to give them that chance.

Nadira’s drapes are also drawn, but there is a small break in the cloth, light spilling out.

Ginny sits on the edge of her bed. “Nadira?”

For a moment, Ginny thinks she will ignore her, pretend to be asleep, but after another long moment her face appears in the break. “Yes?” she asks, voice frostily polite.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Nadira pulls her head back inside with a sigh. Ginny waits for the snap of her curtains and the bark of a spell, but instead Nadira crawls out to sit on the edge of her bed facing Ginny.

She’s wearing her pajamas, bare feet poking out. But Ginny is more surprised by what she is not wearing—her headscarf. It’s startling, seeing the dark, beautiful hair cascading down over her shoulders.

Nadira raises an eyebrow. “You wanted to say something?”

Ginny nods. “I wanted to apologize.”

“Oh,” Nadira says. “Now you have. Can I go to sleep?”

“I think you were right,” Ginny says, pressing on like she just needs the words to be said, and she wonders if this is just another kind of selfishness. Doing this for herself and not Nadira. “I think I was trying to save you. Which is stupid really, because I pretty much believe people can only save
themselves. But maybe that’s what it was about. Me trying to save myself.”

Nadira gives her a look like she’s just explained the sky is blue.

“That bed you’re sleeping in, that was my best friend’s. And I miss her. I miss a lot of people. So maybe I mistook my loneliness for your own. I’m sorry.”

Her eyes narrow. “Just because I took her bed, does not mean I owe you friendship.”

“No,” Ginny says. “It doesn’t. You pretty much don’t owe me anything. And all I owed you was an apology for making assumptions about you when I don’t know anything about you or your life.”

Nadira considers her for long moments. “Okay.”

Ginny nods, swinging her feet up on her bed. “Goodnight.”

She’s surprised to hear Nadira say, “Goodnight.”

The next morning they are comfortably back to ignoring each other.

*     *     *

In Slytherin House, no one speaks of revenge. Revenge is hot and quick and reckless. Reciprocity, on the other hand, Ginny has learned all too well, is about control and planning and proportional response. It is quiet and cold and surgical.

She wonders if Urquhart never learned that particular lesson. After the disastrous Quidditch match, Urquhart settled in to hanging out with Crabbe and Goyle and Tobias and Pansy. Where Urquhart goes, Vaisey follows, though Ginny admits that he seems less than comfortable with the association.

Still, Urquhart has been strutting around the castle like he’s the greatest thing since self-inking quills. Ginny supposes it was only a matter of time until reciprocity caught up with him.

Or at least that’s the only way she can explain how a Venomous Tentacula found its way under his bed.

Martin is acting out the scene, Demelza nearly in tears as she howls in mirth next to him.

“It isn’t funny,” Hannah says, her face pinched with disapproval.

“You weren’t there,” Neville points out.

Hannah shakes her head, clearly frustrated. “This can’t be what the DA is about. Cruel pranks.”

“Why not? The Carrows don’t have qualms about being cruel! You should see what they did to Nigel last week!”

“We have to remember who we are,” Hannah insists. “We aren’t monsters.”

She turns to Ginny for support.

Ginny thinks she’s probably the last person to ask about this, but remembers far too well what Hannah’s place is in all of this.

She’s come to rely on Neville, Hannah, and Luna more than she ever thought she could. It’s terrifying, having to believe that someone will be there when you need them. Because she’s thought
about it, played out a thousand scenarios where this all goes horribly wrong. She can’t help it.

“Okay,” Ginny says. “We’ll talk to everyone about taking things too far. Right, Neville?”

“Fine,” he says.

Hannah looks appeased, Ginny and Neville sharing a look over her head.

At least, she thinks, after seeing what happened to Urquhart the other students will think twice about volunteering to be the Carrows’ lap dogs.

* * *

When she reports to the dungeons for her next detention, there is a younger student already sitting with Snape.

“I’m sorry,” Ginny says, backpedalling.

“Miss Weasley,” Snape says. “Please come in.”

She glances at the boy, but he doesn’t seem to have noticed her entrance. She walks forward until she’s standing near the table.

Snape remains sitting. “Your progress as an Occlumens has…exceeded my expectations. You show a rare gift.”

She knows this is meant to be a compliment, but instead it seems to settle deep in her stomach like a stone. *We aren’t monsters.*

“All of that is talent,” he says, “and some work ethic. But also, I suspect, something more.”

Her chin lifts. She reminds herself that there is no way for him to know.

“Perhaps something a bit more unorthodox?” he presses, like she might be pushed into bragging.

She has learned far too well not to let her surprise show, simply mirroring back his own calm expression.

His lips twitch. “I could ask you about that, but I realize far too well I am doubtful to get an answer, even if I tried to take it.”

She wonders if he’s beginning to realize he has done his job better than intended. She’s let all her other work slide, completes just enough homework not to earn detention. NEWTs and jobs and grades are the farthest from her mind these days. Everything she has, has gone into The Parlor and the DA and this…mastering the protection of her secrets.

“Regardless,” Snape continues. “I believe it is time to move on.”

“Move on, sir?” she asks, wondering if she is relieved by the idea that these detentions are over, or just disappointed.

“Yes. From the protecting of secrets to the taking of them.”

Ginny glances at the boy, still sitting silently as if they aren’t here, as if they haven’t been talking. Only now does she notice the slight sheen to his eyes, as if he is unfocused. Ian, she thinks the boy’s name may be. A Ravenclaw.
And she understands, finally, why he is here.

Snape is regarding her with his fathomless eyes and blank expression. He looks haggard, as he always does, cheeks sunken, hair limp around his face. In that moment he doesn’t look evil or good or anything in between, but simply cold. Hard. Ruthless.

Ginny sucks in a deep breath, because it feels as if the walls are pressing in.

“Miss Weasley.”

She has submitted herself to his tutelage, regardless of his murky motivations. She has done without question everything he has asked.

But this...

She stares at the young boy sitting senseless in his chair, thinks of what she could take from him. What that would mean. For him. For her.

What that would mean about her.

“I won’t do it,” she says, voice wavering.

Snape’s eyes narrow. He pushes to his feet, seeming to fill the small space. “You will,” he insists.

*Why are you doing this?* she wants to ask. *What are you trying to turn me in to?*

“I won’t,” she says, taking a step back.

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking you are here by choice,” he says, leaning towards her across the table.

Shaking her head, she turns and flees the room.

“Miss Weasley,” he calls out after her.

She doesn’t stop.

*   *   *

The last two weeks of term, Ginny is tense, constantly waiting for a summons that never comes. Snape doesn’t seem like the sort of person to make hollow threats. And despite what she may have allowed herself to believe, those were not lessons, but punishments.

Still, she doesn’t get any threats or dark looks from the Carrows, doesn’t get dragged back down to the dungeons. She does her part, completing her homework on time, looking attentive in class, anything not to bring attention to herself.

All the while her brain is spinning with the possibilities.

“Ginny?” Neville asks.

Ginny pulls herself out of her thoughts, looking up into Neville’s concerned face. “Yeah?”

Behind him, someone laughs, a spell apparently having gone awry. This sort of chaos is normal enough in DA meetings that Neville doesn’t even look back. “Everything okay?”
She nods. “Yes. Of course. My mind was just wandering.”

He gives her a smile that seems only half convinced, and turns back to helping a few first years master Expelliarmus.

Ginny blows out a breath.

“Neville’s wrong, you know.”

Ginny turns to look at Luna sitting near her, a letter from her father in her hands. “Is he?”

“Fear isn’t bad,” Luna says.

No, this Ginny knows. It can be a very useful tool. But that doesn’t mean she isn’t constantly struggling not to be overwhelmed by it. “Are you afraid?”

“All of the time,” she says, like this is an obvious fact and nothing to be ashamed of. “It would be a bit foolish not to be.”

Ginny nods. Glancing up, she sees a first year Hufflepuff stun Bassenthwaite, his huge frame hitting the mat with a thump. The Hufflepuff looks horrified, but when Neville revives him, Bassenthwaite just pops to his feet with a deep laugh, smacking the young wizard on the back so hard he nearly crumples.

“Nice shot!” Bassenthwaite says.

Luna finishes reading her letter, folding it back in a complicated pattern, tight corners folding in on themselves. “It doesn’t mean we stop fighting.”

“No,” Ginny says. “It doesn’t.”

“Come on, you two,” Hannah says, coming over to pull them off the couch. “These spells won’t master themselves.”

They let themselves get pulled up into the fray.

*     *    *

Ginny boards the Hogwarts Express with something like relief. She knows if Snape intended to punish her he would have done it already. But still, it’s nice to know she will be out of his reach for a while. Being with her family, she thinks maybe she’ll be able to lower her guard for five minutes, be in a place she doesn’t have to constantly look for trap doors and tricks. Repercussions.

They are only two hours out of Hogsmeade when the train comes to a screeching, unscheduled stop.

Ginny frowns, and soon enough they hear loud voices down the length of the train. Easing open the compartment door, she glances down the hall.

Wizards in dark cloaks and bone white masks over their faces are pacing up the center aisle. Curious faces pull back into other compartments ashen with fear. Ginny closes the door, sitting back down, her back ramrod straight even as her heart pounds away in her chest. She’s aware of Nicola’s eyes on her, the way everyone is tense with expectation.

The footsteps grow louder as they near, Ginny’s hand slipping down into her robes, gripping tight around her wand.
The wizards peer into their compartment.

*I won’t go quietly*, Ginny pledges to herself.

With barely a glance at them, the Death Eaters move on.

Ginny lets out a breath.

“Getting a bit full of ourselves, are we?” Millicent says, voice just tiniest bit rickety under her bluster. “Like you’re really that interesting.”

Ginny forces a shaky laugh.

“We’ve got her!” someone yells.

Ginny pushes to her feet, pressing her face to the window just in time to see Luna dragged off the train by two wizards, her hair pale against their robes.

Ginny opens her mouth, her fist banging against the glass, but in a flash, all three disappear.

Oh, god.

Luna.

* * *

Ginny follows Bill into the Burrow, setting her bag down. With a competent flick of his wrist, Bill guides her trunk up the stairs to her room.

She walks into the kitchen, both of her parents waiting there, faces expectant and wary all at once.

She knows she looks exactly like she did when she left. She doesn’t have any bruises, no scars. One of the lucky ones.

They pull her into warm hugs. You did it, the hugs seem to say. You survived.

She waits until her father and Bill settle back at the table, Mum bustling around the stove. “They took Luna.”

“What?”

She nods. “A few hours out of Hogwarts. Death Eaters.”

Bill and Dad share a look, and they don’t look at surprised as they should be.

“Why take Luna?” Her voice is calm, even. Not a child demanding answers.

Her father considers her for a long moment, something assessing in his gaze. She wonders if he can see that she isn’t the same girl who left the summer before. She isn’t even the same girl who left Hogsmeade only hours ago.

“The Quibbler.”

Ginny nods. She knows better than ever the power of information. Lies. Deceits.

The Quibbler is the last free press, the last voice of support for Harry and Muggleborns.
“They’re trying to get him to comply,” she says.

“Yes,” Dad says. “And he will.” He sounds utterly certain.

“How do you know?” she wonders.

“Because it’s what we would do,” her mother says, her attention still on the stove, but voice tight.

And that’s really what this has always been about, hasn’t it? Not just compulsory education, a way to indoctrinate them, but also a way to control the adults. She looks at her parents and understands that she is a threat hanging over their heads.

You don’t want to cooperate? What if it cost you your child’s life?

Is anything worth your child’s life?

“This is going to start happening more often now, isn’t it?” Students disappearing without a whisper, for things they themselves haven’t done, choices they never got to make.

“Yes,” her father says. “I’m afraid it will.”

Ginny is sixteen. It means she doesn’t have the right to protect herself with her wand. It may even mean she’s a child. But being sixteen didn’t keep Luna from getting taken off that train. And being sixteen won’t keep Ginny from becoming whatever she has to to survive this war.

She crosses over and sits at the table. “Okay.”

_You’ll keep us safe, Ginny._

She won’t fail again.
Sixth Year – Part Two

Chapter Summary

those cunning folk use any means to achieve their ends

Chapter Notes

As the longest entry in this fic yet, I broke it up into a few chapter for ease of reading.

Endless thanks to TimeShifter, Bethany, Zip, and K for their beta help, encouragement, and general awesomeness. I never would have finished this fic without them.

And for all of those readers who took a chance on the slowest updating WIP fic by a brand new author in the fandom, thank you so much for reading along and your lovely comments and being so damn patient and enthusiastic. Six years later, here we are.

Content warnings: references to self-harm and suicide, depictions of violence, child abuse, loss of bodily/mental autonomy, animal cruelty, and death

The wireless warbles with the voice of Celestina Warbucks, the ornaments on the brightly lit tree shivering along to the high-pitched vibrato. Snow falls softly outside the window, a crackling fire warming the room. The smell of spice and sweets floats out from the kitchen.

On the surface, a perfect Christmas.

Only there is a pile of unopened packages next to the tree, an uncomfortable reminder that Ron, Hermione, and Harry are still missing. That no one has heard a thing about them in months. Everyone keeps saying this is a good thing, because at least it means they are probably still free, right?

But Ginny knows they’ve already been gone far longer than the Order ever expected them to be.

She never allowed herself the luxury of expectations.

Everyone tries though, tries to pretend everything is normal. Ginny smiles and laughs like they actually feel natural. She eats and opens presents. She ignores the fact that Bill is clearly hiding something from all of them, some secret that makes it hard for him to look Mum and Dad in the eye. She thinks she could find a way to press him into spilling, but frankly she’s got enough secrets to contend with.

Mum and Dad are being similarly tight-lipped about something, abruptly ending conversations when she walks into the room. Auntie Muriel has apparently done something to make even Mum angry.

Shiny surfaces roiling with secrets just below. Normal life these days.

“Wotcher.”
Ginny looks up from her uneaten mince pie. Tonks gingerly lowers herself onto the couch next to her. Her pregnancy is definitely showing at this point, a large bulbous swell that Mum jokingly assures her will only get bigger in the weeks to come.

Her hair has settled into a mousy brown lying listless against her shoulders, her features somehow sharper, more angular.

Ginny fingers the end of Tonks’s hair, thoughts drifting back to hours spent at Grimmauld laughing over her shifting features. It already seemed like the end of the world back then, but she didn’t really have a clue.

“Can’t morph,” Tonks says. “Apparently changing anything too drastically would be dangerous for the baby.” She shrugs. “Or maybe it’s nature’s way of making sure you actually look like yourself the first time your baby sees you.”

Ginny makes the corners of her mouth lift. “Makes sense.”

Tonks’ eyes narrow, her gaze seeming to pick Ginny apart. Ginny allows it. Tonks may be an Auror, trained and tested, but Ginny is trained as well.

She only looks away when Tonks’ eyes seem to cloud with something like concern.

Ginny escapes one set of prying eyes only to catch her parents watching her from the kitchen. They both quickly look away, doing their best to pretend they are busy doing anything other than observing her.

“They’re worried about you,” Tonks says.

Ginny lets out a breath. “There’s no need to be.”

Tonks rubs a hand across her belly, her brow tightening. “McGonagall wrote them about Snape.”

Of course she did. At least what little she thinks she knows. “It’s nothing.”

Tonks gives her a look like she doesn’t believe her. “Would you tell us if it was?”

Ginny shifts slightly in her seat before she can stop the telling action. “He hasn’t laid a finger on me.”

That’s the truth, at least.

Tonks picks up the untouched mince pie from Ginny’s plate, popping it in her mouth with an audible sigh. “Yes, well,” she says around a mouth full of crumbs, “he wouldn’t have to, would he?”

Ginny doesn’t know what to say, just that she can’t very well tell them the truth. Sometimes the truth is worse than the imaginings. The best weapon you can ever wield is other people’s need for their comfortable assumptions, Snape once told her.

Maybe letting them think Snape’s vindictiveness is taking the form of petty punishment is safer.

Fred and George stomp over then, saving Ginny from having to answer. There’s a large package floating between them. “Just one more thing for you, sis.”

She already has a nearly bottomless bag of tricks and defensive knick-knacks from them. Ones she is not foolish enough to actually let out into the general population of Hogwarts. That is not a war she wants any part of. “What is that?”

Fred whisks the brown paper off of it with a flourish, revealing a wireless a bit smaller than her
Considering the radio stations are just as tightly controlled as all other media outlets these days, she isn’t sure what listening to more lies and misdirection is going to do for anyone.

George doesn’t seem put off by that though, his face bright with mischief. “There’s a particular radio show we think you may find worth listening to this term.” He hands her a small slip of paper with instructions to find a station called--

“Potterwatch?” Ginny says, trying to ignore the way the word catches in her throat.

“Yeah,” Fred says. “With the Quibbler out of commission, we figured we’d fill the gap.”

Considering the lengths Tom has been willing to go to control all media... “Is that wise?”

They give her matching reckless smiles. “What’d be the fun if it was?”

She tries not to find that terrifying.

“Anyway,” Fred says, “we wanted to make sure you had one with you at Hogwarts. So you and all your mates can keep up with how brilliant we are.”

“Yes,” she says. “I’m sure it will be a big hit in the Slytherin common room.”

George rolls his eyes. “It’s for the DA, nitwit.”

Ginny doesn’t let her expression slip, she’s sure of it. “What makes you think--” she starts to say.

“Please,” George says with a dismissive sneer. “Give us a little credit.”

“Yeah,” Fred says, sharing a look with George. “A liar knows a liar a mile off.”

If only they knew.

* * *

In January, the train platform is significantly quieter than it was the previous fall. For the most part people are simply quieter. But there are also fewer students. A quick glance is enough to see that.

It’s not surprising that some parents have used the break as a chance to slip away with their children. They’ve decided England isn’t worth the risk. She imagines the desperation that drives someone to leave everything they have ever known. To trust that it can really be any better anywhere else.

No one lingers.

Like everyone else, Ginny says goodbye to her parents following a careful script. They don’t tell her to be careful. They just hug her, the pressure of their fingers saying everything they can’t.

Please come back to us.

She boards the train and doesn’t allow herself to wonder if she will.

Nadira and her siblings and cousins and extended family are all still here, filling multiple compartments, forming their own tight unit. Ginny can see it now, the protection inherent in it, the insulating of the young ones, of their ways.
The DA members gather similarly, at least the ones who can afford to. Ginny walks past them without a glance. Instead, she settles in with Hestia and Flora.

Nicola arrives next, leaning out the window to wave and laugh at a young girl running up and down the platform waving her arms.

Despite the fact that before this year they rarely all sat together on the train, The Parlor sisters arrive one by one, even Millicent.

Tilly arrives last, walked to the compartment by Bassenthwaite. The former Slytherin Beater is the same year as Tilly, so Ginny supposes it shouldn’t be weird to see them together. It still strikes Ginny as unusual, compounded by the fact that Tilly doesn’t look particularly happy.

Bassenthwaite touches her arm, saying something, and Tilly gives him a cold look.

He lifts his hand, backing away. “Fine,” Ginny thinks he says.

He glances in the compartment as Tilly walks away, catching Ginny’s eye and giving her a slight nod.

She nods back.

He disappears down the corridor, Tilly dragging the door open and dropping down inside with what is very nearly a dramatic flounce. The girls all give each other looks, but don’t comment on the dark cloud clearly hanging over her head.

The train chugs into motion, the city gradually giving way to fields.

“Beatrice didn’t come back,” Hestia reports.

“The Ravenclaw?” Astoria asks.

Hestia nods.

Ginny thinks she knows who that is. A seventh-year. “Did her family run?”

They all look at her like she’s thick.

“She got married,” Flora says.

Ginny blinks. “Married?”

“Yes,” Astoria says. “Her parents set it up.”

“Didn’t you notice the rash of betrothals over winter break?” Hestia asks.

Ginny hasn’t exactly kept abreast of the latest gossip, and the Weasley clan has never mingled with the great families, the sort who still talk about betrothals and arranged marriages.

“What about the laws on compulsory education?” Ginny wonders.

“They’ve been revised,” Flora informs her. “Witches sixteen and older are exempt if they get married.”

Sixteen? Merlin. It seems unimaginable to her. Though, she considers, this is just one more way to keep your child safe. Even if it means marrying her off. Truncating her education.
“I suppose they assume there is no need for married women to have NEWTs,” Ginny says.

Tilly breaks her long silence with a harsh laugh. “Don’t need NEWTs to raise the next great generation of pureblood babies, now do we?” There’s something hard in her expression that wasn’t there last term.

It reminds Ginny that Tilly is already eighteen, mere months away from graduating. It’s all there in her face.

Maybe they’re all hostages no matter where they go.

“Pansy is claiming she’s already turned down three offers,” Caroline says.

“She’s not still hoping for Draco, is she?” Nicola asks.

Tilly snorts. “If she’s one tenth as discerning as she claims to be, she should be able to tell that ship is sinking from a mile off.”

“What about you?” Caroline asks Ginny. “Do you think your parents will try to set anything up?”

“I seriously doubt it,” Ginny says. “One of the benefits of being the only daughter of a poor, blood-traitor family, I suppose.” She gives them all a bland look. “But who knows? Maybe I can snatch up a Malfoy on their way down.”

They all laugh.

* * *

In the common room, there is now a tall mahogany box in front of the announcements board. As they all settle back into their rooms, they warily eye it. A third-year eventually crosses over to it, reading out the lettering on the front.

*If you see something, say something!*  
*If you suspect anyone of disloyal thoughts or subversive activities that could put this school or other students in danger, please report! Together, we will preserve our ways against outside destructive forces.*

Everyone is silent for a long moment as the words sink in.

Martin is the first to speak. “Well, I’m not sure if it’s subversive, but Rosier’s fashion sense is so awful it’s putting my eyes in danger.”

Rosier flips an obscene gesture. “I’m fairly certain your face is the greater offense.”

Under the cover of cutting remarks, Ginny glances around the room, cataloging reactions. Her eyes stray across Nadira. She meets Ginny’s gaze, one eyebrow lifting as if this fundamentally proves something.

*Disloyal thoughts.*

Even their thoughts are to be policed and judged. Umbridge would be proud. But really, she was just the warm-up act.

So be it.
Ginny isn’t angry anymore. She isn’t scared. The numbness has finally faded. The shock, the disbelief, the knee-weakening fear. She doesn’t have room for any of that.

Now she is only certain.

*     *     *

After dinner, Ginny walks into the library. There aren’t many students who bother with the library this early in the term. Near the rear stacks sits Terry Boot, his blue and silver-lined robes mussed, hair cropped close to his skull, his dark brow currently furrowed as he reads from an enormous, ancient-looking tome.

Ginny lowers herself into the seat across from him.

“Weasley,” he says without looking up from his text, clearly managing to communicate that her interruption is not welcome. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I need help.”

“Madam Pince is around here somewhere.” He turns a page, frowning down at the words in front of him. “Bloody amateur,” he mutters under his breath.

Ginny would assume he is talking to her except he pulls the text closer and starts writing in the margins, apparently correcting the author.

“I need your help,” she clarifies. “Opening a door.”

His quill doesn’t stop ticking along, his tongue sticking out slightly in concentration. “Never took you for being that helpless.”

She presses her lips together, knowing he will never help merely out of the goodness of his heart. Neither are threats going to work. No, there is only one way to get to a Ravenclaw.

Ginny reaches out, her fingers trailing along the edge of the table. “It’s probably the most heavily-protected door in the Castle.”

His quill hesitates just for a fraction before it resumes, but Ginny doesn’t miss it.

“From what I’ve heard,” she presses on, “it has all sorts of unique enchantments. Some as old as the Castle itself. Older even, perhaps.”

He gnaws his bottom lip as he finishes his annotation. “Sounds dangerous,” he says. “You’re probably better off leaving it be.”

As if danger ever put off a Ravenclaw. “What do you want?”

He finally puts his quill down, giving her his full attention. She tries not to squirm under the sharpness of his gaze. “Honestly? I want to not write another History essay. Normally I’d just keep ignoring them, but even Binns is bound to notice at some point, I’ve turned them in so rarely.”

She doubts he gives a shite about his grades. But detention? Well, they all take those a lot more seriously these days. But apparently not enough to actually do his homework.

There are probably few things Ravenclaws find more painful than writing a rudimentary, unimaginative essay. Ginny can knock out a solid essay in her sleep. All in all, it’s a fair enough exchange. A foot of parchment for an open door. Though Ginny suspects the door is enough of a
challenge that he’d probably do it for free. Still, she can afford to build a bit of good will. Goodness knows when she may need another favor.

“Fine.”

“Excellent,” Terry says. “Twelve inches on the ramifications of the Wizengamot reforms of the 1730s. And make sure it’s up to my standards.”

“You mean your standards of not even bothering to turn it in?” Ginny shoots back.

Terry has already turned his attention back to the book, his hand flapping as if to dismiss her. “Get me the essay, and then we’ll talk about your door.”

“What?” Ginny asks. “You don’t trust me?”

“I’m not even justifying that with a response,” he says.

Smart, those Ravenclaws.

* * *

The next morning, Ginny has her first Dark Arts class of the term. She follows in behind Tobias Urquhart at a safe distance. Once inside, the first thing she notices is that the desks are all gone, a tall dais running the length of the classroom. But it’s clear that more than the setup of the room has changed.

Ginny’s eyes fall on Neville where he stands with a small group of Gryffindor students of various ages on the other side of the room.

“Enough essays and books,” Amycus growls as they all assemble. “Time to put you all to the test.”

‘Dueling Lessons,’ they are officially called. Ginny wonders if they think any of them are really stupid enough to believe that. Because now, as she looks around at a room of students spanning all years and houses, she realizes this is something much, much worse than simply shuffling classes around to account for a smaller returning group of students.

“Burke,” Amycus says, giving him a feral smile. “Will you please start us off?”

Tobias obediently stands, wand in hand, twirling it absently between his fingers with a devil-may-care smile he’s long since perfected.

“And…Miss Williams,” Amycus says, the common Muggle last name rolling off his tongue like an insult.

The third-year Gryffindor lifts her head, brow furrowing as she looks over at Tobias.

It’s a ridiculously mismatched pairing. But maybe, Ginny considers, taking in Amycus’ twisted smile, that is exactly the point.

Joanna Williams is part of the DA, so Ginny knows she’s had at least the rudiments of protective magic training. Still, Tobias is easily three years older than her.

Her eyes dart to Ginny as she walks up, eyes wide. Ginny can’t even dare to give her a firm nod. All she can do is hold her gaze steadily. You can do this. You’re going to be okay.

She can only hope they aren’t lies.
They line up at either end of the long platform, wands pulled.

Tobias looks to Amicus. With a nod from the Professor, his wand swipes through the air. Joanna staggers back, barely getting a protective spell up in time.

“One must always be prepared,” Amicus says with a nasty laugh.

With that, Tobias attacks again, Joanna stumbling back under the onslaught, barely deflecting, getting no chance to use offensive spells at all. One of the spells catches her in the arm, the girl spinning to one side and going down in a heap.

She pants on the floor, holding her side and looking near tears.

“Get up,” Tobias goads, voice hard, as if he’s forgotten that a Gryffindor is never so easily cowed.

Joanna’s jaw tightens, pure spite seeming to get her back to her feet. She lifts her wand.

“Again!” Amicus orders.

The crackle of spells and the acrid smell of spent magics fills the space, students standing around rapt equally with anticipation and horror.

In the end, Tobias easily defeats her, more making her look stupid than causing her any real physical harm, but part of the class still titters with cruel amusement at the girl’s humiliation. Tobias smirks as Amicus slaps him on the shoulder, declaring him the winner.

“Who can tell me where Miss Williams went wrong?” Amicus says.

“She got out of bed this morning,” Urquhart says, not even bothering to whisper.

Amicus laughs, a few other students following suit. “Yes, well, it’s not all her fault.” He stands over her where she still sits on the floor, rubbing at her arm. “Magic isn’t for the weak.”

“He’s three years ahead of me!” Joanna says.

“I didn’t ask for your excuses,” Amicus snaps. “Strength is in the blood.”

Joanna blushes a deep crimson red, though Ginny suspects that is more anger than embarrassment.

“Return to your seat. Or is that beyond you as well?”

Chest heaving, Joanna walks over to pick up her wand before returning to stand near Neville. This time, she doesn’t so much as glance at Ginny.

Amicus turns to the class with a smile as if this demonstration has proven something. “Who’s next?”

And so he sets out to show just who is in control, and that strength is the new language of power at Hogwarts.

*       *

That evening, Ginny makes her way to the Room of Requirement. While there hasn’t been an official call for a DA meeting, she’s unsurprised to find a dozen students already there.

Some students are practicing dueling and disarming, clearly having had their own Dark Arts demonstration. Bassenthwaite and Reiko are working with Nigel and Demelza.
“How’s Joanna?” Ginny asks Neville.


“Yeah,” Ginny agrees.

“Got at least six new requests to join just the past two days,” he reports.

Ginny glances around the room. There are quite a few new faces, many of them Ravenclaw. She isn’t at all surprised. For all her fellow housemates like to tease Luna, she is theirs. They’ve all taken it as a personal insult.

Seamus and Martin are over in one corner talking something over with Michael Corner and if that isn’t a terrifying combination, she doesn’t know what is.

Hannah joins them. “Hi,” she says to Ginny, reaching out to hug her the way she hadn’t let them on the train.

Ginny pats her awkwardly on the back. “Hi.”

Hannah pulls back, giving her a smile. “Everyone is eager to work on defensive spells.”

“You had your Dark Arts class?” Ginny asks.

Hannah nods, her face grim. “Yesterday afternoon.”

“Clearly we’ll have to step up our training,” Neville says. “We should focus on quick ways to disarm and incapacitate.”

“Yes,” Ginny says. “But I’m not sure that will be enough.”

He looks at her with a frown. “Why not?”

“Because what Amycus is doing isn’t about mastering spells. This is about humiliation. It’s punishment.”

“Meaning we shouldn’t push back?” Neville asks, his voice taking on an edge.

“Meaning simple defiance may only lead to more brutal punishments.”

“So what do you suggest?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not sure. It depends on what’s possible. There could be ways to…mitigate rather than fight back.”

They all pause, looking around as if waiting for someone else to chime in. The empty spot where Luna should be suddenly feels like a physical presence.

Hannah clears her throat. “Maybe it’s time to talk about finding someone to…”

“No,” Neville says.

“Neville,” Hannah says, reaching out to touch his arm.

Neville shakes her off. “We’re not replacing Luna.” He walks away, crossing over to help Nigel with a spell.
Hannah opens her mouth to call him back.

“Let him go,” Ginny says.

Hannah sighs.

Ginny glances over at the wall of photographs of the missing and dead. Someone put a picture of Luna up. Hannah, no doubt. It’s right next to another picture with the simple inscription ‘Muggle family down the road.’

“He isn’t ready,” Ginny says.

And maybe part of her isn’t yet either.

*     *     *

The hallways are even more subdued than usual. Students come out of their Dark Arts classes stunned and anxious. Not to mention that the newly formed Enforcement Squad now roams the halls in packs, looking for any infractions to pounce on. Not that most of the people involved ever needed an excuse.

There’s a booming laugh from the other end of the hallway.

“Hand it over!” Goyle says. “Or would you rather have detention?”

Ginny cranes her neck, taking in the situation in a glance. Goyle and Crabbe are standing over a trembling second-year student.

Chocolate frogs. It’s a stupid thing to risk anything over, but the student still looks utterly defeated as Crabbe shoves the chocolate in his mouth, absentmindedly crushing up the trading card and smashing it with his foot. Nearby, Tobias watches on with amusement next to Urquhart.

Ginny walks past the crumpled card. Dumbledore smiles up at her despite the crease across his nose.

That afternoon, she ignores all her homework in favor of writing Terry’s essay. She imagines Binns may find some of her arguments a bit unorthodox. Then again, Binns probably doesn’t have access to the texts she does. Then she remembers that Terry is trying to stay under the radar, not draw attention to himself. So in the end, she writes two versions of the essay; one nice and boring and perfectly acceptable, the other far more interesting and argumentative.

Terry carefully reads both of them when she hands them over that evening.

He regards her for a long moment after reading the second one.

“Well?” she asks.

“This will do,” he says, holding up the boring one. Before she can take back the second essay, it disappears into his pocket.

She looks at him in askance.

He just shrugs. “That one requires further research.”

“Fine,” Ginny says, deciding she doesn’t care enough to actually fight over it.

“So,” Terry says. “You mentioned a door?”
She pushes up from the table. “I’ll meet you by your common room door tonight at midnight.”

For the first time, he looks minorly alarmed. “You aren’t going to give me more to go on than that?”

“No,” Ginny says. If he can’t do it tonight, she can at least get him a look enough so he can return with whatever he needs next time. She can’t risk her intentions getting out.

Ginny waits out the rest of the evening in The Parlor, watching the girls work at their projects. Caroline flips through more of the glossy magazines covered in vacant, beautiful witches, stopping occasionally to ink in on their faces.

Ginny smiles, turning back to the homework assignment she isn’t doing.

Tilly lets out a curse, the sound of shattering glass filling the space. Nicola touches her arm, talking quietly to her. It’s unsettling to see the normally steady Tilly so on edge. But even Astoria looks drawn.

Ginny pushes to her feet and crosses over to join Tilly and Nicola. Sits with Astoria and asks about any new pieces she’s been working on.

Near midnight, Ginny finally slips out of the common room, narrowly avoiding Filch and Mrs. Norris. Why the bloody Ravenclaws insist on living in the most inconvenient part of the Castle, she will never know.

Slightly out of breath by the time she makes it to the top of the stairs, she gently raps her knuckles against the wooden door.

A soft voice emanates from the wood. *If one is neither coming nor going, neither here nor there, where does the future lie?*

Ginny blinks. “I don’t know,” she admits.

*A fair answer*, the voice says, *though ignorance is no defense.*

She doesn’t get a chance to react to that, the door pushing open and Terry sticking his head out. “Ah, there you are.”

“Yeah,” Ginny says, shaking herself a little and pushing that voice from her mind completely. “Are you ready?”

He nods, falling in after her as they head back down the stairs. She leads him across the Castle, shoving him back in alcoves from time to time. Terry isn’t exactly sneaky, more than once seeming inclined to ask her what she heard rather than just *shutting up* so they won’t get caught.

By some miracle, they make it all the way to their destination. She turns to look at Terry to take in his reaction.

He doesn’t look put out; more like he was *hoping* it would be this door, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

He immediately sits down, opening his small bag and pulling out *dozens* of books and a smattering of magical tools.

“What?” he asks, catching sight of her expression. “You didn’t really give me much to work with.”

Ginny finds she has to revise her assessment of Terry. She expected him to be heedless, but that flaw
is only outdone by his blind focus.

He is so absorbed in the challenge in front of him that she imagines a troll could lumber by and he wouldn’t notice. Ginny shakes her head and does another quiet sweep of the halls below. By the time she gets back from her third check, it’s been almost three hours and Terry is sitting back on his heels scratching notes into a journal, mumbling quietly to himself.

“Anything?” she asks.

He jumps a bit as if he forgot her completely. “What? Oh, yeah. I finished a while ago. I’ve just been playing with some of the wards… I mean, you weren’t kidding. Some of these charms are layered in a way I’d never conceive of, let alone have the bollocks to try—”

Ginny cuts him off, having the feeling that if she lets him get going he will never stop. “I’m sure it’s fascinating.”

She reaches for the handle, pushing slightly. The door opens without protest, both of them freezing for a moment as if expecting a reaction. Ginny shares a glance with Terry, his eyes equally wide, and then eases across the threshold.

Terry nods to himself, writing another note down in his journal.

“Nice work,” Ginny says distractedly. “Now it’s time for you to go.”

He sits back on his heels, still clearly only half paying attention to her. “What, planning on getting caught?”

“Yes,” Ginny says, closing the door firmly behind her. If Terry is half as smart as he claims, he will be long gone already.

Ginny glances around the quiet office at the walls lined with paintings. “’Scuse me, Headmasters.”

The portraits still appear to be slumbering, even as she hears a few scandalized gasps and muttering when her back is turned.

Sitting down in the Headmaster’s chair, she kicks her feet up on the desk and waits.

*What cheek!* someone mutters.

Ginny pulls an apple out of her pocket and starts to nibble at it. When she glances around the room again, she sees that one of the portraits is empty, no doubt off to tattle on her.

Behind her, the large case where the Sword of Gryffindor once hung now sits empty. Ginny frowns at it a long moment before swinging back around to focus on the door.

It isn’t long before it pushes open, Snape appearing in a swirl of dark robes. “Miss Weasley,” he says, eyes narrowing.

She vanishes the apple core with a flick of her fingers and a silent charm.

“What are you doing in here?”

She braces her hands on the desk and calmly meets his gaze. “I suppose this means more detention.”

He regards her for long moments, and Ginny instinctually checks that her defenses are still firmly in place. Still, he isn’t stupid, and she would really only be here for one reason.
He gives her a stiff nod. “We will begin Saturday at eight.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, getting to her feet.

She’s willing to do this on his terms, just so long as next time she isn’t so woefully unprepared.

* * *

The brutality of the Dark Arts classroom is spilling over into the hallways. It’s not particularly surprising, and Ginny wonders if this is part of the intent. Keep them fighting amongst themselves and not questioning what is happening.

She’s just not sure she wants to give the Carrows that much credit.

There’s a buzz of energy building in the DA that feels a lot like a powerful spell reaching critical mass. Complaining about what’s happening will only appease them for so long. There are already dozens of pranks in the works. Ginny tries to stay on top of them, to nudge them in the most reasonable directions, but there’s really only so much she can do. Neville only seems to encourage them. Hannah can scare most people down, but can’t quite see all the pitfalls until they’ve all plummeted down into them. And Ginny can’t be everywhere at all times.

She decides it’s probably time to give them all something else to focus on for a while.

“I have something that might interest you,” Ginny says, uncovering the wireless from Fred and George. “My brothers wanted the DA to have this.”

They look unimpressed.

“Unless that thing will force the Carrows to spontaneously dance as long as the music plays, I’m not particularly interested,” Demelza says.

But other students who knew her brothers better are sitting back looking slightly wary.

Checking her watch, Ginny tunes the radio and says, “Dumbledore.”

*Welcome to Potterwatch!*

Everyone leans in with interest.

Ginny moves to stand next to Neville and Hannah.

For once, the entire room is silent except for the echoing voices of her brothers and Lee Jordan as they update them about what’s *really* happening out in the world. It isn’t long, only twenty minutes, but it gives them all hope, this idea that they aren’t completely alone. That other people are fighting back any way they can.

Everyone jumps to their feet when it’s done, moving from group to group discussing what they heard.

Ginny takes a breath. “She isn’t coming back, Neville.”

He looks at her, brow furrowed.

“Luna,” she clarifies.

His entire body stiffens. “You can’t know that.”
“Yeah,” she says. “I can. And the fact is, we need more help.”

“Neville,” Hannah says, voice soft. She touches his arm. “Ginny is right.”

He looks at her, face full of pain. “Hannah—”

She gives him a sympathetic smile, her own eyes a bit teary. “This only works with four of us.”

Neville’s jaw sets.

“We will get her back,” Hannah says, voice fierce. “We will.”

Ginny isn’t so certain, but she leaves hope to Hannah.

“But until then…”

“Fine. You two decide,” he says, like he can’t stomach the idea of doing it himself. He paces off to help some younger students with their spell work.

Hannah sighs, but really that was probably the best they could hope for. “Terry?”

Ginny nods. “If you’re okay with that.”

“I trust your judgment,” she says.

Together they walk over to where Terry is frowning over a bit of parchment.

“Hey,” Ginny says.

He glances up at her, the furrow in his brow only deepening. “What were your sources?”

“Sorry?”

He holds up what she now recognizes as her second essay. “What sources did you use for this?”

He hasn’t asked her a single question about what she was doing in the Headmaster’s office, or what happened afterwards. But her essay, that somehow is worth all his considerable focus.

“Well,” she says, giving him a mysterious smile. “Not from the library.”

He lets out a frustrated curse.

“Come on,” Ginny says. “We want to talk to you about something.”

He frowns, looking past her towards Hannah.

They sit in a few chairs arranged in the corner.

“Dark arts lessons,” she says.

Terry winces. “Yeah. They’re a problem.”

Apparently he hasn’t been quite so myopic not to notice that, at least. “Is there a way to defend ourselves without actually fighting back?”

“It’s possible,” he says. His head tilts to the side. “You’re hoping to minimize damage?”
“Yes,” Ginny says. “But in a way that doesn’t provoke the Carrows, ideally.”

His eyebrows lift. “Bit of a tall order.”

“Yes, well, I know how you like a challenge.”

“I’ll have a look into it.” He slides her a glance. “Though it may cost you a few more history essays.”

“Actually,” Ginny says, sharing a look with Hannah. “There’s one more thing…”

* * *

Snape paces smoothly from one side of the small room to the other.

A cauldron bubbles in the corner, green mist languidly rising from the surface, curling through the space. Ginny can no longer smell it from behind the charm protecting her face, but still remembers the sickly sweetness of it from when she first entered, the woozy calm that softened her spine. She was a bit sorry to feel the effects dissipate.

A young girl, a Hufflepuff this time, sits in a chair, eyes glassy, body swaying slightly as she stares at nothing.

“Legilimency,” Snape says, voice smooth and almost reverent, “is far from a simple incantation. It is not a string of words spoken and a wand waved. It is an invasion, an infiltration of scrupulous precision. It must be planned and executed flawlessly from beginning to end.”

He stops, turning to regard her.

“Some only wish to extract, happy to let the subject know they are doing it. Wanting them to know. It can be clumsy and brutish. But there are also ways to slip in with barely a ripple, to search without them being any wiser. There are times and places for each of these methods.”

Ginny considers the particulars of those situations. Intimidation or subterfuge.

“But most important to understand is that you can lose yourself in the mind of another. You must always hold fast to your boundaries, know where you end and they begin.”

Ginny doesn’t even know the girl’s name.

“A skill like this requires a certain level of detachment. Both from the person you are invading as well as their concerns. You can’t care about them. You can’t identify with them. You must always see them as nothing more than a means to an end. An object. A thing. To do anything less is to risk losing yourself.”

In other words, she must learn to be cruel. But perhaps she has always been cruel, in her own way.

“I understand,” she says.

“No,” Snape counters. “You can’t possibly. But you will.”

Ginny swallows back any misgivings, any weaknesses. She nods.

“You must not, at any time, use this skill outside the controlled situation of our lessons. You are not yet ready. To do so would not simply be to risk being caught, but to risk your mind.”

He turns to the girl, gesturing for Ginny to take the seat in front of her.
Ginny lowers herself into the chair. It takes a moment to build the nerve to lift her eyes from the slightly worn edge of the girl’s black patent leathers.

The girl’s brown eyes meet Ginny’s, empty of curiosity or recognition.

“She will not remember any of this,” Snape says.

“But I will,” Ginny says.

“Yes,” he says. “Once you take, it will always be yours.”

It’s telling, she thinks, that Snape isn’t letting her practice on him, only the unwilling minds of students. His own protection perhaps, but more likely a test. How far is she willing to take this?

She lifts her wand.

As far as she needs to.

*     *     *

Ginny wakes with a start, the feel of damp stone under her fingers and a smug voice ghosting her ears.

Strange likeness.

She digs her fingers into the soft warmth of her covers to dispel the feeling, taking deep breaths, trying to settle her frantically beating heart.

Just a dream, she tells herself.

In the Great Hall, there’s a bark of laughter as she enters. At the Slytherin table, Tobias sits with Urquhart and Blaise, relaxed and indifferent as if he belongs. Ginny watches him and wonders if they are all destined to this, if it’s unavoidable. If the only way to fight what you hate is to become it.

Tobias glances around the room with an air of boredom, his gaze falling across her.

She looks away, taking a seat at the other end of the table.

Soon enough Martin claims the seat next to Ginny, pulling plates towards himself with almost indecent glee.

Once his plate is thoroughly laden, he leans his head towards her. “I think you’ll want to go down the Dark Arts corridor this morning.”

She looks up at him warily. “I want to go down it? Or I want to avoid it?”

He gives her a wide grin that raises the hair on the back of her neck. “Oh, you’ll definitely want to go down it.”

He glances across the room, and against the far wall Michael Corner and Seamus have their heads lowered together. Seamus looks nearly…giddy.

“Martin,” she says, warning clear in her voice.

He huffs under his breath, talking around a mouthful of sausage. “No talkin’ us out of it now.”
Sure enough, as Ginny leaves Charms later that morning, the halls are buzzing, students heading en masse towards the Dark Art corridor. Ginny lets herself get swept along.

The tattle box in front of the Dark Arts classroom is rattling and rumbling ominously, pieces of paper littering the hallway floor.

Ginny frowns, looking around, and the box lets off an inhuman groan, and with a large belch, starts puffing out slips of paper, a dozen or so at a time.

She looks down at her feet, and the slips of paper have words on them.

*I confess that the Carrows are twats.*

*I cheated on my last Astronomy test.*

*I confess that Harry Potter is rather fit.*

*I confess that I ditched class to have a wank!*

*I have a mad crush on Hooch!*

Within the hour every student has heard about it, and the Carrows have removed the box and sent ten different students to detention, most of them in no way connected to the prank. Not that it matters. The Carrows are trying to show decisive action and strength, but Ginny is sure the students only see desperation.

Every day after that, a different box is affected until every single one has been disabled and removed. A victory, but one with a cost Ginny is sure they haven’t discovered yet.

Only even after the boxes are all gone, confessions continue to appear all over the walls of the Castle. None of them, Ginny can tell, part of the original prank.

The students of Hogwarts have been given a voice, and they latch onto it with painful intensity.

*I’ve never met a Muggle. But I don’t want them to die.*

*I heard someone call someone a mudblood and I didn’t say anything. I was scared.*

*I considered killing myself rather than coming back here.*

*This isn’t the life I wanted.*

Ginny reads them out of the corner of her eye, but always keep walking straight ahead.

* * *

Two little girls sit on a blanket in a wooded backyard. Ginny watches them as they pour imaginary tea, stuffed creatures splayed out around them.

The older girl lifts a cup, little pinky finger crooked just so.

Ginny smiles, remembering her own mother taking the time to do this with her, despite the pressures of older brothers and chores and responsibilities. Her own memory, fuzzy and welcome, rises up.

*Can I pour for you, Princess Ginevra?*
The pain in Ginny’s head is immediate, like a sharp knife in her skull. For a moment everything blurs, like a strange double vision. She stumbles, reaching out for something to hold her up, her hand brushing against the white picket fence circling the garden.

Her vision blissfully settles, the scenes overlapping and blending perfectly.

Ginny sighs, her body relaxing.

Her sister smiles at her, taking her hand. “Come on!”

Ginny lets herself be tugged along, the teapot knocking over on its side.

“Miss Weasley!” a distant voice calls.

She glances back over her shoulder, confused.

The hand tightens around hers, the tang of pine in her nose and leaves crunching under foot.

“Slowcoach!”

“Ashby!” she laughs, letting herself be pulled along.

The entire world seems to tip, and she loses her center of gravity, tumbling towards the grass. Her chair abruptly straightens, legs slamming down into the hard stone, jarring her to her bones.

There’s a man. He’s saying someone’s name. But she’s… Her eyes settle, focus, and across from her in another chair is…

Is that me?

The man drags her up out of her chair, back away from the girl. Away from herself. She protests, reaching for her, but his grip is relentless.

Once outside—no forest, no trees, just unrelenting stone and the painful spitting glare of torches—he pushes her up against a wall.

“Do you think this is a game?” he snarls.

She blinks up at him in confusion, pain splitting her skull, nausea rolling in her stomach.

There was a cat. A sleek calico. They called it Ladyship for the way she strutted around. One time she tied a daisy chain around her neck and nearly lost an eye for the insult.

Didn’t she?

She squeezes her eyes shut. “Was that me?” she mumbles.

Her sister nearly cried she laughed so hard.

The man is still railing at her, the words bouncing off her skin, only adding to the cacophony of confusion.

You must hold yourself apart!

Is this her?

She can barely stand, let alone move away from his rage, helpless to do anything other than let it
washed over her.

His face is close to hers, fingers digging in painfully on her arms, but she’s strangely grateful for it, because she knows, knows absolutely that this pain is hers. Her thought. Her feeling. She grabs it with both hands like a landline, everything seeming to sharpen, rip painfully back apart.

“To care is to be weak!” Snape is spitting at her. “It is to be trapped. You cannot allow this or you will lose yourself utterly!”

She looks up at him, and in all her years at Hogwarts, she can’t remember him ever looking this angry before. She knows this too. Ginny knows this.

He shakes her, her head falling back against the wall. “Do you understand?” he bites out.

“Severus!”

Snape jerks, his head turning towards the voice. It takes Ginny a moment longer to follow, her head rolling to the side against the stone. McGonagall is standing in the hall watching them with open-mouthed astonishment.

“Release her,” she says. Her wand is in hand, half lifted.

Snape straightens, his rage sliding back under a smooth façade. “This does not concern you, Minerva.”

Nonetheless, he does back away from her, and Ginny struggles not to slide down the wall. Her brain is still a whirlwind of settling memories, her body soft and fuzzy. It’s so damn hard to focus, no matter how important she knows it is.

“Miss Weasley,” McGonagall calls in alarm as Ginny starts to list.

Snape presses a hand to her shoulder, turning his back on McGonagall. Reaching into his robe, he pulls out a flask. “Take a small draught,” he murmurs.

Her nose wrinkles at the vinegary smell coming off the liquid, but doesn’t hesitate to do as he tells her. It seems to burn down her esophagus, settling deep in her stomach before bursting out through her limbs. She gasps, but quickly begins to feel more focused.

She breathes deeply through her nose. When she can, she straightens up, giving him a nod.

He watches her for another long moment.

“I know who I am,” she whispers, the foreign memories still drifting about. But she can taste it now, the way they aren’t hers.

Snape backs away, and she manages to keep her feet. “Review chapter thirteen and write twenty inches detailing exactly where you went wrong by tomorrow night at eight,” he says, voice low so as not to travel.

“Yes, sir,” she says.

He takes another step back, his chin lifting as he stares imperiously down at her, every emotion tightly subsumed as if they never existed. “You may return to your dorm,” he orders.

“Yes, sir,” she says, walking carefully past him, doing her best not to betray any weakness.
McGonagall watches her closely, concern on her face. For a moment, it looks like she may reach for Ginny, ask her something, but Ginny doesn’t need that. Doesn’t want that. Not for either of them.

So instead, she lifts her chin and gives her a cool look. “Professor.”

McGonagall’s eyes narrow.

Ginny keeps walking.

* * *

Ginny wakes the next morning feeling like she has a hangover. She hasn’t felt this terrible since her first Quidditch victory when she woke up with a tattoo. Only this time there is no Smita with a goblet waiting for her.

Bridget, Helena, and Nadira are bustling about, going through their morning routines. None of them bother to check on her.

She skives off Charms, knowing Flitwick probably won’t report her. As much as she would love to use that time just to laze about, she forces herself to pull the thick tome out from under her bed. *Occlumency and Legilimency: An Exhausting Primer*

She rereads the thirteenth chapter, but she already knows what it says. Logically, she knows exactly where she went wrong. She also understands just how close she came to disaster. If Snape hadn’t intervened she could have died. Or been as good as dead. A body without a mind. A body with someone else’s mind.

She writes out the essay, ruthlessly detailing each and every error despite the burn of shame. She needs to focus on solutions despite the cost to her ego.

The rudiments of building up boundaries is something she already has experience with. She used something similar in her Occlumency training. But this is different; not about compartmentalizing your thoughts, memories, and self, but rather protecting them from foreign invasions.

According to the literature, she has to see it that way, as something alien. Like a germ waiting to infect her.

What she needs is a wall. Thick defenses built up around her that no one will ever be able to breech.

She drags herself to Potions in the afternoon. Slughorn is subdued as he has been all year. He’s long since stopped with the Slug Club, and she isn’t sure if that is somehow meant to protect the students or if he’s just lost the taste for frivolity.

Just another way everything is wrong.

She whiles away the early evening in The Parlor, half-listening to the bustle of the girls. Her fingers play with the key at her neck, her eyes falling across the library door from time to time.

At eight, she meets Snape in the dungeons, handing him her essay. He doesn’t read it, instead looking her over.

“I hope, by now, you realize how close you came to destroying your mind last night.” He says this as if he doesn’t care either way, but she still has bruises on her arms from where he grabbed her.
“I do,” she says.

“Then let us try again.” He gestures towards the door.

She must visibly balk, honestly not expecting to have to try again so soon.

“You’re afraid.”

She lifts her chin. “It would be a bit stupid not to be, wouldn’t it?”

He nods in approval. “Good. Fear will keep you alive.”

* * *

“Did you forget your homework again, Miss Weasley?” McGonagall asks from the front of the classroom.

Ginny lifts her head with a jerk, her mouth already opens to protest because she definitely turned it in, but something in McGonagall’s expression makes her pause.

“I’m sorry, Professor,” she says instead.

McGonagall shakes her head with prim disapproval. “See me after class.”

Ginny doesn’t argue.

At the end of the lesson, Ginny waits until everyone has packed up and left before approaching McGonagall’s desk. She’s fairly sure she knows what this is going to be about, even without having spent the last hour thinking about it.

McGonagall doesn’t dither, going straight to it. “What are you doing with Professor Snape?”

“Serving detention?” Ginny says as though it’s obvious.

But this clearly is not the right tactic, McGonagall’s eyes narrowing. “Despite what you make think, Miss Weasley, I am not an idiot.”

Ginny would never be stupid enough to make that mistake. “No, ma’am.”

Her expression seems to soften. “If the Headmaster is…inconveniencing you in any way, I hope you feel you can tell me.”

“Inconveniencing me?” Ginny asks, wanting to laugh if the situation weren’t so serious.

“Yes.”

Ginny honestly isn’t sure what McGonagall thinks is happening. If he’s using strange punishments on her. Or what she really means by ‘inconveniencing’. She imagines Snape would say that any strange imaginings McGonagall is dreaming up are still safer than the truth.

But maybe for once the truth is exactly what she needs.

Ginny tilts her head to the side. “Would it matter if he was?”

McGonagall’s chin lifts. “Miss Weasley…” she says, clearly hoping to intimidate her into compliance.
“Yes?” Ginny says.

“You’re a child.”

“Despite what you may think, Professor, I’m not an idiot either. We don’t get to be children anymore. So let’s not pretend that hiding in my bed with a pillow over my head is going to keep me safe.”

“But he will?”

Ginny straightens, immediately realizing her misstep. “That’s not…”

McGonagall sees her falter, pressing unerringly in on the weak spot. “Let us also not pretend that he is anything less than a murderer.”

“I know,” Ginny says. “I know what he is.”

“Do you truly?” McGonagall questions.

They warily regard each other, the silence stretching long.

Ginny finds herself watching McGonagall in a way she’s rarely had a chance to. Sitting at her desk, surrounded by an empty classroom. She never thought to consider the elderly force of nature that was Professor McGonagall as vulnerabilities.

“I know what you risk, being here. What you’re trying to do. We all do.”

For all McGonagall tries to keep her face neutral, Ginny can see it. How much all the students mean to her.

“It means a lot,” Ginny says. “It just… It isn’t enough anymore.”

The pain that creases McGonagall’s face is almost too much to look at straight on.

Ginny takes a step towards her, leaning on the edge of the desk, because for some reason she needs her to understand, no matter how stupid and reckless it is. “I just… I have to do what I can to keep as many of them safe as possible.”

They’re on the same side. Can’t she see that?

After a long moment, McGonagall nods. “But at what cost?”

Ginny gives her sad smile. “That’s the difference between Gryffindor and Slytherin, Professor. We always know the cost.”

McGonagall doesn’t have a ready response to that.

“May I go?” Ginny asks.

McGonagall inclines her head but still manages to communicate that she is far from pleased with the outcome of their conversation.

She walks out.

*   *   *
Ginny stands in the midst of a maelstrom. It looks like an entire library of books has exploded. Pages fly in every direction. Upwards, sideways. She reaches out for one, stretching up on her tiptoes, her fingers brushing the crisp edge only to tumble forward into it.

The ground rushes up to meet her, gravel hard under her skin. She wails, fire on her knee, tears streaming unheeded down her face. “Mummy!”

Warm comfort sweeps closer, soft flesh and cloth smelling of plum and earth and safety. “Hush, love. Just a scratch.”

Mummy’s wand flicks with easy elegance, the pain fading as the skin knits itself back together.

“Shall we try again?” she asks, smile on her face.

Ginny forces herself to step back out of the memory, to watch it from afar.

_Not me, not me._

Merlin, it hurts, like wrenching herself in half, ripping away the aching yearning to crawl into the moment and never leave, cleave to the scents and comforts that are not her own.

“Miss Weasley,” intrudes a voice. “Focus.”

Her hand tightens around her wand, the spell spilling from her lips again, shoring up her walls.

Everything changes.

Loud voices. The crunch of ice. A wailing child. _Why did he ever have to show up? Wasn’t I enough?_ 

Smoke. Laughter. Grit of sand under her toes and the screech of a gull overhead.

“Do you mind?”

The room rights itself as she looks up to see Eliza sitting on the edge of her bed, robes and tie discarded.

“No, of course not,” Ginny says, taking the brush from her outstretched hand.

Eliza sits in front of her, her long brown hair spread out behind her. Ginny gently works the brush through the tangle, the smell of shampoo wafting upwards. Sweet. Floral.

She’s so beautiful.

The unspoken thought settles like shards in her throat. She can’t keep herself from brushing the back of her fingers down the side of Eliza’s neck. She feels a strange warmth pool in her stomach at the feel of her smooth skin.

“What are you doing?” Eliza says, pulling back away when the touch lingers just a bit too long.

She snatches her hand back, the brush clattering to the ground. “I’m sorry. I was just--.”

But it is already there, the wariness in those beautiful eyes.

“You are so weird,” Eliza says, getting to her feet and walking away.
Ginny surges to her feet, blinking against the abrupt change in scenery. The dungeon room is quiet and still, the green mist collecting in the corners.

She looks down at the girl, feels empathy and regret crawling across her skin. What has she taken?

Snape is speaking to her, voice harsh. “If you cannot conquer this, you will never learn this skill. She is a thing, not a person. A means.”

Ginny looks into the girl’s eyes. Why me? Why do I have to be this way?

“I don’t know how,” she says.

“I think you do,” Snape says. “You are being weak.”

But at what cost?

Ginny’s fingers are trembling.

“Get out,” he says. “Come back ready to take this training seriously, or we will find other ways to punish you for your transgression.”

She doesn’t move, still staring down at the girl.

“Get out!”

She flees.

* * *

“Are you all right?”

Ginny looks up from her uneaten lunch to find Reiko regarding her. “I’m sorry?”

Reiko frowns. “You look terrible.”

Ginny gives her a wan smile. “Why, thank you.”

“Wasn’t meant as a compliment.”

Ginny rolls her eyes, turning away only to look straight into the face of Eliza at the next table.

For a moment the yearning is nearly overwhelming, her heart pounding away with an emotion that isn’t her own.

“Ginny?” Reiko says.

“Nothing,” Ginny says, pushing to her feet. “Nothing.”

Abandoning her meal, Ginny flees the hall, leaning back against a wall outside. She can’t breathe.

Merlin, she can’t breathe.

“Stop it, Ginny,” she says, feeling light-headed as her chest swells in painful gulps. “Stop it.”

She pinches her thigh hard, fingernails digging in with bright, sharp clarity. Her thoughts, her feelings. Her own.
“You are you,” she whispers. “You are you.”

Whether she wants to be or not.

She used to wonder why Snape didn’t just take what he wants from students. Why he doesn’t just use this skill to out the DA. But she understands now. To take is to keep.

She forces herself to push off the wall, to go somewhere that isn’t here. That isn’t so exposed.

Tobias comes around the corner at a fast clip, nearly careening into her. He grabs for her arms, helping her keep her feet.

For a moment she almost forgets, almost leans into him. Almost says, God, what have I done? What am I doing?

The door from the hall slams open behind them.

Tobias pushes her way. “Watch where you’re bloody going.”

Ginny stumbles back against the nearest wall, looking up to see Blaise and Pansy watching them.

“What’s going on?” Pansy asked, eyes narrowed.

Tobias shakes his head, brushing off his clothes. “She came running out of the hall like a madwoman and smacked right into me.”

They all turn to regard Ginny with varying levels of distaste.

“You going to swoon, Weasley?” Blaise drawls. “Looks ill, doesn’t she?”

Pansy snickers.

“Doesn’t look all that different to me, to be honest,” Tobias says dismissively, turning his back on her.

“You should wash your hands, Tobias,” Pansy says as they walk away.

He laughs. “What she has isn’t catching. It’s all in the blood.”

Ginny shoves her hands into her pockets and ducks into the nearest classroom, her heart pounding away in her chest.

* * *

Ginny walks down the hallway at a fast clip, scanning the passing students as she goes, trying her best not to look like she is desperately looking for something. Near the Potions classroom, she finally sees the blonde head she is looking for, changing her direction.

Striding up to Nicola, Ginny takes her arm.

Other than looking up at her in surprise, Nicola doesn’t resist, dutifully following after Ginny as she guides her down an adjacent hallway.

“Ginny?” she asks.

“Your brother,” Ginny says, her heart pounding away in her chest.
“Dougal?” Nicola says, clearly surprised by this unprecedented interest in her younger brother.

“Yes,” Ginny says, not particularly caring about the boy’s name at the moment. “Do you know where he is?”

Nicola frowns. “Um. I think he was in the common room?”

Ginny’s fingers tighten on her arm. “You think? Or you know?” They don’t have time for guesses.

“I know,” she says, eyes widening. “He was. I’m sure of it.”

“Okay,” Ginny says, forcing herself to loosen her grip. “Listen to me carefully. I need you to get him as quickly and quietly as possible, and meet me by the sticking step. Don’t stop to talk to anyone, no matter what. And if you see the Carrows, go down the into The Parlor and don’t come back out until I come get you.”

The color seems to drain from Nicola’s face. “Is it my father?”

“Nicola,” Ginny says, voice sharp. “Can you do this?”

She seems to pull herself together, nodding and taking a deep breath. “Yes. Of course.”

“Go,” Ginny says, giving her a little push. “Quickly.”

She only takes a few steps before looking back at Ginny, almost as if looking for reassurance.

“Do not be seen.”

She nods, and disappears around the corner.

Ginny takes a few breaths, organizing and moving all the pieces in her mind, making sure she hasn’t missed any pitfalls. Then she sets back off into the halls.

*     *     *

Ginny forces herself not to pace as she waits by the steps. Nicola should have been here already.

Maybe she should have gone after Dougal herself. She just thought it might be far less obvious for Nicola to do it. But perhaps that was a stupid risk.

She’s about to head back towards the common room when Nicola appears, her brother trailing behind her.

Ginny nods, letting out a breath. There’s no time for pleasantries. “This way.”

“What--?” the boy starts to say, but Nicola hushes him.

They only have to go over a few corridors, and by some great alignment of luck, they manage not to see a single person.

Hannah is waiting for them. She looks at Ginny in question, and she nods.

Hannah looks at Nicola and Dougal. “Hi,” she says, giving them a smile. “The DA meets in the Room of Requirement. The entrance is on the seventh floor across from the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.”
“What?” Dougal asks, taking a step back.

Nicola is the one to look up, her eyes widening as she notices the door in the wall in front of them.


“Come on,” Hannah says, stepping closer to Dougal. “It’s quite safe.”

He looks up at her with wide eyes, but lets himself get shepherded inside.

“Stay here with Hannah and Neville. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She leaves without another word, walking as fast as she dares across the Castle.

Walking calmly into the common room, she gives a cool gaze to the students sitting in various small groups. None of them pay her any attention.

She sits by the fire, pulling out a book.

It’s less than fifteen minutes before the Carrows storm in. Alecto scans the space while Amycus disappears down into the dorms.

“Where are the Blishwick brats?” she asks.

The students all look around.

“Their stuff is still here,” Amycus reports, coming back up from the dorms.

Alecto stamps her foot, her wand gripped dangerously in her hand. “Where the bloody hell are they?”

Most of the students are carefully edging away from her, not wanting to be in her line of sight if she’s losing her tenuous temper.

Alecto’s eyes stray across Ginny, eyes narrowing.

“The older one,” Tobias says, jumping in to help like the good little boot licker he’s become. “She came and got the younger one. Just about a half hour ago.”

“Where’d they go?” Amycus demands.

Tobias frowns. “I’m not sure, sir. I think they left. I mean, they must have.”

Alecto shoves a student to the ground. Rather than be startled by the rough treatment, she just scrambles quickly out of the way.

“They can’t have gone far,” Amycus says.

As the Carrows round up members of the enforcement squad to search the Castle, Tobias included, Ginny gets up and leaves, never once looking at him.

*     *     *

That evening, Ginny brings food to Nicola and her brother.

She still feels the fading adrenaline. Other students have disappeared, the official line being that they had to return home as they were ill. Not that anyone ever believed that.
She was lucky—they were all lucky—that Ginny heard about it first.

Her brother pops up to his feet when Ginny walks in. “What’s happening?”

Ginny ignores his belligerent tone, setting the tray down.

“Sit,” she says.

He looks at the food like she’s out of her mind.

Ginny sits down across from Nicola, content to wait.

He sits down with a thump.

“No one seems to know where your mother is,” Ginny says. “But the Dark Lord wants something from your father and he was prepared to use you two to get it.”

The siblings share a look, and Ginny can see this is not a surprise to either of them.

“And our sister?” Nicola asks.

Ginny remembers the girl at the train station. “I’m sorry,” she says, shaking her head. “I don’t know. I can try to find out.”

Nicola’s jaw tightens. “Thank you.”

“You understand that it won’t be safe for you to go back into the castle now.”

“So, what?” her brother asks, voice hard, but not quite managing to hide his fear. “You keep us locked up in here instead?”

Nicola puts a hand on her brother’s arm, comforting but firm. “You will watch your tone,” she says.

Ginny waits as they regard each other, Nicola’s brother eventually conceding, leaning back in his chair with a nod. “I’m sorry,” he mumbles in Ginny’s direction.

Ginny curtly nods her head. “I can find a way to get you out of the castle, if that’s what you want.”

“And where would we go?” Nicola says.

“Nicola…” her brother protests.

“Now isn’t the time for pride,” she says. “We can’t trust our family members to take us in. Can’t trust them not to turn us over to the Dark Lord for their own benefit.”

He looks a bit thrown by that rather ruthless assessment, but he’s only twelve, Ginny reminds herself, so it’s doubtful he has a full understanding of what is going on around him.

Students with nowhere to go have always been an inevitability.

“If you choose, you can stay here. You’ll be safe. And it can at least give you time to figure out what to do next.”

“You don’t have to decide right now.” She gestures at the food. “Eat. Talk it over.”

Her brother rather petulantly pulls the plate towards himself. Ginny gets up and heads for where Hannah, Neville, and Terry are waiting.
Nicola follows after her, putting a hand on her arm. “Thank you. I know you put yourself in a lot danger to help us.”

“Nicola,” she says, voice chastising. “All this time, did you think The Parlor was just a social club?”

Nicola blinks. “I…suppose I did.”

“Well, that was a bit stupid of you.”

She laughs, the sound a little shaky.

Ginny touches her arm. “Eat.”

She nods, sitting back down by her brother.

“Did you notice that?” Terry says, pointing towards a new annex with two hammocks strung up between pillars.

Ginny breathes out, not quite sure what they did to deserve this space, just endlessly thankful that they have it.

Hannah frowns. “We’ll still have to find a way to get food in here.”

“Yeah,” Ginny agrees. She can only sneak food out of the hall so many times without raising suspicion.

Neville is looking at the back wall, his brow furrowed. “Has that always been there?”

Hanging on the wall is a portrait of a young, somewhat vacant looking girl. She smiles down at them.

*  *  *

Everyone looks up as Ginny walks into The Parlor, Tilly pushing to her feet.

Ginny lifts a hand to stave off their questions. “Nicola is fine.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Hestia says, reaching out and squeezing Flora’s hand.

Ginny sits, letting out a long breath. “But it was a very near thing.”

“Does she need anything?” Tilly asks. “I mean, is there anything we can do?”

“Tilly,” Ginny says in warning.

But she is undeterred, sitting down next to Ginny, body turned towards her and hands punctuating the air. “Where is she? Why did they want her?”

Ginny reaches over and touches her arm, fingers firmly pressing in. “I will take care of it. Do you understand me? I promise I will take care of her.” She looks around the room. “The same way I will keep all of you safe.”

Tilly sucks in a few breaths, finally nodding her head before flopping back against the cushions. She drags her hands over her face. “Yeah, okay.”

The less they all know, the safer they’ll be.
Ginny slides into Muggles Studies very nearly late, having stopped by to see how Nicola was doing first. The cavernous room is already nearly full, but fortunately Alecto is still absent.

Terry gives her a smile as she sits next to him, one that makes the hairs on the back of her neck go up. “Good timing.”

“What?” she asks.

“Not a day you want to miss,” he says.

“What did you do?” she hisses.

His smile only widens. “Just wait and see.”

Ginny tries to covertly glance around the room, but nothing seems that obviously different. Just rows and rows of half-asleep students.

Alecto sweeps in. “Shut it,” she snaps, even though not many students were speaking anyway.

They all know the drill by now.

Her eyes wander the space, finally landing on a student. “Mr. Vaisey.”

His head lifts. “Yes, Professor?”

“Read from page 68.”

The room fills with the sound of shuffling pages. But Ginny is still watching Vaisey, who is staring down at his open book with wide eyes.

Alecto turns at him, brow furrowing. “I said read.”

“But, Professor--” he sputters, clearly reluctant.

Next to her, Terry gives out a very unsubtle snort. Ginny glances at him, finding his eyes gleaming.

Alecto pulls her wand. “READ!”


Every student is now alert, heads lifted.

Alecto doesn’t immediately react, as if she’s trying to figure out what is happening. “You think that’s funny?”

“I’m just reading what it says!” he cries out.

Ginny looks down at her own text, sucking in a breath as she does. Clara Winters smiles up at her. She flips the page again and again, vaguely hearing the sounds of other students doing the same. The book is filled with picture after picture of frozen, smiling Muggle faces of various ages. Some are whole families.

Beneath each is a simple sentence. *Tortured for the crime of being in the wrong place at the wrong*
Alecto snatches up Vaisey’s text.

“What’d you do to it?” she snarls, her face blooming red.

Vaisey is smart enough to clamber out of reach. “Nothing, I swear!”

“Professor,” Tobias says, holding his book out her. “Mine’s like that too.”

Alecto grabs a book from the next table and then another and another, flinging them to the ground, knocking students out of her way.

“Finite Incantatum,” she yells, jabbing her wand at them. “FINITE INCANTATUM!”

The murdered and missing Muggles continue to smile up from the pages, faces fixed and unmoving.

“Get out, get out, get out!” Alecto screams, hair wild about her face.

The students scramble to safety.

* * *

“Merlin, I wish I’d been there,” Seamus complains.

“She actually threw a desk,” a third-year Ravenclaw reports, eyes wide.

“It was amazing,” Demelza says, eyes closed rapturously.

Ginny looks at Terry. “How did you do it?”

He shrugs. “Got the idea from Hermione and those DA coins. Just took a few weeks to magically link all the classroom texts. Then it’s just a matter of a good Protean charm. She won’t be able to use the books again.”

The students break into noisy approval, slapping Terry on the back and reliving the event over and over again.

It isn’t the prank that alarms Ginny so much as the fact that she hadn’t heard anything about it even being planned. That being said, it’s a huge move, a giant slap in the face of the Carrows for which there will definitely be repercussions.

It doesn’t take long for them to appear.

Two days later, Dark Arts class progresses as usual for most of the class, Amycus having Tobias and Urquhart ‘demonstrate’ on younger students.

Nigel lands on the platform with a loud thump, Tobias stowing his wand.

“One more thing,” Amycus says before Tobias can hop back down.

He stops, waiting for his next instructions.

“I’ve left a few holes in your instruction. Probably about time to fix that.”
“Yes, sir?” Tobias says.

“Have you ever performed the Cruciatius curse?” Amycus asks.

There’s a general swell of sound in the room as people gasp.

“It’s an important spell for any wizard’s arsenal,” Amycus continues with a feral grin on his face. “Especially for those that just won’t listen.” He looks over at Neville. “Or those who forget their place.”

_Oh, Merlin_, Ginny thinks.

“Remember, boy,” Amycus says to Tobias, “you have to mean it.”

Everyone seems to be watching Tobias, wondering if he’ll do it. Nigel just looks up at him, eyes wide with terror.

Tobias slowly lifts his wand, his face impassive.

Ginny feels pressure in her chest as his wand falters, his arm trembling. She leans forward. Will he--?

Tobias sucks in a deep breath, his face hardening. He barks out the spell.

Nigel lets out a scream, flipping onto his back. Mercifully it doesn’t last long.

Amycus claps Tobias on the shoulder. “We’ll work on it.”

“Yes, sir,” Tobias says, voice just the tiniest bit shaky under his bluster. “I look forward to it.”

Nearby, Urquhart looks like he actually is looking forward to his turn.

“That’ll be enough for today, I think,” Amycus decides, looking like he’s won.

Ginny isn’t sure he hasn’t.

It’s like a chess match against a petulant, brutal opponent. They make a calculated move, perfectly executed, and the Carrows swat back with flagrant brutality. Not to say it isn’t effective.

Neville and Joanna shoot forward, helping Nigel down off the platform.

“I’m fine,” she can hear him say, but she knows he isn’t.

By unspoken agreement, they all meet in the Room of Requirement.

Neville is noticeably disturbed.

“There’s no defense against it.” Ginny turns to Terry. “Right?”

“No,” Terry says.

“We can try,” Hannah insists.

He looks at her like she’s insane. “No, we bloody well can’t. It’s impossible.”

Hannah puts her hands on hips. “Are you telling me, that with everything you know, and everything you know you don’t know, there is zero possibility? Is that what you’re saying?”
Terry looks taken aback.

“We have to give them something,” she says.

“Even if it’s a lie?”

“It’s not a lie if there’s even the tiniest possibility.”

Terry’s lips seem to twitch despite himself. “Logically, that’s a true statement, I suppose.”

“Hope matters,” Hannah insists.

At some point it may be the only thing they have left.

* * *

Similar demonstrations happen in the other sections of Dark Arts, Crabbe and Goyle being particularly eager from all accounts.

Students start appearing looking shaken and wan. High numbers start skiving off, mostly out of abject terror, which only leads to the Crucius showing up in detentions. There’s no avoiding it.

Added to that, Ginny is still reeling with how close she’d come to not getting to Nicola in time.

The stakes have never been clearer and Ginny is no closer to mastering Legilimency than she was at the beginning of term. She hasn’t had a lesson with Snape in nearly ten days, because she thinks if she takes one more memory or thought she will lose her mind.

Ginny feels like a stranger in her own body, her mind an attic full of dusty trunks and old cardboard boxes, each rattling with the pilfered thoughts and emotions and dreams of her peers. She still can’t walk by Eliza without immediately pivoting and walking in the other direction.

Even more, her distraction is rippling outward. She missed the devastating pranks being planned right under her nose, did nothing to help mitigate the impact. And now they are using Crucius in the classrooms.

She has no choice but to master this once and for all.

Snape offered his techniques. She has read every book provided, but it isn’t enough.

She wishes Luna were here. To look at her with that fathomless stare and say something brilliant like it’s blindingly obvious. To point out how obtuse Ginny is being.

What she wouldn’t do for Antonia’s knowing smiles and oblique comments.

Or Smita…

She squeezes her eyes shut.

But then the most treacherous thought rises up, the wish for even one quiet moment sitting against a tree with a shoulder warm and steady next to hers.

Weakness.

She stands up.
The Parlor girls all regard her warily.

Snape was right. She does know what to do. She doesn’t need someone to tell her what is right. She never has.

You’re stuck deciding that for yourself.

Pulling the key out from around her neck, she crosses over to the library door.

“Mistress.”

Ginny paces in the small space. “I need a way to master this,” she says. “I need to be a Legilimens. I need it.”

Nymue watches on silently.

“I’ve tried to detach myself. I’ve tried not to care…”

“And why should you stop caring?” Nymue asks.

Ginny stops, turning to look at her. “He said…”

Her lips twist. “That is a man’s answer. Always quick to tear something down, when what they really need to do is build.”

Ginny looks up at her, feeling the traitorous swell of hope.

“Show me.”

* * *

Ginny walks through a forest of memories, thoughts and feelings like the barest breeze across her skin. Occasionally she pauses, looking closer, but keeps herself from falling headfirst into them. She skims, and when she takes, she locks it down deep in that special fortress she’s built in her flesh, bolt by painful bolt, like ice in her spine and grit in her jaw.

She delicately places her stolen plunder in the soft space and leaves all the jagged edges for herself.

It’s exhausting, but effective, keeping the constant pressure of opposing poles in place. Like gravity working against a broom. This is something she knows.

She kicks off the ground, lifting up and away from the forest until she’s once again sitting in the hard chair. The boy sits across from her, his memories and feelings still buzzing her skin.

Leon. His name is Leon.

He matters. Not just a means, but an end into himself.

Ginny relaxes back in her chair, her wand lowering.

Snape nods in approval. “You are improving.”

No. She’s surviving.
Sixth Year – Part Three

After a period of horror and shock, the Carrows’s decision to introduce the Cruciatius into the classroom backfires. Rather than being cowed, students now seem even more determined to push back at every turn.

Posters constantly appear all over the castle. Snape and the Carrows can barely open their mouths these days before a poster appears dispelling their lies.

In response, the Enforcement Squad doubles their bullying in the halls. Ginny can’t imagine it will be that much longer until they are at full-on war.

It all just means she needs to redouble her efforts. Everything she has goes into mastering Leglimency, into collecting information, into getting ahead of the Carrows any way she can.

She listens in the classrooms, watches in the halls. Most of the hours she doesn’t spend in lessons with Snape or in class, she spends in the common room or Great Hall or library, listening for any tiny comment that may betray a larger scheme.

She listens and watches and tries to see ten steps ahead. She has to.

“Hey.”

Ginny looks up as Tilly sits next to her. “Oh, hi,” she says, a little surprised to see Tilly up in the common room.

She seems to have channeled her anger at Nicola’s disappearance into a sort of furious energy she uses to attack alchemic projects. She’s far more tight-lipped about the projects than she’s ever been before. Or so it seems from what little time Ginny has spent in The Parlor the last couple weeks.

Ginny slides her a look, because clearly Tilly is working her way up to say something.

Before she manages it, Reiko walks in, Bassenthwaite right on her heels, clearly laughing at something she’s just said.

Coming back from a DA meeting, Ginny realizes, glancing up at the clock. She didn’t realize quite that much time had passed. Tomorrow, she thinks. Tomorrow she’ll make it.

Tilly is staring over at Reiko and Bassenthwaite, glaring as if scandalized by the noise.

Bassenthwaite catches Tilly looking, nodding his head at her. She grimly nods back before returning her gaze to the fire.

“How is that going?” Ginny asks. She may be listening for a particular kind of information these days, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t hear her fair share of gossip. Including the swarm of drama surrounding Tilly’s winter-break betrothal.

It certainly helps explain her mood this term.

“How is what going?” Tilly says, clearly happy to play dumb.

Ginny slides her a glance to remind her just who she is talking to.

Tilly sighs. “Ugh, fine,” she complains. “We’re still firmly humoring our parents. Bassenthwaite says
there’s plenty of time to find a way out of it.”

“He’s a good sort,” Ginny says, knowing it could have been much worse.

“I’m sure he is,” Tilly says. “But I’m eighteen, and that is not what my life is going to be.”

“Yeah,” Ginny agrees.

“It’s not like he wants to marry me either,” she points out. “I told him I thought he’d be happy to have an excuse to get out of here early, he hates books and lessons so much. But he just gave me this strange look and said there were things here he needed to take care of.”

Ginny looks down at her hands. Bassenthaite has taken his role in the DA very seriously. He probably spends more time there these days than she does. *Never been much good at spellwork,* he told her once. *But teaching the young’uns makes a mite more sense.*


If only she knew.

“So who do you have your eye on?”

“What?” Ginny asks.

“You’re spending so much time up here. When you’re not in detention, that is,” Tilly says. She pauses, as if waiting for Ginny to fill the quiet with information. She sighs. “You must be watching someone, right?”

Ginny just forces herself to smile, and Tilly doesn’t push, seeing what she wants.

“Well, figure it out, because we miss you down there,” she says.

It’s not like she’s *avoiding* them. She’s just keeping an eye on things.

“You mean that without Nicola, you need another guinea pig.”

Tilly shrugs. “Yeah. But also…”

“Also?” Ginny asks.

“It’s getting pretty empty down there.”

Ginny winces. There were eleven girls the last year Antonia was mistress. With Nicola gone, they are down to seven. People graduate, move on. But Ginny hasn’t looked for a single new girl to fill the ranks. Hasn’t had time.

She looks around the room. All she sees are hostages. Potential threats. Potential losses.

Tilly touches her arm. “Figure it out soon.”

Ginny nods.

* * *

“This skill is practiced best of all when no one suspects you have it,” Snape says, as if Ginny needs any reminder at all of the power of secrets in the middle of a war.
Ginny has read enough about Legilimency and its uses to know that her training is not strictly legal. This is the sort of skill that requires registration with the Ministry, official public oversight. She doesn’t have room for inflexible laws that couldn’t possibly have been meant to apply to a situation like this.

“While eye contact certainly makes this skill easier, it also makes it more dangerous. More obvious. We will continue to use the hypnotic mist to soften the minds of those you will practice on, though on a lower dose. You must begin to learn the feel of entering a mind in less controlled settings.”

“How?” Ginny asks.

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Meaning it is time to take our lessons into a more…real-world situation.”

He leads her down the hall to the potions room. Right before they enter, he hits her with the familiar charm.

Inside, there is already a student scrubbing away at a cauldron, one of the more harmless, if not annoying punishments floating around the castle these days.

As the door closes, the student turns around.

It’s Hannah.

Ginny very nearly takes a step back, her heart pounding away in her chest.

“I take it you know Miss Abbott?” Snape asks.

Ginny doesn’t let anything show on her face. “We have classes together, sir.” Her head tilts to the side. “Well, at least since she was held back a year.”

Snape lets out a small derisive sound, Hannah’s face flushing red.

Ginny just focuses on breathing because she’s finally realizing what this will mean. Using this skill on someone she knows. Someone who trusts her.

Snape is watching her, almost as if he expects her to balk, to refuse to do it, but how could he possibly know?

“You and Miss Abbott will scrub all of these cauldrons by hand.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, picking up a bristle brush and kneeling in front of a cauldron.

“I will be back to check on your progress.”

She nods.

The door closes behind him.

“Ginny,” Hannah says.

“Not here,” Ginny hisses.

“Shut it,” says a voice from behind them. It’s only then that Ginny realizes they are not alone. Urquhart lounges against the door, watching them. Here as part of his Enforcement Squad duties, no doubt.
He meets her gaze, something snidely superior about his expression, no doubt in response to their apparent swap in status. She may have booted him off her squad, but now she’s the one seemingly in detention.

“Something you want to say, Weasley?” he snaps, swiping absently at the sweat beading on his forehead. There’s something about his eyes…

She glances at the cauldron bubbling in the corner. Affecting everyone in the room equally.

Snape’s slipped up, or just doesn’t care, but either way she will take advantage.

Moving to another cauldron across the room from Hannah, Ginny begins to scrub, her other hand reaching into her pocket for her wand. She whispers the incantation, reaching out with her mind.

It’s a strange sensation. She isn’t sitting in front of someone, looking straight into their eyes, so when she casts the spell, she feels a wave of warring sensations that she belatedly realizes is a combination of all of the people nearby. There is fear, confliction, anticipation, and the tang of adrenaline.

“Oi,” a voice shouts. “Keep working.”

Ginny jerks back to her surroundings.

She’s stopped scrubbing. Silently chastising herself for being so careless, she works quietly, finishing the first and moving on to a second before trying again.

It takes her a long time to figure out how to untangle the two minds. It would be easier to just jump in, but she refuses to push into Hannah’s mind.

Snape would call this a weakness.

She doesn’t care.

It takes a long, long time. Much longer than using eye contact. Only once she is completely sure she has isolated Urquhart’s mind does she gently press in.

It’s a swarm of emotions and half-formed thoughts and urges and memories. Ginny concentrates on creating boundaries and pockets of space, fighting for enough distance to observe and not take part.

*Can’t wait to try these new spells out on those Gryffindor cunts.*

Ginny straightens at the stray thought, chasing after it.

His thoughts are scattered, a giant mess of memories and half-remembered lessons, but Ginny ruthlessly shoves them aside, having no interest in anything but the stray thought. It’s like trying to climb a mountain with gusts of wind and slippery ice and *everything*, including the mountain itself, trying to shake you off.

She grits her teeth, digs in her toes, and presses on.

*Amycus smiles. “Mayhap it’s time for a little spot inspection on the dorms.”*

*Alecto sighs, leaning back in her chair and staring up at the ceiling. “Boooring.”*

“Well, any tiny infraction must be dealt with, don’t it? The squad is getting restless. We should give
them something to play with."

Crabbe and Goyle shoot him unsubtle looks of anticipation, nudging Ginny in the ribs.

Alecto snorts, her chair slapping back to the ground with a thump. "Sure. We could show 'em a few new tricks."

"Miss Weasley."

Ginny pulls back, looking up into Snape’s face.

She has to take a moment, closing her eyes and breathing in deep a few times.

"No one told you to stop, Miss Abbott," Snape says, voice sharp.

Ginny sits back on her heels, glancing over to find Hannah watching her with a frown.

"Get up," Snape says.

Ginny dutifully gets to her feet, following him back out into the hall, Urquhart letting out a derisive snort as she passes by.

It’s on the tip of her tongue, to snap that she knows he isn’t quite so fearless as he appears. That she knows what lurks in his deepest yearnings.

"Miss Weasley," Snape says, voice impatient.

It’s only then she realizes she’s stopped in front of Urquhart, staring him down. More than anything, she wants to cut him down to size, to give him a dismissive glance like he’s a bug. But Hannah is still quietly working, and she will be the only target he has left.

So instead, she drops her eyes like it means anything, like she’s acknowledging the hit.

She still wants to curse the pleased expression off his bloody smug face.

Back inside the small room with Snape, he sits across the table from her.

"What challenges did the lack of eye contact provide?" he asks.

They spend the next twenty minutes picking apart strategies and pitfalls. She asks questions, and he answers as best he can, but most often with questions of his own.

Only this time as she leaves, he asks one final question.

"And what did you learn from Miss Abbott?" Snape asks, voice casual, eyes still on the table. "Anything that might be of...interest?"

They always talk extensively about her experiences. But never, ever has he asked about what she’s seen.

Ginny jerks open the door, and Hannah is walking past, rubbing at her shoulder. They both freeze, looking at each other. Hannah glances back into the room, past Ginny towards Snape.

*Keep going, Hannah,* Ginny thinks. *Just keep walking.*

After a moment, Hannah does, disappearing down the hall.
Ginny turns back to Snape, and the question hanging still unanswered between them. “If you want to know, try taking it from me.”

His eyebrows fly up at her tone, no doubt.

“Yeah,” Ginny says. “I didn’t think so.”

She pulls the door shut after her with a thump.

*     *     *

It’s late when she makes her way to the Room of Requirement, but there are still a lot of students there. She’s thankful Hannah isn’t there for reasons she doesn’t really want to think about at the moment.

She nods at Nicola, moving over to where Neville is talking to Seamus.

“Hey, stranger,” Demelza says. “Where have you been?”

Ginny shrugs off the question. “Come on,” she says. “You’ll want to hear this too.”

Neville and Seamus look up as they approach. “Hey.”

Ginny gives him a distracted greeting. “Look. There’s going to be an inspection of the Gryffindor dorms. The Carrows are going to let the Enforcement Squad do it.”

Neville and Seamus share a look. “When?” Neville asks.

She shakes her head. “I’m not sure. But soon. And they aren’t going to be nice about it.”

Seamus frowns. “How did you find this out?”

Ginny presses her lips together.

“I swear,” Neville says. “Some days I wonder if she has a spy network or something.”

Ginny carefully keeps her face frozen.

Demelza snorts. “Let me guess, ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies.”

“Pretty much,” Ginny says. She reaches out and touches Neville and Demelza’s arms. “Be careful.”

“You know us,” Seamus says, giving her a wide grin.

*     *     *

In the Room of Requirement that weekend, the Gryffindor are nearly rolling with laughter as they reenact the doomed inspection of their dorms.

Only now is Ginny realizing she should have been much more specific in her instructions of how to handle the inspections. Because the stupid gits decided the best thing to do was empty everyone’s trunk in the entire bloody dorm.

It’s like they’ve never even heard of the word subtlety.

Ginny shakes her head, glancing over at Terry. He gives her a disinterested shrug that seems to say, *Bloody Gryffindors, what can you do?*
It’s an obvious thumbing of their noses at the Carrows, but also a clarion call that someone is spying on them. As unpredictable as the Carrows can be, there is no way to know how they will strike back, only that they will.

“This should be interesting,” Terry says.

“Okay,” Neville calls out. “Let’s get started.”

Everyone starts to pair up for defense training.

A third-year Hufflepuff glances around, shyly making eye contact with Ginny when there is no one else to pair up with. Ginny’s face freezes halfway to a smile, because he doesn’t know. Doesn’t remember sitting in a dungeon room with her. Doesn’t remember her pilfering through his thoughts.

She takes a half step back, shaking her head, and the kid’s expression shifts to wary, and really, that’s better, isn’t it?

Ginny turns for the door.

“You’re leaving?” Hannah asks.

“Oh, yeah,” Ginny says, forcing her breathing steady. Even. “Sorry. There’s something I need to take care of.”

Ginny pushes out into the hall, taking a moment to orient herself to the Room of Requirement’s latest exit point. She turns right, because that direction is as good as any at the moment.

It takes her far longer than it should to realize that Hannah is following her. Ginny tries ignoring her for a while, walking faster, but Hannah just stubbornly keeps up.

“What?” Ginny demands, turning around to look at her.

“We’re talking about this,” Hannah says, arms crossed and feet set like it will take a Horntail to dislodge her. “I don’t really care where we do it, but we are doing it.”

She glances around at the students in the halls, as if daring Ginny to make a scene.

Ginny sighs. “Fine.”

She sets out down the hallway, not particularly caring if Hannah follows or keeps up. Her feet take her outside and down towards the Forbidden Forest. Part of Ginny is hoping Hannah will lose her nerve, but her stubbornness has always been a formidable enemy.

It was always inevitable, she supposes, having to deal with Hannah. With what Hannah thinks she saw, what she thinks she knows.

Just inside the trees, Ginny turns, crossing her arms over her chest.

Hannah gives the forest a wary glance.

“You said you didn’t care where we did it,” Ginny reminds her, feeling strangely perverse.

Hannah’s lips press together. After a moment she shakes her head, letting out a long breath. “Are you okay?” she asks, her expression painfully earnest.

“What?” Ginny asks. “I’m fine.”
“Ginny,” she says, voice chastising.

“What?”

“What’s going on?”

Ginny shakes her head. “Nothing.”

“You haven’t been the same since we got back.”

“I’m fine,” Ginny insists.

Hannah throws her hands up in exasperation. “You’re not. You’re…distant. Like you can’t stand to be around us anymore. And it’s only getting worse.”

Something hard seems to have lodged itself in Ginny’s chest. “You’re imagining things.”

“I’m not,” she says, chin lifting. “Is this because of whatever it is you’re doing with Snape?”

“Hannah,” she says in warning, knowing they would get here eventually.

Hannah tilts her head to the side, her voice softening. “Or is it because of Luna?”

Ginny straightens. “What?”

Hannah steps closer. “What happened to her wasn’t your fault.”

Ginny just stares back at her, her breath heaving in her chest.

She touches her arm, fingers soft and comforting. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Bollocks,” Ginny snaps, feeling like everything is trying to rise up and choke her all at once. “You’re the one who said it’s my job to keep us safe!”

“Ginny, no,” Hannah says, looking stricken. “There’s no way we could have known that was going to happen.”

“Yes!” Ginny says, shrugging off her hand. “There was. There was a way for me to know and I didn’t do it. I’m not making that mistake again.”

“I don’t understand.”

Ginny lets out a thick laugh. “Of course you don’t.”

But rather than being put off, Hannah merely presses closer. “Explain it to me than.”

In that moment, it is completely beyond Ginny to hold the words back any longer. “You want to know what’s going on? That’s what’s going on. I’m keeping us safe any bloody way I can. Even if it means doing our dirty work, things you probably couldn’t live with. Because that’s why I’m really here right?”

Hannah blanches, and Ginny can’t stop herself from pushing in on the weakness. “That’s what I thought. So maybe you should be thankful I’m keeping my distance.”

She pushes past Hannah.

“Let me help you.”
Ginny spins back on her heel. “And what are you going to do for me, Hannah?”

Hannah regards her for a moment, and then she is striding forward and pulling Ginny into a hug.

Ginny freezes, feeling like someone just punched her in the chest. She’s horrified to feel the press of tears.

She can’t even remember the last time someone touched her.

Snape wants to be her to cruel. McGonagall wants her to be careful. Nymue wants her to be powerful. And Hannah, what? Wants her to be soft?

“I know you’re doing what’s necessary,” Hannah says. “I know you’re keeping us safe. And maybe you’re right that I don’t want to know. But you can’t…” Her arms tighten around her. “How can you keep us safe if you shut us out? If you don’t let yourself care about us?”

_Caring is a weakness!_

“And when it’s you they take?” Ginny says, deliberately cruel.

Hannah pulls back to look at her, not looking hurt or shocked.

Ginny braces herself for her to say, _You won’t let that happen_.

But Hannah simply says, “You replace me with someone new and let them help you carry on. You don’t do this alone.”

She doesn’t know what she’s asking.

Hannah lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “I think maybe it’s the only way any of this is ever going to work.”

Ginny can’t form words, just looks back at Hannah’s face.

_You’ll keep us kind._

Hannah squeezes Ginny’s arms before letting go. “Just…think about it. Will you?”

She nods.

* * *

Ginny tries. She really does. But transitioning from her lessons with Snape to trying to come back and be with people like she’s normal, like she doesn’t need this separation to keep herself sane... It’s a struggle.

She visits Nicola, forces herself down into The Parlor, comes to training sessions at the DA. Some days she can survive it better than others. But she’s _trying_, dammit.

When she fails, when she gives in to the need to be anywhere else, Hannah is always there watching.

Hannah watches, but doesn’t say anything.

She doesn’t need to. The look on her face is more than enough.

Today the Room of Requirement is nearly empty, and it’s easier when it’s like this.
Ginny sits on a chair near Nicola’s workbench, watching her futz with tiny little metal pieces that Ginny has no idea what they are, let alone what they do. It’s somehow calming though, watching her pull all the pieces together, form them into something intricate and with perfectly orchestrated pieces moving together.

Ginny picks up a small metal trinket, turning it in her fingers. She thinks about the feel of it in her fingers, trying to quiet her mind. It lets off a small spark, Ginny yelping as it singes her finger.

“A diode,” Nicola explains, taking it from her fingers.

“Sorry,” Ginny says, wincing and rubbing her fingers together.

Nicola shrugs. “They aren’t usually that delicate. Except around volatile magics.”

“Are you calling me volatile?” she tries to joke.

“If you are,” Nicola says, eyes travelling across her face, “the diode is the only one to have picked up on it.”

“Yes, well,” Ginny says, forcing her face prim. “We all have hidden depths.”

Nicola goes back to tinkering. “What you’re doing…” she says, voice hesitant. “Not just The Parlor, but this…” She waves vaguely around the room.

“Yes,” Ginny says. Nicola is the first real crossover between those two spaces, and it’s strange, any one person having access to both these parts of her. It leaves her feeling vaguely…exposed.

“It’s a lot,” Nicola says.

Ginny stops herself from picking up another metal bit to fiddle with. “It can be,” she admits.

Nicola nods.

They are quiet for a while, and Ginny thinks maybe that’s the end of it, but then Nicola clears her throat.

“I just wanted to say… I mean,” she breaks off. “If there is ever anything I can do to help…” She shoots her a look like she knows she’s being presumptuous, this idea that Ginny might ever need her help.

Ginny hesitates, but after a moment, stretches her hand out to touch Nicola’s. “That means a lot. Thank you.”

Nicola smiles at her, her cheeks a little pink. “You just… You aren’t alone.”

“No,” Ginny says. “I suppose I’m not.”

*      *      *

It doesn’t take long for the retaliation for the botched Gryffindor inspection to make itself known. The Carrows start chaining up first-years in the dungeons. It’s something Filch threatened for years, but the harmless joke is anything but. The smallest infraction and eleven-year-olds get to spend the night hanging from a dank wall in the dark.

Ginny is actually vaguely impressed by the cold, ruthless logic behind the move. The Quaffle is firmly in the DA’s end of the field now. Their move.
What are they going to do about it?

Before they can even begin to formulate a response, it all comes to a head in a way Ginny wasn’t prepared for, but really should have been, because Michael Corner’s youngest brother gets chained up on that wall. Bad enough on its own, but Michael gets caught trying to release him.

Yet another student made into a very public example.

Ginny sits next to Hannah in the Room of Requirement, Neville pacing in front of them, his face grim. Hannah gnaws at her nails, and the wait is unbearable.

“I just wish he’d come to us first,” Ginny says, not for the first time.

Hannah shakes her head. “It was his brother. Any of us would have done the same.”

“He’s back,” Ginny says as the door to the Room of Requirement opens.

Hannah pushes to her feet, looking expectantly at Terry. “How is he?”

Terry’s jaw is set, a clear indication he did not enjoy his visit to the infirmary. “Pretty much how you’d expect. You know, if someone insulted a Hippogriff.”

Neville curses.

“It’s bad,” Terry continues, his voice shaking slightly. “Worse than I’ve ever seen.”

“Does he need anything?” Hannah asks.

Terry shakes his head. “Pomfrey’s got him pretty sedated. He’s going to be there for a while.” He drops down on the couch, his head falling back against the cushions, rubbing at his eyes.

Neville takes a seat too, but he’s perched right on the edge, his body tense, and Ginny knows far too well the look of a Gryffindor about to blissfully fling themselves off a cliff.

“What are we going to do?” he asks.

Ginny can see it, the way he wants solutions, instant actions. Revenge. Fortunately this is an inevitability she has been preparing for all year.

“As far as I can see, we have three options,” Ginny says.

Terry opens his eyes, squinting up at her. “Yeah?”

She holds up her thumb. “We can keep on as we’ve been doing, knowing that the cost of reprisal has gone way up. That it will keep going up.”

Hannah shakes her head. “But Michael… We can’t--”

Ginny nods. “There will be more Michaels.” She pauses. “Or worse.” It’s really only a matter of time until they kill someone, accidentally or otherwise.

“Yeah, okay,” Neville says. “And the second option?”

Ginny lifts her index finger. “We stop antagonizing them. They did this to make us stop. So we stop. We don’t give them any more reasons to escalate.”
Neville frowns, looking less than pleased. “And just sit on our hands and hope the war goes our way?”

Ginny shrugs, not particularly liking the idea of waiting around either, but understanding the necessity of it.

“They’re torturing students,” Terry says, voice quiet.

“Yeah,” Ginny says. “They are.”

“You said there were three options,” Hannah says.

“You’ll like it even less than the other two,” Ginny warns.

“Tell us,” Neville insists.

Ginny looks at Terry, sharing a grim look, and she knows he has already considered this too.

“We escalate,” he says.

Hannah frowns. “Meaning?”

Terry seems to have a ready answer. “Take the fight to the Carrows. Jinx them, beat them up, lock them away somewhere, run them off.”

Neville looks like that idea has appeal. “Shove them in a Vanishing Closet?”

“Lock them in the Chamber of Secrets.” Terry darts Ginny a look that isn’t subtle.

She rolls her eyes. Next to her, Hannah sighs.

“Feed them to the Giant Squid!” Neville says.

Ginny listens as they brainstorm various ideas. She lets them go until they run out of steam, the ideas becoming more and more elaborate and ridiculous as they go along. But none of them dare say what really needs to be said.

“You’ve been quiet,” Hannah remarks, nudging Ginny’s arm.

She shrugs. “We escalate, they escalate. That’s just more damage on all sides. If we seriously want to do something about the Carrows, there is really only one answer.”

They look expectantly at her.

“We eliminate them.”

“Eliminate them?” Hannah asks, more confused than appalled, and Ginny knows that’s because she doesn’t really understand what she means. It’s not a natural place for her mind to go.

Ginny stares steadily back at her.

Hannah blanches. “You mean… kill them?”

Ginny lifts her chin.

*Could you kill? If you had to?*
“They haven’t killed any students,” Ginny says. “Yet. But it is undeniable that there is blood on their hands. The blood of Muggles. The blood of anyone Tom asked them to kill. They aren’t innocent.”

“But we are,” Hannah says. “And my mother didn’t die so I could become a murderer.”

Ginny doesn’t point out that there may come a time when the choice is between being innocent and being alive.

“Hannah’s right,” Neville says.

Terry sits back. “As much as it pains me, Michael wouldn’t want us to do that either.”

They all turn to look at her as if expecting resistance, but she’s just here to point out the implications. “We also can’t forget who sent them here. Killing them, disabling them, sending them away in any format, that will bring his eye on the school. It would be an open declaration of war.”

Terry lets out a low whistle. “Certainly makes option number two seem more appealing.”

Ginny nods, knowing this was likely the way it was going to go before they even started talking about it.

Neville sits back on the couch, deflated. “So we stop. We do nothing.”

For a Gryffindor, she can imagine that’s pretty much a worst outcome.

“No,” Hannah says. “We don’t do nothing. We just put our energies elsewhere.”

Neville frowns at her. “Meaning what?”

Hannah glances around the room. “This place can be anything we need it to be, right?”

Neville nods. “Sure.”

“Then we make what students don’t have out there. We make it safe. And fun.”

Ginny frowns at her. “Are you suggesting we have a…party?”

Hannah beams. “Yeah. I think I am.”

“Can’t say that’s one of the options I considered,” Ginny says.

Hannah nudges her arm. “That’s because Slytherins have deplorable imaginations.”

They all laugh. After a moment, Ginny joins them.

* * *

While Hannah turns her focus to planning social activities, Ginny continues her lessons with Snape. As the risk of reprisal goes up, and the avenues of resistance begin to narrow and narrow, some days the practicing of this skill is the only thing that makes it feel like the walls aren’t closing in.

She has been gradually building her ability to use Legilimens without direct eye contact, with peeling apart minds one by one. And most importantly, casting it wordlessly. It’s incredibly challenging, but it’s nice to lose herself in something, to focus on one thing so completely.

This evening when she arrives in the potions classroom, Rosier is there guarding the door.
His eyes widen a bit as she enters.

She nods at him in acknowledgment and he nods back. He looks vaguely embarrassed, like he does nearly every time she sees him these days. Like he isn’t really sure how he ended up where he was, but doesn’t know how to get out of it either.

She imagines that describes a lot of them these days.

The only other student here is someone she doesn’t know very well. She thinks he may be one of Nadira’s cousins. Hassan, maybe? She wonders what he did to get stuck in here.

Snape enters after Ginny, crossing over to check on Hassan’s work. “Messy,” he says, swiping half of the pile into a bin. “Have more care or you will have to start again.”

Hassan doesn’t say anything, his face carefully blank.

“Miss Weasley,” Snape says, pulling out a stool and jabbing his finger at it.

She dutifully sits, her lip curling slightly in distaste at the smell emanating from the vat of flobberworms waiting to be carefully cleaned.

“Begin.” With that, he crosses over to the wall as if inspecting Slughorn’s stock organization system. To judge from his expression, he isn’t at all impressed.

Ginny ignores him, focusing down on the slimy flobberworms. After a while, she slips her hand down into her lap, fingers wrapping around her wand.

She’s gotten used to the feeling of many pressing minds, much more capable of separating them. Despite the fact that he is still in the room, Snape’s mind is more like an absence than a presence. But what’s more surprising is that Rosier’s mind is closed off as well. Only, more like surrounded. It’s a very unsubtle block.

She pulls back, glancing over at Snape, and he’s already watching her, one corner of his mouth curled in arrogant satisfaction. That’s when she realizes that he is deliberately shielding Rosier from her. Apparently he is more aware of what she’s been doing than she thought.

“Is there a problem, Miss Weasley?”

“No, sir.”

She turns back to the mindless task of eviscerating flobberworms. Next to her, Hassan works in silence, his cuts efficient.

“I will return in one hour to check on your work,” Snape says.

Ginny waits a few minutes before stretching out her mind again. Hassan’s is easy enough to find since it is the only one available, but she still proceeds cautiously, practicing a rippleless infiltration. Snape has been lowering the dose of mist over time, both from the necessity of the students having faculties enough to serve detention, and to test Ginny.

From a distance, Ginny observes Hassan’s mind, the flicker of various memories and thoughts, the hum of voices in a language she doesn’t understand. Out of the corner of her eye something flickers.

She follows the memory, even as it slides through her fingers. Her feet quicken as it moves further and further away. She slips between a tight passageway and another, tall stone walls pressing high
on either side. When she steps out into an open courtyard, for a moment the sunlight is nearly blinding.

A single person stands in the center, near a small trickle of water. Ginny stays where she is, watching carefully.

He turns towards her. “Get out.”

Ginny pauses, looking behind her. There is no one there. When she turns back, he is nearly upon her.

“Get. Out,” he bites out.

His hand closes around her arm, real and solid and painful.

Ginny chokes back a scream, because she is ripping apart. She can feel it, his mind ruthlessly rifling through her thoughts, her past, her feelings. Not like a search, but like an assault. It takes an endless agonizing moment—minute? Hour? Lifetime? She can’t tell—to finally wrench her defenses in place.

Her chair scrapes against the dungeon floor as she pulls back into the physical plane.

They stare at each other a long moment, minds hard and closed, almost grinding against each other.

Then he shoves up and out of his chair, rushing towards her, and Ginny scrambles up as well, but his hand is hard on her chest as he slams her back into the wall, knocking her wand from her fingers.

“Oi,” Rosier shouts somewhere in the distance.

Hassan’s hand closes around her throat, brow sweaty and half-confused as if he is still struggling under the effects of the mist. Between his mind and reality.

There is shouting, other people in the space, but all Ginny sees is the panicked rage in his eyes, the feel of her empty, helpless fingers.

Things begin to dim around the edges.

*Is that all you’ve got, little girl?*

No.

With what small amount of control she has left, she grabs his wrist, gathering a swell of magic in her hand. *Careful*, she can hear Nymue advise, *not too much, never give too much of yourself*.

Hassan’s fingers tighten, and Ginny pushes the energy out.

He sucks in a startled breath, and then his eyes are rolling back in his head. He falls at her feet, unconscious.

Ginny nearly falls with him, leaning back against the wall on shaking legs, coughing and gasping for air.

When she can, she lifts her head, looking around the room. Rosier is watching her with wide eyes, mouth hanging agape. Snape is the one who is halfway across the room, as if he just rushed in. He looks between her and Hassan.
With measured movements, he leans down and picks up her wand from where it landed on the floor, and she knows in that moment that he saw exactly what she did.

Unceremoniously, Snape flicks his wand at Rosier, and he slumps to the ground unconscious as well.

Ginny’s breath is still heaving in her chest, her head dizzy from the invasion, from the loss of magic. “He knows,” she says, voice shaking. “He knows.”

“I will take care of it,” Snape says, still somehow sounding completely calm.

Ginny stumbles towards the table, her hand gripping the back of her chair before lowering herself into it.

Snape places her wand on the table in front of her with a deliberate click. He waits, as if expecting her to explain how she defended herself with no wand. She keeps her lips pressed tightly shut. After a moment, Snape moves away towards Hassan, pushing his robes out of the way as he squats.

“Fortunately,” he says, his fingers pressed to Hassan’s neck, “he lives.”

Ginny looks up at him in alarm. She hadn’t considered the magic to be so powerful it could kill. Surely Nymue would have said something. Wouldn’t she?

“I apologize,” Snape says, still looking down at Hassan. “I did not realize his training was quite so advanced.”

She looks up at him. “But you knew he was trained?”

He regards her, completely unapologetic. “You needed to know.”

She doesn’t know if he means what it feels like to have someone fight back, or just not to let herself get complacent. A warning to always be cautious. To be ready to defend.

She rubs at her throat, wondering if bruises are already rising. “Well now I do,” she says. “Mission accomplished.”

He graciously ignores her sarcasm, turning back to the unconscious students.

She sits in silence as she watches him Obliviate both of them.

Hassan never once stirs.

*   *   *

Ginny feels a little fuzzy the next three days. Both from the attack and from the wandless defense. Such magics always have a high price, she’s been told. But only now does she really understand it.

She allowed herself to forget an important fundamental thing about Nymue. Not even she is to be completely trusted. She’s never lived, after all, and can’t die, so how can she be expected to truly understand the costs the living might pay?

A foolish mistake Ginny won’t make again.

She’s so lost in her thoughts and the fatigue of her body, that she nearly drops all her books as she collides with someone in the hall.
A younger student looks up at her in alarm, mumbling an apology.

She shakes her head, knowing she needs to pay better attention. There’s a shout down the next corridor, no doubt the Enforcement Squad once again happily at work. They’ve been emboldened by the long silence of the DA, the complete absence of any and all pushback.

Ginny sighs, thankful at least that the Carrows seem to have taken it as victory enough. Far less students are being tortured in class, and nothing like Michael has happened again.

It will have to be enough.

“Ginny.”

She looks up to find Bassenthwaite striding down the hall towards her, people stepping out of his way not just out of respect for his bulk, but the thunderous expression on his face, she imagines.

“What is it?” she says when he gets to her side.

His jaw flexes. “It’s Reiko.”

Ginny feels something cold and heavy lodge in her stomach. “Where is she?”

He just kind of lifts his brow, his head jerking to the side, and there is only one place he wouldn’t be willing or able to openly talk about. “I thought it would be…safest.”

Abandoning all thoughts of Potions, Ginny turns on her heel and heads for the Room of Requirement, vaguely noting that people melt out of her way almost as quickly.

As it’s the middle of the day, there are few people inside, so it doesn’t take Ginny long to locate Reiko sitting on a bench next to Nicola.

Nicola looks up as they enter, looking relieved. “They’re back,” she says to Reiko.

Ginny comes to a stop in front of them, sucking in a startled breath when Reiko looks up at her.

“It’s nothing,” she insists, swiping impatiently at the tears on her face, only managing to mix them with the blood. “I’m fine.”

Ginny ignores her, instead quietly cataloging each cut and bruise on her ravaged face. She turns to Bassenthwaite. “Find Hannah.”

He nods, giving Reiko’s shoulder a squeeze before striding out the door.

Ginny turns back the Reiko, not crossing the space between them. “Who?”

Reiko shakes her head, and part of that, Ginny can’t help but see, is fear.

Ginny’s hands tighten into fists. “The Carrows?”

“No.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It wasn’t the Carrows,” she bursts out.

“Then who?” Ginny demands.
Reiko sighs a little bit. “Crabbe and Goyle.”

“Okay,” Ginny says, feeling a frightening sort of steadiness settle over her.

“It was stupid of me,” Reiko says. “I went down to the pitch on my own and they… Stupid.”

“Reiko,” Ginny snaps. “There is no universe in existence where this is your fault.”

Something in the girl’s expression falters, her lip trembling, and Ginny considers that Reiko’s bluster is all she has holding her together.

Luckily Hannah bustles in then, Neville and Bassenthwaite right on her heels. Hannah sucks in a breath, eyes filling with tears of horror.

Reiko straightens, her chin lifting.

Hannah seems to pull herself together, sitting carefully down next to Reiko. She rubs gently at her shoulder. “Is it just your face?”

“And my back,” Reiko says.

Hannah hedges, looking up at Ginny. “I don’t really have the right supplies…”

“I’m not going to Pomfrey,” Reiko says. Ginny is happy to see the old familiar spark of defiance in her eye. “I won’t give the gits the satisfaction.”

Hannah shakes her head. “I really think it would be best…”

“No.”

Hannah looks at Ginny, for support, no doubt.

Ginny considers Reiko. “She stays.”

“Ginny,” Hannah protests.

“She stays.”

“Okay, fine,” Hannah says, relenting. “I’ll do what I can.”

Hannah efficiently organizes all of them, setting Neville to collecting supplies and Nicola brewing a pain potion.

“Sit there,” she says to Bassenthwaite, gesturing at the open space next to Reiko.

When everything is ready, Hannah carefully cleans and dresses Reiko’s face when the cuts prove to be curse-induced.

Ginny watches the way Reiko slowly quiets under Hannah’s careful, solicitous care, her head eventually coming to rest on Bassenthwaite’s shoulder.

Once the bruises on her back are also dealt with, they help her over to Nicola’s cot, the potion beginning to settle in.

Through it all, Ginny has stood and watched, pushing back her horror and rage and the urge to run out and punch someone.
“Reiko,” Ginny says once she can trust her voice to be steady.

She opens her eyes.

“I will take care of this.” It’s a promise.

Reiko nods, her expression grim.

Ginny turns to leave, Bassenthwaite following her to the door.

Neville falls into step with them. “What are we going to do?”

“We?” Ginny asks, voice calm as if there isn’t lava roiling in her stomach. “We are going to do nothing. We already decided the DA can’t take any more risks.”

Neville touches her arm, pulling her to a stop. “Ginny.”

“They’re Slytherins,” she says. “And we take care of our own.”

She glances at Bassenthwaite. He nods grimly back at her, ceding this matter to her.

She walks out.

* * *

Ginny’s first Unforgivable Curse falls from her lips with greater ease than she thought it possibly could. It’s not just easy, it’s…pleasant. Alluring.

She forced herself to sit on her intentions for two solid days. Long enough for the rumors to circulate and start to fade. Long enough for perpetrators to feel comfortable.

It the end, it will only make the fall so much more effective.

“Draco,” she says.

In the hall, he turns to her, his eyes just the slightest bit glassy. “Yes?” he asks.

“Come with me.”

He nods, falling in step next to her. They walk in silence through the halls and down the staircase, people watching their passage with interest.

“Through here,” she says, gesturing at a door.

Inside Myrtle’s bathroom, two Ravenclaw second-years are sitting at the base of the taps, ignorant of what history lurks beneath them.

“Out,” Ginny says.

They scramble away.

Once they are gone, Ginny holds her hand out. “Give me your wand, Draco.”

He dutifully digs it out of his robes and hands it to her.

“Stand against the wall.”
He steps up against it, looking up at her, his expression completely unconcerned as he waits for her next command.

He hasn’t resisted at all, and it occurs to her that she could make him do anything. Say anything. The power of the spell…

She could own him.

She flicks her wrist, the spell lifting.

Draco sags forward, breath heaving. He looks up at her, glaring, his face florid. “What the hell--”

“Spare me your empty threats, Draco,” she says, pointing her wand at him. “You aren’t really in a position to complain.”

His chin lifts, but she can see the fear in his eyes.

She lets out a humorless scoff. “Doesn’t feel good, does it?” she asks, thinking back to the things he did to her when they were younger. “To be completely at someone’s mercy?”

He seems to pull himself together, a sneer on his face. “Oh, is that what this is? Petty revenge in the girls’ loo?”

“You’re the one who’s a fan of girls’ loo,” she shoots back.

He flushes, but this is a little too close to using something against him she swore she never would. She forces herself to take a breath. “I’m just here to have a little conversation about your goons.”

“My goons?” Draco asks, brow furrowed.

“Crabbe and Goyle. You need to get them under control,” she says.

Draco huffs. “Is that a threat?”

“Do it. Or I’ll do it for you. And I’m not sure you’ll like my methods.”

He seems to consider her, his lips curling with distaste. “Wonder what they’d think, seeing you now? Your precious big brothers. The heroic Potter.”

She feels the dig of that, but refuses to let it show. “They aren’t here, are they? So I don’t think it really matters.”

She steps towards him, liking the way he recoils. But rather than cursing him, she merely puts his wand down on the edge of the sink. “We’re all masters of our own fate. This is your only warning.”

She turns to walk away.

“He killed her himself,” he says, voice vicious.

She stops, feeling something hard and cold lodge itself in her chest. She turns back to look at him. “What?”

“Burbage,” Draco says, spitting her name like something disgusting. “She begged, right up to the end.”

Ginny’s hand tightens on her wand, her vision seeming to sharpen.
“But it didn’t matter,” he says, voice wavering. “He killed her. Fed her body to his snake. Right there in front of all of us.” He swallows, looking nauseous.

Ginny paces back to him, shoving him up against the wall, her wand across his throat. For a moment the rage is so powerful that she feels nearly overwhelmed by it. By what she could do with it.

“If you told me that to scare me,” she says, “you’ve seriously miscalculated.”

He glares at her. “I’m just trying to talk some sense into you! You and your bloody holy crusade.”

She leans into him. “I’ll show you a holy crusade, Draco. You and your mates are going to see it up close, firsthand. I promise you that.”

“You’re wasting your breath,” he snarls. He lifts his arm, his hand twisting into a fist above the black stain on his arm. “There’s nothing worse you can do to me than he can.”

She rips her eyes away from the repulsive tattoo. “I think you’ll find that’s where you’re wrong.”

His eyes drop away. “It doesn’t matter. They won’t listen to me,” he admits, as if it pains him to do so, but his own self-preservation requires it of him.

She isn’t blind. She sees the way people treat Draco now, like he’s got some disease they could all get just by brushing against him. The way people talk about the Malfoys in hushed whispers as if their fate is a horror story.

In that moment she finds she believes him, that he doesn’t have any control over Crabbe and Goyle anymore. His pet monsters have finally broken away from him.

She pushes away from him. “You’ve dug yourself a really deep hole there, haven’t you, Draco?”

He lifts his head, looking back at her with eyes bright with tears of helpless rage, but also somehow terribly knowing. “We’re all in pretty deep these days, wouldn’t you say?”

They regard each other for a long moment.

“Yeah,” she says. “I guess we are.”

She turns and walks away from him, speaking back over her shoulder as she goes. “Let them know I’m coming or don’t. In the end, it won’t matter.”

She knows what she has to do.

* * *

Ginny sits in the Parlor, her fingers tapping on the arm of her chair.

The girls keep giving her very unsubtle looks, and she considers part of that is how little time she has spent down here lately.

“Something is going to have to be done about Crabbe and Goyle,” she says.

By now, everyone has seen Reiko’s face. They don’t need an explanation.

Astoria and Caroline put down their magazines, Tilly coming over to sit on the couch.

“They’re bullies,” Astoria says.
“Yes,” Ginny agrees.

“What makes someone that way?” Flora wonders.


“So, what?” Millicent asks, voice cutting. “You’re going to defeat them with kindness?”

For the first time in a long while, Ginny finds herself thinking of Theodora, of that night of the Yule Ball so many years before. At the time it seemed like simple revenge, punishment for a crime. But Ginny sees it now, the public nature of that punishment, remembers the way everyone looked at Slytherin girls after that. It was reciprocity, yes, but it was also deterrence. It was a reminder to everyone what happens when you try to make a victim of a Slytherin girl.

“No,” Ginny says, pushing to her feet. “I’ll speak to them in a language they understand.”

“And what is that?” Hestia asks, looking wary.

“Fear,” Ginny says.

She walks into Nymue’s library.

* * *

They stake Crabbe and Goyle out in the courtyard in nothing but their pants. The moon retreats behind quickly moving clouds, the pale light failing to fully illuminate the shadows.

Ginny’s sisters stand witness in a half-circle behind her along with a few of Crabbe and Goyle’s victims, their faces carefully hidden in case this doesn’t go exactly as planned.

Ginny stands between them, her face clearly visible. She needs them to know who to fear, just who is watching.

“Wake them.”

Tilly steps forward, flicking her wand at each of the boys.

They rouse slowly, glancing around in confusion that blossoms quickly into panic. Crabbe balks when he sees Ginny, his face paling. It’s nice to see he hasn’t forgotten all of his fear of her. Goyle just looks incensed.

He tugs at his restraints. “Oh, you’ve gone and done it now, Weasley.”

Ginny walks forward between them, the stones cold under her bare feet, the hem of her long white robe trailing behind her. “You think you are in control? You think the Carrows can protect you?” She leans in, her hair falling forward around her shoulders. “There are far greater things to fear here than the Dark Lord.”

Their eyes widen, but they have no ready comeback.

Ginny pulls a knife from the sash at her waist, Goyle’s eyes widening. Crabbe starts to whimper.

Ginny gestures with the knife, one of her sisters lifting a shallow golden bowl and pushing it forward until it hovers between the boys.

Kneeling between them, Ginny knicks first Goyle’s arm and then Crabbe’s, a short stream of their
blood siphoning up into the bowl in a smooth arc of droplets. She plucks one strand of hair from her own head, dropping it into the bowl. Pulling a pouch from her waist, she sprinkles the blood with powdered bracken and dusky camas. With the tip of the knife, she stirs the mixture, three times in each direction.

Her movements are calm and sure as she lets blood drip from the blade, catching a few dark drops on a snowy piece of linen. In the middle of the dark stain, she places a thorny bramble, wrapping it up carefully. Squeezing her hand around the bundle, she fights back a hiss as the thorns pierce her palm.

Taking a deep breath, Ginny lifts her arms and pulls the ancient words up and out into the world as if they are blooming from the ageless earth. “Adixou cuamenai.”

She sways slightly under the flood of energy, not through her wand or from the magical ether, but from deep inside of herself. Crabbe and Goyle let out hoarse yelps as the surge of her magic burns out and through their blood.

Ginny’s own blood hums with the binding, her head swimming.

Taking the bundle, she places it in a small leather pouch, drawing the string tight around the opening. She lifts it over her head, letting the pouch settle between her breasts, resting against her heart.

Picking up a quill, she dips it in the blood, carefully writing a string of runes on each of their foreheads, even as her hands shake. When she’s finished, she vanishes the bowl and quill, tucking the knife carefully back in her sash.

She steps back, another sister stepping forward to hand Ginny her wand. Wrapping her hand around the familiar wood, she carefully enunciates another complex incantation. She feels winded, weak like she hasn’t eaten in days, but manages to properly execute the spell. She has to.

A golden aura builds around Crabbe and Goyle as she speaks the words, bright and sharp and casting everything in the courtyard in black and white. With a sharp slash of her wand, the aura collapses, tightening around the boys’ throats. For long moments they seem to struggle for breath, their bodies writhing, eyes wide.

She lets them struggle.

As she watches them, for a moment it isn’t their faces, but another in front of her.

*I’ll take out your whole blood traitor family. And I’ll enjoy it.*

“Ginny,” one of the girls whispers, voice urgent and afraid.

“Tacento ;” Ginny barks, her wand dropping.

Crabbe and Goyle gasp, coughing and sucking in air.

“What, what did you do?” Goyle asks, voice barely a rasp.

Ginny holds her hands in front of her, palms out. “Know that whatever harm you visit on a student of this school shall be revisited on you tenfold.”

“So it will be,” the girls echo. They retreat into the shadows, disappearing with barely a whisper.

Ginny spears the boys with a hard glance, the moon sliding out from behind a cloud, falling across her in cold, hard light. “I will be watching.”
She steps back into the darkness, leaving them to the cold.

*     *     *

Crabbe and Goyle are bundled to the infirmary the next morning, their lips blue from exposure, but not before nearly every student in the castle has witnessed their humiliation first hand. Rumor has it that no matter how much they are questioned, they can’t seem to tell anyone what happened. In fact, any time they try, their tongues curl back in their mouths, their throats swelling closed.

After a full day of tests and potions, they get released back to their rooms, walking back through the common room with their faces red with rage and embarrassment.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Crabbe snaps at a second-year, shoving the boy out of his way.

Ginny watches, but doesn’t say anything. Patience is all that this will require.

It’s just after midnight when the first screams begin to echo through the Slytherin dorms. Two boys, shrieking in terror, locked in nightmares. It lasts for nearly an hour.

Ginny lies in the dark and listens, the bramble charm lying heavy against her heart.

Fear is a particularly useful tool.

She closes her eyes.

Her own dreams are as dark and still as death.

*     *     *

“They were screaming all night,” Martin says, yawning. “That’s three bloody nights now. Even with Dreamless Sleep Potion.”

Demelza rubs his shoulder. “Well, you do look slightly more awful than usual.”

“I’m too tired to be angry about that,” he says, looking up at her through slitted eyes.

“Pity,” Demelza shoots back. “Your face is almost passable when you’re angry.”

He snorts.

Neville claps his hands, giving Ginny a long-suffering glance, like he has no idea how he is supposed to run a defense class when there’s gossip to be had. “Come on, I want to see those Revulsion Jinxes.”

“They wouldn’t do it,” Euan reports.

“What?” Demelza asks, looking over at the younger boy.

“In our Dark Arts class today. Goyle was supposed to curse one of the first-years. He just stood there, his wand shaking, but couldn’t bring himself to do it.”

“You’re kidding,” Demelza says, eyes wide.

Neville gives Ginny a long look, but doesn’t ask.

A lot of people in the castle are giving Ginny long looks these days.
Crabbe and Goyle haven’t been able to tell. Still it’s enough that every student in the castle suspects. So be it.

*     *     *

“Weasley,” Amycus says as they are all filing out of their midday Dark Arts class. “You will stay behind.”

The other students shoot each other curious looks, many of them lingering in hopes of seeing something to report.

“Of course, sir,” Ginny says, as if this is no big deal.

It was really only a matter of time, she knows. They already suspect her for the disappearance of Nicola. And now, Crabbe and Goyle. It’s an affront to their illusion of power, having their favorite pets neutered so effectively.

Amycus gestures for her to follow him into his office.

“What do you know about what happened to Crabbe and Goyle?”

“Nothing,” Ginny says, sitting in the chair indicated by Amycus. “All I’ve heard is rumor.” She leans in, as if excited to have a chance to get some first hand gossip to pass on herself. “Have Crabbe and Goyle really not been able to tell you?”

“You know very well they haven’t.”

Ginny turns to see Alecto standing in the doorway behind her. “Me?” she asks, making her face fall into lines of confusion.

Alecto snorts. “You forget. I was in Slytherin too. You think you’re so much better than everyone else.”

Ginny supposes that answers the question of whether or not Alecto ever received an invitation.

“What? Nothing to say?” Alecto says, clearly annoyed that she hasn’t made Ginny lose her temper. As if a few nasty words could ever push Ginny to rashness.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know anything,” Ginny says.

Amycus steps forward, a feral smile on his face that sends a shiver of fear down Ginny’s spine. “Then I reckon we’ll have to find a way to loosen your tongue.”

With a flick of his wrist, ropes bind Ginny to the chair, a feeling of helplessness crawling up her throat. She pushes the terror ruthlessly back. *Fear is a tool. It does not control you.*

Amycus lifts his wand.
She knows she screams. No control in the world is strong enough to withstand the pain of Cruciatu, particularly by wizards as skilled in its use as the Carrows. What she can’t tell is how many times they curse her, how long it lasts. It seems to go on and on and on, but could easily have only been moments.

When it finally lifts, she hangs forward against the ropes, feeling sweat dripping down her face. Her muscles continue to twitch with residual magical energy.

“Please,” she pants when she has enough breath to. “I don’t know anything”

Alecto growls, striding towards her and grabbing her chin. “You think we don’t know what you are?” she hisses.

*I am stone, she thinks. I am stone and you are water, flowing past. You aren’t anything but a wisp of wind.*

“You and your blood traitor family?” Alecto says, breath hot on her cheek.

Amycus laughs. “Maybe she thinks her pretty face will protect her.”

Alecto considers Ginny, finger trailing down her cheek. “What if she weren’t so pretty anymore?”

Ginny stares back at her, concentrating on controlling her breathing and not how far into her space she is.

Alecto slashes her wand. Ginny’s head slams back into the chair as if someone punched her across the face. Stars swim in her vision, blood blooming on her tongue.

“What is going on in here?” a mild voice asks.

Ginny doesn’t look up, still fighting the pain in her face, the woolliness of her brain, but easily recognizes Snape’s voice.

“Just asking Weasley a few questions about what happened to Crabbe and Goyle,” Amycus says.

“And what have you learned?” Snape asks, sounding almost bored.

“Nothing yet,” Amycus says. “But we’ve really only just begun.”

Ginny hears footsteps, seeing Snape’s feet edge into her line of sight.

“Perhaps there is a flaw in your approach,” he says, something snide and superior in his tone.

“You can keep your fancy potions and minds tricks,” Alecto says. “Pain rarely fails to get results, given long enough.”

Ginny tries not to quail at the thought.

Without warning, Alecto hits her with another round of Cruciatu, briefer this time. Ginny ends up leaning back against the chair, face tipped up.

“I don’t know anything,” she repeats, swallowing against the bitter tang of bile in her throat. “I swear. I would tell you, I would.”

Alecto lifts her wand.
Ginny shrinks back with a whimper.

“Enough,” Snape says.

“Oh, no,” Amycus counters. “I think we’ve barely begun.”

Snape gives him a look like he’s a particularly annoying bug. “If there is information to be found, I will get it from her.”

“Look here, Snape,” Alecto snarls. “I know you have a soft spot for this one, but--.”

Snape silences her with a single glance. “Leave.”

The siblings share an uneasy glance, finally exiting with little grace. Alecto looks at Ginny one last time with an expression that seems to promise retaliation at some future point.

The door closes, leaving Ginny alone with Snape. She doesn’t particularly find that a relief.

Snape doesn’t say anything, just stands watching her.

Ginny licks her lips, tasting the metallic tang of blood. “I don’t know anything,” she repeats, words almost like a mantra at this point.

Snape regards her for a long moment. “Would it matter if you did?”

She stares back at him, her shoulders lowering. “No,” she says, voice evening out. “I don’t suppose it would.” He’s trained her far too well.

She feels herself list slightly forward against the ropes.

If Snape notices, he doesn’t let on. “I find this entire situation with Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle quite…perplexing.”

Ginny makes a vague sound of interest, trying her best to ignore the painful throbbing in her face.

Snape sits in the chair across from her, leaning back as if they are having a casual philosophical lesson. “What I find particularly interesting is that while the tongue-twisting charm used on Crabbe and Goyle is quite advanced and nearly impossible to break, it would in no way require a blood price nor runic inscription to be effective.”

Ginny focuses on breathing, on keeping her face vaguely curious.

“While it is possible this encompasses some arcane magic I am not familiar with, as far as I could tell the runes only spelled out some particularly creative insults.”

She swallows carefully. “That is interesting. Maybe the person who did it had no idea what they were doing.”

Snape’s eyes narrow. “Or knew exactly what they were doing.”

She takes a careful breath. “I suppose it would be foolish to assume one understands all there is to know about the limitless kinds of magics in the world.”

“I suppose it would.”

With a flick of his wand, the ropes holding Ginny disappear, nearly dumping her on her face.
Snape grabs her shoulder to keep her upright. “Do you need to go to the infirmary?” he asks, more matter-of-fact than particularly caring.

She starts to shake her head, only to think better of it. “No, sir.”

He opens his mouth to say something else, only to stop, his eye caught by something. He frowns, brushing her hair back from her shoulder. His finger pulls at the cord hanging around her neck, and she feels the pouch shift against her chest.

Before Ginny can think of anything to say, anything to deflect his attention from the one place she can least afford to have it, Snape’s hands drops away from her like he’s been burned.

He leans back, his fingers rubbing against each other as if trying to rid itself of an irritating texture. “You may return to your dorm.”

“Yes, sir,” she says. She stands, fighting a wave of dizziness.

Snape simply watches her, face impassive.

Finding her equilibrium, she walks across the room. She just reaches the door when Snape says, “This was foolish.”

“No,” she says, not turning back to look at him. “Necessary.” Otherwise she never would have risked it.

She walks out of the chamber.

* * *

The common room is very full when she returns, more full than it has any right to be considering the time of day.

Then again, she supposes word of mouth is a powerful thing, and everyone wants to see what happened to the supposedly invulnerable Ginny Weasley.

Crabbe and Goyle look up at her as she enters, the two of them nudging each other. She turns and stares at them, and only once she’s absolutely certain she has their full attention, she smiles. It’s a giant, stretching thing, baring her probably bloody teeth, completely uncowed and unafraid.

You think this makes a difference? her smile asks. I’m still here. I’m still watching.

They both seem to pale. Sitting next to them is Draco, looking worn and wary, but as always quiet. He could have told what she threatened, what she did to him, but he hasn’t. She isn’t sure that actually means anything other than Draco has decided being as small and quiet and forgotten as possible is his best possible chance for survival.

They aren’t the only ones watching her, eyes all over the common room appraising the situation. Ginny lifts her chin.

She catches Tobias watching her.

She meets his gaze unapologetically.

He belatedly looks away.

Without another word, Ginny turns and walks calmly to The Parlor. They are all waiting downstairs.
for her.

There is a long moment as they all take in her face.

Tilly is the one to break the silence. “I’ve got something for that,” she says.

“Okay,” Ginny says, crossing over the couch, sinking into it with a sigh.

“The Carrows did that to your face,” Caroline says.

Next to her, Hestia flinches.

“Yes,” Ginny says, massaging her leg. Her muscles are still twitching.

“Because of Crabbe and Goyle,” Caroline presses.

“Yes.”

“How did they know?” Astoria wonders.

“Someone must have told them,” Millicent says, looking around with narrowed eyes.

“Not one of us. It must have been one of the others!” Caroline says.

Flora stands up. “What, you think Reiko would tell? They beat her up!”

Millicent crosses her arms over her chest with a huff. “Yeah, well, there’s worse ways to buy protection.”

Ginny smacks her hand down on the table, the thump ringing through the room. The girls fall silent.

“You think this happened because someone tattled on me?” Ginny says, voice hard and even.

The girls all give each other wary looks.

“This happened because they have no idea what happened. Because they were reminded that they don’t run this school. This,” she says, gesturing at her face, “is a sign of their weakness, not ours.”

The girls seem to consider that.

“Because even after all this, they still don’t know anything,” Ginny says.

“And you’re still here,” Tilly says, holding out an ice pack.

“Yeah,” she says, taking it. “I am.”

“You’ve never asked us,” Flora says, words pouring out almost in a rush.

Ginny looks up at the twins, ice pack still pressed to her face. It feels in many ways like she’s been waiting to have this conversation all year. “Asked you what?”

Hestia gives her an impatient look. “If we’re related to them. If they are our family.”

Ginny very carefully sets her ice pack down on the table, aware that every ear in the room is tuned to this conversation. The chances of two sets of twins with the surname Carrow not being related are slim, but that is far from the point. “Does it matter?”
“Look what they did to you!” Hestia bursts out.

Ginny touches her face, her fingers coming away stained red. “Blood….,” she says, rubbing her fingers together, feeling the slickness between them. “It matters. It’s important. But you don’t choose it.” She glances around at the room, everyone having put their work aside, their attention fully on Ginny. “This place. That is a choice.”

“So you blindly trust all of us?” Astoria says.


They aren’t Gryffindors. They aren’t Hufflepuffs. There is nothing blind or absolute about what they do. Trust is perhaps the trickiest thing of all. They all know that when it comes down to it, betrayal is always possible. There will always be something they would be willing to damn everything else to protect.

“I know each of you are loyal to this place, and thus to each other, to the best of your abilities. I trust in that.” She looks at Hestia and Flora. “So, no. I’ve never asked you. And I never will.” She puts the ice on her face and leans back into the couch.

“How about a drink?” Tilly asks, hand touching her shoulder.


Tilly laughs.

The couch dips as Millicent lowers herself on the couch next to Ginny.

Ginny eyes her. “I take it you disagree?”

Millicent shrugs as if it’s immaterial. She holds up a slim bound book. “I have some designs here you might like to look over.”

Ginny sits forward with interest. “For a tattoo?”

Millicent flips through some images. “I started with snakes, but then I thought…”

“Yeah,” Ginny says, not particularly keen to tattoo herself with a symbol that has been so thoroughly corrupted.

“Keep it,” Millicent says. “Look them over.”

“Okay,” Ginny says, tucking the journal into her chest. “Thank you.”

Millicent nods. She shifts as if to get up, only seeming to think better of it. “You know, I actually asked Antonia once, why they brought you in.”

Ginny calmly looks back at Millicent, knowing that whatever she may say, it no longer matters. “Did you?”

“She said because you ask questions. The sort most people never bother to think, let alone ask.”

Millicent shakes her head. “Personally, I think that makes you mental.”

Ginny laughs, wincing at the pain in her jaw.

Millicent shrugs. “Mental like Antonia and Theodora were, I suppose.”
“Maybe,” Ginny says. She holds up the book. “Thank you for this.”

Millicent nods and disappears back into her corner.

*     *     *

The next day, Ginny returns to the DA. Part of her wants to avoid it, but she forces herself. She walks in, and sure enough, everyone seems to stop what they are doing, looking her over.

The bruise on her face has settled into a deep purple that no charm will ever be able to lift. She just has to wait for it to fade on its own. Proving yet again that for all Alecto is quick to act, she is still perfectly aware of the impact of her actions.

Ginny’s face will be a reminder of what happens to students even suspected of wrongdoing for weeks to come.

A few people give her grim nods, but keep their distance.

“Oh, Ginny,” is all Hannah says, pulling her into a hug.

Ginny pats her on the back, lingering a moment before pulling back. “It couldn’t be helped,” she says.

A cost is a cost, after all.

Terry just frowns, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s disturbing,” he declares.

“Thanks,” Ginny says.

He shakes his head. “I think we all just assumed you were untouchable.”

“No one is untouchable,” Ginny says.


Someone touches her shoulder. She turns to find Reiko standing there, her face still a mass of bruising as well.

Reiko looks at her face. “Thank you,” she says.

Ginny shakes her head. “I should have done something sooner.”

“How could you have known?” Reiko says. “I was so convinced I could deal with it by myself.” She shakes her head. “Stupid.”

“Yeah,” Ginny agrees. “Stupid.”

Reiko pulls a face.

Ginny pats her on the shoulder. “Take comfort in knowing it’s going around.”

“That isn’t at all comforting.”

Ginny laughs, wincing as the skin on her face pulls.

Martin walks up, holding out a broom to Reiko. “Enough chatter. Lets see how rusty you are.”
Reiko scowls, snatching it from him. “If you’re the one with the bat, I could be unconscious and still get to the snitch.”

Martin laughs. “Well, your mouth certainly isn’t rusty.”

Martin gives Ginny a small nod, his expression sobering for a brief moment, then he’s dashing off to catch up with Reiko.

They continue to bicker as they walk over to join other students holding brooms. Ginny glances up, seeing that today the ceiling stretches impossibly high, the room seeming to sweep on forever.

“Is there much pain?” Hannah asks.

Ginny shakes her head. “It looks worse that it feels.” Which is mostly true.

Hannah doesn’t look like she believes that for a moment.

Ginny crosses her arms over her chest. “I know you’re probably disappointed in me.”

_We aren’t monsters._

Hannah touches her arm. “Go play Quidditch.”

“What?”

“Go,” she says, giving her a small push. “It’s important.”

Taking a breath, Ginny forces herself to walk over to Bassenthwaite. He’s watching the tangle of students with his arms crossed over his chest. She knows he probably put this together for Reiko’s benefit.

She’s right in the middle, cussing out Roper as they pull for teams, her face bright in a way Ginny hasn’t seen in a while.

“It’s nice to see a smile on her face.”

He takes a moment to look her over. “You could use a smile on your face too,” he points out.

“Didn’t take you for a mother hen.”

“Sod off,” he says, giving her a broad smile.

“Come on then,” Ginny says, grabbing a broom. “Stop boasting and start kicking my arse.”

For two hours she’s weightless, with wind in her hair and the burn of exertion in her muscles.

Seven full days after Ginny cursed Crabbe and Goyle, she takes the charm from around her neck and places it in a small box. She is so glad to have the prickly weight of it gone.

Later that evening, Millicent gives her a new tattoo. It takes hours. Hours of tiny pricks into her skin as the image comes into being. Unlike her last tattoo, this she remembers every moment of.

It hurts.

She’s glad.
Sixth Year – Part Four

The nightmares end, the Slytherin dorms falling silent once again. And with it, the entire castle seems to slip back into quiet expectation.

There are no more pranks, no more posters. Even the Enforcement Squad seems dispirited. Or terrified of a similar fate, everyone aware of the way Crabbe and Goyle creep about the castle as if to avoid notice.

Even the Carrows stop trying to get either of them to do any of their dirty work.

Outside the snow begins to thaw, and Ginny picks up her quill to dutifully write yet another letter to the ghoul wearing her brother’s face.

*Happy Birthday, Ron*, she writes.

Another letter carefully woven of lies for the people reading any and all missives coming in and out of Hogwarts. She writes of classes not full of torture and boring detentions not spent learning Legilimency and how much of a wanker Tobias is.

She doesn’t write about how students still disappear without a trace. That Ginny and the DA scoop up as many of them as they can before it’s too late. The way the Room of Requirement is filling with hammocks, and the bathrooms that appeared, making it all feel more permanent than it has any right to.

She doesn’t write about the students who slipped through the cracks, the ones they couldn’t save. How hard she works to focus on the next student rather that the last failure. The way it has become their primary focus—survive the day, keep students alive, keep them hopeful.

Hannah arranges Exploding Snap tournaments and hair-braiding gatherings and chess challenges and dance parties, anything to give students even five minutes of not thinking about how terrible everything is.

Ginny doesn’t write about how hard it is sometimes to stay there for the social events. The way watching those students laugh and play despite everything going on feels like the only real thing in the world, and yet she always wonders. Wonders if she really belongs.

*Happy Birthday, Ron*, she writes instead, not letting herself wonder where he really is. How he really spends his 18th birthday.

She sends the letter off with an owl and goes back to walking the halls and listening. Waiting.

*      *     *

Ginny walks a few steps behind Neville as they slowly creep through the dark, quiet halls. Behind her, Justine, a fourth-year Ravenclaw, holds a small bag to her chest, looking surprisingly calm for having just been told that Voldemort is after her family.

Neville lifts his hand, Ginny putting her arm out to stop Justine. They all pause as they hear a sound, and not for the first time, Ginny wishes she had Harry’s bloody map. It would certainly make life easier. But that is a thought she doesn’t have any room for.
Neville lowers his arm, shooting Ginny a bracing smile over his shoulder.

They are almost to the closest entrance to the Room of Requirement when Tobias steps out from behind a suit of armor, his wand raised.

Neville lets out a hoarse exclamation of surprise, his wand lifting, but Tobias has the jump on them, barking out his curse. Justine barely lets out a squeak as she falls over in an unconscious heap.

Recovering quickly, Neville aims a curse at Tobias.

Ginny doesn’t bother trying to grab Neville’s arm, instead shouting, “Protego!”

Neville’s curse bounces off the shield that blooms between the two boys. He stares at Ginny as if this is a betrayal he never considered.

She raises her hands, wand in the air. “I don’t have time to explain, but he’s on our side. I swear.”

“What?” Neville looks back and forth between them. “But I thought...”

Ginny and Tobias share a grim glance. “Yeah, well, you were supposed to,” she says.

“Tis double pleasure to deceive the deceiver,” Tobias quotes.

This may have all started out as anger and regretful words between them, but they’d soon enough realized the value to be found in their very public falling out.

Neville slowly lowers his wand, still looking wary. “Wait. Is this how you--?”

“Neville,” Ginny says. “Maybe this isn’t the time or place for this?”

He blinks, glancing around the hallway. “Right,” he says.

“What’s this about, Tobias?” Ginny asks, gesturing at Justine’s prone body. He never would have blown his cover without reason.

“She’s a plant,” he says, stowing his own wand after giving Neville one more wary glance. “She was supposed to let you ‘save’ her to see how and where students were escaping, and report back to the Carrows.” He wipes at his forehead, which is beaded with sweat as if he ran here. “I just found out. And completely by accident.”

Ginny’s stomach drops. “Merlin,” she breathes, the implications of what they almost did squeezing her chest. Neville looks similarly disturbed.

Tobias shrugs. “Stupid blunderers were sure to have at least one smart idea eventually.”

Neville glances up and down the hall. “So now what? Just leave her here? She’s seen Ginny.” The Carrows would then know for certain that Ginny has been helping the resistance. This time they may not stop at merely torturing her.

Ginny ignores that for now, focusing on other matters. “Do you know why she did it?”

Tobias shakes his head. “Maybe they blackmailed her.”

That’s what Ginny is afraid of. It matters if Justine is being coerced somehow, if Tom has her family. She could still very well be a victim in this.
Ginny bites her lip. One way or another, they need to know. “Let’s get her out of the hallway.”

Neville and Tobias lift Justine and carry her into the nearest classroom. Ginny points to a chair.

After they’ve settled her, Ginny says, “Wake her.”

Tobias raises an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

Ginny nods, pulling another chair in front of Justine and lowering herself into it until they are eye to eye. “We need to know why she did it.”

“You can’t be sure she’ll tell us the truth,” Neville points out.

“No, we can’t,” Ginny agrees. “Which is why I’m not going to ask.”

Neville frowns but doesn’t ask.

“Watch the hall,” Ginny says to him.

He nods, moving back towards the door.

She looks up at Tobias. “Give me three minutes. If I don’t say anything by then, get my attention any way you can.”

“Sure,” he says, still wearing that mask of indifference that he has become far too used to.

“Tobias,” she says, squeezing his arm. “Promise me.”


She nods.

Tobias flicks his wand, and Justine sucks in a big breath, her eyes snapping open. She takes in the scene quickly, eyes narrowing when she sees Tobias, but settling on Ginny with something bordering on horror.

Ginny lifts her wand. “Legilimens.”

She’s never stepped into a mind that wasn’t softened. At first it is an utter whirlwind of screaming, competing thoughts and memories and feelings, and Ginny thinks she will drown completely in them. She wrestles with creating space, with flinging up boundaries.

This is me, she thinks. That is her.

The only saving grace is that the girl is completely untrained, not even the most rudimentary of defenses in place.

Justine, the middle child, the mouse, the forgotten. Not quite as smart as her siblings. Not quite as pretty. Just an afterthought. Ginny tries to sort through the girl’s life with care, digging and uncovering.

Justine weeps, shoving back with sheer blind panic against the intrusion and for a moment everything tips.

Stop, stop, stop!
“Ginny!” someone says, fingers hard on her arm.

_The water closes up over her head. She kicks and struggles, but the inky, cold water just pulls her further and further down, the heavy fabric of her robes tangling in her legs, and oh god oh god oh god I don’t want to die—_

A sharp pain as someone’s palm connects with her cheek, and Ginny jerks back with a gasp.

“Burke!” Neville shouts.

Tobias ignores him, kneeling down in front of her, his hands on her knees, fingers digging in. “Ginny.”

She focuses on him, reaching for him to steady herself, his hands closing around her elbows.

“All right, Gin?” he says, voice soft.

She nods. For a moment it’s too hard to tell where she ends and Justine begins, like the walls are porous.

_I’m right here, for fuck’s sake! Why can’t anyone see that? I matter! Please, Merlin, I matter._

“She volunteered,” she gasps, eyes closed tight.

Tobias looks surprised. “Her parents are Death Eaters?”

“No. She just wanted someone to actually see her.”

She looks up at Justine, the girl weeping noisily into her hands.

Ginny puts her hand on Tobias’s shoulder, leaning on him to stand up, lingering there a moment as her legs wobble dangerously. When she can, the two of them cross over to where Neville is standing by the door.

“They won’t punish her,” Ginny says, voice lowered.

“No,” Tobias agrees. “They’ll just be more convinced they’re being watched, that there’s a mole somewhere.”

Ginny gives him a sharp look. “Will this put you in danger?”

“Nah,” Tobias says. “I am far too useful.”

“You mean way too much of an arse-kisser.”

Tobias grins. “We all have our skill sets.”

If his eyes linger on the crying girl for a moment, Ginny pretends not to notice.

“Okay,” Ginny says. “I need to Obliviate her.”

“I’ve got it,” Tobias says, handing her off to Neville. “You’ve done enough.”

She doesn’t argue, leaning on Neville.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his arm wrapping around her waist.
She nods.

He gnaws on his lip. “Is this how…”

She looks at him. “Neville,” she says, voice sharper than she intends.

“Right,” he says, looking down at his feet. “The less I know the better.”

She sighs. “I’m sorry—”

He shakes his head, giving her a tentative smile. “You don’t have to apologize, Ginny. We’re all just trying to survive, right?”

Right.

That night when Ginny dreams, for the first time the nightmares aren’t her own.

* * *

In Dark Arts class later that week, Ginny walks past Neville on the way to her seat. He gives her a small nod before turning his attention back to Joanna.

He doesn’t seem to be treating her any differently, but she still wonders. Wonders how he feels about what he saw her do to Justine, if his conscience is troubled by it. Because her own isn’t, and she’s beginning to wonder what that may mean about her.

Ginny walks to the other side of the room, sitting down next to Tilly.

“Why don’t we start today with Mr. Burke,” Amycus says.

The class sits up a bit straighter. Starting with his favorite lapdog Tobias is always a sign that Amycus has decided he needs to prove some sort of point, and everyone here knows it.

Tobias gets to his feet, hopping up onto the raised dais like he doesn’t have a care in the world. He gives the class a careless smirk, stretching his neck side to side.

Amycus walks around the edges of the room as if considering his choices for Tobias’s opponent, like he doesn’t clearly already have someone in mind. He comes to a stop in front of Ginny. “And Miss Weasley.”

The students begin to whisper.

Ginny doesn’t know if this is a test, if after the debacle with Justine they suspect her. It could simply just be another way for Amycus to finish the punishment Snape interrupted. She doubts they suspect Tobias, but it’s possible.

Either way, the stakes are high, and they will have to perform.

“Of course, sir,” she says, getting to her feet. Instead of hopping up, she walks around the other side, calmly ascending the stairs.

They square off at either end of the platform.

Tobias looks back at her with cool eyes, saluting her with an insouciant flick of his wrist. She barely nods in return, her mind shuffling through spells and building a strategy.
“Begin.”

Amycus has barely finished the word when Tobias strides forward, attacking with an impediment jinx Ginny neutralizes with an absorption spell she immediately turns back on him in the form of a stunning spell. It makes a hollow ringing sound as it hits Tobias’s hastily thrown-up protection spell.

In the following silence, the only sound is that of students shuffling and whispering.

“Again,” Amycus says.

The students gasp and shout as Ginny and Tobias push back into motion. They are evenly matched, having practiced together in secret all year. They know exactly how the other thinks, how they approach defense and attack. It allows them to put on a great show with little chance of actually hurting each other. But Ginny also knows all too well the way this has to go.

Appearances must be kept, and Tobias’s safety is far more important than her pride.

In the middle of an intense volley of back and forth, she drops her arm, leaving herself open, and Tobias dutifully takes advantage.

She hits the ground with a grunt, her wand flying from her fingers. The pain slams through her body, and she takes a moment to recover before rolling over onto her back, pushing up her elbows.

Tobias stands over her, glancing up at Amycus for orders.

Amycus nods at him, and Ginny knows what is coming. She sucks in a deep breath, and it takes everything in her not to scramble away, not to plead.

Tobias lifts his wand, and it’s there, the barest hesitance. She glares at him with all of the power of hatred she has for the Carrows, and prays for him to mean it.

“Crucio,” he says.

Much later, he cries angry tears into her lap, but doesn’t ask for forgiveness.

* * *

“Are you certain you are well enough to resume?” Snape asks as she sits across the table from him. After a short break, their lessons have resumed.

“Yes, sir,” Ginny says. The bruise on her face has not even begun to fade, and her muscles still ache from her bout with Tobias, but she needs to keep working. Now more than ever.

“Very well.” He lifts his wand to cast a charm on her face.

“No,” she says, lifting her hand to stop him. “No more mist. No more crutches.”

If the near-debacle with Justine has taught her anything, it’s that she needs to stop holding back. This isn’t an academic exercise. It never has been really.

He doesn’t argue, just gives her a piercing look before laying out the consequences. “If you fail, they will know.”

“I won’t fail.”

She walks into the room.
In the weeks after Justine, something about Neville changes. Ginny doesn’t know if it’s the strain of
doing nothing, or a reaction to what he found out about Ginny and Tobias. If it’s the higher number
of students walking around with twitching muscles from the Cruciatus and bruises from Alecto’s
wand. If it’s the students who disappear before they can get to them. No matter the reason, he’s
started getting reckless again.

He’s been mouthing off in class, deliberately provoking both of the Carrows. Once again, he spends
a lot of time in detention. That does nothing to curb his tongue.

Which is why she isn’t all surprised when Amycus decides to start their next class with Neville.


For a moment Ginny thinks he’ll refuse, but after a long pause, he pushes to his feet and takes a spot
at one end.

“And Miss Kapani.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Tilly breathes as the young Slytherin girl looks up at the sound of
her name.

It’s another glaringly mismatched pair, a seventh-year versus a second-year. Yet stupidly brilliant at
the same time, because no matter what happens, Neville is going to look bad.

Neville looks enraged as Asha takes her place at the other end.

“Begin,” Amycus says.

Neville doesn’t lift his wand.

“A reminder that if you don’t fight, you both get detention,” Amycus drawls, giving them both a
feral grin.

Asha lets out a soft sound of distress. It’s one thing to get humiliated in front of the entire class,
another to spend a long night in the dungeons.

Neville ignores Amycus, instead looking at Asha. “I’m not going to fight you.”

“What?” she asks, wand visibly trembling in her hand.

He gives her an encouraging smile, the one Ginny’s seen him use on young students struggling with

“Please,” she says, looking at Amycus with something near panic in her face.

“Do what you have to,” Neville says.

“Miss Kapani,” Amycus says, voice hard.

Neville nods at her again. “Do it.”

In desperation, the girl flings a curse at him.

It’s little more than a stinging hex, Neville sucking in a breath as it hits, but keeping his feet firm.
“Not bad,” he says, rubbing at the spot. “But you aren’t holding your wrist quite right.” He lifts his hand, demonstrating the right angle.

Asha stares back at him nonplussed, the students beginning to whisper.

Neville shrugs, glancing around at the other students in the room. “We all know it’s wrong, using older students to punish the younger. They need teachers, not bullies.”

“Bloody hell,” Tilly murmurs next to Ginny. “Is he trying to get himself killed?”

Ginny shakes her head, her hands fisted in her robes.

“Quiet,” Amycus barks. “This is your final chance.”

Asha lifts her wand, looking for all the world like she’s trying to gather whatever will she possibly can. But after a long moment, her wand starts to dip. She shakes his head, looking terrified, but resolute, as if deciding she can’t find it in her to curse an unarmed student.

Ginny sucks in a breath, eyes glued to Amycus to see how he’s going to deal with this.

“Okay, Longbottom,” Amycus says. “Get down.”

Neville jumps down from the platform with a cocky grin like he’s scored an important point. Ginny is nowhere near ready to celebrate.

Amycus looks up at Asha, still standing on the stage. “Remember whose fault this is, girl.”

“What?” Asha says, taking a small step back.

Ginny leans forward. He wouldn’t, would he?

Neville stops, turning back to look. The smile slips from his face.

Amycus climbs up on the stage to stand across from the girl. “Wand up.”

Asha looks like she is going to pass out.

“Stop,” Neville says. “Just stop.”

Amycus doesn’t look away from Asha. “Finally willing to take my place?”

“No,” Neville says. “But I’ll take hers.”

Ginny curses under her breath. There’s no way Neville would deny himself the chance to fight back against the one person he’s been dying to touch.

Amycus smiles, the cruel gesture contorting his face. “Well now, that’s an interesting idea.”

Asha quickly climbs down, not passing by Neville as he takes the stage again.

Ginny gestures for Asha to take a seat next to her. It’s a small gesture, but loud all the same. Anything anyone wants to say about what Asha did or didn’t do will be at the risk of Ginny’s displeasure. Every Slytherin in the room knows it.

“You did well,” Ginny murmurs as the girl sits between her and Tilly.

Asha lets out a dismissive huff, but doesn’t argue, leaning back against her seat as if trying to hide
from the rest of the room.

Up on the stage Neville and Amycus square off, but Amycus doesn’t wait for anything like a bow or a count, just sets in on Neville immediately. Neville stumbles back, his wand lifting and defending as fast as he can. For a short while it seems like he may just be able to hold his own.

Except Amycus starts using spells Ginny has never even seen, let alone would have any idea how to protect against. Each one is more brutal than the last. Neville is struck time and time again, slashes opening on his face, his body hitting the ground more than once. It isn’t a duel, just a brutal beating.

But every time, Neville staggers back up to his feet.

*For Merlin’s sake,* Ginny thinks, *just stay down. Just give up!*

But he never bows, he never stops trying to get back up, and Amycus is hardly the only one to notice.

He finishes with the Cruciatus until Neville is writhing on the ground, spitting blood on the floor.

Next to Ginny, Asha weeps, covering her face, and she is far from the only one.

Ginny does neither. She just sits and watches. Watches so she will never forget.

Amycus pauses after the third round of the Cruciatus, shoulders heaving with a frightening mix of exhaustion and elation. “You’re just lucky you’re a Pureblood, boy,” he snarls. “Or I wouldn’t stop here.”

Neville shoves up on one shaking elbow, looking up at Amycus. Somehow, he manages to smile, blood staining his teeth. “And exactly how much Muggle blood do you and that sister of yours have?”

The entire class gasps, and Ginny has to wonder if maybe Neville really is trying to get himself killed.

Amycus lets out a guttural cry and then steps forward, swinging his foot into Neville’s stomach.

The physical violence is somehow more shocking than all of the spells, because Amycus has clearly lost control, and everyone knows it.

Neville laughs between painful gasps. “Is that…all you got?” he barely manages to get out.

For a moment Amycus seems on the verge of losing it completely, his face red and splotchy, wand nearly shaking with rage as he grips it.

“Lesson over!” he snarls and paces out of the room.

The students remain frozen in horror, so quiet that Ginny can hear the wheezing of Neville’s breathing. No one wants to be the first to move, the first to risk Amycus charging back in looking for another target.

In the end, it’s Ginny who is the first to stand, every eye swiveling to her. She walks over to the steps and quietly takes the stage. She crosses over to Neville, looking down at him for a long moment before kneeling next to him.

Slipping an arm behind his shoulders, she helps him up into a seated position.
“Ginny, you shouldn’t—” Neville starts to say, voice barely a whisper. They have all been very careful to keep their distance from Ginny when they are in the castle.

She looks into his ravaged face, the blood splattered on his robes. “As if you have any right to tell me to be cautious.”

After all, isn’t this what Neville was really trying to tell them all? He’s reminding them that some things are just more important than safety.

She looks around the room, everyone still taking in the gory details. “Didn’t you hear him? Lesson over. Get out.”

Most of the students don’t waste any time scrambling to their feet. Only Urquhart and Tobias seem to linger, talking quietly to each other as they go.

“Can you stand?”

He nods.

It takes Neville a while to find his feet, leaning a lot of his weight on Ginny as they gingerly work their way down the steps and out into the hall.

“Infirmary,” Ginny says, pulling him to the left.

Neville resists as much as he’s able, opening his mouth like he’s going to argue with her.

“You really think you can fight me?” she asks.

He lets out a shaky breath. “I would never be that stupid.”

Students in the hall seem to melt out of their way as they approach, whispers following in their wake. Ginny is aware of Nigel and Joanna trailing them, Asha just a few steps behind.

Word travels fast, because by the time they get to the infirmary, Hannah is there, hands wringing in front of her.

She gasps as she catches sight of Neville, her hand covering her face.

Ginny feels Neville tense.

But Hannah doesn’t yell or cry; just steps up on the other side of Neville, helping Ginny bear his weight.

“I’m sorry,” Neville says. “I just… I couldn’t let him win.”

Hannah doesn’t say anything.

Ginny is the one to tighten her arm around his back. “We know.”

They continue on to the infirmary in silence.

* * *

Despite being told to stay in the infirmary, Neville struggles back to his feet the next morning, dragging himself to class despite how absolutely horrendous he looks.
I’m not going to hide, he insisted.

Ginny knows he’s supposed to be a cautionary tale for the students, but she sees it, the way his brutalized face only becomes another rallying cry. Small rebellions begin to spread through the school like a virus, breaking the fragile truce that held sway over the castle.

She isn’t the only one to notice, the Carrows sending a slew of students once again to hang in the dungeons. But it doesn’t help.

Meaning the Carrows will have to get creative.

Considering all of that, Ginny isn’t exactly surprised when Tobias slams into her in the hall on her way to her first class.

“Goddammit, Weasley,” he snarls. “Watch where you’re going.”

When they’ve gone their separate ways, Ginny looks down at the note now tucked in her hand. *Neville’s Gran.*

Ginny immediately changes directions, understanding at once what this means. They’ve decided Neville is too much of a liability. They’ve used students to control their parents. Why not use family against the students?

She searches the halls, finally spotting him near the entrance the Charms room. As she walks past, she loops her arm through his, pulling him back into a classroom.

He hisses in pain, and she immediately loosens her grip. Despite being up on his feet, he’s still in pretty terrible shape.

“Sorry,” Ginny murmurs, glancing around the space to make sure they’re alone. “They’re going after your gran.”

“My gran?” Neville says, like what she’s saying makes no sense.

“Yes, Neville. Your gran.” She shakes her head. “Maybe they hope if they have her, if they can hang her safety over you, you’ll behave. And having you cowed would be far more useful than beating you again.”

If Neville were suddenly running scared, *everyone* would notice. It would probably cut this latest rebellion down rather nicely.

His expression hardens, clearly completely outraged in a way the beating somehow never managed. “How? When?”

“I don’t know anything else.”

“Oh, Merlin,” he says, his brain finally catching up. “I have to warn her.”

She nods. He needs outside help, as soon as possible. “Arianna’s portrait.”

“Aberforth,” he says, darting back out into the hallway, clutching his side as he goes.

* * *

Neville gets his warning to Aberforth, but they don’t really have any way of knowing the results of
that warning. If it got there at all. If it got there in time. They’ll just have to wait.

She tries to have a conversation with him about laying low for a while, just keeping his head down. But Neville is past listening at this point.

*She’d want me to keep going,* he says.

Not knowing Augusta Longbottom, she’ll have to take his word for that.

Ginny is in Muggles Studies when Amycus charges into the room, disrupting the stilted silence of students copying lines from the board. There have been no textbooks since the Great Muggle Studies Prank, and the classes have been broken up in much smaller groups, strictly by House.

Easier to control, Ginny imagines.

The students look up in interest and just as quickly away when they catch sight of Amycus’ slightly manic expression.

Ginny darts a glance at Tobias a few rows away. He told her earlier that they have been suspiciously quiet about something.

Still staring down at his desk, he lifts one shoulder, clearly having no idea.

Amycus is whispering intently to Alecto, his hands animated and agitated, something in his expression sending alarm bells off in Ginny’s head. Whatever this is, it can’t be good.

There’s no time for an extended ear, or really any way she can risk it.

If she really wants to know, there’s only one choice.

Amycus turns his head, just a casual passing glance across the entire classroom, but Ginny jumps on it, casting a silent spell.

She slips into his mind.

The chaos of an adult mind, so full of memories and suppressions and deep, deep wells of trauma and emotion, is almost overwhelming. She teeters, in danger of tipping over into that endless morass, of losing herself in it.

They are things, she reminds herself. They are monsters.

She looks down at his mind, carelessly shifting and tossing aside memories.

*The room is thick with the scent of blood and musk, the high-pitched whine of a cornered animal.*

*The Kneazle bats with its paw, claws tucked in tight. Nothing more than a warning, maybe a pleading. But the cats are frenzied, driven by bloodlust and potion-laden milk, and he knows how this will end, how it always ends. They will eventually overwhelm the Kneazle.*

*It won’t fight back. They never fight back.*

*Aunt Bea cackles. “The only way to win is with claws, boy. Remember that.”*

*Ginny feels her stomach turn, the air too thick to breathe. “Fight back,” she whispers to the Kneazle. “FIGHT BACK!”*
The Kneazle goes down in a pile of fur, blood splattering across the wood floor.

Ginny gasps, fingers gripping the edge of her desk.

A thought blares across his mind, snapping Ginny back. Granny’s slipped the sodding net. The boy’s a goner.

Kill him.

Kill him.

Kill him.

Ginny pulls herself back, nearly falling out her chair.

“What the hell is your problem?” Bridget hisses, shoving at her.

Luckily the Carrows pay her no mind, already storming out of the room.

Not this time, Ginny thinks. No one else is going to disappear.

Forcing herself to her feet, Ginny stumbles out of the room after them, nearly toppling into desks as she goes, the students bursting out into noisy surprise. She ignores it, pressing out into the hall. Once she’s there, she tries to conjure her patronus. She can’t even get the slightest wisp, the nausea in her stomach overwhelming any happy thoughts.

She can still smell the blood, hear the whimpers of pain.

Not me, not me, not me.

“You have to do this,” she whispers to herself, wrenching together the foreign memories, balling them up tight and thrusting them away somewhere deep, deep, deep.

You’ll keep us safe, Ginny.

Closing her eyes, she takes a deep breath and focuses on her own precious memories. Her family. Flying on a broom. The door of The Parlor opening under her hand. Neville, Luna, and Hannah. Warm fingers tight in her own. Lifting her wand, she sends her Patronus out into the hall, a white blur that disappears into the nearest wall.

Run, Neville. Run now. They’re coming for you.

* * *

All Ginny wants to do is head straight for the Room of Requirement to make sure Neville made it. As always, there are far too many eyes on her. So instead, she forces herself to go to dinner with everyone else. Put food on her plate like nothing has happened.

Like she isn’t perfectly aware that the Carrows are both missing. Like she can’t tell that the Gryffindor table is agitated. There are whispers about a disrupted Transfiguration class.

McGonagall sits at the high table, her sharp gaze peering out over the room.

Luckily it isn’t long at all until Hannah walks into the hall. She glances over at Ginny, giving her a small nod.
Thank Merlin, Ginny thinks, closing her eyes.

“What’s going on?” Reiko asks.

“Not here,” Ginny says and forces her fork to her mouth.

Only after dinner is completed does she allow herself to walk calmly to the Room of Requirement.

As promised, Neville is there. She walks straight up to him and hugs him tight.

“Thanks for the heads-up, Ginny,” he says.

She shakes her head. “They were going to kill you, Neville.”

The stakes have just gotten higher.

“So much for not antagonizing them,” he jokes.

Ginny laughs, the sound thick in her throat.

He looks surprisingly cheerful considering people spent most of the day trying to murder him. There’s a letter clutched in his hand.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“It’s from my gran,” he says, smiling. “She put Dawlish in the hospital.”

They all laugh.

If it sounds more like relief than amusement, Ginny will take it.

Later that evening she makes her way to her secret cloister. Tobias is there, pacing back and forth.

“He’s fine,” Ginny says. “He made it to the Room of Requirement.”

“Thank Merlin,” Tobias says, dropping down onto a block of stone. He drags a hand across his face. “I didn’t know about it. They are being a lot more careful now, what they say in front of us.”

“That’s good,” Ginny says.

He gives her a look of disbelief. “If you hadn’t managed to find out like you did, if you hadn’t been there…”

“But I was there. And more importantly, they know you didn’t know. That should take the pressure off of you.”

He gives her a hard look, eyes lingering on the bruises still marring her face. “And what’s going to take the pressure off of you?”

Ginny shakes her head. “Don’t worry about it.”

Maybe she deserves the pressure.

* * *

Easter break arrives, and Ginny waits until the last possible moment to sign her name on the list of students staying in the castle. She’s supposed to go home. Her parents are expecting her to. But she
can’t.

The night before the students all leave she sends an owl off to her parents, writing about how she has too much work to get done to come home. She makes it deliberately dismissive and petulant like a daughter who can’t be bothered to see her family. Her parents won’t be the only ones reading it, after all.

They’ll understand, she tells herself.

She’s staying so she can look less suspicious, after all. Be distant from her blood traitor family. And not at all because she doesn’t have the heart to explain the bruises on her face. Not at all because of the things she’s done.

Wonder what they would say, seeing you now?

Besides, Neville, Nicola, and the others are still stuck here, trapped and hidden in the castle’s secret spaces. They need someone to watch their backs.

The week passes quietly, Ginny one of few students to stay. While she would love nothing more than to hang out in the Room on Requirement all day, she knows her absence is only more obvious now. She checks in with them as often as she dares, spending the rest of her time in the library or sitting in the common room. Somewhere public.

She’s walking back from lunch when someone comes up from behind her at a fast clip. Before she can turn and see who it is, they grab her arm, shoving her bodily into a classroom.

Ginny stumbles forward into the empty room as she hears the door shut firmly behind her. She spins around, hand reaching for her wand, to find Snape standing in front of the door.

“Sir?” she asks, watching him warily even as she tries to will her heartbeat to slow.

He doesn’t waste time telling her what this is about. “Your brother has been spotted in the company of Harry Potter.”

It’s as if a ton of lead drops down on Ginny’s chest. Her mind flies in a million directions, elation at the confirmation that they both still live, fear over who saw them, and confusion as to why Snape is telling her this.

She ruthlessly forces herself to focus on the most pressing of those reactions, the man standing in front of her. She takes a few steps back, giving herself space, checking that her mental barriers are still firmly in place.

But instead of cursing her or killing her or whatever it is Tom has most likely asked him to do, he only says, “You understand what this means.”

That her family has been exposed, once and for all, and none of them are safe any longer. She can’t worry about her parents right now though. Gauging the distance to the door, she slides her hand down further in her pocket, her hand wrapping around her wand.

She carefully swallows, finding her voice. “Yes, sir.”

She isn’t sure what he may see in her face, his eyes still cool and intent on her. “And do you know what to do?”

She blinks back at him. “What?”
He takes a step towards her. “Do you know what to do?” he repeats, each word precise and cutting.

It’s an honest question, she realizes. He wants to know if she has an exit plan. He’s not asking what it is, just that she has one. She takes a moment she surely doesn’t have to search his face. “Yes, sir.”

He nods, stepping to the side, clear of the door, offering her a direct path.

She stands there another moment, her breath still heaving in her chest, watching him warily.

“Go,” he says, “Quickly.”

She doesn’t need to be told twice. She crosses the space, not really believing he can be letting her go until she’s safely past him. At the door, she pauses, looking back at him.

“Sir.”

She doesn’t really have anything else to say, nothing that wouldn’t be far too telling, or put either of them in too much danger.

He looks at her for a long moment, something there in his expression she’s never seen before. “Go,” he says, voice soft.

She turns and flees.

* * *

Ginny runs. She doesn’t bother to look calm or collected or like she isn’t fleeing, because there is absolutely nothing left for her to hide behind. No lie can protect her, no house colors or secret magics. Not from this.

She will not become a pawn to be used against her parents or her brothers or Harry.

She thunders up the stairs, skidding down the hall, ignoring a startled Filch bellowing at her as she passes.

The doorway to the Room of Requirement begins to bleed into place as she turns the corner. In the distance behind her, there is more shouting.

“Come on,” Ginny breathes, willing the door to open faster, faster, faster.

She stands in front of it, bouncing on her feet as it finally clicks, wrenching the door open and darting inside.

She slams it behind her, leaning back against it as her heart pounds away in her chest.

“Ginny?” Neville asks, looking up from where he is playing Exploding Snap with Dougal. “What’s wrong?”

She doesn’t answer him, her head still a swirl of competing thoughts and impulses. Her eyes dart to Arianna’s portrait.

“She has to warn her family.

“They’ve seen Ron,” she says, pushing off the door. “They know he’s helping Harry.”

“What?” Neville says, following after her. “Who saw them?”
“I don’t know. Snape just said…”

“Snape?” he asks, voice sharp.

“He warned me.” She turns to Neville, not understanding how he isn’t getting this. “Neville. My family.”

He sucks in a breath, cursing. “Of course.”

“They’ll be coming for them too,” she says, looking up at Arianna. “I have to talk to Aberforth.”

“Whoa, Ginny, slow down,” Neville says, touching her arm. “You still have the bloody Trace. You can’t go gallivanting into Hogsmeade. Especially if they’re looking for you.”

“He’s right,” Nicola says.

Neville looks relieved to have someone on his side. “I’ll go,” he says. “Okay?”

Ginny closes her eyes, forcing down the traitorous pounding of her heart. “Yes. Of course. You’re right.”

He shakes his head. “Never thought I’d have to be the voice of reason.”

“Neville,” Ginny says, hating the way her voice is almost pleading.

“Oh, right,” he says, scrambling up into the portrait hole. “Tell them Ron’s been seen with Harry?”

They’ll understand what that means. “And also that I’m safe. They don’t have me.”

Her family can’t know where she is thanks to the Fidelius Charm. But they can at least know that. Not that she can really hope for it to make too much of a difference.

It can’t be helped.

“Okay,” Neville says, and takes off at a run down the passage.

Ginny stands there long after the sound of his pounding feet disappears.

“Come on,” Nicola says, touching her shoulder. “Let’s get you a hammock.”

Ginny turns to look at her.

She smiles. “It’s not so bad, really.”

Ginny lets herself be led away.

* * *

That night, Ginny lies in a hammock, staring up at the ceiling.

For now, she is safe. She has no word of her family. No information one way or another, so being safe is going to have to be enough.

Still, sleep doesn’t come, Snape’s words echoing traitorously in her ears like her brain is caught on a constant feedback loop.

*Your brother was spotted in the company of Harry Potter.*
He’s alive. Ron is alive.

Harry is alive.

The lack of mention of Hermione is a giant hole she refuses to touch.

They’re alive.

There’s still hope.

The next morning she rolls off the hammock and faces the reality of her new life. Limited food, one set of clothing, her wand, and a handful of other people. Protective walls she can’t afford to go past without risking everything. That knowledge pressurizes claustrophobically as she considers everything she’s had to leave behind, all the paths now closed to her.

She has to concentrate really hard on controlling her breathing.

“Wonder what this is?” Neville says.

“What?” Ginny says.

She turns, and Neville is tugging on the handle of a new door in the wall that refuses to open under his hand.

It doesn’t look like much more than a door to a broom closet.

Ginny breathes out.

* * *

She spends the rest of the week helping Nicola with projects while Neville paces the space and climbs the long length of the passage to speak to Aberforth.

“Any news?” Ginny always asks the moment he gets back.

He shakes his head. “Just what we already knew. As far as the Order knows, the rest of your family made it into hiding. No one knows where.”

That will have to be enough.

On Monday, everyone is a bit agitated, knowing the Hogwarts Express is making its way back, bringing the students with it. There will be outside information and updates, and someone to tell them exactly what is happening in the rest of the castle.

Ginny has been drowning in it, the not knowing.

Late that evening, Terry is the first student to appear.

His eyebrows lift as he sees Ginny. “Thought you might be here.” He smiles at her. “Quite the buzz at the Feast when it became clear you weren’t here anymore.”

“I can only imagine,” Ginny says, wondering what kind of story the Carrows are going to come up with.

“Where’s Hannah?” Neville asks.
Terry shakes his head, his expression sobering. “She wasn’t on the train.”

“What?” Neville demands, voice sharp. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know. No one seems to.”

“How can no one know?” Neville demands.

Ginny reaches for his arm, fingers digging in as she tries to focus over the rushing sound in her ears. “Tell me where the DA meets.”

“What?” he says, looking at her like she’s lost her mind.

She pulls him around until he’s looking at her. “Tell me where the DA meets.”

“It…” He struggles, not able to get the words out. He lets out a breath, giving up trying.

Ginny closes her eyes. “She’s still alive.”

“What?”

Terry nods. “She’s our Secret Keeper. If something happened to her, we would all be Secret Keepers. You’d be able to say the location.”

“That doesn’t help us know where she is!” Neville bursts out.

“No,” Ginny says, willing a cold calm over herself. “But I’ll take ‘alive and not here’ over the alternative.”

But clearly Neville takes zero comfort from that. Despite being of age, he’s been more or less content to stay here and help the students. Ginny isn’t sure how much longer that can possibly last though. She can feel it, his volatile energy, his need to get out and do something. Hannah disappearing may just be the last straw.

There is only so much they can do from inside the Castle.

She touches his arm. “Maybe check in with Aberforth? See if the Order knows anything about the Abbotts.”

He nods. “Right. Yeah,” he says.

He disappears up into the portrait hole. At this point it’s become a daily ritual.

Ginny looks at Terry. “I need you to tell me everything that’s going on in the castle.”

* * *

At lunch the next day, the occupants of the Room of Requirement wince their way around a lunch of stale bread and cold chicken. Aberforth sent through some almost edible sweets recently, but they don’t seem to be doing much of anything for their mood.

Neville has been very quiet since he got back with no news about the Abbotts. Ginny tried to point out that no news could be interpreted as a good thing, but he just gave her a hard look and curled up on his hammock.

She knows he thinks the way she’s approaching this means she doesn’t care. Ginny doesn’t know
how to explain that focusing on hard, rational facts is the only thing keeping her from screaming.

“Anyone up for a game of chess?” Dougal asks, his perpetual boredom just another irritation.

Ginny thinks it’s probably her turn to entertain the boy for a while. “Sure.”

As she pushes to her feet, Arianna’s portrait swings open. Ginny frowns. Aberforth has never been here himself, so she has no idea who it could be.

“Neville,” she says.

He looks up. “What the—”

He breaks off as Hannah steps out of the tunnel.

“Hannah?” Ginny says weakly.

She smiles, climbing down into the room.

Ginny surprises herself by crossing over and dragging her into a hug. When she pulls back, she looks Hannah over. Fortunately she seems totally fine.

“Sorry if I scared you,” Hannah says. “Not being on the train.”

Ginny shakes her head, not quite trusting herself to speak.

Neville still hasn’t said anything, just staring at her. Then he walks forward and crushes her in an enormous hug, both of them looking a little red-faced when he finally pulls back.

“Um,” he says, rubbing at the back of his head. “Are you okay?”

She nods, cheeks pink. “I’m fine.”

“What happened?” Ginny asks.

“My father didn’t want me to come back. People have heard what’s going on here. He said we had to run, that it was safer. I told him I couldn’t do that. I need to be here. I’d already missed the train though.” She looks back at the portrait hole. “So I came the only way I could.”

“Brilliant,” Ginny says.

Hannah ducks her head. “Well, I wouldn’t go that far.” She gives them a hopeless little shrug. “I just…thought I should be here.”

“Yes,” Ginny says. “You should.”

The Room of Requirement takes on a celebratory feeling that evening as students begin to filter in. It may be a small thing in the larger scheme of the war, but it has the feeling of a major victory, one of their own returning to them.

Besides which, Ginny thinks they have all come to depend on Hannah in vital ways.

Under the cover of the chaos, Ginny taps Nicola on the shoulder. “Shall we?”

“What?” she asks, looking up with a frown.

Ginny cants her head towards the simple wooden door in the back corner.
She squints over at it for a long moment before her face lights up. “Really?”

Ginny shrugs. “Only one way to find out.”

The door opens easily under Ginny’s hand, leading into a short passageway lined with torches. The ground underneath is packed earth and the temperature seems to drop quite a few degrees. At the other end is yet another door, this one oaken and lined with metal bands.

“Good evening,” Ginny says after pushing the door open.

Every head swivels in her direction. “Ginny!” Hestia says, jumping to her feet.

Tilly lets out a yelp of joy, dragging Nicola into a hug.

Everyone is talking at once, laughing and chatting, and Ginny feels some of the panic she’s been living with begin to fade.

Millicent stands next to Ginny, watching the reunion. “Still here, huh?” she says, sounding almost disappointed.

“Always,” Ginny says.

She grunts. “We brought that down for you,” she says, gesturing at her trunk.

Ginny raises an eyebrow. “And why would you do that?” It shows an amount of faith in her, that she would come back, that she was maybe still here.

Millicent scrunches up her nose. “Don’t get sentimental on me, Weasley.” With that, she crosses over to her canvasses and gets back to ignoring them all.

“How are you all?” Ginny asks as they all settle back on the couches.

“They interrogated us,” Tilly reports.

“What?”

She nods. “Before we even got in for dinner.”

“Why?” Ginny asks.

“To find out where you are, of course,” Caroline says.

Ginny looks around at the girls again, eyes sharp for any sign of bruises or pain.

“It was bit stupid,” Astoria says, lips pursed with annoyance. “Tipping their hand by telling us they didn’t know where you were.”

Hestia nods. “If they wanted to really scare everyone into behaving, thinking they had you would have been worse.”

Tilly laughs. “Now everyone has their theories, each one more ridiculous than the last.”

“Yeah?” Ginny asks.

“Apparently you’re living in hiding with the mermaids,” Flora says.

Hestia nods. “After developing a rather tempestuous affair with a merman.”
Ginny laughs. “Good for me.”

“No, no,” Astoria says. “She’s camping in the Forbidden Forest.”

“Haunting the Quidditch pitch,” Tilly drawls.

Caroline shakes her head. “I heard she was spirited off by the Headmaster to the safety of a private dungeon palace.”

“Well, my favorite is the theory that you are secretly an animagi and are sleeping in the owlery,” Flora says.

“Yes,” Ginny says. “Because there are absolutely no illegal animagi in this Castle.”

“No a one,” Hestia says, trying to look innocent and failing spectacularly.

Considering everything, they seem in high spirits. Every girl takes time catching up with Nicola, hugging her tight.

Tilly is the one to pull Ginny aside. “You may need to see to Crabbe and Goyle.”

Ginny’s smile fades. “Of course,” she says as if her stomach hasn’t suddenly turned to stone.

Crossing over to her trunk, she lifts the lid, sifting through her belongings. The box still sits in the bottom corner as it has for the last month. Pulling off the top, she reaches for the pouch, her skin seeming to crawl at the simple contact.

All she has to do is wear it for one night. Just one last round of nightmares to make sure they know nothing has changed. Simple enough.

She sets it back down.

After midnight, Ginny sneaks up from The Parlor into the common room. Climbing down the stairs into the seventh-year boys’ dorm, she scrawls a simple message on the wall in red, dripping ink.

I’m still watching.

It’s a risk, just a different kind than the alternative.

* * *

“I think your message was effective,” Bassentwaite reports the next day when he and Reiko drop by the Room of Requirement.

Reiko nods. “I could hear the stupid gits screaming all the way up in the common room.”

“Well,” Ginny says, “it wouldn’t do to let them think they were free of me.”

Bassentwaite laughs. “I doubt they’re quite that stupid.”

Reiko waves at Demelza, crossing over to talk to her and Martin.

“Can you do something for me?” Ginny asks, looking up at Bassentwaite.

“Of course,” he says, not even hesitating.

“Actually two things.”
“Well, now that sounds like too much work,” he says.

Ginny rolls her eyes. “One, don’t ask any questions.”

He shrugs. “Never been much for questions.”

She holds up a folded piece of paper. “And deliver this note. In person. Unobserved if at all possible.”

He glances down at the name written on the outside, his mouth popping open.

Ginny reaches out and touches his arm.

He closes his mouth. “I’m on it.”

“Thank you.”

Much later that night, Ginny steps out into the hall, taking a moment to orient herself to see where the Room of Requirement has dumped her. She could have easily ended up halfway across the castle from where she needs to be, but by some trick of luck, she’s on the right floor, just a bit too far west. The stairwells are the easiest places to get caught, after all.

Gripping her wand, she moves cautiously down the hallway.

She almost runs into Mrs. Norris at one point, having to re-route and making the distance almost twice as far. All in all, by the time she slips into the cloister, she is hugely relieved to have made it.

Tobias is already pacing inside, looking up at she enters.

“Ginny,” he says, dragging his hand through his hair. “When they said you were missing and then bloody enormous Bassenthwaite is glaring down at me like an insect…” He breaks off, cursing under his breath. “That’s some messenger boy you’ve got.”

She shrugs. “I’ve always said it. Quidditch it a serious business.”

“Gin,” he says, giving her a repressive glance. “You shouldn’t have risked this. Coming here. It’s stupid.”

Her jaw tightens. “I’m not leaving you out here alone. And if that’s stupid, so be it.”

“It’s not like I’ll be able to get messages to you. I’m not exactly useful anymore.”

“Well,” she says. “Maybe it’s time for you to develop an intense dislike of Bassenthwaite. He already knows after all. I’m sure he’d be up for it.”

Tobias snorts. “I’m sure he would. I’m just not sure I could survive that rivalry. He’s a sodding giant.”

“True,” she says. “Oh, and would you look at this?”

It’s a sign of his agitation that he doesn’t think twice about looking down that the piece of parchment in Ginny’s hand. He immediately tears his eyes away. “Bloody hell, Ginny! I told you I didn’t want to know!”

With a quick charm, she burns the parchment. “It’s protected information. No one can take it from you.”
He’s been fighting knowing where the DA meets all year. She’s let him have his quirk. But he
doesn’t have her there to watch his back anymore, and he needs an exit plan.

“The moment you feel like you’ve been discovered, if there is any chance, you come in. Or even if
you just get tired of doing it. Promise me.”

He scuffs at a rock with his shoe. “I’m sure they’d love to welcome me with open arms.”

“Tobias. If they knew…”

“Don’t,” he says. “Don’t make it sound like that.”

“Like what?” she asks, lifting her hands in exasperation.

“Like I’m some hero, and not just an arsehole who got himself in way over his head.”

But this is a fight they have been having all year. “You made your choices, Tobias. And we both
know there were far easier paths open to you.”

He clenches his jaw, looking away. “Well, I can’t bloody well forget the information now, can I?”

“Don’t pout.” She pulls her bag off her shoulder. “I’m not sure when I can come again, so I brought
you a few extra to tide you over.”

His face brightens like a little boy on Christmas morning, their argument quickly forgotten. “Gimme
gimme,” he says, making grabby hands.

She pulls out a stack of books, including *Moby Dick*, *Snow Crash*, *The Things They Carried*, and an
old ratty copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

He immediately grabs one, sitting down and opening it to the first page. This is pretty much the only
place he can afford to indulge himself. Be himself. At least he’ll still have this place, if nothing else.

Ginny settles down next to him, enjoying the quiet. It can get claustrophobic, being in the Room of
Requirement day after day. She closes her eyes, breathing in deep of the cool fresh air, listening to
the gentle trickle of water and the turn of pages.

She idly wonders what Tom would say about it. The uses she’s putting his knowledge to. Things
like this cloister. But the cloister has long since ceased to be about Tom. Long before the war even
began.

Long before she started bringing Tobias here for secret meetings.

Ever lying in wait to creep in on the slightest weakness, dangerous thoughts rise in her mind,
memories of other days in this space, ones she is finding it harder and harder to suppress.

*He’s alive. He’s alive. He’s alive.*

Ginny opens her eyes as the pressure becomes unbearable, pulling her knees into her chest.

“Harry kissed me,” she says, words spilling out.

“What?” Tobias asks, looking up from his book with a frown as if he can’t possibly have heard her
right.

“A few days before the Ministry fell.”
She can feel his gaze on her face as she stares down at her toes. His book flicks shut with a snap. “And you hexed him, right?”

Ginny bites her lip, understanding what he’s really asking. “No.”

He blows out a breath. “Merlin, Gin, you really never go for the easy path, do you?”

She laughs, the sound thick in her throat as she turns her face into his shoulder.

Tobias reaches for her ankle, squeezing it gently. “You never said anything.”

She shrugs. “Harry was scared what Tom would do to me if he knew.”

“But you’re telling me now.”

She is, and she can’t be sure what that means, the way her mind is travelling back to Harry after spending so much time resolutely not thinking about him. It’s like having news, no matter how small, has pried everything open.

“I guess… It feels like we’re holding on by our fingertips, like everything is slowly slipping away and I know we can’t keep this up much longer. But the alternative is for all of this to finally end. One way or the other.”

“For the Chosen One to do his thing,” Tobias surmises.

She nods. “I don’t think…” She stops, clearing her throat, finally forcing the words out and into the open, the ones that have been choking her all year. “I don’t think he expects to survive.”

“Oh, Gin,” Tobias sighs, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

She wishes she could be weak enough to cry. Just once.

She’s not sure she remembers how.
Sixth Year – Part Five

Neville bites back a groan as he sits down next to Ginny, shifting gingerly in his seat. She looks at him out of the corner of her eye. He struggles first thing in the morning, even though he tries to hide it, and she suspects he’s in more pain than he lets on.

“He’s early still, most of the students still in their own hammocks. This is one of her favorite times, everything still and quiet before the inevitable chaos of the day.

Fortunately Neville seems to get this, so he makes a good morning companion.

Ginny turns her attention back to the cloth in her hands. She’s embroidering, putting awkward stitch after awkward stitch into strips of black cloth, hoping against hope that she will never need to hand them out. All she has left at this point are her plans. Plans and backup plans and contingencies for those. An endless morass of conditionals.

“That’s not for another six weeks,” he says, as if six weeks is a lifetime and not a quickly approaching complication.

Technically there’s no reason they can’t just stay in the castle, but at some point that will become unsustainable. Aberforth can only supply them with so much food. Not to mention that they are no longer a small handful of students, but an entire bloody battalion. Tempers have flared from time to time, though Hannah does her best to keep everyone distracted.

Most of the ‘troublemaking’ students are in the Room of Requirement full time now. As April wanes, more and more students have come to take refuge when they just can’t take it anymore. They tend to come in bruised or shaken, and this paints a clear-enough picture for Ginny.

The students still sticking it out—mostly Slytherin, who are much better equipped to hide in plain sight—talk about the strange sort of quiet that has fallen over the castle now that all open rebellion has stopped.

Inside the Room of Requirement, the students seem to think the war will somehow come to an end any day now. Ginny doesn’t know if that is simply self-preservation masquerading as hope, or a total lack of understanding that a resistance isn’t the same as a war.

The truth is they are all just hanging on, trying not to lose ground. That isn’t the same as winning. All she needs to do is listen to the latest Potterwatch to understand that.

“We’ll come up with something,” Neville says, nodding to himself.

She can’t help but think he’s waiting for her to come up with something, and she tries not to struggle under the weight of that, of how blind she is stuck in here.
He glances around before leaning in. “How is…our friend doing?”

Ginny hasn’t been able to risk going back to the cloister to check in with Tobias in a while. “Bassenthwaite says he’s holding in there.”

She just hopes that’s enough.

* * *

Of the four of the DA leaders, only Terry is still openly living in the castle. Which is helpful except for the fact that Ginny finds herself increasingly frustrated with him, because Terry often only sees what is of interest to him in any given moment, and she needs the big picture. She needs the thousand details to weave together.

Fortunately, Ginny finds a valuable resource in probably the last place she expects, because apparently Caroline hears about everything that happens in the castle. Ginny makes a habit of spending an hour or so with her every day, just listening to the gossip of the day. Caroline seems content enough to share, even though she still seems to think Ginny is strange for her interest.

“You think you’d have better things to do,” she says.

Ginny smiles. “You’d be surprised.”

Caroline huffs and goes back to detailing the trials and tribulations of the Great Families and their rather dramatic offspring.

At the very end of April, Ginny travels the short passage into The Parlor one afternoon to find Caroline and Astoria relaxing during a break in their schedule. Astoria is practicing her harp behind a silencing charm.

“Hey,” Ginny says, sitting on the couch next to Caroline.

She gives Ginny a tight smile, looking up from a small stack of mail in her lap.

“Packages from home?” Ginny asks.

Caroline nods. “My birthday is next week.”

“Yeah,” Ginny says. They’ve been planning a small celebration for the event.

“My mother sent me a list of people to sit next to at meals.”

Ginny frowns. “Why?”

“To help expedite an appropriate betrothal, of course.”

“Of course,” Ginny says. It’s Caroline’s sixteenth birthday after all. And apparently to her parents that only means one thing. “Do you want to be betrothed?”

Caroline turns to her. “When has that ever mattered? What I want?”

For a moment, Ginny can’t help but think of that bold little girl on the train she’d been so many years before.

*You’re the first girl on the Slytherin Quidditch team in over a decade!*
In a fit of pique, Caroline shoves the stack off her lap, papers scattering here and there. Ginny leans over and pick one up. It’s an article that’s clearly been clipped from a magazine. *How to draw the right sort of attention,* the title reads. She skims it, eyes lingering on things like *posture, appropriate laughter, soft voice, deliberate leaning.*

She hands it to Caroline.

“It’s like she has no idea what is really happening!” she says with uncharacteristic sharpness, crumpling the article up.

Getting to her feet, she paces out of the The Parlor.

Across the room, Astoria has stopped playing, her eyes following the departure of her best friend.

*   *   *

“Neville! Ginny!” Nigel calls one evening.

Ginny looks up from her embroidering, catching Neville’s eye across the room. Together they cross over to where a small group of students are gathered around the wireless.

Nigel has become the resident wireless tapper, always searching for a new episode of *Potterwatch.* Ginny understands the impulse, even as the endless tapping tends to grate on her nerves.

His face is shiny with excitement. “They’re saying the three of them broke into Gringotts!”

“What?” Neville asks.

Demelza nods. “Escaped on a dragon, if that is at all to be believed.”

At this point, Ginny wouldn’t put anything past them.

“What would they want from there?” Terry wonders.

“You mean besides a giant pile of gold?” Seamus says.

Everyone begins to wildly speculate.

Hannah crosses over to join them, touching Neville’s arm. “Arianna’s here.”

Ginny glances over at the portrait. The young girl gestures at them, hand beckoning.

Neville sighs. “I suppose I should go see what he wants.”

“I can go,” Ginny offers.

“Nah. I’ve got it.”

“I’ll go with you,” Hannah says.

They try to keep Ginny on site, as the Trace makes her magic far too dangerous outside of the school. Just one more reason the rapidly approaching end of term needs to be dealt with. She has a nearly two-month gap between school ending and turning seventeen that has been troubling her more and more.

Neville isn’t gone long, maybe a half hour.
“Oi!” he calls out. “Got a surprise for you lot.”

Ginny pushes to her feet. Neville’s face is shiny with a sort of pure joy she hasn’t seen in a long time. He shuffles to the side, and someone is standing right behind him that is definitely not Hannah.

Harry steps out of the shadows, blinking slightly at the light and the sudden rush of sound as he’s recognized. Students are yelling and cheering, and it’s like a wall of noise. Ginny just stands and stares.

He doesn’t really even look like himself, is her first thought.

She watches, frozen, as he seems to recover enough to look around the space, eyes lifting to the banners floating above them, lingering on the green one at the end.

She wants to ask, *What did you expect?*

Only then he’s scanning the crowd, his eyes eventually landing on her, his shoulders seeming to drop with relief.

She gives him a grim smile, and he smiles back.

He hops down into the room, and that’s when she sees it, the familiar gleam of red hair behind him.

Ginny runs forward, elbowing people out of her way.

“You idiot,” she says, throwing herself at Ron the moment he climbs down.

“Good to see you too, Gin,” he says, voice wry, but arms tight around her.

“Are you okay?” he asks when they finally pull apart from each other, eyeing the barely fading bruises on her face.

“Well,” she says, “they canceled Quidditch.”

“You poor thing,” he says.

“Ginny,” Hermione says, hand on her arm. “We were so worried when they said you disappeared.”

Ginny drags her into a hug. “*You* were worried?” she says, voice slightly hysterical.

She lets go of Hermione, turning to Harry, but before she can even think of hugging him, of whether she really should, his face creases in pain, a low groan spilling out of his lips. Ginny steps towards him in concern, but Hermione and Ron turn their backs on the rest of the room, pressing in close to Harry as if to protect him from something.

Above her, the portrait swings open again. Seamus roars out Dean’s name as more students start pouring out of the passageway. The two boys embrace, both speaking over one another as they laugh and touch.

“How?” Ginny asks, stunned by the reappearance of so many long lost students all at once.

Neville shrugs. “I sent out a message on the coins the second I saw it was Harry. Hannah’s at the other end telling them where to come.”

Dennis and Colin are jumping down, Nigel crying out their names, but Ginny only has eyes for the pale blond head right behind them.
“Luna,” Ginny says, pulling her into a hug.

“Hello,” Luna says, like it’s only been a few days since they’ve seen each other, patting Ginny on the back.

Ginny pulls back to look at her. She seems thin, and there’s a fading bruise around her eye. “I am so sorry.”

Luna smiles, something dark under her serenity. “I believe I was exactly where I was meant to be.”

“Ginny,” Neville says, waving them over. He and Terry are already standing with Harry, talking something over.

She grabs Luna’s hand, pulling her along. Bringing her back where she belongs. Neville gives her a brilliant smile.

“What are we doing?” Ginny asks.

“They’re looking for something in the castle,” Terry says.

“Yeah?” Ginny asks, looking over at Harry.

“An artifact, something to do with Ravenclaw,” his voice is tight as he rubs at his forehead, and she isn’t sure if that is pain or annoyance at having to explain this all again.

She lifts an eyebrow at him. “Something Ravenclaw? You don’t have anything more to go on?”

Harry shakes his head, managing to look embarrassed and impatient all at once.

“Right,” she says. She turns to Luna and Terry. “Any ideas?”

“Just Rowena Ravenclaw’s lost diadem,” Terry says, glancing sideways at Luna. “Which is lost.”

“Do we even know what that would look like?” Ginny asks.

“I can show him,” Luna says.

Ginny glances at Harry, and he nods. “It’s the best idea we have.”

Together, they move off into the crowd.

Ginny looks at Terry. “In case that doesn’t pan out, maybe you could check in with the other Ravenclaws, see if they have any ideas?”

“Sure,” he says, moving off.

Ginny shares a glance with Neville, the room a chaotic tumble around them. “We don’t know what this is yet,” she reminds him.

“Don’t we?” he asks, eyes bright.

She shakes her head, looking up, catching sight of Harry and Luna as they move through the crowd. She rushes to catch up with them.

“Harry, wait,” she says, stopping him near the door.

He turns back, looking, well, she isn’t sure what. Wary?
“Ginny,” he says, like maybe he doesn’t have time to deal with her right now.

She shakes her head. Neither of them have time for that right now. “Do they know you’re here?”

“Oh,” he says, his jaw tightening. “If they don’t already, they will soon.”

She nods, the implications of that spooling out in front of her.

“Ginny,” he says, looking worried like it’s just occurred to him what this may mean for Hogwarts.

Her fingers squeeze his arm. “It’s okay,” she says. “Go.”

“Come along, Harry,” Luna says. “Ginny has everything under control.”

They disappear out the door.

Ginny stares a moment at the closed door, listening to the pressing noise of students around her.

War is coming to Hogwarts.

Neville steps up next to her. “Ginny?”

“Send for the Order,” she says.

Neville meets her grim gaze. “I already did.”

* * *

Reiko is the first student from inside the castle to arrive. She reels back a bit at the sheer amount of students now packing the space.

Her eyes find Ginny. “McGonagall wants everyone in the Great Hall,” she calls out.

“What about Snape and the Carrows?” someone shouts.

Reiko shakes her head. “Apparently they’re gone.”

A cheer goes up in the room.

Reiko crosses over to Neville and Ginny. “She want to evacuate the students through here.”

There’s only one way that will work, and part of Ginny quails at the thought of giving up the protections of their one last safe space.

Ginny turns to Neville. “We’ll need Hannah to make an announcement. Have her leave a written slip with Aberforth for anyone else coming through.”

Neville nods. “I’ll go get her.” He glances at both of them, giving them a bracing smile. “See you in the Hall.”

“Okay,” Ginny calls out to the room. “Let’s get moving!”

Walking through the halls is strange after nearly three weeks of hiding. Sleepy students shuffle along, many of their eyes widening when they catch sight of Ginny.

She skims the crowds, trying to find Tobias in the crush.
McGonagall stands at the front of the room as they all file in. If she’s at all surprised by the reappearance of dozens of students after weeks and months of being missing, she doesn’t show it.

McGonagall calmly explains the evacuation plan, Hannah looking small up there as she speaks loudly over the hall, giving all of the students the secret location of the Room of Requirement.

Hannah has just finished when Ginny notices Harry skirting the edges of the hall, looking around for something, leaving a wake of gasps and craning necks in his wake.

She frowns, wondering what happened with Ravenclaw’s diadem, but then there isn’t room for thinking anymore because from nowhere and everywhere a grating, echoing voice drills into her mind.

In an instant, Ginny is eleven years old again, the years melting away. The far-too-familiar whisper is now a scream, a voice ripping through her brain. Inescapable. Decimating.

*Give me Harry Potter.*

It takes everything she has to keep her feet, to not the let the voice buckle her knees.

Tom’s voice finally fades, leaving echoes she swore never to feel again. There is a long moment of breathless, painful silence.

Then Pansy surges to her feet, screaming for them to hand Harry over.

There is part of Ginny that doesn’t blame her, part of her screaming for self-preservation with the feel of Tom still fading in her mind. But this is not something she will ever allow.

Ginny pulls her wand, three other houses of students only a step behind her, but it’s someone else who stupefies the terrified girl.

Tobias.

He stands over her prone form, lips curled with distaste. “She always did annoy me,” he says.

Ginny shoots him a grim smile as he comes to stand next to her, nearly a dozen other Slytherin moving to back them.

McGonagall recovers herself. “Mr. Filch, would you escort Slytherin out—”

Ginny turns to look at her.

McGonagall falters, clearing her throat. “Would you escort Miss Parkinson and her friends out first? And anyone else willing to capitulate to Voldemort’s demands.”

Blaise and Urquhart gather up Pansy, warily watching the wands pointed in their direction, Crabbe and Goyle shooting threatening glares at Tobias. Bridget and Helena trail behind them, faces screwed up as if they smell something bad. People are pushing out the other members of the Enforcement Squad, spanning all four houses.

If you believe all the lore, if you never learned to actually *look*, you would probably expect the school to divide in one clean line between Slytherin and everyone else. But there are Ravenclaw families in tight with the new regime, pleased with new Ministry positions, less restrictions on experimentation. There are people who fold with the wind, too frightened to do anything else. There are those who think they know a winning side when they see it.
The one thing the lines are not is predictable.


“What if we want to stay and fight?” someone shouts.

“If you are of age, that is your decision,” she says.

A cheer goes up in the crowd.

Tobias turns to Ginny, his hand on her arm. He’s of age, even if she isn’t.

“You’re staying?” she asks, even as she already knows the answer.

“You know me, can’t miss a chance to show off.”

Neville comes to stand next to Tobias, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll make sure everyone understands,” he says.

Tobias gives Ginny a big hug as if saying goodbye, but into her ear whispers, “See you soon.”

*     *     *

Ginny gets swept up in the flow of evacuating bodies, her mind lingering on the details surrounding getting the younger students clear of the fighting. Getting to Hogsmeade through the secret passage will still leave them vulnerable unless they have somewhere to go after that. Almost all of them are too young to Apparate. They can Floo, she supposes, but the Ministry no doubt has protections in place.

Aberforth may know what to do, she tells herself.

Near the entrance to the Room of Requirement, Nadira has gathered up all her siblings and nieces and nephews, the entire Shafiq clan evacuating as a unit.

Ginny comes to a stop next to Nadira. “Is everyone here?”

Her eyes skim the group again. “Yes.”

Ginny nods. “And you know where you will go?”

“This is not my fight,” Nadira says as if Ginny has left some criticism unspoken.

“No,” Ginny agrees. Why should she have to fight for a place that calls her strange and dismisses all she knows? This system has never welcomed her. “But it’s mine.”

Nadira considers her for a long moment before nodding. “Then I wish you good luck with it.”

Ginny holds her hand out.

Nadira looks back at her a long moment before folding her palm across her chest.

Ginny pulls her hand back, mimicking the gesture. “You as well.”

Nadira says something to her family, the small ones filing first into the room.

Once they are all through, Ginny follows next.
While she’s been gone, the Order has started gathering, including her family. And Harry. Still looking like he’s lost something.

“Ginny!” Bill shouts as he catches sight of her.

He crushes her into a hug.

Then her mother and father are there, everyone talking and shouting over each other, and Ginny has to wonder why she ever thought she couldn’t go home.

Her dad lifts her chin, eyes narrowing at the bruise on her face. “I’m okay,” she promises.

George squeezes her arm. “Where in Merlin’s name did you bugger off to?”

She gives him a smile. “I’ve been here the whole time.”

Fred’s eyebrows lift. “Hiding in plain sight. Gutsy.”

She shakes her head. “Calculated.”

Lupin appears. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but Minerva needs help securing the castle.”

Her mum nods, turning to Ginny. “You'll have to leave. You aren’t of age.”

“Mum,” Ginny argues, knowing it’s expected.

“Your mother is right, Ginny,” her dad says.

Her brothers give her sympathetic looks, but don’t step in to help her case.

Ginny closes her eyes for a moment as if calming herself. “Fine,” she says, just the tiniest edge of annoyance.

Only Harry gives her a look as if suspicious of her easy capitulation. Everyone else is apparently too busy to even notice.

She takes the time to hug each of them, tell them she loves them, hold them tight and breathe them in.

The moment their backs are turned, she heads for the unassuming door at the rear of the room.

She passes through to The Parlor. She’s not surprised to see that everyone has gathered there.

They turn to look at Ginny as she enters, everyone falling silent.

“You all know that the Dark Lord is coming,” Ginny says. “This is the most well-protected part of the castle. You will be safe here.”

It will be one less thing for her to worry about.

“You can bring any underage siblings in here as well.” She points to a stack of blindfolds carefully embroidered with runes. “Those will allow them in.”

The girls look at each other, but if they have a problem with Ginny bending the rules, they don’t say anything.

Ginny looks around at them. “I’ve chosen my fight. Your fight doesn’t have to be my fight. Just know that whatever happens, you will always be my sisters.”
Tilly is the first to step forward, like it isn’t even a question. “I’m with you.” She slings a canvas bag across her chest. “I’ve been working on some side projects. Can’t ask for a better chance to try them out.”

“You’re sure?” Ginny asks because this isn’t something to be taken lightly.
Tilly’s jaw tightens. “This is our school. They would do well to remember that.”
“Ginny,” Nicola says, tugging on her sleeve.

Ginny takes a deep breath, turning to look at the fourteen-year-old girl she has watched blossom in this space over the last year.
Nicola eyes are bright, but her voice steady. “I won’t fight. I can’t. I’m all my brother has.”
Ginny tries not to let her relief show. “I understand.”
“But I made this for you,” she says, holding out a box. “It’s only a prototype.”
It looks like it is made of bronze, and hums with some unseen current.
Nicola points at a button. “Push this and it will absorb all spells in a thirty yard radius. I’m not sure of its capacity, I haven’t tested it as much as I would like…”
Ginny reaches out, touching her arm. “Thank you.”
Nicola nods.
Ginny stows the box in her robes, knowing there is no time for ceremonies. Pulling the key from around her neck, she lifts it over Nicola’s head. “If all seems lost,” she says, “use this key.”
Nicola looks down at it and back up at Ginny’s face. “You’re coming back.”
But there is no way to know that.
Millicent steps up next to Nicola, putting a hand on her shoulder. She gestures at the stack of embroidered blindfolds. “I’ll make sure these get handed out.”
Ginny nods. “Thanks.”
“Try not to die, yeah?” Millicent says.
“Worried?”
“Not really,” she says. “I just don’t want all that hard work to go to waste.” She gestures at Ginny’s arm and the tattoo there.
Ginny’s lips twist. “I’ll do my best. To stay alive and not lose the arm.”
“See that you do.”
A few feet away, Caroline and Astoria are in arguing in low tones.
“No,” Caroline says, the firmest Ginny has ever heard her voice. “This is my choice.”
Astoria steps back as if she’s been slapped.
With jerky gestures, Caroline winds her dark blond hair up into a ponytail. “It’s not what my parents would want, or what you want, but it’s what I want. For once in my life, that should matter more than everything else.”

“I can’t… I can’t go with you,” Astoria says. “My father…”

It’s no secret that Astoria’s father is in tight with the Death Eaters for all that no one has never said it out loud. He’ll be out there in the halls.

Caroline nods. “I know. It’s okay. But I need to do this.”

Astoria hugs her fiercely.

“You aren’t of age,” Ginny says, knowing it needs to be.

Caroline considers her over Astoria’s shoulder. “Neither are you.”

“True.”

Caroline’s expression hardens. “This isn’t your decision to make.”

“No,” Ginny agrees. “It isn’t.”

A crow flies over, coming to rest on her shoulder.

“Are you sure?” Ginny asks.

The bird caws, talons tightening.

She’ll take that as a yes.

* * *

In the common room above, Tobias is already waiting for her.

The girls look at each other with varying levels of wariness. Ginny just crosses over to him, taking both of his hands in hers.

“Shall we?” he asks.

She nods, squeezing his hands. “For Smita,” she says.

He nods, his jaw tight. “For Burbage.”

Ginny looks back at Tilly and Caroline. “Let’s go.”

Up in the halls, students are darting here and there, the sort of thrumming energy Ginny hasn’t felt in a long while. Flora immediately lifts off Ginny’s shoulder, sweeping up into the air and out the nearest doorway.

The first person they run into is Neville. He’s got a fluffy pink pair of earmuffs around his neck.

“What’s happening?” Ginny asks, grabbing his arm.

He doesn’t bother questioning what Ginny is doing here. “We’re off to the greenhouses,” he says. “Got a nice crop of infant mandrakes we’d like to introduce to them.”
“And some Devil’s Snare,” Terry says. “I’ve always wanted to see them in action.”

Seamus is trailing a few steps behind, rolling his eyes at the herbology geekery no doubt. “Defensive spells are very well and all, heck they’re great. But this waiting is killing me.” He bounces on his feet.

“I doubt we’ll have long to wait,” Tobias says.

“Mr. Longbottom,” Professor Sprout calls out.

Neville gives her a big grin. “Gotta go!”

They disappear around the corner, just in time for Reiko and Bassenthwaite to pass by, brooms lifted up on their shoulders.

“There was no talking her out of it,” he says when he catches Ginny watching.

“Don’t even bother trying,” Reiko says, face mulish as she resolutely marches past them without stopping.

Bassenthwaite shakes his head, giving Ginny a look. “I’ll keep her safe.”

Ginny nods.

“See you later, wife,” he shouts at Tilly as he sets off in a jog to catch up with Reiko.

“You’d better,” she yells after him. “Because I want a bloody divorce!”

They disappear, Bassenthwaite’s laughter echoing behind him.

“Come on,” Tilly says, moving off with Caroline. “Help me pass these out.”

And then it is just Tobias and Ginny.

“What do you think?” he asks.

She needs the bigger picture. “Astronomy tower.”

He nods.

They swerve and push through the mass of students, often feeling like they are moving upstream. The crowds thin as they approach the base of the tower. Pushing open the door, they glance up the sweeping stairs curving up into the darkness above.

“Ugh,” Tobias says, pulling a face.

“Wanna race?” Ginny says, and starts up the stairs.

“Merlin, I hate you sometimes,” he grouses.

Tobias is breathing heavily a few steps behind her as they pause halfway up.

“Almost there,” Ginny says, starting back up again.

“We aren’t all bloody Quidditch stars,” he complains, holding a stitch in his side.

Finally pushing out into the open air, Ginny realizes they weren’t the only ones who had this idea.
Flitwick is already up there, pulses of light emanating from the tip of his wand, building into enormous wards cocooning the entire castle.

A few minutes later Tobias catches up, face red. “Bugger,” he exclaims, leaning against the wall.

Flitwick turns at the noise, his eyes widening. “Miss Weasley--” he starts to protest.

“I know, Professor. I’m underage. But the passages are all closed. And we can help.”

His eyes dart to Tobias, clearly processing something. “I suppose you will be safer up here than running around the castle,” he decides.

Ginny steps up to the crenellations, glancing down over the grounds.

Tobias steps up next to her. “They’ve brought the bloody Dementors,” he mutters. Sure enough, in the distance there are black hovering forms just outside the wards.

Ginny feels her heart begin to hammer in her chest.

“How long can you reasonably expect the wards to hold, Professor?”

He shakes his head. “It’s only a matter of time. There are far more of them than there are of us.”

That is not something Ginny can do anything about, so she pushes it aside, letting her eyes take in the grounds beneath them. Long columns of armor are walking down out onto the lawns towards Hogsmeade, and at least that is a few more on their side.

They have the Forbidden Forest on one side, the lake on another, the sweeping open ground towards Hogsmeade between, and the hulking bulk of mountains behind them. Ginny analyzes the easy paths, the likely paths, trying to think of it from her opponent’s side.

A screeching call makes her look up. A large crow sweeps down, landing on the crenellation.

There’s a piece of paper in one of her claws.

Ginny takes it, glancing at the writing on the paper.

She nods. “Thank you,” she says to the crow, running her hands down over the black plumage. “Be safe.”

The crow caws at her and takes off.

Flitwick’s eyes narrow as the bird flies away. “I don’t want to know who that is, do I?”

It isn’t really a question.

Ginny crosses over to the large map Flitwick has spread out on the ground. She marks the numbers and types of troops in the locations Flora provided.

They all stare down at it, Flitwick moving off from time to time mumbling to himself as he adds yet another layer.

Ginny stares and stares, and finally she can see it, where the defenses will buckle first. *Nice try, Tom* , she thinks.

“Professor,” she says. When he looks, she points. “There.”
He silently considers it for a moment, eventually nodding. “You’re right. They’re trying to lure us into defending the wrong area.”

His Patronus streaks off—communication with McGonagall, she can only assume.

Moving back to the wall, Ginny and Tobias watch the army of armor suits reposition. Before they finish, bright lights begin to explode against the wards.

“They’ve begun,” Flitwick observes.

Ginny glances over at Tobias, his posture betraying not an inkling of impatience.

He meets her eyes, and it seems to be an acknowledgement that these could be their last moments, that they could very well die as soon as the fighting begins. Ginny has long since adapted to the long play, to cool analysis and careful execution. She knows this fight will allow for neither. She’s suddenly thankful for all the time she spent with Gryffindors this year, knowing there will come a time to embrace her inner rashness.

Together they stand and watch as each defense is carefully stripped by the invading force.

“The wards are down,” Flitwick says.

Tobias and Ginny share a grim look.

“Suppose it’s time to join the fray,” he says.

She reaches out and takes his hand.

His mouth twists. “I have no intention of dying, Ginevra.”

She squeezes his fingers. “See that you don’t.”

* * *

The castle is in utter chaos.

If there had ever been lines, a hard definition between the defenders and the attackers, they are nothing but a blurred memory. Now there are only scrums and weak spots, one group pushing up against another.

Ginny and Tobias find themselves behind a barricade spanning a hallway, built of rubble from the collapsing walls. There are giants outside apparently, and worse, to judge from the concussive forces battering the stalwart old pile. But there are also people on brooms streaking overhead, and werewolves scrabbling along walls as if gravity doesn’t affect them.

There are perhaps a dozen students clumped together, their strategy seeming to consist of popping up long enough to fling spells over the top, alternating with shield charms.

“Well,” Tobias shouts as a spell ricochets overhead. “This is fun.”

Ginny already misses the expansive view from the top of the tower, a dispassionate height from which to make sense of all of this. From here all she knows for a fact is that they are vastly outnumbered and outskilled. A handful of professors, the last remaining remnants of the Order, the DA.

And Harry.
She can only hope that wherever he is, he’s doing something to finish this all off. But none of them can afford to rely on that.

“There!” Colin says, pointing at a werewolf working his way up the wall on one side.

Three of them send stunning spells at the same time, the werewolf letting out a yelp and falling back. The longer she is here, the more clear it is that if they stay here, they’re just going to get picked off one by one. The worst is how relieved the students looked when they saw her appear with Tobias, like she’ll be able to come up with something.

“It’s too buggering hard to think!” she cries in frustration, falling back behind the barricade.

That’s when she notices movement in the hall behind them. Snatchers.

“Behind!” Ginny bellows, flinging a large piece of rubble at them, and it buys them precious moments as their attackers are forced to blast them out of the way, fine dust and gravel spraying back at them.

“This way!” Tobias shouts, gesturing them into a narrow hall off to the right.

The Snatchers are scrabbling after them close behind. They race around a corner. And rush headlong into a crossing full of Death Eaters.

Tobias lets out a hoarse yelp of surprise, but is already casting spells, because the Death Eaters seem similarly surprised. It’s probably the only reason it isn’t an immediate rout. A few fall to well-placed stunning spells, and then they are back on defense.

Ginny concentrates on protection and absorption spells, letting the rest of the group attack and disarm. She’s just finished deflecting a particularly strong curse when she feels her wand rip away from her fingers, clattering a few feet away in the rubble.

Turning, she looks into the masked face of a Death Eater. She steps back, but he is already sending his next curse her way, and no raised arms are going to help her. At the last possible moment, Tobias steps across her, shoving her back against the wall as his shield spell blooms in front of them.

“Get down,” he says, pushing her to a crouching position.

Ginny judges the situation from what little she can see between the students’ legs, locating her wand on the floor near the wall. Too far to risk going after.

Someone lets out a yelp, falling against Ginny. She pulls the body towards her, making sure they are covered.

Attackers ahead, attackers behind.

It’s pretty much a kill box.

_of bloody course_, Ginny thinks, cursing to herself. Box. Scrambling for the cube still tucked away in her robes, she pulls it free. Stepping out from behind Tobias and the scrum of students, she presses the button.

The mouth opens wide with an inhuman shriek, and then every spell in the room is rushing towards her—defensive and offensive indiscriminately. Ginny holds the box up, shrinking back, praying that Nicola knows what she’s about. At the last moment the spells bend towards the box as if pulled in by
gravity, the mouth gobbling them all up, metal growing hot under her fingers as more come and come.

Ginny screams against the pain, but holds on.

The cube snaps its jaws shut.

In the ensuing shocked silence, Tobias punches one of the confused Death Eaters across the face. Ginny takes advantage of everyone standing about in confusion to get her hands back on her wand.

“Nice,” Tobias shouts. “I’ll take twenty.”

The quiet doesn’t last, but their attackers seem rattled, unsure of what might happen next, some of them backing out of the room.

“Here!” one of the students says, gesturing towards a classroom.

The students huddle back into the relative protection of the doorway, dragging their stunned and incapacitated friends inside.

Tobias and Ginny watch their retreat, covering them as best as they can. The window next to Ginny shatters, and she pulls back just as a stray spell ricochets through the room, eventually hitting a Death Eater. He hits the floor with a grunt.

“Ginny,” Tobias says, grabbing her robes and pulling.

She reaches out a hand to the wall to steady herself. “Okay—”

The wall blasts away under her fingers and the next thing Ginny knows, she is plummeting out of the castle.

She manages to twist her wand, shout out a cushioning spell just before she hits the hard ground below.

Tobias lands with a thump next to her. He rolls over onto his back. “Ugh. Well, that could have been worse.”

There’s a high-pitched humming sound, and a few feet away, the box sits, sparks coming off of it from where it landed.

“That can’t be good,” Tobias says. He scrambles up to his feet, scooping it up.

They’re out in the courtyard now, or what’s left of it. There are pockets of students and Order members here and there, and what looks like the glow of a pack of Patronuses near the gate.

“There!” Ginny says, pointing towards a giant relatively far from anyone else and currently hurling jagged rocks at the castle to calamitous effect.

With a grunt, Tobias lobs the box towards it, sending a quick spell after it to make sure it covers the distance. It lands at the giant’s feet with the force of a bomb, an explosion of brilliant colors washing up over his enormous body, all of the spells hitting him at once.

The giant shrieks, turning and running towards the Black Lake.

“Remind me to never get on Nicola’s bad side,” Tobias mutters.
“Come on,” Ginny says. “We need to get back under cover.”

That’s when the world seems to explode.

*     *     *

Ginny shakes her head, trying to clear the ringing in her ears, but the movement just makes everything worse. Her side is on fire and she lies half sprawled across a broken piece of rubble. With a groan, she rolls to her knees. She cradles her ribs, idly wondering how many of them she’s broken.

Glancing around, she finds her wand, and it’s only then that she sees Tobias. He’s half-covered by rubble, blood trickling down his face, and he’s lying very, very still.

“No,” Ginny says, scrabbling towards him. She falls more than once, crying out in pain, but refuses to stop, the battle still raging around her nothing more than a distant buzz.

She finally, finally pulls herself up next to him, her hand pressing down on his shoulder, and he lets out a groan, his eyes fluttering open.

“Fuck,” he rasps.

“Just hold on,” she murmurs, looking at the stones covering the lower half of his body. She charms away the larger pieces, her arm shaking with fatigue.

Tobias lets out a long string of curses, and Ginny tells herself if he can manage that he’s fine. The last piece of rubble remains stubbornly in place, Ginny finally leaning into it, pushing it even as her side screams and Tobias does too.

“You stupid berk,” she says as it rolls off, finally revealing his mangled legs. Blood wells up immediately, Ginny scrambling to press her hands to the wound.

“My fatal flaw,” Tobias says, voice rough. “Letting myself get turned into a bloody hero.” He looks up at her, his eyes unfocused. “Get it? Bloody?”

His head lists back against the ground as his blood flows out over her fingers.

No. No, no, no, no.

God, why hadn’t they been smart enough to spend time on healing charms? Why hadn’t they prepared for this? They had so much time. So much time wasted thinking they knew what war really looked like. Time wasted on pranks and petty revenge and having parties rather than thinking what your friend’s blood would feel like between your fingers.

Focus, Ginny.

She casts a charm, ropes wrapping around his thigh. She urges them tighter, Tobias groaning in pain. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she says. She has to get the bleeding stopped.

A curse streaks by overhead, the power of it lifting her hair like wind. She ducks down over Tobias’s body. Somewhere nearby, there’s another explosion.

“Just go,” Tobias mumbles, hand pushing weakly at her shoulder.

“That is never going to happen,” she snarls.

She sits up, aiming her wand at a pile of debris at the feet of a group of approaching Death Eaters.
“Reducto!” she shouts, the ground under their feet exploding and lifting them up into the air. She doesn’t bother to watch them land, to see the fallout, just leans down and slides her arms under Tobias’s.

She starts dragging him back towards the castle. She tries to move away from the front lines, but they seem to have all but disappeared at this point.

There is fire in her side, and she tries not to see the trail of blood Tobias is leaving behind him. She doesn’t see any more Death Eaters, and she doesn’t know if that is just blind stupid luck, but doesn’t have time to think about it. She’s just about made it inside when a strange quiet falls over the castle.

And then it’s there again, that hated, familiar, horrible voice—filling everything, coming from nowhere and everywhere.

Dispose of your dead.

She whimpers, tugging at the heavy weight of Tobias’s body.

The words seem to go on and on, threats and challenges, and *Harry Potter, come face me yourself.*

She drops to the ground, her arms wrapped around Tobias’s still form, utterly defeated because has it really all been for nothing? All of it?

*Aberration,* the voice whispers.

Not so strong after all.

“Ginny.”

She looks up to see Neville working his way over the rubble towards them. Before she can even summon the words to beg for help, he’s lifting Tobias’s legs, heedless of the blood.

“Come on, Ginny,” he says, voice soft and encouraging. “Almost there.”

Somehow she finds her feet.

The Great Hall is in chaos, people calling out names, groaning in pain, shrieking in grief. She ignores it all in favor of finding someone to help.

“Over here,” Madam Pomfrey says, appearing next to them and gesturing at one of the dining benches.

She pushes Ginny back out of the way, and she can’t even follow what the Matron is doing, wand flashing, bandages flying through the air.

“That’s all I can do for now,” she says before moving on to another patient.

“What?” Ginny says, but Pomfrey has already moved on.

Ginny lowers herself to the ground, leaning against the bench, her hand finding Tobias’s, fingers pressing against the steady throb of his pulse.

Not five yards away is a pair of bodies on a stretcher, hands stretched out towards each other, but not touching. Ginny forces her eyes away and thinks about the warmth of Tobias’s skin.

She’s still sitting there when they bring Fred in.
She stares at his horribly still body and knows she should be feeling something.

“I’ll stay with him,” a voice says.

It’s Luna. Dirt in her hair and a long scratch down her arm, but standing and breathing and living.

“Luna,” Ginny says, voice breaking.

Luna’s hand slides down Ginny’s hair, a gesture of comfort. “Go,” she says. “I’ll stay.”

Ginny nods, pushing to her feet and stumbling towards her family as if moving through a physical wall of sound and pain.

None of them see her approaching, and the one closest to her is someone she hasn’t laid eyes on for over two years.

“Percy?” she says, looking up at her long lost brother standing with tears on his face.

“Ginny,” he says, pulling her in tight against his chest.

Everything seems to be happening far away, the screaming in her mind like a distant buzz. No one in her family even bothers to question what she is still doing here, they just pull her close.

She doesn’t know how long she sits there, Ron appearing, shouting with disbelief as he folds himself over Fred’s prone form. Ginny just stares and tries to breathe because she doesn’t have a plan for this. Can’t line up any of her variables.

And Fred just still refuses to move.

Time seems to mean nothing, bodies and lives and broken plans moving by without them.

“Snape is dead,” Ron reports at some point, his voice hollow. “Voldemort killed him.”

Ginny can’t breathe.

“Serves him right,” someone snarls.

“Does it?” Ginny finds herself saying.

They all turn to look at her with surprise, but all Ginny can think is how little they really know about people’s lives. She didn’t like him, not exactly. He was unpleasant and unforgiving, but does anyone deserve to die like that?

“He killed Dumbledore,” Bill says.

“Well,” she says, thinking about the last time she saw Snape. Go. And for some reason that is so much easier to focus on. “Maybe.”

Nothing she learned about Severus Snape this last year makes sense, and she’s just allowing for the possibility.

“Starkers,” Charlie mutters, probably assuming this is some misplaced Slytherin loyalty, if he can even allow the idea of Slytherin and loyal in the same thought.

Slytherin are loyal, Ginny knows. It’s just that the lines they draw, the units of insiders they create are not defined by common boundaries, by anyone else’s rules. They do not pledge loyalty based on
notions of people they should care about. It is far more complicated and infinitely more nuanced than that. It can’t be understood with just a glance.

And maybe Snape couldn’t be either.

Ginny pushes to her feet, ignoring the ache radiating from her side, the numbness in her heart.

“Where are you going?”

She glances down at Fred’s body, so horribly still, and knows she can’t stay here. “To help with the injured,” she decides.

If she stops now, she may never be able to start again.

*   *   *

Outside, darkness has fallen, thick and inky, the moon and stars hidden behind a cloak of smoke and mist and spent magics.

There are soft moans of settling stones and listing trees and fallen bodies left behind.

The first body she comes to is draped in a dark cloak, almost disappearing into the earth if not for the bone-white mask covering their face.

A Death Eater.

She lifts her wand and with a quick spell, she knocks off the remains of his shattered mask, a surprisingly young face peering out. A boy, really. They stare back at each other.

The only movement is his hand, moving towards the wand on the ground just barely out of reach of his ravaged body.

Ginny kicks it away with her foot, cracking it in half with her heel.

His mouth twists into a snarl. “Do it,” he spits, blood on his lips. “Finish it.”

She could, she knows. It would be so easy. Just a flick of her wrist and one less monster in the world. One less murderer. Isn’t that what they are fighting for?

Isn’t that what they are dying for?

“How do you know it wasn’t me?” he goads, voice a painful rasp. “That I didn’t kill your best mate, your father? That I wouldn’t kill you too if I had my wand?”

She thinks of Fred, of Tobias. Of countless others she probably doesn’t even know about yet. “I don’t,” she says, hand tightening around her wand. “But if you did, what makes you think I would want your death to be quick?”

He blanches, the first real glimpse of fear shining in his eyes.

To Ginny, it seems pretty clear that he won’t survive. His body is crushed like he got the worst of a giant, or stampeded by centaurs. Blood seems to seep out of endless wounds. Still, there is some small chance a medic might make it in time.

Pointing her wand up, she sends a flare into the sky. He curses at her, but she ignores it.
Kneeling next to him, she lifts the corner of his robe, pressing the fabric against the blood oozing out of his side, because stopping the blood (so much blood) is the only thing she can think to do.

He laughs, a sick rattling sound in his throat. “Are you actually trying to save me?”

She ignores him.

“You can’t,” he says, the faintest sign of a wobble in his voice.

She meets his eyes. “I know.”

It probably would be more merciful to finish him off, she thinks. Maybe if she were slightly more compassionate, she would.

As it is, no one comes.

She watches him die, his hand gripping tight onto hers until the very end, as if he’s forgotten he hates her, would much rather kill her. She can only think that in death, everybody looks the same.

When it’s done, she lets go of his hand, leaving his eyes staring empty up at the sky, and wearily pushes back to her feet.

She scans the field and tries to make her feet move, to just keep going. Find the next body. Do something.

A figure appears up over the rise, materializing through the smoke. At first Ginny assumes it is the medic at last, until she registers the figure’s familiar determined and steady gait.

“Harry,” she breathes.

He doesn’t stop moving towards her until he’s standing right in front of her.

She thinks to ask what he’s doing out here, where Ron and Hermione are, but she already knows, doesn’t she? Deep down she’s always known. Because the Forbidden Forest stretches out behind her, and there is only one thing that can stop all the killing.

You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself.

Harry opens his mouth as if to say something, but seems to change his mind, instead reaching for her face. He kisses her, both more forward and confident than he’s ever been before, and if she needed any more proof where he is going, what this is, she has it now.

Ginny closes her eyes, pressing into him, and he tastes like smoke and blood and tears and sweat, and it isn’t fair. It isn’t fucking fair at all.

She pulls back, gasping for air, her forehead resting against his.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

She shakes her head. Reaching up, she presses her palms firmly against his cheeks, framing his face, staring at him so hard it makes her vision begin to swim. Like the pressure of trying to memorize him, to slow down time, is too much for her mind to handle.

“Bloody hero,” she says, choking on the accusation.

His face contorts, as if he’s trying to smile but his lips just won’t cooperate. “If there were any other
way…”

“I know,” she says. Because he may be reckless and stupidly brave and a bloody fool from time to
time, but it’s all there in his face… How much he wants to live. How utterly terrified he is.

His fingers tighten on her shoulders. “I wish…”

She kisses him hard, not wanting to think of possibilities, of the future, and this time he’s the one to
eventually pull away, his fingers dragging across the back of her hand, and then he’s disappeared
under his cloak and is gone, nothing but a ghost against her skin.

She presses her fist to her mouth and stares out into the dark of the forest and tries not to scream.

“Miss? Was that your flare?”

She turns to find a haggard-looking medic climbing toward her over the rubble.

“Miss?” he asks.

Ginny shakes her head. “It’s too late.”

It’s all too late.

Together they turn and move towards the next body.

*     *     *

“Something is happening,” the medic says, his hand latching on to Ginny’s arm.

She glances back toward the Forbidden Forest, and sure enough, she can detect movement in the
trees. And the sound of shouting and small explosions. Sounding almost like…celebration?

She feels everything inside her go cold.

“We have to go,” the medic demands, dragging her after him.

She doesn’t argue, stumbling over rocks and craters as she does her best to keep up with him.

Voldemort’s voice chases them from behind, amplified and echoing.

*Harry Potter is dead.*

The medic curses as Ginny nearly falls, her legs trying to give up. He glances back over his shoulder.

“Run,” he says.

Somehow she does.

They reach the castle just ahead of the Death Eaters, Neville and Hannah and Luna and the rest of
her family pouring out the front doors.

“Ginny,” her father says, pulling her against his side.

His face is pale as he looks out over the grounds behind her. Ginny slowly turns, and there Harry is,
cradled in Hagrid’s arms like a rag doll.

She doesn’t scream like others around her do, doesn’t cry out or feel tears welling in her eyes as she
stares at Harry’s lifeless body. Her father’s hand is firm on her arm, but she doesn’t know why. She
Isn’t going to throw herself at Voldemort the way Neville does.

No. Instead she stands and understands with absolute, hard-edged clarity that even if it is the very last thing she ever does, she will destroy Voldemort. She sees that life spread before her, that single drive filling her vision, because looking at him, she doesn’t see an evil, unbeatable wizard, a murderer. She sees a smug young boy with flowing black hair and a festering fear eating away at his heart. She knows this boy inside and out, as well as she knows herself.

She will destroy him and grind his bones to dust. Even if it takes a hundred years and every drop of blood she has.

Could you kill, if you had to?

Yes. Yes, she could.

She will.

It’s at once the calmest and most frightening feeling she has ever experienced. It sustains her through the following chaos, watching Voldemort torture Neville. Only then--

There is a sword and a snake and a head spinning through the air, and everything cracks back open.

Ginny fights with Luna and Hannah at her back. She fights for Tobias in the hall behind her, for Harry walking alone into a forest, for her brother, for this school and this castle that is theirs, dammit. It feels as if her brain has shut off entirely. She’s nothing but an instinct anymore, a body in motion. Survive.

She gets separated from Luna and Hannah as the fighting spills into the hall. She turns, nearly tripping, only to come face to face with dark eyes staring out from a bone-white face, dark hair a wild tangle.

Bellatrix cackles with manic glee, her wand flashing. Ginny manages to deflect the first curse, and the second, but her arm is partially numb from the last deflection and she isn’t sure she can stop another.

Death passes a hairsbreadth from her, a burning hex that leaves her knees weak just from the proximity.

And then her mum is there, shoving her out of the way, screaming at Bellatrix, wand flashing so fast Ginny can barely track what is happening.


Mum, Ginny thinks, trying to get back to her feet, refusing to watch this happen.

Bellatrix lets out a triumphant bark of laughter, but it seems to catch in her throat as her mum unerringly sends one last spell in her direction. But nothing so simple as a spell, but rather a wall of energy, a radiant force.

Bellatrix is coming apart, something so quiet and delicate. Ginny has never felt power like that in her life, the way it seems to radiate through the air.

“Ginny,” her mum says, grabbing her arm, pulling her close.

She nods, looking up at her mother, the hardness in her eyes that almost renders her unrecognizable.
“I’m okay,” she breathes.

There’s a gasp from the center of the room, Ginny turning just in time to see Harry pull off his cloak to stroll calmly in front of Tom. Her brain stutters, trying to make sense of what she’s seeing. This is when her knees weaken, tears pricking against the back of her eyes as if that terrible calm before never existed.

He’s alive, but only for now.

She catches maybe half of what is said between them as they circle each other, understands even less. The crowd around them is rapt with attention. This, Ginny realizes, is exactly what she’s been waiting for since Percy first stormed out of the Burrow. Good and evil circling each other, one final great battle. It’s still nowhere near as simple as that.

It’s terrible and transfixing and pulses with the knowledge that this moment will define all of their futures.

Harry is steady and brave as always, but there is something different in him now, more calm and sure than ever before. Like he’s seen something, understands something none of them can touch. Not even Tom.

In the end, Ginny is proven right about Harry. When it comes time to cast one final spell to save his own life, to save the lives of everyone here, Harry doesn’t reach for the killing spell. He does nothing more than disarm Tom, letting the dark wizard’s own killing spell rebound upon him.

Poetic justice, and proof that Harry is no murderer.

She can’t say she would have done the same.

He disappears beneath a pile of jubilant people.

Ginny’s knees give out.

* * *

When she recovers, numbly getting back to her feet, she moves across the hall not towards the celebrations, but the body crumpled on the floor. Everyone is giving it wide berth, as if scared it may still possess some power, some control over all of them. But there isn’t any of that anymore.

Because lying on the floor is Tom. He’s motionless, completely unthreatening. She looks for anything of the boy he once was, but just can’t see it.

She considers that maybe Tom has been gone for a really long time.

But Ginny… She’s still standing.

You’re stronger than you know.

A white sheet materializes, falling softly over the desiccated remains. Ginny turns, startled to see her mum standing next to her, wand in hand. It’s a surprisingly compassionate gesture towards a man who had none. Particularly from a woman who has lost two brothers and a son to his terrible reign.

Mum takes Ginny by the elbow. “Come away, dear.”

Ginny looks one last time upon the body of a boy turned murderer. Did he even notice? How do you know when you’ve become nothing but a monster?
But there aren’t any answers here. Just a husk.

Ginny lets herself be pulled away.

She can still feel it, the fading aura of that powerful spell encompassing her mother. “You were amazing.”

“You pick your battles,” Mum says. She turns her head, appraising her daughter. “But I think you already know that lesson, don’t you?”

Ginny tightens her jaw against the threat of tears and nods. “I had really good teachers.”

* * *

Walking out of the hall of jubilant celebration, Ginny makes her way towards the makeshift infirmary.

“Ginny.”

She turns, and near one of the first pallets is Reiko. Her face is still a mass of bruises, so it’s hard to tell if she’s been hurt.

Ginny touches her arm, “Are you—” She breaks off when she sees who is lying on the pallet. It’s Bassenthwaite, his face pale and slicked with sweat.

Ginny kneels down next to Reiko. “What happened?”

“Some sort of curse. Something dark.” Reiko has tears on her face, not bothering to hide them. “They say they can’t— That there’s nothing—”

Ginny grabs her hand.

Bassenthwaite’s eyes barely crack open. “That you, Captain?” he asked, words partially mumbled.

“Yeah,” she says, settling down next to him. “It’s me.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I’m okay.”

He nods, sucking in a rattling, wet breath. “Y’know, we definitely would have taken the Cup again.”

Ginny reaches out and takes his hand. “Of course we would,” she says, keeping her voice steady only through sheer force of will. “You’re the best Beater I’ve ever had.”

His lips twitch. “Flatterer.”

She shakes her head. “Just a fact.”

“At least now you’ll have Graham.”

They both know why they fought. For students like their missing teammate Graham. So he won’t have to hide anymore, so he can be back here playing Quidditch were he belongs.

Bassenthwaite nods, his eyes closing, breathing labored. “That’ll be better… Things back to what they should be.”
Ginny bites down hard on her lip. “I’ll make sure of it,” she promises.

His hand squeezes hers. “I know you will.”

She leans forward, pressing a kiss to his forehead, and the fact that he doesn’t pull away or tell her to sod off is like a knife in her gut.

She looks at Reiko.

Reiko gives her a firm nod. She’ll be there until the end.

Ginny squeezes Reiko’s shoulder, and forces herself to move further into the room, scanning for Tobias, terrified of what else she may find.

He’s only three pallets over, but he’s very, very still, and she stands for a long moment, frozen, until she registers the gentle, even rise and fall of his chest. She skims her eyes down his body.

“What couldn’t save the leg,” Madam Pomfrey says, looking up from the girl in the cot next to Tobias’s. “Maybe under different circumstances…”

Ginny kneels down next to Tobias, touching his forehead. “But you saved his life.”

“We’ll transfer him to St. Mungo’s as soon as Shacklebolt confirms it has been secured. I’ll keep him sedated until then.”

It’s a reminder that while Voldemort may be dead and Hogwarts a temporary sanctuary, there is still a battle waging outside, a Ministry littered with Death Eaters and deceit.

Tom has died before. It may take a while for people to accept that this time it’s forever.

Ginny leans down, resting her cheek on Tobias’s shoulder.

She rests there, staring off into the distance, letting thoughts just pass by, slide off. It takes a long while for her to register the dark blond hair trailing out from under a white sheet on the other side of the room.

She squeezes her eyes shut and listens to Tobias’s breathing.

* * *

Ginny keeps moving, and despite the pain and this hollow ache in her chest, it’s good, always having one more task, one more thing to do.

She lets her feet carry her to the common room. It’s empty, a few trunks here and there as if they’d been abandoned half-packed, or been ransacked. She walks past them, past the empty hearth and the lake keening at her like a question.

She pushes open the door to The Parlor, winding down the steps.

Dozens of people are inside, the lights blazing. Everything intact and untouched. Tilly looks up as Ginny enters, crossing over and giving her a firm hug.

She pulls back, her face streaked with tears through the dirt on her face. “Ginny. Caroline…”

Tilly’s jaw tightens. “I lost her in the chaos somehow. I should have—”

Ginny shakes her head. “Tilly.”

She closes her eyes, nodding her head. “I know.” With a breath, she turns as if to move back into the room.

Ginny puts out a hand to stop her, Tilly looking back at her in question.

She takes in Ginny’s grim expression. “Oh, goddess. Who else?”

“It’s Bassenthwaite.”

“No,” she says, voice firm. Disbelieving.

“He’s in the infirmary. They don’t think…” She lifts her chin. “You should go see him.”

Unspoken is, while you still can.

Tilly turns without another word, rushing up the steps.

Ginny moves further into the room, touching Nicola’s arm where she sits with a collection of young students.

She looks up, face flooding with relief. “Ginny.”

Nicola pushes to her feet. Pulling the key up and over her neck, she lifts it back over Ginny’s head, letting it fall back in place.

“Back where it belongs,” she says.

Ginny tries to smile, looking around the space. Unlike the rest of the castle, down here it’s almost possible to believe none of it actually happened.

Only Astoria sits on the couch, with Hestia and Flora on either side. She’s staring off into the distance, tears streaming down her face unheeded.

“Her father…” Nicola shakes her head.

Oh, Merlin.

Ginny clears her throat. “Does she know about Caroline?”

Nicola nods, her face pale.

Take good care of them.

“It’s not your fault, Ginny,” Nicola says.

“Then whose fault is it?”

Nicola doesn’t have an answer.

Ginny moves further into the room, moving from person to person, hearing about their experiences, their losses. Collects them all up and stitches them together like a cloak she’ll never really be able to take off.
She’s not surprised none of them seem to have any interest in leaving this sanctuary. They linger for lots of reasons, she knows. Waiting for word of loved ones. Waiting to be told what to do. Waiting for some sense of normality to reassert itself.

Because the truth is that none of them really know what kind of world is waiting for them at the top of the stairs.

* * *

Night has fallen again by the time Ginny makes her way back into the Great Hall. There are still people here, huddled in small groups, but the celebration and merriment have long since faded.

Off to one side, she can see that her mum is finally sleeping, her head on her dad’s shoulder. Her father looks up at her, catching her eye, and she nods to him, letting him know she’s okay.

He looks back at her with exhausted, haunted eyes and nods.

Ginny keeps moving, finding her way to the small room adjacent to the hall, the one with bodies waiting to…go elsewhere.

She stands in the doorway, taking in the sheer number of sheet-covered bodies. People sit here and there, holding vigil, but the room is unnaturally still and silent.

Ginny moves through the bodies, searching.

She wonders at the fact that she can recognize the draped form as clearly as she could a face. Slowly lowering herself to her knees, she reaches for the cloth.

“Don’t.”

Ginny looks up to see George sitting in the shadows against the wall, and just for the tiniest moment she can almost imagine…

She wonders if for the rest of his life, George gets to live with looking like a ghost. If it will always be why not me?

“Don’t remember him like this. Remember him like…” George breaks off.

Remember him as he was. Full of laughter and pranks and being a berk and impossible and wonderful and putting a giant salamander in her bed. Remember when she was a toddler and was still confused why there were two of them, how she used to crawl up into his lap and he’d pretend to be annoyed by it. He never pushed her off.

Ginny lets go of the cloth and crawls over to sit next to George. She wraps her arms around his waist, her face pressing into his chest. He’s motionless against her.

She takes a risk, speaking through the horrible thickness in her throat. “I love you, Forge,” she says, an echo from long, long years before.

He makes a choking sound, and for a moment she thinks she’s miscalculated, or that maybe he’s forgotten, but then his arms wrap around her, fingers digging into her back. He’s shaking, and she isn’t sure if those are tears or laughter. Maybe just an agonizing combination of both.

It’s only then that she lets herself really feel it, the loss and the almosts and the fear and helplessness of years and years of worry. The tears come and come and come until they feel like they will never
stop.

For a while, she sleeps, her big brother’s arms tight around her.

*     *     *

Dawn comes grey and heavy to Hogwarts.

Ginny wakes to deep, hollow numbness. The pressure of tears are gone, but leave nothing behind but emptiness.

She leaves George finally sleeping, Charlie coming in to take her place.

She doesn’t smile at him, or look him in the eye, just lets him squeeze her fingers as she passes.

She washes in the buckets available outside in the debris-strewn courtyard, and grabs a bowl of porridge the House Elves are stirring in giant vats. She wonders if the kitchens were yet another casualty, but doesn’t bother asking.

Seamus and Dean are eating nearby, bodies still touching as if to make up for their long separation, Terry, Michael, and the Patil twins sitting nearby. Ginny sees other people, other familiar faces, but doesn’t stop, doesn’t speak.

Her feet take her to her favorite sanctuary without conscious thought.

Like the rest of Hogwarts, her secret cloister has not escaped unscathed. One of the main supports is shattered, a giant beam slanting down across the center of the space. The sound of water is conspicuously absent.

She stands in the doorway, staring at the devastation, totally unprepared for how much it disturbs her, how adrift it makes her feel. People are dead, far too many people. This is just a room. Just a thing.

Stepping inside, she spends long moments methodically clearing the rubble off a stone. The simple task completed, she sits, letting the silence of the space settle over her, staring off into nothing as the exhaustion takes hold.

By her foot, she sees the spine of a book poking out from under the rubble. She brushes off the cover. Tobias will want to finish it, she thinks, tucking it into her pocket.

She has no idea how much time passes before she hears the sound of someone climbing up and over the rubble behind her.

She looks down at her bowl, now cold and still untouched, as Harry carefully lowers his body next to her, like he’s ancient and aching. She stares at the ripped knee of his trousers, the cuts and bruises on his hands.

For a long moment they just sit there, his shoulder warm and steady next to hers, like the world is just a little less likely to fall away under her feet, and that’s just as unfair as everything else.

“You did it,” she says.

He doesn’t say anything, and she forces herself to look up at him. He’s already watching her, his head turned towards her like he’s been studying her too. This close, she can see the dark circles under his eyes, the hollowness of his cheeks, and the shadow of a beard on his face.

When had he grown up?
“You finished it,” she says.

But he doesn’t look pleased, just regards her with his serious, deeply troubled eyes. “I’m sorry.”

She sucks in a breath, knowing he’s apologizing for Fred, for Lupin and Tonks, for Colin and Caroline and all the others (so many), like it is somehow his fault. For a second it all threatens to swamp her again, but she ruthlessly shoves it back down.

Looking back at the rubble, she eventually shakes her head. “I wonder if it can be salvaged,” she says.

She thinks she means the cloister, but maybe she means the school, the world.

“I hope so,” he says.

“I suppose it’s a bit insignificant,” she says, but her voice breaks and cracks and she should be stronger than this.

Harry’s body shifts, turning towards her. “I’m really glad…,” he says, and when she looks up, he’s watching her like she was the one in danger.

“Me too,” she tries to say, the image of his body lying so terribly still at the feet of Voldemort still burned into her mind.

They regard each other, like neither of them can manage to look away, and that’s not all just exhaustion.

She wants him to hug her, to fold her into his body, to make this all go away. She wants him to never touch her ever again.

I wish… had been his last words to her. She isn’t sure she knows how to wish anymore. She feels a lot like this cloister, shattered and transformed and something that maybe can never be put back together again.

She’s done things, seen things, things she can’t put into words, things she doesn’t even know how to feel about. How she should feel about them. She looks into Harry’s face and feels a thousand miles away from the girl he kissed the summer before.

She doesn’t know how to put any of that in words though, so instead she finds herself saying, “I’m a Slytherin.”

Harry’s expression doesn’t shift, still staring straight back at her with nothing of confusion or surprise. “I know,” he says.

Not ‘so what’ or ‘who cares’, but an acknowledgement, an affirmation. Like he couldn’t even imagine it any other way.

Ginny bites down hard on the inside of her cheek.

He tentatively reaches out towards her, his fingers brushing against the back of hers, and it’s almost too much.

“I’d like to tell you about Severus Snape,” he says.

She looks up at him in confusion, but he looks calm and certain, his voice soft as he tells her the story of a Slytherin called Severus Snape. She sits and listens, collecting the tales and secrets, weaving
them into her own.

For Ginny, Harry’s words are the final puzzle pieces falling quietly into place. She knew, she realizes. It was there in front of her, but she couldn’t see it. Wouldn’t allow herself to see it. Because the danger of the game Snape played is breath-taking, terrifying.

Harry turns to look at her. “He’s one of the bravest people I’ve ever known.”

“No,” Ginny says.

“What?” he asks, like she’s the last person he expects resistance from.

She shakes her head. “He wasn’t brave.”

It was something else entirely, but no less important. Ginny sees a man that if he had been even a tiny bit less cruel and hard…maybe none of them would be sitting here right now.

She looks at Harry, her hand squeezing around his, holding his gaze no matter how hard she finds it because everything just still hurts.

“He was necessary,” she says.

She can tell Harry doesn’t understand. Not really. But that’s okay. Because she thinks she’s finally starting to, the lesson this place has been trying to teach her all along.

* * *

The sun is high in the sky by the time Ginny works her way out the front door of the castle.

Neville sits with Luna and Hannah on what’s left of the grass, the three of them sharing a bowl of food between them. Ginny feels something ease in her chest just seeing them there. Picking her way around the rubble, she sits down with them, Hannah holding the bowl out to her.

Ginny takes a bit of bread, lifting it to her mouth and chewing methodically.

“Look what I found,” Neville says. He holds up the Sword of Gryffindor for her to see, something a bit defiant and humorous in his gaze.

“Reckless,” Ginny says, lips twitching.

He smiles like it’s a compliment, and maybe, somehow, it is.

“I suppose it ended up in the right place after all,” she says.

“Things usually do,” Luna says.

“We did it,” Hannah says, something like awe in her voice. “We survived.”

The four of them sit there together, looking out over the grounds.

Everything is decimated. There are plumes of smoke rising from the direction of Hogsmeade, broken stones and suits of armor strewn across the lawns. Some sort of substance slicks the surface of the lake. The Quidditch pitch has been reduced to nothing but ashes.

“We’ll rebuild,” Neville says.
Ginny takes a moment to critically eye the damage. “Yeah,” she says. “We should be able to do that.”

Hannah links her arm through Ginny’s. “We’ll do it together.”

Luna lifts her face to the shifting afternoon light, eyes closed as if listening to the hum of the grounds no one else can hear.

Seyventh Year

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue

“Stop hovering like a bloody mother hen, Weasley,” Tobias growls.

Ginny rolls her eyes, but does take a deliberate step away from him, her hand dropping from his arm. Pissed off has pretty much been his base state the entire summer. Not that she blames him. It’s probably far easier than facing what’s ahead of them.

Students and their families walk around them as they stand on the train platform. A few of the students smile, others just give them suspicious looks. But that’s nothing new. Not really.

It’s a bit startling, being here. There was talk of not opening the school again so soon. The hospital visits and funerals and trials feel like they have barely finished. Even the school is apparently not completely repaired.

Yet here they all are, lining up to board the Hogwarts Express.

“Maybe your brother and Potter had the right idea,” Tobias says after another person not so subtly looks down at his legs, only to quickly look away again.

Like they’ve never seen a bloke with a cane and a bloody enchanted leg before, he likes to mutter.

Tobias glares at the witch. “Skiving off abroad is sounding really good right about now.”

“They aren’t exactly on vacation,” Ginny says, tone endlessly patient.

Ron and Harry left with Hermione for Australia a couple weeks before, beginning what seems to be turning into a long, arduous process of tracking down the Grangers. It’s not like Hermione ever does things by half-measure, after all. She hid them very, very well.

Too well, if Harry’s letters are anything to judge by.

He went along, and she isn’t surprised by that. Not really. The three of them are doing it as a unit, as they have done all things for the last seven years. He’s promised to write this time at least, and that’s better. He even promised to come back. Someday.

She may even believe it.

Tobias sighs. “Are we sure we want to do this?”

Ginny is momentarily distracted by the sight of Astoria crossing the platform, wand steady as she guides her trunk up onto the train. It looks wrong, seeing her without Caroline by her side.

“No,” she says. “Not in the slightest.”

Tobias huffs. “Well, then, just so we’re clear.”

She must drift for a moment, losing time and place the way she does sometimes, because Tobias touches her arm.
“Gin,” he says, voice soft.

She gives her head a small shake, looking up at him. His fingers squeeze gently, as if reminding her that they’re doing this together.

She gives him a bracing smile.

“Come on, Weasley.” he says, smacking his trunk with his cane. “Help me on the train, you lazy wanker. I’m a bloody war hero.”

She takes his arm. “Come on, war hero,” she says, voice wry.

They’ve faced worse.

*     *     *

After storing their trunks, Ginny and Tobias work their way through the compartments.

One of the first ones they pass by has only a single occupant in it, his face turned defiantly out towards the window as if to deny the scrutiny of any passing students. But despite the meticulous clothing and perfectly slicked-back hair, his fingers are pressing into his thighs, betraying discomfort.

It’s strange to see him sitting alone, but Ginny thinks that’s the way it will probably be from now on. Now that there is a clear winner and a loser, people find it much easier to toe a line.

“Gin?” Tobias says, noticing she hasn’t followed.

“Give me a minute?” she says.

His eyebrows lift, glancing into the compartment. “Suit yourself,” he says.

Draco looks up as she pulls the door open, and there’s none of the posturing or belligerence she might expect. She isn’t sure if that’s because he’s resigned himself or if they maybe reached a bit of an understanding at last. She thinks it probably doesn’t matter.

“Weasley,” he says, voice wary.

She doesn’t say anything right away, taking some perverse pleasure in letting him squirm.

She’s honestly surprised to see him here. She wouldn’t have expected him to be daring enough to come back. Maybe this is what Dumbledore and Snape worked so hard to achieve though—one less victim to Voldemort’s campaign of fear. Harry probably had a little something to do with it as well, that Draco ended up on this train and not in a cell. Or maybe the Malfoys’ disgrace from both sides is thought to be punishment enough. She supposes only time will tell.

“You just planning on staring at me?” he demands, nerves betrayed by the way his hand isn’t completely steady as he runs it over his hair.

She deliberately looks down at his arm, the smooth, untouched skin, as if the mark never sat there.

He tucks his arm into his chest, a shadow passing over his face. “It went away when he did.”

“Doesn’t quite seem right,” Ginny says, leaning back against the door.

He turns to look at her with a frown. “What?”
“When I’m stuck with mine.”

He winces, chin automatically lifting as if to counteract the telling lapse in control. She knows then that he understood exactly what he was doing all those years ago. But so did she.

“How me?” she asks, finally wanting to know why he always tormented her of all people, why she always enjoyed his special attention.

Draco doesn’t pretend not to know what she means, turning his cool eyes on her. “Because you didn’t deserve to be in Slytherin.”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course. I’m a Muggle-loving blood traitor.”

“No,” he says.

She looks at him in surprise.

“Well, yes, you are,” he amends, his lips twitching slightly. “But that’s not why.”

She frowns. “Then why?”

He gives her a look like he thinks she’s being thick. “Because it was so obvious you never wanted to be there.”

Ginny blinks back at him in surprise. She never considered how apparent that might have been to the others. But maybe the stranger part is that she can’t even imagine being anything else.

She crosses over to sit down next to him, Draco leaning back as he does, his hand reaching for what she assumes is his wand. But rather than cursing him, Ginny merely pulls up her own sleeve, holding her arm out to him. It takes him a moment to build up the nerve to actually look, his mouth falling open when he does.

“What did you—?” he says, eyes tracing over the sharp angles and round body of a spider rendered with precise, tension filled lines. Each detail is carefully outlined as it stretches out across her wrist, appearing to writhe and weave itself together out of nothing.

Ginny still thinks it may be the best work Millicent has ever done.

“What do these mean?” Draco asks, finger stopping just short of touching the runes inked in the center where the old green lines are still carefully visible.

Ginny watches him, waiting for him to meet her eyes before speaking. “I define.”

It is what you make of it.

They regard each other for a long moment. Draco is the first to look away.

She gets to her feet.

“See you around, Weasley,” he says, eyes staring out the window.

“Yeah,” she says, leaving him to his solitude.

In the next car, the door doesn’t open into a corridor. There are no compartments, just one giant room with chairs and tables haphazardly spread throughout.
Martin and Demelza are in one corner with their heads close together, Seamus and Dean talking to Terry nearby. Neville and Hannah sit on either side of Tobias, Hannah saying something that seems to be making Tobias equal parts horrified and pleased.

Reiko and Susan watch Luna with varying levels of disbelief as she shows them something in the latest edition of The Quibbler.

“Ginny,” Luna says, looking up at her and smiling. “There is a seat here, if you would like.”

She takes it, squeezing Reiko’s hand as she passes. “So what are you showing us?”

Luna begins a long discussion of the newly discovered Netastrian Imps.

Ginny settles back, the train swaying into motion under her feet, the hum of student voices all around her.

Not houses, just survivors.

* * *

In the Great Hall, the clean up is not completely finished. Ginny can see a bit of sky through a crack in the enchanted ceiling as she sits at the head of the Slytherin table. It makes her think of Quidditch and open spaces and an entire world of possibilities.

She listens to the Sorting Hat sing its song, this one operatic and lilting and no doubt years in the making. Brighter days and new purpose, a future some began to doubt would ever be.

Four pillars. Four foundations. Four friends. Hogwarts stands or falls.

It’s just a hat, but Ginny feels like maybe it’s looking straight at her.

The small group of timid little first-years look impossibly young as they shuffle towards the front of the chamber one by one.

Ginny meets each of the newly sorted Slytherin with a steady gaze and a solemn little nod. You are one of us.

She’ll teach them what it really means to be Slytherin—choice and ambition and cunning and all the murky shades of grey. Subtle. Useful. Unexpected.

But just a house.

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Chapter End Notes

For those of you who aren’t ready to let go of this Ginny or who didn't get their Harry/Ginny fix, this story continues in the Armistice Series.

Works inspired by this one Changeling [PODFIC] by Opalsong. Cover for "The Changeling" by
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