The Sacred 28
by kcthekat

Summary

In a dwindling post-war society, pureblood prisoners are being released into the care of Death Eaters for "rehabilitation." And because life is quite unfair, Draco Malfoy has been entrusted with one very angry, very vengeful Ginny Weasley.
Chapter 1

Author’s Note: So strange, but you never know when inspiration will strike. I haven’t read a Harry Potter fanfiction in years, but this story just wouldn’t leave me alone. After thinking on it for a few weeks, I decided to share it, on the off chance that some of you may enjoy it, too.

Warnings: Dark themes, mentions of torture and rape, also adult language. More in this chapter than in most others. This story is rated M for Mature.

Enjoy.

“Oi! Mum, Ginny took my food – “

“Stop lying on me! Your pastry is in your fat face!”

Ron Weasley pointed vehemently. “Did you hear what she just said to me?” he asked around a mouthful of dinner roll. He managed to swallow enough to whine as Molly Weasley walked by, blissfully calm in the sea of chaos that was her home.

“Honestly, you two, one might think you’d be a little nicer to one another here on a holiday like this,” started their mother, before Bill, Fred and George all came crashing into the kitchen, hands diving into plates only to be swatted back by a spatula, and then more shouts sounded, happy cheers for Arthur as he stepped through the front door.

“Finally!” crowed Ron, making a face as Percy plopped into the seat next to him. “It’s about time we finally eat!” As if he hadn't been sneaking bread for the last ten minutes.

“I’m here, I’m here, you won’t starve,” teased Arthur, dropping his briefcase, excited glimmer in his eye as he started in about something exciting he’d found at work that day. Ginny turned in her chair, small feet just a few inches too high to touch the floor, and admired them all as Charlie came last, ruffling her hair as he passed, taking a seat next to their father.

“Next year,” said Ron to Ginny, their argument forgotten, “I’ll be eating like this every day, because I’ll be at Hogwarts.”

Ginny glowered, envious. “And then I’ll be there,” she said haughtily, “and I’ll do better than you at everything. I will, you just watch.”

“Yeah, right,” he muttered, cheeks already plump with food. “I’ll probably have to protect you and stuff, because I’ll be the experienced and brilliant second year, and you’ll be like a little baby.”

Ginny flicked butter at him and it landed on his cheek. “You can’t even protect yourself from butter!” she laughed, growing louder when Fred and George joined her and their mother wiggled a finger. “I’ll be the one protecting you, Ron!”

“Nah,” disagreed Ron again, wiping casually at the butter at his face and giving her a real smile, freckled cheeks lifting. “It’ll definitely be me. No one at that school is messing with my little sister. Not while I’m around.”

Ginny rolled her eyes.

“Sure, Ron,” she said lightly, digging into her food. “Whatever you say.”
The floor was cold and wet.

Only a hint of light made its way through the cracks and crevices in the heavy door, and it wasn’t really enough to see by. A small barred window sat at the top, but it only served to show a sliver of shadow as others walked by outside, unhindered by the pitch-black air of the square squat cell.

Chatter filtered through the openings, mostly indistinguishable, but sometimes a real word here or there. It was nothing of importance, nothing comforting. Only the shifting of the shadows, a witch or wizard standing outside the door at alternating hours, gave any real indication of passing time.

They weren’t in Azkaban, but thanks to the freezing cold air and heavily barred doors, it really made no difference. They may as well have been under the watch of dementors, for all the hope they had left.

Today, as the changes in watch were made and the shadows shifted, someone opened the door, as they sometimes did. The magical wards at the front of the cell, translucent and shimmering, barely visible, warned any of the occupants against making a break for it, even when the heavy door was pulled back.

It was always the same silhouette there when the door was opened, and the same gritty voice that called out.

“Ah,” came the voice, throaty and guttural, unpleasant in every way. “Let’s see here… who’s got some time for old Nott today…”

No one in the dark square – not those huddled in the corner or others curled into tight balls on the floor – moved or reacted, save for one, who whimpered softly. It was she who caught Nott Sr's attention, and before anyone could react (not that they did, not anymore) Nott lashed out with his wand and a bright coil caught the prisoner's ankle.

There were eight of them in the cell, but he picked her the most often.

“No,” she pleaded desperately, clawing at the grimy ground, but Nott just tugged on the coil and pulled her slowly across the ground, positively jubilant in the face of the young woman's fear. He paused, though, and looked across the cell, bringing up a lantern to shine it on the dirty faces there so he could peer thoughtfully at them.

“Aw, I don’t think my companion much likes me today,” Nott taunted further. “Anyone want to take her place?”

Again, no replies, and certainly no volunteers. Nott stepped around the terrified girl and shone the light closer to her face, before a glint of flashing eyes caught his attention, and he brought the flame up to a figure in the corner.

“What about you, Weasley?”

Hands curled tightly on her upper-arms, the young witch in question shifted her gaze slowly up to meet Nott’s, hazel eyes heavy, narrowed, and severe. Nott’s thick lips curled, and if possible, his features became even more grotesque. “You’d sure be a nice one…” he commented, reaching out to touch her face, but something in her expression stopped him, and he pulled back with a snort.

“But I’ll leave you be,” Nott muttered, shifting away from her. “For now, that is.”

He said that very same thing often – fifteen times, by Ginny's count – but he never came for her,
for whatever reason.

Perhaps she wasn’t his type, though from Ginny’s estimation, his only requirements so far were a beating heart and a great show of reluctance. Ginny's features, still blank, sharpened in a show of hostility, and her fingers tightened on her upper-arms where they balanced on her dirty knees.

A growl built in her throat when Nott leered too close, but he was gone in the next instant, dragging his unwilling partner with him.

When the poor girl was returned to the black hole a half-hour later, no one in the cell had moved at all.

Days later – though, how many no one in the cell could say – the door opened again, and many of the inhabitants of the cell flinched. However, the silhouette that filled the doorway was not that of Nott. Instead, it was two figures, standing in full Death-Eater regalia, masks drawn over their faces.

“Up,” one ordered.

No one moved, possibly because many had not stood on their own weight in some time, Ginny among them. However, even if she had felt as spry as she’d ever been, Ginny would have stayed rooted where she was, if for no other reason than spite.

“I said, up!” barked the first one again, and this order came with a lash of the wand. Ginny was snatched to her feet by an invisible force, and her joints protested grimly. Still, she kept quiet even as a few of the others – whose faces she had rarely seen in their time together, given the darkness of their cell – cried out in pain.

The group of eight exited the cell, and once they began moving, the spell controlling their steps was lifted and four more Death Eaters joined the first two, escorting them in tightly contained rows along a narrow stone corridor. The dank grey walls and the lack of décor made it difficult to determine their exact location, but Ginny didn’t bother to try and search for clues anyhow.

She’d woken up in that place some time ago, and she had not left it a single time since.

Now, as the group was roughly herded around corners and upstairs, Ginny’s mind wondered only vaguely where they were heading, with no real anticipation or anxiety of what was to come. Anything that could have sparked fear in her before was long part of memory. Any pain, any loss, any suffering she might encounter wherever she was going seemed inconsequential. Even the idea of conjuring up the fear felt pointless and silly. Something of a hysterical laugh bubbled in Ginny’s throat, but she quelled it.

For the first time, Ginny noted that Ernie Macmillan was up ahead of her, one of the dirty and ragged prisoners who’d been kept in the cell with her. He had a streak of blood on his face that had become so soiled, it was nearly black. His head was down and his eyes were low, like everyone else’s.

When Ginny’s blank stare led her to walk directly into the person ahead of her, she realized that the filthy girl in front of her was Lavender Brown. The two paused and made eye contact for the first time, but their expressions remained muted, and Lavender simply turned around and continued walking before one of the Death Eaters could jab her, as they’d done others, with the points of their wands.

At last, a door opened up overhead and the eight prisoners, along with their masked escorts, stepped out of the cold corridor and up a set of stairs. Something felt strange under Ginny’s bare
foot, and when she cast a vague glance down, Ginny realized she was stepping on carpet for the first time in ages.

The group was led across an ornate sitting room, one lined with antique furniture and a great gaping fireplace. They passed through in silence, and more doors – these tall, white and artfully designed – loomed in front of them. Two of the Death Eaters opened them, and the crew moved through.

Eventually, they filed into yet another large room, and a few of the prisoners timidly looked to their left, where curtain-lined windows revealed it was nighttime. None of them had seen such a thing for quite a while, and a few simply stared.

Others, like Ginny, simply stared straight ahead as the Death Eaters moved in sync with one another to form a line in front of them. Others were already there, and now Ginny noted with disinterest that a maskless Death Eater – Avery, perhaps, she wasn’t sure – stood at the center with a scroll in hand. His disgust at the appearance of the neglected prisoners was visible, but it was almost certainly because they were treading dirt and filth into an otherwise clean room filled with expensive furniture, rather than because he was disgruntled at their treatment.

Clearing his throat a bit, Avery unfurled the scroll. Without indicating anything noteworthy to the prisoners, he glanced instead to the Death Eaters, all of whom stood with rigid and rapt attention.

“Dolohov,” he read from the parchment, and one of the masked villains stepped forward. Avery – or whoever – glanced at the prisoners. “You’re taking Prewitt,” he noted without sympathy.

A young witch at the end of the line flinched, but Dolohov moved forward and yanked her to him with a flick of his wand. Once he had a good grip on her arm, the two disappeared with a crack.

Avery went on dully, even as some of the other prisoners glanced at one another, eyes wide.

“Carrow,” he said to the Death Eaters, and a witch in a mask stepped forward. “You have Macmillan.”

Ernie stiffened next to Ginny, but he said nothing as the Death Eater grabbed his arm, prodding his chest with her wand in an unmistakable taunting motion before they, too, vanished into thin air. Ginny’s eyes flickered to the spot where Ernie had been only moments ago, and for the first time, a spark of animosity burned in her chest.

Still, her face remained impassive as names were called, and one by one, the prisoners were dispersed. “Nott,” called out Avery, and Ginny felt her jaw tighten. The mask was in place, but the unseemly gait was unmistakable. Her fingers clenched at her sides. Fury burned pleasantly in her chest.

Let Nott come for her. She would mark him from the inside out.

“You’ve got Brown,” said Avery at last, and Nott shifted in the direction of Lavender, who immediately whimpered and backed away. Nott caught her with a glowing rope at the end of his wand and snatched her close, and Ginny forced herself to look at the ground as Lavender screamed and struggled. The shrill noises and desperate cries were unceremoniously cut off when Nott and Lavender both disappeared.

Without reacting, Avery turned back to his list. “Malfoy.”

Ginny slowly lifted her gaze as the tall figure moved ahead of the others, and she felt her features twist into a dark grimace. The lighting in the room was low, subdued, but it seemed to grow darker
in that moment, shrouding those who remained there. Avery glanced up and scanned the remaining prisoners.

“You have Weasley,” he said.

Ginny shifted her hostile gaze up at the skeletal mask, and it was anyone’s guess who had the more frightening stare. The hooded figure hesitated for only a moment, and Ginny felt herself sneer.

The great Lucius Malfoy, cautious of her.

Still, he took her arm in his grip, and in just a moment, they were both upturned, vanishing from the stately room and reappearing outside in mere seconds. The sensation of a breeze caught Ginny off-guard, and she blinked against the wind in her eyes. It was enough of a pause to allow Malfoy to reach over and bind her wrists with a quick spell.

Making a guttural noise of disapproval, Ginny snatched her arms, trying to move them away, but he took advantage of her delayed reflexes and hauled her forward. It was then that Ginny took a look up, and she saw they stood in front of an elaborate manor, more beautiful and stately a home than any she'd ever seen. Manicured gardens, strangely desolate and solitary against the night sky, lingered in the distance, while other more dense gardens sat in front of the home. Some foliage decorated the ground sparsely, looking out of place and lonely.

A few of the peaked windows appeared warm with lights, but many others were dark, without a hint of movement to be seen.

A magical barrier shimmered around the pair as they passed through, and in moments, the unsightly pair stood in front of large doors which opened without assistance. Ginny stumbled forward, and when she moved to jerk back, a short but powerful hex hit her spine and she yelped, body clenching around the pain for a moment before she regained her breath.

“Move,” ordered the voice behind the mask.

Too weary and filled with suffering to notice much of her surroundings, Ginny dragged her tired body along yet more lavish hallways until they came to one which ended at a pair of double-doors. It was here Malfoy led her, opening the doors, shoving her roughly inside, and then stepping in behind her, slamming the doors shut behind him.

Ginny faltered but remained standing, and when she managed a long, deep breath, she used it to push herself to an upright position and turn the full power of her glare in the direction of Malfoy. A blistering curse rose on her tongue, but when the Death Eater turned and removed his mask with a wave of his hand, it died in her throat.

Draco Malfoy, not Lucius, stood in front of her, pointed features narrowed.

Ginny’s expression twisted into a furious growl. “You.”

It was the first thing she’d said aloud in ages, and it was low, hoarse, and borderline demonic. So alarming was it, in fact, that Draco Malfoy – much taller than her and the only one with a wand – took a step back.

“Bloody hell, Weasley,” he scoffed. His calm disdain was almost too much for her. “You look even worse than usual.” The words were barely out of his mouth before Ginny flew at him, stumbling and crashing into the door when he leaped out of the way. The furious redhead rounded on Draco with a wordless yell.
“Calm down, you lunatic!” snapped Draco, snatching out his wand and pointing it at her, which arrested Ginny in her spot but did nothing to diminish the hatred-fueled glare. “For the love of Merlin,” he groused, wand still raised. His usual haughtiness quickly replaced his brief panic. “I knew you were raised in a hovel. I didn’t realize that meant you were practically a wild animal, too.”

“Shut up,” hissed Ginny, hazel eyes deeply narrowed, fingers clenched at the joints in claw-like positions.

Scowling heavily, Draco crossed the room, which Ginny only just now understood was a very large bedroom, complete with a four-poster bed, a dresser, a desk and many more pieces of ornate furniture.

With one hand, Draco reached up and unclasped his cloak. The simple motion made Ginny react with a jerk, and she pressed her back against the doors, instantly defensive. Draco paused, eyes flickering over to her, brows furrowed.

“What in the hell is your problem?” he asked, carelessly tossing the cloak aside.

“Do not touch me,” growled Ginny in reply, and comprehension dawned on the older wizard. An expression of disgust crossed Draco’s features.

“Nott been up to his usual tricks?” asked Draco casually, turning away from her as he continued to make himself more comfortable in his surroundings, unfurling his sleeves and tugging at his collar. “Don’t worry, Weasley,” he said with a shrug. “Unlike Nott, I know plenty of witches who would sleep with me willingly. No need for all that business.”

“Good,” seethed Ginny, her voice returning, fierce. “Saves me the trouble of having to rip you apart with my bare hands.”

At this, Draco turned to face her with a glare, fingers pausing at his sleeves before dropping. He observed her silently for a long moment before he scowled, features turning annoyed. “Look here, Weasley,” Draco turned to her and approached very suddenly, ignoring the way she darted against the wall again. In that moment, Draco’s features turned very severe, and Ginny hated how he looked so much like Lucius. “We’re going to establish a few things right now,” said Draco, wand held tightly in hand.

He brought it up to point at her, the tip hovering very near her throat. Ginny’s eyes flickered at it, but she remained still. All Malfoy would have to do is overpower her, and it would all be over.

“You are here,” he told her gravely, venom lacing his tones, “because you are a pureblood. The reason you are even graced with the ability to breathe air – the reason you are so fortunate as to stand in my home at this very moment – is because your wretched family happens to be one of the very few remaining pureblood families left in Great Britain.”

Ginny blinked, making every effort to force her body through the very real physical barrier of the door.

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“Now,” continued Draco sharply, “personally, I think the world would be far better off without your genetics polluting the bloodline, but the Dark Lord feels differently. So guess what, Weasley? You’ve been blessed with a second chance. You – “ here, he touched her throat with the tip of his wand, and Ginny flinched, “ – are now my responsibility. It is through my gracious mercy and expert guidance that you will, one day, transition into the Dark Lord’s new world as a functioning member of the pureblood society.”
He backed away from her, lips curled in a sneer.

“A new order has been established, Weasley,” he told her, and then he turned his back on her and his attention shifted to a fine wooden cabinet. He pulled out a bottle of Firewhiskey and a glass. “And fortunately for you, you have the opportunity to be a part of it. Mostly for lack of better option.”

Understanding crept up Ginny’s spine and settled darkly in her mind. Ernie Macmillan. Lavender Brown. The other prisoners she had seen. They’d all been purebloods.

Ginny’s hostile glare moved up to Draco’s face again, even as her first real tendril of fear took hold. “A new order,” she repeated lowly, hoarsely. Merlin, that would mean… Her chest hurt deeply as she asked the question clawing at her chest.

“How long was I in there?”

Draco took a sip from an expensive looking glass engraved with his initials. He paused before answering. “About ten months,” he told her, tone quiet and unaffected. Ginny closed her eyes, body trembling. Ten months. She’d been locked in that cell that whole time, and now she had been re-birthed into literal hell.

Draco seemed content to let these thoughts hover over her like an unwelcome cloud, his efforts mostly focused on his drink and the fireplace nearby, which he observed with a dull look of irritation. Ginny’s teeth grinded unpleasantly against each other, and she remained frozen in her spot.

If Voldemort had kept her and a few other chosen purebloods alive in those cells for that long, only to force them into close quarters with known Death Eaters, what did that mean for the rest of the British magical population? Could he really have been so desperate for purebloods that he was willing to hold onto – rather than kill or torture into insanity – known allies of Harry Potter?

A cold sensation burst into Ginny’s chest at a sudden realization, and she whirled to face Draco, stepping away from the door. He looked up at her, wand tight and tense in his hand.

“The Muggle-borns,” she gasped out. “What did he do with them?”

Draco swirled his drink in the glass a bit. “What do you think he did with them, Weasley?” he asked darkly. While he didn’t seem to take delight in the words, he also made no motion or indication of sympathy. He simply watched her, features drawn and uncaring.

Ginny swallowed tightly, and it hurt her throat. “He can’t – he can’t have killed all of them…”

“And why not?” asked Draco, moving forward and draining the last of his glass, leaning close to her.

“You don’t get it, Weasley,” he told her in a harsh, low whisper. “He is in complete control now. The Ministry of Magic, the school. It’s all his.”

The young witch stepped back away from Draco and clenched one hand into a fist. Her body hurt, and she hadn’t been fed properly in days. Nothing in or on her body felt right. And yet none of that mattered in that moment.

“SHUT UP!” she screamed, eyes flashing, and she whirled to face him, one hand lashing out. “Go on, then, Malfoy,” her voice shifted suddenly to low, quiet tones, each word more heated than the last. “Try and make me into a puppet for your society. See how well I do for you.”
Draco scowled, standing back away from her. “For the love of Merlin, Weasley, you don’t really expect to fight this, do you?”

At this, Ginny’s lips quirked, though it only served to make her look more manic.

“Oh, I will fight it, Malfoy,” she told him, approaching slowly. “I will best you at every turn. I will get a hold of a wand and I will hex you until you are a thousand different particles, floating back to the ground. And I swear to Merlin, I will choke to death on a thousand razorblades before I join Voldemort’s sick society.”

“So then, what?” countered Draco, waving his glass mockingly. “You’d rather return to that rat-infested hole, eh? Better than what you grew up in, was it?”

Ginny hissed between her teeth. “I will burn your house to the ground,” she said slowly, deliberately, eyes locked on him, “with all your family inside before I follow a single command of yours.”

Draco balked. “You are deranged, Weasley. Positively insane.” Then he shook his head, scowling heavily. “Why in the hell the Dark Lord assigned you to me, I have no idea – “

“Probably hoping I would kill you,” interrupted Ginny. “You’re his least favorite, and everyone knows it.”

The older wizard glared and refilled his drink. “Well, that’s still a hell of a lot more than you can say,” he quipped, turning to face her again. “You’re on trial for your life, Weasley. Fail this, and you’re dead.”

For a moment, Ginny fell quiet. Then she slinked forward, though the strange movements of her body might’ve been the result of being cramped up for so long. “Do you think that frightens me, Malfoy?”

The question came as a soft whisper, seething with barely contained fury. Draco finally met her gaze, and his grey eyes flickered at her proximity. In that moment, Ginny looked like she’d crawled directly from an earthy grave, filthy from head to toe, hair strewn and features twisted. He regarded her carefully.

“Harry Potter is dead,” she said slowly. When Draco didn’t respond, Ginny’s teeth clicked together harshly, painfully. “My brother Ron is dead. Hermione Granger is dead. Albus bloody fucking Dumbledore – is DEAD!”

The last word was a sudden, jarring shout, but to his credit, Draco didn’t flinch. Ire burned inside of Ginny like it hadn’t in months, and the hardened apathy that had enfolded her during her time in the cell – time which Voldemort had apparently spent shaping his illustrious pureblood utopia – melted away under a pyre of uncontained agony.

“The only thing that has kept me alive all this time, Malfoy,” continued Ginny heatedly as she stalked forward, eyes now wide and furious, “is the knowledge that someone in my family – even a single bloody fucking person – might still be alive. But if all you’re going to do is make me into your dirty puppet so you can finally get off your knees and return to your former glory - ”

“Well, how about this, Weasley,” cut in Draco, advancing on her with his wand drawn, “How about I take you to Nott instead, if you’re so upset at being here, huh? You want to get tossed in with him and Lavender Brown, getting raped senseless – “
“SHUT UP!”

“Your life,” he seethed, “is over. And now you can suck it up and become part of the world again, or you can curl up into your pathetic little ball and die. I. don’t. care.”

“Like I believe that,” growled Ginny, twisting her head at him. “If Voldemort is desperate enough to keep me and the others alive, it has to be because he’s realized how small the magical population is without Muggle-borns, isn’t it?”

At Draco’s cutting glare, Ginny let out a bitter laugh. “You think I don’t know about the Sacred Twenty-Eight, Malfoy? Before the war, there were only twenty-eight pureblooded families left in Great Britain. Of course I know that!” She tossed out an arm in a wild swing. “I’m magical too, Malfoy! I know our bloody history! So don’t think to fool me, because I know – I know what this little project must mean, and how important it is!”

“You don’t know the half of it,” whispered Draco lowly. “You’ve been asleep, Weasley. And it’s time for your rude awakening.”

“Big talk coming from someone lording a wand over a defenseless little witch,” murmured Ginny darkly in reply. Her eyes flickered at his wand. “Give me one – any wand, any at all. And then we can see how high you stand and how far you fall.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?” asked Draco.

“A bit of an unfair question,” replied Ginny. “I think we both know the answer to that.”

The taller boy shifted and glared down at her. Then he laughed bitterly, shaking his head at her. “You know, I don’t remember much about you from school – other than you were hot for Potter and you spent most of your spare time on your back, ready and willing for anyone who’d take the time.”

Ginny’s heated stare trembled furiously.

“But you know,” said Draco languidly, grey eyes fixed on her, absent sympathy. “I look forward to getting to know you. Because,” he leaned close, “when you finally succumb to the inevitable realization that you are without friends, family and allies to return you to your wholesome, unrealistic universe, I will be so, so very glad to watch…” he paused.

“Especially knowing that Harry Potter’s last romp is just another cog in the pureblood aristocracy. Just as she was always meant to be.”

Just before Ginny’s fury could take hold, Draco snatched her arm, dragged her struggling body across the room, and hurled her into an open doorway. Ginny’s hip hit something hard, and she gripped it with a gasp of pain, only dimly registering that it was a porcelain tub.

“Now bathe,” he ordered, nodding to a pile of robes folded neatly nearby. “I don’t want you further contaminating my house.” With that, he slammed the door shut just as Ginny launched herself against it, and she hit the wood with a heavy, hard thud.

Draco Malfoy turned away from the door, now alone in his room. He stopped when a furious howl sounded on the other side, a high-pitched wail that erupted for only a second before every bit of glass in Draco’s room burst with magical energy.

Draco jumped, eyes wide as he looked up around the room at the broken bits and then back at the bathroom door, where Ginny Weasley continued to howl in rage.
“Bloody hell,” he muttered, before he began looking for another drinking glass.
"Say it again, Rowle... I must hear it once more."

The large blonde wizard shifted side to side, fighting the desire to look away. His entire body curled in on itself in an effort to pull away from Voldemort without looking too obvious. “We – We lost them, my lord. They got away.”

“Potter... got away.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Rowle, and even from where Draco stood several feet away, the hulking hunch of the older wizard’s shoulders held a visible tremble. “But – but we can track them, we – “ Rowle’s words were cut short by of a cry of pain, and he dropped to the hard marble floor, head bouncing unpleasantly against the unforgiving surface.

The noise it made – slap! – echoed in Draco’s mind. Bellatrix giggled nearby.

The slim grey figure of Voldemort stepped forward, wand raised. The tip of the ominous wood sparked with energy and each jolt of power seemed to wrap around Rowle in a vice-grip of pain. Rowle’s great muscled bulk thrashed helplessly against the curse, and a noise like a lost child escaped him, desperate and afraid.

“More, Rowle? Or shall we end it and feed you to Nagini...” questioned the Dark Lord, somehow audible over Rowle’s screams and the uncomfortable shifting of everyone else in the long, dimly lit room. “You called me back for this, to tell me Harry Potter has escaped again?”

The tip of Voldemort’s wand lifted and the curse ceased for a moment, leaving Rowle to slump against the floor. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, and more pooled on the floor beneath his head.

“I’m – sorry, my lord,” gurgled Rowle from the floor, eyes darting around wildly, though the rest of his body seemed unwilling to move. “We – we will find – them – “

Voldemort paced, and the heaviness in the air moved with him.

Draco stood next to his father, and in a wild moment of fear, he wished he could just go home and sit in his room. What he wouldn’t give to be in the Slytherin Common Room right now, he thought grimly.

Voldemort came very close to them, and his serpentine face tilted in Draco’s direction.

“Draco,” he said languidly, wand still in hand. “Give Rowle another taste of our displeasure.”

Draco felt his father stiffen just a bit at his side, but Lucius made no motion to say what everyone else in the room - save perhaps Bellatrix - was thinking: that Rowle had had enough. That any more might kill him. And that he’d been a loyal Death Eater on a hundred different days, performed the tasks he’d been assigned, gone above and beyond, and yet it was this one failure that would destroy him.

Draco remained where he was, unable to move.

The Dark Lord’s features instantly sharpened, and he approached Draco in two long steps, moving
right in front of him. “Do it, or feel my wrath yourself!” Voldemort bellowed.

A hand prodded at Draco’s back, and he knew it was his father’s. With only a moment to collect himself – no hint of which passed over his features – Draco stepped forward with his wand in hand and pointed it at Rowle. Draco swallowed thickly, because he wasn’t sure if the words would come out.

Rowle chose that moment to look over at him, his eyes discolored and his lips gaping, his chest heaving for air. The two wizards made eye-contact, and Draco remembered in that instant that Rowe had attended his seventh birthday party.

“Crucio.”

When morning dawned the next day, Draco stayed in bed for a full half-hour before he could will himself to get up.

The raucous noises coming from the trapped Weasley in his bathroom had continued for so long the night before, he’d eventually gotten up and cast a silencing charm on it before falling back into bed. Now, as he lay against his sheets, he wondered if that had been a mistake. The silence was almost more unnerving than her inhuman shrieking.

Raking his hands over his face, Draco rose from his bed, grabbed his clothes and went to a bathroom down the hall to shower. When he returned to his room, he was fully dressed and confident. Whatever manner of insanity Weasley had planned for him, he could handle it. Approaching the door, Draco banged on it once – just enough time to alert her, but not enough for her to gear up for an attack – before throwing it open.

He didn’t see her at first, but when he finally did, Draco dropped his arms and scowled heavily.

“Bloody hell, Weasley,” he groaned, finding the stubborn ginger sitting curled on the floor, every bit as filthy as she had been the night before. Only the whites of her eyes appeared without dirt, and those were staring up at him with an eerie intensity. “I told you to bathe!”

Ginny sidled him with a flat stare. “Get dead, Malfoy.”

Eyes narrowed, Draco pulled out his wand. “Damn it, you filthy little blood traitor, you are giving me hives just looking at you. Now, get in that bath and make yourself look like a civilized creature!”

A few seconds of silence, and then –

“Go hug a Hungarian Horntail.” Ginny cocked her head up at him. “I’m not doing a damn thing.”

Draco took in a long deep breath. Some tiny voice in his head told him that a gentler tactic might work better, but another, louder voice told him to hurl the damned girl out of a window and into a patch of thorny bushes. Wand in hand, Draco stalked closer and pointed directly at her.

“Get up,” he told her in low, measured tones, “or I will Crucio you until you finally start acting with some sense.”

At this, Ginny’s eyes flickered to his wand, and Draco kept his features carefully still. After considering his words for a moment, Ginny settled her chin on the upraised arms she kept pulled around her knees. “Do it, Malfoy,” she said in her low, gruff voice, still not fully recovered from its disuse. “If you’re as terrible at curses as you are at everything else, I’ll probably just fall asleep.”
Draco’s wand dipped in Ginny’s direction, and he saw her tense just a bit, despite her lax dismissal. He smirked inwardly, glad to get some kind of reaction out of her. He raised his wand at her where she sat against the cold marble floor of his bathroom, and Ginny jumped in alarm, one hand slapping loudly against the hard floor.

**Slap!**

The sound reverberated through the small room, making it a thousand times louder than it had any right to be, and Draco froze.

Nothing happened for a long moment, and Ginny looked up at him curiously. Blinking out of his stupor, Draco shoved his wand into his pocket. “I don’t have time to clean up the bloody mess you might cause,” he snapped instead, and Draco turned to go out of the door, though he stopped himself with a growl. He turned to her and pointed.

“Until you wash and get dressed, you are going to stay in this bloody bathroom. *Without food.*” Satisfied, Draco snapped his cloak closed over his shoulders. “See how long you last then.”

“Much longer than you would, I’m sure,” was her response right before he slammed the door shut and stalked off.

Ginny’s fingers scratched lightly over the floor. It was an idle, senseless motion, but she’d grown so used to the grimy stone floor of the cell, she now felt rather pleased at having something else to touch. Even being in a well-lit area, without the threat of Nott looming in the doorway, was a welcome improvement.

Draco could rail against her all day about how much better things could be, but her mind could only allow her this for now.

The stupid prat had been gone for a while, though what he could possibly have to do for hours at a time, she didn’t know. Even if Hogwarts had been re-opened (which she doubted), Draco should be done with schooling, so he wasn’t there. For the first time in a while, Ginny considered whether or not she would like to return to Hogwarts. Ultimately, she determined that she would not.

It wouldn’t be the same. It couldn’t.

Taking a long look around the bathroom, Ginny studied her surroundings from her spot on the floor. The bathroom was, as anyone might expect, lavish and elegant, if not a bit old-fashioned. The porcelain tub sat in the center of the open room with its gold claw feet on each corner, and it was really large and deep enough for Ginny to drown herself in. This self-engineered ending was a possibility she considered for a few hours. It would serve damned Malfoy right, making her stay in here only to come in and find her floating lifeless body. Let him explain that one to Voldemort.

Still, Ginny decided against it, even though the idea of going into a blissful sleep, never to awaken, was a pleasant one. Never in her life had Ginny ever thought, even for a second, that she might consider such a thing. But here she was, passing the hours with calm contemplation on how she might best end her life. Whatever way hurt Draco the most, that’s how she would do it.

If she did.

After several hours of this, Ginny’s thoughts shifted to Harry. He would be sore at her for thinking like that, she realized dully, fingers tracing patterns on the polished marble floor. He would never want her to die by her own hand, but Harry was dead, and there was nothing he could do or say to
stop her. Nor could Ron or Hermione, two completely opposite people who had still managed to work so well together.

*What would Hermione do in my situation,* Ginny wondered. Probably figure out some clever solution, use her mastery of words to find a way out.

Ron, though. He’d just create mayhem in whatever way he could, probably all of which would be accidental, and yet somehow it would work and accomplish the task at hand. And then he’d just shrug and laugh, because he was Ron, and of course he’d meant for that to happen, didn’t you know?

Ginny looked across the room at the porcelain tub.

Still, they were dead. They’d died, and Ginny had seen it, so no one could ever lie to her about it. She’d been there.

For a long time in the cell, when time had ceased and only the abhorrent cruelty of their keepers had given the prisoners any sense of interaction, Ginny had encapsulated her emotions in an impenetrable sphere. She’d felt nothing for herself, nothing for the other prisoners, and nothing for her captors. Then, after she’d been handed over to Malfoy, the rage had returned.

The grief was there, too, but it was pushed far, far to the back of her mind.

And now, as Ginny sat on the hard floor and listened to the sounds of Draco returning from whatever the hell it was that he did all day, she realized other emotions were starting to push through her barrier to make their own unsolicited returns – emotions fueled mostly, it would seem, by the desire to wreak complete and total havoc on everything around her.

The door opened, and Draco peered inside to see her just as he left her, filthy and unmoving. Scowling heavily, he shut the door without a word, content to leave her without food for the entire night. Ginny didn’t protest, and instead she strained to listen for his movements. When they ceased, she knew he’d gone to sleep.

At last, Ginny reached up a shaky hand and grasped a countertop. Lifting herself with the last ounce of her strength, she pulled herself along the wall of the bathroom until she reached the tub. Her too-thin arms barely supported her weight against it, and with one hand, Ginny reached out and turned on the faucets.

Moments later, Ginny Weasley sank into a hot tub of lavender scented water, dipping all the way below the surface until only her narrowed hazel eyes were visible.

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Morning broke.

In Draco Malfoy’s posh suite, a hand reached out, slowly, slowly, edging closer to where the handle of a dark wand sat, just barely visible at the edge of a luxurious pillow. Across Draco’s lax form, the hand moved carefully, warmed by the morning light coming in from the window.

*Nearly there, nearly there.*

Draco’s eyes opened suddenly, and he let out a loud yelp before snatching the hand over him. Ginny Weasley shrieked on top of him and immediately dove for the wand, but Draco turned her over on the bed and the two grappled for a moment before he succeeded in trapping her between his legs.
“What in the hell, Weasley!” exclaimed Draco, wrestling the witch beneath him and nearly losing his grip on her, because Merlin, she was stronger than she looked.

“LET GO OF ME!” Ginny thrashed wildly, but then she made a move for the wand again and this time Draco grabbed both of her wrists, barely avoiding a punch in his bare stomach before he finally managed to slam both her arms against the bed.

“How in the blood hell did you get out of the bathroom?” Draco yelled in alarm, looking over his shoulder at the ajar door. Ginny hissed between her teeth.

“I have my ways,” she growled in response, lurching her body to try and drive him off her, but Draco outweighed her and he doubled-down his efforts to contain her. “Growing up in my house, you learn a thing or two,” she taunted, and Draco silently re-evaluated his dedication to the pureblood cause, because if he’d thought she looked insane yesterday, it was nothing compared to now.

Somehow, with her face and hair clean and her features entirely visible, Ginny Weasley was even more terrifying than before, like an enraged Veela.

“Weasley, I feel obligated to inform you again, for emphasis, “ Draco leaned close, pushing his weight on her still thrashing wrists, “you are absolutely mental.” Unfortunately, what he couldn’t mention was that he was unable to reach his wand, so nearby, without releasing one of her hands, and he wasn’t sure what would happen when he did that.

“Go on, Malfoy,” she said, eyes darting over to the wand less than a foot away on the massive bed. “Go and grab for it. I’ve seen your reflexes on the Quidditch pitch. You’re slower than an inbred troll.”

Draco narrowed his eyes at her, barely stifling a noise of indignation. “You know, it’s no wonder your unpleasant attitude chased away Dean Thomas and – whoever that Ravenclaw guy was – “

“Shut up, Malfoy – “

“And then Potter, too, because you have all the grace and tact of the bloody lake squid.”

Ginny opened her mouth to reply, but Draco took that moment of distraction to dive for his wand. Ginny let out a furious curse and tried to snatch it first, but Draco’s longer arms outreached hers and he grabbed it, rolling onto his back and pointing it right at her. “Stupefy!”

A short noise escaped Ginny before she was blasted back off the bed, and she landed on the floor with a thud. Draco took a moment to recover his breath before he jumped up and grabbed her hands, casting a quick spell to bind them. Then Draco dragged her a few steps to the side of the room, where he secured her against a wall.

“There,” he grunted, dropping away from her just as Ginny began to regain her senses. Looking up and blinking at her bound hands, she tried to spin and face Draco, but only succeeded in discovering just how limited her movement was in her confinements.

“Get these off me, Malfoy!”

Draco pointed with his wand. “You see that, you bloody head case? That’s what you get.”

Ginny kicked at him.

Pulling away from her, Draco shook his head and proceeded to his wardrobe, where he pulled out
some clothes. “Now,” said Draco, giving her a smirk, “I am going to go shower and get ready, because unlike you, I serve an actual purpose. You will get to stay here and stare at the wall, because that’s what prisoners do.”

Ginny’s response to this was a deep breath, and she had every intention of following up with a loud, soul-shattering scream, but Draco quickly snatched up his wand and cast a silencing spell on her, which left her straining to make noise, but to no avail. Red in the face, she settled for glaring at him instead, and any time he came even remotely close, she lashed out at him with her bare feet.

“A house-elf will bring you some food,” was all Draco said in response, making one last grimace in her direction before he headed out, shutting the door behind him.

“Damn it,” muttered Ginny darkly to herself. So close.

A part of her had hoped that Malfoy was a deep sleeper, but as it turned out, even her greatest efforts at stealth had stirred him. Now, as she sat curled up on the floor but also chained to a wall, Ginny decided it was time to re-evaluate her strategy.

As Draco had said, a house-elf turned up with a tray of food for her, and the smell of it was nearly enough to knock Ginny right out. She’d been living off of scraps for the last several months, and as soon as the house elf set the tray of food in front of her, she thought she might cry. It smelled so good. And some part of her had thought maybe to further rebel against Malfoy by not eating, but as soon as she reworked her position to allow her to grab at the food, she knew it was a lost cause.

She ate the whole meal – bread, fruit, eggs, bacon and juice. Oh, it was so good. She was probably going to have stomach pains later, but for right now, she felt better than she had in ages. After finishing her food, Ginny edged the plate away with her feet and turned to look out over the room.

As she’d done in the bathroom, Ginny evaluated her surrounding area for possible assistance. She’d already noted that it was Malfoy’s bedroom, some kind of suite, totally massive. She was chained against the furthest wall, near a tall window, and she could tell just from the small bit of outdoors she saw that they were not on the first floor. Splendid.

Her eye caught a mirror, and Ginny paused, studying her reflection.

Her hair was rather long, and still the same shade of deep red as it had always been. She hadn’t seen its true color in Merlin only knew how long, and it had taken forever to work out the knots and tangles. Her skin, too, was bright and clear, and the pleasing shape of her face was once more visible.

The robes Draco had left for her were simple grey robes, but they were still more stylish and elegant than anything she’d ever owned. The fabric was criminally soft, and it had an inner-lining of silk, something she’d never had before. There’d been slippers there, too, but Ginny had rejected those, because they looked slippery and she thought she’d might have to do some running.

Now, she regretted her decision a bit, because her feet were cold.

Sighing, Ginny let her head fall against her chained hands. Yes, she decided then. A new plan.

“So you see, Mister Malfoy, if you can just – well, contribute a bit here, I’m sure we can make these agencies profitable again – “

“Arikson,” Draco said as he leaned across the table, “If I had a dozen Polyjuice Potions, I still
could not transform myself into someone who gives a damn about any of your proposals.”

The short squat wizard began to furiously sort through his papers, each with a bigger price tag attached to it. “But – no, there’s this – putting the Malfoy Estates name to this would – skyrocket profits – “

Leaning back in his chair, Draco Malfoy turned his gaze up at the ceiling and studied a crack in the ceiling. “I’m not investing more gold in your properties, Arikson,” said Draco the ceiling. Outside their meeting room, other witches and wizards in smart office wear paced, meeting with various consultants and financial strategists. “We don’t need more residential properties, we already have twelve, and there aren’t even enough wizards to fill them.”

Slapping his hands on the arms of the elegant leather armchair, Draco stood and picked up his cloak. “Now, if no one has any thing productive to tell me, I’ll be on my way,” he said, ignoring the mumbling of a few other wizards, all of whom had spent the better part of the afternoon trying to convince him of their certain success.

Draco wasn’t sure he knew what the Malfoy fortune needed, but it certainly wasn’t those run-down pieces of rubbish. Exiting the room, Draco took a sharp left and came to a row of fireplaces. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed in some Floo powder and called out the name of his home.

However, instead of heading to his suite upon his return to Malfoy Manor, where a great headache almost certainly awaited him, Draco spent his time in his father’s study, reviewing a very long list of property agreements.

When it was time for dinner, Draco forced himself to stand, noting the way his joints cracked unpleasantly from sitting all day. He felt this was really unfair of his body to do to him, given that he was only eighteen years old, but a trip to the Healers just wasn’t in the picture at the moment.

Instead. Draco strolled into the dining room of Malfoy Manor a few minutes later, unsurprised to see that only his mother occupied a seat at the uncomfortably long dinner table.

Draco took a seat across from her. “Evening, mother.”

Narcissa Malfoy glanced up and smiled in her small but genuine way. “Evening, darling.” She was still prepping her cloth napkin when their food appeared in an instant, elevated to their plates by the busy house-elves who worked in the manor’s large kitchen on the floor below.

Narcissa began to eat, and Draco stirred his food a bit. “So,” said his mother, in a chipper tone that meant she was broaching a subject she was already uncomfortable discussing, “how are things with … the girl?”

Draco paused and glanced up at his mother. “Oh, it’s brilliant,” he told her plaintively, before adding, “She tried to kill me in my bed this morning.”

Narcissa’s fork clattered to her plate in alarm. “Draco!”

He waved a hand. “Well, you asked.”

“This whole situation is ridiculous,” snipped Narcissa, scandalized. Still, she picked up her fork again and jabbed at her food aggressively. “Honestly, what does the Dark Lord expect from you – “

Draco prayed silently for sudden deafness. “Mother…”
“You have so many responsibilities,” went on Narcissa with high-pitched irritation, though she kept her voice quiet. “And your duties – they’re overwhelming as it is – “

Draco made a noise of wry agreement. “Mm, I have indeed noticed that Father has left every single burden of caring for our estate on me. Good of you to notice."

Narcissa dropped her fork again, “Your father is working at the Ministry, Draco, his new job is very important. It takes time to establish an entirely new government. And besides, he feels as if you should learn these things– “

“And doing so without his assistance is somehow making the experience more meaningful?” asked Draco, eyebrows raised. “How thoughtful of him.”

“You know what you need?” interrupted Narcissa suddenly, her features alight with false optimism. “You need to spend some time with someone your own age.”

“I have someone my own age locked in my room right now,” Draco pointed out darkly.

“I don’t mean that blood traitor trash,” countered Narcissa, and somehow she still managed to sound polite and cheerful. “I mean with someone of note. Which is why I have invited your cousin Damien to stay with us for a while.”

Draco blinked slowly, trying to remember who she was even talking about. “Doesn’t he live in Russia?”

“He does,” said Narcissa, pausing to sip at her wine. “But he’s currently doing business with the Ministry concerning some very important developments, and I thought it best if he had somewhere local to stay while he’s working.”

“Nevermind the fact that we are capable of near-instantaneous travel,” deadpanned Draco.

“You two got on so well when you were young,” went on Narcissa, ignoring him. “I thought it would be nice for you.”

Draco disagreed, mostly because not only had Damien once suspended him upside down from a third-story window, but because Damien was actually about seven years older than Draco, and therefore not really his age at all. Somehow, his mother seemed to have forgotten all of that.

“What’s he doing at the Ministry?” Draco asked at last, because the situation on the whole stay seemed settled and he may as well forget about arguing against it. “I don’t remember him being good enough at anything to be of use.”

He speared some of his food and ate it as he observed his mother’s carefully constructed facial expression. “He’s going to be the new deputy headmaster at the school,” she said, forcing a small smile. “Isn’t that exciting?”

Draco stopped eating, and he finally gave up on the act altogether, putting down his fork and leaning back in his chair. “Damien?” he said incredulously. “What the hell qualifies him to be a deputy headmaster of anything?”

“It’s more of a political position than an educational one,” said Narcissa, lips pulled into a tight smile. “His family has become quite popular with the Dark Lord in the last six months. They are now enjoying many different positions of prestige.” Naircissa continued to eat, but Draco could read the anxiety in her porcelain features.
“So,” she continued lightly, “I must ask you to be courteous to him during his visit. He is your cousin, after all.”

And one of the Dark Lord’s new favorites. The magnitude of this was not lost on Draco.

“Of course,” he said simply, his heart sinking. He tried stirring around his food a bit, but when he made no actual effort to eat, his mother cleared her throat.

“You should eat, Draco.”

“I’m not hungry, Mother.”

“But it’s your favorite,” she said earnestly, motioning to the various dishes. “And look, there’s kidney pudding – “

“For the love of Merlin, I’m not hungry!” burst out Draco.

The volume of his voice jarred them both, and Narcissa stared over the dinner table for a long moment before she pulled back her hand and settled it in her lap. “Of course,” she all but whispered, returning her attention to her dish. Draco closed his eyes in regret, his heart sinking further.

“I’m sorry, Mother.”

“No, you’re quite right, I need to stop bothering you – “

“No, it’s – “ Draco stood, rounding the table. “I’m sorry, I just had to deal with idiots all day.” He paused next to her chair and touched her shoulder, and Narcissa brought up a hand to cover his, smiling a little when Draco leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

“I love you, son.”

“I love you too, Mother.”
Despite the exhaustion he felt following dinner, Draco was very reluctant to retire to his suite.

Unfortunately, he had little choice, and so the young wizard made his way out of the dining room and down the manor’s antiquated hallways. Long lines of white crown molding followed him down the corridors, and the elaborate green, black, and silver carpets muffled Draco's footsteps against the dark hardwood floors. The manor had looked the same for as long as Draco could remember, although his parents had let parts of it fall into disrepair during the war. This was something else Draco planned to address, sooner or later. Unfortunately, the many updates needed for the manor would have to wait. More pressing matters lay ahead.

As Draco stopped at the tall doors and prepared to enter his suite, he made certain to clear his features of any anticipation or anxiety.

Remarkably, Ginny Weasley was right where he had left her, for once.

In fact, she looked positively demure, curled up on the hardwood floor with her hands bound at shoulder-level against the wall, her bright auburn hair soft and flowing prettily against her shoulders. She even peered up at Draco with a strangely placid expression, free from the hostility of the past few days.

“Enjoy your quiet day?” taunted Draco, pointing his wand at her. With a quick charm, the silencing spell was lifted, and Ginny shifted in his direction.

“I did, actually,” she said softly, and Draco blinked at her unusual tone, caught off guard. He quickly recovered, pulling off his cloak and hanging it in his wardrobe. “It gave me a lot of time to think,” went on Ginny, turning her knees until they sat modestly in front of her.

“And what, dare I ask, were you thinking about?” inquired Draco, moving to stand in front of her with his arms crossed.

The littlest Weasley blinked up at Draco with a small smile. “Now that I’ve eaten and rested, I think my head is starting to clear,” Ginny said lightly. “And I believe I’m ready to learn all you have to teach me about this… new society.”

Draco raised a brow.

“So, you see,” Ginny went on, and oh, her voice could be quite persuasive when she wanted, “you can just… release these binds,” she tilted her head at him, batting her hazel eyes. “And I’ll do whatever you like, Malfoy. Really.”

Draco eyed her, well-aware Ginny Weasley was a thorn doing its very best to disguise itself amongst roses. Rather than let her know he was on to her, Draco pretended to think it over, giving her time to watch him. He even caught a glance of her in the reflection of his mirror, and it was only when Ginny thought he wasn’t looking that her eyes flashed with true meaning.

What a sneaky one, he thought, with just a hint of admiration. She would have made a mighty fine Slytherin.

After making her wait for a few moments of thoughtful silence, Draco moved to stand directly in front of her and peered down at her face. “I’m glad you’re starting to see things my way, Weasley,”
he started, before continuing just as sweetly, “…But there is absolutely no way I’m taking off those binds, you loon.”

Ginny’s sweet features instantly transformed into a sharp mask of anger and she shrieked, kicking with all of her strength at the large bookshelf next to her, which she had, some hours before, used her table knife to saw one leg off of. The huge case toppled forward with a loud groan.

Draco barely scrambled out of the way before the solid oak bookcase and all its contents crushed him under its weight. Instead, it fell to the floor with a great thundering crash, spilling pieces of wood and books all over the once pristine floor.

“BLOODY HELL, WEASLEY!”

Whirling to face her, Draco found Ginny Weasley still in her spot, looking at him without an ounce of surprise, sympathy or remorse - a bit of disappointment, though. A furious growl built in Draco’s chest.

“Everte Statum!”

Ginny’s body flew back against the wall with a loud painful thud, and she gasped before collapsing to the floor, her full weight falling to her bound wrists, as they would not reach the floor. She let out a cry of pain before Draco grabbed her binds and dislodged them from the wall, moved her across the floor, and tossed her into the bathroom once more. He locked it with a ridiculously strong charm.

“Bleaker!” snapped Draco to the air.

A house-elf appeared instantly, apparating from within the house. “Watch this door,” ordered Draco furiously. “If this bloody witch gets out of this room, I will string you up by your intestines, do you hear me?”

The house-elf’s eyes widened and he nodded furiously.

With that, Draco grabbed his things and swept out of the room. He’d sleep in one of the manor’s many guest bedrooms tonight.

He didn’t want to be anywhere near that Gryffindor scum.

In the desolate area of England where the Malfoy Manor had sat for generations, the morning dawned dull, grey, and dreary.

Draco Malfoy left the house as he did nearly every morning, cloak drawn over his shoulders and wand in his pocket. Normally, Draco carried a briefcase with him, inherited from his father and bearing a silver snake head on its latch. However, today he left it behind and ventured out, not to the business districts where he frequented, but instead to a familiar alley.

As soon as the required steps had been taken away from the Malfoy Manor’s doors, Draco disappeared in a wisp of swirling color, only to reappear moments later just inside the entrance to a cobblestone street which seemed to dead-end at a wall.

It did not, of course, end at the brick wall. But Draco found no reason to use that entrance.

Instead, he started off in a rapid step, hands in the pockets of his cloak. The noise of his boots against the dusty streets was muted by passing trash moved by the wind, something that was
certainly more common than it had ever been before. Window after window showed broken glass and black, empty storefronts, and even though a low-hanging sign welcomed passerbys to Diagon Alley with a jovial image of a witch and a broomstick, its efforts were in vain.

None of the faces Draco saw in Diagon Alley were the least bit pleased to be there, even those lucky few who had managed to find jobs.

Each face Draco passed was ducked low, eyes averted, with faces set in anxious lines. The grey sky from the manor had carried over to the magical district, Draco noticed, his own grey eyes casting upwards to look over the brooding clouds. A wind kicked up, carrying stale scents from the unused buildings, and Draco wrinkled his nose and pulled his scarf further up his face.

“Daily Prophet!” called a wizard, perhaps the only one on the street who dared to make a noise. “Get your copy here!”

Draco paused and pulled out a sickle, which he tossed to the wizard before picking up a copy of the paper. He quickly tucked the rolled up paper into his cloak instead of reading it. The Prophet was nothing more than propaganda for the Ministry – and honestly, in that way, it wasn’t much different than from before the war – but as the Ministry was now controlled by a very different entity, the content of the Prophet wasn’t news at all, just a set of ominous warnings for the general public.

But the Ministry expected everyone to read the paper anyway, if only for efforts at normalcy, and so Draco always bought it when he could manage. After all, if there was anything Draco knew how to do well, it was play along when told to do so.

Turning a sharp corner to yet another bland and listless street, Draco glanced to his left and spotted Ollivander’s Wand Shop. For a moment, he dared to stop and watch. The old wizard wasn’t in there, though where he was, Draco couldn’t say, because he knew Ollivander had survived the war. The shop was open, too, though it was some young apprentice managing the front, rather than the old wizard himself. As Draco watched, the apprentice glanced up at Draco and the two made eye-contact.

The apprentice’s eyes widened and he immediately looked away. Draco did the same, turning and walking on.

Finally, he managed to find an open storefront, the one he’d been looking for. It had a few small tables out front, though no one used them. CROSS YOUR TEAS, read the storefront sign, and a metal silhouette of a teacup being stirred by an elaborate capital T moved in slow, lazy motion. Draco ducked inside to the dim tea room, eyes squinting as his vision struggled to adjust.

“Draco,” called a voice after a moment.

Draco peered across the small round tables and their tiny centerpiece lights, moving only when he saw the source of the voice. His companion didn’t bother to wait for him, instead turning and heading down a set of stairs to a more private area, away from the entrance.

“Take a seat, my friend,” said Blaise Zabini, gesturing to the cushioned seats.

Draco did so, falling rather heavily and ungracefully into one and leaning back against the plush fabric. “That bad, eh?” asked Blaise with a chuckle. Draco opened his mouth to speak, but a black-haired witch came in at that moment, eyes downcast.

“Good morning, sirs,” she greeted, hands running over her serving apron just once. “What can I do
“Honey lemon,” ordered Blaise immediately, eyes still on Draco.

“Earl grey.”

The witch nodded once before taking off, moving past the curtain. The shimmer of magic around its edges, which stifled all outsiders from eavesdropping, glimmered as she moved past. As soon as she was gone, Draco dropped his hand heavily to the table.

“Sorry I’m late. Took a bit to find this place,” said Draco. “Nothing around here looks the same.”

“Is that so?” murmured Blaise. “I hadn’t noticed.”

At that moment, the witch re-entered with their tea. As she set it down on their table, Draco’s eyes flickered to a tattoo on her arm – H.B. The waitress caught him looking, but she only lowered her eyes and straightened, asking them if they needed anything else before disappearing.

Blaise drank his tea. “This place is rubbish,” he commented.

“It’s the only tea shop open right now.” Draco sipped at his own tea. “Half of Diagon Alley is gone.”

“It’ll come back,” said Blaise, as many others had said a thousand times. Draco only made a small grunt of agreement. “As the lovely Headmistress of Hogwarts says,” continued Blaise, lips quirking at a sardonic smile before he affected a high-pitched tone, “we must all – ahem – do our part!”

Draco rolled his eyes, but he did chuckle just a bit. “Merlin’s beard. She is atrocious.”

“I agree,” remarked Blaise lightly, before setting aside his cup. “Now, come on, then.” At Draco’s raised brow, the darker wizard leaned back in his chair leisurely and gestured. “Tell me about your new friend,” implored Blaise with exaggerated patience.

Draco’s features instantly shifted into a scowl. “What? How did you hear?”

“Oh,” said Blaise, “it’s all the talk. They’re the first trial, you know, of the blood traitors. If this reintegration thing works, it’ll be the first decent news the Ministry’s had to report since the war ended.”

“Not if they’re reporting on me, they won’t,” muttered Draco darkly. “I have Weasley.”

Blaise’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Ginny Weasley, you mean?” At Draco’s grunt, Blaise reached up a hand and tapped his chin thoughtfully. “My, my. That is interesting, indeed.” He tilted his head in Draco’s direction. “Well? How’s it going?”

“Bloody awful, how do you think it’s going?” snapped Draco. “That filthy little blood traitor is an animal, I’m telling you. She’s wild, like a centaur or something.” At Blaise’s chuckle, Draco’s scowl deepened. “Think I’m joking, do you? Yesterday’s homicidal efforts involved a bookcase. She’s completely mental.”

Blaise’s amusement only seemed to grow. “Resourceful,” he admitted. “You have to give her credit for that much.”

“Shut up,” groused Draco, sipping at his tea again. He lowered his voice as he continued. “I have
enough to deal with as it is, Blaise. I never asked for a bloody pet. And out of all the purebloods being released, the Dark Lord should have known better than to give her to me. She already hates me.”

“That’s true,” conceded Blaise without much sympathy.

Silence fell over the two for a moment and Draco traced the lid of his cup. “Do you think he did it on purpose?” asked Draco after a moment.

“What?”

Draco studied his drink. “Do you think the Dark Lord gave me Weasley because he knew I would fail?” The atmosphere of the small lounge grew considerably more solemn. “Like he did with Dumbledore?”

The amusement faded from Blaise’s features. “You don’t know that’s what he was doing, mate.”

Draco turned his cup slowly in its saucer, eyes on the porcelain. “Yes, I do.”

The two young wizards sat in silence for a moment before Blaise waved a hand and said mildly, “I very much doubt the Dark Lord would have done that with Weasley, of all the blood traitors. She’s far too important to the cause.” When Draco didn’t seem convinced, he went on, “Buck up, Draco. If he was willing to risk your failure, he would have used someone far less valuable than Weasley, and you know it.”

Draco’s eyes flickered up to Blaise before he nodded vaguely. “I suppose you’re right,” he admitted, only a little comforted.

“Still, though,” said Blaise, returning to his normal, unaffected tones. “You’d better figure out something. Because it sounds like whatever you’ve been doing so far has been—ah, not so successful.”

“What am I supposed to do?” asked Draco flatly, annoyed once more. “The bitch is already used to being dirt-poor and starved, so there’s nothing I can take away from her. And bribery and torture aren’t looking all that promising, either.”

“Is that your idea of being convincing?” asked Blaise, amused at Draco’s glare. “Bribery and torture? How did you ever land a girlfriend, I wonder.”

Draco huffed. “It’s not the same, you git—“

“Oh, but it is,” cut in Blaise, before he let himself chuckle at Draco. “I mean, you do realize you’re probably going to have to marry Weasley, right?”

At this, Draco coughed on his tea, slamming the cup rather forcibly back on the table. “What?” he swiped at his face with a napkin. “Who in the name of Merlin told you that?”

“Well, no one,” admitted Blaise, as though Draco were very slow, “but it’s a bit common sense, isn’t it? I mean, yes, we need purebloods back for loads of reasons, but the most basic one is reproduction.”

“I know that,” seethed Draco, “but not with me. Let the filthy blood traitors marry each other!”

“Right,” remarked Blaise dryly, “So they can all continue exactly the same as before, convening with one another whenever they wished and possibly congregating to rise up against the Dark Lord.
Honestly, Draco, no wonder no one ever puts you in charge."

At Draco’s glare, Blaise continued airily, “The Dark Lord isn’t going to let known supporters of Dumbledore just jump right back into their lives without supervision. They’re being paired off with trusted Death Eaters, of course. So they can be watched.”

A curious mix of fury and panic wormed its way into Draco’s blood. Surely his parents wouldn’t allow such a thing. “You don’t know this for sure.”

“I don’t, no,” admitted Blaise with a casual shrug, “but it makes sense.”

It did, as furious as it made Draco to admit, even to himself. Still, no one had told him that, not even when they’d been given their brief overview on how to handle the captives, so at that moment, he chose instead to believe that Blaise was an idiot and ignore him.

“Why haven’t you gotten anyone?” grumbled Draco instead. “You’re not doing anything productive at all.”

“Perhaps the Dark Lord knows I prefer wizards to witches,” responded Blaise with a smirk, and Draco rolled his eyes.

“Oh, yes, I’m so sure the Dark Lord is concerned with your sexual preferences.”

“Probably not,” admitted Blaise. “But really, only a few of the captives have been released. Best not to put them all out at once, you see.” He sighed heavily. “Still, I’m sure I’ll get one eventually. And I’ll be glad for it, because nearly everyone else who’s left in this crippled society is closer than a second cousin to me.”

At Draco’s wry smirk, Blaise continued darkly, “I know some families around here are fine with defective, inbred babies, but I would like to avoid it, if at all possible. I mean, have you seen the Carrows lately?” Blaise waved his tea cup. “I think they gave up on wizards altogether and just started shagging trolls instead.”

At this, Draco actually chuckled, and he and Blaise shared an amused glance before they took their time finishing their tea. “Yes, well,” said Draco after a few minutes of silence, “just be glad you don’t have to deal with what I have waiting for me at home.”

“Oh, I would gladly take Weasley off your hands,” quipped Blaise, snapping his fingers. “Like that, mate. She’s a fine looking witch, so far as witches go.”

Draco sighed heavily and stood, tossing a few galleons onto the table. “If I thought the Dark Lord would allow it, I would deliver her to your front door without a second word.”

“I’m sure,” smirked Blaise. With that, the two wizards gathered their things and made their way outside at a leisurely pace. “Hope I helped.”

Drake paused on the sidewalk. “By laughing at my expense and giving me a bunch of gossip?”

Blaise paused and nodded. “Well, yes, of course.”

“No,” deadpanned Draco. “You probably just made things worse. But I’ll allow it, considering my options for friends are few and far between.”

“Heartwarming,” responded Blaise with a sly smile, unperturbed. “So where is she, by the way? Weasley?”
Draco shrugged on his coat. “Locked in a bathroom,” he started, before his features clenched and he groaned. “Bollocks,” Draco scowled. “I left that bloody house-elf in charge of her. He’s probably been standing in front of the damn door for twelve hours now.”

Blaise snorted. “House-elves are so stupid.”

“I know,” grunted Draco. “I have to go.” As he moved to leave, though, Blaise stopped him.

“Just give it some thought, Draco,” said Blaise, sliding his hands into his pockets. “Your problem, I mean. You do know this girl a bit, after all... Use your brain to get to her.” At Draco’s pensive stare, Blaise quirked his lips and started off, before disappearing with a crack.

“Right,” Draco muttered bitterly, before he, too, disappeared.

In the bathroom of Draco Malfoy’s suite, Ginny Weasley wondered if anyone planned to feed her that day.

The house-elf was lingering nearby, but he didn’t seem to have any notion at all of moving away from the door, much less fetching her some food. Ginny thought about just asking – he could probably hear her, after all – but she didn’t want to get him in trouble, so she simply stayed where she was on the floor.

Ginny’s hands were still bound, but at least she wasn’t chained to a wall anymore, which meant she was free to walk around the impressively large bathroom. She gave herself another bath, more out of boredom than anything, and then she took her time carefully combing through her hair, though it was difficult with the restraints on her wrists.

Sometime in the evening, Ginny heard the doors open, and Draco Malfoy’s voice echoed outside, barking at the house-elf, whose shadow disappeared from under the small gap between the door and the floor. Ginny scrambled to put the porcelain tub between herself and Draco, instantly defensive, when the doors opened and he stepped through.

Draco paused in the entryway, eyes glancing around suspiciously before he looked to her.

“Get out here, Weasley,” he said simply, when he wasn’t immediately beheaded by some kind of contraption. Ginny paused, a bit unnerved by his calm tones. Stepping out of the bathroom uncertainly, she took a moment to stretch out her legs, kicking them under her grey robes. She’d finally put on the slippers, too, and her feet felt pleasantly warm and cozy.

Draco turned to face her, and Ginny moved to dart away, but he simply tapped his wand on her binds. They disappeared, freeing her hands and wrists. Ginny blinked in surprise, moving instantly to rub her sensitive skin. As she watched, Draco Malfoy took a very long time evaluating her. Then he stepped back, removed his cloak, and moved over to his bar of liquors and potions.

“Do you play wizard’s chess, Weasley?”

Ginny raised a brow, eyeing the row of shining glasses a bit distractedly before she processed his question. “A bit,” she said at last. “Why?”

“A bit?” repeated Draco, bringing a tumbler to his lips and sipping at something. “So does that mean you’re rubbish at it, then?”

Ginny narrowed her eyes, her pride instantly kicking up in response to his words. “No, of course not. I’m very good. Just haven’t played in a while, that’s all.” In truth, Ron was far better than her,
even though he had been the one to teach her. Still, she opted not to mention that.

Draco approached her. “Good,” he said sharply. “Because you and I are going to make a little wager.” Before Ginny could protest, he brought up a hand to silence her. “One game of wizard’s chess. Right now. And if you win, I will … “ he paused, meeting her eyes, “ … let you leave here. Freely, without a fight.”

Ginny stared, her heart suddenly pounding hard in her chest, try as she might to make it slow. A curious burn pushed its way up her throat. “Stop lying.”

“I’m not lying,” he promised evenly.

“Shut up.”

“I won’t help you escape, Weasley, but neither will I stop you or alert anyone else to do so. I swear it on my grandfather’s grave.”

Ginny’s features, drawn with suspicion, studied him for a moment as she paced. “And what do you want if you win?”

Draco drained the rest of his drink and set it down rather loudly. “Honestly, I’m hoping you win, so I don’t have to look at you anymore,” he told her bitterly, before adding, “but if I do win, I want you to shut up and stop fighting me all the time. Understand?”

“Why would you do this?” asked Ginny sharply. “Why would you risk having to let me go, if that really is what you intend to do?”

“Because, Weasley,” snapped Draco as he rounded to face her, eyes flashing, “I don’t want your filthy blood traitor corpse lingering around here anymore than you do. Not to mention the fact I don’t much relish the idea of having to constantly babysit a lunatic. Oh, and – “ he made himself another drink, “ – I would also like to be able to use my quarters again without worrying about getting crushed to death, so there’s that as well. Really, Weasley, take your bloody pick. I can go on if you’d like.”

Excellent points, in Ginny’s opinion, and they were, at least, consistent with his character. Draco Malfoy was nothing if not selfish, and he’d grown up as an only child. It was quite obvious he didn’t appreciate having to share his space with her. Still…

“If I escaped, Voldemort would be furious with you,” the young witch reminded him, eyes narrowed.

Draco meandered over to the corner of his bedroom, where a square table sat, a set of wizard’s chess pieces waiting and ready. He took a seat and studied his glass. “Yeah, well, what else is new,” he muttered lowly, eyes on the amber liquid. When Ginny remained standing, unmoving in the center of the room, he looked over at her with raised brows.

“So are we playing this game or what, Weasley? I don’t have all night.”

A heartbeat passed in silence. Then Ginny walked over to Draco’s shelf of liquors, picked up the bottle he’d poured his drink out of, and then grabbed a glass of her own before coming over and promptly dropping into a seat opposite him. Draco stared, dumbfounded, as Ginny poured herself a drink and then tossed it back in one gulp.

For a moment, she managed to control her features. Then Ginny let out a low whooshing breath.
“Bugger, that’s strong,” she coughed.

“That’s because it’s not the cheap swill you’re used to drinking, you classless swine,” snapped Draco, grabbing the bottle and refilling his glass. Still, he left it on the edge of the table where their chessboard sat, and Ginny got herself another half-glass before turning her attention to the table.

After a moment, she pointed. “I want white.”

“Fine,” Draco turned the board around. “Ready to lose, Weasley?”

“Not a chance, Malfoy,” she responded, her eyes raking the board eagerly. A competitive instinct kicked up in her chest then, and it was exhilarating. For a moment, her heart fluttered to life, and she glanced up in time to see Draco watch her face for a moment before he gestured and leaned back in his seat, glass in hand.

“Your move, Weasley.”

The game started with a flourish, and with every movement made by the players, the chess pieces seemed to grow more animated and combative. Outside of the player’s commands to their lively pieces, the conversation was held to a minimum, with only the occasional passing comment made. It went on this way for quite a while, with each of them working against one another with intense focus.

“Knight to E5,” said Ginny nearly a half-hour later, her fingers twitching at her glass. She wanted more, but she and Draco had made it halfway through the bottle of Firewhiskey, and she needed to keep her wits about her. She watched as her knight piece called out its battle cry and hurried forward, straight into the fray.

“Interesting,” noted Draco with only an ounce of sarcasm. “Despite the fact that you have almost no strategy at all.”

“Just make your move, Malfoy.”

He did so, eyes lifting to hers. “Check.”

Ginny’s eyes widened, and her chest suddenly tightened, pulling in on its center with terrifying strength. Fighting to keep the panic off her face, Ginny quickly moved her pieces to block his. Still, three moves later, he was in check again, and she knew, even without making a move, that he’d beat her.

“Checkmate,” he said when she didn’t move, and his piece wiggled into its proper winning position, smashing all the opposition in its way. Ginny sank back in her seat, deflated. Her furrowed brows and crumpled expression stayed on the board, even as her broken pieces cried out against their defeat.

After several long seconds of silence, in which neither of them said or moved at all, Ginny leaned forward and picked up the Firewhiskey again, filling her glass and taking one long gulp. “Would you really have let me go?” she asked dully, when Draco didn’t speak.

Across the table from her, Draco raised both brows. “Yes,” he said, in what seemed to be a truthful manner. “Does that make you feel better or worse?”

“I’m not sure,” she answered softly, eyes still low.

At this, Draco leaned forward and swept the pieces away before taking in a deep breath. “Look,
Weasley. I would have let you go if you’d won, but truth is, you would have never made it out of this house, and I know that. Besides me and my mother, there’s always other Death Eaters hanging around, coming and going, and one of them would have stopped you for certain."

Ginny responded to this by drinking more of the Firewhiskey from her glass.

Draco continued, “Not to mention the loads of magical barriers and defenses around this place. Even if I hadn’t lifted a finger to stop you, you would have never made it off the property."

“So I’m really trapped, then,” she noted quietly.

Draco studied her from his spot. “You don’t have to be.”

At this, Ginny looked up slowly, her eyes searching out his. What an unusual shade of grey, she noted apathetically. Like stone. “What am I doing here, Malfoy? Really?”

Something seemed to cross his mind at her question, but after a moment’s consideration, he appeared to dismiss it. “You’re here…” he said, leaning on the table with his elbows, because the whiskey was starting to get to him, she imagined, “… because only twelve of the twenty-eight pureblood families left in Great Britain are represented in the Death Eaters. Without reintroducing the other families who managed to survive the war, our population would die out much too quickly.”

“And what if we don’t want to take part in Voldemort’s society?” asked Ginny, lifting her chin. “What if all the prisoners would just rather see it burn?”

As she expected, Draco scowled at this, though it was without any real venom. Instead, he just looked tired. “Then he’ll kill you, Weasley. What do you think?”

“Surely he’d want to try his hardest, though,” she pointed out, taking a swig of her own drink, her head a bit cloudy. If she’d felt fearless before, it was because death would have been a blessing. Now, she could hardly seem to care about whether she lived or died at all, despite her hunger for information. “If he’s this desperate, he wouldn’t just kill us right off for refusing. He’d want us convinced.”

Hence why you are with me,” intoned Draco dryly, leaning back in his chair again. “And I’ve got news for you, Weasley. You’re one of some sixty pureblood prisoners, but you’re lucky enough to be part of the very first group. Most others are still languishing in cells, just like you were.”

Ginny’s jaw tightened and her eyes dropped once more. She put down her half-full glass and let her hand fall, no longer content to hold it.

“Which means,” continued Draco pointedly, “Their potential freedom is entirely contingent upon your successful reintegration.”

“I don’t want to do this,” Ginny admitted in a low whisper. “Why can’t I just be cast off? I just want to be done with all this.”

At her words, Draco reached forward and nudged her glass back at her with a single long digit. “Because,” he told her slowly, with only a small bite of irritation, “you were the second half of Harry Potter, that’s why.” Ginny’s eyes flickered at the name, but the rest of her face remained impassive. After a moment, she took the glass again at his suggestion, bringing it to her lips. “If the Dark Lord can show everyone that even you, Ginny Weasley, are willing to accept the way things are, it will help bring everyone else around.”
A soft noise of distress made its way up Ginny’s throat, and she stared hard at a distant corner. “All the more reason not to do it.”

“Possibly,” conceded Draco. “Would you like to know a reason why you should?”

Ginny cast him a disbelieving stare at this, but she gestured for him to go on. Draco swirled his drink in his glass and waited a long moment before speaking. “It’s bad out there,” he told her quietly. “For everyone.”

That wasn’t what Ginny had expected to hear, and certainly not in such a soft, sincere tone. Draco didn’t elaborate, and so Ginny leaned forward slowly, her eyes finally moving to his face again. “What’s happening?”

Before answering, Draco finished off the rest of the Firewhiskey, dividing it between their two glasses. “Well, let’s see,” he said, and Ginny watched as a dark cloud formed over his features, so sudden and transformative, her hazy, addled mind had trouble believing it could be insincere. “The economy is in shambles, what with everything that needs to be repaired and reordered. Purebloods aren’t always the best at operating on a mercantile scale, so well over half of the businesses in Diagon Alley are closed. There’s too few consumers and even fewer suppliers, and the result is that unless you work directly for the Ministry, your clan is losing gold, and fast.”

“Yes, I can imagine the Lestranges wouldn’t care much for shopkeeping,” commented Ginny wryly.

“Course not,” agreed Draco, slurring just a little. “And really, that’s what the half-bloods are supposed to be for, but there’s not enough of them, either.”

“Why not?”

Draco shrugged. “Most died in the war or fled. The Dark Lord is allowing them to marry purebloods, of course, but they’re marked, and not many of the Death Eater families want to take a risk at marrying them.”

“Marked?” questioned Ginny, brows furrowed.

Draco responded with another shrug. “Mm, there needed to be some kind of distinction, a class system. So, half-bloods carry tattoos on their arms now. It means they’re allowed to live here, but until they can purify their bloodlines, they’re still the … lower.”

“That’s ghastly,” said Ginny flatly.

“They’re not supposed to leave,” went on Draco, “if they get caught leaving Great Britain, they’ll get imprisoned. But some still do. There’s just too little here for them right now.”

“And you really expect me to believe that my siding with Voldemort will somehow make things better for them?” asked Ginny sharply. “What kind of fool would believe that?”

Draco scowled. “The kind of fool who realizes that the more witches and wizards there are to operate within the society, the better the chances of any kind of growth. If we keep at it like this, with just the Death Eater families, the magical population of Great Britain will die out, Weasley. Gone. Centuries of magical families left with nothing.”

Ginny hissed, “Well, Voldemort should have thought of that before he started killing everyone. And one of you idiots should have reminded him!”
“Oh, right,” said Draco sardonically, “because even we love a chance to correct the Dark Lord. Think, Weasley. Sure, we’d hoped more wizards would survive the war, but they didn’t, and now we’re stuck with this.”

“This is all just – just fucked, Malfoy,” snapped Ginny, before reaching for the bottle of Firewhiskey, only to find it empty. “Oh, bloody hell.”

“See what you did, Weasley,” complained Draco. “A hundred and twenty Galleons, that was.”

“And I could have gotten just as drunk off a cheap bottle of Giggle Water,” Ginny snarked in reply, before staggering to her feet. Draco did the same, making no motion to help her as she ambled over to the couch in front of the fireplace and collapsed onto it.

“I hate this new world,” Ginny murmured blearily, face pressed against the velvet.

Behind her, Draco staggered over to his bed. “Well, get over it,” he told her before yanking off his boots. “Because it’s the one you live in now.”
Chapter Four

He didn’t think his hands would ever stop shaking.

“Tell me, Draco,” his father said, his voice quiet, still too hoarse from his incarceration. Draco glanced up from his spot in front of the fireplace and secretly wondered if his father would ever look well again, or if Azkaban had taken something from him that he would never get back.

“Tell me what happened,” commanded Lucius lowly.

Draco turned his trembling gaze to the fire. It had been months since it had happened, and he hadn’t spoken to anyone about any of it – not the Vanishing Cabinet, not the vicious attack on Hogwarts.

Not Dumbledore.

No one had asked. But now Lucius, freshly freed from Azkaban, held Draco in an unwavering stare that demanded answers.

Several minutes passed before Draco could speak. He and his father were alone, but Draco’s stomach churned with fear at thought of being overheard. Lucius placed a hand on his shoulder, though he spoke no comforting words, and Draco cleared his throat a bit, fighting for words.

“I found Dumbledore in the tower,” Draco managed at last. He kept his gaze on the fire. “He was weak, and I – I managed to corner him.”

From the opposite side of the fireplace, Lucius watched him.

“He – He didn’t seem surprised,” noted Draco slowly, a fresh round of tears threatening. Merlin, hadn’t he cried enough? Still, there didn’t seem to be anything he could do to stop it. The memory played out in his mind like a nightmare, a wound too fresh and raw to not sting. “He spoke with me for a bit,” Draco went on, “trying to talk me out of it… said I could – I could be safe… you and Mum, all of us, protected.”

Admitting his moment of weakness was yet another dig at his misery, but Draco had to tell someone, and he knew, at least, that his father wouldn’t punish him. Not like Voldemort.

“He told me,” continued Draco, his tones wavering, “he told me, I wasn’t a murderer. And that I wouldn’t be able to do it. I wouldn’t be able to kill him.” Several seconds passed in silence, before Draco admitted in a cracked whisper, “And he was right. I couldn’t do it.”

Draco’s eyes lifted to his father’s, shades of grey identical to one another.

“Everyone was there, watching me, but I - Snape had to do it. I couldn’t…”

Lucius nodded slowly, his hand remaining where it sat on Draco’s shoulder. Nothing was said, and Draco, desperate to fill the silence with some effort at salvaging his dignity, turned to face Lucius and rushed out, “But I’m the one who got Dumbledore there! And I – I disarmed him, so the Dark Lord must know – “

At this, Lucius’ eyes flickered, and his features became sharp and alert.

“You disarmed Dumbledore?” asked Lucius.
Draco balked in response at his father’s sudden change of tone, and Lucius took the moment of silence as confirmation. The older wizard then stood away from the elegant armchair, clasped his hands behind his back, and moved to stand in front of the fire. Then he turned to face Draco, his expression shifting to one of cool quiet anger.

“Do not tell anyone what happened that night. No one.”

“But, Father – “

“I mean it, Draco,” snapped Lucius before advancing on his son. “No one must know of your failure. It will bring greater shame to our family. Do you understand?”

Draco hadn’t imagined his misery could grow even more, but the look his father gave him in that moment made him realize that nothing would ever be the same again.

“Yes, Father,” Draco responded dully.

“Swear it.”

“I swear,” promised Draco, his eyes low and glassy. “I won’t tell anyone.”

Lucius observed his son for one long moment before he nodded and swept out of the room, letting the doors close heavily behind him. As soon as he was gone, Draco dipped his head into his hands and wished desperately for the companionship of a stupid little ghost girl.

But he wasn’t at Hogwarts anymore, and so he gave in to his misery alone.

His mouth tasted like sandpaper.

Groaning, Draco sat up in his bed and blinked away a bout of dizziness just long enough to bark at the air, “Bleaker!”

The house-elf appeared instantly. “Yes, Mister Malf – “

“Water, breakfast, and the – the drunk – tonic, whatever it’s called – “

“Yes, Mister Malfoy,” said the house-elf, well aware of how these mornings typically went. He disappeared with a crack, leaving Draco to look across his bedroom and blink against the soft early morning light, which he found downright offensive, given his ailments.

A whole bottle of top shelf Firewhiskey. In one night. What had he been thinking?

A moan sounded from the couch, the front of which turned away from Draco’s bed, facing the fireplace. The back of the couch obscured the moaning occupant from sight, but after a few minutes of grunting, Ginny Weasley’s mussed head and sour expression appeared.

Ginny and Draco glared at each other for a full minute, each too nauseated and dizzy to fight, but not too far gone to resent each other in silence.

Bleaker reappeared in that moment with two trays, one in each hand. He delivered one to Draco’s bedside before marching over to Ginny with the other identical setting of food, water and potion bottles, meant to help their hangover maladies.

“Hey,” grunted Draco disdainfully, biting at a piece of plain toast. “I didn’t say to get her anything, you stupid elf.”
“Ah, Bleaker is most sorry for this misunderstanding,” the house-elf said quite sincerely as he handed Ginny the tray, “Bleaker simply thought to bring Missus Weasley her breakfast, as always.”

Draco glared, and before he could find something to throw – it was pretty obvious Bleaker had been in this situation before – the house-elf bowed hastily and disappeared. Scowling, Draco leaned one shoulder heavily again the headboard of his bed and ate at the edge of his bedcovers, also gulping down the tonic that would quell his more severe symptoms.

The two teens ate in silence for a few minutes before Draco looked over at Ginny again, who was still on the couch, shoving food into her mouth with all the grace and tact of a slug. When Ginny caught him looking, she made a face and asked over a mouthful of food, “What the hell are you looking at, Malfoy?”

Disgusted, Draco scowled and forced himself to stand. “Something Newt Scamander should have studied for his book, obviously.”

Ginny mimicked him under her breath as Draco passed by to the bathroom, where he spent the next twenty minutes showering and suffering in silence as he thought about how truly unfair his life was. Finally, Draco left the bathroom to find Ginny still sitting on the couch, hair sticking up in every direction and her clothes heavily rumpled.

Draco grabbed his clothes out of his wardrobe, changed in the bathroom (he wasn’t modest, but the last thing that blood traitor deserved was to get to see him naked), and then re-emerged, his mind clear and his body relatively rejuvenated.

Meanwhile, Ginny Weasley still looked like she’d just been found after ten years of living in the Forbidden Forest with a bunch of damn centaurs.

“I need to figure out somewhere to keep you,” said Draco at last. “I’m not leaving you in my room all the time, even if you are locked up.”

“Then give me my own room,” countered Ginny immediately, standing away from the couch. “I’ll be on my best behavior, honest.” She didn’t even try to sound sincere that time, and Draco wondered why she even said it. Probably to amuse herself, he decided.

“I’m not putting you somewhere I can’t keep an eye on you,” snapped Draco, before he turned and headed to some double-doors on the left side of his room, opposite the bathroom. Opening them revealed a smaller room connected to his, one he hadn’t used in years.

Standing in the middle of it thoughtfully, Draco decided it would have to work.

Ginny entered slowly behind him and peered at the furniture. “What’s this, some sort of office?”

“It was my study for school before Hogwarts,” Draco told her. “There’s no door leading to the hallway, and it can only go to my room. Still, it’s separate, so maybe I won’t have to look at you so often.”

Ginny cocked her head in his direction, eyes narrowed. “Learned your charm direct from Voldemort, did you?”

Draco ignored her. “Bleaker!” The house-elf appeared. “Get the interior transfigurationist in here,” commanded Draco before the elf could even open his mouth. “Put in a bed and a wardrobe and – I don’t know – a table or something.” He looked over at Ginny. “That’s probably already more furniture than you had in your whole house, I suppose.”
Ginny’s glare deepened. Just before Bleaker disappeared, she said to the elf, “Oh, and if you could, Bleaker, make it all gold and scarlet, please.”

“Certainly, m’aim!” said the house-elf.

“No, no, no,” Draco started, but the elf had already disappeared, and he glared at Ginny’s growing smirk. “You are a spiteful shrew,” he told her flatly, to which Ginny simply shrugged. However, she grew quite vocal when Draco forced her out of the room and back into the bathroom of his suite.

“The room won’t be ready for a while, and I have things to do,” he told her, pulling out his wand to lock the door.

“Then just let me stay out here!” argued Ginny. “I’m sick of being stuck in the bathroom!”

“Well, too bad, you lunatic, because I don’t trust you in here alone. So shut up.” With that, Draco slammed the door shut and locked it, only pausing to muse on Ginny’s creative – and loud – curses on the other side of the bathroom door. Then he grabbed his cloak and left the room, disappearing from the manor’s grounds a few minutes later.

As desolate as Diagon Alley had been, the Ministry of Magic was, in contrast, quite lively.

Witches, wizards and all other manner of magical creatures moved about with rushed purpose. Letters whizzed by, flying from one office to the next, carrying information and orders and Merlin only knew what else. The massive statue that had one sat in the center of the main lobby was now gone, replaced by a large, rectangular stone bearing the image of the Dark Mark.

The other side read MAGIC IS MIGHT in rather large bold-face letters.

Draco Malfoy paused and looked at it for a long moment, even as others milled around him distractedly, always in a hurry.

“Mister Malfoy!”

The obnoxiously high-pitched voice caught him off guard, and for a moment, Draco forgot where he was. “What?” he snapped, turning to find Dolores Umbridge standing in front of him, a good six inches below where his gaze comfortably landed.

As expected, the pink-clad witch bristled.

“No need to be all snippy,” Umbridge said, being the queen of snippiness, and therefore an authority on it. “I need your help tracking down your friend Vincent Crabbe, for a little security job once the school re-opens. I’ve tried owls, but I’ve gotten nothing. How might I best contact him?”

Draco stared for a long resentful moment. “A séance, probably,” he deadpanned at last. At Umbridge’s confused look, Draco reigned in his irritation as much as he was able, only to spit out venomously, “Crabbe is dead. He died during the Battle of Hogwarts. For the love of Merlin, how could you not know that?”

Umbridge sniffed. “Well, I certainly have a lot of things to do, don’t I? I can’t be expected to know everything!”

“Or anything, apparently,” said Draco, before turning away from the dismayed Headmistress.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” he said, no longer looking at her. He left Umbridge where she stood –
still making that ridiculous sniffing noise – and made his way through the maze of offices, meeting rooms and court sessions to find the office he was looking for.

*LUCIUS MALFOY* read the plate on the door, and below that: *HEAD OF MUGGLEBORN REGISTRATION*.

It was an innocent enough name for the group responsible for rounding up and killing or otherwise enslaving MuggleBorns, but let the Ministry call it what they liked, Draco didn’t care. Knocking on the door once, Draco entered once he was sure no one else was in the room.

Lucius Malfoy looked up from his desk, his weathered face relaxing a bit when he saw who it was. “Draco,” he greeted, returning his attention to his ink-covered parchment. A pile of scrolls sat to his left, unopened and waiting.

Draco took a seat in the leather chair opposite his father, as it was the only other seat in the room, the location of which placed the large imposing desk between the two wizards, giving Draco had a sudden uncomfortable feeling of anxiety.

“Father,” said Draco, setting down his briefcase next to the chair, “I wanted to ask you about this – reintegration thing.” He leaned forward as Lucius looked up from his parchment again, and the tense nature of Lucius’ expression aged his features greatly.

Though, if Draco was being honest, the effects of Lucius’ imprisonment at Azkaban had never fully left him – not in his appearance nor his demeanor. The older wizard’s cheeks were still much too pointed, and his skin much too pale and sallow. Where Lucius once had firm muscle, he now had sunken skin, clinging to bones. The darkness under his eyes, too, never seemed to abate, not even a little.

It had been an entire year since Lucius’ liberation from Azkaban, and yet Draco realized, as he sat and looked at his father under the full, damning morning light coming in from the office windows, that his father looked like he’d never left the place at all.

“What do you want to know?” asked Lucius crisply, snapping Draco out of his morose thoughts.

Shifting in his seat, Draco tried to make his father meet his gaze, so he could evaluate him for the truth. “Blaise seems to think – “ his father immediately glared, because Blaise, like the antagonistic older brother Draco never had, always seemed to come up with the most troublesome ideas, “ –that the Dark Lord is planning to marry off the blood-traitors with some of us, the ones in charge of watching them.” Draco watched Lucius carefully, evaluating him for any hints of dishonesty. “Is that true?”

Lucius sighed, and Draco got the distinct impression that he was already annoyed with the conversation.

“He might, Draco. It’s a possibility.”

At his lax dismissal, Draco sat up straighter, immediately indignant. “What – So, you think I might really have to marry Weasley, then?”

“I don’t know, Draco,” said Lucius, eyes flickering at his son with irritation. “He may request it, I’m not sure.”

“What in the hell,” exclaimed Draco, forgetting all manner of decorum and fumbling right past Lucius’ scathing glare, “You can’t honestly expect me to – “
“I expect you,” Lucius stood from his seat, looming over Draco, “to do as your bloody well told, Draco.”

A bit cowed, Draco leaned back in his seat, away from Lucius, but he went on relentlessly, “I should be able to marry whatever witch I want! You can’t honestly think I’ll do that?”

“Of course I can,” barked Lucius, before calming a bit and taking his seat again, shuffling his papers with a great deal of animosity. “What did you expect, Draco? To be able to choose your wife someday? You may have had some word in it before, but your marriage was always going to be one that is the most advantageous to our family name and our bloodline.”

At this, Draco fell back in his seat, stunned. Lucius, to his credit, took some pity on him. He set aside his papers and looked over Draco for a long moment before speaking.

“You would have had some say, of course. But there are only so many pureblood options left to us. Even without the intervention of the Dark Lord, your mother and I would have done most of the choosing for you. So do not think yourself so disadvantaged.”

“This is ridiculous,” murmured Draco, not caring if he sounded whiny. “And completely unfair.”

“Is it?” asked Lucius, eyes raking over Draco’s face. “Your mother and I were arranged, more or less.” At Draco’s visible surprise, Lucius made a weary noise. “I knew your mother from school, of course, but I never thought to court her. It was only a few years after school that we met again, and by that time, it had already been decided upon by our parents.”

Draco paused. Fighting the urge to feel foolish, he asked uncertainly, “But you… care for each other. Right?”

At this, Lucius grew visibly annoyed. “You know very well we do,” he said briskly, as uncomfortable as Draco was. “I should think such a thing would be quite obvious.” The two wizards fell silent, each musing over the conversation in their own manner.

“But,” said Draco, earning another glare from his father, “Weasley? You can’t want that for me, she’s atrocious. And she’s a filthy blood traitor who once got on with Harry bloody Potter.” Just the thought of being handed Potter’s leftovers made him seethe, and only the presence of his stern father kept him from having an outburst.

“It doesn’t matter what I want,” said Lucius, surprising Draco again, who frowned deeply. His father, for the first time during their meeting, looked downcast. He quickly recovered, however, though Draco couldn’t look past the expression he’d glimpsed. “Your job now is to do as the Dark Lord bids and keep the Malfoy Estate.”

At this, Draco sighed heavily. “Right, well, if you could help me with that – “

“All you need to do is oversee the new trade agreements, Draco,” interrupted Lucius impatiently. “Our wealth maintains itself.”

“But Father, Diagon Alley is dying,” protested Draco, “and half of our property investments are empty, there’s no wizards to work them – “

“It will come back, Draco,” Lucius cut in again, his tone making it quite clear that he expected no further rebuttals. “It always does. We suffered after the first war, and yet we recovered. We will do so again.” With that, Lucius began sorting through his papers again, and it was clear the conversation was over.
Dejected, Draco stood from the chair and picked up his briefcase. Before he reached the door, Lucius called his name. Draco turned, and he watched as his father inspected him for a moment before speaking.

“Your Aunt Bellatrix will visit soon,” said Lucius at last, his grey eyes on Draco’s face filled with meaning. “Make certain everything is … prepared for her.”

*Everything* meaning the hostile young witch currently locked in his bathroom. Right.

Nodding just a bit, Draco turned and left the office, feeling altogether much worse than he had when he’d entered.

Regular meals and a somewhat decent place to sleep had done wonders for Ginny.

Unfortunately, being fully aware and less apathetic now meant that she was bored stupid being locked up all day. And – also unfortunately – this meant that as soon as Draco Malfoy walked through the door to his suite and unlocked the one barring her from going anywhere, Ginny was immediately ready to tie up with him, if for no other reason than because she had nothing better to do.

“It’s about damn time, Malfoy,” she said, stomping through the doorway as soon as it was open. “What could you possibly have to do all day? Finally have to do your own evil deeds now that your brainless cronies Crabbe and Goyle are gone?”

Grey eyes narrowed on her instantly, but Ginny brushed him off, not giving due consideration to the slow-building fury in Draco Malfoy’s expression. Draco came up behind her, roughly pushed her out of the way and then opened the double-doors with a charm. Ginny brushed by him carelessly and let her heart leap with silent joy.

A bedroom, just as she’d asked, trimmed in scarlet and gold. And Draco’s audible grunt of disgust behind her was just the cherry on top.

“Excellent,” said Ginny, though she was careful not to address Draco when she said this, for fear of giving him too much credit. She did, however, turn to face him so she could fold her arms and scowl. “Now, get out of my room, Malfoy.”

At this, Draco’s quietly building anger seemed to reach its peak, and Ginny only realized in that instant that he’d been seething since he walked in. Sure, he was always irritated with her, but he looked positively venomous in that moment. It was a bit more intimidating than she had imagined, possibly because he looked so very much like Lucius Malfoy.

“Listen here, you *filthy* little blood traitor whore,” he snapped, and Ginny’s features sharpened in response, her jaw locked. “I am *sick* to death of you already. I don’t want to hear your voice, I don’t want to see your face, I don’t even want to think about the fact that you are alive.” He pulled out his wand and pointed it at her, and Ginny lifted her chin defiantly, even as she felt a tremble move through her body.

“If I could,” said Draco slowly, advancing on her with a look more menacing than he’d given her any other day she’d been there, “I would kill you right now. But the Dark Lord wants you alive, so until I can find some bloody fucking wizard to take you off my hands and make you into the submissive bitch you were born to be, I have to keep you here.”

Ginny growled, fingers curling into tight fists, but even she knew she couldn’t attack him when he had a wand pointed directly at her.
Whatever he’d been doing all day, it had not done much for his mood, she noted.

“So yes,” continued Draco, eyes deeply narrowed on her, “I will gladly get out of your room. And you can sit in here by yourself until you waste away and die, or the Dark Lord comes to get you. Whichever comes first. I am done with you.”

With that, Draco turned and left the room, slamming the doors behind him without ever touching the handle.

Ginny watched the closed doors for a few moments, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. Then she retreated slowly to the single chair next to the fireplace and curled into it.

Hmph, she thought. Let Malfoy think he was punishing her by keeping her in that room alone. She’d show him.

She’d been through worse.

Alone his room, Draco hurled his briefcase down to the ground, not caring if it scuffed.

After several seconds of shallow breathing, Draco clenched his eyes shut for just a moment before forcing himself to calm. He hated her. And he hated Umbridge and her ignorant banter. And – in the darkest, most bottom pit of his very soul – he hated the Dark Lord, because he was a bloody fucking liar.

This was not the world Draco had been promised as a child.

It was hell.

The room was nice enough.

In truth, it was far fancier than anything Ginny had ever lived in, including Hogwarts. Old-fashioned, certainly, and not to her tastes, but agreeable.

And so she slept, glad for the comfortable bed and its scarlet covers. Sometimes she stretched or exercised, trying to keep her body limber. Her food appeared and disappeared. Her room had another bathroom, like Draco’s, only much smaller.

And so on the hours went, with only the fireplace giving her warmth, as the room had no windows.

After two days, Ginny was sure Draco would re-appear and demand she do whatever fool thing he needed her to do for Voldemort. But he didn’t.

On the fourth day, she knocked on the door separating their rooms, but there was no response.

She could hear nothing from his side – not his voice nor his movements – and after a total of six days, Ginny began to fear that Draco was completely serious about leaving her in there for her entire stay.

That wasn’t to say that she missed his company, of course, the sorry prat. But it was hard to sit in complete silence twenty-four hours a day, locked in a room with no window, with no one to speak with.
No, Ginny decided. This was not a smart plan. And, in truth, it hadn’t been wise of her to provoke Draco when he was already in a tizzy about something. So, with this in mind, Ginny devoted her spare time (read: all of her time) to devising just the right things to say to Draco when he finally relented and let her out of the room again.

Unfortunately, an entire week went by without a single word or noise from anyone else, and Ginny really began to fear she was going mad. Her home had always been so noisy and full of activity, and Hogwarts had been the same. This room was nearly a worse prison than the one she’d been kept in before, if only because she felt so close to freedom, and yet completely isolated.

Desperate, she began to look for ways out, but she knew there were none. Finally, in a last-ditch effort, Ginny gripped her hair tight against her scalp for a painful moment before she cleared her throat and said aloud –

“Bleaker!”

She wasn’t sure it would work, since she wasn’t a Malfoy, but the house elf appeared instantly at her side, just like he always did for Draco.

“Yes, Missus?” asked the elf politely, and Ginny nearly cried.

“Oh, Bleaker! I’m glad you’re here, uh,” Ginny kneeled in front of the small elf, who smiled a little at her joy. “I need you to do something for me, please.”

“Anything Bleaker can do for you, Missus,” said the elf with an eager nod.

“Yes, uh,” Ginny cleared her throat again, her features fighting to remain sincere as she said through gritted teeth, “I need you to… give Malfoy a message for me.” She paused. “Young Malfoy. Draco. Not Lucius.”

The elf nodded again.

“Tell him,” Ginny continued slowly, “… that I need to speak with him. And, er, I’m – Well, I – would like to…. “ The words caught in her throat, but she pushed them out anyway, “… apologize.” Her teeth hurt from all the pressure her soul was putting on her to take back those words, but she was afraid Draco wouldn’t come if he didn’t feel like his ego would be salvaged.

“Please, Bleaker. Try and make him come here.”

The house-elf smiled and nodded. “Yes, Missus. Bleaker will do his best. Can Bleaker do anything else for you, Missus?”

Ginny blinked, caught off guard. “Well, uh,” she looked around slowly, “I’m pretty bored in here. Could you maybe find me some books? So I can read while I wait for Malfoy?”

“Certainly!” said the house elf. “Our beautiful manor boasts a large library, the grandest in all the world, Bleaker bets! Any favorites from you, Missus?”

Ginny thought about it. “Uh, The Tales of Beedle the Bard, maybe?” Her mum had probably read her every story in there a hundred times, and suddenly, Ginny yearned for the familiarity of it. Bleaker seemed pleased with her choice, and he nodded and disappeared.

Ginny knew Draco probably wasn’t home, as it was the middle of the day – something she only knew because of an ancient magical clock ticking in the corner – but she was content to wait. Irritable as it made her to think of calling on Malfoy and making some sort of show of contrition,
she knew it was the wisest thing to do.

She would never get out of this place if Malfoy hated her so much he was willing to lock her away for weeks at a time. She needed to at least get on decent terms with him.

But in her own way. Not his.

Thinking on her possible courses of action, Ginny took a seat in her scarlet armchair and pondered in silence until Bleaker showed up with a pile of books. Ginny thanked him graciously and reached for the top copy, and there it was: *The Tales of Beedle the Bard.*

Opening the worn cover, she decided the book was rather old. Her hunch was confirmed when she saw, inside the hard cover in messy, childish writing, a bunch of faded inky letters which read:

*Property of Draco L. Malfoy.*

It would have been nice, Draco thought as he entered his suite that evening, to think that his week and a half without Weasley had been as pleasant, quiet, and relaxing.

Unfortunately, that was simply not true.

Because, even without Weasley’s bothersome behavior, uncouth table manners, and very unladylike mouth, she had still managed to ruin his day simply by existing, and therefore being spoken of by the Dark Lord’s other elite.

Bellatrix was coming, and soon. And, as everyone within the newly established pureblood society knew, a visit from the darkest witch of their era was not something to be taken lightly. With that heavy cloud hanging over his head, Draco swept into the room, put down his briefcase, and then threw open the double-doors to Ginny’s room without so much as a word.

The redhead was standing next to her bed, thoughtfully examining her elbow (though Draco couldn’t imagine why). Her response to his entrance was to look up, eyes wide and full of surprise, before she said –

“What the hell do you want, Malfoy?”

Draco glared and immediately turned to leave.

“Oh, no, wait wait – “ Ginny hurried up behind him, catching the door before he could slam it shut. “No, sorry, that was – that was instinct, really. I – Did you get my message?”

Turning slowly to face her, Draco took in a long, deep breath. “Obviously.”

He watched as Ginny smoothed back her hair, straightened her robes, and made some sort of pathetic effort at looking put-together, though what her presentation mattered, he wasn’t sure. Again, Draco was greatly dubious about Ginny’s mental faculties.

“Okay, I – I shouldn’t have given you such a rough go, alright?” she said at last, folding her arms. “Look, you’re right. This hellhole is all I have. And I should be making the best of it.”

“How optimistic of you,” noted Draco dryly, one dark brow cocking high. “What does this have to do with me?”
Ginny eyed him for a moment before answering. “I want another challenge. Like the chess match.” At Draco’s eyeroll, she went on, “I have to have something to work towards, Malfoy, or I’ve — I’ve got nothing. I can’t just stay here and bide my time, waiting for whatever Voldemort has in store for me.”

“Weasley, I’m going to beat you at chess every single time. I’ve been playing since I was four.”

“Not chess then,” said Ginny, shaking her head. “Quidditch.”

At this, Draco almost laughed. Instead, he settled for a derisive snort. “We don’t have enough people to play Quidditch, you idiot.”

“Fine,” said Ginny, tapping her chin. “A game of PIXIE, then.”

Merlin, he hadn’t played PIXIE in years. It’d been his favorite game for ages. Still. “Weasley, you’re mad if you think I’m letting you on a broomstick.”

“Oh, come on, Malfoy!” protested Ginny heatedly. “Find us some training brooms or something, I don’t know! Just — just give me something. I’m useless to you if I stay in here. I’m not made for sitting around in rooms trimming my fingernails all day. I have to —” at this, she paused, and Draco noticed her voice crack a bit as she strained to control her facial expressions, “— I have to get out. I have to do something.”

When Draco fell silent, Ginny pressed on, “I mean, I get why you don’t want to do it. After all, I can definitely outfly you —”

“Like hell you can,” cut in Draco, affronted.

“— but then again, I’m pretty sure a pregnant niffler could outfly you, so…”

Draco glared, and Ginny’s lips quirked innocently. After observing her for a long moment, Draco asked, “And what exactly do you want this time if you win? Freedom, again?”

At this, Ginny’s features dropped into a more serious expression, and her voice grew quiet and determined. “No,” she said firmly. “If I win, Malfoy… “ Their eyes met. “I want you to find what’s left of my family.”

Silence fell between them, and Draco shifted before moving back into his room and dropping into an armchair. Ginny followed, taking the other chair just a foot away. She watched him intensely, and when he didn’t respond, apprehension finally showed in her features, too pronounced to stay hidden.

“Do — Do I — have any family left? Are they — “

“I don’t know, Weasley,” Draco answered honestly.

Looking over at Ginny, he realized, for the very first time, that she looked genuinely distressed. Not angry, not vindictive. In that moment, she looked very much her young age, try as she might to hide it. Draco continued, uncomfortable under her watery stare, “I’m not even sure how many bloody siblings you have —”

“Six, Malfoy, I have — I had — “ Ginny leaned over her chair, fingers curling into the fabric. “… six brothers.” When Draco lowered his eyes and didn’t respond, Ginny went on quietly but urgently, “I know my parents are gone, Malfoy… and I know Ron is gone, too, and Fred. I saw them fall.”
Draco looked up slowly and met Ginny’s gaze as she pleaded, “But the others… Please, if I win the match, find them for me. If I’m to have any hope of really living, I have to know that they’re alright.” Her head dipped for a moment as she swallowed past a lump in her throat, and Draco secretly, silently, commended her efforts at staying put together.

“I need to know I still have someone,” she said at last.

Draco considered her words before speaking, and then he sighed. “Fine,” he said, looking over at her and scanning her face with his gaze. “You win, and I’ll find out what happened to your family. But it may not be good news, Weasley.” He wasn’t sure why he was saying it, but he was, with every word as calm, even, and unaffected as he could manage. “There were a lot of dead after the battle.”

“I know,” whispered Ginny. “But I have to know for sure.”

Draco nodded slowly. “If that’s what you really want.”

“It is,” said Ginny, rising from her chair. After a moment, she gave Draco a stiff nod and then left his room. She could feel his eyes on her back as she retreated, and as soon as she was back behind closed doors, she let herself close her eyes and exhale.

If Draco kept his word – and it seemed as though he would, so long as she won the game – then she had something to look forward to. Real hope.

Satisfied, Ginny sat in her chair by the fireplace and picked up *Tales of the Beedle the Bard.*
Nothing in Ginny Weasley’s short life could have prepared her for the sight of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the wizard she’d fallen for as a star-struck ten year old, lifeless in Hagrid’s arms, floating across the ruined courtyard of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Nor could anything drown out the sound of Voldemort’s voice, booming in the otherwise silent arena, which remained littered with stone, blood, and bodies.

“Harry Potter… is dead!”

Cheers from the Death Eaters. Silence from all others.

Ginny’s unfocused eyes remained on Harry even when Draco Malfoy emerged from the group near her, shuffling forward in response to Voldemort’s command. If she’d looked up, Ginny might have seen the terror in his expression, the remorse in his features.

She didn’t, though. She was too lost. And then Voldemort was speaking again.

“Bring forth… the Mudblood and the blood traitor.”

This caught Ginny’s attention, but no sooner had she moved, reflexively, to reach out for Ron and Hermione, than an arm wrapped around her from behind, keeping her in her spot even as she struggled.

Death Eaters reached out and grabbed Ron and Hermione, dragging them forward. Tears, blood, and sweat stained their faces, expressions turned to the crowd of defeated witches and wizards, all of whom huddled as far from the Death Eaters as possible.

“No,” whimpered Ginny, her entire body trembling as it never had before. “No, no, no, no. Not them, please, not them.”

She didn’t know then who was holding her back, but if she’d bothered to look at the thick, scarred arm, she would’ve instantly recognized it as Charlie’s. Nearby, someone else had restrained George, who was making louder protests than Ginny, and if it hadn’t been for the combined strength of Lee Thomas and Bill Weasley, he might’ve broken through the crowd in his desperation to reach Ron.

The pair faced the crowd bravely, hands linked, and as Ginny’s eyes clouded with tears, Ron managed to catch her gaze with his.

His lips quirked in a motion meant to be reassuring.

The smile disappeared as soon as the curses started.

“NO!”

Ginny lurched forward in her bed, her cheeks taut and sticky with tears.

After a few moments of blinking against the dim early morning light, Ginny’s body slowly relaxed.
Still, her pounding heart and aching joints let her know that the anxiety from her dream, so potent, would follow her throughout the day.

Ginny closed her eyes against the view from her bed – a room in Malfoy Manor, designed just for her, with all the nice, luxurious things she’d always secretly coveted, even if only a little. The colors were designed as she’d asked, in shades of scarlet and gold, and though Ginny had found it comforting at first, now she felt as if it was nothing more than a cruel mockery.

What she wouldn’t give to be in the Gryffindor Common Room right now.

Sighing heavily, Ginny got up, dressed, and went to her door, surprised to find it unlocked. She entered Draco’s room only to find him just entering from the corridor, already dressed. Draco raked his gaze over her once before he spoke.

“Well, today is your lucky day, Weasley.”

“Oh?” responded Ginny dryly. “Voldemort dropped dead, did he?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Hardly, you stupid ginger.” Tossing aside his briefcase – what was even in there, Ginny wondered – Draco began tugging at the more confining parts of his wardrobe, yanking at the collar of his robes and pushing up his sleeves. “I’ve managed to procure an appropriate broom for you. Looks like you’ll get your mid-air beating today after all.”

Ginny instantly perked up. “We’re going to fly today? Really?”

At her excitement, Draco’s lips quirked. “That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? A game of PIXIE for a chance to find your brothers?”

Determination spread through Ginny Weasley like wildfire.

“A chance?” she repeated loftily, doing her very best to keep cool. Sidling past Draco towards the door, Ginny flung open the doors to the corridor.

“I’ll get my win today, Malfoy. That’s a guarantee.”

Draco had to admit, the fresh air felt wonderful.

The weather surrounding Malfoy Manor was, on most days, typical of their area of England: grey, a bit misty, and not all that pleasant. However, today had dawned unusually bright, and though there was still a persistent chill in the air, the lack of clouds made everything in direct sunlight feel pleasantly warm.

Draco paused and glanced behind him as Ginny Weasley stepped outdoors with a timidity that surprised him. True, she hadn’t been outdoors in quite some time, but she’d looked rather ghastly that morning, as if she hadn’t slept well, and now here she was, getting what she damn well wanted, and her response was to act like a little mouse. Fortunately, her hesitation was short-lived, and soon Ginny was bounding out ahead of him, over the grass and into the sunny warmth.

Rolling his eyes, Draco moved across the grassy courtyard and followed a stone path between a pair of tall well-manicured hedges. The footpath opened up to a lush open area with a small gardening shed in the corner. A well-worn leather chest Draco had requested from Bleaker sat just on the edge of the open grass, and it trembled and jumped in its spot as Draco took a moment to pause and appreciate it.
He hadn’t seen his Quidditch equipment in some time.

Turning back, Draco looked up in time to see Ginny step up behind him, her face turned up to the sky and her stance well relaxed.

“Come on, then,” said Draco, uncomfortable at her obvious delight in the sunny morning. “Here’s your broom. It’s the training sort, so you know what that means. You go too high or too far, and it’ll stop you right in the air, you understand?”

Ginny accepted the broom with an eyeroll. “Yeah, yeah. I’ve got it. Not going anywhere, Malfoy.”

“Good.” Draco picked up his own broom and admired it before glancing over her. “Now, let’s get this over with.”

The words were barely out of his mouth before Ginny hopped onto her broom and soared into the air, warm winds pushing her long hair back off her face, stirring her robes and revealing her legs, which she’d carefully tucked into black tights for the purposes of flying.

“Waiting on you, Malfoy,” she called cheerfully below.

A noise dangerously close to a chuckle bubbled in Draco’s throat, but he determinedly quelled it, instead jumping onto his own broom for the first time in months, letting it take him straight from the grassy knoll to the crisp air above.

As soon as he and Ginny were level in the air, they caught each other’s gazes, and Draco made a derisive snort at her grin. “Keep smiling, Weasley,” he said lightly, biting back his own happiness at being in the air again. “You’re about to go down.”

“Yackity yack yack yack, Malfoy! Get on with it!”

With a snap of his wand, Draco opened the leather chest far below. Out of the box zoomed two Bludgers, straight into the air and rushing past them with so much force, the wind rolled their brooms in their spots.

“On count of three,” called out Draco, before pointing the wand at the unmoving Quaffle still on the ground. Ahead of him, Ginny bent low on her broom, and with a flick of Draco’s wand, the Quaffle went flying up into the air.

Draco and Ginny flew straight at the ball, but it was Ginny’s small hand that snatched it first, zooming past Draco and racing toward the tall goal that sprang from the ground, growing taller for their game even as she approached. Draco turned skillfully in his spot and caught up with her, looping over her and snatching the Quaffle out of her hands before she could reach the goal, though both of them came to a screeching halt when the enchanted Bludgers raced by, nearly smashing into both of their brooms.

“Whoa!” Ginny yelped, and Draco used the moment of distraction to race around her in the direction of the opposite goals. He reeled back his arm to throw the Quaffle, but the other Bludger appeared and he had to duck. The Quaffle fell out of his hands and he tried to recover it, but Ginny swooped underneath him, snatched it in her hand and fled back to her own goal.

Draco turned and tried to catch her again, but Ginny deftly ducked under another brilliantly aggressive Bludger, turned a loop and fired the Quaffle. It zoomed straight through the tall hoop.

“YES!” shrieked Ginny, pumping a fist into the air with a wild grin.
Draco slowed his broom and rolled his eyes, instantly reminded of Quidditch back at Hogwarts. With only a slight glare in her direction, he pulled out his wand and waved it at her goal – a sparkly scarlet P appeared over it.

“That’s just one, Weasley,” he reminded her in a taunt, pointing his wand at the Quaffle to retrieve it. Ginny only laughed in response – a genuine, amused laugh - and the noise was so foreign, Draco nearly dropped his hold on the ball.

The game resumed.

Draco took some time to find his rhythm, but despite what Harry Potter and his buddies had always insisted, Draco hadn’t made the Slytherin Quidditch team purely because of his father. Draco had been flying for years – and he was very, very good, which, to his everlasting delight, seemed to surprise Ginny each time he zoomed around her, making impressive scores of his own.

Though honestly, he needed to pull out all the stops, because Ginny Weasley was very nearly as good as he was – perhaps even just as good, though he was not willing to concede that, not even in his own mind. Of course, there was also something a bit fun about showing off, even if it was just for a Weasley.

Quaffle in hand, Draco flew over the gardening shed, tossed up the Quaffle in the air and dropped off his broom so he could race, on foot, across the roof of the small building before leaping off it again and landing back on his broom, just in time to catch the Quaffle once more before he hurled it through the ring and narrowly avoided yet another Bludger.

“HAH!” The triumphant call to Ginny Weasley was met with a very unladylike gesture.

“Yeah, yeah, all tricks and no skill,” she taunted from mid-air.

Draco returned the obscene gesture – his mother would kill him, if she’d seen it – before waving his wand and making another letter appear over his goal post. So far, Draco’s read PIX and Ginny’s read PIXI. She only needed one more letter to win.

The playing began in earnest once more, with both Ginny and Draco skillfully dodging Bludgers, battling for control of the Quaffle and also performing unnecessary but rather artful stunts, as if one-upping each other was also part of the game (which it wasn’t).

It also made the game last longer than it probably should’ve, but despite Draco’s initial reluctance, he was more than satisfied to let the game continue on. Any time a brief lull came in the match, he found himself breathless and exhilarated.

Oh, how he’d missed flying.

Ginny took control of the Quaffle and raced past Draco, who turned on a dime and followed her close enough to reach out and touch her broom. When Ginny glanced over her shoulder and saw him so close, she hit the brakes on her broom and let him barrel ahead of her, laughing as she masterfully jumped off her broom to avoid a Bludger, catching the handle with one hand and then tossing herself back up onto the seat.

“What was that about tricks?” mocked Draco from where he hovered defensively in front of Ginny’s goal. “See if you can get it past me, Weasley.”

Eyes determined, Ginny lowered her head and rushed forward, racing right at Draco. Pulling back her arm, she darted around him, diving low and then popping back up, directly in front of the goal. Draco groaned inwardly, knowing she was ready to make the score.
Suddenly, Ginny froze on her broom, her eyes on something in the far corner of their makeshift Quidditch pitch.

Then her hand fell still, the Quaffle falling from her grip. Draco followed Ginny’s gaze and his eyes widened, his own insides suddenly icing over, flooding his veins with fear.

It was then that the Bludger flew past Draco, narrowly missing his shoulder. He snapped his head in Ginny’s direction. “WEASLEY!” he called out, but it was too late. The Bludger smashed into Ginny’s stunned body and sent her flying through the air, where she fell helplessly, some thirty feet above the earth.

Draco whipped out his wand. “Arresto Momentum!”

Ginny’s body lurched to a stop in mid-air before descending slowly to the grass. Flying down and dropping hurriedly off his broom, Draco tried to reach Ginny before the looming shadow made it to her.

Unfortunately, Bellatrix Lestrange closed the distance to Ginny first.

“My, my, Weasley,” said the dark-haired witch slowly, her knotted wand tip playing at the corner of her lips, lose in her curled fingers. “Such delayed reflexes might get you hurt someday...”

Draco moved up behind Ginny as she struggled to stand, his eyes on Bellatrix. The hostility rolled off Ginny in waves as she straightened, hands clenched at her sides. The afternoon was still bright and sunny, but somehow, without a cloud in the sky, Bellatrix seemed to draw in shadows that hadn’t been there before, making everything darker around them.

Bellatrix’s eyes shifted to Draco quickly, her motions as peculiar as always. “Hello, nephew.”

“Aunt Bella,” he greeted dutifully, moving to shift in front of Ginny, because he couldn’t see her face, but he was sure it was quite unfriendly. “I didn’t realize you were coming today.”

“A surprise, obviously,” said Bellatrix in her languid way, moving around the two teens in a motion not unlike a prowl. “After spending so much time in Azkaban, I like to visit family… as often as possible.” She circled around to stand in front of them again, this time much closer. The relaxed atmosphere from before had effectively evaporated.

“Besides,” continued Bellatrix, locking eyes with Ginny, who stood stiffly next to Draco, sporting a few grass stains on her robes and a murderous glare to match. “I heard you had a new friend.”

When both Draco and Ginny stood silent, Bellatrix’s lips quirked higher, twisting into her features. “Now, I can’t help but feel like I’ve met you before,” murmured Bellatrix to Ginny, every word slow and deliberate. Her gaunt features lifted higher in excitement at Ginny’s tense face, and Draco felt his insides simmer. Bellatrix, of course, knew damn well who Ginny was. And she’d known she was here, at Malfoy Manor.

Draco’s silver eyes slid to the side to watch Ginny’s features tighten further, a barely contained fury brimming just below the surface.

“Perhaps not, though,” said Bellatrix, suddenly moving back from Ginny and speaking lightly. “Maybe you just look like someone I knew once upon a time… “ Her wand found its way to her lip again as her smirk deepened, her voice becoming a taunting whisper, “… someone I left in a pile of bodies.”
A great burgeoning scream was Draco’s only warning before Ginny lunged right at Bellatrix.

The older witch jumped back, wand raised, but Draco was there first, snatching Ginny around the waist and nearly hauling her off the ground in an effort to hold her back. His first instinct was to grab his own wand, but he was afraid Ginny would snatch it, and then Merlin only knew what would happen, but Draco was absolutely certain he’d rather be dead than find out.

“LET GO OF ME!” Ginny was frenzied.

Bellatrix managed to laugh loudly enough to be heard over Ginny’s screams. “Find me in the sitting room once you’re done with all that,” she told Draco, her voice absolutely jubilant as she sauntered off, ignoring both Draco and Ginny as he fought to drag her away, even when she dug in her heels to fight him off.

“COME BACK HERE, YOU BITCH!” screamed Ginny, but Draco secured his arms around her and pulled her back from the view of the manor, shoving her behind some hedges. As soon as Bellatrix was gone, Ginny snatched herself away from Draco, stumbling over her own feet and falling into the grass again.

They both breathed heavily, and Draco put his hands on his hips and turned his face to the sky, as if hoping for some kind of divine intervention. Such as a lightning bolt, which might helpfully strike him dead.

What a pleasant, pleasant afternoon it had been. Ruined.

“We can have a rematch later, Weasley,” Draco said after several seconds, because he wasn’t sure what the hell else he was supposed to say that wouldn’t send Ginny, who was now sobbing angrily, into a fury again.

“No,” growled Ginny tearfully, pushing herself up again, her limbs quaking. “No, I lost. Forget it.”

Draco watched her for a long moment. “Weasley…” he started at last, but Ginny brushed past him, leaving her shattered broomstick behind.

“I lost,” she murmured as she marched past him, her eyes low and red. “I bloody lost.”

It was nearly twenty minutes before Draco finally made his way into the sitting room of the manor, after having locked Ginny securely in her room.

A special sort of ire settled in his chest after locking her door, and Draco stewed on it all the way down the corridor and across the house.

Wasn’t the bloody point of all of this to make Weasley want to be here? Compliance was supposed to be the key; acceptance, sustainability, and a true desire to be a part of this new pureblood society was essential to creating the sort of environment the Dark Lord wanted – all under his careful control, of course.

But how the hell was Draco supposed to accomplish that with Bellatrix fucking Lestrange going about, mucking things up with her insanity? If Draco had learned anything in the past two years, it was that that crazy bitch had been better off in Azkaban.

What he wouldn’t give to tell her a thing or two, Draco thought, and on his way to the sitting room, he mused on doing just that.
Such as letting Bellatrix know that she was far more hurtful to the cause of stability of the wizarding world than anything the Dark Lord himself had ever done. That Draco’s mother, Narcissa, was perhaps the only person left on the planet who loved Bellatrix more than she feared her.

And that she wasn’t fucking helpful, and no amount of dueling power would change that, because the fighting was over and it was time to be civilized again.

But Bellatrix only had one setting, so to speak, and in the wake of an attempt at civility, she was simply out of place and, above all else, dangerous.

Unfortunately, as Draco wound himself up with all the right scathing words to say to his Aunt Bellatrix, he found himself stunned into silence once more when he came upon the sitting room to find – not just Bellatrix, who alone was enough to make him forget his brief bout of courage – but a tall, slender young wizard with brunette hair and a flash of grey eyes.

“Cousin Draco,” said Damien fluidly, rising from his seat with an artificial smile Draco immediately took issue with. “Oh, look how you’ve grown.”

Thanks to years of practice maintaining a set of placid and unimpressed facial expressions, Draco did not give away his intense internal reaction to Damien’s words, virulent though it was.

“Damien,” Draco greeted dully instead, unable to dredge up a more enthusiastic tone. “Apparently, we are receiving all sorts of visitors today I was unaware of.”

Narcissa appeared at Draco’s side, looping an arm through his. “So good to have family with us, isn’t it?” she asked, her tone carefully crafted to be both polite and commanding. Draco got the message.

Be nice.

The four of them – Narcissa, Bellatrix, Draco and Damien – moved to some couches. “What took you so long, nephew?” asked Bellatrix with a taunting smile. “Seems like a walk in from the courtyard shouldn’t have taken quite so long.”

Draco blinked away a glare. “Yes, well, my time was well spent trying to make sure Weasley doesn’t kill herself in my absence,” he told them all matter-of-factly. “Took me a moment.”

Bellatrix narrowed her eyes a bit, though her expression remained coy. “I had no idea she was such a sensitive creature.”

_Are you bloody kidding me?_

Draco and Bellatrix observed one another coolly for a long moment, and Draco battled with himself over all the things he would like to say, the kindest of which simply being that Bellatrix was doing more harm than good to Voldemort’s cause. However, the words stuck in his throat, and Draco kept fearfully, shamefully silent, sipping at a cup of tea without speaking.

“So tell us more about the school,” said Narcissa conversationally, addressing Damien. “I’m sure you and Headmistress Umbridge are quite ready to begin.”

“Very much so,” said Damien, eyes flickering to Draco before returning to Narcissa to accompany his odd smile. “Glanfuil will be the greatest wizarding school in all of Europe once we’re in there.”

At this, Draco glanced up from his teacup. “Glanfuil?” he repeated, brows furrowed.
Damien’s handsome features lifted in a smile that managed to be both condescending and polite. “Yes, cousin. The school? Or haven’t you heard that we’ve renamed it for its grand reopening?”

Draco put down his teacup a bit more roughly than he’d intended. “You’ve renamed Hogwarts?” he bit out, looking to his mother, who appeared nervous, and Bellatrix, who’d grown bored. “Why would you do something like that? The school’s been around for a thousand years. It’s always been Hogwarts.”

“It was a decision reached by the Ministry some months ago,” said Damien lightly, still sipping at his own brew. “We thought it best, after all, to have a new identity to reflect the school’s newer, more stringent entrance requirements.” Looking back at Narcissa, Damien gestured grandly. “A brand new school for our remarkable new world. Fitting, don’t you think?”

“Very,” agreed Narcissa enthusiastically. “I’d always thought Hogwarts was such a silly name for a school. So dirty. Don’t you agree, Bella?”

“They can call it whatever they like,” said the dark-haired witch disinterestedly, “so long as they keep the filthy Mudbloods out.”

“That is the idea,” agreed Damien cheerfully.

Draco stared at his now empty teacup and wondered if his entire life was falling apart.

Ginny wasn’t sure how much time passed between the moment Draco locked her in her room and the moment he entered his own room again, but she was aware, on some level, that she hadn’t moved from her spot, nor had she blinked. It was even quite possible that she’d scarcely breathed in all that time.

The doors to her room opened and Draco Malfoy entered.

When Ginny failed to react, he sighed and moved nearby, standing near where Ginny huddled in her armchair, staring blankly at the roaring fire in the beautiful stone fireplace in front of her. “Bellatrix is gone, Weasley.”

Ginny took a long time to respond. “She’ll be back.” Her voice was hoarse from screaming. “She always comes back.”

Nearby, Draco shifted. “You’re going to have to deal with her at some point,” he said at last, irritation making his voice sound rough. “I realize she’s a bit of a sore spot for you – “

“That bitch,” Ginny was suddenly on her feet, standing directly in front of Draco, “killed my mother.” Tears filled her eyes, and she felt her limbs tremble with rage and – Merlin, so much sorrow. Never would Ginny be able to rid herself of that image.

Molly Weasley, falling to Bellatrix’s wand.

Never in a million bloody years would Ginny forget that feeling – the sensation of being burned from the inside out, such a real, vibrant, insurmountable pain tearing through her heart, as if someone had taken a serrated knife from a bladesmith’s fire and let it rip, still molten, through every fiber of her heart.

Just the thought of it made bile rise in her throat.

Draco observed Ginny coolly, and she backed away, falling into a huddle in her chair once again.
After several long seconds of silence, in which neither of them moved or spoke, Ginny said quietly, lowly to the air –

“There will never be a good thing in my life again.” And then, “Get out, Malfoy.”

Only a moment of hesitation from Draco, and then he was gone, shutting both doors quietly behind him.

In the calm quiet of his bedroom, Draco paused to look thoughtfully at the doors to Ginny’s room. Then, with a soft scowl, he brought out his quill and parchment and sat down to write a letter.

A few days passed after the PIXIE match, and in that time, Ginny found that, despite the fact that the only company available was positively wretched, it was also quite clear that solitude did not suit her. Unfortunately, even if she and Draco Malfoy had wanted to spend time together, he was often busy.

This meant that, during the day, Ginny was left alone, in silence, with nothing to do but read and try to ward off bad memories. The only bright spots in her day were when Bleaker appeared to give her food, because he was always so kind and genuinely happy to see her. Ginny had never fully appreciated house-elves before, as Hermione had, but the friendship of Bleaker made her swear to herself that she would never take them for granted again.

“Bleaker?”

The house-elf looked up from where he was carefully placing a tray of delicious food on Ginny’s small personal table. “Yes, Missus Weasley?”

Ginny moved over to her chair. “Do you think you could find me some parchment? And some quills and ink? I think I’d like to do something creative. Write, or maybe draw or something.” Anything to alleviate the mind-numbing boredom induced by hours and hours of prolonged silence. Anything to distract her.

“Mm, yes, Missus! Bleaker can certainly do that,” the house-elf told her in chipper tones.

And just as promised, Bleaker returned in less than a half-hour with a set blank parchment, a variety of ink colors and quills, and even a pair of scissors for cutting. Ginny smirked and tucked away the scissors, glad to have something sharp that Draco didn’t know about. She wouldn’t use it unless she absolutely had to, because she didn’t want Bleaker to get in trouble, but it comforted her to have it nearby.

With something new and interesting to do, Ginny managed to enjoy most of her afternoon, humming to herself and drawing. She made a large picture of a multi-colored flower, and to her delight, she found that the inks created a magical shimmering effect that made it all look like the ripples created by a gentle breeze on a lake.

After that, she created a little Quidditch flip comic and laughed at her own ingenuity. The twins would have appreciated this one, she thought, fighting off a pinch of sadness.

So distracted was Ginny that, when the time rolled around for Draco to return home (not that he always interacted with her, but she could always hear him enter the room next door), she didn’t notice that he was later than usual. Ignoring the sounds of someone moving about beyond her door, Ginny stayed where she was, on her stomach on the floor with her arms covered in ink (robe sleeves pushed up) and her eyes studying the Hollyhead Harpies logo she’d drawn.
A short knock rapped against the door before it opened and Draco stepped in. “What in the name of Merlin are you doing?” he asked immediately, bewildered.

Ginny spared him only a brief glance. “Creating art, Malfoy,” she told him in a tone that indicated it was none of his business.

Draco observed her work from his spot. “It looks hideous.”

Rolling her eyes grandly, Ginny shifted in her spot, still on her stomach. “Do you have something you need, Malfoy?”

At this, Draco smirked, looking a bit too pleased with himself as he gestured with his long fingers. “Me? Oh, no. But there is someone else here who’d like to see you…” With that, Draco shifted back to the door and gestured to someone in the room.

As Ginny watched, the newcomer stepped through the door and made a beeline for her. The name burst forth from Ginny before she even knew what was happening.

“GEORGE!”

In one fluid motion, Ginny yanked herself from the floor and flew into the young wizard’s arms. George caught Ginny and spun her around in flurry of movements, a strangled noise caught between a gasp and a laugh escaping him. “Gin, oh, Merlin!”

He pulled away just a bit, swiping at some tears before he looked over at the door with a grin. Her heart leaping, Ginny let out another jubilant cry as both Charlie and Percy appeared, and she rushed into their arms, letting both of her older brothers scoop her up.

“Oh, Merlin, I can’t – believe – “ Tears choked Ginny and she simply tucked into the three of them, desperate to touch them and embrace them, to know that they were really there. By the time she finally managed to pull back and study their faces, she had managed to reign in most of her tears.

Oh, they all looked so thin. Percy had always been a bean pole, but he looked downright unhealthy now, they all did. Even Charlie, who had always been the stockiest and most muscular of all the Weasley boys, was now downright lanky. Their faces were clean but their robes were worn, Ginny noticed, and they all bore signs of abuse and neglect, though none of them seemed injured beyond repair.

“Oh,” gasped out Ginny, tucking her face as she knew they were all studying her in exactly the same way she was studying them. “Come, come on, come sit down.” Suddenly desperate to make her brothers as comfortable as possible, Ginny led them away from the door and to the seats in front of the fireplace.

Taking in a deep breath, Ginny sat close to George, who looped an arm around her shoulder and held her close. “We’re so glad to see you, Gin,” he said thickly, before pausing to look around the room. “You seem to be okay, are you okay? Are they feeding you and everything here?”

Ginny nodded quickly. “Oh, yeah, I’m fine. I mean – I was imprisoned until about a month ago, but I’ve been here since then.”

Charlie observed the room critically. “And Malfoy?” he questioned, a bit skeptical than George. “Is he treating you alright? Is he… abusing you at all?”

Ginny blinked. Oh, right. Draco. She’d forgotten all about him. Glancing back at the door, she
noticed he was gone, and he’d closed the door behind him. No doubt he was on the other side of the door in his own room, though. He could hear them talk if he really wanted.

At the moment, though, Ginny was so happy, she didn’t care, not one bit.

She waved her hand dismissively at Charlie’s question, because the truth was, she was perfectly well.

“Oh, no. I mean, besides being locked in here, of course. But I’ve got my own space, and Malfoy’s really just ready for me to leave, I think. He usually just doesn’t bother with me, to be honest.”

“That’s good,” George exhaled, and Percy nodded, smiling at her.

“We’re so glad you’re alright,” Percy said, and his tone was so sincere, Ginny felt doubly guilty over ever teasing thing she and the others had ever said about him. Percy had come through in the end, he’d helped them at the battle in Hogwarts. He’d forsaken the Ministry and done what was right, and that was all that mattered.

“I love you all so much,” she managed through a fresh bout of tears, her eyes turning to each of their faces. Her brothers all nodded, and Percy swiped at his face with his sleeve while Charlie squeezed his shoulder. A short silence fell over them before Ginny managed to ask the only other question that mattered.

“Is this… is this all of us?” she asked cautiously.

At this, Charlie lowered his eyes, and Percy looked away, biting his lip.

George, at last, cleared his throat and said, “Bill survived the battle. But he, uh, had some sort of – I don’t know, fit or something, when the Death Eaters tried to take him. Something to do with the werewolf thing, I suppose.”

“That’s all she needs to hear,” said Charlie lowly from the side.

“Fit?” inquired Ginny, desperate for information. “What’d you – “

George was the only one who would look at Ginny’s face. “He tore into some Death Eaters like they were paper.”

“George,” Charlie reprimanded sharply.

“She needs to know,” countered George just as sharply, before looking over at Ginny. “They took him down, after that. Decided he was too dangerous to keep around as a prisoner.” Charlie sighed heavily from his spot, but George simply offered Ginny a sad smile.

“He was a hero. And I’m glad he killed some of them.”

Ginny agreed, but for the sake of keeping the peace, she simply nodded and put a comforting hand on Charlie’s. He softened a bit at her touch and squeezed her fingers. George spoke up again.

“But, hey, at least we’re not the only Weasleys.” At Ginny’s curious look, George managed a smile. “Fleur was allowed to move back to France, but not before she came and talked with me in my cell for just a bit.” George’s lips quirked. “She was pregnant.”

Ginny’s eyes widened. “So… so Bill has a –“

“Yep,” said George, leaning against a chair. “Not sure if it’s been born or what it is, but somewhere
out there, we’ve got a little niece or nephew.”

“Wish we could talk to her,” put in Percy. “Find out what happened.”

“Oh!” Ginny perked up. “I could talk to Malfoy, I bet he would let me write a letter, see if I can reach her.” After a moment, Ginny looked up at each of their faces again. “Hey, have you guys been fed? Do you need some food?”

At their mutual glances, Ginny knew they needed something. Jumping up from her spot, she called out Bleaker’s name.

“Yes, Missus?” asked the house-elf politely, startling everyone in the room except Ginny with his sudden appearance.

“Can you get them some dinner, please? All three of them?”

“Of course!”

Ginny smiled, pleased, as the house-elf disappeared. Her brothers watched in amazement as the Bleaker reappeared with plates of food balanced all the way up the length of his arms. He placed the food in front of the Weasley boys and stood back. “You’d better clear the way,” said Ginny with a somewhat hysterical grin. “These blokes can really eat.”

Bleaker disappeared with a titter, and Ginny dropped back to her seat as Charlie, Percy and George all stared in disbelief at the food. Suddenly, all conversation was forgotten as they dug in, and Ginny watched happily as they stuffed themselves with food.

When George was done, Ginny immediately leaned into him again. Charlie was watching her as he finished the last of his food, and she smiled in response.

“So,” said Percy after they’d finished their food, “I suppose you’re aware of this whole reintegration initiative for pureblood prisoners?”

Ginny frowned a bit and straightened in her spot. “Yeah,” she picked at the carpet. “That’s why I’m here, after all.” She lifted her eyes to them. “Do you think that’s what they’ll do with you all?”

“Seems like it,” said Charlie truthfully. “We’ve been in cells since the battle ended, but there were whispers of the plan to bring us out again. Still, something tells me we won’t be staying here.”

Ginny tried not to be disappointed. “Maybe you will,” she said, because oh, how much it would mean to her to have her brothers nearby, to know that they were safe. George prodded her shoulder.

“We’ll be fine, Gin. We’re tough.” He paused. “Not as tough as you, but still pretty solid.”

Ginny cracked a grin.

After a few more minutes of chatting, hugging and generally being mushier than Ginny had ever been in her life, a knock came at the door. It opened to reveal Draco, standing in the gap.

“It’s time for them to go,” he told the group in indifferent tones, though his eyes remained on Ginny.

Dejected, Ginny stood slowly, her hand finding Charlie’s arm while the other groped for George’s. “Just – try and send me an owl when you can, alright?” she told all three of them, doing her very best to remain collected and strong. “And if you need something, you tell me, and I mean it. I’ll
George looked down fondly on her. “We believe you,” he said sincerely. Then he pulled her into a tight hug, and she felt a tremble run between them before George forced himself to pull away. Percy hugged her next, unable to hold back a little snifflle.

“You are so like Mum,” he told her weepily, and it made Ginny’s eyes swell with tears once more.

Charlie was last, and he hauled her off the ground into a bear hug that reminded her of all the times he’d done the very same thing when she’d been so small. “Please be safe,” he told her warmly, before giving her one last glance and stepping away.

The three Weasley men walked into Draco’s room and gathered near the door, where, Ginny was startled to see, two Death Eaters in full regalia waited. Immediately, Ginny lurched forward, because she was suddenly aware of the fact that she may never see them again, and she was so desperate to keep them close.

Draco caught her arm. “Relax,” he murmured lowly, even as the Death Eaters led Charlie, Percy and George away. “They’re just escorting them. None of the actual Death Eaters will be taking your brothers.”

“But – but – so where?” Ginny turned wildly to face him, unable to keep her cool for a second longer, because she felt like her heart was ripping into shredd all over again. “Will they be okay? Tell me, Malfoy because Merlin help me, if they’re leaving to go get – tortured or – “

“They’re not,” Draco told her emphatically, glancing at the door to make sure they were now alone. “All of the worst already have their pureblood prisoners, Weasley. I don’t know the exact locations, but your brothers are probably going to end up under the supervision of some of the newest converts, witches and wizards from other parts of Europe who’ve been asked to come here to help the British magical population.” He released her as Ginny slowly relaxed, just a bit.

“Most of them didn’t fight for the Dark Lord. They’re just sympathizers who aren’t even all that familiar with your family.” Draco raised a brow at her, grey eyes moving over her tear-stained features. “Your brothers will be fine. They’re luckier than most to be out of those damned cells earlier than planned.”

Ginny trained her stare on the now closed doors for several moments before she turned slowly back to Draco. The two looked at one another with curious expressions, the sort that Draco would have normally turned away from.

“Thank you,” murmured Ginny at last, her voice trembling.

This made Draco finally shift away, though his own expression relaxed some, and he seemed to lose some of his business-like demeanor, falling into something more comfortable as he plucked a drinking glass from his personal bar.

“Yes, well, they would’ve been freed eventually. Just needed some tracking down.” He filled his glass and looked back over at her. “Wasn’t that hard.”

“But I lost,” Ginny told him, crossing the room and moving to block his path, because even though she normally wanted nothing more for him to leave her alone, she now had no desire other than to make him look at her. “I lost the match. Why did you seek them out?”

Scowling when she stood in his way, Draco let out an aggrieved sigh. “Because – I don’t know, Weasley – you would’ve won the match, right? If not for my wretchedly disturbing aunt.” He...
paused. “She’s enough to make anyone fall off their broom.” His tone was casual, dismissive, and one hundred percent transparent.

Draco Malfoy was not so altruistic that he was willing to concede victory to anyone, whether they deserved it or not. He had another motive for this kindness, and it wasn’t hard to figure out that that motive was probably to make Ginny less combative and more cooperative.

Which, honestly, was less sinister a reason than any other Death Eater might’ve done it.

The truly terrible thing about it was that it was working. Ginny knew, in that moment, that she would have done anything to stay on his good side, so she could guarantee seeing her brothers again.

That didn’t mean she would stop fighting. Not ever.

But it did mean that, whether she liked it or not, she and Draco Malfoy had a system, a sort of give-and-take, or whatever it might have been called. Either way, it worked, for the time being.

Feeling calmer and more hopeful than she had in ages, Ginny made her own drink with Malfoy’s liquor (he scowled but didn’t stop her) and then took a gulp. “I’ve changed my mind, Malfoy. I do want a rematch.”


“I already told you, Malfoy,” Ginny said, folding her free arm over her chest. “I don’t take things I don’t earn, and I don’t want to be in your debt. Besides, I like winning.” She shrugged.

As expected, Draco rolled his eyes at her. “You know, Weasley, I do have better things to do than fly around with you all afternoon.”

At this, Ginny smirked, drained the last of her glass and then brushed by him, leaning her face close to his as she said coyly, “…No you don’t, Malfoy.”

Then she swept past him and disappeared into her room.
The first time Draco stumbled in the unused washroom, it took several seconds of foggy silence for him to finally realize where he was.

He hadn’t meant to come there, but now, as he blinked away tears and swiped roughly at his face with the sleeve of his school robes, Draco realized it was one of the few places in Hogwarts where he might remain undisturbed.

His chest felt concave, and he could feel the health slipping off his bones. He must look positively skeletal now, he thought bleakly. He’d always been rather slim anyway, though, so perhaps no one would notice.

Tumbling forward, Draco at last reached the old sink, a great white porcelain bowl that clung to the wall with little more than rusted hinges and hope. Draco leaned on it as much as he dared, knowing that even old faulty bathroom faucets were stronger than he was at the moment.

A few great heaving breaths left him as he tried to calm down.

So the necklace thing hadn’t worked. Was that a surprise? Did he really think using an Unforgivable curse on that damn girl - trying to Imperius her into giving it to Dumbledore – would really do the job? If Dumbledore was that easy to kill, someone would have done it a long time ago.

A tiny voice in Draco’s head told him that maybe – just perhaps – he had come up with such a convoluted plan because he didn’t really want it to work.

A louder voice – grating, terrifying, and echoing in time with his pounding heart – told him that of course he’d wanted it to work, because if it didn’t, everyone he loved would die.

The isolation of the unused, abandoned room suddenly overtook him, and he sank to his knees, not rising again until a timid voice called to him from a dusty corner.

“…Are you alright?” asked the specter.

“Oi! Malfoy!”

It was three days later, and Draco paused at the door to his room, having just prepared to leave the house for the day. However, he’d no sooner stepped foot into the corridor than he was stopped by Ginny Weasley as she flew across his room and ungracefully crashed into his still-open door with all the elegance and grace of an inebriated giant.

“What, Weasley?” Draco asked, exasperated. “I have places to be.”

Ginny leaned against the door, panting a bit from her sprint. “I need you to pick something up for me while you’re out today.”

Draco furrowed his brows. “What do I look like, your bloody servant?”

“Come on, Malfoy, you’re the one keeping me here! And I need you to get me something that has yet to be provided, so that’s on you.”
Draco scowled. “Fine, what do you need?” He instantly grew suspicious when Ginny’s expression twitched with the attempt to hide a smile.

“Tampons, mate. It’s that time of the month. Or it will be, soon.”

Draco, normally in such control of his expressions, simply could not figure out what to do with his face in response to her request. Finally, Draco slapped a hand over his face and growled loudly, “Bloody hell, Weasley, you couldn’t have asked Bleaker to get you that?”

Ginny folded her arms and leaned casually against the door. After a long moment of thought, she nodded and said, “I could have, yes.” There was no missing her smirk this time.

“Get back in the room,” hissed Draco, poking her in the arm with one long finger.

“Are you gonna get my stuff or not, you prat?”

“I don’t have time to deal with you, you mangy – “

“Come on, Malfoy!”

“Draco.”

The quarrelling pair suddenly fell silent, and Ginny peeked further out of the door and down the hallway. Draco, where he stood in the corridor, felt his heart drop, but he carefully straightened to his full height and nodded in greeting as his dear cousin Damien swept down the hallway.

“Damien, I was just on my way – “

“Do not trouble yourself, cousin,” said Damien with a disarming smile, which he slowly turned in Ginny’s direction. She stood just inside the doorway, but easily visible to Damien, and he let his eyes rake over her just once before settling on her face. Damien did not attempt to hide his inspection of her, and as Draco watched, Ginny’s face lost any of its previous mirth and hardened into a dangerous expression he knew quite well.

“So this must be Ginny Weasley,” drawled Damien, still smiling.

Draco secretly wondered why witches seemed to think Damien was handsome. Aesthetically, he was fine enough looking, but there was something odd about his face, a quirk that made his features look exaggerated, bizarre and unsettling, like a grotesque character of fiction.

However, a quick glance at Ginny revealed that whatever spell Damien cast over other females, it did not seem to extend to her.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Damien continued with Ginny didn’t respond. “I’ve heard all about you.”

Ginny grimaced pointedly in Damien’s direction. “Yeah? Haven’t heard a word about you,” she said flatly. Draco carefully repressed his amusement, even as his insides fluttered with anxiety.

“Weasley,” Draco said, clearing his throat a bit, “this is my cousin, Damien Black. Damien, this is, as you’ve guessed, Ginny Weasley.” After a pause, he continued stiffly, “She’s… staying with us for a while.” It was all a pretense – Damien knew exactly who Ginny was and why she was there – but part of growing up in the upper-crust of society was establishing, right off the bat, which universal lie applied best to each situation. It was important that everyone use the same one, you see, in order maintain the correct air.
Ginny scrunched up her face. “Mmhm,” she grunted. “I’m on vacation, mate.”

Damien, far from being bothered by Ginny’s obvious hostility, seemed greatly amused by it.
“Wonderful,” he said, extending a hand to her. Ginny let her eyes shift to Damien’s extended hand, then to his face, and then, after a long moment, she looked over at Draco.

Draco wasn’t sure what she was asking for with her silent look, but he shifted his eyes in Damien’s direction, and Ginny took the hint, shaking the other wizard’s hand before yanking her own hand back and – to Draco’s eternal dismay – wiping it slowly and pointedly on her robes.

*Merlin, strike me dead where I stand.*

“We should get going,” said Draco at last, moving between Damien and Ginny and ushering the latter back into the bedroom. “We have a lot of important work to do.”

“Yeah, I bet,” said Ginny loudly from where he corralled her into the room. “Missing a boot-licking session, are you, Mal – “

Draco cut her off by shutting the door and quickly locking it with a flick of his wand.

Turning to face his cousin once more, Draco straightened and did his best to face Damien with dignity. It hardly seemed to matter, though, because Damien was still looking at the entrance to Draco’s suite, his eyes alight with alarming focus as he studied the closed door, as if he could see Ginny just beyond it.

Draco narrowed his eyes.

“Let’s go, then,” he said, and moved around Damien to start down the hallway. He had moved about twenty paces when he looked back and realized Damien was still studying the door.

When Draco paused, suspicious gaze on Damien, the older wizard turned slowly and faced Draco, thoroughly nonplussed. Then he smiled and began to walk, leading the way out of the manor when Draco stayed where he was, uncertain and anxious.

As odd as the morning had been, Ginny felt good about the day ahead. Draco had, for whatever reason, not chosen to lock her in her room, which meant she had free reign of two rooms, rather than just one. Unfortunately, Draco’s room didn’t have much in the way of interesting items, which was disappointing to Ginny. It was quite possible that he’d taken out anything incriminating because he knew she’d snoop.

Then again, he might actually keep all that Dark Magic stuff elsewhere in the manor. It probably wasn’t even his (whatever “it” was, because Ginny wasn’t sure what kind of Dark artifacts really existed and what was just hokey, but if it WAS real, she was sure the Malfoys had it somewhere), and if it was around, it probably belonged to Lucius, that silver-haired bastard.

Draco’s room had some unique furniture, though: his bed – lavish, elegant, and with emerald green sheets and blankets – a few expensive looking paintings, an empty space where his bookshelf used to be before Ginny destroyed it, a low table, his lounge and the two chairs that accompanied it in front of the fireplace, a rolltop desk (which was locked) and, finally, the long mahogany bar where he kept all his nice liquor, also locked.

Additionally, there was a tall expertly-crafted wooden armoire, which was filled with clothes. Seriously, it was packed with all different sorts of robes. Ginny marveled that Draco even owned that many sets of clothes, because he seemed to always look the same to her.
Draco had also had many books around before Ginny destroyed his bookshelf, and he hadn’t bothered to replace it, so he must’ve taken the books elsewhere. The low table still had the chess set on it, with the pieces waiting patiently on their respective squares. Ginny sat in one of the chairs and studied the pieces, wishing she could practice on her own so she could beat Draco later.

Finally, after she grew bored and did some digging, Ginny turned up some parchment and quills and excitedly sat down in one of the luxurious chairs near the fireplace, a large book underneath the parchment so she could write.

*Dear Fleur,* she began.

“Poppy Pomfrey.”

The dark room rounded in shadows looked down on the lone woman, who stood at the center, her chin lifted. At the sound of her name, the witch gave only a short nod.

Draco watched from his seat, where he prayed silently for the ominous shadows of the room to envelop him, effectively blending him in with the other Ministry officials watching the trial, not to be noticed. Damien sat at his side, looking for all the world like someone attending the theater, pleased and entertained.

“You stand accused,” said the red-faced witch at the podium, “of assisting in the illegal transportation of Muggleborn witches and wizards.”

Draco couldn’t look away. Someone would notice and question his resolve.

“Furthermore,” continued the judge, “you provided medical attention to criminals of the Ministry, and thus allowed them to escape their proper judgment.”

Madam Pomfrey looked exactly like she had at Hogwarts, white cap and all. In response to the accusations, she folded her hands in front of her and blinked up at the judge, who grew irritated.

“What do you have to say to these charges?” snapped the judge.

When that stupid beast hippogriff had mauled him, Madam Pomfrey had spent an extra hour making sure Draco’s arm wouldn’t scar.

“I am a healer,” said Madam Pomfrey at last. “I help those who need it. I do not discriminate.”

“Even,” said the judge with eager venom, leaning forward, “when those who need your assistance are deserving of their suffering, for their crimes against the Ministry?”

“It is not for you to decide who deserves suffering,” said Madam Pomfrey.

The group of witches and wizards bristled from where they overlooked the trial in their elevated seats, and Draco did his best to look equally offended, which was something he was normally very good at.

“Poppy Pomfrey,” said the judge, whose name Draco did not know, because he hadn’t been listening, “you have admitted to your crime of healing and transporting Muggle-borns. You are thereby found guilty by the laws of the Wizengamot.” The court scribe nearby scribbled furiously. Madam Pomfrey did not seem to react.

“Your punishment,” spat the judge, “shall be decided shortly. Take her away.”
A pair of brutish looking wizards came and escorted the tiny witch away. Draco kept his gaze averted as Pomfrey passed, all the while trying his best to avoid looking as ill as he felt.

“Ah,” said Damien as the two left the foreboding room, looking very much like a man replenished, “nothing quite so good as seeing our legal system at work, don’t you agree, cousin?”

Even if Draco had shared Damien’s enthusiasm (which he most decidedly did not), there was almost no chance he would ever be as flamboyant about it as Damien. What seemed to invigorate his cousin only made Draco long for the isolation of home, but again, Draco wasn’t free to respond that way, so he put on his most pleased expression and nodded with a tight smile.

“I need to go speak to my father,” said Draco, edging away from Damien.

“Ah, yes, well then,” said his cousin as Draco turned to leave, “I suppose I’ll see you and your lovely friend at dinner tonight, then.”

Draco paused. “My – Who?”

“Miss Weasley, of course,” said Damien lightly. “She will be at dinner tonight, I’m sure?”

“Well, she – ‘…eats alone in a corner like a wild animal, Draco started to say, but Damien was already walking away, effectively shutting down any of Draco’s protests. Once Draco was alone – mostly, of course, as he was standing in the middle of a crowded Ministry hallway – he let his shoulders fall for a moment as he deeply, deeply pitied himself.

Then, with a heavy sigh that shifted into a scowl, Draco squared his shoulders again and moved in the direction of Lucius’ office. As he neared it, he became distracted by a familiar voice, one with a heavy Irish accent made all the more incomprehensible by desperation and despair.

“… please, Mister Malfoy, I’m tellin’ you – e’s not a Muggleborn!”

“I don’t have time for this, Mr. Finnegan.”

“But you’re the head of the Muggleborn Registration! If ye’ would just – a moment, please – “

Draco rounded a corner to see Seamus Finnegan, practically on his knees, extending something to Lucius Malfoy that the older wizard refused to see. “It’s too late for your friend, Mr. Finnegan,” snapped Lucius. “So do move on, already.”

With that, Lucius left the young wizard standing alone, and he disappeared down the hallway, so that only Seamus remained, his expression stricken. Draco approached cautiously, his face and tone deliberately indifferent.

“What are you doing here, Finnegan?”

Seamus’ gaze snapped to Draco, and it was a true sign of his desperation that his immediate reaction was hopeful.

“Malfoy! Maybe ye’ can talk some sense into your father!”

“My father has more sense than your entire family combined,” scoffed Draco. “What do you need, Finnegan?”

Seamus skipped over the insult and waved his hand, which gripped something on a chain. “Look, Malfoy, those Snatchers – they got Dean a few days ago.” His voice cracked, and they both
ignored it. “But look, Dean – he’s not a Muggle-born, right? He’s half-blood!”

Draco raised both brows. “Since when? I’m sure I’ve heard before that both of his parents were Muggles.”

“That’s what he thought, too!” Seamus opened his palm to reveal something a large heavy round pocket watch. “But look, I went to his Mum after he got picked up, and she showed me this, said Dean’s real dad left it years ago when he was a babe, but she’d never been able to get it open, she thought it was broken or something, but – “ Seamus tapped the pocket watch with his wand, and it popped open, revealing an unusual clock with an ‘D’ at its center. In place of numbers, the rounded edges of the clock displayed words like Sleeping, Working, Having Fun, and Mortal Danger. There was also one that said Gone.

Two hands stuck out from the center of the watch. The larger one pointed to Mortal Danger. The shorter second hand ticked in a complete circle, but it moved quite slowly, and sometimes stopped altogether for a few seconds before starting again.

Draco looked up at Seamus with a raised brow.

“Don’t you see?” asked Seamus, snapping the pocket watch shut. “Dean’s dad left this, ‘e was a wizard!”

Well, Finnegan was right about one thing. The item was certainly magical. There was no doubt about that. “Can you prove that this belonged to his father?” asked Draco skeptically.


“His muggle mother?”

Seamus’ features crumpled even further as he realized the impossibility of this. Draco barely repressed a sigh and scowled instead, as he felt it was much more suitable. “How long ago did Thomas get picked up?”

Seamus pulled the pocket watch close to his chest. “Three days ago.”

This time, Draco did sigh, the noise loud and aggrieved. “Then you’re wasting your time, Finnegan. He’s already dead. Muggle-borns are eliminated within twenty-four hours of being admitted and evaluated. You know this.”

“He’s not dead, though,” growled Seamus fiercely, opening the watch again. “Don’t you see? The watch would say if he’s dead!” Seeing Seamus was close to tears, Draco took a step back and kept his face impassive.

“Do yourself a favor, Finnegan. Let him go.”

A feral snarl escaped Seamus. “No! I will tear this bloody heap of shit Ministry apart before I let them just keep Dean prisoner somewhere! I’ve got to find ‘im! I will!”

Draco turned away and started walking. Good luck with that.

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Ginny, who had started a drawing but had grown bored, watched her feet where they were outstretched in front of her, wiggling her toes to the rhythm of a tune in her head.
The door opened, and Draco Malfoy came in, looking as haggard as she’d ever seen him. This was, of course, as good a reason as any to antagonize him. “Did you get my stuff, Malfoy?”

Draco Malfoy paused near the door and closed his eyes, apparently doing what he could to calm himself. Ginny smirked to herself, satisfied. “I’m just messing with you, Malfoy. I got it from Bleaker.”

“Good,” snapped the blond. “Because the answer is no, I did not have you on my mind for a single moment today.”

Ginny set her quill and parchment aside and cocked her head at Draco. “What do you do all day that makes you so tired, Malfoy? Being a priss can’t possibly be that exhausting.”

Draco bypassed Ginny completely and went to his bar, making himself a drink much stouter than a pre-dinner beverage had any right to be. “Don’t you know, Weasley?” he asked sarcastically. “I moonlight as a lumberjack.”

Ginny snorted. “I would pay so much gold to see that.”

“What, all six galleons of your inheritance?”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed deeply on him. Draco, stealing her earlier satisfaction, smirked at her before falling into the opposite chair in front of the fireplace, drink in hand. “Shut up,” he said, when Ginny hadn’t spoken for a few minutes.

Scowling heavily, Ginny leaned over the arm of her chair and waved a rolled up piece of parchment. “Malfoy, I need you to get this to Fleur. My brothers said she’s free and in France.”

Draco took a long sip of his drink before he looked over at the parchment. “Fleur Delacour? The one from the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Yeah, but she’s a Weasley. She married my brother Bill before the war.”

Draco paused as he tried to remember which one Bill was, and then silently congratulated himself for remembering that Bill was the one who’d gotten mauled by the werewolf. He was dead, Draco recollected. Not one of the ones who’d come to visit.

“What do you want to talk to her for?” asked Draco, brows furrowed.

“Well,” said Ginny, “first of all, there’s the issue of none of your damn business – “

Draco rolled his eyes.

“ – but also, she had a baby. Bill’s baby. I want to see it.”

“And what’re you going to do with a baby?” asked Draco. “Eat it?”

Ginny fell back in her seat. “Now why would I do something like that?”

“I’ve seen your table manners, Weasley. I cannot, however, explain them.”

Ginny thrust the parchment over the space between their chairs. “Please, Malfoy. Just send it to her.” With a deep sigh, Draco took the parchment and inspected the envelope.

“You do realize I’m going to read this to make sure you’re not writing anything you shouldn’t?”
Ginny rolled her eyes, and Draco snapped open the parchment, unfolding it and reading aloud:
“Dear Fleur,” he began, squinting as he struggled through Ginny’s awful handwriting, “It’s me, Ginny. I am at stupid Draco Malfoy’s manor in the middle of Fuck-all, England.”

Draco paused and glared over at Ginny, who leaned over her chair arm and watched him with growing delight at his irritation. Draco continued to read.

“I’m writing to make sure you are alright,” he read aloud, “I also want to ask if the baby is born and what sex it is. I would like to see it, but you probably shouldn’t bring it to Malfoy’s place, because one of his crazy family members might make it into a blood sacrifice.”

Draco dropped the parchment and glared at her again. “Go on, then,” taunted Ginny.

“A picture will do,” he read on. “I would very much like to see it. I hope everything is going well for you. Sincerely, your sister, Ginny.” He paused, before reading on, “P.S. – Malfoy reads all my letters, so feel free to write as many terrible things about him as possible. The end.”

When Draco looked back over at Ginny, he was immediately met with her devilish delight. He folded the paper and replaced it in the envelope. “Honestly, Weasley,” he said with a wave of his hand, “However did I manage to whittle away my evenings before I had you to come home to?”

“Probably spent them preening in front of a mirror and crying.”

Draco flicked his wand and Ginny’s chair overturned, dumping her onto the floor. As she struggled to right her chair and salvage her dignity, Draco called for Bleaker, who appeared with a snap. “Give this to the long-distance owl,” Draco told the elf, who took it with a happy nod and disappeared.

Ginny fixed her chair and sat back down, glaring. “That’s it? I could have just given it to Bleaker?”

“He’ll only take letters from me,” said Draco, sipping at his drink. “Even he’s not that stupid.”

The two lapsed into silence again.

“Speaking of stupid,” said Draco after a few minutes, reluctance making him glare heatedly at his fine drinking glass. “You are, apparently, expected at dinner tonight.”

“Expected by whom?” questioned Ginny, instantly suspicious.

Draco kept his tone carefully even. “My cousin, Damien.”

Ginny leaned forward, her hazel eyes flashing. “And you just let him tell you what to do, Malfoy? Honestly, of all the spineless, weak-willed bollocks – “

“First of all, shut up,” said Draco, “and second of all, I could refuse if I wanted.” This was not true, but he had to say it, both for himself and for Ginny. “It’s simply easier to comply. Besides, you have to do this at some point. May as well be now.”

Ginny raised both brows. “And how do you know I’ll behave, Malfoy? Maybe I’ll just – “

“Do you want to continue seeing your brothers or not?” interrupted Draco immediately, and Ginny shut her mouth with an audible click, her features sharp and angry. “Because if you make a fool of yourself,” he continued before she could protest against him blackmailing her with the only family she had left, “not only will your brothers never be allowed to return here, but we will all get punished.”
That part, at least, was true.

“This is so unfair, Malfoy. All I want is to be able to see my family.”

“And the only reason you even know they’re alive,” said Draco quietly, his eyes narrowed on her, “is because my family still has some influence around here. If that goes away, I won’t be able to help you get back to them. Not ever.”

He let Ginny think on that before going on, “Just don’t make a scene. Keep your mouth shut the entire time, and we’ll both be fine.”

After a few minutes of silence, Ginny mumbled, “Can’t eat if my mouth is shut.”

“You know what I bloody well mean!”

Ginny huffed, exhaling heavily out of her nostrils once before slumping over in her seat, arms crossed tensely. After a long pause, she said, “Your cousin is fucking creepy, Malfoy.”

“I am aware of that.”

Ginny frowned at her own upraised knees. Then she whispered, “He looks like Tom Riddle.”

At this, Draco’s eyes shifted up, brows furrowed. “Does he?”

“The diary version, yeah. When he was a teenager.” Ginny shifted in her seat, the uncomfortable memories causing her to squirm. “I don’t like it.”

Draco swirled his drink in the glass. He shared her sentiment, but didn’t care to voice it aloud. Instead, he reclined as far as he could in his chair. Several minutes passed by in complete silence. Then, without realizing what he was doing, he said –

“I saw Seamus Finnegan at the Ministry today.”

Ginny’s head lifted, her eyes wide. “What, really? Is he – is he alright?”

Against his will, Draco’s mind conjured up the image of the tearful Finnegan, begging Lucius Malfoy to help his friend (or whatever they were). He considered telling Ginny that Seamus was fine, he’d just been meeting with someone, nothing was wrong.

Instead, Draco said, “He was pleading Dean Thomas’ case.”

Ginny’s already pale face lost the rest of its coloring. “Is Dean…?”

Draco thought about it and decided to answer honestly. “I’m not sure,” he said, eyes on the fire raging in the fine old stone hearth. “He was caught three days ago. He should’ve been dead within a day.”

“But he’s alive?” questioned Ginny, leaning forward.

“Finnegan seems to think so,” admitted Draco evenly.

The pair fell silent again, and Draco took that time to turn over the day’s events in his head. One of the most dependable and often touted regulations in the new Ministry of Magic was the quick and effective disposal of Muggleborns. They were caught, tried, and eliminated, all within twenty-four hours, like a guaranteed rubbish pickup.
But if Dean Thomas was still alive after three days, why was he being held? And why was the Ministry, who had no reason to appease a public that already followed them blindly, lying about it?

And if that was true, what was really going on with the captive Muggleborns?

The trickle of doubt working its way through Draco’s chest was terrifying, because he dare not act on it, but neither could he banish it.

By the time Ginny finally dragged herself out of her chair and washed up for dinner, Draco was already standing at the door, tapping his foot impatiently, as if he hadn’t eaten in days and would surely starve before Ginny reluctantly made her way to the corridor.

“I don’t want to do this,” she groused.

Draco was thoroughly unsympathetic. He did, at least, look just as unenthusiastic as she felt, so that was something. Shared misery was even better when shared between enemies. “Let’s just get it over with,” he told her, and Ginny followed him down the corridor in the direction of the dining room.

“Will there be other Death Eaters here?” asked Ginny, eyes narrowed.

Draco glanced over his shoulder at her. “Probably, they come and go. I never know who will be around.” Ginny’s face instantly grew dark, and Draco slowed down to whisper lowly to her, “Not Bellatrix, though. She’s off somewhere.”

“Good,” said Ginny darkly as they rounded to the dining room. “Because if she was here, I’d tell her to go lie spread-eagle in front of the Knight bus.”

The dining room came into view, and the first thing Ginny noticed was Narcissa Malfoy, standing nearby and carefully inspecting her fingers for any speck of dirt, before she became distracted by an older magical couple Ginny didn’t recognize. Her demeanor instantly shifted and she greeted them with all the polite eloquence of a woman who’d spent years preparing herself for these exact situations.

“Who’re they?” grunted Ginny in a crude attempt at a whisper.

“Some Ministry people,” murmured Draco in reply, pausing with Ginny at the forefront of the elaborate dining room, which to her more like a banquet hall.

“From the Ministry of Evil, you mean?” snipped Ginny.

“Just shut up– Ow! Weasley, I swear to Merlin, if you kick me one more time, I’ll put you in a Leg-binding curse so strong, you’ll spend the rest of your life looking like a beached mermaid.”

“Draco, darling.”

Again, their quarrel was interrupted, but this time it was Narcissa’s strained smile – obviously, she’d been trying to get their attention for a while – that took Draco’s attention away from the hostile redhead at his side. Ginny grunted but fell silent, instead taking Draco’s few moments of distraction (as his mother introduced him to the Ministry couple) to glance around the dining room.

It really was ridiculously lavish, and Ginny couldn’t help but wonder how holiday meals went in a place like this. Didn’t seem like the kind of warm, cozy Christmas dinner she’d always had at
home was even possible here. Everything she saw was—beautiful, certainly—but terribly lonely. The table itself seemed to stretch for miles, and Ginny lost count of how many chairs it had before a new voice cut through the polite chatter.

“Oh, good,” said Damien, smiling as he scanned everyone’s faces. “Everyone is here.”

The young wizard eyed Ginny for a long moment before shifting aside, allowing Lucius Malfoy himself to step forward. Draco stiffened at Ginny’s side.

“Father,” he said in greeting. “I haven’t seen you at dinner in quite some time.” Ginny observed that Draco was quite put-off by his father’s appearance.

“I do try my best to be here,” said Lucius to Draco, without any real warmth. After this, the older wizard shifted his attention to Ginny. “Ah,” he drawled. “Ginny Weasley.”

Heat settled in Ginny’s cheeks, and her teeth clicked roughly together. “It’s been a while,” said Lucius as he looked down at her over the slope of his elegant nose, “since I’ve been… forced to look at you.” A hint of arrogant amusement flickered in his expression.

Ginny could feel Draco’s eyes boring into her from the side, and she knew he was waiting for her response. The faces of George, Charlie, and Percy popped into Ginny’s mind, and the result of this thought was that she managed to screw her face up in something that might’ve been mistaken for a smile, but only by someone wasn’t quite sure whether the expression required physical pain or not.

Lucius rolled his grey eyes at her and moved away, taking a seat at the head of the long table. Sighing, Ginny glared briefly at Draco, who turned his eyes heavenward for a moment. Of course, that was only the beginning of their joint trial. “So good to see you both,” said Damien as he approached, before he smiled directly at Draco and gestured to the dining table. “Please, take a seat.”

Ginny glanced at Draco’s face just in time to see the irritation flash briefly in his grey eyes. She could practically read his anger: This is my fucking house, you prat. Don’t tell me to take a seat.

Ginny moved when Draco did, and they took seats next to one another.

Narcissa sat on one side of Lucius, but Damien took the opposite side, which naturally should have been Draco’s spot. Ginny knew Draco had noticed, but he said nothing, instead looking every bit as miserable as she felt. He hid it, though, behind stoicism, while Ginny masked hers with a dead-flat glare at anyone who even glanced in her direction.

Everyone had taken a seat and placed their napkins in their laps with the doors opened to the dining room and a new pair entered. “Sorry we’re late,” came the guttural voice, thick and nasally. “Hard to travel with the wife this way.”

Ginny, who had been toying with her napkin, froze in her spot. Her features instantly morphed into red-hot hatred as her eyes lifted, finding Theodore Nott Sr. moving across the room to join the table.

Behind him trailed Lavender Brown. She was thin in the face and swollen in the belly.

Draco’s hand jumped to Ginny’s arm beneath the table, and his fingers wrapped around her wrist. “Stay calm,” he whispered slowly and deliberately, but Ginny barely heard him over the sound of her heart pounding in her ears.
Lavender looked terrible, *awful*, pale, with deep bruise-colored circles under her eyes, visible marks on her neck, and a small bump to her belly. And that disgusting piece of garbage had called her his *wife*.

“Malfoy,” Ginny growled in warning, unable to take her eyes off Lavender.

“Ignore him,” tried Draco in a low whisper, but such a task quickly proved impossible when Nott took a seat down the table and shot Ginny a toothy, smarmy grin.

“’Ey, Weasley. Been a while since I seen your pretty face.”

Ginny toyed with a fork in her tight grip, and Draco subtly pulled her hand from the table and wrestled the fork from her fingers under the cover of the tablecloth. She didn’t answer.

Lavender took a seat next to Nott, her eyes low and dull. Nott nudged her shoulder and she winced.

“’Ey, say hello to your friend, luv,” he commanded. Lavender paused before lifting her eyes slowly to Ginny’s, and the redhead felt her stomach turn at Lavender’s ghostly expression.

“Hello,” said Lavender.

Ginny swallowed tightly. “Hi.”

A thick moment of silence followed. It was broken by Damien, who clapped his hands together. “I do so love reunions,” he said gleefully. “Now, let’s eat, shall we?”

The dinner was long, uncomfortable, and nearly unbearable for Ginny, who couldn’t make herself eat a single thing. Instead, she pushed the food around in her plate and sipped at some wine. Draco gave her a sidelong glance.

“Come on, Weasley,” he said quietly. No one else was paying attention to them. “I’ve seen you devour this same meal before. Eat.”

“I can’t eat with him here,” murmured Ginny bitterly. “I will vomit all over this table.” Her eyes flickered to Nott, who was, at that very moment, pawing at Lavender, who sat placidly in her seat without reacting or eating much.

Draco rolled his eyes and gave up, only to be distracted by one of those Ministry people, who leaned forward to ask him some engaging questions about some investment of his. Ginny took the moment of distraction to fall back in her seat and stare at her still-full plate.

Down the table, out of Draco’s earshot, Nott grunted something about “headin’ to the loo” and then got up, disappearing from the dining room. Ginny’s eyes flickered down the length of the table. After waiting about ten seconds, Ginny leaned over to Draco and prodded his arm.

“I’m going to the bathroom, Malfoy.”

He pulled himself away from the conversation. “Wait, what?”

“The *loot*, Malfoy,” said Ginny with a scowl.

“Oh,” he said, before raising a brow at her. “Alright, fine, but if you’re not back in three minutes, I’m coming to look for you.”

“You do that,” said Ginny, pushing away from the table and leaving the dining room with a huff. As soon as she was out of sight, Ginny hurried down the corridor and slipped into Draco’s suite,
where she reached her room, grabbed the scissors she’d kept hidden, and tucked them into her robes.

Then, after locating the loo and determining that Nott was still inside, Ginny carefully positioned herself around the corner furthest from the dining room. When Nott emerged, wiping his hands on his robes, Ginny made just enough noise to attract his attention.

When he spotted her, she let her eyes widen as if she’d been caught and rushed away. As expected, Nott’s footsteps followed her down the hall. Ginny let herself get far enough away from the dining room to stay out of earshot. Then she crouched down behind a low table and waited.

Nott came down the corridor looking for her, but he walked right past her hiding spot. As he did so, Ginny pulled out her scissors and, with one great swing, she jammed the sharp blades into the back of Nott’s tender ankle, slashing right into his tendon.

The wizard fell over with a startled yelp of pain, and Ginny jumped up, snatching at his wand with a fierce shriek. Nott caught her arm, though, and he snatched away the wand and shoved her roughly into a wall, even as his leg bled profusely onto the ornate rug that lined the corridor.

“You sneaky ‘ittle bitch!” he exclaimed before brandishing his wand. “Crucio!”

Burning hot pain exploded throughout Ginny’s body, and she fell to the floor, her knees crashing to the hardwood with a loud painful crack. Nott stumbled in front of her, howling with pain even as he tried to remove the still-embedded scissors. “I swear ta’ Merlin,” he growled, snatching Ginny’s hair and yanking back her head, even as her body continued to writhe in pain. “I don’t care if you belong to the Malfoys or not,” he snarled very close to her face, pain from his wound making him wild. “I’m gonna take up that little cunt of yours until there ain’t nothin’ left – “

Ginny’s insides raged, and not just from the pain. Her eyes, twitching under the excruciating shocks of the curse, widened at his threat, and anger flooded her limbs with purpose.

“Swear ta’ Merlin,” Nott went on, bearing down on her and swiping her face with one great slap. Ginny tumbled to the floor and the curse fell away, but Nott already had a hand on her. She could feel her lip bleeding, but it was Nott’s hand on her robes that scared her. He ripped at her collar, as if he intended to pull her robes off, and his other hand waved his wand wildly. “Gonna take you just like I should’a before – “

Ginny let out a great scream and reached over, snatching a table leg and pulling with all of her strength so that it fell over on Nott and sent the already injured wizard to the ground. As soon as he fell over, Ginny snatched up his wand and rolled away, jumping up and pointing at him.

Down the corridor, Draco’s panicked voice called out to her. “WEASLEY, DON’T!”

But the spell was already on Ginny’s tongue. “INCENDIO!”

For one impossibly long moment, Ginny could only see Nott’s squinted eyes and piggy-like features, stretched wide with surprise and fear. Then his entire body went up in flame, from head to toe, enveloping him in a plume of fire that burst in one single moment and then died in the same.

For a split-second, Nott remained intact as a statue of ash. Then the ash crumbled, and where Nott had been moments before, only a pile of dust remained.

When it fell, Ginny looked down the hall, chest heaving, to see Draco Malfoy standing opposite her, his own wand drawn and his expression uncharacteristically stricken. Their two gazes met. They both held wands. The wands were not pointed directly at one another, but neither were they
lowered. The moment lingered on without either saying anything.

Ginny slowly, slowly lowered Nott’s wand, which trembled at the end of her hand. With a hard swallow, she shifted her dull gaze to the pile and ash. Then the wand fell from her hand and rolled away on the floor.

As Draco approached cautiously, Ginny leaned one shoulder against the wall and slid slowly to the floor, very near where the remains of Nott sat. Draco observed the situation for a long moment of silence, his own wand dangling next to his hip.

“What on earth happened?” came Narcissa’s voice. Ginny’s eyes flickered in her direction as the rest of the dinner party appeared behind Draco, all looking aghast. “What is that?” Narcissa addressed the pile of ash.

Draco, his back to the rest of the dinner party, raised his eyes to Ginny’s. Without moving them, he said to the group, “It was Nott.” After a pause, he added, “I killed him.”

Ginny’s eyes shifted a little, but she kept silent, ever attentive. The Ministry woman gasped dramatically. “Why would you do a thing like that?”

Draco paused for only a moment before reaching forward and picking up Nott’s fallen wand. Then he turned to face the group and bellowed in a sudden rage, “Because he couldn’t keep his fucking hands to himself, that’s why!”

The dinner party shifted in unison to look at Ginny, with her busted lip and torn robes. Narcissa made a small sniffing noise of disapproval, and the Ministry woman fanned herself. Damien, from his spot, leaned over and peered at the ash pile curiously, making a ‘hmm’ noise.

“Come on, Weasley,” snapped Draco, shoving Nott’s wand into his robes. “I have places to be.”

With that, Draco turned and marched past everyone – including his parents, who had remained judgmental and silent – and trudged down the hallway. Ginny rose shakily and moved as well, though not before stooping down to grab a fistful of Nott’s ashen remains in her hand. She purposefully let it sift through her fingers and follow her path down the corridor, much to the dismay of the dinner party.

When she passed Lavender, Ginny caught the other girl’s eye for just a moment. The barest moment of appreciation passed between them.

Then Ginny continued on, leaving a trail of Nott’s ashes in line with her every retreating step.

As soon as they entered the suite, Draco snapped Nott’s wand in half and threw it in the fireplace. Then, with his own wand, he pointed at the fireplace and said, “Incendio.” A fire roared to life and burned up the magical wood.

“Just in case they check my wand,” he explained to Ginny dully.

“They who?” she questioned, a bit sickened by how comforted she was to be back in the room.

“The Ministry, of course,” Draco answered. “I need to report this before someone else does.”

Ginny immediately moved in front of him, her eyes wide.

“What the hell, Malfoy? If you report it, they’ll put you away!”
“Not if I can make my case first,” he said, though his twitchiness betrayed the anxiety behind his false calm. “Everyone knows what Nott was like. And honestly,” he took in a deep breath, “there’s probably loads of wizards who will be glad to be rid of him.”

“And what if you don’t come back?” asked Ginny. “What if the Ministry puts you in Azkaban? Or kills you?”

Draco pulled on his cloak. “Then you’d better hope your brother’s wife comes for you,” he told her dispassionately. “Because no one here is going to help you.”

With that, he took one last glance at Ginny and left the room, locking the door to his suite behind him.
Chapter 7

Author’s Note: So excited for both new and old readers! I sincerely appreciate every review!

Enjoy.

Something rattled in her new cauldron.

Reaching in curiously, Ginny Weasley withdrew the leather-bound book with a thoughtful twist of her lips. Was this an old textbook given to her by her brothers? She turned it over in her hands, but it didn’t have a title. Ginny hopped over to the little table in her bedroom and set the book in her lap. It fell open over her skinny knees.

The pages were blank.

It’s a diary, she realized, with a great deal of delight. She’d never had a diary before, but now that she was grown-up – eleven years old and about to attend Hogwarts, after all – she figured she had a lot of mature thoughts that needed to be put to paper, thoughts that were secret and important.

After finding just the right quill and ink, Ginny settled down on her bed with the diary raised up on her knees. Tongue pressed between her teeth, she put the quill tip to the parchment. Using her best penmanship, she wrote.

My name is Ginny Weasley.

As the last dot dried, a curious tingling sensation jumped up Ginny’s fingers, and it felt a bit like the shock that came from rubbing her sweater sleeves together. As Ginny looked curiously at her fingertips, something remarkable happened.

Writing appeared on the page, just under her own.

Hello, it said. It’s lovely to meet you.

Ginny’s eyes widened. Glancing around, as if someone might be lurking nearby and playing a trick on her, Ginny bent over the notebook and wrote again.

Who are you, she wrote. Are you the diary?

There was a pause before the elegant handwriting began again, looping in and around the page in a dark green ink.

I’m your friend, it said. My name is Tom.

The Ministry of Magic was dark.

Despite the late hour, Draco observed many witches and wizards working still; they were fewer in number than normal work hours, but no less rushed. In the days of the old Ministry, projects were sometimes left unfinished, papers were hastily filed, and tricky hexes were best left solved on another day. However, any kind failure in the new Ministry of Magic – no matter how small – carried with it the possibility for a much more … unfortunate punishment.

Needless to say, productivity was up.
Draco swept through the shadowed halls with his eyes hard and his heart in his throat. As soon as he came to the long corridor leading to the Dark Lord’s quarters, he suddenly had the sensation of walking in lead shoes. Each step took more strength and conviction, and by the time Draco reached the daunting double-doors, he was quite sure his insides had turned to liquid.

He rapped on the door twice.

Upon hearing the call for his entry, Draco stepped inside and blinked at the dimness of the room. This was not Voldemort’s personal space. It had once been the office of Cornelius Fudge, and the other Ministers who had served the magical population of Great Britain.

Now, it was nothing more than an executioner’s room filled with office furniture. Many a wizard had met his end in this room in the last year.

“Draco… Malfoy.”

Some of the shadows in the room drew together to form a long lithe figure, and Draco forced his eyes to focus on it as Voldemort appeared in front of him. The Dark Lord had been in the room as soon as Draco had entered, but he blended seamlessly into the gloomy corners.

Unfortunately, Voldemort was not the only wizard lurking in the darkness.

“Cousin,” said Damien, as he materialized very near the Dark Lord himself, standing at his side like a dutiful son. Draco’s eyes widened minutely, but he kept his outward expression as calm as possible.

“My lord,” Draco managed after a moment, shifting his grey eyes to the serpentine face, “I have something I must report to you – “

“Theodore Nott, yes… I know.”

Draco’s lip curled in a sneer aimed at Damien, but he quickly disguised it and looked back to Voldemort, who approached the younger wizard slowly.

“Do not fear,” said Voldemort after a lengthy pause, in which he appeared to savor Draco’s every tendril of anxiety. “Damien informs me that such an act was … most necessary.”

Draco remained stiff and still, his hands behind his back.

“Apparently,” said Voldemort, moving to stand in front of the heavy oak desk, “Nott was incapable of following orders. I commanded him to leave Ginny Weasley be, and yet… well, his disobedience cost him, obviously.”

Draco fought past a hard swallow. His throat felt like the scorched earth of the hottest desert.

“What did Damien tell you, my lord?” Draco dared, his voice quiet and even. Damien’s lips quirked to the side, but he said nothing.

“Only the truth,” said Voldemort languidly. “Nott attacked Weasley, after I told him not to. And you were forced to intervene.” The eyes of the Dark Lord rested on Draco’s face. “Damien witnessed the entire event,” continued Voldemort, sharp gaze trained on Draco for any hint of a lie. “And I trust his judgment.”

This time, Draco shifted his gaze to Damien’s face, unable to look away any longer. The two looked at each other for a long moment.
“Is what Damien tells me the truth, Draco?” asked Voldemort, his words deceptively soft.

“Yes, my lord.” Draco continued to stare at Damien.

“Good,” said Voldemort, before rounding his desk again, each movement strangely ethereal. “Then I suppose we have nothing more to learn from each other… tonight, that is.” With that, the Dark Lord looked to them both with a strange expression akin to a smile.

“You may both leave.” And then – “Rest,” Voldemort said, eyes lowering to his desk, where scrolls sat on top of scrolls, bearing Merlin knows what kind of information. “There is much more work to be done for our grand new world.”

Damien and Draco both retreated to the door and left.

Without saying a word, they returned to Malfoy Manor together via the Floo. As soon as they were once more in the house, Draco rounded to face Damien, his grey eyes narrowed deeply. It took all of his self-control not to pull out his wand.

“Why did you lie?” asked Draco sharply, moving to stand directly in Damien’s way.

The elder of the two looked down at Draco with a raised brow. “Dear cousin,” he said, clasping his hands in front of him. “I would never lie to our Dark Lord.”

“You didn’t witness anything,” hissed Draco, his nerves desperately frayed. “All you saw was a pile of dust and – “

“The Dark Lord,” interrupted Damien, eyes twinkling, “knows how Nott acted with the other prisoners. However, punishing Nott himself would have only incited the ire of the other wizards in our beloved order. Why does it matter how Nott died? He needed to be taken care of. And now he is.”

Damien’s tone was so casual, he might have been discussing the weather.

“So, perhaps I stretched the truth a bit for our Dark Lord, but it was only for his benefit,” continued Damien airily, before he locked eyes with Draco. “Besides… “ He drew closer. “What else could have possibly occurred?”

Draco glared and said nothing.

Damien withdrew, smiling pleasantly at Draco. “Try not to look so surprised, Draco. We are cousins, after all. Wouldn’t you want to help me if I were in a dire situation?”

Draco would gladly push Damien in front of a centaur stampede if given even half the chance, but he wisely chose to keep this information to himself.

Apparently, Damien did not expect an answer. Instead, he simply smiled his little peculiar smile and sauntered off, leaving Draco behind, mystified and rattled.

“Malfoy!”

As soon as Draco walked into the suite, Ginny leaped up from her seat. Never before had she been so glad to see Draco Malfoy walk through those doors.

“What happened, what’s – are we dead?”
At Draco’s peculiar stare, Ginny blinked. Instead of answering her, the older wizard closed his doors behind him and made his way over to the lounge, which he fell into rather ungracefully. Then he stared at the fireplace, two fingers splayed on his chin as he fell into deep thought. Ginny took a seat on the opposite end of the lounge, her legs folded up underneath her.

“Damien got there before me,” said Draco at last. Ginny’s eyes widened. “And then,” continued Draco, finally looking over at her, “he told the Dark Lord he’d witnessed the whole thing, and that I had been within my rights to kill Nott, because he was harassing you.”

Ginny stared, dumbfounded.

“My thoughts exactly,” remarked Draco, pushing a hand over his exhausted face.

Next to him, Ginny frowned and became equally pensive, her eyes on the fire. “You know,” said Draco after a few minutes of silence, “I’m surprised at you, Weasley, for what you did to Nott.” He raised a brow at her, exhausted but unable to move on from the night. “Seems a little brutal for a Gryffindor.”

Ginny didn’t look at him. Instead, she let herself remember each time Nott had dragged a screaming witch out of the cell, so delightfully pleased at her fear and pain. She also remembered Lavender, who looked like a beaten husk of a person.

“If I were a necromancer,” said Ginny firmly, slowly, “I would bring Nott back to life… only to kill him again.” She let that thought settle over Draco before she shifted in his direction, her eyes hard. “Why would Damien lie for us, Malfoy? What’s he playing at?”

Draco peered at the flickering flame through the splits in his fingers where they pressed over his face.

“I wish I knew,” he murmured at last.

Three days passed rather uneventfully.

On Saturday, Draco Malfoy rose and dressed, and he was in the middle of adjusting his sleeves when Ginny Weasley burst in from her room. He rarely kept the doors between their rooms locked anymore, though they often kept to their own spaces. However, Ginny – who had not bothered to knock, because she had no manners at all – was now bouncing in his bedroom as she waved a piece of parchment.

“Malfoy! Fleur wrote back to me!”

“Congratulations,” deadpanned Draco.

“She wants to know if she can come and visit in a few days,” said Ginny, letting herself fall into one of his chairs as she looked at the parchment again. “I want to see her.”

Draco sighed and thought about his schedule. Why was he even allowing Weasley this? He wasn’t sure he knew the answer. “Thursday is best,” he said at last, not looking up at her.

“Good,” said Ginny, immediately bolting from the chair and scrambling around, looking for a quill and parchment, even though they were right out in the open. Merlin, she was so impatient, Draco observed. He picked up his cloak and secured it around his shoulders.

“Where are you going?” asked Ginny, rather accusatorily. “It’s Saturday! Surely even your villainy
takes a rest on Saturdays.”

Draco scowled. “I’m meeting Blaise in Diagon All – Why the hell am I telling you anything? Mind your own business.”

Ginny briefly abandoned her quill and parchment. “Merlin, I want to get out of here so bloody much. Why can’t I come to Diagon Alley?”

“Because you’re not cleared to leave the Manor yet.”

“Well,” snapped Ginny irritably, “when will I finally be able to leave?”

“I don’t know, Weasley, probably when you stop setting people on fire!”

Ginny folded her arms and grumbled, as if Draco had asked something quite impossible of her. Then she dropped herself back into her chair with her quill and parchment. “This place is stupid boring,” she groused, dabbing her quill in the ink balanced precariously on the arm of the chair. “I bet you were the slowest first year in Hogwarts after growing up in this mind-numbing prison.”

Draco rolled his eyes at her. “Pretty sure Potter grew up in a bloody broomstick closet, and you lived in a shack. I still call mine the better by far.” He tucked his wand into his robes. “And you know, you should be a little kinder to me, you ungrateful ginger. I saved your bloody life by going in to the Ministry for you after the whole fiasco with Nott.”

“Don’t be stupid, Malfoy,” said Ginny, rolling her eyes heavily. “You only did that to save your own neck.”

Draco made an affronted noise. “I most certainly did not,” he said, as if he had never done such a thing in his life.

“Don’t lie!” Ginny scowled at him. “If you’d told Voldemort that I was the one who killed Nott, you’d have to admit that YOU let me out of your sight long enough for me to get a wand and scorch that bastard to pieces. Taking credit for it only made you look like you were in control when, really, you weren’t.”

Draco gave her an unimpressed grimace. “Whatever, Weasley. The only thing that matters is that he was a problem, and now he’s… “ Draco paused, smirking to himself as Ginny groaned, “ …Nott.”

“That was a terrible joke, Malfoy.”

“It was a fantastic joke, and you are a philistine.” Draco grabbed the last of his things and headed towards the door.

Before he could leave the room, Ginny stretched over one arm of the chair, extending herself like a strange freckled turtle so she could look at him. “Malfoy, wait! Can you get me – “

“No.”

“It will make dealing with me so much easier.”

Draco paused at the door and lifted a brow. “Is it the Draught of Living Death? Because if so, then yes, I agree.”

Ginny twisted around in her chair and stood on her knees, peering over the back at Draco. “I want a
radio. I need something to listen to.” She paused. “Besides your grating voice, of course.”

Draco put a hand on the doorknob. “Your persuasion skills could use some serious work, Weasley. Have a nice day.” With that, he turned and exited the room, locking it behind him.

Meeting up with Blaise didn’t take that long. They met for tea, as they had before, and Draco updated him on the whole disaster with Nott. “Honestly, it didn’t turn out nearly as awful as it could have,” admitted Draco, draining the last of his tea.

Blaise smirked, genuinely amused. “Exciting stuff, mate. I’m jealous, truly.” He set his tea cup aside. “And it might interest you to know I just saw Theo earlier today. He had Lavender Brown with him, and they were shopping together. She looked rather well. Pleased, even.”

Draco immediately made a mental note to tell Ginny that.

“How’s a good bloke,” said Draco after a pause. “Not the friendliest fellow, but better than his father by sickles and galleons.” The two departed the tea shop and said their good-byes, and Draco strolled down the mostly abandoned streets.

He did, however, find a new store where an empty front had been only weeks before.

Struggling to remember what had been there before the war, Draco paused to look at the still dusty storefront before he stepped inside. The glass door, propped open, needed a good cleaning, but the OPEN sign was there, so Draco strolled into the store proper.

Most of the shelves were still empty, and though there were many displays available, they held only a scattered assortment of items for sale. The floor had been swept recently, and a pile of refuse sat in the corner next to a bewitched broom that had obviously seen better days. It was currently spinning in useless circles in its spot, and really just making things worse.

There was a counter under a dim set of lights, and although it was near the window and should have been bathed in light, a thick layer of grime was stuck to the front display glass and only pockets of warm sunlight filtered through. Draco paused near the counter and looked around.

“Hello?” he called out uncertainly.

A voice called to him from the back, and after a thud and a grunt, a familiar redhead popped up.

“Hey, there,” said the voice, “Sorry, I was in the – “

George Weasley stopped in his tracks. “Draco Malfoy,” he said after a surprised pause. He quickly looked around the store. “Is Ginny with you?” he asked excitedly.

Ah, thought Draco, the joke shop was here. Now he remembered.

“No, I’m afraid not,” admitted Draco, sliding his hands into the pockets of his robes as he looked around. The place was a mess. “She’s not cleared to leave the manor yet.”

George’s face fell, but he quickly recovered, dusting off his hands on his robes before he grabbed a few more things and began organizing them behind the counter. “Well, in that case, is there something I can help you find?” he asked, with only a little reluctance.

Draco raised a brow at the nearly bare shelves. “I doubt it,” he answered dryly. “Did the Ministry get you to come back here and reopen your shop?”
“Yeah,” grunted George. “But they didn’t want it to be the same kind of store, of course. Wanted more general merchandise.”

Draco eyed the empty shelves. “Such as… invisibility cloaks?”

George rolled his eyes deeply again, and Draco smirked a bit, amused as he realized George was just a taller, male version of Ginny. “It’s hard to do anything without a wand,” George continued, lifting a box up to the counter (by hand, eugh, thought Draco). “But they say they’ll give mine back if I do a decent job here.”

Draco looked around. “Well, you’re certainly off to a good start.”

George opened his mouth with a sharp retort, but Draco cut him off. “How much did the Ministry give you to stock the shop, Weasley?”

George shut his mouth with a click and shook his head. After a moment, he gave an unamused chuckle and leaned a hip on his counter. “Six hundred galleons,” he answered at last.

“That’s it?” asked Draco, astounded. “Six hundred galleons to stock an entire shop?” His first broom had cost that much.

“Ridiculous, isn’t it?” agreed George. “They claimed that was all they could spare.”

Draco made ‘mmhm’ noise, shaking his head as he walked around the shop, pausing as he looked out through the grimy windows and out onto the desolate streets of Diagon Alley. The place was a pitiful mockery of what it had once been.

A noise drew Draco out of his thoughtful stare. Glancing back, he saw a pair of lovely dark-haired witches walking in from the back, each levitating some boxes with their wands and chattering with each other in what sounded to Draco like Russian.

“Hired help?” asked Draco, and George actually smiled a little.

“They’re part of the family that’s keeping me,” he said. “Moved here from Moscow about six months ago.” He paused. “They don’t speak a word of English, but they’re quite nice.” He glanced over at Draco and said with a hint of amusement, “Pretty sure their parents expect me to marry one of them.”

Draco and George looked together over at the young witches. Both girls had dark hair and skin, and they were very beautiful. Draco’s eyes flickered back to George. “Must be terrible for you,” he said unconvincingly.

George cleared his throat a bit, but he had trouble suppressing a smile. “Torture,” he agreed.

Shaking his head, Draco withdrew from the counter. His mind was already made up, but he took a moment to pause and evaluate it one more time. Then, pleased, he turned to George and lifted his chin a bit.

“Weasley, how would you like an investor for your shop?”

George, who had been staring at the two witches, looked back at Draco with surprise. “What?” he asked with a small laugh. Then he folded his arms. “You want to invest in my shop, Malfoy?”

“Why not?” asked Draco, pacing by the bare shelves. “Diagon Alley needs it. And the Malfoy Estate is more powerful than any other in the country. It’s our duty to help the community grow.”
He turned back to George. “Besides, you and your brother ran a successful business before. You can make it work, can’t you?”

George eyed Draco carefully. “I think so, yeah.”

“Good,” said Draco. “So, let’s see… “ Turning to survey the store, he shifted back in George’s direction. “About five thousand galleons should do it, right?”

George’s eyes widened. “With five thousand galleons, I could have this shop fully stocked tomorrow. What kind of return do you want for all that gold?”

Draco shrugged. The amount of gold wasn’t really the point. Reviving Diagon Alley was. Still, he couldn’t give Weasley something for nothing.

“We’ll say 5% of total profits. Sound agreeable?”

“That’s all you want, really?” asked George skeptically. Draco scowled.

“You and your entire family are the most suspicious lot in the world. Do you accept the deal or not?”

George thought about it. “I’ll have to see it in writing, of course… but, well. Yeah, I’d be stupid not to take that.”

“Yes, you would,” said Draco, greatly nonchalant, even under George’s suspicious gaze. “Excellent, then. I’ll have our accountant get the notice to you from Gringotts, along with your paperwork. If you agree to the terms, you’ll have your gold in just a few days.”

George squinted at Draco like he wasn’t sure whether or not the younger wizard was a mirage. Then he nodded and extended a hand, which Draco accepted with less hesitation than he might’ve just a year before. “Alright, then.”

“Make it worth my gold, Weasley.”

“You’ll get your investment back, Malfoy,” said George confidently, and Draco had to appreciate that, even if he’d never even think of saying it aloud.

Just before Draco left Diagon Alley, another shop window caught his eye.

His first thought was – When did Dean Thomas work at O’Malley’s Clock Shoppe?

But, as Draco approached the shop window and peered closer at the old black and white magical photo, he saw that the young wizard in the photo wasn’t Dean Thomas at all. It was another young wizard, in an older style of dress, standing with a group of other wizards in front of the shop some years before.

However, the wizard in the photo did look powerfully like Dean, so much so that Draco had to stare to make certain he wasn’t mistaken.

“Can I help you, sir?” came an old man’s voice. Draco looked up as the shopkeeper stepped outside, peering at Draco in a friendly way.

“Who is this?” Draco asked, pointing. The old wizard looked up at the photo.

“Ah, that’s just my old crew, on the day we celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the shop,”
said the old wizard, who must have been O’Malley. “That young wizard there, that was Alec Travers. Good bloke, good kid. Worked for me for about three years.” O’Malley thought about it. “That must have been, oh, about twenty years ago.”

Draco didn’t take his eyes off the picture. Alec Travers smiled and waved from within it.

“What happened to him?”

“Ah, he left when he met a girl,” said the old man with a wistful smile. “He came back to visit often, though. Even had a custom-made pocket watch made when she got pregnant.”

Draco looked over at O’Malley. “Was it for his son?”

The old wizard scratched his head. “Think so, yeah. Those were pretty popular that year, what with the war going on and everything. Made people want to keep a closer eye on their loved ones.”

The old man sighed.

“I’m not quite sure what happened to Alec, though. One day he left and never came back.”

Ginny heard Draco return to the Manor from where she sat in her own room, doodling on a piece of parchment. After giving him a few minutes to do whatever, Ginny let herself into his room only to see him settling down in an armchair with a copy of *The Daily Prophet*, though he set it in his lap and didn’t open it.

Ginny fell into the other chair. It wasn’t that she wanted to be in Draco’s company, really, but her options for socializing were unfortunately limited.

“Did you get me a radio?” she asked, as politely as she could.

Draco glanced up at her as though he’d forgotten she was there. “No,” he said. Honestly, he’d just forgotten. He might’ve gotten it if he’d thought about it, just to shut her up.

Ginny tried not to be disappointed, but in truth, she’d mostly wanted the radio because it might give her some inkling of what was going on outside the manor. Ever since Draco had told her about Seamus at the Ministry, her desire to know more had been eating away at her.

“Have you seen Seamus at the Ministry again?”

Draco glanced up at her with a startled expression, as if he’d been caught out of his bed afterhours. “Why do you ask?”

Ginny frowned. “Because I can’t stop thinking about what might’ve happened to Dean.”

Draco sighed heavily, because he’d already spent the better half of the day musing on the conversation at the clock shop, and now it was as if Ginny was picking up on his doubts, making them fester unpleasantly. “It doesn’t matter, Weasley. There’s nothing to be done.”

“That’s not true,” said Ginny, her eyes suddenly sharp on his face. “And you know it. You’ve heard something.”

Merlin, was she a bloody Legilimens? “I haven’t heard anything,” said Draco gruffly.

“Malfoy, come on – “
“Weasley – “

“Tell me what it is, Malfoy!”

“No!” Draco shifted to face her in his chair. “Look, you harpy, I didn’t hear anything. I just – I saw – “ He paused, before finally grinding out quickly, “I only saw a photo of someone today. Someone who might’ve been Thomas’ father, an employee at the clock shop in Diagon Alley.”

Ginny stared, lips parted in disbelief. “So… a wizard?”

“Obviously.”

“Then show it to the Ministry, Malfoy!” Ginny leaped up from her seat, but Draco was already determinedly opening the newspaper, doing his very best to block her from view. He hadn’t intended to tell her, but when she’d caught on to his thoughts so quickly, he’d felt compelled to tell someone.

Not since Moaning Myrtle at Hogwarts had Draco been able to share anything even close to doubt with anyone. Blaise was a decent confidante, but even he was not without his own loyalties. Draco could only trust him with so much information.

“Malfoy, please,” Ginny was in front of him, her hands on the arms of his chair. “Please, tell the Ministry to look into it – “

“For the hundredth time,” Draco dropped the paper in irritation, “the Ministry claims Dean Thomas is dead.”

“But if the watch says he’s still alive, then he must be, right?” Ginny moved to the side of the chair and stooped down. “Malfoy, my parents had one of those clocks. They’re never wrong.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, because I’m not going around the Ministry and asking a bunch of questions.”

“Not even when you think they’re lying to you?”

“Especially not when I think they’re lying to me.”

“Malfoy,” Ginny gripped the chair, her brows furrowed. Draco spared a glance at her face and instantly regretted it. She looked positively crestfallen, and what was worse, it seemed entirely sincere. “Please, if you’ll just – look into it, something, I swear I’ll – I’ll go and have a nice dinner with the Death Eaters, and I’ll be so, so good. I swear.”


Ginny stood next to the chair, anger flashing briefly in her eyes. “Seriously, Malfoy, you’re talking about asking a few simple questions. And that makes you afraid for your life?” When Draco didn’t answer, Ginny made a soft noise of disbelief.

“Is that the kind of government you wanted, Malfoy?” she asked in a near-whisper. “Is that what you fought for?”

Draco lowered his eyes to the paper in his hands but he didn’t read it. The words blurred together in his vision. When he still didn’t speak, Ginny moved away and sank back into her chair, letting her head fall into the palm of her hand where her arm rested on the chair arm. After a long moment of
silence, Draco shifted in his chair and flapped the paper into an upright position.

“I’ll look around. But I’m not asking anyone anything.”

Ginny looked up at him, a bit surprised. Still, she opted to simply nod and not say anything. After a few minutes of Draco silently reading the paper, he turned a page and asked, “What’re you so obsessed with Dean Thomas for, anyhow? Are you still in love with him or something?” He turned another page. “Because he left you for another bloke. You do know that, right?”

Ginny lifted her head and let her mouth drop open in surprise. “First of all, Dean is my friend, and I care for him. And second of all, he did not leave me for a bloke. I broke up with him.”

“Mmmh.” Draco folded the paper. “Probably the most relieved he ever felt in his life.”

Ginny clenched her jaw and send him a scathing glare. “Shut up. And he and Seamus weren’t dating.”

Draco actually laughed, still looking at the newspaper. “You are incredibly wrong,” he said with a great deal of amusement. “Ask Blaise if you ever see him. Or just believe whatever you want. Does no harm to me.”

Ginny fell back in her chair and stuck out her lip as she thought about that. “Well, whatever,” she decided. “If Dean and Seamus were together, I hope they were happy.” She bit her lip, trying not to let herself feel sad again. Merlin, she hoped Dean was alright. She quickly shifted mental gears.

“Is Blaise Zabini gay?” she questioned curiously.

Draco shrugged, still reading the paper. “He dates whoever he wants.”

“Ah.” And then, because she was suddenly wildly curious, Ginny asked, “Are you still dating Pansy Parkinson?” She honestly wasn’t sure whether Pansy had even survived the battle. “Is she still around?”

Draco snorted and rolled his eyes. “Unfortunately,” he said, “But no, we haven’t been together in ages. She got married just a few months ago.”

“Gross,” said Ginny. “Who would marry Pansy Parkinson?”

Draco smirked and glanced up from the newspaper. “Viktor Krum, apparently.”


Draco made a noise of agreement. Still, he said, “Don’t blame him too harshly. We don’t all get what we want when it comes to those things.” Ginny wasn’t sure what Draco meant by this.

“I would’ve had what I wanted, if not for this stupid war,” she muttered rather darkly.

“Oh, right,” said Draco sardonically, glancing over at her with a sneer as he turned the pages of the paper, “Your precious Potter. Merlin, what did you even like about him?”

“Plenty,” said Ginny hotly, her skin prickling with anger at Draco’s dismissive behavior. To even hear him mention Harry's name infuriated her. “Harry was kind, funny, talented, endlessly loyal... and,” Ginny carefully concealed a hard swallow as she looked away at the fire, “He was brave.”

Her misery shifted into annoyance at Draco’s derisive snort.
“Bravery,” he repeated with crystal clear condescension, “What is with you Gryffindors and your obsession with bravery? Where’s it gotten you?”

Ginny scowled. “Bravery is what I used to get rid of Nott.”

“Oh, no, Weasley,” Draco disagreed, “That was cunning, not bravery.” At Ginny’s aghast stare, he waved his hand and continued, “You saw an opportunity to hurt someone who’d hurt you, and you took it. Simple as that.”

Ginny fell silent, her brows furrowed.

“I truly believe,” said Draco airily, “that this inherent bravery that Godric Gryffindor was searching for doesn’t really exist at all. Or, at least, it’s not what people think it is.”

Ginny remained silent for several seconds. Then she shifted in her chair and said thoughtfully, “That actually reminds me of something Hermione once said.”

This caught Draco’s attention, and he twisted in his seat a bit to give her his full attention.

“Hermione said,” Ginny went on, her eyes low and on the fire, “that Godric Gryffindor wasn’t looking for witches and wizards who lived without fear. He was looking for those who had fear, and chose to be brave anyway. Because courage isn’t something you’re born with.” Ginny looked to Draco, meeting his gaze unabashedly. “It’s something you find and act on, even when you know there are consequences.”

“I mean, think about it,” she continued, as Draco listened. “Hermione could have just as easily been in Ravenclaw. And Ron would’ve made a great Hufflepuff. Even Harry – “ She paused here, biting her lip, but she went on as Draco listened intently, “He told me the Sorting Hat tried to put him in Slytherin.”

Draco’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

“But he wanted to be in Gryffindor,” said Ginny, letting one finger draw down the length of the chair arm as she mused on the fire. “He chose to be brave. And that’s all Gryffindor wanted, I think.”

Ginny and Draco both remained silent as they thought on this.

Finally, Draco asked, “And what house would you have been in, Weasley? If not for Gryffindor?”

Ginny’s eyes flickered to Draco’s for the barest moment before she quickly turned them away. At this, Draco smirked and leaned back in his seat. “You don’t need to say anything,” he said, letting his head drop back against the chair. “I already know the answer.”

Ginny glared. “I would never allow myself to be a Slytherin,” she said in a hard voice.

Draco turned his head, and his cheek pressed against the chair. “That’s a pity,” he said, sounding quite sincere. “Because if you had been a Slytherin, and still fought for Dumbledore during the war, then perhaps other Slytherins would have followed you.”

He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. “And then your side might’ve won.”

Ginny’s brows knitted together tightly, and she sank further into her seat, unable to escape his words. After a few minutes of silence, Draco rose from his chair and brushed by her, but not before dropping a shopping bag onto her stomach. Ginny grunted at its weight.
“Your brother sent you that,” said Draco as he walked off.

Ginny blinked in surprise before she opened the bag. Inside was a large assortment of her favorite candies – Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans, sugar quills, the whole lot. She allowed herself one small smile, knowing, without asking, that this had come from George.

Ginny popped a tangerine hard candy into her mouth and savored the taste of it.
"To those of you who do not know, we are joined tonight by Charity Burbage, who until recently, taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Her specialty was... Muggle Studies."

Snickers from most of those seated at the table. Across from Draco, Severus Snape watched impassively as the battered and beaten witch was levitated down the length of the Malfoy dinner table. Draco stared straightforward, his shoulders trembling, as the captive witch passed by. She was crying. Parts of her hair stuck to the side in a bloody matted knot. Her body was cruelly hexed into a painful arch, and her head was pulled back unnaturally tight against her neck, as if it had been snapped already, and was now just fixed permanently in that position.

"It is Miss Burbage's belief," continued Lord Voldemort, with an air of amusement, "that Muggles are not so different from us. She would, given her way, have us mate with them."

Down the table, Bellatrix made a loud gagging sound, earning more titters from the other Death Eaters. Tears gathered at the corners of Draco's eyes, but he pushed them back, unwilling to look left or right. Instead, he focused on an indistinct corner of the dining room.

"To her, the mixture of magical and muggle blood is not an abomination... but something to be encouraged."

A small whimper escaped the captive witch, and Draco made a matching noise of despair which was covered up by his father's deliberate shuffling in his chair.

"Severus, please," choked out Professor Burbage. "We're... we're friends."

The other Death Eaters looked expectantly at Professor Snape. After a moment, Draco did as well. But all Snape did was stare, his features set in unmoving lines creased with age, his greasy hair hanging around his sallow face as always.

At the head of the table, Voldemort raised the wand he'd so ruthlessly taken from Lucius. Draco had never seen his father so downtrodden, so humiliated. With one quick wave of Lucius' stolen wand, Voldemort took Professor Burbage's life. The body hit the table with a resounding thump, just in front of Draco.

Burbage's face, turned in Draco's direction, was entirely still, save for a single tear that slipped free of her frozen gaze. It dropped down the length of her bruised cheek and to the table, mixing unpleasantly with bits of blood.

"Nagini," said Voldemort, smoothing his hand over a giant serpent as it slithered on to the table. "Dinner."

That night, and every other night for over a week, sleep treated Draco like rain treats the desert. Absent, when so desperately needed, and then all at once.

It was Thursday.
It was finally Thursday, and Ginny was so excited, she could barely keep still. "Will you please stop bouncing around?" asked Draco finally, more than a little irritated.

"Then why don't you leave, Malfoy?" retorted Ginny at once, though it was without any real venom. She was too excited about Fleur's visit. If she'd known her brothers were coming, there was no way she could have contained her excitement, but that had been a surprise. Now, she was expectant and positively jubilant.

"Because it's my room, you harpy!" snapped Draco from his spot.

"Oh, just get over yourself – " A knock came at the door, and Bleaker peeked in his head.

"Master Malfoy, Missus Weasley, you have guests – "

"Oh, let them in, let them in!" Ginny popped up from her seat, but even she was not quick enough to race to the door before it opened fully, and a stunning witch with silvery-blond stepped inside with a wide smile.

"Fleur!" Ginny exclaimed, hurrying to see the other witch, who enveloped her in a tender hug.

"Ginny, I am so 'appy to see you!" exclaimed Fleur, holding Ginny close for a tight embrace before she let go. The two paused to look at one another's faces, and Ginny knew they were both secretly evaluating the other for any injuries, any physical displays of the pain they'd both been through. Fleur looked a little thin for someone who'd just had a baby, but other than that, she seemed well enough.

Something else caught Ginny's eye, and her lips parted in surprise. "Gabrielle!"

The younger Delacour sister stepped into the room with a little grin which blossomed into a full smile, and she and Ginny hugged as well. "I didn't know you were coming, too," admitted Ginny, not at all perturbed. "Come in, come sit."

Fleur turned to face Draco, who'd been standing a few steps away, watching the women exchange greetings as he sipped some pumpkin juice from a pristine looking glass. "Malfoy," Fleur greeted courteously. "Zank you for allowing us to come to your home."

Draco responded with a polite nod of his own. "Pleasure," he said simply.

Ginny watched the brief exchange curiously, and she silently marveled at the way other people were somehow capable of conveying a wide range of emotions with such subtlety. Present in Draco and Fleur's brief exchange was carefully crafted blend of etiquette, a sample of caution, some genuine gratitude, and a hint of hostility.

In a way, Fleur and Draco were not all that different. They both came from prestigious magical families with no muggle ties, and they both shared an arrogant, somewhat critical personality, although Ginny knew how that Fleur often meant well. It had taken Ginny a while to realize this – after all, she had not liked Fleur at all when the two first got together, and Ginny had made this quite well-known in their family – but after Bill's attack, Ginny's hostility for Fleur had begun to erode.

And now, as she sat down with Fleur and Gabrielle, Ginny felt her heart swell at the sight of them. They were her family.

"I'm so glad you're both here," she told them sincerely, and Fleur reached forward with a brilliant smile that lit up Ginny's heart.
"So are we," Fleur said, biting her lip. Sadness briefly took over her features, and Ginny knew that, when Fleur looked at her, she was seeing Bill. Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny noticed Draco beckoning to something, and a moment later, Bleaker set a beautiful tray of tea and cakes in front of them. Draco remained standing, but hovered nearby, his hip leaned against a table.

"Thank you, Bleaker," said Ginny, taking some tea. Fleur and Gabrielle accepted some as well, but Fleur quickly put hers back down and reached in her small bag. Out of it, she pulled something out and pressed it into Ginny's hands with a tearful smile. When Ginny turned it over, she saw it was a photograph.

"Oh, Merlin…" A lump rose in Ginny's throat.

The squirming baby in the photo was the spitting image of Bill, right down to her red hair and freckled nose. Perhaps the only thing she'd inherited from Fleur was a pair of crystal clear blue eyes, which blinked up from the photograph with the tender curiosity of an infant.

"Her name is Margrethe," said Fleur softly, her lips turning up in a shaky smile. Her little sister reached over and curled one hand over Fleur's, offering her a comforting smile. Fleur squeezed her sister's fingers.

Ginny could scarcely take her eyes off the photo. "She's the most beautiful baby I've ever seen," she told Fleur truthfully. "May I…?"

"Yes, yes. Ze photo is yours," said Fleur, carefully dabbing at the teary corners of her eyes. "I 'ope you will be able to see 'er in person soon."

From his spot, Draco gestured with the hand holding his drinking glass. "We do not sacrifice infants here, by the way."

"Zat is good to know," said Fleur, with just the barest hint of veiled animosity. Ginny's lips quirked and she hugged the photo to her chest.

"Thank you, Fleur. Where is she now?"

"Ah," said Fleur, relaxing some and drinking some of her tea. "We are staying with wiz' some family friends, and zey are watching her today. In a few days, we will visit each your bro'zers as well, so zat zey may see her."

"That's good," said Ginny, folding one leg underneath her on the lounge. "But why are you back here in England? And how did you manage to get back to France in the first place? I don't understand what happened after the battle."

Fleur and Gabrielle exchanged looks, and Fleur swept a piece of silvery hair behind her ear. "I was arrested after ze battle, but only for a few days. My family in France, zey have… well, my grandparents have ties to certain dark wizards here in Great Britain. Zey were able to use zeir influence to get us back home." She looked a bit shamed at sharing this information, but Ginny was careful not to show any judgment in her features.

"After ze battle was over," continued Fleur with a deep sigh, "I stayed with my parents while everyzing was… changed here." At this, Fleur sent a somewhat apprehensive glance to Draco, but he remained silent, sipping at his drink and acting as a simple bystander. "I sought we would be safe in France, but after ze new Ministry of Magic was established, zey contacted my grandparents and requested my return." Fleur made a face at the word 'requested,' and Ginny knew there hadn't been much of a choice in the matter.
"Zey said, I had been married to a British magical citizen, so it was my duty to come back." Fleur shook her head, looking down at the teacup in her hands. "My grandfazzer, he is very supportive of ze Voldemort. And so, he ordered me, and I came back here."

"And you?" asked Ginny, looking over to Gabrielle. Gabrielle had been so small all those years ago at the Triwizard Tournament. Now, she was nearly a grown witch, only a year younger than Ginny.

"I could not let my sister go alone," said Gabrielle firmly. "Wizout Fleur, zere is nothing for me in France."

"I told her to stay 'ome," said Fleur, looking over at Gabrielle, "but she could not be persuaded."

Gabrielle made a face and shrugged her slim shoulders. "And what would I have done in France, Fleur? Nozing! Besides, ze French magical government is too scared of Voldemort! Zey let him tell zem what to do, as if he is our leader. Ze whole of magical Europe is doing zeir best to stay on Voldemort's good side. Zey may has well be his servants, too!"

"You don't really think the French magical government would have surrendered you to Voldemort, do you?" asked Ginny, her brows furrowing deeply.

Had Voldemort's influence really spread that far?

Fleur frowned, her beautiful features pursed tightly. "Ginny, ze entire magical world is terrified of 'im. Especially ze spineless cowards in our French parliament. Zey do not want to make 'im zeir enemy. No one does."

"Even ze Americans are keeping zeir distance," said Gabrielle with a sigh. "While ze rest of the world waits to see if Voldemort will attack zem, too."

"Great," murmured Ginny, sitting back further in her seat. Fleur and Gabrielle looked equally put out, their earlier happiness awash under a cold wave of reality.

"I cannot even find work here," said Fleur softly. "I was ze top of my class at Beauxbatons! I have always planned to study arithmancy, zat is why I first got ze job at Gringotts. But now." Fleur pressed a hand over her face, and for the first time since Ginny had known her, she looked truly tired. "I have to care for Margrethe, and Gabrielle, and we must depend on ze kindness of a family who 'as already given us too much. I cannot do anyzing here, but I cannot leave."

Sweeping back her hair from her face, Fleur held her tea cup but did not drink from it as she said, "Ze family zat is keeping us even 'ad to pay ze tax for me zis year, and I cannot allow zem to do zat again."

Ginny's brows furrowed in confusion. "Tax? What tax?" Off to the side, she distinctly heard Draco shifting from his place at the nearby table. Fleur blinked in surprise and glanced at Gabrielle, before looking back to Ginny.

"Ze tax from ze Ministry? It is – Oh, I do not know ze name – but surely you have heard?" At Ginny's blank stare, Fleur continued, "It is ze fine placed on any British witch or wizard of legal age who is not married."

"What?" Ginny yelped.

"Yes," said Fleur. "And now zat we are here, zey expect us to pay it as well."

"Well – how much is the tax?"
"Five hundred galleons," said Fleur, as Ginny's heart dropped into her stomach. "We barely managed to pay it this time. Next year, Gabrielle will be of age, too, and we will 'ave to pay it for ze boz of us."

"That is outrageous!" Ginny whirled in her seat to look back at Draco, who stood calmly in his spot, though it was quite clear from his expression that he was greatly desirous to leave the room. "Malfoy, what in the hell – "

"For the love of Merlin, calm down," said Draco, shifting his grey eyes away from the witches and to a nearby window. "I already paid the fine, Weasley. For both of us."

Ginny stared. "You did?"

"Yes," he hissed, eyebrows raised. "Now, continue with your visit."

Ginny narrowed her eyes to let him know that the conversation was not over, but she did turn back to Fleur, who simply shook her head. "We cannot pay it again next year, Ginny. We will 'ave to figure somezing out."

"You could do what Grandfazzer told you to," said Gabrielle lowly from the side. "You could let zem arrange a marriage for me – "

"No!" Fleur exclaimed suddenly, so loudly that everyone in the room except her actually jumped. The elder witch's cheeks flushed, but not from embarrassment. Instead, Fleur's bright gaze was alight with heated anger. "You will NOT be bartered or sold into some terrible arrangement! And you certainly will not be married to some 'orrible De'z Eater!"

At this, Fleur suddenly paused and her gaze, somewhat frightened, flickered up to Draco. "I am sorry – "

"Don't, he's not going to tell on you," interrupted Ginny flippantly, waving a hand at Draco where he stood. Ginny wasn't sure how she knew that, but in the end, she reasoned that she made hateful comments about Death Eaters all the time, and Draco never thought it was worth the effort to try and punish her for it.

When Ginny glanced at him a moment later, she felt her suspicions were confirmed. Draco simply looked bored, and like he'd rather the visit was over already.

Clearing her throat, Fleur smoothed down the folds of her robes in an effort to calm herself. "We cannot pay it again next year, Ginny. We will 'ave to figure somezing out."

"You could do what Grandfazzer told you to," said Gabrielle lowly from the side. "You could let zem arrange a marriage for me – "

"No!" Fleur exclaimed suddenly, so loudly that everyone in the room except her actually jumped. The elder witch's cheeks flushed, but not from embarrassment. Instead, Fleur's bright gaze was alight with heated anger. "You will NOT be bartered or sold into some terrible arrangement! And you certainly will not be married to some 'orrible De'z Eater!"

At this, Fleur suddenly paused and her gaze, somewhat frightened, flickered up to Draco. "I am sorry – "

"Don't, he's not going to tell on you," interrupted Ginny flippantly, waving a hand at Draco where he stood. Ginny wasn't sure how she knew that, but in the end, she reasoned that she made hateful comments about Death Eaters all the time, and Draco never thought it was worth the effort to try and punish her for it.

When Ginny glanced at him a moment later, she felt her suspicions were confirmed. Draco simply looked bored, and like he'd rather the visit was over already.

Clearing her throat, Fleur smoothed down the folds of her robes in an effort to calm herself. "You will not be sold to someone you do not even know," she told Gabrielle more calmly, even as the younger girl pouted. "You will marry for love." A pause fell over the women, before Fleur continued in a small voice, "… as I did."

Heartache floated between the three witches for a long moment of heavy silence.

Eventually, the trio fell into lighter topics – little Margrethe's development, and her rosy little cheeks, as well as the family Fleur and Gabrielle were staying with, who were French and quite nice. They spoke of Fleur's upcoming visits with the boys, with whom she had exchanged letters.

"I will be 'appy to see zem," said Fleur with a small sad smile. "You are all my family, and I missed you."

"We missed you, too," said Ginny sincerely. "Please, write to me as often as you'd like. And you can come and visit as well. I'm – well, I'm pretty much always here."
Fleur nodded in understanding, and the three witches rose. "Next time, we will bring your little niece to come and see you," said Fleur, hugging Ginny once more. "She will be so excited to meet her ozer aunt. I know it."

"She's only a few months old," Ginny reminded Fleur with a little chuckle. "She won't even know who I am."

"She will, you will see," said Fleur with a smile, before she and Gabrielle said their reluctant goodbyes. They also said goodbye to Draco, who replied in kind before seeing them to the door of the suite.

Once it was shut, Ginny rose from the lounge and folded her arms over her chest.

"Why didn't you tell me about the tax, Malfoy?"

Draco turned in his spot, breathing in a deep, all-suffering sigh. Then he brushed by Ginny, walking to the other side of the room and stealing one of the little treats from their trays. "Why on earth would I discuss something as dreadful as taxes with you, Weasley?"

"Because it affects me, Malfoy!"

"No," he disagreed, "it doesn't. Because I paid it already. There, problem solved." It was pretty obvious Draco didn't want to talk about it, which, by Ginny's estimation, meant that it needed to be discussed. She followed him across the room.

"No, Malfoy, not problem solved, you prat! There's a bloody tax on unmarried witches and wizards! I mean, are you kidding me?" She stomped into his path and Draco almost ran into her. "That's just one more slimy way for the government to steal people's gold and control their lives!"

"Yeah," said Draco, eyebrows raised. "It's a tax. Honestly, do you know anything?"

Ginny scowled. "Five hundred galleons is a lot more than most people can afford, Malfoy. They have to know that only a privileged few can pay it. Everyone else has to – " She stopped, her hands dropping to her side as she felt herself grow heavy under the weight of her realization. "…They're going to have to marry." Even Fleur, who was the mother of Ginny's precious niece.

"Malfoy," said Ginny, her heart sinking as she came to sit on the edge of the lounge, "some evil bastard is going to wind up taking in Fleur when she can't pay the tax, and then he'll have Bill's little girl in his vile clutches." Horror mixed with fury and froze Ginny to her spot. She barely noticed as Draco paused and looked her over.

"They've got an entire year," Draco told her softly after a moment. "The tax was only just due. Your sister-in-law will have plenty of time to figure something out."

Ginny snapped out of her trance. "Wait, what if – what if you gave them a little more time, Malfoy, you pay their fines next year – "

"I could, yes," said Draco, holding up a hand to stop Ginny, "but I won't."

When Ginny's features instantly morphed into anger, Draco straightened from his spot and moved to stand in front of her. "Because," he went on pointedly, his voice low, "paying the tax is all well and good for a year or two, but the true point of the entire process is to encourage compliance. Paying the fine for other people so they can essentially defy the Ministry is the very sort of foolish thing that attracts unwanted attention."
"But," Ginny managed, trying to control herself, "But… Malfoy, what about Fleur? And Gabrielle? What about my brothers, Malfoy?"

"It's a tax," said Draco wearily, "Not a bloody death sentence. Just relax."

Ginny sank into one of the chairs opposite the fireplace and sighed heavily. "This is so unfair," she whispered, not looking up as Draco took a seat in the other chair, a teacup in hand. "Why is this happening? What's the point of trying to force witches and wizards to marry against their will?"

"It promotes population growth," said Draco, his gaze on his teacup.

Ginny glanced over at him with unveiled disgust. "You sound like a recording."

Draco simply sipped at his tea in response, eyes looking forward at the fireplace, which was not lit. Only piles of grey ash decorated the inside of the ornate brick hearth.

"Why did you pay for me?" Ginny asked after a pause. She moved into one of the armchairs and curled up against the side of it.

"You're supposed to be my responsibility," Draco said, as though it were obvious, though to Ginny, nothing made sense anymore and any assumptions she made always seemed to be wrong. Besides, they both knew, without saying it aloud, what the alternative to paying the tax would have been.

With this in mind, Ginny asked, "Well, what happens to me next year?"

Draco drained the last of his tea and set it aside without examining the tea leaves at the bottom of the cup. "I don't know, Weasley," he said at last, before turning his head over to look at her. "I guess that's up to you."

The next few days passed uneventfully, with Ginny devoting most of her spare time to letting writing. Fleur had left her a piece of parchment with the locations of her brothers – or, at the very least, the best method to get letters to them – and so Ginny made sure to write all three of them every day. She was relieved to receive letters in return, and it was through those letters that she learned of George's shop reopening, and that the family keeping him was actually quite nice. Or so he said. Ginny still wasn't quite willing to believe that, knowing that George's letters were likely read by those keeping him, as Ginny's were.

Despite her constant contact with her brothers, Ginny was still surprised when one of them casually visited her at the manor. The unusual morning had begun as most others did, with Ginny and Draco arguing about something inane.

"What are you even talking about? The Holyhead Harpies have three times as much firepower – "

"Firepower? You're joking, right? When was the last time they won out? Back when Merlin was studying his numbers?"

"You're over here talking about the bloody Falcons like they've been relevant since the fourteenth century! Not even their own fans expect them to win, they just want to see someone get knocked out."

"Exactly. Quality entertainment in Falmouth. Good English team. Good blokes."

Ginny squinted from her spot across the small table where they were eating breakfast. "Didn't those two Beater guys get arrested in the sixties for using spiked clubs?"
"Suspended," Draco corrected arrogantly, "And it was all in the spirit of the game."

Ginny rolled her eyes grandly and drained her tea. "Mmhm," she said, popping her lips in a way that she knew annoyed him. "They'd be real spirits if they tried any of that bollocks while playing me."

"Oh, I bet," said Draco with a great deal of sarcasm, finishing his own breakfast. "They'd only have to see you first thing in the morning and – there, done. Gone to the afterlife and glad to be tortured in hell rather than stay wherever you are."

"Well," countered Ginny without missing a beat, "I hope they save you a seat when they go, Malfoy, that way you can spend eternity exactly the way you spent your life."

"Hot?" Draco supplied with a smirk.

Ginny cut her eyes at him and said flatly, "On your arse, doing nothing."

Draco responded by making a grand, overly exaggerated eyeroll at her before standing. "Just goes to show much you know, Weasley. What do you think I do when I leave here all day? While you're languishing away in your gilded cage, I am hard at work."

Ginny's brows furrowed. "Like I believe that," she said, letting herself fall back against her chair, not bothering to rise when he did. "I thought the whole point of you aristocratic types was that you let everyone else do the work while you reaped the rewards."

"That's just one part of it," quipped Draco, sliding on his cloak. "Everything changes after a war. There's a lot that needs to be done. Meetings, new deals, trips to Gringotts."

"Still," said Ginny, now genuinely curious. "That all sounds like something you could just hire someone else to take care of. Is there any reason you'd rather do it all yourself?"

Draco paused at this, fingers on the clasp of his cloak. After a moment, he asked airily, "What else would I do with my time? Stay here with you?"

Ginny pursed her lips before she leaned over and put an elbow on the table. She balanced her chin on her fisted hand. "You that desperate to stay busy, Malfoy?" she asked, before she raised both eyebrows. "You must be, if you're willing to spend so much time doing things you don't really want to."

She stood up, walking around the table and stretching out her arms to grab onto his bedpost, deliberately hanging on it as she pretended to think and tapped her chin. "Now, why oh why, could you want to distract yourself from what's going on around you? Hm, I wonder."

"Shut up," said Draco, annoyed.

"Could it be because it's awful?" tried Ginny, but Draco was already on his way out of the door. Ginny sighed heavily and let go of the bedpost, only to lean against the couch and watch him go. "Don't forget to grab me some – "

"I am not your bloody servant, you harpy!"

Bleaker appeared suddenly in front of the door. "Ah, Master Malfoy – "

"Move, you stupid elf, I have to go."

"But Master Malfoy, Bleaker apologizes, but –"

"Bleaker, if you value your skin still in place on your body –"

"There is a guest!" squeaked the elf, flinching and covering his body, even though Draco hadn't raised a hand at him. Yet. When Draco sighed and folded his arms, the elf relaxed. "A Mister Weasley, here, for Missus Weasley."

"Oh!" Ginny jumped up, excited. "Who is it?"

"You didn't tell me one of your brothers was coming today," said Draco with a scowl.

Ginny shrugged. "I didn't know, just let him in." Grinding his teeth together, Draco told Bleaker to bring in the Weasley.

As it turned out, the visitor was Percy.

"Ginny!" he said with a brilliant smile, ignoring Draco completely and scooping Ginny into a hug. Ginny returned the embrace with equal enthusiasm, and when she pulled back to observe him, she realized he looked much better than he had a few weeks before. He was dressed in nice, smart robes, and he had better color to his cheeks.

"What're you doing here?" asked Ginny, as Draco left the door and followed the pair of them.

"Yes, Weasley," said Draco with a great deal more bite than he'd had before. "Do tell us why you're here, seeing as how you didn't see fit to inform me of this visit."

Percy glanced over his shoulder at Draco and put on a polite smile, but Ginny could see he was really getting a kick out of disturbing Draco so much. It reminded her of before the war, when Percy first started working at the Ministry. He'd been so pompous and proud, and at the time, it had annoyed Ginny. Now it delighted her to see him turn it on Draco.

"My apologies, Malfoy," said Percy, folding his hands in front of him. "I've only recently been allowed to travel on my own again, and I was desperate to see my sister."

Ginny stared. "Wait, you're just – by yourself? No escorts? Percy, how on earth did you manage to get them to trust you again so soon? I've been in this bloody Manor for close to three months!" At Percy's suddenly sheepish look, a red hot flame of anger started to curl in Ginny's stomach. She narrowed her eyes.

"Percy…"

"Now, Gin, look here –"

"What did you do, Percy?"

"Nothing!" Percy took a step back and held up both hands, and that was when Ginny noticed. He had a wand. Percy had a bloody wand, and Ginny hadn't been allowed so much as a match since her arrival.

Ginny leaned close, and her words came out a low, grating growl. "Percy… Are you working for the bloody Ministry again?"

Percy glanced at Draco out of the corner of his gaze, and now the younger wizard looked much less annoyed than he had before. Instead, he seemed downright pleased, his arms folded and his
lips quirked. "Go on, Weasley. Answer her."

Percy gave Draco an annoyed glare before he looked back at Ginny. "Gin, I only did what I needed to do —"

Ginny let out a blistering curse that had Percy red in the face, and Draco barely stifled a snort from his spot. Percy glanced over at him and glared again. "Malfoy, may I speak to my sister alone?"

"Have a death wish, do you?" asked Draco nonchalantly.

Percy scowled, and Draco waved his hand. "May the odds be in your favor," he said dismissively, and Percy led a seething Ginny into her room and closed the door. As soon as the latch was done, Ginny exploded.

"Percy, of all the terrible, awful, slimy things to do — this Ministry — it's a DEATH trap and — Can't believe you're doing this AGAIN —"

"Ginny —"

"What would Mum say? And Dad? How could you —"

"Ginny —"

"If you let those horrible people corrupt you AGAIN —"

"GINNY!"

Percy lowered his wand, and Ginny belatedly realized he'd cast a Muffliato charm on the door, effectively shielding their conversation from Draco. Once he'd done that, he shook his head at her in disbelief, laughing just a little. "For the love of Merlin, could you have a little faith, please? And just —"

Now he reached in the pockets of his robes and pulled something out, something that fit in the palm of his hands. When he unfurled his fingers, it was revealed to be a necklace.

"... trust me," he finished quietly.

Ginny peered at the necklace. It was a slim gold chain with a small gold W on the end. He held it up for her, and when Ginny looked it over, she could feel the magic surrounding it. Percy moved forward and slowly slipped the necklace over Ginny's hair, fixing the clasp and letting it fall to her front. Ginny glanced down at it.

"I know you're not one much for jewelry," said Percy softly, and Ginny felt herself calm, "but this is very important. I need you to wear it at all times, alright?"

Ginny touched the necklace lightly. The magic buzzed under her fingertips. "Why?"

Percy sighed. "I can't tell you yet, alright? There's too much uncertainty. But..." he touched Ginny's shoulder and squeezed it, something Ginny couldn't remember him ever doing in the past. "But it's going to help you, Ginny. Maybe not today, maybe not in a few weeks. But once we get things figured out."

"Who's we?" asked Ginny quietly, her eyes now focused on Percy's face.

Percy's lips quirked at a small smile.
The rest of the night, Ginny thought on Percy's visit. He hadn't told her anything else, but she felt the weight of the necklace constantly against her skin, where it was hidden under her robes. Draco usually ate dinner with his mother in the dining room, while Ginny still ate in the bedroom; that was fine, because she was glad for the solitude as she thought things over.

For the first time in weeks, Ginny felt genuine hope bloom in her chest.

When Draco returned from dinner, she was careful not to reveal anything else about Percy's visit. Instead, she asked him again for a radio.

"Maybe," he said lightly, reclining his long legs on the couch and opening his copy of *The Daily Prophet*. Sighing, Ginny let herself fall over the oversized armchair like a melted piece of candy and waited until Draco was done with the sports section. When she reached out a hand, he passed it to her without looking up from an article in the Business section, something about interest rates on lump sums of gold.

Ginny skimmed the words and moving pictures, but her mind was elsewhere, far, far away from Malfoy Manor.

The following day, Draco left the Manor with his briefcase and wand, his mind caught up in a whirlwind of facts and figures he needed to remember for a meeting that day. A group of wizards was trying to get him to take part in a development project for Diagon Alley, but Draco had the sneaking suspicion that they were deliberately fudging the numbers. If they tried to get one over on him today, Draco would eviscerate them.

Ah, how proud his father would be, if he ever bothered to pay attention anymore.

With that small irritation in mind, Draco entered the Ministry of Magic via the Floo and crossed the busy main floor, his steps quick and assured. Turning down a hallway near his father's office, Draco's attention was suddenly diverted by a clattering noise and a great deal of shuffling. Brows furrowed, Draco peered around a corner, even while the instinct to press on and ignore anything unusual urged him against it.

For a moment, Draco saw nothing down the long dimly lit corridor.

Then, out of a room on the left, three wizards appeared as they struggled to maintain their hold on a thrashing young wizard. A series of blistering curses left the struggling wizard, and Draco felt his jaw lock tight as he recognized the Irish lilt.

"Let go'a me! Tell me what you did! TELL ME!" screamed Seamus, just before one of the wizards finally managed to free a hand long enough to grab his wand and point it at Seamus. With one quick jinx, Seamus was instantly slack in the wizards' arms. His limbs dangled like a ragdoll's, and the other wizards – Yaxley was one, and Carrow – growled and snapped at each other.

"Take 'im down with the others," grunted Yaxley, and Carrow snorted before dropping Seamus' limp body to the floor, uncaring when his head hit the floor with a terrible thump. Then he grabbed Seamus by the ankle and dragged him off, around the corner, with Yaxley and the third wizard following closely behind. They disappeared from sight.

All of this Draco watched from his spot, his shoulders tight and his fingers stiff at his side. After a moment of silent stillness, Draco spotted something glinting on the floor. With trembling fingers, he edged forward just barely close enough to pick it up.

When Draco opened his own palm to look at it, he realized it was the pocket watch Seamus had
shown him before, the one from Dean's father. He stared hard at its clock face.

As he stared, Draco kept his mind and chest as clear from the debris of feeling as he could manage. Lifting his gaze slowly to the space the wizards had only just occupied, Draco took a step forward before he could let his prudence stop him. Moving one step, and then the next, Draco glided across the floor with every subconscious effort at silence.

The hallway rounded out to a set of stairs that moved down, seemingly into a pit of shadows. Magical energy crawled up each step, lifting into the air like smoke after a fire. Much against his will, Draco felt himself move down each step, the pocket watch clutched tightly in his hands. At the bottom, he came to the dim outline of a set of large double doors.

In their haste to drag Seamus along, the doors had been left slightly ajar. Draco reached up and wrapped his long fingers around the edge of one door, his eyes struggling to adjust to the darkness of the room beyond it. He didn't step inside – there was a barrier keeping him away, but thanks to the door, he could see, just inside, and –

The sight struck him like a curse straight to his chest.

The massive room – larger than the Great Hall at Hogwarts – was filled with witches and wizards of all ages, all on their knees, bound and cowering in a dark room where the only light came from electric tendrils of energy as it was brightly and brilliantly torn from each of the captives.

Their cries filled the room, each of them lurching, jerking, protesting against the magical energy as it was siphoned from them. Their agony filled the room with heavy air. Draco recognized just a few, but he knew that they were Muggleborns. All of them, nearly two hundred.

Some were children, barely old enough to attend school. Others were ancient. A few were former classmates.

Seamus had been bound and put in a corner, and now he, too, cried out in agony as the magical energy was pulled from his body and gathered with all the rest at the front of the large dark room. Death Eaters paced the rows of suffering witches and wizards, watching them behind their skeletal masks. Even as Draco watched for only half a minute, three captives across the room collapsed and did not get up.

At the front of this sea of suffering, two wizards moved their wands mechanically, channeling the gathered magical energy into a glass box.

In the box, Draco saw, was the Elder Wand.

Whimpers, cries of despair, bellows of pain. It echoed through the room in a cacophony of misery. Draco shut his eyes against it, and before he knew what he was doing, Draco pulled away from the door and sped back up the stairs. He didn't stop moving until he was home again, quite forgetting everything he had planned to do that day.

Once back home, Draco stayed away from his suite until late in the evening. It was only when night fell that he felt compelled to return to his room once more.

That was where Ginny Weasley found him, seated in his chair, with his head bowed against a closed fist, a silver chain dangling from his clenched palm. His eyes were closed, long platinum hair falling forward over his face. Some white-blond tips stuck to the damp trails on his cheeks.

"Malfy…?" questioned Ginny, entering cautiously from her room. She waited when he took a while to respond.
"Just go," whispered Draco. "Please."

Something in his pleading tones must have struck Ginny, because she hesitated for only a moment before she turned and left, closing her door quietly behind her. After a moment of terrible silence, Draco dropped his arm and let it fall loosely over the arm of the chair.

The pocket watch tumbled out of his hand and opened when it hit the floor, revealing the clock face within.

The shorter clock hand was entirely still. The larger hand, which had once pointed to Mortal Danger, had moved. Now the narrow sliver of black pointed to a single word.

Gone.
Author's Note: Thank you for the reviews! Seriously, they never fail to make my day. This chapter is a bit shorter than before, hence why it is up so quickly. I hope you continue to enjoy…

"Take it," Ron said, pushing the bottle into her hands. "I've already had some, just drink it."

Ginny eyed the Felix Felicis before reluctantly draining the rest of the Luck potion. That was when they heard it – the rustling that meant someone was leaving the Room of Requirement. Harry was gone with Dumbledore searching for Horcruxes, and he'd warned them that something might happen while they were gone.

Just as he'd predicted, Draco Malfoy emerged from the room with his sickly pale face and a grey-eyed gaze trembling with nerves. It widened when he saw Ginny, Ron, and Neville all waiting for him.

"What're you all loitering around here for?" Draco sneered, and Ginny felt loathing bubble in her chest like hot tar. "You'd best clear out, before you get what's coming to you."

"What," said Ron, "So you can creep about like the little gremlin you are, doing Voldemort's bidding? You're a bloody Death Eater, Malfoy. And everyone knows it."

Draco glared at them each in turn, his steely gaze looking more terrifyingly cold than Ginny had ever seen it before. He looked at her last, and something else flickered there – but only for an instant. Then it was gone.

"Then you should know to get away," Draco told them solemnly. Then, with a flourish of his hand, he tossed out the Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. Blackness enveloped the trio and Ginny felt it seep into her skin like a poison.

"MALFOY!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, but they couldn't see anything. They could only hear it, loud and distinct, near them and around them and everywhere at once.

The pounding of feet, as the Death Eaters swarmed.

Ginny slept only a few hours before something woke her, though she couldn't say what.

A glance at the ancient clock on the wall revealed it to be the early hours of the morning. Sitting up slowly in her bed, Ginny peered around the now familiar room before she slipped out of bed. Still in her pajamas, she went to her door and opened it just a crack, peering into where Draco had been sitting the night before.

To her astonishment, he was still in his chair, not sleeping and instead staring vacantly at the fireplace, which appeared to have gone out hours before. Ginny slipped barefoot into the room and approached Draco cautiously. She didn't bother to hide her presence, but she wasn't sure if she should speak or not.

Her bare toes brushed something cold on the floor, and she stooped low, picking it up. It was a pocket watch. Ginny's eyes scanned it, and a painful twist lanced her heart. Slowly, she looked up at Draco's exhausted, still features.
"Is Dean dead, Malfoy?"

She'd spoken quietly, but the question echoed as if she'd shouted it into the otherwise silent room. Draco scarcely moved.

"Yes." His voice was hoarse and flat.

Ginny let her fingers slide over the pocket watch until the top closed with a soft click. A familiar tingle of grief wormed its way through her chest and into her throat, but she kept it concealed. Instead, Ginny moved stiffly without a word and took a seat in the chair next to Draco. The window in the far corner of the room showed the early twinkle of the barely-there sunrise, and it bathed the room in cool shades of misty grey and blue. The peculiar lighting gave Draco a monochromatic look, a vision accented by his dark robes and somber expression.

"What happened, Malfoy?" Ginny asked at last. "Tell me."

She wasn't sure if she really expected him to answer, but he did.

"Finnegan was right," Draco told her, in barely more than a whisper. His voice sounded rough and unused, and he finally shifted his gaze, though only to lower it and stare further at the ashy stones in the back of the fireplace. "I found where they're keeping them. The Mudbloods."

Ginny instinctively corrected the slur. "Muggle-borns, Malfoy."

He shifted in her direction then, and she was struck, almost as powerfully as before, by the look in his eyes. "The Dark Lord is draining them of their magic, Weasley," Draco said evenly. Ginny's eyes widened, and her grip on the pocket watch tightened. "He's channeling it into the Elder Wand."

Ginny's brows furrowed and she swallowed tightly. "...I didn't know the Elder Wand worked that way," she admitted softly, too softly to cover the sound of her pounding heart.

Draco stared at her. "It doesn't."

Draco turned away once more, and this time, he rose from his chair with a pained grunt, as if his bones protested the movement. His back to her, Draco stopped and slipped his hands into the pockets of his robes. "There've been rumors," he murmured, more to himself than to her. "Whispers... that the Elder Wand isn't working like it's supposed to. Something isn't right. The power isn't there."

He turned to face Ginny again, and his haunted expression was perhaps one of the most terrifying things she'd ever seen, if only because she knew it was sincere.

"He must think this is the way to fix it," said Draco quietly. "Someone – someone he trusted – must have convinced him that harvesting magic was the answer."

"How many were there?" asked Ginny before she could stop herself.

The first flicker of doubt flashed across Draco's face, and Ginny could see him pulling back, mentally retreating from his frank admission. "I'm not sure, Weasley."

"Malfoy, where is Seamus? You said he had this watch. What happened to him?"

Draco met Ginny's gaze. "He was causing too much trouble. They put him away, with the others. Like Thomas."
Ginny squeezed her eyes shut, and her fingers trembled around the pocket watch as she willed away her furious tears. "How many, Malfoy? Bloody tell me." Her eyes opened, and she stepped forward, so that Draco had no choice but to look at her or turn away. "How... many...?" she growled.

His features tightened. "Over a hundred, perhaps two," he admitted at last, and Ginny felt all the air leave her chest as she turned away from him and barely kept herself from hurling the watch into the wall. She took a deep breath and then turned to face him again.

"Malfoy, we've got to do something -"

The sun began to peek over the horizon, and the blues and greys filtering through the window began to shift into warmer rays of orange and pink.

"No," interrupted Draco, his voice suddenly firm.

"Yes!" Ginny exclaimed in return, bounding up to him again. "Malfoy, you saw them, you saw them suffering, and it's killing them!"

"They were already dead," said Draco, moving away from her. Ginny's mind raced as she watched the sympathy drain from his features. More than sympathy, she realized. He'd been distraught all night, and now he was leaving all of that in his chair, where he'd sat and mused in misery all bloody night.

"Malfoy, don't do this, please!"

Draco whirled to face her, his features suddenly sharp with anger. "You are a fool if you think I am risking the life of my parents to free a bunch of strangers from the Ministry, Weasley!"

"Then why did you tell me, Malfoy?"

"Because," Draco hissed, and for a moment, he paused, his features flickering with confusion at his own behavior. "Because I - I had to tell someone." He quickly turned away, as if he could feel his expression revealing more than he'd like, going too far for him to pull back.

"Now just forget about it!" he snapped.

"Forget about it?" repeated Ginny harshly. "You mean like you do, Malfoy?"

Draco froze.

"Don't think I haven't seen it!" Ginny continued fiercely, stomping up behind him. "Every single bloody time you see or hear something you know is terrible, you just - " She squeezed her fingertips in front of her face " - pack it away in a little tiny box and push it to the back of your mind! You suppress EVERYTHING, Malfoy!"

"Shut up," Draco hissed, eyes flashing dangerously.

"Every time you have to deal with Damien, every time you're afraid of Bellatrix, every time you see anything awful happen, you just tuck it away in the furthest spot in your mind, so that you never have to face it!" Ginny exclaimed, throwing out an arm. "Well, I'm not letting you do that with this, Malfoy!"

"I don't CARE, Weasley!" Draco shouted, eyes blazing. "All of those bloody Mudbloods can keep dropping dead! It makes not a damn bit of difference to me!"
Ginny cut her eyes at him. "Which is why you stayed up the entire night, right? Because you cared so little about the horrible things you saw? The agony, the pain, the murders? That was nothing to you, was it?"

Draco's jaw tightened and he turned away, snatching up his cloak and heading for the door, even though it was well before the time he normally left for the day. Ginny clenched her fingers at her sides, and her fingertips brushed the dark red pajamas she'd requested. The silky scarlet fabric suddenly felt like sandpaper against her skin.

As Draco reached for the door handle, she lifted her chin and said through clenched teeth, "It's good to know you're not completely immune to suffering, Malfoy."

Draco's fingers curled tightly on the doorknob. "Did you think I was?" he asked, each word low and measured.

Ginny wasn't sure if that was meant to be a real question or not. She remained where she was, across the room, standing so stiffly that her joints ached. After a long, heavy moment, in which tears pushed at the corners of her eyes and a lump rose in her throat, she spoke again.

"You let them in." Her voice trembled. The accusation lingered heavy in the air.

Draco turned just enough to let her see his eyes close, and his torso hunched just a bit, as if he, too, were fighting off the effort to break down and sob. The warm early morning rays of sunlight poured in through the window and fell over Ginny, wrapping around her and pressing her shadow against the wall right next to Draco. Her silhouette lingered there, just near him.

Draco's lips parted, as if to defend himself. But then he simply closed his mouth and let his hand drop from the doorknob, as if he knew he had no place to go.

"You," said Ginny, her tone wavering as she failed to suppress a hot tear, as it slid down her face. "You let them in... to Hogwarts."

"I know," he said at last, only part of his face visible to her. He hovered near the door but did not attempt to leave. "I remember."

Then he shifted a little and lifted his gaze to her fully. How very much like Lucius he looked in that moment, Ginny thought with a piercing combination of fear, anger, and confusion.

"But that's what needed to be done," Draco informed her stoically. "And your poor opinion is of no consequence to me, Weasley."

Ginny flexed her fingers at her sides. "And what of your opinion, Malfoy? Are you proud of what you did?" She watched his entire body tighten. "Was that your shining moment? The one you remember fondly as the day you truly... made it?"

Draco's eyes lowered, but only for a few seconds, before he forced them back up, as if he remembered the proper mask and raised it as soon as he could manage.

Ginny seized the moment and stepped forward; her shadow shrank from the door until it was replaced by Ginny's physical form, warm under the rising sun's warmth as it poured in from the window.

"You know what, Malfoy? It doesn't matter. It's done."

Ginny stood as tall and straight as she could. "But this – these witches and wizards are dying slow,
painful deaths. This is not about the purification of the magical race, or whatever else. What you saw… " She fought to bring back those images Draco had tried to tuck away, and she saw them float to the surface of Draco's features, even as he tried to press them back.

"… That cannot be allowed, Malfoy," Ginny said heatedly. "It can't. Whatever you did at Hogwarts – none of that matters now. We aren't students anymore. And now you have the power to stop at least a portion of this abhorrent cruelty," she whispered. "Don't you want to, Malfoy? Don't you want to know that you were responsible for helping spare at least some of the pain in this cruel place?"

Draco's grey eyes flickered, and she saw – with a thrilling, electric beam of hope that split her chest and flooded her limbs with purpose – that Draco was still affected by what he'd witnessed.

That, try as he might to hide it, Ginny was right. He was not immune to suffering, and he never had been. Draco Malfoy's humanity was packed away tight, but it was still there, lurking. She'd glimpsed it before, but now, as they stood side by side at the entrance to the room, she believed, for the first time, that it could be put to use.

Still, Draco pulled away from her and moved slowly across the room, where he took a seat on the edge of his bed. Since her arrival, Ginny had noted that Draco, despite his slim frame, always moved with a great deal of heaviness. It was as if his skeleton was made for the burden of carrying his soul, rather than his body, and it weighed him down like nothing she'd ever seen before.

"I can't risk my family, Weasley," he said after a long moment, sounding positively miserable.

"Anything I try will fail, and then my parents and I will be killed for nothing," Draco lifted his eyes to her, and they reflected the same mistiness she'd witnessed just before the sunrise. "And if that happens, then you – " he pointed at her, his arm bent at the elbow and poised on his knee, " – you will be given to some other Death Eater. Someone who doesn't let you go outside or see your brothers."

He paused, before adding tiredly, "Someone like the Lestranges." For whatever reason, that seemed to depress him further.

Leaning forward, Draco balanced one elbow on an upraised knee and pushed his hand over his face. Ginny had never seen him so solemn, so thoroughly beaten. If the color grey ever transformed into a person, it would appear exactly as Draco Malfoy appeared in that moment, she realized.

Ginny approached slowly and sat down next to him on the edge of the bed. "I'm willing to take that chance," she murmured, although the thought of being handed over to Bellatrix Lestrange made her insides quiver with fear.

"Of course you are," Draco muttered dully into his hand. After a moment, he dropped it and looked over at her with a sigh. "But I'm not."

I'm sorry. He didn't say the words, but Ginny felt them, and it surprised her. The pair sat close to one another on the bed and remained quiet for several moments.

Then Ginny lifted her head, looking straightforward before shifting in Draco's direction. "Maybe … maybe you don't have to be the one to free them, Malfoy." She bit her lip and turned fully to face him, as Draco gave her a dubious look. "Maybe," she continued, growing a little more excited, "You can just… give someone who's already in there a little boost."
After a moment, Draco raised a brow. "You can't mean Finnegan?"

"Why not?" asked Ginny. "He's only been in there for a day, right? He'll have the strength to fight if he needs."

Draco leaned against one of his bedposts and fixed Ginny with a most bemused look. "Weasley," he said slowly and pointedly, "I realize you didn't have classes with Finnegan, so allow me to enlighten you - the only thing that idiot knows how to do is blow shit up."

Ginny paused, before a true grin began to transform her features. She leaned close to Draco.

"Then that's exactly what we'll let him do."

The everyday bustle of the Ministry of Magic was drawing to a close for the day. Few witches and wizards remained on the open floors, moving between offices, finishing up their tasks or worrying about anything that may follow the next day.

Down a corridor, a Death Eater in a skeletal mask moved and turned down a flight of stairs. Hidden under his robes was a small cloth bag containing a few very specific items. The Death Eater's steps were unhurried, though sometimes there was a hitch to the step, as if he'd briefly forgotten which direction he was heading in, or why he was going there.

The Death Eater reached the double-doors and pushed them open, only to be stopped by the barrier guarding the massive room, where howls of pain and agony threatened to drown out any hope of normal conversation. The other Death Eater at the door, also in a mask, held up a hand.

Wand check. The Death Eater held up his own wand, and once it was identified, he was allowed to enter.

The pacing began, as it did with all the other Death Eaters in the room, some eight or ten in number, not counting the two at the very front, who moved their wands in the same motions over and over again as bursts of magical energy was cruelly ripped from the captives. The newly arrived Death Eater quickly took over his usual route, moving slowly up and down the rows of nearly two hundred Muggle-born captives.

Other Death Eaters filtered through the dark room, but they kept to their corners, watching passively as witches and wizards struggled against the painful theft of their magic. Occasionally, the Death Eaters nodded as they passed one another, but for the most part, they stayed several feet apart, as the room was quite large.

In one of the most distant shadowy corners of the room, Seamus Finnegan crouched, his hands bound behind him, sweat beading at his temples and his skin flushed red with the effort it took to breathe against the onslaught to his body. He gasped, wrenching forward often in pain, but he also cursed loudly with every lurch, glaring daggers at anyone who came near.

Even now, as the most recent Death Eater approached, Seamus hissed and growled at him.

It was only when the Death Eater passed the row behind Seamus that the young Irishman suddenly felt something drop into hands where they were bound behind his back. At that very same moment, the magical binds on his wrists evaporated.

Seamus blinked in disbelief and left his hands where they were as the Death Eater continued to walk; the movement had been so smooth, Seamus wasn't one hundred percent sure if the Death Eater had had really anything to do with it at all. But when Seamus pulled his hands around front,
with the shadows hiding most of his movements and the nearest Death Eater paying him no mind at all, he found a cloth bag in his hands.

Seamus emptied the contents into his palms. Out fell the pocket watch he'd dropped in the corridor, and his heart raced as he curled it in his fingertips. Next he found three small potions bottles, all filled with highly volatile mixtures he recognized immediately.

The last was a note.

*The wall behind you.*

And then below that –

*Kill me first.*

Seamus' eyes slowly lifted to the Death Eater who'd passed him, and he realized now that the masked wizard was standing unnaturally still, very near the back wall of the room. Resolve spilled into Seamus' veins and filled him with a vicious strength he'd never known before.

Turning the bottles in his hands and quickly unstopping them, Seamus worked as quickly and subtly as he could in the darkness of the massive room. Another Death Eater was approaching, and this one was not Imperius'ed as he guessed the first was.

And so Seamus furiously worked the three bottles together, recorked them, and then shook them in his hands until the mixtures inside were frothing and popping with unspent magical energy.

Then, hunched over as if still suffering, Seamus put his hands behind his back again and waited, waited until three Death Eaters had all convened rather close to him. Once they were near, Seamus Finnegan drew in a long, deep breath.

In a flash of movement, he leaped to his feet and hurled the first bottle at the back wall. Before anyone else knew what was happening, the wall exploded into a furious magical plume of fire. The force of the explosion blasted all three of the Death Eaters off their feet, and Seamus burst forward, snatching the nearest fallen wand off the floor and pointing it directly at the Death Eater who'd passed him the bag.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The body collapsed and went slack, and Seamus turned, unleashing two furious curses that blasted the other two dazed Death Eaters into heaps on the floor. Smoke billowed throughout the room, and all the magical restraints on the captives flickered and disappeared. Seamus picked up another wand and hurled it at the nearest newly freed captive.

"EVERTE STATUM!" Another Death Eater went flying off his feet and onto the ground. Seamus looked over as the smoke cleared where the wall had been. Just beyond it, only twenty feet away, was the entire set of Floo chimneys. His eyes widened.

"THIS WAY! EVERYONE, GO!"

The captives began running, screaming, leaping for wands whenever the Death Eaters fell, while Seamus took the second bottle and flung it towards the front of the room, blasting more holes into the Ministry's elegant walls. The captives who had the strength turned to fight as more Death Eaters stormed in from the front of the room, with Ted Tonks and Seamus charging forward, firing
off spell after spell, blasting back the Death Eaters and ducking curses in the same moment. Ted Tonks looked back at the Floos as the captives began fleeing, leaping into the green fire and shouting for the first place of safety they could think of.

Other witches and wizards, those still remaining afterhours, ran towards the Floos in an attempt to stop those who were fleeing.

That was when Colin and Dennis Creevey sprang forward, and with synchronized movements using stolen wands, they hurled their arms forward and shouted in unison, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

From their wands leaped great white magical creatures, an elephant on one side and a rhinoceros on the other, which stomped forward with great power and knocked witches and wizards out of the way with stunning ferocity.

More Muggle-born captives disappeared into the Floos, and others dragged and pulled their weaker friends, shoving them into the green fire before jumping in themselves. Children – too young to know magic, never allowed to attend Hogwarts – cried out in confusion, fear, and pain, until Seamus and Ted Tonks brandished their wands and lashed out with glowing gold ropes, which they wrapped around two children at a time before flinging them into the Floo. "GO, GO!" Seamus shouted, waving in others, dragging any who didn't have the strength, those who might have been near death, all the while fending off the stunned Death Eaters as best as he could with the few remaining captives until they, too, fled.

All of this Draco Malfoy watched from his hidden spot, the magically-disguised room in the Ministry's main corridor which his father had shown him years ago, a place where he could hide if needed. Draco's palms were slick with sweat and his heart was racing, but he could not look away. Lucius was not at the Ministry today. He was safe from involvement in this battle, and Draco had made certain he would not be blamed.

More Death Eaters raced towards the captives, called in from other parts of the Ministry, and Draco could feel the approaching presence of Lord Voldemort. The Dark Lord's anger seeped into the room like a poisonous gas.

"Come on, let's go!" shouted Ted Tonks, gesturing to the Floo. Seamus turned to look at him, before looking again at the Death Eaters as they rushed forward. Then, as Draco watched, Seamus glanced down at the pocket watch in his hand. For a moment, unimaginable despair took over his features.

Then his face hardened, and Seamus closed the pocket watch, clasping it near his chest. "Go," he told Tonks. The older wizard hesitated. "GO!" Seamus shouted. "Now, hurry!"

What are you doing, Finnegan!" Draco panicked from his spot. Get out of there!

But Seamus practically shoved Ted Tonks through the Floo, not going with him. Instead, Seamus took one last steadying breath before lifting his wand and waving it fiercely, the spell coming out in an anguished cry that echoed throughout the Ministry.

"CONFRINGO!"

The fireplaces housing the Floos burst, one by one, in time with the movements of Seamus' wand as he destroyed them all in one quick powerful burst of energy. Debris and magical energy flew into the air and littered the floors. The last floor had barely started to crumble when a curse blast by
Seamus' shoulder, and he turned to face the horde of some thirty Death Eaters rushing at him, with Voldemort at their center.

Seamus Finnegan, now completely alone, faced them with his features set.

His eyes trembled, and the fear read clearly throughout his body. But as Draco watched, Seamus simply tucked the pocket watch gingerly into his robes, holding it tightly for a moment. Then he reached into a different pocket and pulled out the last potion.

Voldemort and a few others managed to stop in time. Another five or six Death Eaters were too slow.

And when Seamus Finnegan hurled the last bottle into the ground directly at his own feet, the ensuing magical explosion caught them all, too.

"… now appears that as many as one hundred and fifty Muggle-borns have escaped custody at the Ministry of Magic," the female voice on the radio said, "with substantial damage to the – " The magical signal blinked in and out, cutting off the words, " – apparently led by a half-blood wizard named Seamus Finnegan – "

"YES!" screamed Ginny at the top of her lungs, pounding her fists on the table holding her brand new radio. "GO, GET OUT OF THERE!"

She screamed at the top of her lungs, sobbing all the while. The sobs overwhelmed Ginny, and she sank to the floor right next to her radio, even as the broadcast was abruptly stopped, and a new voice took over, stoic and male.

"Please disregard the previous newscast – No escape of Muggle-borns has taken place – There is no cause for alarm." Then it shut off with a click, and the radio went silent, with only the soft hum of magical energy sounding in the room to accompany Ginny's sobs.

Still, she had enough strength to scream at the top of her lungs, one more time, and it burst from her chest like a furious war cry.

"GIVE THEM HELL, SEAMUS!"

Author's Note: The Creevey brothers actually died in the Battle of Hogwarts. However, you'll just have to give me this one tweak, because reasons.
He knocked on her door, but little Ginny refused to acknowledge it.

"Gin-Gin?"

The boy peered inside the room with a worried frown. When he spotted his tiny redheaded sister, he came into the room and shut the door behind him.

"Ginny, please don't be mad at me."

But the three year old couldn't be swayed. In her little mind, she felt nothing other than complete and utter betrayal.

"You leaving," she bit out with an angry sob. "You go away and never come back!"

"It's Hogwarts," Charlie reminded her gently. "Just like Bill does. And Bill always comes home."

But Ginny was too young to remember Bill leaving for school for the first time. All she knew was that Charlie had always been at home, with them, and he'd always played with her and loved her best. He took care of her when Mum was busy, and he was the only one of the boys who let her kick around the ball or play with his toys.

And now he was leaving her behind.

"Please, Gin-Gin," said the young boy, moving to crouch in front of her with a hopeful smile. "I'll be so sad if I leave and you're still mad at me."

The little girl held tight onto her anger, but her misery was just too much, and she finally leaped up and jumped into her big brother's arms.

"I just want you to stay!" she cried out, "Please, please, please!"

Charlie quickly wrapped Ginny in his arms, dragged her over to the rocking chair in her nursery and gathered her up in his lap. Ginny's hot little face pressed into his robes and sobbed, while Charlie patted her head with a divine patience beyond his eleven years.

"I'll always come back home, Ginny," he told her, growing more and more distressed at her tears. "I swear it. One day, you'll be big, and you'll see. You'll see how it is."

"Don't wanna," she sniffled, finally calming down.

"I know," he said with a little teary smile. "But you don't have to worry. One day, you'll be at Hogwarts, too, and you'll see why we go there."

Ginny grunted in response, and Charlie laughed a little, wiping away his tears.

"Who gonna play with me like you do?" asked Ginny, desperate to know. Charlie smiled at her.

"You have lots of brothers, Gin. They love you, too."
Draco came home from the Ministry that night, but he didn't return to the suite he shared with Ginny.

Instead, he sat alone in the corridor outside his parents' room, carefully avoiding making a sound. Draco knew his parents were in there. He could hear them talking about the escape ("Draco once said the boy could rub two bare cotton balls together and start a fire," said Lucius), but their muffled voices sounded more weary than anxious. So Draco sat on the floor, like a child, with his knees pulled up to his chest and his anxious stare focused on the entrance to the hallway.

When Ginny crept out of the suite and peered down the hallway, she saw him.

The radio broadcast had ended, and the news dared speak nothing more about the escape. But as soon as Ginny saw Draco, desperately keeping his vigilance over his parents' room, she knew it had been a night that would remain forever etched in his mind.

And if Draco remembered this night, then it didn't matter so much if the news didn't report it.

Ginny edged forward, only vaguely noting that Draco hadn't locked the door to the hallway from his suite. Her bare feet padded along the carpet that lined the center of the otherwise cold floors, and when Ginny reached Draco, she stooped down in front of him.

His gaze flickered to hers.

"They're alright," she whispered as reassuringly as she could. She could hear Narcissa and Lucius behind their door, so she knew it was true. "Go and talk to them, if that will make you feel better."

Draco's eyes glanced at the doors. "If I see them, they'll know something is wrong," he said very softly. His expression was a curious mixture of fear, spite, and longing, as if he was just as ready to fight as he was to cry.

For the first time since arriving at the Malfoy Manor, Ginny felt true compassion swell in her chest for Draco. Her eyes raked over his face, and she felt like taking his hand, even though it was clenched around his own bicep and looked as immovable as a stone wall.

And so instead Ginny stood, offering Draco her hand so that he could accept it if he wanted.

After a long moment of thought, Draco reached up and grasped Ginny's hand, letting her pull him to a stand. The grip lingered for just a moment.

Then Ginny reached over and rattled twice on the bedroom door. Draco practically hissed, but Ginny darted away and around the corner just as the double-doors opened to reveal both Narcissa and Lucius, their expressions pinched with confusion as Draco whirled to face them.

"Darling," said Narcissa, stepping forward and touching Draco's cheek. "Are you alright?"

"I…" Draco swallowed tightly, before he glanced at Lucius, who studied him. "I just… I wanted to say goodnight, that's all." He hadn't done something like that in years, and it must have seemed odd – *curse that good for nothing ginger*, he thought – but his mother lifted her lips in a soft smile.

"Come in for a bit," Narcissa said, stepping aside. Draco entered the large master suite his parents inhabited, and he walked with them to where a lounge sat next to two chairs, much like in his own
quarters. When Draco was a child, he'd spent many an evening in here, listening to his parents read aloud or tune in to a radio show.

The radio was on, just like before; as Draco listened, it played a soft tune. No news. No politics. Just a tender melody that permeated the air and filled Draco with a nostalgic longing. Draco's father settled in his chair, where he had a book, and Narcissa sat at the end of the lounge. Without thinking about it, Draco stretched out on the lounge (which he was actually too tall to do) and laid his head in Narcissa's lap, so that her slim hand could stroke his hair back from his face just like she'd done so many times when he was a child.

If Lucius was concerned about the escape, he didn't show it. Instead, he took a moment to look over at Draco with just the slightest quirk of his lips. Then he looked back to the novel in his hands.

"Do you want me to start from the beginning?" Lucius asked Draco without looking up from the book.

Draco barely quelled a bubble of emotion in his chest, and he deliberately kept from looking directly at his father. "Yes."

So Lucius turned back a few chapters and started at the beginning of the book, and Narcissa and Draco listened attentively for the rest of the evening.

When Draco finally returned to his suite, it was very late. The first thing he noticed was Ginny Weasley, asleep on the lounge in his room in front of the dying fire. Draco paused and observed her for several minutes without moving.

Then he moved past her, calling very quietly for Bleaker as he did so. The elf appeared, and Draco immediately shushed him before looking back at Ginny.

"Get her a blanket," he ordered in a careful whisper.

Then he quickly changed clothes and climbed into his own bed.

Morning dawned.

"Malfy," hissed Ginny in a whisper. She jumped up onto his tall bed and shook him none too gently. "Malfy, wake up!"

Draco blinked awake, startled, and nearly knocked Ginny off the bed. He almost fell to the floor himself when he scrambled for the wand, suddenly sure that the entire manor was under attack and oh, Merlin, his parents were going to be killed and someone knew, someone KNEW –

"Oh, come off it, will you?" Ginny grunted, poking him in the side. "Calm down, you don't need your wand, just be quiet!" Leading him by the arm, Ginny tugged Draco out of the bed and the two stumbled across the room until they were kneeling next to the door to the hallway. Ginny eased it open just a crack, with Draco standing behind her, and familiar voices filtered through.

"... must say, this has put the Dark Lord in a most unfortunate predicament," came Damien's snide voice, more cross than Ginny had ever heard it, though he held it to a cool edge. "After all, the Muggleborns are supposed to be your responsibility."

Lucius's retort was calm and self-assured. "The incarceration of the Muggleborns was not my idea,
Damien. I am only responsible for locating the filth. To harness their magic for the Elder Wand was Yaxley's idea."

Ginny shifted to glance at Draco, who raised a brow; both continued to listen with their eyes wide.

"I find it difficult to believe," said Damien, "that Yaxley, of all people, came up with such an idea on his own."

"Remarkable, isn't it?" asked Lucius, every bit as calm as Damien was irritated. "Who knows what other untapped potential he has in store for us?"

Draco leaned close to Ginny. "Damien's right," he whispered to her, standing just behind her shoulder. "Yaxley is a complete moron and everyone knows it. How he came up with an idea like that…"

Ginny glanced at Draco and bit her lip in thought.

"Whatever the case may be," said Damien, now noticeably irritated, "every solution you and your companions have proposed to address the Dark Lord's problem has been temporary at best."

"As opposed to your solution to the Dark Lord's problem," replied Lucius smoothly, "which has been nonexistent."

Ginny bit her lip to keep from laughing, and she glanced up to see Draco smirk. She could feel his animosity for Damien looming from where he peered over her head.

Damien, after a heated pause, began to speak again, but Lucius cut him off. "Damien, it is Yaxley who lost the Mudbloods, and your issues are best discussed with him. If the Dark Lord is displeased with me, I have no doubt he will address me directly."

Damien shifted slightly into view, and Ginny ducked back a bit.

"I'm sure he will," said Damien lowly. "After all, he has had little issue bringing up your failures in the past."

Ginny felt Draco tense behind her. Lucius, likewise, lost any attempt at keeping his posture amicable or even indifferent. Ginny watched as his expression took on the look of steel she knew so well.

"Damien, I understand that your newfound position with the Dark Lord has emboldened you to the point of recklessness," drawled Lucius, edging just a hint closer to the younger wizard, his grey eyes flashing. "However, I would warn you against becoming too comfortable in your position. For, you see, I have been serving the Dark Lord since before you were…" Lucius narrowed his eyes "…even born."

Lucius then folded his hands calmly over the top of his snake-topped staff, saying slowly, deliberately, "And I have given him everything."

Damien regarded Lucius for a long moment before his features slid into a smile that sent a chill down Ginny's spine.

"Not everything, Lucius."

With that, Damien turned and slipped from view. Lucius watched him go, and when Damien was gone, he exhaled for just a moment. Ginny thought it was fascinating to watch Lucius' mask drop
for just a moment, as Draco's sometimes did.

Still, Lucius always looked malicious and cold to Ginny, even when he was alone, and the older wizard quickly recovered before walking away as well. Ginny closed the door very quietly and straightened, as did Draco, who turned and inhaled deeply.

"Bloody hell, if that sorry bastard Damien decides to blame this on my father," started Draco through clenched teeth.

"He's just frustrated," cut in Ginny, moving over to the breakfast tray and picking up a piece of fruit. "He doesn't have anything on Lucius. Just relax."

"Still," said Draco, rounding to face her, "if someone finds out –"

"Well, they just might, if you keep bringin’ it up because you're worried all the time!" pointed out Ginny, before she moved over to the lounge and leaned against the back of it.

"Just have a little faith, Malfoy."

Draco’s expression made it quite clear that he thought this was the most ridiculous thing anyone had ever said to him, so Ginny gave up.

He did seem to calm a bit, though, and soon Draco picked up some of the food from the breakfast tray too, before he moved over to the lounge and flopped onto it. Ginny leaned over the back of the lounge and peered down at him.

Draco was actually too long for the cushions, and one of his legs hung over the end, with a bare foot sticking out of the bottom of his pajama pants. He had no shirt on, as he'd just woken up, and although Ginny glanced for only a moment – really, just a single moment – she noticed that he'd gained back a bit of the weight he'd lost in school. When she'd first come to the manor, Draco had looked almost emaciated. Now, his torso and arms had finally filled out once more. Or, at least, as much as they ever had. He was quite skinny, like Harry had been.

Which reminded Ginny of a thought she'd had while spying on Lucius and Damien.

"Malfoy," she said carefully, "is Lucius… ill?"

Draco shifted his head to look in her direction, his brows furrowed and his eyes narrowed. "Sick? Of course not. My father doesn't get sick." He paused. "Why?"

Ginny shrugged, and instead of blurting out what she was thinking – which was the unflattering but accurate assessment that Lucius looked like a dried up zombie – she chose her words carefully.

"He's just – I don't know, looking a bit peaked. Like he needs a good meal and about five days worth of sleep." Also a blood transfusion, but Ginny left that out.

She watched curiously as Draco seemed to think this over. Then he shook his head, his eyes aimed on the ceiling. "He's just stressed from work," Draco bit out, obviously feeling a bit defensive. "My father isn't sick. He has a lot of important things to do is all."

Ginny let it drop. The two ate breakfast in mostly silence, but it wasn't an uncomfortable one. Each of them had a lot on their minds. It was Draco who finally broke the silence.

"Finnegan didn't make it out. He didn't even try."
Ginny lowered her eyes. She'd guessed as much from the broadcast. Once Seamus had been identified as the one who'd started the whole thing, an aching feeling in her heart prepared her for the worst. After a long quiet moment, Ginny glanced up at Draco's face. "Was he brave?" she asked softly. Draco shifted his weight onto his elbows and laced his fingers, so that his gaze peered just over the top of them, at the window to the bright outside world.

Then he nodded.

"Yes," he murmured.

Draco found his father in his study, where Lucius was sorting through some documents. The older wizard looked up when Draco entered.

"Good morning," said Draco, as if he dared to bother Lucius in his study all the time, which he certainly did not. Lucius raised a brow at him, but he didn't kick him out.

"Good morning, son," he said instead, looking back at his documents. "Do you need something?"

Draco tried to act casual, but he finally decided that acting casual was even more suspicious than acting suspicious. So he gave up. "I heard about what happened at the Ministry," he dared. Lucius looked up and sighed, moving around his desk and stacking some rolls of parchment to one side.

"Yes," said Lucius, "most unfortunate. But they're just a bunch of Mudbloods. We'll find them again."

Draco shifted. "Since you're in charge of the registration," he said, following Lucius' face as the other wizard moved around the room, "will the Dark Lord punish you?"

"No," said Lucius easily. "Yaxley was in charge, the idiot. And if he is punished for their escape, then that's what he deserves for campaigning to take on the responsibility." Lucius rounded his desk and for a moment, his grey eyes flickered to Draco's. "After all, it would have been natural for me to take up the mantle, given that dealing with the Mudbloods has been mostly my responsibility up until now. But Yaxley was just..." Lucius picked up a quill "... so insistent. I thought it best that the accountability lay with him."

Draco raised a brow as Lucius' lips lifted at a ghost of a smirk. "Just in case," Lucius added languidly.

Draco folded his arms and opened his mouth to ask another question, but Lucius cut him off. "Speaking of prisoners of war," said Lucius, as if he were remarking on the weather, "How are things with the girl?"

Draco blinked, caught off guard. He watched Lucius for a moment longer, trying to decide whether or not to push the subject further, but instead he relaxed some and leaned against the desk, where he picked up a vial of ink and toyed with it.

"Oh, you know," he said with a shrug. "She's Weasley."

Lucius raised a brow. "And?"

Draco fell into a chair and sat all the way back, enjoying how nice and comfy his father's chairs were.

"It's not so bad, I suppose." Draco thought about it. "She's completely bossy, of course. And, well, I
mean, she's so *Gryffindor-y,*" Draco continued, shooting an annoyed look Lucius' way. "It's always – *Wake up, Malfoy, I want to go flying,*" Draco imitated in a high-pitched voice. "*Or – Stop saying Mudbloods, Malfoy.* Or – *I can totally beat you at chess, Malfoy.*" Draco waved a hand. "Which she has yet to do, because she is not nearly so good at chess as she thinks."

Lucius' lips quirked at a smile, but Draco wasn't looking and he missed it.

"Perhaps you should teach her," suggested the older wizard.

"Maybe," said Draco with a shrug, "just so she's a worthy adversary. Oh!" He snapped his fingers. "And she's always trying to get me to be nicer to Bleaker." Draco rolled his eyes grandly at this idea. "She's far too nice to him, Father. He's going to start expecting that sort of behavior from all of us, and I can't have that." The younger wizard paused thoughtfully. "Perhaps I ought to just get her an elf of her own. That way she can be ridiculous with her own damn servant."

Lucius paused near the window that looked out over the gardens. "Perhaps you should," he agreed lightly. "I got your mother a house-elf as a gift when we first married."

"Really?" Draco asked. "Which elf?"

"It's dead," Lucius answered blandly. "You knocked it out of a window when you were a toddler."

Draco stared. "What, really? Why would I do that?"

Lucius made an exasperated noise. "I don't know, Draco. Children are often wasteful with resources. That's why they're children."

"I wonder if I thought it was funny," mused Draco.

"Probably," deadpanned Lucius. "You were cackling the entire time."

Draco smirked, instantly amused with himself. Lucius rolled his eyes at him, but his haggard features held the hint of a smile as he turned away and gathered his things. Draco finally stopped walking around the office and shifted to look at his father. In the early morning sunlight, Draco remembered Ginny's question — *Is Lucius ill?*

Now, as Draco looked over his father, he couldn't help but note just how worn his father's appearance had become.

In truth, Lucius looked no less frail today than he had that morning in his office at the Ministry, when Draco had first thought to grow worried for him. Lucius was still too thin, and his color wasn't right. There were deep circles under his eyes, and a strained tremor to his movements. It made something unpleasant roil in Draco's stomach to see him that way. Bellatrix and the others had recovered from Azkaban, but Lucius never seemed to.

"Why're you asking about Weasley anyway?" inquired Draco curiously.

Lucius looked over Draco. "I only wanted to be certain she wasn't making you miserable in your own home," he told his son, but there seemed to be a lot left unsaid in the seemingly simple answer.

A moment passed in silence. "Father," started Draco carefully, "...is there something going on?"

Lucius actually did smirk this time, before he picked up his cane and prepared to leave. "What a ridiculous question, son. There is always *something* going on, I'm sure."
Draco made a face. "That," he said, "is an unsatisfactory answer."

"Life is full of unsatisfactory answers, Draco," said Lucius dryly as he prepared to leave. "If you don't like it, then it's probably best you stop asking questions now."

With this pearl of fatherly wisdom imparted upon his son, Lucius brushed by Draco and swept out of the room.

A few days passed, and although both Draco and Ginny waited anxiously to see if Voldemort would swoop in on the manor and destroy them all, nothing of note happened and they began to gradually relax.

The incident at the Ministry, Draco told Ginny, had been swept under the rug. Voldemort did not want anyone to speak of it, though they weren't sure if that was because the incident exposed a political lie or because the breakout was embarrassing for the Ministry. Either way, no one seemed keen on bringing it up, and Draco was glad.

The weekend arrived and Draco fully intended on sleeping in.

However, when he shuffled out of bed just after sunrise to use the bathroom, Draco found an owl waiting with a letter at the window. He took the letter, which was addressed to Ginny, and thought of just shoving it under her door, rather than daring to wake her up. However, something told him to read the letter before giving it to her.

So he did, because he was Draco Malfoy and he did what he wanted.

"Bloody hell," he hissed after scanning the letter. Doing his very best to stay quiet, Draco tucked the letter back in its envelope, quickly got dressed, grabbed everything he needed to stay out all day and then, with every effort at stealth, he slipped the letter under Ginny's door and then practically ran out of his suite.

Once he was safely outside, Draco let out a breath of relief.

He only made it about halfway down the hall before his mother stopped him. "Draco," said Narcissa, an eyebrow raised. "Where are you off to so early on a Saturday?"

Draco opened his mouth to respond, but he was interrupted by a loud, comically high-pitched scream of rage from his suite. Draco closed his mouth and waited patiently for the scream to stop. It took such a long time that he actually glanced at the clock and put a hand on his hip.

Narcissa stared, looking over at the suite's closed door, aghast. When the furious shriek was finally done, Draco answered casually, "I would not go in there today, if I were you. On a related note, I suddenly have loads to do outside of the house, so I will see you this evening. Goodbye, mother."

With that, Draco left the house and went to Diagon Alley, where he managed to spend most of his day. In fact, he stayed out nearly ten hours, only returning to the manor once more when it was nearly dinner time. The sun was just beginning to dip into the horizon when Draco slipped through the door of his suite and tip-toed inside. Ginny's door was closed, and he didn't see her in his room. Maybe he could just –

BAM. The doors to Ginny's room swung open with a fierce kick and Draco instantly threw up his hands in a defensive position.

"I need a Howler, Malfoy!" Ginny demanded as soon as she spotted him, her eyes blazing. "Right
Draco dropped his hands and his shoulders went slack. "Er," he said, pointing at her, "No."

"This," Ginny waved the parchment bearing the letter she'd received that morning, "is complete and total bollocks! And why the hell have you been gone all day?"

"Honestly? Because I was hoping someone would drop by and perform an exorcism on you while I was away," Draco informed her, before walking over to his bar and fixing himself a drink.

"This isn't funny, Malfoy," Ginny hissed, marching across the floor. "Some Death Eater BITCH has gone and forced George to marry her!"

Draco thought about the witches he'd met in George's store. "I very much doubt that was the case," he told Ginny sincerely. Ginny's freckled face turned a furious shade of red, and so he added, "Also, that witch is not a Death Eater. She's just one of those sympathizers from – I don't remember – Russia, I think."

"How do you know so much?" asked Ginny suspiciously.

Draco waved the hand holding his drinking glass. "Because, Weasley, I make it my business to know things. Look, the point is, your brother is fine."

"But –"

"He might even like this girl, for all you know," interrupted Draco. "Did his letter say he was forced?"

Ginny growled. "No," she said flatly. "But I know he was."

"And how do you know that?" asked Draco, but Ginny let out a furious yell and hurled the parchment to the floor. When her gaze turned back to Draco's, though, it was pinched with tears, not anger.

"Because," she said tearfully, "He would've never gotten married without us there!"

Draco paused, looking over Ginny's tear-stained face, even though she quickly wiped away the dampness and forced the anger back into her expression. "Not unless someone made him," continued Ginny with a catch in her voice. "He wouldn't do that."

Draco tapped a long finger on his drinking glass. "Unless, of course," he said quietly, "He knew you might react badly." When Ginny looked up to glare at him, he held up his hand in a placating gesture. "There probably wasn't much of a ceremony, anyway. I'm sure…" Draco took a seat on the edge of the chair's arm "… that he felt this was the best way to do things. Neatly and without fuss."

Ginny screwed up her face in a grimace. "Neatly and without fuss. Yeah, that's George, alright."

Draco rolled his eyes. "People change with war, Weasley," he told her, tilting his head. "Sometimes things like this are necessary." He watched as Ginny lowered her eyes to the parchment, before she stooped and picked it up again. She swallowed, her eyes scanning the handwriting again, as if to make sure she'd read it correctly.

At last, she sighed and sank into the chair Draco sat on. Her body fell slack against the cushions, and Draco thought made her look like melted strawberry ice cream.
"It's still bollocks," she muttered, frowning deeply.

Sitting just above her, balanced on the arm of the chair, Draco took a sip from his Firewhiskey and then passed the glass to her. Ginny glanced up darkly, but after hesitating for only a moment, she accepted it and finished it in one gulp.

Unfortunately for Ginny, the following week brought with it more unwelcome news.

Draco was the first to be alerted to the two guests, as Ginny was preoccupied, and so he swept into the foyer of Malfoy Manor alone. "Weasley," Draco greeted Charlie tonelessly, before he noticed Fleur as well. "And… Weasley."

"Malfoy," Charlie greeted, and although his tone wasn't unfriendly, it was certainly bereft of any warmth. "We're here to see my sister."

Draco folded his arms. "Owls go extinct, did they?"

Charlie's eyes narrowed minutely. "We thought it best to drop by when you didn't expect us. Just in case…" he trailed off, only for Draco to roll his eyes.

"Just in case I'm secretly keeping your sister in a pit of vipers, Weasley?" Draco deadpanned. Charlie's jaw tightened noticeably, and Fleur immediately touched his arm in a reassuring manner. Interesting, thought Draco. Then he sighed dramatically.

"Don't be stupid. I would never do that to those poor snakes." Then he turned away and began walking. "You really want to see the abhorrent conditions in which your sister lives, Weasley?" he asked over his shoulders. "Allow me to show you."

Five minutes later, Draco threw open the doors to his suite.

As soon as he did so, he dropped his arms with a scowl. "Bloody hell, Weasley," Draco called out to the room. "I told you to keep this nonsense in YOUR room!"

Ginny Weasley's voice rang out from somewhere in the room, but it was difficult to see her, what with everything in the suite covered in blankets, pillows, and chairs, all of which was artfully formed into an impressive fortress.

"I ran out of space!" she called out from a hiding spot under a checkered blanket. "Consider yourself annexed, Malfoy!"

Draco turned very slowly to glare at Charlie and Fleur, both of whom were having a very difficult time stifling their laughter. Breathing in deeply, Draco faced the monstrosity of blankets and chairs once more.

"Weasley, your brother is here," he said flatly.

"Really?" shrieked Ginny, and a moment later, her head popped up in the far corner of the room, hair mussed. "Oh, Charlie!" Her face lit up in a brilliant smile, "And Fleur, too! Brilliant! Uh," she paused, looking around as Charlie waved with a sincere smile. "Hang on."

Then she disappeared again, ducking beneath the blankets and weaving her way through the room as best as she could, occasionally bumping into chairs and Merlin only knew what else, as Draco, Charlie, and Fleur all waited, with varying degrees of amusement and exasperation.
Finally, Ginny emerged near the door, and she instantly hugged Charlie and then Fleur. "What're you two doing here?" she asked, pushing back her messy hair from her face. "Everything alright?"

"Yes, yes," said Fleur immediately. "We only wanted to visit you, zat is all."

Draco took this opportunity to glance down at Charlie's hand, and what he saw there made him raise a brow. High. Charlie caught him looking and covered up his hand quickly, averting his eyes from Draco's.

"Oh," said Ginny, looking over Fleur's face a bit uncertainly. "Well, great."

"You might want to take them outside," suggested Draco, "seeing as how you've left them nowhere to sit."

Ginny grinned a bit. "Yeah, well – Hey, have you two had lunch? We could go outside and have a picnic!"

"That sounds great," said Charlie, ready to make Ginny happy in any way he could.

"I'm sure Bleaker can find one," she said sweetly, smirking at Draco, who bit back a smirk and simply shook his head at her.

"Enjoy your lunch. My aunt is visiting, so I will be in the sitting room." At Ginny's instant look of dismay, he added quickly, "Not that aunt. My grandfather's sister. She's ancient." Ginny relaxed a bit, and Draco gave a quick cordial nod to the other two before he vanished from the room.

"Ready?"

Fifteen minutes later, the three Weasleys were settled under a tree in the gardens, a blanket (which had taken some time to locate) spread beneath them and a nice lunch laid out. Ginny ate happily, glad to have Charlie visit since she hadn't seen him again since that first visit weeks ago.

"Where'd you get that necklace?" he asked curiously, pointing to the gold 'W'.

Ginny popped a piece of cake in her mouth. "Percy gave it to me," she said after swallowing (most) of her food. There was more to the necklace, she knew, but she wasn't sure what that was, and she didn't think it was safe to bring it up to Charlie. Not yet.

"Hm," he said simply, and Ginny shrugged.

"Just trying to be nice, I suppose. You know how Percy is. Not really sentimental. I think he just thought it would be a nice gesture, I don't know."

Charlie nodded. "I've spoken to him a few times. He seems to be… doing well."

"We are all doing ze best we can," Fleur reminded them both, and it was only then that Ginny realized she and Charlie had the same pinched expression on their faces.

"So," Ginny said, "Charlie, have you seen little Margrethe? Isn't she the best baby you've ever seen?"

Charlie smiled a bit. "Yes, she's lovely."
"Maybe," said Fleur, "We will bring her next time, and you can finally see her in person. We thought of bringing her today, but she was being so fussy."

Ginny nibbled on another cake. "We?" she repeated curiously. "You mean you and Gabrielle?"

Fleur paused, and her eyes flickered quickly to Charlie, who instantly looked down at his teacup. Ginny lowered her cake, slowly sucking a few crumbs off her lips. Suddenly, it didn't taste nearly so sweet.

"You said 'we'," Ginny said again, straightening. "Did you mean…"

That was when Charlie shifted, and Ginny realized with a terrible jolt that he looked terribly uncomfortable and – ashamed. "Ginny, there's…" But he trailed off, and neither he nor Fleur said anything.

Ginny looked between them, and her stomach lurched. "We…" she said, for what felt like the millionth time. That was when she looked at their hands. Charlie wore a simple band, as did Fleur.

The words were almost too much for her to say aloud. "You two… got married?"

Tears instantly pushed at the corners of Ginny's eyes, and she felt her expression tremble; her entire face contorted with the kind of piercing betrayal she hadn't felt since she was a very little girl.

"Ginny," came Charlie's voice, and it sounded as though he'd called out to her a few times. His little sister finally shifted her teary gaze to his, and his expression was distraught, imploring. "Ginny, please listen…"

"How could you do this?" asked Ginny, her voice cracking. She looked to Fleur. "You love Bill."

"I do, yes," said Fleur quickly, and her own eyes filled up with tears. "But Ginny… Ze tax, we had to do somezing and –"

"We're lucky the Ministry even allowed this," said Charlie with a thick swallow; he found it difficult to look Ginny's way. "Fleur's grandparents had to call in a few favors…" He wasn't crying, like Fleur and Ginny, but shame read in every line of his face.

Still Ginny just shook her head, her eyes low on checkered blanket. "No, this – this isn't right – you shouldn't have to do this – you're – " She swallowed a sob, but a tiny squeak escaped her as she desperately sucked in a much needed breath. "This isn't right!"

She slammed a hand down on the blanket. "This is not the way things are supposed to be!"

Charlie simply ducked his head, unable to look at Ginny, but Fleur leaned forward and said as firmly as she could, "But zis is ze way zey have to be right now, Ginny. Charlie and I are – We already were family. We care about each ozer. We will 'elp each ozer."

"But you don't love each other," cut in Ginny furiously. "You told Gabrielle to marry for love, and now you're, what, just – putting on a show? Is it supposed to make me feel better that you don't even really care for each other?"

"We do care for each other," said Charlie quietly, finally looking up at Ginny. His eyes glimmered with sadness. "Which is why we're going to work together to stay safe and care for Margrethe." Reaching out a hand, Charlie wrapped his fingers around Ginny's. She didn't pull away, but somehow, the loving grip made her sob even harder.
"Ginny, please," whispered Charlie, his face filling Ginny's blurry vision, "I'll be so sad if I leave here and you're still mad at me."

Ginny closed her eyes, and the rest of the visit passed by in a slow, hazy blur.

Some hours later, after Charlie and Fleur had left and the sky had dwindled into a hazy late afternoon mix of pinks and oranges, Ginny stared hard and thought nothing.

After several minutes of still silence, Draco Malfoy leaned forward from his spot on the grass, where he sat cross-legged on the opposite side of a chess board.

"Alright, Weasley," he put a chin in his hand and looked over her face, "Why are you so upset about your brother and Delacour?"

One of Ginny's tears slipped free and fell on the chessboard. "It's not supposed to be like this," she whispered. "George was going to marry someone like Angelina. He liked her." She squeezed her eyes shut. "And – And Fleur and Bill – they were – so in love, and, and – "

Charlie and Fleur had left hours ago, and Ginny had hugged them both tightly. But she'd never recovered the brilliant smile she'd had when they'd arrived.

"And, Charlie," Ginny doubled over, uncaring that Draco saw her crying. She didn't give a damn anymore. Everything in her body felt weak, like crumbling parchment, and it did not occur to her to pretend otherwise. They were alone in the courtyard, under the very same tree Ginny had shared with Charlie and Fleur, and nothing made any sense to her at all. The pain started in her stomach and went through every limb, fizzling out at the tips of her toes.

"And," Ginny wept, not even seeing Draco or the chessboard through her tears, "And Charlie never even wanted to get married!" Ginny pushed her trembling hands in front of her face as tears poured down her face. She looked up at Draco desperately. "He never wanted - and he loved his - his work and - "

"Not everyone understands Charlie," she sobbed, nearly incomprehensible, fumbling over every word.

All of this Draco listened to, with only the soft breeze passing over them making any noise in response. When Ginny was done, unable to say anything else through her sobs, Draco looked over the chessboard and then raised both brows, as if he'd discovered something useful there.

"Weasley," he said after a few moments, "Your brother and sister-in-law are fortunate they were allowed to marry. You should be happy." Draco brought up a knee and balanced his arm on it as he tilted his head at her.

"Look," he dropped his head enough to catch her low gaze, his voice quiet, "They're luckier than most. And they're adults, Weasley. They're allowed to make the decision to marry for convenience."

Ginny bit her lip and smashed her hand over her face to wipe away her tears, but more came, still, just quieter. She glanced at Draco just briefly, allowing her hair to curtain parts of her face.

"Maybe," said Draco gently, "this wasn't their first choice. But it's the safest one they could make." Ginny looked up slowly, just in time to watch Draco observe the chessboard with a faraway look.

"And that's all anyone can really ask for right now," he finished softly.
Ginny's sobs calmed and slowed, but the heaviness of her heart remained. "Now," said Draco, reaching over and tapping Ginny's shoulder, "Focus." He pointed at the chessboard.

"But," choked out Ginny, only to be cut off by Draco.

"Focus," he repeated firmly. Ginny turned her trembling gaze to the chessboard. "Not just on your pieces," Draco counseled her, his grey eyes trained on her face, "...but on the whole board."

Slowly, mechanically, Ginny looked over the board, taking into account everything she could see, feel, and sense, any strategy she could predict or account for.

After a long moment, she made her move.

Across the chessboard, Draco Malfoy watched Ginny's piece slide into place. Then he looked at her face again and his features relaxed into a small but sincere smile.

"Ah," he murmured. "That's better."

Three days later, George Weasley arrived at Malfoy Manor, with a lovely young witch named Vera in tow.

When Ginny received them both in the sitting room, her posture stiff and her face carefully composed, George did not introduce his new wife. Instead, the young witch stepped forward and spoke to Ginny in heavily accented English.

"Hello Ginny," she said slowly, carefully, with every effort at correctness. Her smile trembled nervously. "I am... so happy... to be - " she glanced at George, and he nodded in encouragement, "... a part... of your - " she paused again "- family," she finished at last.

Ginny listened, and when Vera was done, she looked at George, who looked to her with a painfully earnest look of hope. Then Ginny glanced at Draco, who stood tall at her side, just near her shoulder. He didn't say anything, she was able to take something away from his gaze. Not strength, exactly, but a sense of direction, perhaps. It was a strangely comforting experience, and some of the tension faded from her form.

Looking back at Vera, who waited anxiously, Ginny finally spoke.

"I'm happy, too," she told Vera slowly, letting a small smile take over her features so Vera would be sure of her meaning. Vera let out a breath of relief and enveloped Ginny in a hug, positively beaming when Ginny returned it.

George grinned as well, and Draco made eye-contact with Ginny just long enough to wink, his lips quirked in a smile. Ginny's own smile became a bit more genuine.

"Draco Malfoy," he introduced himself to Vera, who accepted his handshake eagerly, already knowing his name and family. "Let's have some tea, shall we?"
Chapter 11

Author's Note: Thank you so much for the reviews and support! You guys make my day. This is a bit shorter, but I graduate in two weeks, so don't worry. The next chapter will have more to it. :)

Every year, Draco's parents had a grand Christmas party at the manor.

Only the most elegant witches and wizards were invited, of course, nothing but the best. But Draco never minded all the stuffy adults, because they often brought their children, too, and Draco could run and play with wild abandon without his parents worrying too much about the noise or the fuss. It was always a wonderful evening, full of Great Britain's magical elite, a real Who's-Who of the times.

But to Draco, it was just the best holiday of all. And not just because of all the food or the decorations, and not because his friends got to come over and play. But because, at the end of the night, when all the guests had gone home and the Manor was finally quiet again, Draco's parents would curl him up in their arms and they'd all go to their suite, where they read together until Draco fell asleep.

Then, in the morning, they had their own little Christmas together, just the three of them.

It was on days like those Draco most often recalled his parents smiling, and it was also one of the few times he saw his father as truly affectionate. Sometimes, when Lucius thought no one was looking, he would watch Narcissa appreciatively before reaching over and drawing a hand over her face, so that his fingers brushed the top of her hairline, down over her ear, and then to her jawline, where his thumb swept the soft edges of her face and brushed just under her lips.

Narcissa, on these rare occasions, would smile truly, brilliantly. And small Draco would watch from his spot, the very example of admiration.

It was difficult to notice at first, but after the day George and Vera visited, things started to get… better. The days began to blend together in a way that they hadn't before. Instead of passing by Ginny in a meaningless array of bleak and unremarkable instances, Ginny found the next few weeks to be surprisingly enjoyable.

Fun, even.

Such as that day Narcissa brought over her snooty friends...

"… planning on an upgrade for the foyer here," Narcissa was saying to her well-to-do guests as she led them along the bright sunlit dining room. The two elegant witches nodded in approval, making noises of agreement whenever prompted.

Just then, a blur raced by one of the large windows, rocking the hinges.

The three women paused, and one of them leaned over and peered curiously at the tall glass. "What on earth was that?" she asked, and Narcissa raised a brow before plastering a smile on her face.

"I'm sure it was nothing – an owl perhaps – "
But then something blazed by again, and this one was accompanied by a blustering roll of wind that blasted open every window in the room, creating a gust that nearly bowled the three women over. Startled, Narcissa straightened quickly only to see – to her mounting rage – a Snitch hovering just in front of her, wings beating furiously. Then it was off, out of the opposite window, and she knew what was coming next before it even happened.

"I SEE IT, MALFOY!"

That was when two large blurs raced through the open window, just over the heads of the women, through the dining room and straight out of the opposite window after the Snitch, creating such a billowing gust of wind that all three of the witches looked like they'd just stepped out of a tornado.

After a moment, Narcissa cleared her throat, smoothed back her wild hair and said chipperly, "Tea, ladies?"

Or that day they experimented with some Weasley-esque inventions...

"I'm not sure we're supposed to light this in grass," noted Draco, looking down at the monstrosity of fuses and magical explosives they'd made.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Thanks for the update, Filch! Now hurry up already!"

They did so, and as soon as the firework was lit, a ring of grass around it erupted in a popping purple flame. "Oh, bloody hell –"

"ABANDON SHIP!"

The two bolted, but even from the inside of the house, Lucius Malfoy could hear his small garden shed explode into a furious blaze of Merlin only knew what.

"This is why," he said to himself, "I only had the one."

Or that time Ginny really, really did her best...

...Ginny sat at the long Malfoy dinner table, her fingers firmly grasping the fork, her feet doing their very best not to twitch. Draco sat directly across from her, and the only other occupant at the table was a very irritable Narcissa, since Damien was gone more often than not.

After nearly twenty minutes of uneasy silence, Ginny screwed up her best attempt at a smile and said to Narcissa, "So… this is very good." After a pause, she ventured politely, "Is it like… a – family recipe?"

Naricissa's eyes slowly slid to Ginny, her pretty lips pursed into a tiny sour pucker. "Are you suggesting," she asked, scandalized, "that I made this meal myself?"

"Merlin," Draco pressed a hand over his face.

"BLOODY HELL, MALFOY! I TRIED!"

There was also the day Ginny helped Draco out...
"Okay, so explain to me again," said Draco, "why you would prefer to fix this, instead of just letting me take it to a shop?"

Ginny ran a rag over the handle of the broomstick and smiled, pleased. "Because Malfoy, if I'd let someone else fix it, then I couldn't do this!"

Then she turned it to flash him the other side of the broom, which now read – **THE FLYING FERRET**.

"I hate you," he told her flatly, as Ginny laughed herself into a fit on the ground, wallowing around in the grass like the dirty little troll she was.

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Or the day she nearly beat him.

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"Check," said Ginny, her chin in her hand.

She nearly missed Draco's look of surprise on the opposite side of the chessboard, but when she caught it, her features instantly brightened. "Did I – did I catch you off guard, Malfoy?"

"No," he said, but she could see he was pressing back a smile. "I knew that was coming."

"Liar!" Ginny straightened and pumped both fists in the air. "Admit it, Malfoy! You didn't see that coming!"

"You're still going to lose," Draco said with a chuckle, but Ginny folded her arms over her chest smugly and shook her head.

"Doesn't matter. I'm getting better."

Draco rolled his eyes, but his smile remained.

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And then one morning a few weeks later, it snowed.

"Malfoy!"

Ginny pounced onto his bed and he groaned. "Malfoy, it's snowing!"

"We live in England," he grumbled. "How rare is snow?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "But it's the FIRST snow! That's important!" She jumped back off the bed, bare feet padding along the floor before she tossed herself against the frosty window and smiled. "Wait," she said, "What month is it?" She really needed a calendar.

Draco rolled over in his bed and squinted at her. "November, you harpy. Shut up."

"November…" Ginny murmured, glistening eyes on the snowfall out of the window. It was still soft, light, like a layer of sugar placed delicately on the many fixtures of the Malfoy grounds. The courtyard she could see from the bedroom window was slowly falling to sleep under a blanket of sparkling white particles, and Ginny's chest swelled with affection for the sight of it.

If it was November, that meant she had been at the Manor for nearly six months.

Turning on the window seat, Ginny wrapped her arms around her knees and watched the growing
opaqueness of the window; a misty seal of frost crept over the edges, as if it were trying to sneak into the room and disturb its warmth. Snow had always seemed sentient to Ginny.

It wanted her out there.

"I'm going outside," she told Draco, before dashing around the room. Only then did she realize she didn't have any gloves or a hat or anything, not even a coat. "Malfoy, I'm taking your stuff."

Draco mumbled something into his pillow, but Ginny disregarded it.

A few minutes later she was gone, out of the door, stomping down the hallway in her graceless way. Twenty minutes later, Draco approached the window of his bedroom, a cup of hot coffee in his hand. Peering out of the window, he spotted Ginny out in the courtyard, running about in the snow.

Ginny was wearing Draco's black coat, which ran very long on her shorter frame, and one of his matching black hats, pulled down far over her ginger hair. She'd taken his gloves as well, too long for her fingers but suitable enough, it seemed, to gather all the snow she could and plop it into an ever-growing pile.

Shaking his head, Draco settled on the window seat and watched her, finding that he enjoyed it quite a bit.

Just a few days after the first snowfall, Ginny sat on the floor with Bleaker, dealing out cards.

After a few rounds, Ginny let out a groan. "Oh, you beat me again, Bleaker!"

Bleaker tittered. "Missus Weasley is too kind to Bleaker."

"Damn right she is," said Draco, appearing in the room from the hallway. "Go clean something."

The elf nodded graciously and disappeared. Ginny made a face, and Draco raised a brow.

"Why are you still in your pajamas?" he asked, and Ginny returned his sarcastic look.

"What? It's only 9 AM. Who do I have to look fancy for?"

"Well," said Draco, "I don't think even a vagabond like you should wear pajamas to Diagon Alley." Ginny blinked confusedly for a moment, before suddenly, delight took over her features and she leaped to her feet.

"What, you mean – I can go? Today?"

"Got the signature this morning," he said, carefully pressing back a smile. He waved the parchment, but Ginny was already bouncing on her feet.

"Yes, yes! Oh – wait – hang on – I'll go change, don't you DARE leave without me!" Then she rushed into her room to change, quickly brushing out her hair. Once she was done, the two stepped outside of the manor, where a light snow remained. They exited the main gate to get to the apparition point, but Draco paused and held up a hand to stop her bouncing.

"Now, Weasley, remember that Diagon Alley isn't going to be exactly the same – "

Ginny made an impatient face.

" – and before you blame it all on me, as you always do, it's just a product of war. And it's getting
"Is Fortescue's open?" she asked, and Draco marveled at the fact that her first concern was ice cream.

"Yes," he said, amused.

"So let's GO already!" Then she stuck out her hand pointedly.

Draco observed her for a moment before he shook his head and stepped forward, sliding his hand into hers. A split-second later, they both disappeared with a pop.

As soon as they appeared together in Diagon Alley, Ginny's face lit up in a dazzling smile, one which Draco noticed with a hint of pride. She let go of Draco's hand, but kept close, and together they walked into the busy street.

Draco's cautious mood lightened considerably at seeing how much busier the streets were than they'd been a year before. It was true – businesses really were coming back, just slowly. Sure, there were still several empty streets, but he'd keep Ginny from those for now, give them time to make their comeback. For now, at least five of the busiest blocks were in great working order.

Ginny gasped loudly before running to a shop window. "Malfoy, look at this broom!" Before he could even respond, she hurried around the display and into the shop, moving up to the fabulous new broom models with an airy sigh of appreciation.

"This is just beautiful," she said, holding up her hands reverently. Draco was forced to agree.

"Damn fine model," he said, getting a tingle of excitement he hadn't felt in years. "Look at the handle design – totally updated. Top of the line."

"Ah," said the storekeeper, coming over to them. "You both have a good eye!" He proceeded to prattle on about every single detail of the Pegasus 2000, "Only just come out a week ago!" The shopkeeper said proudly. Ginny had never had a salesman pay so much attention to her, especially not in a full-price shop, and she soaked up every detail of the luxurious broom.

It was only after the salesman was dismissed that Ginny realized he must have recognized Draco. Ah, the attention rich people got, she thought wryly.

"Bloody hell," she said, finally noticing the price tag. "This thing is five thousand galleons! You could buy a house for that!"

"Who needs a house when you have a great broom?" asked Draco. "You can't put a price on what carries you hundreds of feet off the ground, Weasley."

"Ooh, what a philosopher you are," Ginny snorted with a grin. "Please, tell me more of your great life wisdom."

"Shut up."

"You shut up."

After they left the broomstick shop, the pair drifted in and out of various shops, and Ginny was just as delighted to see the things she recognized as she was at anything new. They went through the pet store ("You really need a cat, Malfoy. You seem like a cat person."

"What do I need a cat for? I
already have you to destroy things and not listen when I talk") and to the herbology store, where
Ginny mused over the plants with delight.

They finally made it to Fortescue's, but as soon as they approached, Ginny balked. "I don't have
any gold," she muttered. Draco gave her an incredulous look.

"Well, by an amazing stroke of luck, I do," he informed her wryly.

"I don't want to take your gold. I want a job."

"Fine," said Draco, "Your job is to stop complaining." At Ginny's scoff, he picked up her hand and
deposited some Galleons into it. "There, for a job well done. Now go." Ginny stuck out her tongue,
but the desire for sweet creamy goodness won out, and she trotted up to the shop with Draco.

"Alright," she said, "But only because I really want a treat."

"Mmhm." Draco looked over the menu. "It is really too cold for ice cream."

"Well, get over it!" Ginny exclaimed, now distracted. After a thoughtful perusal of the menu, she
leaned in to the window. "Cinnamon twist for me! And – What, Malfoy? Oh! Chocolate for him." When
they received their treats and Ginny tried to return his change, he waved her off.

"Keep it. Use it to by yourself a muzzle."

"Oh, you are so funny," said Ginny, settling down at one of the outside tables with Draco. After
enjoying a few amazing bites, she sucked on her spoon before she pulled it out and pointed at
Draco next to her. "I really do want a job, Malfoy."

"You're not good enough at anything to have a job," he told her lightly, watching people on the
streets.

"I am at least eighty-million times better than you are everything," she informed him, spooning
more ice cream into her mouth.

"Well, the terms of your newfound freedom are that I'm with you in public," he told her, shifting in
her direction. "So until that is lifted, you're actually still under supervision."

Ginny groaned around her spoon before she jabbed it aggressively into her ice cream. "Why is this
taking so long? My brothers got to do whatever they wanted within just a few months!"

Draco looked over at her with a smirk. "Well, obviously, they still think you're a danger. And so
until you can convince them you're not, you'll need to be watched." He paused. "In other words,"
he said plaintively, "You're going to need to get better at acting."

Ginny thought this over. "So you mean then," she said, edging closer as her eyes twinkled, "you
realize now that I am always going to be a threat?"

Draco rolled his eyes a bit, but the effect was muted by his ice cream spoon in his mouth. He
dropped the spoon into his cup and observed her with something dangerously close to appreciation.
"I'm saying they would be unwise to underestimate you."

Ginny placed her chin in her hands and gave him a real smile, but softer than her others.

"Yes," she agreed quietly. "That is true."
Of course, a trip to Diagon Alley would not have been complete without a trip to George's shop. Sneaking up behind him, Ginny waited until George was bent over, fixing some items on a shelf, before she popped him in the ribs and caused him to jump. "Agh – Ginny!" George let out a whooping yell and scooped Ginny up into his arms. "What're you doing here? You can go out now?"

"Yeah, I mean, you know," Ginny looked over her shoulder at Draco who slipped his hands into the pockets of his robes and greeted George with a nod. "With Malfoy, but yeah, I can visit now!"

"That's great," George said, hugging her close again. "When can I exploit you for free labor?"

"Soon," Ginny promised with a laugh. "I promise."

Draco rolled his eyes. "You just said you wanted to work for gold!"

"Whatever, Malfoy, it's a family business!" Ginny said, before twirling in her spot, delighted to see that George's store was quite busy. The shelves were full, people were moving about, talking, laughing, looking over the shelves. Sure, it wasn't the same as the joke shop, but she was thrilled to see George so productive and successful.

The lone twin showed them all around the store, although Draco had already seen most of it. Vera appeared, wearing an adorable little salesperson apron she'd made herself. She still couldn't speak much English, but she was more than happy to hug both Ginny and Draco, the latter of whom patted her shoulder awkwardly. Even through the language barrier, it was obvious she was a happy, bubbly person.

"We should get going," said Draco a short while later, and even though Ginny made a loud, aggrieved noise, she knew he was right. They'd been out all day. After giving George and Vera a reluctant good-bye, the two departed for the end of the street, which was slowly thinning as shoppers and workers returned home.

The sun had already dropped behind the tallest buildings of Diagon Alley, and it gave the streets a settled look of grey. As Draco and Ginny prepared to depart, Draco looked across a crowd of people. He paused, and when Ginny followed his gaze, she saw Lavender Brown emerge from a shop, carrying a tiny baby swaddled in a blanket. A moment later, a tall thin boy she recognized as Theodore Nott Jr. emerged behind her. After helping Lavender adjust her cloak more snugly around her shoulders, Theo put a hand on Lavender's back and they turned to walk away. Ginny thought she saw a glimpse of a smile on Lavender's face, but she couldn't be sure.

Looking back at Draco, Ginny's lips quirked. He offered her his hand for the Apparition, and she took it.

As the days passed, Ginny found herself more and more relaxed in the manor. Draco seemed to stay at home more often, handling business from the comfort of his own room as opposed to Diagon Alley, and Ginny found herself strangely glad for his company. On the days when he was gone for hours, Ginny found herself looking at the clock often as she waited for him to return.

This, Ginny told herself firmly, was only because she had no one else to talk to.

"What was your favorite subject in school?"

Draco considered Ginny's question from where he was perched just opposite her on the plush window seat. The pair sat facing one another, their backs against opposite panes and their legs
extended, so that Draco's longer limbs rested next to Ginny's. On the other side of the frosted glass, the cool dark night showed only the occasional glimpses of heavy snowfall outside.

"Alchemy," he answered after only a moment.

Ginny stared in disbelief before letting out a laugh. "Alchemy, seriously? That's like – potions but with math."

"And what's wrong with that?" he asked, amused.

"Seems really hard. And I don't even remember that being offered at Hogwarts."

"You could only take it as a sixth or seventh year," he told her. "And you'd be terrible at it."

"Oh?" asked Ginny with an eyeroll. "You think I'm not smart, Malfoy?"

"You're not patient," he corrected her. The two took turns reaching in a bowl of caramel popcorn, their fingers brushing occasionally. "Alchemy projects can take years, decades even. You'd lose interest."

"So is that what you would've done for a job?" Ginny asked curiously. "If you'd been born a plebian who had to work for a living?"

"Maybe," Draco said. "Good thing I'm rich. What was your favorite subject?"

Ginny crunched on some popcorn as she thought. "Transfiguration, I think. But I wouldn't have done something like that for work. If I could've had any job, I'd be a professional Quidditch player." She grinned, and Draco rolled his eyes.

"Let me guess. The Holyhead Harpies."

"You bet your ass," she said with a confident nod. "It's what I always wanted. I'd be their Captain, too. Focused and driven, like Oliver Wood, but a little less crazy. Because he was right mental, sometimes."

"I remember," said Draco dryly. After a few minutes of silence, he said looked over Ginny's face and said, "You can still do that, you know. The British Quidditch League hasn't disappeared or anything."

Ginny blinked, looking surprised. Then she crunched on more of their snack and looked out of the window. "Huh," she said. "I guess I just – I hadn't really thought about it in so long. I keep forgetting."

"Forgetting what?" he asked, curious.

Ginny looked over at him. "The future."

She leaned her forehead against the cold glass of the window. "That there even is one." The coolness of the glass seeped into her skin, and Ginny reached up, drawing a fingertip along the window so that it made a line in the misty glass. Draco didn't have anything to say to that, so he leaned back his head and looked with Ginny out of the window, out on to the snow-covered grounds. A strange ease settled over them both, and it was enough to lull Draco into a relaxed pose where he sat. After several minutes of comfortable silence, in which the only sound was the crackling of the nearby fire, Ginny nudged his leg.
"You're falling asleep," she said with a short laugh. "Go to bed, Malfoy."

Grunting in agreement, Draco slid down from the window seat, and Ginny did the same.

"Good night," he said with a yawn.

"Good night," Ginny replied as she shut the door to her bedroom, only just realizing what she'd said when her door closed with a click. She paused, standing in the darkness of her room, hand still on the door.

Then she let her grip fall away from the handle and climbed into her bed to sleep.

Out of all of her brothers, it was, surprisingly, Percy who came to visit at the manor most often.

"My schedule is more relaxed than theirs," he told her a week after Ginny's first trip to Diagon Alley. "I'm technically a tax collector for the Ministry, so I often leave the office during work hours." Ginny made a face.

"Ew, Percy. Of all the awful jobs you could have taken."

"What's wrong with collecting taxes?" he asked, astonished. "I'm doing a civic duty!"

"Yeah, but like, are you taking taxes for that horrible marriage law? Because if so, that's awful."

Percy sighed. "I collect all the taxes I'm told to, Ginny. And so far I haven't had to take anyone's last Knut, so please, do try and be supportive." Ginny tried her best to fix her facial expression in a more amicable manner, but it was hard. Draco was right. She needed to work on her acting.

Draco wasn't in the room – he was actually with his mother in the foyer – so Percy took that opportunity, as he seemed to do often, to ask about his treatment of Ginny. "Is he abusing you at all?"

"No, Percy," said Ginny, exasperated.

"I'm only asking," said her brother. "I want to know how he's treating you."

"He's fine," she said. "Really. Sometimes, he's not even a complete prat."

Percy seemed to think on this for a moment, and Ginny felt him looking at her necklace, the golden 'W' hanging on a delicate chain around her neck. "Do you think…" Percy paused. "Do you think he might actually be feeling some… remorse?" When Ginny's brows furrowed, he leaned forward and continued in a whisper, "Do you think you might be persuading him to come around to our side?"

Ginny's first thought, much to her horror, was that there was no 'our side.' But she quickly banished the thought. Of course there was still a fight on. It was just slow and hidden. Subtle. And so far, she had contributed nothing, but apparently, Percy was doing something, even if he wouldn't tell her what.

Ginny observed Percy's eager expression. "No," she said with a shake of her head, "No, he's not – it's not like that. He's still the same blood-purist, egotistical elitist he always was." She paused. "He's just… nicer about it, that's all."

Percy looked disappointed, but he simply shrugged and leaned back. "Well, if you think there's a chance he might ever help us… You should tell me. Immediately."
Ginny sighed heavily and pushed herself up from the couch. "Whatever, Percy. Malfoy doesn't think like that."

"So he's still loyal to Voldemort, then?"

Ginny picked up a quill and pressed the sharp end into the pad of one of her fingers. "As loyal as he's always been," she answered stoically.

"Hm," said Percy again, before hopping up. "Well, I need to be going. Be sure to write me if anything happens." With that, he left rather abruptly, and Ginny was left alone with her thoughts until Draco returned.
Ginny thought the nightmares would stop after she threw out the diary. But if anything, they grew worse.

Her schoolwork suffered. She failed to notice greetings, her eyes always drooping with exhaustion. Her friends worried but eventually gave up on discovering why she was so distant. And none of this seemed fixable to Ginny, who was only eleven. Everything felt far and exhausting, so out of a reach for someone who hadn’t been allowed to ever truly begin.

Why did you abandon me, Ginny?

It always started out that way, gentle and sad and lonely. Calling out for her as a void, before the shadows began to take form, and that strange face she’d come to know took shape once more.

It was Tom, trying to draw her back to him. It was so difficult to resist.

Come back to me, Ginny. Please. I need you. You’re my only friend.

So soft, so pleading.

But each time Ginny refused, the voice grew harder. More chilling.

GINNY. HOW DARE YOU LEAVE ME, GINNY?

She cried out in her sleep, and her roommates cast silencing charms on her bed.

Hands reached for her in her dream, and Ginny screamed, desperate to get away, because it all felt so real. The menacing presence, which seeped into her skin and threatened to strangle her heart. Tom had been so kind at first. So caring.

She’d wanted so badly to help him, to talk to him. He tugged on those memories in her mind, preying on them for what they were – a desperation, a longing for companionship.

We can be friends again, Ginny.

The voice was gentle, but the grip on her – even within the nightmare – was not. Ginny tried to worm away, she struggled, but the grip grew tighter and tighter and tighter.

Please, she begged in the dream. Please let me go.

The face of Tom Riddle, so young and handsome, transformed into a cruel sneer. The grip never ceased, and the pain felt so real, Ginny could not imagine what was worse – enduring these nightmares for months on end, or returning to the haze of confusion that had plagued her when the diary had manipulated her nights, placing literal blood on her hands.

Ginny’s pillow was wet with her sobs. Please, Tom. Please go. Please leave me be.
And yet his grip remained. It was just a dream, just a dream.

But when Ginny jerked awake the next morning, the bruises on her arm were quite real. And she knew it wasn't the last time Tom Riddle would use her.

"Malfoy."

Draco ignored her, grey eyes on a piece of parchment in his hand. It was only one of about fifty in a pile next to where he sat at a table in the manor's library.

Ginny inched forward. "Malfoy." A short pause. "Malfoy. Maaaaaaaalfoy." She was no more than three inches away from his side. When he steadfastly refused to acknowledge her, she took a long deep breath.

"MAAAAAAL – "

"What?!

Ginny did a very poor job of covering up her grin. "I want a Christmas tree."

Draco's expression made Ginny lose all control of her laughter. "That's what you're bothering me for?" he asked in his most aggrieved tones. He turned his attention back to the parchment, which Ginny was pretty sure was something related to his not-work-work, since Draco claimed that rich people didn't work, even though he actually worked all the time.

"It's not even December yet." Draco signed the document with a flourish and picked up another. "And the Christmas tree is always in the parlor."

"I don't like going in the parlor," countered Ginny. She wrinkled her nose and then muttered, "Your mum is always in there."

Draco glared at her. "My mother doesn't have an infectious disease, Weasley. You two can be in the same room together."

"Yeah, because that always works out real well," said the redhead with a huff. "Remember last week? She told you that she was going to call an exterminator to get me out of the house?" Ginny paused. "And she said this while I was standing there?"

Draco did his best to continue ignoring her, so Ginny clicked her tongue loudly before changing tactics.

"Christmas trees smell nice. We could put it in your room, where the bookshelf used to be."

"The one you smashed into a million pieces, you mean?" asked Draco without looking up.

"Mnhm." Ginny smiled innocently. Draco paused long enough to give her a look that Ginny now recognized as his curious mixture of exasperation, genuine annoyance, and a hint of amusement. However, he was saved from answering further by a tap on the window.

Ginny jumped up and received an owl, taking the letter from it and yelping when it bit her because she didn't have any treats. "Hateful creature," she muttered, coming back to the table. "Oh, it's for me! And it's from Fleur!"

Draco raised a brow at her but didn't say anything, instead choosing to return to his work, glad for her distraction. Ginny opened the letter and scanned Fleur's elegant handwriting. At one point, she
giggled a bit, but by the end of it, a frown had wormed its ways onto her features. She folded it and thought again, settling across the table from Draco.

"Malfoy."

A deep sigh. "What?"

"Fleur and Charlie are having some problems." Ginny tossed the letter onto the table. "Apparently, they live in a tiny little flat in Diagon Alley, and Charlie's miserable there. Which I don't find surprising, because Charlie hates cities. Fleur says it's the only place they could afford, though."

Draco looked up at Ginny, thoroughly unsympathetic in his expression, although he didn't stop her from continuing.

"Plus," said Ginny with a wince, "it seems that Charlie got, erm, fired from his new job at the Magical Animal Menagerie."

"Fired?" repeated Draco. "What, did he free all the animals or something?"

Ginny bit her lip and grinned a tiny bit.

"You're joking," said Draco, leaning back in his seat.

"Mm, apparently he had a bunch of his friends lined up to take the animals away, too. The conditions must've been pretty bad there." Sighing heavily, Ginny too slumped in her seat. "Poor Charlie. He's completely out of his element, Malfoy. He's with a girl – pretty new thing for him – and a baby, working a new job that's just fired him, and at the end of the day, he only has a sad little flat to go back home to." The thought genuinely depressed Ginny. Charlie was normally such a happy fellow. But judging by the contents of Fleur's letter, Charlie was being uncharacteristically short and bitter at home.

"Malfoy, we need to help them."

At this, Draco rolled his eyes and looked at his work again. "I don't have time to help your brother, Weasley. I have my own things to worry about."

"Oh, come on, Malfoy! Surely we can do something!"

"We could, yes. But we won't."

"Look, all they need," said Ginny leaning forward, "is a new place to live. That would help Charlie's spirits, and he could find a new job." She gestured to the pile of scrolls on the table. "And you own like twenty properties! You could rent one to them, somewhere out in the country."

"How can I rent to someone who doesn't have a job?" asked Draco incredulously. "Despite my many acts of good will over the years," he paused here, making it clear that he knew he'd done no such thing, "I do not run a charity." He flipped up the paper and blocked Ginny's face again. "If you want to help your brother, I suggest you remind him that people do not pay to look at empty cages where animals used to be."

Ginny scowled heavily and put her chin in her hands to glare fully at Draco. When he remained silent for a few minutes, staring at his papers and making notes, Ginny's lips quirked to the side mischievously.

"Malfoy," she said after a few moments, "Are those documents you're looking at quite…"
"Very," he said without looking up.

Ginny's eyes flickered to the door of the library, which was open. Then she glanced at Draco's wand, which was on the table next to his books. She paused just a few seconds, gathering her energy.

Then, with a wild grin, she snatched the parchment out of Draco's hand and knocked his wand off the table, so that it rolled under a chair.

"Weasley!" exclaimed Draco, but it was too late. Ginny had made a mad dash for the door.

"DON'T YOU – BLOODY HELL, WHERE IS MY WAND – " Draco finally grabbed it, but Ginny was already out of sight.

Shrieking with laughter, Ginny raced out of the room, and Draco tore off after her, nearly crashing into a table in the hallway as he did so.

"COME ON, MALFOY!" she called out to him with a breathless laugh. "ARE YOU EIGHTEEN OR EIGHTY?"

Parchment in hand, Ginny dashed through the parlor and crashed through the doors on the opposite side, trying not to laugh, because it only took more air out of her lungs. Draco burst into the room behind her, and as soon as he spotted her catching her breath, he ran after her, causing Ginny to shriek and take off running again.

Draco had much longer legs than Ginny, but Ginny was better on the turns, and every time she cut around a corner, she gained just a little distance on Draco, who had a harder time getting around the various obstacles Ginny cleared with ease.

"DO NOT LOSE THAT PARCHMENT, YOU STUPID GINGER!"

"Ahahaha," was Ginny's answer as she thundered down the hallways, hurtling herself through each room, through one door, and then another. One door led her to a flight of stairs, and she nearly fell down the steps, she was running so fast and Draco was gaining on her.

The next set of doors opened into a massive kitchen filled with house-elves, all of whom looked stunned to see her. "Oops, sorry!" Ginny called out, before screaming at the top of her lungs when Draco came crashing in behind her, his hand only inches away from her robes.

"NOPE!" Ginny took off again, leaping straight over two house-elves carrying a tray of bread. Draco skidded to a stop right next to them, then looked around, bewildered.

"So this is the kitchen," he said to himself.

Then Ginny accidentally knocked into a shelf, spilling a bunch of pots and pants, and his attention was once more on her as he raced in her direction. Ginny shrieked and flew through another set of doors, and the pounding of their feet only slowed when Ginny ran up yet another set of stairs back to the main level.

Screaming like she was being chased by a werewolf, Ginny sprang into a hallway and through another set of doors – only to freeze mid-run when she saw Lucius, Narcissa, Damien and three other haughty looking
wizards having tea together.

"Erm," said Ginny, one leg still lifted as if to run.

That was when Draco burst through the door, slammed right into Ginny and hurled her into an open closet, which he immediately shut and leaned against, panting heavily. When Draco noticed his parents and their guests, he slipped into an unconvincingly casual pose, elbow leaned against the closet door, his legs crossed at the ankle.

"What…" said Lucius, as if he were looking upon the human equivalent of a migraine, "… are you doing?"

Inside the closet, several thuds and bangs seemed to indicate that there was a lot of crashing going on inside. Draco's eyes widened innocently at Lucius' question and he lifted a hand, tapping the tip of his wand on the closet door. Inside, Ginny's screams suddenly became much more muffled.

"I…" Draco said slowly, "… am getting an extra curtain, of course."

While Narcissa rubbed the bridge of her nose, Draco opened the closet door and pulled out a lump of dusty old curtains that were shaped suspiciously like Ginny. "So then," continued Draco, slowly edging out of the room with the curtain-laced lump struggling in his grip, "I'll just… be on my way."

Ginny continued to scream from her velvet prison.

Once Draco had dragged Ginny back to their shared suite, he yanked back the top of the curtains from her head and she gasped, finally able to breathe properly.

And of course, her first reaction to this new supply of oxygen was to laugh uproariously at Draco's expression.

"Are you gonna help my brother or not, Malfoy?" she exclaimed as soon as she could talk.

Draco lifted both hands in the air and groaned loudly. "BLOODY HELL, FINE!"

At the kitchen table of a small flat in Diagon Alley, Charlie Weasley sat with his hands folded.

"I really am sorry," he said again, frowning deeply at his calloused fingertips.

Fleur stood in the kitchen, arms folded. She closed her eyes because she could not bear to look at him. "I just – I just can't talk about zis right now, Charlie. I cannot." She placed a hand on the kitchen counter and tried to keep her temper in check. The stress felt like a fracture in her spine, growing worse with every day. The stifling nature of their tiny flat did not help either of their tempers.

"We don't even have enough gold to go and get ze zings needed for Margrethe," she whispered, tears filling her eyes.

Charlie swallowed tightly, feeling worse than he had in a very long time. Then a knock came at the door, and Charlie and Fleur tensed in unison.

Instantly alert, Charlie grabbed his wand and waved Fleur away from the door. She turned and headed into the flat's one bedroom, where Margrethe was sleeping, her gaze suddenly terrified. Charlie moved up to the door cautiously and peered through the peephole.
When he drew back, his brows were furrowed in confusion. "What in the hell…"

Charlie Weasley opened his front door to see Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley standing just at the entrance of his flat, wearing matching black sunglasses and pleased smirks.

"Pack your meager belongings, Weasley," said Draco.

"Because you three," said Ginny with a wide grin, "are moving!"

Two hours later, Draco was the first to drop down into a grassy path out in the English countryside. Setting his broom against a low stone wall that was covered in moss, Draco took a moment to find the wrought-iron gate. Ginny peered out from behind him, her grin still in place, as Charlie and Fleur landed their brooms behind them, bewildered. Margrethe was asleep and swaddled in a sling on Fleur's front.

"Right this way," said Draco, leading the others down an overgrown path.

After several feet, the path twisted and opened up to reveal a lovely little grey-stone cottage, set just in front of a pond covered in lily pads. Everything else around the cottage was natural woods, though an unpaved road was visible through a break in the tree line. A great old tree shadowed the grassy area in front of the house, with thick old branches that lingered low enough to swing on. Birds chirped above their heads, and the sun filtered through the foliage in sparse rays of yellow light.

Charlie and Fleur stopped in their tracks upon seeing the cottage.

"Well," said Ginny, turning to look at them. "What do you think?"

"We can live here?" asked Charlie, his blue eyes wide and astonished. "Really?"

"For the same price you pay in Diagon Alley, yes," said Draco, his lips quirked. For a moment, nothing was said. Then Charlie let out a great whooping sound, and his entire face lit up.

"This is – PERFECT!"

He snatched Ginny up in a hug and twirled her around, and the motion was accompanied by a joyful laugh. Fleur laughed, too, a single tear escaping before she wiped it away. "Oh, zis is so beautiful," she said to Ginny, hugging her tightly as well.

Ginny beamed. "Well, it's actually Malfoy's property, so," she said, shifting a smirk in Draco's direction. He refused to look as pleased as he felt, but Ginny could tell it was there, in his eyes.

"No hugging required," he told Fleur, holding up his hand as if he were warding off a demonic presence. He pulled a piece of parchment out of his robes and gave it to Charlie when the older wizard finally stopped running around. "In order to keep this place, I suggest you get a job again. Talk to this wizard at the Ministry, tell him about your magizoological work. He'll have something for you, I'm sure."

Charlie accepted the parchment, his lips parted in surprise. Then he smiled and tucked it into his pocket. "Thank you, Malfoy."

Draco squinted at Charlie's thanks like he wasn't sure how he felt about it. But then Ginny appeared at his shoulder, positively jubilant, and Draco simply rolled his eyes and gave his own little smile. A moment later, Ginny bounced off with Fleur to look at the inside of the cottage,
which had been neglected in the past few years but wasn't without a great deal of promise.

Charlie and Draco remained outside, where Charlie happily leaned against a tree and peered up into its branches. Draco was distracted by his observation of the property, and he didn't notice for a moment that Charlie was watching him until the older wizard spoke.

"Ginny seems to be doing a bit better," said Charlie, though he didn't sound overly gracious. He moved to stand near Draco. "I'm grateful for your help. And I'm very happy she seems to be well taken care of."

Draco looked over at Charlie and raised a brow, because he recognized something in Charlie's tones that made him know to pay attention.

"You appear to have some redeeming qualities," noted Charlie, glancing out over the land. "Which is nice. But you have my young sister in your captivity, so I feel obligated to remind you of something."

Charlie looked at Draco and held his gaze unwaveringly. "Ginny may not have her wand back yet… but I do."

Draco paused, and as he always did when receiving threats, he took his time evaluating the potential risk involved.

Charlie Weasley was not a particularly menacing person; he had round, friendly features and although he'd once been quite muscular, his body was currently very thin from the imprisonment. Charlie also wasn't known for violence, so far as Draco was aware, and he certainly wasn't what anyone might call a Dark wizard. All in all, nothing about Charlie really seemed to present a serious danger.

Then Draco remembered that this was a man who'd spent the last five years of his life *living in caves and fucking with dragons*.

"Noted," said Draco simply, facing forward once more.

When Ginny and Fleur came back out, Charlie took Margrethe, freshly awake from her nap, and held her in his arms as he pointed out to her every species of tree and bird he could see on their new property. Ginny smiled, happier than she'd been in a while, watching Charlie's delight as he took the wide-eyed baby from spot to spot, cheerfully telling her a million facts, as if she could really understand them.

Draco and Ginny watched from under a tree as Margrethe coo'ed happily at Charlies delight. "Another ginger," Draco said of the baby, shaking his head in disbelief. "Honestly, does it ever run out with you lot?"

Ginny smirked. "I don't think so, no."

Charlie's delight seemed to further confuse him. "Some people are so happy with so little," Draco remarked to Ginny.

"It's not little to them," she reminded him gently. Ginny wasn't looking at Draco, but instead she was watching the little family as they moved around the cottage, in awe of every exciting little detail. "Having a space to call home… having that comfort – it's so important."

Draco looked over at Ginny, where she leaned against the tree just next to him.
"To know that you have that sort of place," murmured Ginny, her eyes in the direction of Charlie and the others, but still faraway. "That kind of home, where you can walk through the door and finally just… breathe. It's a comfort like nothing else in the world." Draco fell silent and thought on this.

Ginny and Draco left a little while later, so that Charlie and Fleur could get settled in.

Three days later, just before the start of December, Draco dared to wake Ginny up in her bed, which was always a risky endeavor.

"Mmph – What?" asked Ginny, lifting her head from her pillow. Draco huffed, but he wasn't nearly as bothered as he liked to pretend.

"Get in here and tell me where you want this damn tree."

They placed it where Ginny had suggested, in the spot the bookshelf had once occupied. Then they spent the better part of the afternoon buying Christmas ornaments in Diagon Alley, because Narcissa refused to share any of the ones from the tree in the parlor.

Which was just fine with Ginny, because their ornaments were much better.

For the last few weeks, Ginny had been doing her best to have a civilized dinner in the manor's dining room, which usually only involved Narcissa, as Damien was suspiciously absent more often than not, and Lucius rarely made it home in time for Narcissa's ridiculously early dinner schedule.

Just a few days after the start of December, however, Draco and Ginny – who was dragging her feet – entered the dining room to find not only Lucius and Narcissa, but Damien and a few other Ministry dignitaries as well. Ginny screwed her face up in a grimace.

"Hold it, Weasley," Draco murmured, snatching Ginny's sleeve before she could flee.

"I would rather starve," she whispered in her whiniest tones.

"Well, too bad." Putting his hand at the small of her back, Draco pushed Ginny forward a bit until they could both take a seat at the table. The truth was, he was feeling much the same as Ginny, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Even worse, Draco found himself sitting opposite of Damien, whose lips were curled in their usual grotesque expression; it was supposed to be a smile, Draco supposed, but the way Damien's mouth twisted looked to Draco like someone had tried unsuccessfully to explain a smile to a puppet-maker, and the puppet-maker, having never seen such a thing himself, had recreated it the best he could.

"Good evening, cousin," said Damien as soon as the two were seated. He shifted his strange expression to Ginny. "And Miss Weasley, a pleasure."

Ginny winced at him and Draco sighed inwardly.

The meal started a few minutes later, and Draco was glad that the conversation seemed to be mostly about topics that didn't warrant his commentary. He ate largely in silence, with Ginny at his elbow, pushing around her food on her plate but eventually eating when no one bothered her.
"How are things coming at Glanfuil?" asked Narcissa to Damien. "I'm sure we are all very excited for the school to finally re-open."

Damien sipped at some wine and his peculiar smile wavered a bit. "Slow-going, I'm afraid. It would seem that this quirky little castle your country calls a school is behaving quite... belligerently to our presence there."

"The... castle is?" asked Narcissa, her brows furrowed.

"Mm," Damien's usually pleased expression slipped for a moment. "Yes, many of the portraits won't act accordingly for us. And some parts of the castle simply refuse to open. It's proving to be quite time-consuming." He paused. "There was also apparently some kind of incident involving the lake. It would seem there are hostile mermaids down there." He paused. "And a... squid, of all things."

Draco and Ginny exchanged furtive amused glances.

"Hogwarts," said Lucius airily, "is a fascinating place of many secrets."

Damien narrowed his eyes minutely, but Ginny caught it. "Yes, well, I suppose it does have its oddities," said Damien, still holding his wine glass, "but these changes are absolutely necessary to move forward. After all, Hogwarts was subpar as it was. A joke in the realm of magical education, really, leagues beneath Durmstrang."

Damien sipped at his wine as if he had not just insulted every single person at the table with him. Then he happened to look up at Draco. Apparently, he sensed Draco's earlier amusement, because his attention shifted to the younger wizard with thinly veiled condescension. "In fact, I think Draco would certainly benefit from returning to school, once it's all completed, of course."

Draco looked up at Damien with a hard gaze but said nothing.

"I mean, he's still young," carried on Damien to Lucius and Narcissa, who stared with plastic expressions of interest. "He has a chance to redeem himself, make something of his education. It would be such a shame if he were to continue through life as he is now."

Ginny glanced at Draco out of the corner of her eye, and she saw that while he staring very hard at his plate. He didn't look quite like the beaten dog he had before, but it was clear he didn't plan on retaliating.

"Actually," said Narcissa, her tone so chipper and polite that Ginny was genuinely impressed, "Draco did very well in school. He finished his seventh year at the top of his class."

"Oh, yes," said Damien with an actual laugh, and the noise was nauseating, "But only after the Mudblood left, right?" When no one responded, Damien looked around for further comment. "I mean, that is accurate, isn't it? The little Granger girl beat you every year until the Dark Lord killed her, correct?"

When Draco simply glared, and Lucius and Narcissa stared straight-forward with tight jaws, Damien made a little noise in the back of his throat that might've been another chuckle. Then he continued eating.

"Don't worry, dear cousin," Damien said after a moment of uncomfortable silence, "there's still hope for you yet. You could just – start all over, as a first year in Glanfuil." He looked very amused at his own little joke.
The only sounds following this declaration was the scraping of utensils on plates. That is, until Ginny spoke up, using every polite nuance she'd learned from Narcissa over the past several months.

"You know, if you're really having trouble at Hogwarts – I mean, Glanfuil, I know where you can get some help," she said. Damien looked up in surprise, and Draco glanced over at her with a raised brow. Ginny carefully kept her tones as polite and eager as possible, without sounding too strange.

"I mean – I don't know about everyone else, but I definitely want to return to school as soon as possible," she said with a confident nod. "So anything I can do to help... Well, you know."

Damien looked even more pleased, if that was possible. "Certainly, Miss Weasley. Do tell."

"Well," said Ginny, "there's a ghost who can help. He knows everything about the school, and he can definitely talk the portraits into giving you an easier time. I think he accidentally got locked in a trunk during the battle, but if you go and let him free, he'll do whatever he can to make things go smoothly for you." She paused, and when Damien gestured for her to continue, she told him, "You just need to go and release him from the trunk on the seventh floor. That's where he got stuck."

"Hm," said Damien. "That sounds plausible. I'll visit the school tomorrow and speak to this spirit myself." He smirked at Draco, as if he'd drawn this information out of Ginny through the sheer power of his will. "And what's this specter called?"

Ginny bit into some food to keep herself from laughing. "Peeves," she managed after a moment. "Very nice fellow. Wonderfully helpful."

"Oh, good," said Damien.

Lucius and Narcissa both paused, their forks halfway to their mouths. The entire table sat in silence. Damien returned to his food, oblivious. Then -

"Pass the salt, please," was all Lucius said.

Ginny enjoyed the rest of the dinner, and judging from Draco's secret glances at her throughout dessert, he was feeling much the same.

"Malfoy," said Ginny, standing in front of their Christmas tree and eyeing the various ornaments with a great deal of satisfaction, "how come you never stand up to Damien?"

Last night's dinner wouldn't leave Ginny's mind.

Draco looked up from where he was lounging in his chair, reading the newspaper. Her question seemed to sour his mood a bit. "Damien's comments are beneath me," he said at last. "They're not worth pursuing in an argument."

"Since when, Malfoy?" asked Ginny, moving over to the chair and pushing his legs off one of the chair arms so she could sit. Her socked feet pressed into the cushion near his leg. "I've never seen you let someone insult you like that and get away with it. In fact, I'm pretty sure you started a new fight every day at school, any time anyone so much as looked at you wrong." She paused. "Of course, those fights usually devolved into 'my father is going to hear about this!', but still."

Draco frowned at his newspaper and pretended to read, but his eyes weren't moving. Ginny nudged his leg with her socked foot. "I was only teasing."
Sighing, Draco dropped the newspaper. "Retaliating against Damien would be … unwise," said Draco at last, looking up at her. "Even for my father, if I thought he could be bothered."

Ginny frowned and looked thoughtful. "Is Damien really that dangerous?"

"It's not him that's dangerous," Draco told her truthfully. "It's his proximity to the Dark Lord." He tossed aside the paper and leaned back in the chair, pushing his hands through his hair as he gazed up at the ceiling and dropped his arms. "What I don't understand is why he's suddenly so important. I mean, a year ago, he wasn't even in England." Draco let his hands fall to his stomach and he looked at Ginny, his brows furrowed in thought. "He's not a duelist, like Bellatrix. And he's not rich like Blaise's family, or politically important like my father. So what worth does the Dark Lord see in him? What could have made him so valuable to the Dark Lord now that the war is over?"

Ginny put her chin in her hand. "You'd know better than me, Malfoy."

"Unfortunately," he said, "I really don't. I mean, I saw him perhaps twice in my life before he came here, and we were children. I wouldn't have recognized him on the street before this year. He doesn't even look like I remember him."

Ginny fell silent for a moment. "Maybe… " she said slowly, her gaze intense, "Damien and the Dark Lord are lovers." Draco's aghast expression had only just begun to form when Ginny burst out laughing.

"Do not ever put that image in my mind again," he ordered.

"It's too late, Malfoy! Now it's never going away," she laughed before hopping up. "Oh, I left my comic book in the library. Think on that mental picture while I go and get it." Draco rolled his eyes at her and waved her off, and Ginny got up and left the suite. The library was on the third floor, one down from Draco's top-floor quarters, and so she went down the stairs and hurried to the book-filled room.

Once in the library, Ginny quickly found her comic book – one of her purchases from their last trip to Diagon Alley – and started back down the hallway. She was so preoccupied with her comic book that she nearly missed the figure standing at the end of the corridor.

Ginny stopped in her tracks and looked up to see the dark outline of Damien standing in a wide archway. Even though he was quite slim, his form seemed to take up the entire space, and Ginny halted several feet away.

Ginny's knowledge of the manor was limited, and she could not think of a way to get back to the suite without passing by Damien, who was watching her in silence. Rather than turning around, she opted instead to simply march by him, as he had not said anything to her.

Damien remained absolutely still until Ginny was very near him. Then she made the mistake of looking up at his face, and what she saw there sent a spike of terror through her heart.

The peculiar smile was gone.

"Ginny… Weasley," he said, turning slowly in her direction. He was still blocking her exit. Ginny curled the comic book to her chest and observed him with what she hoped was an unimpressed grimace. She had never seen Damien without his plastic smile. And now she realized, with a great deal of dread, that she preferred it to whatever this was.

"I'm sure you thought you little prank was amusing," said Damien slowly, now fully facing her. His eyes were strangely dark in a way they certainly hadn't been before. "Did you?"
Ginny tightened her jaw. "It's not my fault if you were fool enough to fall for it."

"That … creature," and now his voice was hard and low, "destroyed every single bit of reconstruction I'd made to that school. A year's worth of work – vanished."

Ginny's throat felt tight and dry. "Well," she said, "that's poltergeists for you –"

"Silence," Damien hissed, suddenly very close. Ginny jerked back, and memories – phantoms of the past that made her stomach curl and her heart drop – shoved their way to the forefront of her mind, blistering in their painful intensity.

"Get the hell away from me, you stupid Tom Riddle fanboy," growled Ginny, and that was the last thing she managed before Damien flicked his wand, and a burning pain suddenly ripped across Ginny's neck.

With a strangled gasp, Ginny fell back against the wall with a painful thud and clawed desperately at her throat, where the slim golden necklace Percy had given her grew tighter and tighter against her weakening windpipe.

"You…" said Damien as he leered at her struggle, "… are still wild like a little beast, too wretched to be of any use at all. To kill you would be a pleasure to both the mind and body."

Ginny's vision blurred and tears poured down her cheeks as she continued to struggle. Spots appeared in her eyes, and her fingernails raked down her own neck as she fought for air. The burn had spread to other parts of her body now, and panic overwhelmed her. "Mal –" she tried, knowing he was so nearby. "Ma –"

"Poor little lost pet," whispered Damien, leaning close. His eyes moved to the necklace where it robbed her of breath, and his fingers reached out, touching the little golden 'W' on the end. Damien held it in his fingertips for a moment before he flipped it upside down against Ginny's increasingly purple neck, so that it looked like an 'M' instead. This seemed to amuse him, but Ginny was rapidly losing her ability to see or think or do anything.

Her voice vanished, and her knees crumbled beneath her. Blood began to pool around the tiny links in the necklace chain. She couldn't even gasp anymore.

Damien waved his wand, and the necklace fell slack.

Immediately, Ginny pitched forward with a loud gasp, her arms and legs unable to take her weight before she fell onto her side, desperately trying to breathe. Damien watched her without an ounce of sympathy, and as Ginny fought for air, he leaned over her and gripped her arm tightly, yanking her up enough to whisper in her ear.

"Careful… that you don't end up in someone else's custody, blood traitor."

Then he shoved her away, stepped over her still struggling body and disappeared down the hallway.

It took several minutes for Ginny to work up the strength to push herself into a sitting position, and when she finally did, she leaned against the wall and raised a trembling hand to her neck. Flecks of blood returned with her palm, and Ginny's teary gaze looked at the lines in her hand, where the scarlet color sank in deepest, before she dropped her hand to the floor with a thump.

When she wiped at the tears on her face, a bit of blood caught her cheek.
Draco glanced at the clock. What on earth was taking Ginny so long in the library? He'd just started to get up to go after her when the door opened and she slipped inside, quickly closing the door behind her.

"Finally," Draco said, sitting back in his seat. "What on earth took you so long?"

Ginny was still facing the door, but when he spoke, she shifted in his direction. Draco's brows furrowed. Everything about her looked wrong – the way she was standing, with her shoulders hunched high and her eyes low, the unseemly gait she used to walk across the room. She stopped a few feet away and tried to talk, but no sound came out. Draco stood immediately and his book cast aside, his eyes on her.

"Weasley?" he questioned, when their eyes met and he realized her expression was trembling. That was when her shoulders sagged a bit, as if she were very tired, and he spotted the bright ring of swollen red skin around her neck. Draco was in front of her in seconds.

"What in the hell happened to your neck?" he asked vehemently.

Before he could think about what he was doing, Draco brought up a hand and pressed his long fingers over the abused skin, just at the nape of Ginny's neck. Ginny's lips parted a bit, and he started to draw back, thinking he'd caused her pain. Then he realized her injured skin was inflamed from the abuse, and his hands were likely much cooler in comparison. Ginny leaned into his touch because of it, and her eyes closed.

After several seconds, Ginny finally managed to talk, and Draco felt a tear fall onto his hand, where it was still on her skin.

"He didn't – think – " her voice was raspy and quiet, " – my joke was – very… funny."

Draco's brows furrowed in confusion for only a split-second. Then his eyes drifted to the necklace, where it hung loosely on Ginny's neck, and then back to where the angry red ring of skin simmered under his hand. One thumb moved out, grazing over Ginny's skin, slow and gentle.

The movement was in stark contrast to his features, which moved slowly, in sync, like the intricate internal gears of a clock, to form a chilling expression Ginny had never seen on him before.

If the grey of his eyes had looked like stone before, it was molten now, too furious to remain cold and fixed.

Draco pulled his hand away from Ginny's neck suddenly and moved past her, heading to the door.

"Wai – " Ginny's voice still didn't work right, and any noise she managed felt like a grater to the inside of her throat, " – Malfoy, don't – "

Draco ignored her and grabbed his wand.

Ginny raced to the door and threw herself against it, blocking his path. "Don't!" she rasped out. "I – mean it – " She tried not to show how scared she was, really, she did. " – He – wants you to – he wants – a reaction – "

"Damien is not," growled Draco, eyes flashing, "…staying in my bloody house anymore. And if he refuses to leave, I will curse him to hell."

Ginny barely kept from recoiling at his steely glare, which was so reminiscent of Lucius that for a moment, she forgot who she was looking at. She knew, though, that the fury was not for her, so she
stayed where she was, blocking the door.

"You just said," Ginny forced herself to say, tears threatening again, try as she might to hold it together, "You just said – he's – dangerous because of – Voldemort. Don't – don't give Damien a reason – "

"A reason to do what?" hissed Draco furiously. "To attack you? Again?"

"To take me," gasped out Ginny, barely pressing back a sob.

This stopped Draco, though his grip on his wand seemed firm enough to snap the wood in half. He looked over at the closed door, glaring at the crack that separated the door from the wall, as if it was this vulnerability that had allowed Damien inside their home.

Finally, Draco yanked himself away from the door and walked a few steps away from Ginny, his back to her. She watched as he lifted a fisted hand to his head and then dropped it. His grip on the wand remained firm.

"I can take you to St. Mungo's, if you need," said Draco, looking out of the window.

Ginny shook her head as Bleaker helped her press the medicine onto her aching skin. "No," she murmured. "I'll be alright." The last thing she wanted was to explain this to anyone else.

They each stood in silence for several seconds. Ginny moved over to a chair and sank into it numbly, her arms folded over her stomach. She didn't realize Draco was moving until he was in front of her again, and this time he had a washcloth from the bathroom. He waved his wand over it, murmuring a quiet spell, and Ginny's tired gaze looked up to see small crystals shimmering on the top of it.

His eyes lowered, Draco sat on a footstool just in front of her and pressed the cloth against Ginny's neck. The spell helped cool the burns from the chain and soothed away some of the remaining pain, and Ginny let herself relax a tiny bit as the pain numbed.

Closing her eyes again, Ginny tried desperately to let her memories of the event melt away with the cloth, as her physical pain did, but it was no use. She could have held the cloth herself, but Draco kept it there without saying anything. They both bowed their heads, not speaking or looking at one another.

"He's even worse than Nott," whispered Ginny after a long moment. "Nott… he was cruel, but stupid. Not Damien…" A fresh tear escaped. She hadn't been so afraid in a long time, and even though Damien unnerved her, she hadn't allowed herself to truly fear him. She had fooled herself into thinking that the way she interacted with Draco was the way she could behave with the other Death Eaters. But it wasn't true.

No matter how much she pretended things were alright – and here, in this room, with her brothers or even with Draco, she could do that. But it wasn't real. Draco was shielding her from a lot, and whether that was out of concern for her or concern for himself, it didn't really matter. The life she was living in this house was not a real life, and Damien had just reminded her of how things really were out there, in the nightmarish hole Voldemort had manipulated their world into.

"He's not taking you anywhere," Draco told her quietly but firmly, adamantly.

Ginny simply let her head drop and took as much comfort in the cool cloth and gentle hand at her neck as much as she could.
Unfortunately, the respite was short-lived. Just a half-hour later, Bleaker appeared to tell them that dinner would be served shortly.

"We're eating in here," Draco told the house-elf coolly. He was sitting on the opposite end of the lounge from Ginny, who was stretched out over most of its length, her face pressed into a pillow and her eyes on the fireplace. Her socked toes curled just near Draco's hip, and she had a blanket pulled up to her shoulders, even though she wasn't cold.

Bleaker hesitated, and Draco's grey eyes narrowed on him. "What?" snapped Draco.

"Master Malfoy has requested that you both come," said Bleaker with a worried frown. "Master was quite… firm." Then he disappeared with a soft crack. Draco leaned back against the lounge and dragged a hand over his face, wishing for nothing more than to spend the rest of the evening in the suite, without having to talk a single other person. But Ginny sat up slowly at her end of the lounge and tossed back her blanket, her expression flat and her words quiet.

"Let's just get it over with," she murmured, eyes low.

Draco looked up at her uncertainly, but he knew they had no choice. Together, they moved to the door. When Ginny hesitated, Draco reached up a hand and brushed his hand on the collar of her robes. Then he tucked them a bit closer to her skin, so that the marks were more difficult to detect.

He knew, from the way Ginny pressed back her hair and hardened her face, that she didn't want to be seen as a victim. And her imitation of someone who was not distraught was quite impressive, but Draco knew better. He'd seen her for hours at a time every day for the last six months, lived with her in what used to be his own small space.

He knew what Ginny Weasley looked like when she was screaming on the inside.

As soon as Draco and Ginny entered the dining room, the reason for his father's insistence became immediately, terrifyingly apparent.

"Good evening, nephew," said Bellatrix Lestrange, her dark lips forming a sinister smile as her attention shifted to Ginny. "And… nephew's pet."

Ginny stopped in her tracks, her mask slipping for a moment as she balked, frozen to her spot. Draco turned swiftly and blocked Bellatrix from view, his face low to hers as he pretended to take his time adjusting the collar of his robes.

"Do not let her in your head, Weasley," he whispered to Ginny firmly. "You'll never get her out again. Just… " Ginny met his gaze and her mask slipped further, revealing her fear. "Just," said Draco again, faltering at her desperate look, "shut off everything in your mind that you don't need. Put it away. Understand?"

Ginny tried to nod, but the motion came out as a tremor instead.

Knowing he had no choice, Draco turned and led Ginny to the dinner table, where Bellatrix reclined next to Damien, who looked so pleased with himself that Draco knew instantly that he was the one who had called on Bellatrix to come and visit. Lucius and Narcissa were there as well.

The food appeared, and Draco and Ginny both picked up their forks, but didn't eat.

"You look a little rough around the edges, Weasley," noted Bellatrix after only a few seconds of blissful silence. Ginny stared at her plate and didn't reply. "What's the matter?" the dark witch
continued with a gleeful malevolence. "Can't hack it around real purebloods?"

She laughed, and Damien looked equally amused, but no one else bothered.

When Ginny failed to react, Bellatrix looked put-out. "I'm talking to you, blood traitor," she sneered. Ginny scraped her fork across her plate and said nothing, which only incensed Bellatrix's ire. "Then again, I can't expect that you'd be a very good listener," said Bellatrix languidly, stretching her long arms across the table and flexing her pale fingers, which had sharp fingernails on the ends.

"After all, your father wasn't very good at listening, either... " she paused, for effect, before continuing lowly, "... especially not after I cut off his head."

Ginny's fork fell to her plate and her trembling hand slipped off the table, falling limply into her lap. Her gaze was so low that her chin nearly fell on her collarbone, and at Bellatrix's words, she simply closed her eyes. A few tears, silent and hot on her cheek, squeezed through and fell freely.

Draco narrowed his eyes deeply on Bellatrix and, before anyone else could react, he dropped his fork with a clatter. "Bleaker." The house-elf appeared. "Take Miss Weasley back to her room," he ordered tonelessly.

Immediately, Ginny rose from the table to leave, but Bellatrix snatched Ginny's wrist to keep her still. Draco's hand was nearly as fast, and his sudden grip on Bellatrix's arm caused the older witch to let go of Ginny in surprise.

Draco tossed Bellatrix's hand away as he stood from the table, and Bleaker hurriedly led Ginny out of the room, his hand on her elbow. As soon as Ginny was gone, Draco turned to face Bellatrix, and his next words were low and severe.

"Do not ever speak to her again."

Narcissa dropped her fork in alarm. "Draco!" she admonished, looking quite terrified. "Watch your tongue - "

"No, no, Cissy," interrupted Bellatrix, looking up at Draco from under her hooded eyes. "Let him talk... " She locked eyes with Draco. "Or what, little nephew?"

"I am acting on direct orders from the Dark Lord," said Draco, his eyes hard, "to make Ginny Weasley want to be here. How am I supposed to do that when you bring up her murdered parents at every available opportunity?"

Bellatrix shrugged, her dark lips quirked. "It's not my fault she's such a sensitive creature – "

"The very next time," Draco interrupted her, causing Bellatrix's features to tighten, "you dare to speak to Ginny Weasley is the very last time you are allowed in this house."

Bellatrix balked a bit at this, her lip curling in a sneer. She opened her mouth to speak, but Draco cut her off again.

"And if Weasley regresses at all because of your actions, I will be sure to let the Dark Lord know exactly who is responsible for impeding his great initiative," said Draco, before he leaned over the table and placed his hands flat on the tablecloth.

"And do not think you are above the Dark Lord's ire," he warned her in a low murmur, as Bellatrix's face contorted with fury, "Because you mean nothing more to him than a fleck of dirt on
his robes."

Before Bellatrix's rage could fully take hold, Draco pulled away from the table roughly and swept out of the dining room.

He found Ginny sitting at the window, staring out dully over the manor's landscaped grounds.

When she saw him, she pulled up her knees enough to allow him space for his usual spot, which Draco took. Neither of them spoke for a while.

"When I found my brothers again," said Ginny after several minutes of silence, "I promised myself I would never fall into that pit of despair again. The one that – " her voice was still hoarse and cracked " – the one that made me want to drown myself in your tub when I first came here."

Draco looked over Ginny's face, unable to hide his surprise at her words.

"But when I think about people like – like her, that – that terrible atrocity disguised as a person – "

Ginny squeezed her eyes shut.

"And I know, I know that she – she bloody won, she got what she wanted, and she – she did those things to – my family," Ginny's voice cracked. "It feels so unfair to live, then."

Unfair and exhausting. Just the thought of it made Ginny want to crawl into her bed and simply waste away.

"I can't imagine what might make you feel better," Draco admitted stoically after a pause. "Nothing would comfort me, if I were in your position." Ginny looked up at Draco, who was reclined against the opposite end of the window seat. "But," said Draco after a moment, "I do feel like you should know that people like Bellatrix – and Damien too, the bastard – they love to watch people crumble in front of them."

Draco shifted in Ginny's direction. "They live for it. They want you to fall." He waved a hand, sounding as casual as he could, because he felt like the last thing Ginny needed was to hear more anger, more hostility. "That sort of thing makes them feel powerful. And so the best thing to do, really, is to refuse them their satisfaction." Draco met Ginny's gaze. "If you lie down and die, you're just doing what they want. Better to make them furious by refusing to quit."

Ginny's brows furrowed. "Are you suggesting," she asked slowly, "that I stay alive out of spite, Malfoy?"

Draco thought about this. "Honestly, I can't think of a more Slytherin piece of advice to give you."

Ginny squinted at him, but then, miraculously, her lip quirked just a tiny bit. The simple motion made the knot in Draco's chest loosen, and he extended his long legs, so that they stretched out between Ginny and the edge of the seat.

For a moment, they both allowed themselves to feel just a bit of comfort. Then Ginny looked out of the window and said quietly, firmly, "I'm going to kill Bellatrix Lestrange one day."

Draco's eyes widened a bit, but when he looked at Ginny's face, all he could think to say in response was the truth.

"I believe you."
Fifteen minutes later, when Draco complained to Ginny that he was hungry because he'd been forced to leave the dining room early ("Oh, there's no re-entering that dining room tonight, I'm afraid"), the pair decided to spend the rest of their evening their way.

Which was how, late into the snowy evening, Ginny and Draco ended up on the roof of the manor just near Draco's bedroom window, lying on their backs side by side on a magically warmed blanket, with a tray of fruits and vegetables between them. The radio they'd brought up from the room was on the roof with them, just behind their heads, broadcasting a Quidditch match.

Above the pair, lights twinkled from one end of the universe to the other, settled and comfortable against a dark night sky. The air was cold, but their spot was warm, and no one could see them or bother them or pressure them or frighten them.

Draco cheered at the announcement of a goal, pumping his fist into the air. Next to him, Ginny let her head fall to the side, in Draco's direction, and she watched.
Chapter 13

Author's Note: Thank you so much for the support! I'm finished with my degree and hopefully on my way to working full-time. In the meantime… more story goodness. And for those of who you have been impatient for a little more… attraction, well… anyway, just enjoy this chapter. ;)

"Your time has come, Draco."

Draco stood motionless, rooted to his spot, unable to think past his terror. Voldemort moved around him like a shadow pulling away from the sun.

"I have a great task for you… a grand mission, for our cause."

Lucius stood nearby, and even though Draco dared not look at him, he could feel his father's fear. Everyone in the room – Voldemort, Lucius, Bellatrix and the other Death Eaters – all knew that whatever Voldemort asked of Draco, it was not truly a task. It was a punishment, for Lucius' failure.

"You, young Draco," Voldemort moved in front of him, inhuman eyes trained on Draco's face. "You are to kill … Albus Dumbledore."

Draco dared not make a sound, but a whimper bubbled dangerously close to the top of his throat. His eyes shifted to the floor, and he wished more than anything to be dead at that moment. Because he wouldn't live through this, he knew it.

Voldemort may as well have asked Draco fling himself into hell.

"M'lord…" dared Lucius, though his protest sputtered out.

"Kill Dumbledore," Voldemort hissed to Draco, a clear mimic of Nagini, who slithered too nearby for anyone's comfort. "And your family will once again enjoy my… generosity."

Draco closed his eyes and kept his features impassive. "Yes, my lord," he answered at last.

Voldemort moved away, but Bellatrix slinked into his place, every bit as dark and ethereal as the Dark Lord himself. Her dark lips curled into a smile. "My lord," came her breathy whisper. "How can we be sure Draco is up… to the task?"

Draco said nothing as Voldemort turned to face him again, then edged closer. All at once, Draco felt the tendrils of Voldemort's mind reaching out to his, probing for any kind of weakness as he loomed over Draco. The Dark wizard's serpentine features hovered close, and Draco felt his insides curl. He hated this.

But that hate was deep, deep below the surface. And when Voldemort prodded at Draco's mind, he found only a steel wall.

The Dark Lord paused and his unusual features slipped into a strange smile. "A natural Occlumens… How fascinating." He turned to Draco's aunt. "Help train him, Bellatrix… I believe he will suit our purposes quite well…"

Bellatrix looked surprised, but she quickly recovered; a flash of suspicion then passed over her dark eyes. She moved closer and moved around Draco, leaning just close enough to whisper, for
his ears only.

"What are you hiding... little nephew?"

*Draco stared straight ahead at the dark corners of the room. Everything, he thought.*

Draco awoke with a start.

The sky outside his bedroom window was dark, without even a hint of morning light. A glance at his clock told him it was only one in the morning, still far from dawn. Sitting up in his bed, Draco swallowed tightly. Then he shifted his gaze over at Ginny's door, a curious pain in his chest. Bellatrix's face continued to float in front of him, poised in an unwelcome memory, and he wondered if she was still in the house.

It had only been a few hours ago at dinner when Draco had threatened her over taunting Ginny. He wasn't sure if Bellatrix was still in the house, but Draco suddenly felt an irrational fear, like Bellatrix was lurking somewhere in the room. He tossed off his covers and moved barefoot across the room to Ginny's door, which he opened with a crack.

Ginny's bed was empty.

Fear lanced Draco's heart, and he immediately turned back into his room. Had Bellatrix come for her while Draco was sleeping? Draco snatched up his wand and prepared to leave the room, though what he planned to do, he wasn't sure.

And then he saw her.

Ginny was asleep on the lounge in his room, just a few feet away from his bed. She'd taken her own bedcover with her and curled up against the cushions, just in front of the fireplace. Her cheek was pressed against am embroidered cushion and her body curled tightly on one end in a little ball. Exhaling slowly, Draco put his wand on the bedside table and closed Ginny's bedroom door. Then he moved over to the lounge and watched Ginny for a moment. The nearby fire was weak, but it simmered persistently, casting the small area in front of the mantle with a soft warm glow.

Ginny was sleeping soundly, though she shivered some. It was quite cold, and Draco wondered if that was why she'd slipped into his room after they'd both gone to bed. Her room didn't have a fireplace, after all, thought Draco as he moved in the semidarkness of the room. One hand reached out, brushing just the tips of Ginny's hair, as if to confirm that she was real. After assuring himself that she was no mirage, Draco reached over and tugged the blanket more securely around her shoulders before sinking onto the opposite end of the couch, one elbow leaned against the lounge arm, so that his hand propped up his head. The position kept him looking down the length of the couch at her, and Draco let himself relax, knowing that she was safe in there, with him.

The young wizard let his hand slide over his face tiredly. What was wrong with him?

He'd threatened *Bellatrix*, the most dangerous witch he knew. And Draco was not fool enough to think that Bellatrix would spare him pain because of their shared blood. If she felt slighted – and surely she did thanks to their exchange at dinner – she would come after him. The only thing that tempered her was the Dark Lord and his desire for order. If Bellatrix was left to her own devices, she would wreak havoc, just because she could. Merlin only knew what she was capable of without the watchful eye of the Dark Lord.

But still... he'd done it. At that very moment during dinner, Draco had felt his fury double-over,
and he'd pressed it into every seething word he'd delivered to Bellatrix.

And even though he was anxious of her retaliation, Draco couldn't find it in himself to regret his words, not yet. It was the first thing he'd done in ages that he didn't feel agony over. Bellatrix was cruel, and what's worse, she was cruel to Ginny, who'd already dealt with enough.

Draco looked over at Ginny's sleeping face, bathed in flickers of orange that highlighted her hair where it twisted and curled around her jaw and neck.

Draco was not very compassionate. He didn't enjoy suffering, like many others in his circle, but it was not ingrained in him, as with Ginny's family, to do anything to stop it. And even if it had been something his parents had impressed upon him – to work towards the betterment of others, to assist where assistance was needed, to lend himself to others in that selfless kind of way – he felt certain he would have lost such altruism the moment Voldemort returned.

Nearly all magical children grew up hearing whispers of Voldemort's cruelty, his power, his complete disregard for life. The Dark Lord had been a historical footnote, a frightening bedtime story, but that was it. But not for Draco.

He'd seen it, starting from the time he was eleven years old. And perhaps Harry Potter's response to Voldemort's return had been to embolden himself into a hero of the ages – a decision which had cost him dearly – but Draco had, instead, spent the next several years of his life effectively shutting himself down, piece by piece, tucking away anything that might expose his uncertainty, his fear, his desire to simply be left alone.

It was far easier to exist in a world controlled by a malevolent dark wizard when all vulnerabilities were carefully contained. Caring too much – as Draco still sometimes did – was not only a weakness. It was a death wish. He had personally seen it more than once, the fatal outcome of compassion.

Tom Marvolo Riddle had never experienced sympathy or love or even concern. As Voldemort, he preyed on those once-comforts. He had humiliated Lucius and Narcissa, and he'd punished Draco because he knew they loved him.

Is that what you fought for, Malfoy?

Draco pressed his hands over his face and let his spread fingers push up his exhausted features. When he pulled his hand away and curled his fingers at his chin and mouth, he let his grey eyes fall to the dying fire. They narrowed unconsciously when Draco thought back to Damien. In a split-second, Draco's tired apathy melted away and reformed as a steel blade.

Draco was not cruel, like Bellatrix, but that did not mean he wasn't dangerous if he cared to be. And, as Draco looked at the red-hot coals burning away in the last remnants of the fire, he realized he suddenly cared to be quite dangerous if the situation called for it.

His anger at Ginny's treatment was justified, he told himself ardently, because he was responsible for her. Not because he cared for her well-being, or because he enjoyed making her happy.

And certainly not because he felt better with her around. Or because he liked having her at home. Or because they had fun together. Or because she did things that made him feel his own young age again.

Draco closed his eyes when he thought again of how she'd looked coming into his room, with her neck bruised up and her body trembling. The rage he'd felt at that moment shocked him.
Fortunately, Ginny seemed much better by the time they'd gone to bed.

But the fact that she was in here, with him, meant that she didn't feel safe alone in her room. She could blame it on the lack of fireplace, but she'd slept fine in there before. Draco moved his hand down his face and let his head fall back against the lounge, so that his closed eyes looked up at the ceiling.

"Malfoy?"

Draco opened his eyes and looked down at Ginny, curled so close to him, her fingers wrapped around the edges of the blanket. She didn't lift her head to look down drowsily at him where he sat. "Are you alright?" she asked in a sleepy murmur.

Draco shifted his grey eyes over to her and tried to let himself relax. This felt like a moment he might enjoy, if he could push away his troubled mind.

"M'fine," he replied quietly. "Just couldn't sleep."

Ginny shifted a little so that her arm tucked further under the cushion under her head. "Do you want me to go back to my room?" she asked in a whisper.

Draco let himself sink further into the cushions on his end of the lounge and his head fell to the side so he could look at her. "No."

Ginny's lips quirked just a bit. "Good." She paused. "It's cold in there."

"I know," he responded with a soft smile. The smile fell away as Ginny grew quiet, and worry creased his features again. After a moment, Ginny sat halfway up and reached down, tugging on her end of the blanket until it covered Draco's lap, too. Her eyes flickered to his before she laid back down, and Draco followed her movement with his gaze the entire time.

"Get back to your beauty sleep," she teased gently, lying down and closing her eyes again. "Your good looks are all you have going for you."

Her eyes were still closed, but her lips turned up at a smile. Draco looked down at the blanket she'd used to cover him and gave a small chuckle. Then he leaned back on the couch and slowly let himself relax.

Uncertainty was a bitter heaviness in Draco's life, one which weighed more in his chest with each passing day. But at least with Ginny curled up beside him, her warmth let him know that she was safe.

And that he was no longer alone.

Draco woke first, though that was not unusual. What was unusual was the body curled up very near his.

A few confused seconds passed before Draco began to realize he was still on the lounge in his room. Birds chirped near his window, and a brilliant blue sky shone beyond it, sparse clouds peeking in through the arched glass. Early morning light lifted the normally dark room into a dreamier state, giving it an openness it rarely possessed.

Draco shifted his eyes back down to the spot next to him, where a bundle of blankets gathered at his chest turned out to be Ginny in disguise.
Ginny was still asleep, thank Merlin, but at some point in the night, she had managed to move to his end of the couch and turn into him, so that her forehead pressed against his exposed collarbone, just above where his nightshirt started. Her hands were fisted between them and pressed against his chest, and her tiny cold toes brushed against his legs. Her hair covered much of her face, but Draco could see peeks of freckles and pale skin between the bright red strands.

Ginny slept on, oblivious, but Draco froze, unsure what to do. One of his arms was behind his own head, but the other was settled over Ginny's hip, so that his fingers curled against the base of her spine, just under the hem of her pajama top. He moved it slowly, and he felt the fabric of her pajamas against his palm. Instead of using his arm to pull himself away, however, he let his arm resettte over Ginny on top of the blanket.

Draco had never woken up next to anyone before.

The air outside their spot was cold, and the fire had died. But in their blanket, their space, everything was warm and comfortable. Draco raked his eyes over Ginny's sleeping face, or what he could see of it. Most of her features were hidden in his chest. Draco's fingers shifted up to brush at some of her long hair where it lay against their blanket. The dark red strands fell over his fingers and he let himself enjoy the way they felt and looked.

Common sense dictated that he get up, squirm away from Ginny and move, especially since Ginny almost certainly hadn't wormed her way up to him consciously. He'd noticed before that she moved a lot in her sleep, and she probably had no idea what she'd done.

Still, Draco didn't move. Because as afraid as he'd been last night, a sense of calm he'd never felt before threatened to settle in his chest. Fear and anxiety hovered near the edges of his consciousness, unwilling to leave completely, but this feeling was the closest he'd come to untangling the web of misery he'd felt in his chest in years. Perhaps ever in his life.

Draco let his hand move up again and brush some hair from Ginny’s face.

His lips quirked. She looked like she'd burrowed into some hole, cocooned in the blankets and hidden from the world. What would his life be like, Draco wondered, if he woke up feeling this way every day?

That was a scary question, so Draco pressed it away.

However, Draco couldn't press away everything – including Ginny's body, which shifted in her sleep and edged a bit closer. Well, thought Draco, this was going to get very uncomfortable very quickly if he didn't do something. He could already feel himself getting a little too – ah, pleased at their current position.

Because it wasn't like he didn't know - on a purely impersonal and objective level, of course - that Ginny was pretty. Draco had also known Pansy was pretty, but he hated her, even though she was the only girl he'd ever dated. And that whole thing had been almost entirely due to Pansy's effort, not Draco's.

Draco’s lack of dates, however, was not because of any lack of attraction to females, no matter what Blaise liked to insinuate. Draco and Pansy had, after all, done … things.

But Voldemort had returned to his full form by the time Draco was fourteen years old. And the moment he had stepped foot in the Malfoy Manor, nothing had been the same.

What are you hiding, little nephew?
Physical attraction and lust – those were certainly still there, from time to time, when Draco's anxiety afforded it. But only Pansy's shrill persistence had managed to permeate Draco's standoffish behavior, and only because she was aware of what he was going through. Not that she was particularly concerned with his well-being, but she at least understood.

Still, Draco had cast her off as soon as they'd finished school, and he was glad to be rid of her. Pansy was a selfish cow, and Draco had never felt any real connection to her. Certainly he had never held Pansy the way he held Ginny now.

Draco looked over Ginny's sun-warmed face and curled a finger near her jaw; he let it linger for only a moment, though. He then pulled his hand away and let his arm drop over Ginny's side once more. He'd allow himself to relax here for just a few minutes, Draco decided. Then he'd get up and leave Ginny on the couch, Draco told himself firmly.

That plan went just fine for about sixty seconds.

Then Ginny Weasley decided to move again, and this time, she managed to wind one of her legs between his and press right up against him, so that every curve of her body fell against his with one warm curl.

FUCK, thought Draco.

What had only been a mild inconvenience before suddenly became much more noticeable. Draco clenched his eyes closed, knowing that if Ginny woke up and felt how hard he was – and there was no way she wouldn't, because the little beast was now completely entangled in him – she would kill him, wand or no wand.

And of all the ways Draco had conceived he might die, this had not been among them. Unfortunately, Draco was wedged between Ginny and the back of the couch, so it was going to be very difficult to move out from underneath her without waking her.

Still, Draco tried. Carefully pulling out his arm from under his head, Draco shifted just an inch upwards before Ginny moved again, one of her arms winding around his torso. This only made her breasts press against his chest, and the thin fabrics of their pajamas did absolutely nothing to disguise their shape or softness.

Draco secretly wondered what divine being hated him so much.

Each time he tried to move, the sleepy ginger seemed determined to keep him in place. Draco was now painfully hard, and each wiggle of Ginny's body only made things worse. I hate everything, he thought, feeling quite desperate, because everything on Ginny felt soft and inviting, no matter how much he tried to banish it.

Shifting carefully, Draco moved to try again to get up, but everything in his body protested against the movement, especially the part of his body that urged him to press back into the warmth of Ginny's soft form.

That part was … especially strong.

Draco's fingers twitched, because instinct wanted him to curl them on some bare part of Ginny's skin and urge her closer, anything to satisfy what his body was begging for. But for the love of Merlin, he wasn't Nott, and although Draco was certainly no virtuous do-gooder, he also did not grind against women in their sleep.
Tempting though it was.

Finally, Draco felt he was pulling away enough to move over Ginny and off the couch, when she shifted again – and this time she spoke, her voice thick with sleep. "M – Malfoy?"

Draco almost shrieked, because he'd been concentrating on getting off the couch and not paying attention to Ginny's face. Falling back onto the couch, Draco made a kind of strangled noise instead of answering. That was when Ginny blinked open her eyes, spotted him so nearby, and did a quick assessment of herself on the couch.

She practically leaped off the cushions in alarm, and Draco helped catch her before she crashed onto the coffee table. "Bloody hell," she managed groggily, blinking and – to Draco's surprise – flushing a bright red. "I'm – Ah, sorry, about – that – "

Draco pulled his knees up very high so that the blanket came with them. The position looked very awkward, and Ginny's brows furrowed. At least she had been too mortified by her own position to consider Draco's. "It's alright," Draco said simply, drumming his fingers on his knees in the most unconvincing manner possible, much to his despair.

Ginny squinted. "Why're you sitting like that – "

"You can work for your brother today," Draco blurted out, sounding way too chipper for the early hour. "I'll just – go and run errands in Diagon Alley for a few hours. Then you'll money for the… er, holidays."

This completely distracted Ginny from Draco's awkward pose. "Really?" she exclaimed. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," he answered immediately. "Now go and get dressed before I change my mind."

A brilliant smile crossed Ginny's face and she jumped up, pausing only long enough to hook one arm around Draco's neck from behind, in something akin to a hug. "Thanks, Malfoy!" Then she disappeared in her room.

As soon as she was gone, Draco let out a breath of relief, tossed off the blanket and hurried to take a shower.

Fifteen minutes later, he was much recovered and fully-dressed. And – well, he would just have to be sure not to think on that little instance ever again. Or at least in public.

While Ginny finished getting ready, Draco stepped out of their suite into the hallway. As soon as he did, he spotted a figure ducking into one of the rooms down the corridor. Draco's spine stiffened a bit, and after glancing quickly at his bedroom door, Draco moved silently down the thick carpeting that lined their halls.

He reached his father's study and slowly pressed open the door.

Damien was standing at Lucius' desk, his fingers skimming some parchment filed into a drawer on the side. He looked out of place in Lucius' fine study, and it was clear he was browsing in the hopes that his intrusion might go unnoticed.

Draco stepped in and shut the door behind him loudly.

Damien's eyes snapped up to Draco, but he dared to look more annoyed than alarmed. "Good morning, cousin," he said, an extra air of amusement attached to his tones, as if he enjoyed nothing
quite so much as Draco's anger.

"What are you doing in my father's study?" asked Draco, not moving from the door. He made a mental note of where his wand was in the pocket of his robes.

The older wizard, slender and strange, moved around Lucius' desk with a careless shift of his shoulders. "Perusing," he said mildly. He cocked his head in Draco's direction. "Surely your father wouldn't mind. After all, he isn't… hiding something, is he?"

Draco kept himself still. "My father has nothing to hide from the Dark Lord," he answered evenly. "But you are not the Dark Lord."

This seemed to crease Damien's carefully constructed nonchalance. "You seem angry with me, Draco," noted Damien as he drew his fingertips down the edge of Lucius' elegant wooden desk. "Have I done something to… your lips curled here "… upset you?"

Draco's features remained etched in hard lines, but he said nothing. If he let himself think about Ginny's injury now, he would do something rash. Damien seemed to sense his hostility, but it took no Legilimens to do that. Draco's eyes, narrowed and cold, watched every step Damien took, and to an outsider, the pair looked like a couple of dark statues, forever locked in their belligerent opposition.

The two wizards stood in stark contrast to the bright and airy book-filled room.

"Do not," said Draco after a long pause, and he scarcely recognized his own voice, low and severe as it was, "ever go near her again."

"Or what?" Damien asked, before giving a small chuckle. "You'll report me to the Dark Lord, as you threatened to do with Bellatrix?"

"I'll kill you." The words were flat and direct.

Damien's expression lost its mirth. "Careful, now, cousin. Making threats like that might lead others to believe you've grown tired of living."

"I've grown tired of you, Damien." Draco stepped closer, standing eye-to-eye with his older cousin. "Finish your bloody business at the school and leave."

Damien finally moved to stand just in front of Draco. "Ginny Weasley appears to be an exposed nerve for you, Draco," he observed, eyes flashing dangerously. Then his lips curled in a smirk. "Perhaps one day, we'll find out if she feels the same way about you."

Draco did not allow himself to think on Damien's words. "Get out of my father's study."

The older wizard paused, but then, after looking Draco up and down for a moment, he turned and calmly stepped out of the book-filled room. Draco followed directly behind him and closed the ornate wooden door.

"Malfoy, there you are – "

Ginny froze as soon as she saw Damien, and although she kept her face admirably free of fear, tension read clearly in her body. Damien paused long enough to look down the corridor at her and soak in her anxiety, but Draco shoved past him and moved to Ginny.

"Let's go," he told him, sending one last warning stare at Damien before he touched the small of
Ginny's back and led her away.

Once they were alone, on their way to the Apparition point just outside the Manor's grounds, Draco said to her, "I want you to keep Bleaker with you when I'm not around."

Ginny looked up at him, her brows knitted with confusion. "Bleaker?"

"He'll protect you with his life," said Draco, not looking at her. "House-elves are much more powerful than they appear."

"But Malfoy, I can – "

"You don't have a wand," he reminded her vehemently, and for a moment, he felt barely restrained his frustration. He couldn't get that bastard out of his house and he couldn't leave Ginny alone. Relying on a house-elf was humiliating enough. At Ginny's expression, he sighed softly and said more gently, "I know you're capable of taking care of yourself. But you are crippled without a wand. Just… do as I ask, please."

Ginny studied his face and then gave a slow nod. "I will," she promised. "Now, come on… stop worrying." Linking her arm with his, Ginny tugged him to the Apparition point and then curled her fingers around his.

Draco barely resisted the urge to squeeze her fingers before they both disappeared.

"My life," said Draco to Blaise later that afternoon, "is a great cosmic joke."

Blaise sipped at his tea and chuckled. "I know," he agreed, "that's what makes hearing about it so very entertaining."

Draco rolled his eyes and cast his gaze out over the bustling street. Diagon Alley was alive with the spirit of the holidays, although December had not quite yet started. Snow blanketed the cobblestone streets, but it had not yet grown so thick as to impede shopping. Bag-laden patrons moved in and out of shops with breathy excitement, puffs of white air preceding every pair of rosy cheeks as people walked past. Some shop owners had already decorated their storefronts for Christmas, and the fresh scent of pine mixed pleasantly with the crisp snow. Near Blaise, a lovely red bow sat atop a streetlight, and green foliage wrapped around the post in a swirl until it stopped at the bottom.

"If it makes you feel any better," piped up Blaise after a few minutes of silence, "my time as a confirmed bachelor seems to be coming to an end."

Draco raised a brow. "Really? Who is the unfortunate witch?"

"No idea," sighed Blaise. "My dodgy old grandfather is setting it up. And he won't let me inherit a single Sickle until it's all said and done, the contemptuous bastard."

"Pity," said Draco, and he meant it. "How does Jean feel about it?"

Blaise made a face and shrugged, but Draco could see genuine sadness lingering in the other wizard's features. However, the morose stare was gone in an instant, replaced by Blaise's usual haughty expression. Instead of responding to Draco's question, Blaise said, "Yes, well, I do hope she's pretty. I won't stand for ugly children."

"I doubt that will be an issue," Draco said, trying to make Blaise feel a bit better. After a few
minutes, the conversation fell to other topics, and the two rose together, walking down the streets of Diagon Alley and pausing occasionally at storefronts. Draco peered at the window displaying the newest flying broom, the very same model he and Ginny had looked at earlier in the month.

"Thinking about getting a new broom?" inquired Blaise.

Draco's lip quirked a little. "Not for me."

His friend looked over and studied Draco's features for a moment before he smirked and said casually, "You certainly seem to enjoy treating her."

"Who?" Draco asked, even though he immediately regretted it, because he knew damn well who Blaise was talking about.

"Don't act stupid," said Blaise as they turned to walk away. "Weasley, of course."

Draco made an affronted noise. "It's not like that." He paused. "I just can't have her living like a poor person in my care, that's all." Blaise let out one of his little derisive snorts.

"Right, and you get no sense of personal pleasure from the act at all."

Draco rolled his eyes at Blaise. After a few moments of silence, Draco looked out ahead of them and said, "Sometimes it is nice, making someone happy for a change." He looked over at Blaise and added, "You would know that if you ever bothered to please anyone other than yourself." Blaise scoffed. "No thank you."

Smirking, Draco led Blaise into George's shop, where Ginny had been working for the last few hours. He'd tried to give her enough time to really work – he'd gone to Gringotts, and then to a few of the businesses his family had a stake in, checking up on things. Now, with Blaise, he crossed into George's shop only to be greeted by the lone twin, who was wiping his hands on a rag.

"Malfoy," George greeted with a cordial nod. "And..." he paused at the sight of Blaise. "Zabini, right?"

"Indeed," said Blaise airily. "I believe one of my older sisters was in your year at Hogwarts."

"She was, yeah," said George slowly, "Pretty sure she told everyone I had wrackspurts on my genitals in fifth year."

"Ah, Isabella," said Blaise fondly, before adding to Draco, "she's my favorite."

Draco snickered before bypassing George and leading Blaise towards the back of the store. He took his time finding Ginny, knowing she was probably busy, and he was right – when he and Blaise tracked her down, Ginny was working with Vera to set up a holiday display on the second floor of the shop. Ginny was wearing a shop apron and one of her cheeks was smeared with dust.

Draco felt a little bubble of amusement at her appearance, though he did not dare to let himself think of it as endearing. Ginny turned and saw him before he said anything.

"Oh, Malfoy! Is it time to go already?"

"Shortly," he told her. "Dinner's soon."

"Okay, but just – fifteen more minutes, alright, we've got this – thing," she said, starting to show him, before she finally noticed Blaise. Ginny's features instantly pinched into a grimace. "Zabini,"
"Weasley," responded Blaise in return. "I see minimum-wage work suits you well."

Ginny smiled sweetly. "Not nearly as well as completely undeserved arrogance suits you."

Draco snorted and Blaise, far from being insulted, made an appreciative noise. "Ah," he said to them both, "how I miss school." With that, he nodded to the pair and bade them both good-bye, looking between them with a hint of amusement before he left the store.

Ginny rolled her eyes at Blaise's back before looking to Draco again. "Fifteen more minutes, alright? I want to help Vera put these candles up. Look!" She showed him with great enthusiasm how the candles created scenes in their smoke that came from burning their wicks, each of which corresponded to the scenery on the front and the accompanying scent. Draco thought that was ridiculous, and he told her so.

"Alright, alright, just go and wait while I finish up," she told him with an eyeroll, and Draco walked away, smiling to himself.

Ginny began to gather up more candles and she placed them on the shelves in a specific order, making certain to give them the best look she could. Vera chatted with her whenever she could manage in English, and Ginny was happy to teach her words and phrases as they worked. When they were done, Vera gave her two thumbs up.

"Good!" she said in her thick accent, smiling.

Ginny laughed and quickly put up the empty boxes before she wiped her hands haphazardly on her apron and pulled it off, hanging it on a hook near the workroom. After writing down her time on the log, Ginny moved happily to the second-floor banister so she could peer down at Draco, who was waiting for her downstairs.

To her surprise, Draco was standing near the counter talking to someone. After a moment of inspection, Ginny realized that someone was Astoria Greengrass, a Slytherin girl who had been in her year at Hogwarts.

Ginny balked. Draco and Astoria appeared to be having a perfectly polite conversation, but as Ginny moved around the banister and down the stairs to their level, she felt perturbed to realize they were smiling and chatting and looking so… pleased with each other.

This, to Ginny's surprise and mounting irritation, did not sit well with her.

It was just – well, Ginny was quite used to Draco's attention being on her, whether that attention was positive or not. And lately, it had nearly always been positive, which is perhaps why watching him smile at a pretty witch like Astoria rubbed Ginny like sandpaper to her bare skin.

As Ginny approached, she realized that Astoria looked as lovely as ever, much to her chagrin. Her hair was prettily curled against her shoulders, and her fashionable cloak was perfectly in place, without a single fleck of dirt or stray hair to undermine its quality. Even her boots appeared without stain, as if she'd just stepped out of a photoshoot for Witch Weekly.

Suddenly, Ginny became much more aware of her own disheveled appearance. Her own hair had nearly fallen out of its hair-tie and she'd pulled it carelessly to one side, so that many strands were still loose and fell around her face. Ginny's robes were quite dusty from moving boxes, and she had a nice clean cut on her elbow from a box-opener blade. She'd also cut the sleeve of her robes, though she wasn't sure when she planned on telling Draco about that, because it seemed like she
ruined a set of robes every week in some way or the other.

And it wasn't that Ginny was immune to beauty or fashion. She very much enjoyed those things, despite growing up in a household that hardly bothered. She didn't feel disdain towards anyone who kept their appearance. But it had never been a big part of her life, if only because no one else she knew bothered with it, and it certainly hadn't been a concern since coming into Draco's home.

Before seeing Astoria, Ginny hadn't been bothered by any of her possible short-comings. Now, as she approached Draco and his little companion, she felt thoroughly inadequate.

Astoria was talking animatedly to Draco about something, so Ginny paused long enough to take in a quick breath and then hurry forward, as if she'd only just spotted them.

"There you are," she said to Draco, as if she'd hadn't been watching the for the past thirty seconds. He immediately turned to her, and Ginny – quite unconsciously – touched his arm before shifting in Astoria's direction. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Draco glanced at Ginny's hand, which as still curled on his bicep over his robes. An eyebrow lifted a bit, but he didn't comment or pull his arm away. His lips did quirk a bit at a hidden smile, though.

"Ginny!" said Astoria with a surprised smile. She glanced at Ginny's hand on Draco's arm very quickly, but her polite – and surprisingly genuine – smile remained. "I haven't seen you since –" Astoria paused, because she hadn't seen Ginny since the war, but it wasn't within the parameters of upper-society etiquette to mention that, so she simply finished, "– since school."

After a pause, Astoria added more gently, "You look well."

Ginny let her hand drop but she remained close to Draco's side, something he seemed to observe with an air of amusement. "Er, thank you. So do you."

The worst part was Astoria was actually very nice, especially for a Slytherin, so Ginny couldn't find any reason to be unfriendly, even though something needled in her chest to act that way anyway.

"Astoria was just doing some shopping," Draco cut in after a moment. "We ran into each other at the door."

"Oh, well, that's … splendid," said Ginny, doing her best to sound sincere.

"I was just telling Draco about the Burkes' holiday dinner party," explained Astoria to Ginny. "I don't think it will be nearly as grand as the ones your family used to have," she told Draco with a knowing smile, and Ginny's features pinched a little, because she had no idea what Malfoy dinner parties were like but apparently Astoria did. "But," continued Astoria, "I'm sure it will still be a great deal of fun. You were invited, weren't you?"

"I believe the invitation is somewhere, yes," said Draco. "I hadn't considered yet whether or not I cared to attend."

"Oh, you should," said Astoria animatedly. Then she hesitated and added more quietly, "It's been a while since anyone in your family has come to socialize, especially you, Draco. People are starting to miss you." Draco seemed to understand something about Astoria's words that Ginny did not, and this only served to further chafe the redhead. She felt like the two were having a conversation in a foreign language and disregarding her complete ignorance of it.

"Is that so?" responded Draco thoughtfully, before he pressed away his pensive stare and smiled at
Astoria again. "Well, in that case, perhaps I should make an appearance." He glanced at Ginny and then looked back to Astoria, his lips quirked.

"If only for the pleasure of your company," he added to Astoria.

Ginny's eyes cut in Draco's direction like a pair of daggers.

Astoria giggled, not noticing Ginny's expression. "Well," she said politely, "I hope you do. And Ginny – " The redhead schooled back her glare and fixed her face with a fake smile. "Are you planning to come as well?"

Ginny glanced at Draco, who seemed to be waiting for her answer from behind an expression of poorly hidden amusement. "Yes," said Ginny at last, forcing her teeth apart. "I will be there… with Draco," she finished lightly, looking in his direction.

Again, Astoria seemed to search for something between them. Then she simply smiled and clasped her hands in front of her. "Wonderful. I'll see you both at the party, then." With that, she turned and left the shop, and Ginny watched her go before shifting to give Draco the dirtiest look she could manage.

The older wizard gave her an innocent look before leading her outside of the shop. "What? I didn't force you to accept that invitation," he said, as if that was the source of Ginny's irritation. "Do you even really want to go?"

"Oh, yes," said Ginny sardonically as they walked, suddenly feeling very cross. "I love spending my evenings in rooms full of people I hate, drinking terrible wine and talking about – " she kicked at something on the path " – how my blood is so pure I could baptize a newborn baby in it."

Draco tilted his head at her. "So then don't go," he said, not unkindly.

"Oh, I'm going." She cocked her head in Draco's direction. "If only to watch you enjoy the pleasure of Astoria's company." There was absolutely no way she could have kept the peevishness out of her voice, but damned if she didn't try.

Draco looked straight-forward so Ginny wouldn't see his efforts not to laugh. "I was only being polite," he said lightly.

"Bollocks," grumbled Ginny. "You are never polite, Malfoy."

"I can be, if the situation calls for it," defended Draco lightly.

"Well, so can I," said Ginny, as though it were a competition. "And I'll prove it by being at that stupid party and not killing anyone."

"If you insist."

Ginny's thoughts turned back to Astoria, and the effortless way she carried herself. If anyone was polite, it was Astoria. She was exactly the sort of lovely socialite espoused as the optimal witch by much of the pure-blood British society. This reminded Ginny of something she hadn't thought of in quite a while.

"You know," said Ginny to Draco, even though she was looking forward, and it seemed clear she was talking more to herself, "my grandmother was so excited when I was born. I was the first female Weasley born in generations, and she was ecstatic. And she used to tell me – " Ginny affected an old woman's voice here " – Ginevra, there are only three things a good witch should
be. Pretty, Polished and Present." Ginny made a face. "Can you believe that? I remember thinking – bollocks, there's got to be more to it than that. But no, that's all she believed was necessary. Pretty, Polished and Present. The ideal pure-blood witch."

After a pause, Ginny looked straight-forward and said with a grimace, "Well, you can imagine her disappointment with me." Sighing, Ginny went on, "And I mean – Really? That's it? Seven generations of waiting for a female Weasley, and that's what you have to tell her? I mean, where do you even go from there? What's the purpose? Where's the fun?" Ginny tossed out her arms and nearly hit a fellow Diagon Alley patron. The old wizard shot her a dirty look but Ginny didn't even seem to notice.

Finally, Draco tilted his head so that he was looking down at her face, which was naturally a good bit lower than his. "Are you even talking to me anymore?" he teased.

Suddenly realizing her churlishness, Ginny made a face and shrugged her shoulders a bit, embarrassment taking away from her irritation. "Maybe ranting a bit," she admitted sheepishly. Then she extended her hand to him. "Let's just go home. I'm hungry."

Draco watched her for a moment. Then he took her hand, but he didn't disapparate. "Would you prefer to eat somewhere in Diagon Alley?" he asked, and Ginny's sullen expression lifted a bit.

"Yes," she answered, looking as dignified as she could manage.

So Draco stepped down from the Apparition point and tugged gently on Ginny's hand, until she fell into step next to him. After a few steps, Ginny said rather softly, "You better not leave me alone at that dinner party, just so you can go dance with some girl."

Draco thought about teasing her – which was the only reason he'd even made the comment to Astoria in the first place – but instead he chuckled a bit. "I won't," he promised, only just then realizing that he still held her hand.

So he squeezed it in reassurance, and Ginny relaxed.
Chapter 14

Author's Note: Thank you to everyone who reviewed! And yes, I will most likely continue to update more quickly now that I am finally – after eight long years – done with college.

Also, to clear up some questions about Damien – He is a Black, but he is not Bellatrix's son (as he would be a Lestrange if that were the case). He is a more distant relative than that to Draco – a second or third cousin on Bellatrix and Narcissa's side. This probably means he is distantly related to Ginny, too, but that doesn't really matter for the story. Just clearing that up!

Thanks again for all the well wishes and congratulations! And for those of you who are working in school (and on your thesis!) I say to you – You can do it! And congrats on all the work you've done up until this point!

Also, I could really write a separate stand-alone fic about Charlie and Fleur during all this time. Maybe I will after this story is finished.

Now on to Ginny and Draco.

Edit: Jesus, this chapter turned out to be 10,000 words and 23 pages long.

Curses flew in every direction.

Pressed against a wall, her chest heaving, Ginny dared to peek around a corner. She spotted Dolohov in a heated battle with McGonagall, but the old professor managed to dispatch him before running off. The battle for Hogwarts was in full-swing.

We just have to get through this, Ginny thought. Harry is in the forest, and once he's defeated Voldemort, everything will be alright. She did not know then – at that moment – that Harry was already dead. In truth, the war was already over.

But for now, the battle raged in Hogwarts, and no one was safe from the slaughter. Ginny sucked in a deep breath, gripped her wand and dashed out from her hiding spot, brandishing a curse at the first Death Eater who ran by. It dropped him to the ground, but she had no idea who it was behind the mask.

Turning quickly, Ginny dodged a curse and rolled behind the statue outside of Dumbledore's office. It was then, just around the corner of the statue, that she heard their voices.

"What if we can't find him, Lucius?"

"We will, just keep your head low – "

"But what if – what if he's hurt somewhere, someone said there was a fire and Crabbe's boy was killed – "

"We'll FIND him! Just stay behind me!"

At that moment, Ginny peeked around the statue to spot Lucius Malfoy, as bedraggled as she'd ever seen him, gripping Narcissa's arm tightly and using his taller, broader form to shield her from any curses that might come their way. They skidded to a stop at the end of the corridor, and it was clear they were searching for Draco.
Ginny narrowed her eyes and raised her wand.

That was when Lucius – and Lucius alone – looked up and spotted her, with her wand extended, poised from her hiding spot to kill them. And she could. Ginny had no doubt that she had enough hatred for their family to kill them both on the spot, especially with her blood pumping and her body aching from the fight.

Lucius froze, his arm extended over Narcissa, his expression stricken. One hand was open, spread against Narcissa to keep her back. The other had been at his side, but as Ginny watched through her red gaze, Lucius slowly raised his other hand so Ginny could see it.

Empty. Lucius had no wand, and neither did Narcissa. Both of her hands were fisted at her hair, and she was close to sobbing. "DRACO!" she called out desperately, whimpering when the only answer to her plea was crashing and screaming from the floor below.

Ginny's hand trembled on her wand. Narcissa still hadn't seen her, but Lucius's gaze was locked on hers, his grey eyes wide. His opened hand stayed where it was, so Ginny could see.

A moment passed in heated silence. Then Ginny lowered her wand with a scowl, shaking her head. With one last disgruntled look at Lucius, she mouthed three words to him – The Great Hall.

Lucius' relief was tangible, even from a distance. With one curt nod in Ginny's direction, he grabbed Narcissa and they began running again.

Ginny left in a separate decision, uncertainty weighing on her heart.

The afternoon air was pleasurably crisp and light, and the sun gave an added layer of warmth to make up for the snow blanketing the ground outside of Charlie and Fleur's cottage.

"So how do you like working for old George?" asked Charlie with a grin. "It's been a week today, right?"

"Yep," Ginny confirmed. "And it's pretty fun," she conceded, turning her face up towards the sky. Draco was out there flying, she knew, but she couldn't see him. He'd left as soon as they'd arrived for their visit, citing the need to get away for a while. He had to accompany her to Charlie's house, but he always found an excuse to leave them alone, so Ginny and her brother could talk. It was something he always did with his usual amount of snarkiness, but Ginny knew it was a kindness, even if he refused to treat it that way.

"And I'm getting to know Vera better, too," added Ginny, sipping at some tea. The hot liquid offered a nice buffer against the cold afternoon. She and Charlie could have easily sat inside and kept warm, but Ginny shared her brother's love of the outdoors.

"Oh?" asked Charlie curiously. "And how is she?"

"She's quite funny, actually," admitted Ginny. "She still doesn't know much English, but she really likes pranking George." Ginny grinned. "Two days ago, she told him to stop eating her candy, but then he licked it just to gross her out, so she jinxed the cash register. The next time he opened it, it went POOF!" Ginny tossed up her hands. "And George had to spend the rest of the day serving customers while covered in sticky pink goo. It was great."

Charlie laughed. "Wow, that sounds… surprisingly apt, for the wife of George."

"I know, right?" Ginny looked out over the snowy grounds and smiled. "So, how's your new job?
"Ah," said Charlie, shifting in his chair. "Well, I like the actual work. And it pays well, thank Merlin. We're finally back on our feet." He hesitated before continuing, "The only thing I don't like is having to report to the Ministry once a month. I have to actually go in and submit my findings to an office there."

"What's so bad about that?"

Charlie glanced quickly at Ginny and then shrugged a little, sadness pressing at his features. "The Ministry's not the same anymore, Gin," he sighed. "Being in there... it's awful." Charlie looked over Ginny's face, as if trying to decide how much he should say. It seemed that he felt the need to get something off his chest, so Ginny straightened up and listened attentively.

"It's just – alright, well, you remember that breakout the Ministry had a few months ago? The one where all the Muggleborns escaped?"

Ginny's heart stalled and sputtered for a moment, but she managed to nod calmly. "Yeah, I – I heard about it on the radio."

If Charlie noticed anything peculiar in her hesitation, he didn't comment on it. Instead, he leaned back in his chair and looked away, obviously visiting the memory in his mind's eye. "I was at the Ministry just a few days ago. And – well, I guess they recaptured some of them. Just a few. And they were leading them through the Ministry in handcuffs as I was leaving."

At this, Charlie dropped his gaze to the patio table the pair occupied just outside of the cottage.

"They were children, Gin. I mean – young, barely old enough for Hogwarts. I guess – I guess that's why they got caught again? Because they had no idea what to do." Charlie paused long enough to look ashamed, but his eyes were on the table, and his own hands, rather than Ginny. "I knew they were leading those kids to their deaths. The Ministry isn't going to make the mistake of keeping them around a second time. And – And I knew, that if no one did anything, those children were going to die. I wanted to help. I wanted to fight, to try and get them away. And I was just about to do it – I had my wand in my hand, even, ready to attack those Snatchers in the middle of the Ministry floor."

A heavy pause followed.

"But," said Charlie softly, his features pinched with shame "but I didn't. Because of them."

Ginny and Charlie's eyes rose in unison to the cottage, where Fleur stood in the window, holding Margrethe in her arms and smiling as she bounced the baby on her hip. Ginny shifted her eyes back to her brother, but Charlie looked at Fleur and the baby still, even as he spoke.

Charlie said, "I knew that if I tried to help those kids, I would be killed. And that would be okay, except that Fleur and Margrethe would be alone again." Scowling softly, Charlie curled his fingers around one another on the table.

"I let those children die because I wanted to come home to my family, nevermind what happened to theirs."

"Charlie..." Ginny moved her hand over his. "I know that was hard, but you're not to blame. Not for any of it."

She wasn't sure if Charlie heard her. He squeezed her hand in return, but when he spoke, he
sounded rather faraway. "You see," he said, still looking at the window. "That's the real evil of what You-Know-Who is doing. He isn't just making people marry and have children for the sake of Great Britain's magical population."

At this, Charlie finally looked at Ginny again.

"He's doing it because he knows people with nothing left to lose are very dangerous," said Charlie quietly. "But those of us who have someone waiting on us to come home…" Charlie dropped his gaze again. "We can't afford to act rashly. We can't afford to fight."

Ginny felt Charlie's fingers curl tighter over hers, almost painfully so, as he murmured, "We can't afford to lose again."

Ginny wasn't sure what to say. After watching Charlie's thoughtful face for a while, she simply got from her spot, still holding his hand, and crawled into his lap. This had the desired effect of making him smile, and he wrapped his arms around her, rocking her gently side to side.

After several seconds of silence, Charlie whispered teasingly, "I remember when you could do this without crushing me."

So Ginny scowled and socked him in the shoulder.

"Here."

Ginny looked up from her magazine to see Draco drop a coin purse in front of her. It clattered loudly. "What's that for?" she asked.

Draco took a seat across from her. "It's for dress robes. You'll need something decent to wear to the Burkes' dinner party."

Turning a page in her magazine, Ginny said loftily, "I make my own gold now, Malfoy."

"You're saving that for Christmas," he answered in a voice that let her know he was already prepared to argue with her. "And besides, I doubt you've made quite this much so far."

Ginny picked up the coin purse. "Bloody hell, this feel like a hundred galleons!"

"A hundred and fifty," Draco corrected, "and if your robes cost any less than that, they're rubbish."

Ginny gaped at him. Her dress robes for the Yule Ball in third year had cost sixty galleons, brand new. And her parents had scrimped and saved for those for two months. Ginny prodded the bag and made a face. She was beginning to regret her spur-of-the-moment decision to join Draco at the dinner party, but the whole thing was in about ten days, and she'd already accepted. No turning back now.

"Uuuggghhh," was all Ginny said aloud.

"I have some things to take care of today, so we'll go to Diagon Alley tomorrow," he promised her, pulling on his cloak. Great, thought Ginny. Not only did she have dress robes to worry about, but Draco wasn't even going to be home today.

"Bleaker!" The house-elf appeared, and Draco knelt in front of him, so that they were eye-to-eye. It might have been endearing, if Draco's expression hadn't suddenly sharpened into the fearsome glare he'd inherited from Lucius. The house-elf was very brave not to draw back, but he did squeak
"I'm going to be out today," Draco told the elf, "so you are to stay with her until I return. And if you value your head, you will not let Damien anywhere near her. Understand?"

"Yes, Master Malfoy."

"You have permission to use any force necessary against him if he tries to hurt her."

This time, Bleaker nodded firmly. "Yes, Master Malfoy. Bleaker will give his life for Missus Weasley if necessary."

"You're damn right you will," said Draco, standing again. "Be the most useful thing you could do with it."

Ginny tapped her finger on Draco's desk, where she was sitting in the rolling chair. When Draco was finally done with his threats, she let out a long dramatic sigh. "It's fine, Bleaker. Nothing's going to happen," she told the house-elf reassuringly, before jumping up as Draco prepared to leave. "Although no one would have to worry if you'd take me with you – or just stay here – "

Ginny loathed being in the Manor alone. It was nice to know Bleaker would be there, but she'd grown to quite hate it when Draco left.

"I can't," said Draco, turning to face her as he tugged on his gloves. His voice was much gentler than the one he'd used with Bleaker. "I'm sorry, but I'll be at the Ministry. And I assure you that you don't want to be there." He didn't tell her he had to attend a sentencing. No reason to bring that up and sour her mood further.

Another sigh, but Ginny just folded her arms over her robes and fought the urge to sulk.

She followed Draco to the door and, as he patted himself to make sure he had his wand, Ginny picked up his fur hat and held it out to him on the top of one finger. Winter was now firmly settled in their part of England, and the wind outside was blistering, tipping everything in painfully crisp frost. Including one's ears, if they weren't careful.

Draco accepted the hat and said sympathetically, "I won't be gone all day."

"Go, I don't care."

"Fine, I'll stay gone all day and night."

"I'll just run away with Bleaker, then. We'll get married, live in the Hamptons. Bet it's not snowing there."

"Have fun with your ugly half-elf children," Draco responded with a smirk before sliding on his hat. Ginny rolled her eyes good-naturedly as Draco flashed her one last half-amused, half-exasperated look before leaving. The door closed behind him, and Ginny sighed as soon as it clicked shut.

"Well," she said to the house-elf, "looks like you and I are about to have an Exploding Snap tournament. So prepare yourself!"

"Ooh, Bleaker loves that game!"

After lunch, Ginny put away their games and told Bleaker to relax and enjoy himself while she
rested on the couch. Of course, the whole "relax and enjoy himself" order meant that the house-elf merely stood where he was, looking a bit awkward and uncertain, not really doing either of the things Ginny had suggested he do.

Finally, Ginny gave him some of her art supplies and "ordered" him to make her something nice. He seemed even more uncertain about this task, but because it was a direct command, he put himself to it and it left Ginny some time to think.

There was something going on – a feeling, a realization, a shift, something Ginny could not identify and dared not investigate too thoroughly, not even in her own mind. But it was different, certainly. Ginny's conversation with Charlie the day before fell on her mind, and Ginny felt herself frown. The news of the children was distressing, but after she'd told Draco about it, he reassured her that only a few had been found by the Snatchers. Many more were now free because of their efforts. That made little difference to the children who Charlie had seen, but it was the only comfort Ginny had.

Strangely, Charlie's words about Voldemort's true purposes in creating families made her think of Draco. It was no wonder his family was such a closed off lot, Draco included. There was no lack of love between them to explain their seemingly cold behavior; instead, it seemed to be their persistent experiences that led them to feel exposure to emotional attachments was a potential weak link.

And yet… Draco, after all this time, certainly felt … well, a part of Ginny's life, though she couldn't be sure exactly what that meant. But whereas her first few months at the Manor had been nothing short of miserable, she'd found that, as of late, her time with Draco was certainly among the happiest. Her family, too, but Draco was so often there with her when she was with them, he felt firmly cemented in that realm of her life.

And she laughed. She laughed quite a bit, actually. With George and Vera, at the shop. With her other brothers, with Fleur, with the lovely little baby Margrethe.

With Draco Malfoy.

That instance with Damien had been terrifying, and the dinner with Bellatrix had reminded Ginny of everything she hated, everything she had lost. That loss burned in her still, and she doubted the scars it left would ever heal.

Still, in their space – Draco's room, and hers – Ginny had something close to that warm cozy feeling she'd had at The Burrow. Her things were here, in both of their rooms, her clothes and her radio and her drawings and her books. Her presence in his part of the Manor was unmistakable, just as Draco's was.

And she liked it.

She liked her spot at the window, which she and Draco sometimes shared, because they could look out over the gardens from there. She liked to sleep on the couch in front of the fire – the very same one she'd woken up on with Draco, a memory which made Ginny flushed with embarrassment like she hadn't been since those first few awkward years at Hogwarts.

Ginny also liked her chair, which was also near the fireplace; it was unmistakably hers now, because Draco had his own and the two chairs were very near each other, but undeniably different. Ginny's chair was filled with pillows and a blanket she'd bought at Diagon Alley. It had a small stain on the arm where she'd spilled some ink, and she probably had a quill or hair-tie lost in the cushions.
Draco's chair usually had at least one book sitting in it, and he'd pick it up and read a few chapters at a time, in the evenings when he wasn't too tired. It also sometimes had his cloak draped over the back, and once he'd fallen asleep in the chair and slept the whole night with his cloak over him. Ginny remembered smiling at that and shaking her head. Draco was way too tall to sleep in a chair, and he'd looked like a jumble of limbs, wizard-in-a-box that read on the side – some assembly required.

Ginny sat in her chair and looked over at his.

The image of Draco watching over her from his end of the couch suddenly appeared in Ginny's mind. His anxious vigil, so reminiscent of the one he'd kept over his parents that night he'd helped the Muggleborns escape the Ministry, refused to leave Ginny's mind.

What had he said to Bellatrix after she had left dinner, Ginny wondered.

After nearly a half-hour of silence, Ginny looked over at the coin purse of gold on Draco's desk. Suddenly, she very much wanted to buy dress robes. But she didn't want to have Draco with her when she got them. No, she wanted to do something – well, impressive. She remembered Astoria, and how certain she was to look as beautiful as ever. Ginny scowled.

Besides Astoria, there would be many other prominent purebloods in attendance as well. Malfoy's circle of magical nobility, Ginny's enemies. Could she really go to a party with them and pretend to have a good time?

Ginny thought back to Draco, and a furious mix of emotions tangled in her heart. A part of her wanted to look exactly as lovely as Astoria, elegant and refined and beautiful. But she wanted more than that. She wanted to be striking, strong. She wanted to show everyone at that silly holiday dinner that she was not defeated. She was alive and well and confident as she'd never been in her life. And Ginny had never really lacked confidence, so this would be a prodigious thing indeed.

Ginny wanted to walk in to that dinner party with Draco and look – not like she belonged there – but like wherever she did belong, it was better than this. After thinking on this notion for a while, Ginny decided there was only one person to talk to in order to achieve this monumental level of arrogance.

"Come on, Bleaker," said Ginny, hopping to her feet. "We're going to go find Narcissa."

As it turned out, Narcissa Malfoy was sitting in the parlor, drinking tea and observing something in the western gardens out of the window. Nearby, a soft tune played on the radio, and an unopened book sat on the table next to her chair.

Ginny took in a deep breath, fought for all her self-control and knocked lightly on the doorway.

When Narcissa spotted her, the elder witch's eyes immediately narrowed. "What do you want?" she asked in a low flat voice, her tea cup frozen in her hand. Ginny steeled herself for insults and stepped into the room.

"I just – wanted to ask for your help with something."

Narcissa looked back out of the window. "No."

Ginny growled inwardly. "You haven't even heard it, yet!"

"Where is my son?" asked Narcissa coolly. "Have you done something to him?"
"What? No, look –"

"Then where is he?"

"He's out of the house! Will you just hear me out?"

"I'd rather not." Narcissa picked up her book and opened it pointedly. Ginny sighed, knowing that a normal person would just give up and considering it a victory not to have to deal with Narcissa at all. But Ginny was not a normal person, so she persisted.

"It will help your son to hear me out," she pointed out in her most persuasive tones.

Narcissa's eyes snapped up to Ginny's face, but her puckered expression remained. "What are you talking about, Weasley?"

Ginny moved forward at Narcissa's barely-there acquiescence and leaned against a chair next to Narcissa, who appeared to find this simple motion quite distasteful. "I just need some help with dress robes, for the Burkes' holiday dinner. And I thought you might could help."

At least she managed to make Narcissa smile, even if it was a completely disdain-filled look of amusement. "And why on earth would I want to help you buy dress robes?"

Ginny had prepared for this. "Well, from what I understand, most of your circle has been missing the Malfoys in public for a while. Draco plans to show up to the Burkes' party to let everyone know you lot are still large and in charge… And I'll be going with him."

Narcissa raised a slim black brow.

"And if I were to come in there looking like a 'dumpy little fool'," said Ginny, watching as Narcissa silently reveled in hearing her own insult to Ginny repeated back to her, "Well, it would only make your son look bad." She paused for effect. "And you, plus Lucius. You know. My keepers?"

Narcissa lowered her teacup back to its saucer. Ah, thought Ginny. She had her attention.

"Just think," said Ginny, waving a hand, "I've been locked up for over a year, including my time in the dungeons. I don't have any idea what's a good fashionable set of robes. So if I look horrid, people are going to see me on Draco's arm and say – " Ginny put her on her best snobby old lady voice here, and it was quite convincing, " – Look at what Narcissa and Lucius let hang around their son! Oh, the shame! Oh, the embarrassment! Oh, the indigni –"

"Alright, alright!" snapped Narcissa. "You've made your point."

Ginny closed her mouth with a click and tried not to smile. She watched as Narcissa rose delicately from her chair and crossed over to Ginny, raising her hand to Ginny's face but not touching her. Ginny blinked awkwardly as Narcissa gave her a none-too-subtle appraisal.

After a very long pause, in which Ginny barely kept from dancing from toe to toe in anxiety, Narcissa sighed, sounding like the most aggrieved woman alive.

"Is there any chance I can convince you to dye your awful hair?"

Ginny scowled. "No, Narcissa."

"Oh, fine," sighed the elder witch. Then she snapped her fingers. "Go to the drawing room. I will be there within fifteen minutes."
Ginny stared and stumbled after the woman, who was already walking out of the room. "Wait – the drawing room? Aren't we going to some store in Diagon Alley?"

Narcissa paused and looked over her shoulder, pretty features pinched with disgust. "To buy something off the rack? Surely, you must be joking." Then she swept out of the room.

Ginny had not been joking. But apparently, neither had Narcissa.

Within half an hour, Madam Malkin herself walked in, with at least five bins hovering behind her filled to the brim with fabrics. "Oh, Mrs. Malfoy," said the portly witch as soon as she entered the room. She was wearing one of the finest sets of robes Ginny had ever seen on her, and she looked positively delighted to be there.

Ginny could only gape. "These aren't even robes!" She poked into one of the bins. "They're just massive spools of fabric."

"Obviously," said Narcissa with a roll of her eyes, though it was a much more refined expression than Ginny's would have been. "For an event such as this, you need something unique, styled just for you. Something tailored to your body, your style, and the occasion." Ginny watched as Narcissa pulled out a roll of elegant fabric, so beautifully printed that Ginny gasped. She was afraid to touch any of the fabric, it was so nice.

"Today, we will pick out the fabrics for your robes and decide on a style. Then Madam Malkin will tailor it specially for you."

Ginny balked. "Your son only gave me a hundred and fifty galleons."

"We have an account," said Narcissa without even looking in her direction. Instead, she was admiring a spool of deep red fabric with black beading. "Hmm, perhaps … oh, no. Not with your terrible complexion."

Ginny glared at the wall and wondered why she had done this to herself.

For the next hour, the three witches looked at bin after bin of fabrics, all of which appeared to be finer than anything Ginny had ever seen. "I think this is just a Christmas dinner party," said Ginny as Narcissa held up a royal blue fabric to her chest, then took it away. "Not like – a ball or anything."

"This is your first public appearance," said Narcissa, pausing in front of an entire wall of fabric Madam Malkin had set up. She picked up some white lace and pressed it up against a spool. "And every single one of these parties is just one great effort to look superior to everyone else there. You should remember that from now on."

Ginny bared her teeth at Narcissa behind the other woman's back.

Suddenly, Narcissa made a noise that might have been happiness, and she slowly pulled out an emerald green fabric with light black beading. "Oh," she gasped, holding a hand to her heart, "this is… perfection."

Ginny peered around Narcissa. "It's green," she groaned. "like – Slytherin green."

Narcissa quickly cut her off. "Green is a Christmas color, this is a Christmas dinner. Stand on the stool." Clicking her tongue in her mouth, Ginny moved over to the stool and stood on top of it, so that she faced the long mirror Madam Malkin had brought. The portly shop owner appeared on the
"Ooh, excellent choice, Mrs. Malfoy! So beautiful – and rare, too. Brand new to the shop."

Ginny opened her mouth to protest, but Narcissa stepped in front of her and wrapped the fabric around her entirely, bringing up her hands to tug the fabric around Ginny's chest and under her arms, so that it resembled some sort of desired shape. Then she pinned it into place and called for another fabric she'd set aside. Within moments, Narcissa brought up a very sheer fabric of the same emerald color and she draped it over the green and black, so that it wrapped around Ginny's shoulders almost like a shawl. She took the same fabric and placed it low, so that it went down to Ginny's feet.

When she was done, Narcissa took a step back and observed Ginny with perhaps the first ever hint of approval she'd ever given her.

Ginny looked at the mirror. "Oh – " she said, "Oh, well… " It was lovely, even in its barest form. "Wow, this is actually pretty … nice."

Narcissa's lips twitched at a self-satisfied smile. Stepping up to the platform, she took Ginny's hair in her hands and loosely braided it before setting it one shoulder. "There," said Narcissa, moving behind Ginny and toying with a few strands of hair, so that they hung loosely around her face. She looked at Ginny's reflection over the younger witch's shoulder.

Ginny raked her eyes over her reflection. "I think – yeah, I think this is… great." She paused, and then glanced over her shoulder. "Thank you."

Narcissa's reaction was to smile smugly, of course. "As you indicated before, I certainly know what I'm doing." She continued to mess with small pieces of the robes. As she did so, Ginny ventured a question.

"Do you ever wish you had a daughter?"

This made Narcissa pause, and she rounded in front of Ginny, her eyes low and on the robes as she nitpicked over some folds and creases. "No."

Well, alright then, thought Ginny.

But after a few seconds of silence, Narcissa spoke again. "I grew up in a household of girls," she said. "And I saw how they suffered for every indiscretion. Better that I have a son." Her hands dropped away from Ginny, as the redhead watched Narcissa with surprise at the other woman's admission.

"Everyone suffers, of course," said Narcissa crisply. "But witches aren't allowed to talk about it, as wizards are." To Ginny's great shock, Narcissa looked up and met her gaze then. "My sisters both learned this the hard way. And they responded to it in very different manners."

Madam Malkin was bustling nearby, out of earshot.

"And you?" dared Ginny.

Narcissa raised both brows but kept her face in an impressively blank mask. And Ginny understood. Draco Malfoy hadn't inherited Lucius' cold demeanor. He had inherited Narcissa's ability to hide in plain sight. Compartmentalization at its finest.

"Everything ready?" asked Madam Malkin, looking positively gleeful. Merlin only knew how
much gold she was making off this one purchase.

Narcissa pulled away from Ginny. "Yes, but I want you to return tomorrow. I've decided that I need some new dress robes as well." Ginny thought Madam Malkin might faint, but all she did was nod eagerly and set to packing up her things.

Narcissa moved behind Ginny again, and this time, she gripped the younger witch's shoulders and straightened her spine. "Now, remember – don't slouch, it is the most unseemly thing you can do. Keep your shoulders back, your chin high and your lips unsmiling. Smiling creates creases."

Ginny barely kept from rolling her eyes.

"After all," said Narcissa, sounding as smug as ever, "there are only three things a good pureblood witch must be."

Please, no, thought Ginny.

"Pretty, Polished and Present," announced Narcissa proudly.

Ginny's brain took a deep breath and then screamed for eternity.

As Ginny and Narcissa were leaving the drawing room, Draco came marching up the corridor. "There you are," he said as soon as he saw Ginny, looking both irritated and worried.

"I left you a note in the room saying I was with your mother," said Ginny.

Draco balked. "I thought that was a joke."

Narcissa swept by then and patted Draco's head as she moved past, causing him to make a very childish face at her. "There, there, son," was all she said, before disappearing around the corner. Ginny grinned widely at Draco's obvious distress.

"This makes me very uncomfortable," he told Ginny, but she simply moved right past Draco – and patted his head on the way before dashing off.

For the next week, Ginny spent most of her time working – when Draco found reason to occupy himself nearby – and saving every sickle she made for Christmas presents. She then bought the gifts one by one, thinking long and hard about each.

"We're going to have Christmas at Charlie and Fleur's," she told Draco over dinner, smiling happily at the idea. "Even Percy said he was going to be there, even though he acted like it was a total chore. Oh! And we'll be going there the day before Christmas eve, that way you can still spend plenty of time with your parents."

Draco took a carrot off Ginny's plate with his fork because she didn't like them. "That is a very small house to gather so many people in," he noted.

"It'll be cozy," admitted Ginny, not at all bothered. "You'll deal."

"I suppose I'll have to," he said, eating the carrot. "Unless I suffocate and die."

"In which case," cut in Ginny cheerfully, "we will prop you up and make you into a scarecrow for the garden." She finished her meal and pushed it away so that Bleaker could take it from their table in the room. They had forgone the formal dinner table that night, as they sometimes did.
"Now, wrapping time!"

Ginny spent the rest of the evening wrapping the gifts she'd bought and carefully arranging them under the tree in Draco's room, which glittered under the lights and tinsel, bright against the dark corner of the room near the snow-laden window.

After finishing his meal, Draco made a glass of wine and settled down next to the tree with her, long legs stretched out comfortably, simply watching. After wrapping each present, Ginny handed it to Draco, so he could write on the label.

He had better handwriting, she told him, and he was forced to agree. When he received the last one, he asked who it was meant for.

"You," said Ginny with a little smile. "From me, of course."

Draco raised a brow, his lips quirked. "There's no need to buy me anything. I'm rich. If I want something, I get it myself."

"Yeah, well." Ginny reverently placed another box under the tree and sat back to admire her work. "Sometimes you don't realize you want something," she said softly, looking at the tree, "until you have it in your hands."

Draco's fingers turned the feather quill one way and then the other. Then he chuckled a bit to himself and wrote on the label.

*To Draco*

*From Ginny*

When he handed it to Ginny, he watched her face as her eyes flickered over his face for a moment. After that, she shifted to the tree again and placed the small box with the others under the tree. Then she sat back, shoulder to shoulder with Draco, as they admired the tree.

The night of the dinner, Draco Malfoy stood in front of the mirror in his room. His hands tugged at the cuffs of his own dress robes, and he turned to examine them from both sides. When one button refused to cooperate, Draco dropped his hands and prepared to call on someone to help.

But Lucius was already there, stepping forward and adjusting the snap.

"Father," said Draco in surprise. Lucius was wearing dress robes as well, and even though he still had too sickly a look to him, his features held a comforting degree of confidence.

"Your mother informed me that attending this event would be a good idea," Lucius told Draco. "And so here we are." Something glittered in Lucius' eyes as he looked over his son, and Draco dared to hope that it was pride. "We've hired a carriage to take us all."

"You do know that Weasley is coming too, right?" asked Draco as the two left his room. Somehow, the mental image of all four of them coming into the Burkes' dinner party together was almost too foreign an idea for Draco to conjure.

"Of course," said Lucius with a hint of dryness.

The pair stepped into the hallway, and Draco took a moment to appreciate his father. He was such an impressive figure, even in his less-than-stellar state. And now that Draco was grown, he planned
to do his father proud. Lucius, as if sensing Draco's thoughts, placed a hand on his son's arm and squeezed it in a rare moment of physical affection.

Then a door opened down the hall. Draco turned, and as Lucius watched, his son was swept away in a single moment as Ginny Weasley appeared in front of them.

If Draco had been walking when he spotted her, his feet would have certainly come to a stop. Instead, it was his heart that skidded to a halt as Ginny approached; her dark red hair was curled and put to one side in a thick braid, with twirling strands hanging loosely near her ears and face; in the spirit of the holiday, red Christmas berries tipped with green leaves made the occasional artful appearance in her hair. The braid sat elegantly over one shoulder, which was covered only by a sheer green fabric, all the way up to the high elegant neckline. It gave the impression of modesty and elegance, but Ginny's bare skin beneath the transparent material was visible all the way down to the line of the satin underneath, which started just above the slope of her chest.

Below that, Ginny's pale skin disappeared into dark green satin, embellished with bits of black beading, all of which fit perfectly to her body, sloping down her hips and along her thighs. The satin stopped just above Ginny's knees, and from there, only the sheer fabric completed the robes to the floor. Long sleeves, made of the same transparent material as the neckline, ran the length of Ginny's arms and wrapped tightly at her wrists, giving them a more sophisticated shape.

As Ginny watched Draco's awed expression, he saw her smile widely, completely transforming her features into a rosy-cheeked flush that he'd rarely – if ever – seen on her.

Draco's mind registered vaguely that Narcissa had also entered, but he couldn't take his eyes off Ginny. Her appearance had stunned him into silence, and everyone in the hall seemed to know it.

"Are you ready?" asked Ginny with a teasing smile, as Draco hadn't said a word.

Unable to answer, Draco simply extended an arm to her.

The foursome climbed into a dark carriage pulled by unseen forces, one with such fine details that Ginny had to keep herself from touching and prodding everything she saw. The carriage pulled them along the roads and then up into the air, so that they arrived at the Burkes' home in less than twenty minutes.

Ginny leaned forward and peered out of the window. "Ooh," said Ginny. "Fancy."

Draco, who had regained the ability to speak, looked with her as the carriage landed. "It's nice enough," he said mildly. "Not nearly as grand as the Manor."

"Well, of course not," said Narcissa. "Nothing compares to our beautiful home." She smiled at Lucius, who returned it in his own subtle way. Ginny snickered inwardly. *I cannot believe I am with these people,* she thought with a bubble of hysteria.

The "nice enough" house of the Burkes was not half the size of the Malfoy home, but in truth, it was no less elegant and luxurious. The carriage pulled them around a fountain to the large front double-doors of the home, and when the door opened, Draco stepped out first and held out a hand for Ginny. She took it, but then did a little hop off the carriage, just to prove she could have somersaulted out of the carriage on her own, thank you very much.

"What is wrong with you?" Draco asked wryly.

"Just that stuff that makes me interesting," quipped Ginny with a grin, linking her arm with his.
They walked into the Burkes home close together, with Lucius and Narcissa behind them. More doors opened wide, and the newest arrivals stepped into a great dining hall.

Ginny had to admit, it was stunning. If Narcissa's earlier comments about constantly outdoing each other was accurate, the Burkes were trying very hard. The room was already filled with people, standing, talking, accepting drinks off platters brought by servants. And not house-elves, either, but other witches and wizards in uniforms. Ginny raised a brow as one passed with a plate of very fancy looking hors d'oeuvres.

"I'm proud of you for not grabbing that tray," Draco whispered to her dryly.

"My self-restraint will dwindle as the night goes on," she warned him. "Take in all of the good-behavior-Ginny while you can." Draco smirked to himself and drew Ginny along the dining room with him.

It didn't take long for other people to begin noticing them. And when they did, Ginny drew in a deep breath and took every effort to exercise what she'd practiced. People here still thought of her as a prisoner of war.

Tonight, she would show them that she was anything but.

As if sensing her resolve, Draco stuck to her side through every uncomfortable conversation and stiff greeting. Most of the party-go'ers were quite curious, not just about Ginny, but all the Malfoys. It was true they'd fallen out of favor during the war, but one would never know it, looking at the way Lucius and Narcissa carried themselves.

People might have whispered behind their backs, but it was much more difficult to doubt their power when faced with them. Ginny and Draco were much the same, whether consciously or not. Most of the others at the party, Ginny only knew by name. Fortunately, it seemed that only a few of the truly combative Death Eaters were there. Many of those Ginny had actually fought in the war had died or were otherwise absent.

"Bellatrix won't be here," Draco reassured her. "Even we all know she's not exactly dinner party material."

Still, there were others. Dolohov was there, and the Carrows. They had Ernie MacMillan with them, and he looked positively miserable. Hannah Abbott was there, too, and she kept sending longing looks to Ernie across the room. The two had been very close in school, Ginny remembered.

"Ginny," said a thickly-accented voice.

Draco and Ginny both turned to see Viktor Krum, of all people. He smiled sincerely at seeing her, and Ginny realized she hadn't seen him since Bill and Fleur's wedding. It felt like a lifetime ago.

"Viktor," said Ginny, releasing Draco's hand to shake Krum's. "It's wonderful to see you!"

The Bulgarian wizard nodded his head graciously to her, before turning to do the same to Draco, with a bit less enthusiasm. "Malfoy." He turned back to Ginny rather quickly. "How are doing? You look very beautiful."

A tiny bit of fangirlish joy crept up Ginny's throat and nearly made her giggle in a very undignified manner. She carefully squashed it.

"Thank you, Viktor. You look very nice as well." She glanced at Draco, who chose that moment to
take a long drink from his wine glass. "And I'm doing very well."

"Good," said Viktor, also looking to Draco again meaningfully. It was not necessarily a friendly glance, and Draco did not miss it. "Have you had any contact with Fleur? I hope she is alright."

"She's great," Ginny told him, touched that he cared about his old competitor. "She's living with my brother Charlie now. I think you met him at their wedding."

"Oh, I did, yes! He is the dragon man." Viktor grinned at Ginny's laugh. "I will be glad to never see another dragon in my life, though."

"After the fight you gave that one in the tournament, I'm sure they feel the same way," said Ginny, and Viktor's smile grew.

"Yes, well, when you are a champion, it is either them or you," he said, before leaning forward a bit, "and I am very competitive. So I always choose me."

"Where is your wife, Krum?" cut in Draco finally.

Ginny barely contained a snicker at Krum's annoyed expression. No wonder he looked so put-out. She expected anyone married to Pansy would hate to be reminded of the fact. "I am sure she is here somewhere," Viktor said, looking around with a grimace. "but I suppose I should go and find her."

"Indeed," said Draco.

Viktor reluctantly bade them both good-bye and then marched off. Draco rolled his eyes grandly. "Overgrown Bulgarian pigeon."

Ginny reached up and tugged gently on his robes, drawing her with him to the long dinner table. "Come on," she said, and it was more her eyes than her voice that led him, as if there was nothing else to do but follow. And he was alright with that, especially when everyone watched as Draco and Ginny sat down together, with Lucius and Narcissa on Draco's side.

Draco wondered if he could remember the last time he felt so fortunate or proud.

The dinner was formal, and despite the festive and enchanting room, it was too stiff and dull for Ginny's taste. Still, the food was amazing, and the hall seemed to grow more beautiful each time Ginny looked at it. Glass chandeliers reflected the many flames keeping the hall alight. The floors were a reflective marble, and the cloth on the tables was a pure white fabric with light gold embroidering, tassels hanging on every end. Candles lined the center of the table, separating each of the heaping dishes of meats, vegetables, cheeses and breads. And desserts, too.

When Ginny hesitated at the crazy number of utensils next to her five plates, she glanced down at Narcissa, who sighed softly and then tapped one of her own. Ginny picked up that one in her own set, and it worked just as well as any other fork, but she was glad not to be embarrassed.

It was crazy, thought Ginny, how much food was there. There were probably people starving, the low workers of Diagon Alley who had yet to regain any of their fortunes lost in the war. But this was a feast fit for the ages, far too much for even the seventy or eighty people who were there.

Still, the tarts were too much for Ginny to resist, though she managed to wait until the end of the meal to try one. "This is the best thing I have ever eaten," she pronounced to Draco, and then when she thought no one was looking, she turned to Draco and shoved an entire tart into her mouth.

"Good lord," Draco muttered, putting a hand over his face, which only made Ginny laugh, and then
Draco too, until Ginny almost choked because she couldn't swallow the tart. It was only when Lucius and Narcisa both gave them dirty looks that they tried to quiet themselves, which they only managed to do with a great deal of effort.

Once the meal was finished, the adults – or, well, the more mature adults – began talking about business and politics and all manner of mind-numbingly boring topics. When Ginny spotted Draco looking down the table, she peered with him only to see Blaise Zabini wiggling his eyebrows at Draco and pointing to some doors on the other end of the banquet hall.

After a few moments, Draco looked down at his parents. "We're going to go and talk with Blaise and the others for a bit," he said primly. "You know. Go into the sitting room or something." Lucius' expression said that he clearly didn't believe this, but he waved Draco off, and his son and Ginny rose from the table as subtly as they could.

Down the length of the table, others sneaked off, too.

"Now, let's see here," said Draco, taking Ginny's hand and leading her down a dark corridor, away from the party. "Blaise always manages to find the best spots and – ah, here we are." With a push at a hidden door, Draco led Ginny down the stairs and far away from the sounds of the adults.

"Where are we going? Isn't the party back there?" asked Ginny. "Not that I mind leaving, of course. No one was even singing Christmas carols. I mean, really. What sort of Christmas party – "

Draco pushed open a door, and music, lights and revelry suddenly assaulted them.

"Ah!" Blaise lifted fine crystal decanter full of what was undoubtedly liquor. "There you two are."

Draco dropped down the last step and grinned. "Starting without us? Not very kind of you to do on Christmas."

"Christmas isn't for two more weeks. And I am no Yuletide saint," smirked Blaise, throwing back half a glass of whiskey. "Now, let us celebrate properly."

Secretly, Ginny had always wondered what it was like for the elites her own age. She wondered what their exclusive get-togethers were like, what sort of things they might do or wear or take part in. Now, she had her answer.

They sneaked away from the adults and got drunk, just like poor people, only they did it million-galleon homes and with liquor that cost more than Arthur Weasley's monthly salary.

One by one, the younger generation of witches and wizards from Great Britain's wealthiest and most refined slipped away from the stuffy dinner party and descended into what looked like a great luxurious den, with refined couches and stylish, high-backed chairs, two fireplaces – one on each end of the large room – fixed with fine stones and hearths big enough to stretch out on. The middle of the room had once had some tables, she saw, but they'd been pushed aside to make room for the people trickling in, all those around Ginny and Draco's age.

Music played from a large magical stereo, not the slow classical music from upstairs, but more modern music, like the Weird Sisters, though occasionally an upbeat Christmas song managed to break through.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the room was that one side was entirely glass, and it extended from the rest of the den like a long sunroom. Through the glass, a snow-covered courtyard lay underneath the dark night sky. Moonlight reflected on the untouched snow and made the outside air seem brighter.
Ginny looked around as the other people gathered, and she spotted someone that made her very excited. "Lavender!"

At Hogwarts, Ginny and Lavender had never given each other the time of day. Now, they embraced each other like old friends. "Oh, Ginny, you look so wonderful!" said Lavender happily, holding Ginny's hands.

"You do, too," said Ginny, and she meant it. Lavender looked worlds better than she had before, and it showed in her glowing smile. Theo Nott Jr. stepped up behind Lavender, and Draco took that moment to extend his hand, which Theo took.

"Draco," said Theo amicably. "Good to see you, mate."

If there were any hard feelings about his father's fate, Theo didn't show it. Lavender looked up at Theo and smiled, and Ginny barely kept from dancing, she was so glad to see Lavender safe and happy again. Looping her arm through Lavender's, she led her a few steps away. "How are you doing? And how's your baby?"

"He's wonderful," said Lavender with a gentler smile than before. "He's at home, with a nanny. If you'd ever like to meet him, you're welcome to visit. Malfoy, too."

"We'll do that," Ginny promised. "And… Theo? He's alright to you?"

Lavender glanced back at Theo and then looked to Ginny with a nod. "He is, yes. I mean," she tucked her hair behind her ear, "we're not… together. Really. I don't think – I don't think I'll want that for a long while. But he's fine with it. And he's so good with Parvartus. I mean, Theo is his brother, but I think – I think he'll be more like his father."

Ginny patted Lavender's hand. "Sounds like a fine arrangement to me." She paused, suddenly remembering she was the one who'd fried Nott Sr. "And is Theo, you know, upset about his father?"

"Oh, no." Lavender shook her head quickly. "He's glad to be rid of him," she said before adding in a whisper, "I wasn't the only one he was cruel to."

Ginny nodded in understanding as Theo and Draco rejoined them.

"Well," said Ginny loudly as the two approached, "you be sure to let me know if there is ANYTHING you need, Lavender. Ever. Especially something that requires violence on my part." She looked directly at Theo, who raised a brow.

"That was a threat," Draco told Theo matter-of-factly. "In case her subtlety proved to be too much for you."

"I got it." Theo smirked.

Suddenly, an upbeat song started over the magical radio. Astoria and her sister Daphne appeared in front of them. "Come on!" Astoria called out, beckoning. Ginny blinked in surprise, but when the other young witches – all except Pansy, who glared from a corner – began dancing, Ginny found herself grinning.

"Come on, Lavender."

"Wait, what – "
But Ginny was already tugging Lavender to the center of the room, where the others danced in circles, their dress robes billowing and their heeled shoes clicking on the floor. Music blasted from the magical speakers and lifted the air, so that Ginny felt she had no choice but to dance to such an upbeat rhythm. Lavender flushed scarlet, but Ginny turned to her and bowed lowly, like a regal old gentleman, before offering Lavender her own hand.

Laughing, Lavender finally accepted Ginny's hand and danced with her, growing more energetic with each step. Astoria bounced over to them, perfectly gorgeous and smiling. The girls linked arms and dove around each other, hopping and laughing with every step.

Hannah Abbott appeared, pulling a breathless Ernie by the hand. The two, finally able to see one another, embraced and then danced happily.

Blaise walked over to Draco, who watched from the side with a great deal of pleasure, his eyes never leaving Ginny. "Enjoying the show?" teased Blaise, and Draco didn't even tear his gaze away long enough to roll his eyes.

"Perhaps."

Draco did glance to the side, though, as a handsome young Asian wizard slipped past Blaise, winking at him before he joined the dancing. Draco snorted, and Blaise shook his head.

"That boy will be the death of me," he remarked mildly to Draco.

Draco shifted his gaze back to Ginny, who twirled and danced and laughed more than he'd ever seen her. Her braid whipped around with every movement, as she ducked in and out of arms and moved with the sort of grace she normally reserved for the sky.

I can relate, he thought.

As Ginny turned to face him from her spot on the dance floor, her eyes met his and her smile, if possible, grew. Some of her hair had come loose from its elegant style, and it looked so much more like Ginny that way, with pieces hanging near the corners of her eyes, just next to her flushed cheeks.

She paused in her dancing to look at Draco, who watched her unfailingly, his arms folded and his lips quirked. While she was paused, Blaise lifted his wand and waved it at some small silver boxes that dangled from the ceiling. From them, small lights dropped down over the room, falling in cascades as soft and delicate as the snow outside. The effect was a brilliant luminescence that drifted slowly over all their heads, twinkling like slowly falling stars. Some of them fell over Ginny's hair, giving it an extra burst of otherworldly warmth.

The song stopped, and many of the dancers, out of breath and still laughing, exchanged drinks and smiles and hugs. They were glad to be done with the war, too, and as the victors, they reveled in their comforts.

But all of this was new to Ginny. And nothing more so than the way Draco was looking at her, as if the room had evaporated around them and they were standing under the warmth of a summer sun, bare feet against a grassy plain and a gentle breeze curling around them, rather than where they were, in the middle of a room full of people sheltered against a snowy December night.

A softer tune came over the radio, and many other people fell to the cushions and chairs with their drinks. Draco, on the other hand, stepped forward and walked around Ginny, so close to her she could feel him brush against her back.
"Think you can slow it down for one song?" he asked quietly, moving to her side and lifting one hand. The low tone of his voice gave Ginny shivers in a way she had never experienced in her young life. Bringing up her hand, she slipped it into Draco's and fell into step with him.

The song was mostly violin, and it played a familiar tune, one Ginny hadn't heard in years but felt in her memories as if it were laced in her bones. When she remembered the dance – ancient, formal but made more intimate because of their closeness – Draco actually looked a bit surprised.

"What?" she murmured, a little grin on her features. "You thought I didn't know how to dance?"

Draco's hand curled on the small of her back and she felt, rather than heard, his chuckle. "You tripped over the umbrella stand again this morning," he reminded her. "It's been in the same spot for three years. Forgive me for doubting your coordination."

Ginny pressed back a snicker. "Alright, point made."

As if testing her merit, Draco twirled her, and Ginny met the challenge, moving back skillfully into his grip. He pulled her even closer, and Ginny's heart thumped in her chest, though she fought not to show it. "This song reminds me of the Yule Ball," Ginny said, one of her hands moving from his shoulder to his front, perusing the front of his dress robes. "Do you remember?"

"I do," he said, "but you were too young to go to the Yule Ball. What were you even doing there?"

"I went with Neville," she told him. "Didn't you see me there?"

Draco thought about this as he twirled her. "Ah, I do remember." He gave her a smug look. "You were wearing those awful dress robes."

Ginny prodded his chest. "Hey, you take that back!"

"They were the color of Valentine's Day candy," Draco pointed out with wry amusement. "And they were atrocious."

"Oh, I was so proud of those," reminisced Ginny with a snicker. "And cut me some slack, you prat. I was thirteen."

"No excuse," he whispered in her ear, making Ginny's heart race again. Even when he pulled back, their faces were very close together, and the way his eyes moved over her face distracted Ginny so much that she nearly missed his next words, soft as they were.

"You fared much better tonight."

They'd slowed some, though not because of the music, which Ginny only faintly registered. Every beat of her racing heart blurred together as the only soundtrack she could hear. Her fingers, which had been pressed against the front of Draco's dress robes, curled some in the fabric, ensnaring him as if she expected him to escape.

Because she could think of nothing else to say, she asked quietly, "Where is Astoria?"

Draco's watchful gaze did not falter. "I haven't any idea," he told her in what seemed to be the most truthful tone he had ever used with her. They continued to sway.

"None?" inquired Ginny in a whisper.

"None," he confirmed softly.
At this, Ginny felt one of Draco's hands slide up the length of her arm and curled over her fingers against his chest. Ginny let him draw her hands back, behind her, loose so that arms were comfortably settled on the base of her own spine. Draco's fingers slipped into her palms and laced with hers, his arms lining Ginny's and bracketing her so that there was scarcely an inch between them.

Their bodies were nearly as close as they'd been that morning they'd awoken together. Only this time, Draco's face was quite near to hers, and she could feel every movement of his fingers over her hands. Their position was more of an embrace than a dance, and Ginny felt so bewitched by it that moving did not even occur to her. They stopped dancing completely, but did not move away from each other. At least, not until someone nearby cleared his throat.

Draco and Ginny both blinked out of their stupors and looked up to see Blaise, looking quite amused. "The song is over," he told them a bit mockingly. Ginny glanced up and realized everyone in the room had been watching them. Clearing her throat, she released stepped away as Draco released her hands.

Fortunately, she was saved from saying anything further by Hannah Abbott, who waved her over to where a bunch of the girls were sitting. "I'll just – ahem, go and – talk to them, for a minute," she told Draco before quickly ducking away.

He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it. He seemed a bit dazed, but not disappointed at Ginny's departure, as if he, too, needed a moment to think. Ginny practically flung herself onto the cushions and took the glass of iced liquor from Daphne as soon as it was offered.

"That certainly looked like a cozy dance," teased Tracey, another Slytherin girl from Draco's year. "I've never seen Draco act that way… with anyone." With this, she shifted her head coyly in Pansy's direction, where the other girl was still standing, but within the group, her arms crossed and her features pinched.

Ginny drained the glass and chose to say nothing. At her side, Lavender patted her knee reassuringly.

Pansy scowled openly. "Oh, please," she said, sliding forward. "Everyone knows what Weasley is really doing here."

"Here we go," thought Ginny, already fixing herself another glass. Like she didn't already feel light-heated enough.

"Weasley," snarled Pansy, "is nothing more than a blood traitor and a prisoner. The fact that she's even here is a disgrace, and I can only imagine the sort of embarrassment Draco and his parents feel at having her soiling their home."

Proud with this statement, Pansy put her hands on her hips and smirked.

Ginny, meanwhile, filled her glass all the way to the top, while the other girls all looked to see her response. Finally, Ginny took a long drink from her glass and pointed at Pansy with the same hand.

"You know, you're right, Pansy. I am a blood traitor and a prisoner. However," she said, leaning back casually in her spot "that is infinitely preferable to whatever grotesque, malformed, wretched thing you are."

And then Lavender, apparently quite tired of dealing with bullies, tossed back the rest of her drink and said loudly, "I know exactly what you are, Pansy. You're a rude bitch."
Pansy's jaw dropped.

This time, everyone except Pansy burst out laughing. "It's true!" exclaimed Daphne as she flipped her hair over her shoulders. Even Astoria was having trouble covering up her laughter, and in the end, she succumbed too, falling over in her seat.

Pansy, red-faced and furious, stomped off.

"This," said Ginny to Astoria, "is an excellent party."

The Malfoys' carriage didn't pull away from the Burke home until nearly three in the morning.

In the cab of the gently jostling carriage, Lucius Malfoy looked over his son, who was slumped in the corner of the opposite cushions, fast asleep. Ginny Weasley was pressed into his side, curled under one arm, equally dead to the world.

Lucius' gaze shifted to his side, where Narcissa dozed with her head against his shoulder. Across from Lucius, Draco's eyes opened just a bit, enough to watch blearily as his father swept his hand over Narcissa's face, his fingers starting at her hairline, first tracing the line of her face and then stopping so that his thumb could sweep over her jaw.

Draco closed his eyes again before Lucius could look back and see him. His only movement was to secure his arm more firmly around Ginny, and he was fully asleep again in mere seconds.

As such, he missed Lucius' appreciative gaze as it turned back on him.

Outside the carriage, snow continued to fall.

Author's Note: The song Ginny (and the others) dance to is "Back to You" by Twin Forks.
Author's Note: Thank you, as always, for your amazing support! I cherish every review, really. I will say, I did something with this chapter I rarely do – I scrapped the whole thing and re-wrote it. I want this to make as great for you guys to read as it is for me to create. And sometimes that means working double-time.

Enjoy.

"Hadn't you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn't like her spotted, would you?"

Draco watched as Harry, Hermione and Ron gawked at him, the last of which was already working himself into a red-faced fury. Draco sauntered closer, his head inclined in Hermione's direction and his eyebrows raised.

Nearby, a family of Muggles tossed and turned violently in the air, just above a circle of malevolently delighted Death Eaters in masks. The celebrations of Ireland's win over Bulgaria still sounded in distant corners of the campgrounds, despite the late hour.

Soon, however, it would evaporate into a thick atmosphere of terror.

"What's that supposed to mean?" snapped Hermione.

Draco rolled his eyes grandly. And she was supposed to be the smart one. "Granger, they're after Muggles," he told the trio. "D'you want to be showing off your knickers in midair? Because if you do, hang around... they're moving this way, and it would give us all a laugh."

"Hermione's a witch," grunted Harry, ever the astute one. "Just get out of here, you bloody morons. I hate you, thought Draco, ready to give up the effort altogether.

"Have it your own way, Potter," he said, pulling a malicious grin onto his young face. "If you think they can't spot a Mudblood, stay where you are." This, of course, earned another virulent reaction from Ron, but Draco shrugged it off and instead tried something else. "I suppose your dad told you all to hide?" he said to Ron. "What's he up to – trying to rescue the Muggles?" Good luck with that, Draco thought.

"Where're your parents?" said Harry. "Out there wearing masks, are they?"

A part of Draco was tempted to say yes, just to watch their horrified reactions. Potter and his bloody friends thought they were so tough, but the only thing hard about them was their thick skulls. Draco glanced out at Hermione Granger out of the corner of his eye and growled inwardly.

Take the bloody hint, you stupid Mudblood!

"Well, if they were, I wouldn't be likely to tell you, would I, Potter?" asked Draco casually, his plastic expression still in place.

Finally, Hermione took the other two and led them away. "Come on, let's go and find the others." She shot him a disgusted look, which Draco relished. Let her hate him. He hated her, too.

And yet –
"Keep that big bushy head down, Granger."

The Golden Trio sneered at him before they disappeared into the forest, leaving Draco alone, just on the edge of a dark treeline edging the circle where Muggles continued to thrash and jerk in mid-air. Two of them were children, younger than Draco.

Once the three were gone, Draco leaned a shoulder against a tree, thoroughly alone. Chaos continued to build all around him, but Draco took that time to look up at the night sky. It seemed that it had been filled with a scattering of lights, twinkling stars, just a short while ago. Now it appeared to be nothing but a great dark blanket, despairingly empty of light.

It was a space which Draco knew would soon be filled with a green blight composed of smoke and magic.

When it happened, Draco watched from his secluded spot. As everyone else panicked, he exhaled heavily and turned away, walking deeper into the forest until he was eclipsed by the shadows entirely.

The morning after the party dawned as cold as the many before it, giving Ginny a chill before she'd even fully awakened.

Stretching out her limbs against the empty, cool sheets, Ginny felt a strange sense of discomfort when she realized she'd been deposited in her bed, rather than on the lounge where she'd become accustomed to sleeping. Draco was right, in a way. She'd campaigned for her own space for weeks, only to mostly reject it after the fact. Her room was nice, it was true, but most of her time was spent in Draco's quarters, even when he wasn't home. Ginny especially liked waking up there.

Waking up alone in her room made her feel like she was still a prisoner.

Rising from her nest of blankets and pillows in Draco's room, however, made her feel like she was waking up into a home, not a gilded cage. This was a ridiculous thing to think, Ginny told herself, as she was just as trapped in Draco's room as her own.

Still, that didn't change the fact that she enjoyed waking up near someone, someone who greeted her and got ready for the day with her and enjoyed breakfast with her and – well, all manner of things people normally do together.

It was a comfort and an ease Ginny had never achieved with …well, anyone.

Even at the Burrow, Ginny had stuck to her own room, desperate for her own space and some privacy, for crying out loud. She'd wanted to spend as much time gaining her independence as possible. That part of Ginny was still there, of course – the one which urged her to create days for herself, rather than relying on someone else to build them.

Draco Malfoy, though, had become such an integral part of what Ginny sought to create for herself, that it was nearly impossible to imagine building anything at all without him there.

The party at the Burkes' had been Ginny's first opportunity to branch out from Draco, to talk to people without him standing next to her, to have fun and maybe even make new friends (potential allies, she told herself) or see old ones.

And yet most of the night, they had stayed quite close to one another. Any time Ginny strayed, called over to the other witches or dancing, she had quickly looked for Draco because everything felt infinitely less interesting without him there.
She'd enjoyed talking to others, and it was nice to get out of the manor. But, to Ginny's great surprise, she'd found she had far less to say when Draco wasn't there. It didn't seem worth it to experience things without him.

And that dance…

Ginny turned in her bed, which lacked the familiar and comforting confinements of the couch. It was too much space, she decided, much preferring the way the lounge in Draco's room seemed to wrap around her.

The mere memory of the way Draco Malfoy had looked at her last night was enough to make Ginny's chest grow tight, and a strangely pleasurable sensation twisted in her stomach, a terrifying combination of pride and fear and a desire that made Ginny's throat suddenly quite dry.

No one had ever looked at her like that. And she'd had no shortage of admirers.

The way he'd held her during the dance, the sensation of his hands moving down her arms and curling into her hands, it all brought Ginny into an intense focus that made her relive every day of the last several months with painstaking clarity.

Perhaps the most heart wrenching of this, Ginny thought abstractly, even as she tried to force herself to move on with her thoughts, was that Ginny was beginning to feel like things were going to be … okay. To her great shock, this feeling was strongest – by far – whenever Draco was around.

The guilt Ginny felt over this one thought – the sudden realization that she may well be able to move on with her life, happily, even – was enough to make her curl into a tight ball beneath her sheets.

Nothing will ever be okay again.

That's what she'd told Draco when she'd first come to the manor. And so how could she allow herself to feel like she had last night? Ginny's memories of the party, which thinned towards the end of the affair thanks to a good bit of alcohol, were some of the most pleasurable of her life.

The attention Draco had given her, the way everyone else had noticed, and yet it hadn't affected his focus on Ginny at all, the rare acquiescence of Lucius and Narcissa to behave amicably in public to her. That evening had left Ginny feeling every bit as powerful and elegant as she'd always desired, and the best part was that she'd shared it intimately with someone to whom she had the sort of closeness she'd always envied in others.

How had that person come to be Draco Malfoy?

Draco saw humor in the same things Ginny did. He was passionate about many of the same things, though with enough difference between them that they taught each other new things. Last night, he had stood at her side through every uncomfortable conversation with the magical elite and pulled her away when it grew to be too much for her.

And then they'd come home.

Finally, Ginny threw off her covers and got up, moving quickly to the door that separated their rooms. Peeking into Draco's room revealed his bed was empty, but Bleaker was there, waiting just outside Ginny's door. When he saw her, his wrinkled features lifted in a smile.

"Oh, good morning, Missus Weasley!"
"Morning, Bleaker." Ginny looked around. "Where's Malfoy?"

"He went out for a walk in the gardens, missus," said Bleaker. "He says to tell you, if you wake, he will be back very soon."

Merlin, it was early. Ginny wasn't sure if Draco got up this early because he was such a light sleeper or because it was his habit, but whatever the case, Ginny was glad not to share his affinity for the break of dawn. And he did all of this with what was probably a nice hangover, too.

Still, the thought of a brisk winter morning suddenly sounded quite inviting to Ginny as well. Going out into the gardens was too much work, though, and Ginny also wasn't sure she was ready to see Draco. Instead, she wrapped a houserobe around herself and walked with Bleaker down the corridor to the library, where she moved to the outside balcony.

Slippered feet pressed away a few inches of snow before Ginny brushed off the railing and perched herself on it, despite Bleaker's clear anxiety at watching her dangle her legs over the side. After a great deal of nervous chuckling, Bleaker managed to get on the railing next to Ginny, and the two looked out over the snowy estate.

Draco's room didn't have a balcony, so sometimes they sat out here, reading or enjoying some tea when the weather was nicer. As it was, the sky above Ginny and Bleaker was a soft blue tinged with white flecks of snow, stirred from the ground and the snow-capped trees. The gardens were as beautiful as ever, stretched out in front of them in intricate and highly designer forms. The green of the foliage was largely disguised by the blanket of snow, but rather than taking away from its majestic state, the puffy white flakes created a maze of sugar-tipped shapes which seemed to rise straight out of the ground, guarding the Malfoy estate from unwanted visitors.

It wasn't snowing at the moment, but Ginny could feel crystals pressing at her cheeks, brushing against her skin as they carried through the air. It was bracing, a welcome sting that helped Ginny break out of the haze of her heavy sleep.

She couldn't see Draco from her spot, but his footprints were visible in the snow, winding exactly along the cobblestone path no one could see any longer. He knew it from memory, Ginny realized with a smile. He could have walked anywhere, and yet he chose the path he knew, even when it was hidden to him.

Ginny's hands gripped the railing, and some ice crunched under her bare palms. The effect was a numbing sensation in her palms.

_I live with him_, Ginny thought, startling herself, as if she hadn't known that the entire time. He'd been looking at her like that, and she lived with him. Even though Draco wasn't at all near her at the moment, Ginny suddenly felt the intimacy of their situation. Not the one placed on them by Voldemort, but the one they'd fallen into, blindly, darkly, tumbling into a great expanse of unknown.

She didn't dare give it a name, this great unknown, but it surrounded her on all sides, curling around her heart like the ribs in her body.

But the feeling was sharp, like jagged splintered bone, and no matter how much Ginny wanted to let herself breathe and fall into it, the pain was always there to remind her why she shouldn't. The Malfoy Manor was _not_ Ginny's home.

But the room Ginny shared with Draco, that — that _room_, with him in it, came dangerously close, so close that Ginny hated it for daring to make her feel so welcome and warm and devastatingly
happy. That space was theirs, and within it, they were more true to themselves and to each other than anyone else in the world.

Ginny had that with him, and Draco had that with her, even though neither of them seemed keen on acknowledging it.

"I cannot let myself be happy here," she told Bleaker, startling the house-elf with the sudden roughness of her voice. "This place… this is – this is not where my life is supposed to be. And I am not supposed to let myself feel good about – about any of it."

Bleaker looked up Ginny, large eyes wide, and listened patiently.

"My friends were hurt here," Ginny proclaimed to Bleaker, whose eyebrow ridges lifted in surprise. "My best friends, the love of my bloody life, my brother – they were tortured here. In this house. This – bloody – house." She looked sharply over at Bleaker, as if she needed him to know this, as if it was essential that he understood, even though he wasn't protesting her at all.

"This place is evil," Ginny told him adamantly, "and the people who live here – "

Ginny stopped, because she couldn't bring herself to say it. "I cannot let myself forget what happened here, Bleaker. And I cannot forgive those people who let it happen."

Bleaker looked back out over the snowy landscape and nodded slowly, his hand folded demurely in his lap. "There have been a great many things here, Bleaker has seen," he admitted. "Some things – very, very bad."

Ginny looked over at him. "Do you – Were you here? Did you see them bring in," her voice caught, but she continued over a swallow, "Did you see Harry Potter when he was here?"

Bleaker tilted his head at her. "Harry Potter? Well, Bleaker must have seen him, because Bleaker has been at the Malfoy Manor for, oh," he tapped his chin, "seventy-two years, Bleaker thinks."

"Wow," murmured Ginny. "That's a long time."

"Yes," agreed Bleaker, smiling a bit sadly at her. "Bleaker is not sure if he saw Harry Potter, though, because Bleaker has seen many witches and wizards brought to this manor. Still… there was this one boy – a boy Master Malfoy, he says was Harry Potter. That is what he called him."

Ginny watched as Bleaker shrugged his thin shoulders. "But Bleaker does not think it was really Harry Potter. Bleaker thinks Master Malfoy and Mistress Lestrange were mistaken."

"Why do you think that?" asked Ginny curiously.

Bleaker kicked his little legs. "The captured wizard's face was injured, you see." Bleaker tapped his own cheek. "Hexes, Bleaker thinks. Puffed up, like this." He imitated a swollen head, puffing out his cheeks. "So he looks very strange. And everyone else say – This is Harry Potter, this is Harry Potter! We must call the Dark Lord!" Bleaker wiggled a finger. "But young Master Malfoy – he says, he is not so sure. He does not think this is Harry Potter."

Ginny's eyes widened. "Draco… he said it wasn't Harry?"

Bleaker nodded enthusiastically. "The others all say – tell us, Draco! Say to us, this is Harry Potter! But young Master Malfoy, he says he is not sure, and he never said – 'this is Harry Potter.' He refused. Even though everyone was yelling at him, still, he would not say."
Bleaker hummed thoughtfully. "So Bleaker thinks, it must not be Harry Potter, because surely if it was, young Master Malfoy would know."

Stunned, Ginny looked back out over the snowy gardens. "Yes," she agreed softly. "He certainly would."

The memory of Draco's hands on her arms, dipping into her palms, lacing his fingers with her all pushed back at Ginny's consciousness, so she closed her eyes to rid herself of it. Placing herself in the darkness of her memory, however, only served to make every pleasurable sensation even more real.

So Ginny opened her eyes again, and the magnificent snow-capped landscape before them took on a new clarity. For no reason anyone might see, Ginny's heart hammered in her ribs. Wind swept over them, creating a swirling curl of frost-laced chill that caught Ginny's still-somewhat-styled hair and pulled it around her face. Looking through her curtain of hair up at the sky, Ginny exhaled.

It was all so unfairly beautiful.

Just as Ginny was thinking this thought, Draco emerged from behind some hedges, a dark figure against the untouched white powder all around him. He seemed to be in deep thought, and Ginny watched him, wishing she was closer to see his face, study his features. It was then that he turned and caught sight of her, sitting on the railing of the balcony.

Ginny's face split into a smile before she'd even realized it, and as Draco moved slowly closer, she saw he was looking at her much the same. It was such a startlingly gentle expression, one she had never – not once – seen on his face during their years at school.

And it was just for her. She could not prove it, but she knew it.

"What're you doing up there?" he called up to her, about ten feet below. And before she could answer, he added, "In my house robe, nonetheless?"

But young Master Malfoy, he says he is not sure, and he never said – 'this is Harry Potter.' He refused. Even though everyone was yelling at him, still, he would not say.

Ginny glanced down at the house-robe, which was emblazoned with an 'M' on the right corner pocket. I'm proud of you, she wanted to say. "I couldn't find mine," she said instead, looking down at him with a smirk.

"Of course not," said Draco dryly. He didn't take his eyes off her.

You are not who they think you are, thought Ginny. You are better.

Draco couldn't have known her thoughts, but from his spot several feet below, he gave her such a rare look of undisguised appreciation that she wondered if her joy at seeing him – really, truly seeing him – was entirely visible.

"Come on, then," she said to him at last, her lips quirked. "If you want your robe back so badly, you'll have to come and get it."

Then she disappeared off the balcony, leaving Draco to balk at her words, blinking awkwardly until he hurried inside.
That same day, in the hour just before noon, Lucius Malfoy stopped his trek across the manor when he heard a rather unfamiliar sound.

It was his son's laughter.

Lucius slowed his pace, silently doing his best to remember the last time he had heard Draco laugh so sincerely. It must have been years, he realized as he peered through the slightly ajar door.

To his great surprise, Draco was laughing at something he was reading. It was a comic book, Lucius realized with a hint of wry amusement. He'd thought Draco stopped reading those years ago.

That was when Ginny Weasley appeared, leaning over the back of the lounge with her own comic book and a laughing smile that matched Draco's. "Okay, but this one – no, really – Alright, so," and then she began babbling about something in the book, which Draco seemed to follow with a somewhat distracted focus. As Lucius watched, Ginny rounded the couch and fell onto the lounge right next to Draco, pressed against his side down the length of the cushions.

Draco shifted his arm behind her head, so that it lay against the arm of the lounge, and his fingers hovered just above Ginny's opposite shoulder. Neither of them seemed to mind the closeness, Lucius observed. In fact, as Ginny spread the comic book across her upraised knees, Draco braced his temple with the hand behind her head, so that their faces were very close.

Ginny was talking animatedly about the comic, but Draco seemed to scarcely hear her.

Each time the redheaded witch's eyes fell on the comic book, Draco was looking at her face with his lips quirked. The expression rooted Lucius Malfoy to his spot.

"Okay, so you have to read this part – starting here – wait, no – okay, yes, here," Ginny pointed, looking up at Draco and pausing as she registered their nearness, a pink flush on her cheeks. Draco quickly looked away, down at the comic book, but his tender smile remained.

"Yeah, yeah, I know how to read a comic book," he told her, and Ginny grinned.

They both turned to look at the comic book, but Lucius moved on without watching further.

The days pressed on, shifting with each ticking hour of the clock into the festive holidays everyone awaited with great anticipation, Ginny most of all. The consumers of Diagon Alley, as well as Hogsmeade and the other magical commercial areas, bustled in and out of shops with great zeal, ready to celebrate in the early beginning successes of the newest British magical economy.

Things weren't where they needed to be, not entirely, but winter took on the rebirth of spring, and from the icy streets and powdered storefronts came new life. Ginny worked as often as possible in George's shop, which needed all the hands it could get. Each time George came to open up the store, a line of customers waited for him. He'd hired two new employees, further adding to the economy of the alley, and Ginny often found herself meeting new people, though many of them seemed to already know who she was, as if they were seeking out her help finding Sugar Quills because they simply wanted to say they'd spoken to her.

Ginny didn't really mind, not entirely. Most people were nice, if not a bit curious, especially the newly immigrated Europeans who'd answered Voldemort's call for pureblooded witches and wizards in Great Britain. Some were rather forceful, though. A Russian customer had once said something rude to George only to find Vera in his face, giving him a blistering rundown of every curse in their shared language.
It had taken a while for George to explain Customer Service to her after that, but Ginny was pretty sure that Vera was still satisfied with what had happened.

As her last shift before the holidays rounded to a close, Ginny found herself hastily re-stocking some shelves with the aforementioned Russian sister-in-law she'd come to appreciate. Ginny had just placed the last box on the shelf when a hand darted out and knocked down the entire row, laughing as they fell to the floor. "What the –"

"Sorry, blood traitor," drawled the voice, and Ginny looked up to see Marcus Flint's hideous face peering down at her with a smarmy grin. "Better clean that up." He sauntered off after that, and Ginny scowled before squatting down to collect the boxes again.

Vera appeared next to her and quickly helped. "Stupid," she said of Flint, happy to use her new favorite English word. Ginny smirked, but it was Vera's sister Vita who responded.

"Stupid AND ugly!" Vita called out loudly, so that Flint stopped and glared before leaving the shop. Vera laughed.

"Good English!" complimented Vera to her sister.

"Thank you!" Vita flashed them a grin.

The three witches laughed, and Ginny took a moment to appreciate the two sisters, both of whom had bright white smiles that stood out beautifully against their lovely dark skin. Their families were of African descent, Vera had told Ginny one day.

"Here, let me –"

"No, no. You go," said Vera to Ginny. "Malfoy is here. Go from work. Be happy. Smile." Ginny flushed a bit at the knowing look Vera gave her when she mentioned Draco.

"Alright, alright." Ginny hugged both of the girls good-bye and then bounced downstairs, where she saw Draco standing near the front of the shop, looking over the corner of the store filled with sweets. She waved at him. "I'll be right back!"

Then she went to the front, where George was leaning against the counter, looking a bit too innocent. Ginny raised a brow. "Watcha' doing, George?" she asked slowly. The older wizard grinned and looked up at the stairway to the second floor, where Vera and Vita were.

"Ooooh, nothing."

Something exploded upstairs, and a plume of glittery smoke wafted down the staircase. "GEORGE!" screamed Vera from upstairs.

"You might want to go ahead and leave," advised George, grinning. "Here's your pay." He handed her the coinpurse of gold. "Oh, and tell Malfoy his cut is ready, too." At this, Ginny balked.

"What?" she asked. "Malfoy doesn't work here!"

"It's his profit," said George, raising an eyebrow. "You mean he didn't tell you?" At Ginny's confused stare, George slipped his hands into the pockets of his robes. "Malfoy invested in the shop months ago. Ten times as much gold as the Ministry gave me."

Ginny stared, her lips parted. "What... really?"
George hummed in an affirmative. "Mm, yeah, I hate to admit it, but this place never would have gotten going without it. It was totally empty." At Ginny's look of disbelief, George folded his arms. "Honestly, Gin, I thought he just did it to get on your good side. But if he didn't even tell you…"

"No," said Ginny softly. She looked over to where Draco was standing with his back to her, his gaze fixed on a shelf of sugar quills. "He didn't." With a quick nod at George, Ginny took her gold and stuffed it into her bag before moving over to Draco, who was still looking over the candies and pranks, left over from the joke shop. George had managed to stuff a lot of it into a corner, rather than having to throw it away.

"Thinking about getting up to some mischief, Malfoy?" Ginny asked at his side. Draco smirked up at the shelves.

"Beats the hell out of being an adult," he remarked.

Ginny grinned up at the shelves, though she did so over a tight swallow. After a moment, she dropped her head a little and then tilted it at the wizard next to her. "Thank you for investing in George's shop," she said quietly.

Draco looked over at her in surprise, but he quickly recovered and gave a casual shrug. "It seemed like a good business idea at the time. And look," he gestured to the packed store, smirking. "As usual, I was right."

"Of course," Ginny said with a slight roll of her eyes, before she glanced over her shoulder. People always watched them in public, she noticed, and today was no different. Everyone seemed to know who Draco was, and their reactions alternated between curiosity, reverence and outright fear.

For the first time, Ginny felt she understood how it felt to be looked at that way. How isolating it was.

Looking at the shelves herself, Ginny reached with one hand and gently pressed her hand into Draco's. Her fingers slipped into his and laced there, curling against his knuckles. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Draco look at their joined hands with surprise. Ginny determinedly kept her eyes on the shelf.

"So which flavor is your favorite?" she asked without looking away from the candy.

Draco took a moment to answer, only using that time to watch her with his lips slightly parted. Then they turned upward in a small but sincere smile as he, too, looked to the sweets once more.

"Chocolate," he said, leaving their hands joined.

"Mine, too," said Ginny.

"Oh, well, in that case." Draco reached forward with his empty hand and plucked two chocolate sugar quills from the display, before he extended one to Ginny. A true smile formed on Ginny's features, and she took the quill from him.

"Take it out of my cut, Weasley," called Draco, waving the sugar quills to George, who looked up just in time to see the two teens leave the shop, still hand in hand.

Together, Draco and Ginny stepped out of the store and into the snowy afternoon. White flakes drifted down on them in soft waves, and Draco found himself distracted by the way they looked in Ginny's hair as the two made their way through the streets. It reminded him of how she'd looked under those magical lights in the Burkes' home, that night of the party.
"Ooh, look!" said Ginny, tugging him by the hand. When she turned to look at him, laughing as she dragged him along, Draco felt as if he could see everything in the world, shaped around the outline of her smile. Every rush of warmth that brought color to her cheeks was enough to drive Draco to distraction, and how he had ever looked at her and not seen every freckle on her skin, every dimple in her cheeks, was suddenly beyond him.

Ginny finally paused in front of a shop window, and her gloved hand brought Draco's to a spot behind her back, so that he stood behind her, very close. "It's nice, isn't it," said Ginny breathlessly, "the cauldron in the window, I mean."

If there was a cauldron there, Draco hadn't noticed it. Instead, it was the image reflected in the window that captivated him. When he sought out Ginny's face in the reflection, Draco saw that she, too, was looking not at the cauldron, but at the two of them standing so close together, their hands intertwined behind Ginny's back. Draco's thumb swept over Ginny's knuckles, and he wished they weren't wearing gloves.

"You should tell me what you want for Christmas," said Ginny, not looking away from the window.

Draco tilted his head down a bit, his lips close to her ear. "I already told you," he murmured, eyes still on the reflection. "I'm rich. I have everything I want."

At this, Ginny turned her head slowly, her eyes moving to his. "You don't fool me, Malfoy," she informed him softly.

As Draco watched her, he understood her words to be absolutely, unequivocally, unbearably true.

In the days just before Christmas, Draco and Ginny spent more time at the manor, sometimes entertaining visitors. Blaise came by with two of his four sisters, as well as their mother, who refused to give anyone the time of day except Narcissa.

Lucius made his occasional appearance, as did Damien, but he left shortly before Christmas. To visit his family back in St. Petersburg, Narcissa told Draco.

"I hope he dies on the way there," was Draco's response.

Draco and Ginny also visited Lavender and Theo, as Ginny had promised, and the four of them spent a pleasant afternoon at the Nott home, which had undergone quite the transformation since Nott Sr's justifiably gruesome death. Theo was, Ginny remembered, the least talkative and least abrasive of all the Slytherin boys in Draco's year, and although he maintained that arrogance that seemed to cloak all Slytherins from their moment of birth, he was actually quite tolerable.

And Merlin, was he patient with Lavender. For whatever reason, Theo was perfectly content to listen to Lavender – with all the appearance of attentiveness – as she babbled about the baby ("What the hell kind of name is Parvartus?" asked Draco in a mutter. "That sounds like a disease.") and the newest decorations in the house and the holidays and all manner of things that even had Ginny wondering how Theo managed.

But they were both content, and Lavender was no longer being abused, so Ginny was more than glad to listen to the talkative witch, and to play with the little baby, who was too cute to be Nott's child, so she pretended he wasn't.

As the visit ended, Ginny and Lavender stood in the sitting room with hot cups of tea and watched through the windows as the boys walked outside, talking and occasionally laughing with one
another. Their conversation was muted through the window, but Ginny liked how relaxed Draco seemed. Theo was an easy-going fellow, he’d told her. Lavender was still talking about something décor-related, but Ginny was distracted by Draco, who she watched lean against a tree as he talked to Theo.

When Draco caught Ginny watching him through the glass, he winked at her.

"Ginny?"

The redhead turned quickly, making a slightly startled noise. "You are doing well, aren't you?" asked Lavender, and Ginny got the impression that she’d changed subjects once more while Ginny hadn't been paying attention. "You're safe, with Malfoy?"

"Yes," Ginny answered.

"Good," said Lavender sincerely, looking to the window again. "I hope I never have to be a part of another war ever in my life."

Ginny stared, silent, as Lavender smiled.

"I hope… well, I hope one day all of our friends can be as happy as we are," she said to Ginny.

"Yes," said Ginny after a long pause, even though Lavender didn't seem to be waiting for a response. "So do I."

Later that same evening, deep into the night, Draco awoke to see Ginny sitting at the window seat in his room, staring out into the darkness. Normally he was the one to brood in the night, so he shifted a little to pull his pillow away from his face.

"What're you doing?" he asked sleepily. The heaviness of his dreams kept him from keeping his eyes fully open, and his body urged him shut up and go back to sleep. He didn't, though. Even his sleep-addled mind couldn't turn away from the sight of Ginny's pensive stare or the tight curl of her body against the velvet cushion.

"I'm thinking about something Lavender said today," Ginny told him without looking away from the window.

"Mm," Draco curled his arms under his pillow. "I bet it was riveting, whatever it was."

This made Ginny look over at him, and she slipped away from the window and padded over to his bed. After a moment's hesitation, she pulled herself up onto the high mattress, turned herself in his direction and stretched out next to him, her cheek pressing into one of his many pillows.

The room was dimly lit, with only the cool grey illumination of the moon pressing in through the window allowing Draco to see her at all, but it was striking, seeing her there.

"My friends are still suffering," she told him in a whisper, her eyes wide. "And I am doing nothing to help them. I don't deserve to – I should be – "

"How do you know your friends are suffering?" Draco asked her in a sleepy whisper. Of course it was her altruism keeping her awake this late. What a strangely fascinating person she was. "They could be fine."

"Don't you understand?" she asked him in a desperate whisper. "I can feel it, I can feel myself
"Giving up every will, ever desire I thought I would have forever, and I do not – I do not deserve to be hap – " She stopped here, and Draco's eyes opened fully to look over her face, taking in every shade of light as it poured over her features.

"I am too content," she told him stiffly, but he could read the tremble in her shoulders.

"Is that really so bad?" he asked, and despite the tired ache of his body, he felt a strange thrill racing through his muscles.

"It is," said Ginny quietly, "when my friends are hurting."

"How do you know they're hurting?" he challenged, curling his head closer to hers on the pillow. "Brown is fine, and you've got your brothers – "

"But what about Neville?" asked Ginny, her lips parted. "And Luna, and her father, and everyone who fought with us in Dumbledore's Army? Where are they? They could be – they could be still locked in dungeons, after all this time." And then, as if she could think of nothing worse, Ginny said, "They could be with Death Eaters!"

Nothing was said for a moment, and Draco watched Ginny intensely for several seconds before reacting. Slowly, Draco shifted, sliding down his blanket so that it exposed his bare torso down to where his hips disappeared into pajama pants. As he did so, he lifted one arm out of the blanket and held it, just a few inches above the sheets, so that the naked skin of his forearm showed the deeply black skull that marked him.

Ginny's eyes followed the length of his arm all the way to the Dark Mark, past every visible muscle and exposed inch of skin. Even though she'd likely noticed the mark before, Draco felt the need to remind her. It was not something which gave him a pleasant feeling, but it was there, and he didn't wish to hide it from her.

The witch lying next to him look at the mark for a long time, unable to say anything. At last, her eyes lifted to his again, and he lowered his arm, leaving it between them.

"Is it really so bad," said Draco after a long bout of silence, "to be happy here? Why does the suffering of others mean you have to suffer, too?"

"Because," whispered Ginny, in a vulnerable bout of despair that manifested in a tiny voice he'd never heard from her, "So many people I care about, so many people I knew, they were taken away from their friends and families. And they deserved so much better... they did."

"And you think they'd prefer you felt this way?" he asked, his brows furrowed.

Ginny looked up at his face, his lips parted. "It doesn't matter what they felt, they're gone – they don't have a chance to say anything anymore – "

"So the fact that they would hate to see you punishing yourself like this means nothing to you, then?"

Wetness tinged at the corner of Ginny's eyes. "It doesn't – mean nothing – " She stopped talking when Draco reached up, letting two fingers drop gently, feather-light, to her jaw.

"If those people really contributed so much to your life that you would agonize over their deaths," Draco told her very quietly, "then you are wasting it by refusing to be happy."

A powerful sensation crept into the center of Ginny's chest and settled there, and the effect was
that a single tear escaped Ginny's eyes and wet the pillow at her cheek. The rest of the tears, which moments ago had threatened to overwhelm her, fell away and retreated into the inhale of Ginny's chest. 

Draco seemed to sense the intimacy of their position and, after letting his fingers linger on her skin for a moment longer, he pulled his hand away. Ginny swallowed tightly.

"I can't believe you're telling me this, of all people," she managed after a moment, giving a watery chuckle. "You're never happy."

Draco raised a brow, and oddly enough, the tension dispelled and his lips quirked at a smile. "I have my moments."

At this, Ginny dared a small smile and reached up her hands, curling them under the pillow that was his. "I wish we had all known each other better in school," she told him. "I think… I think it would have helped."

Draco's grey eyes traveled over Ginny's face. "I wish I had known you better," he murmured with a smirk that made Ginny's heart flutter. Then he shifted onto his back and closed his eyes. "To hell with everyone else."

The weight did not completely disappear from Ginny's chest, but what remained was easier to handle when shared.

"Good night," Ginny whispered with a soft smile.

Draco opened his eyes and turned his head in her direction. "Good night," he whispered in return, fascinated by the sight of her.

The following day dawned like many others, but as Draco felt himself lifted from the throes of sleep, he quickly discovered a sight unlike any he'd ever seen.

Ginny was still in his bed. Their conversation from the night before washed over him, and Draco turned in his bed, bare torso sliding against the sheets warmed from their bodies, until he was facing her. He didn't think Ginny had truly meant to fall asleep in his bed, as she hadn't even found her way under the covers, but there she was, curled so near him and pressed into his pillow.

She was still asleep, of course, and he didn't dare wake her. That was Bleaker's job, as she was less likely to cause bodily harm to the elf than she was to Draco. Draco smirked a bit to himself, a curious thrill urging him to be active, but the sight in front of him forbidding him from rising out of the bed.

The air outside had been a misty grey for much of the month, but the rays that struggled in through the frosted glass held an extra look of warmth that morning, creating golden light which filtered through and illuminated the room.

After lying in bed for almost half an hour, Draco's peace was disturbed by Bleaker.

"Young Master," he whispered, as if that alone was enough to wake Ginny (which it was not). "Your father, Master Malfoy, has requested you to come see him in his study."

*Damn it all*, thought Draco. Leave it to his father to choose this morning to drag him away. Still, a
summons from Lucius was not to be ignored, so Draco reluctantly pulled himself out of the bed and tugged on some robes.

"Stay with her," he told Bleaker through a yawn, pushing his long hair back from his face.

The house-elf nodded and did as he was told, although he had to wake to take up his post until Draco rounded the bed to Ginny's side. He took a blanket from the lounge, one of hers she'd bought at George's store, and he draped it over so he didn't have to tug his own blankets from beneath her.

Then, with one last look at her, he left the room.

Seriously, what had his life become when waking up like that left him with such a feeling of unbridled joy? "Eughhhh," groaned Draco as soon as he was out of the room, though no one was around to hear him. "Kill me."

He managed to pull himself together before he stepped into Lucius' study. The other wizard was standing at his desk, but when Draco entered, he moved around it and gestured to some seats near the window. "Good morning, son."

"Father," Draco greeted, trying not to yawn again. He sank into the tall-backed leather chair opposite his father. "To what do I owe the... early morning wakeup call?" As if he hadn't already been awake, staring at the witch in his bed.

"What are your plans for today?" asked Lucius conversationally, instead of answering Draco's question.

Draco thought about it. "We're going to Charlie Weasley's," he told Lucius. "You know. For Ginger Christmas."

Lucius gave him an amused look. "That sounds appalling."

Draco waved his arm and then dropped it back to the chair, as if to say – Well, what're you gonna do? Lucius nodded, as if he understood the sentiment exactly. "Still," he said after a moment, "you don't seem too displeased."

Draco tilted his head in his father's direction. "Well, the eldest, Charlie, is quite awkward, so it's always entertaining watching him try to navigate a normal conversation. Worth the trip, really."

The two shared amused smirks before falling silent for a few minutes, each looking out over the book-filled room.

When Draco looked back to Lucius, he saw the elder wizard's weathered face – too weathered, Draco recalled – had lost some of its mirth. "Draco," said Lucius slowly, his eyes on the window, "there is something I would like for you to have."

Draco's brows furrowed and he sat up straighter in his chair, concern making him rapt with attention.

That was when Lucius shifted and reached into the pocket of his robes, pulling out a small box. As Draco watched, Lucius gripped the small box for a moment before he reached over and placed it on the small table between their chairs.

"Open it," Lucius told him.

Draco's eyes shifted to the box without touching it, though at Lucius' look, he finally felt compelled to pick it up. With a shift of his fingers, Draco opened the lid to the box, only to reveal a very old-
fashioned and quite garish ring.

Ginny would hate this, was his first thought.

Then, as this idea settled uncomfortably over Draco's mind, dark dread manifested in his heart. Slowly, Draco looked up to his father, his lips parted. Lucius seemed to sense his distress, but he said nothing.

"What is this?" asked Draco at last, an edge to his voice.

Lucius observed him for a long moment before answering. "You know what it is, Draco," he told him. "And it … belonged to your great-grandmother, many years ago. It is a family heirloom, of considerable value, of course."

Draco closed the lid with a snap and slowly, cautiously placed the elegant box back on the table, as if it would erupt into flames if he moved too quickly. "Father, I…"

"Draco," interrupted Lucius, and Draco looked up to see him straighten in his seat, looking quite like he had prepared each word he was about to say. "I understand that you are young, and that far too much as been asked of you since the Dark Lord's return. But this – this will be to your benefit."

Fear threatened to drive Draco from the room, as all he could think was what Ginny would say at the sight of such a thing.

"Marrying Weasley will provide you with a much needed stability for when you become head of this household," Lucius told him, ducking his head to try and catch Draco's gaze. "You will have a pureblood wife to carry on our family with, and you will greatly please the Dark Lord in doing so." He said this as if it were the most important thing Draco could hope to accomplish, and it was clear to Draco that Lucius was doing his best not to look desperate as he did so.

"You hate the Weasleys," said Draco stiffly, not looking at his father.

Lucius paused. "I have my reasons for feeling this one is a cut above the rest," he said. "Low though such a standard may be."

Draco pushed himself out of the chair and moved away from the table, leaving his back to Lucius, who stood as well. "Draco, I waited – as long as I possibly could – to ensure that you would be pleased with this." When Draco didn't response, he stepped closer. "You care for her. That is infinitely clear."

Away from Lucius, Draco squeezed his eyes shut.

"Why do you seem so opposed to this?" asked Lucius.

Draco tilted his head back, so that his gaze looked up at the ceiling. At Lucius' question, Draco felt his ire reach its peak with alarming speed, and he turned to face his father with every feature narrowed and severe.

"Because I don't want to keep her prisoner anymore!"

Lucius stared, his lined features falling into thoughtful repose while Draco simply shook his head in disbelief. "I don't want to trap her," Draco said much softer, though his words were no less vehement.

"Trap her?" repeated Lucius in disbelief. "You are offering her a chance to become the mistress of
Draco let out a bitter laugh and dragged a hand down his face. "She doesn't think like that, Father." He turned to look at Lucius, his hands falling to his sides. "She won't see it that way."

"Draco," Lucius moved closer to his son and grabbed his arm, doing everything he could to force Draco to look at him. "This is for your safety and for hers. You will need someone at your side when I am gone."

"Why are you talking like all of this is going to happen tomorrow?" asked Draco heatedly. "I'm not going to be head of the family in forty-eight hours!" Something worrisome flashed in Lucius' eyes, and Draco pulled back enough to study his father's face. "Father?"

"Of course not," said Lucius, straightening to his full height. "But the day will come. And this single act could secure everything you need to be safe with the Dark Lord."

"From him, you mean?" asked Draco darkly.

Lucius said nothing, but his eyes lowered to the floor, and Draco turned away from him again, moving slowly across the floor of the study. "I won't do it," he said after a stretch of silence. He faced his father again. "I am not forcing one more thing on her."

Nevermind the fact that some small, shameful part of him entertained the pleasurable prospect of doing just that. What it would mean to wake up every morning with her next to him, like he had that day. Draco adamantly and painfully pushed that thought away.

He watched as Lucius turned and picked up the ring box from the table, turning it over in his hands before he approached Draco and extended it to him.

"If you don't," he told his son, painfully earnest, "the Dark Lord will find someone who will."

This hit Draco like a punch to the gut, and he looked away, hating everything he knew in that moment. Birds chirped outside the window, and the morning continued on, as bright and beautiful as it had been when he'd awakened.

But everything had changed.

With a great huff, Draco snatched the box from Lucius and shoved it into the pocket of his robes. Lucius dropped his hand slowly, allowing Draco this fit of temper that would have normally been met with severe retribution.

"Draco?"

The younger wizard stopped at the door to the study, his back to Lucius. "Yes?" he asked, not bothering to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"Do you have your wand?"

Draco's eyes flickered and he turned to Lucius, eyebrow raised. After a moment, he reached into his robes, where his wand was kept. He'd barely pulled it out when Lucius reacted, disarming him with a quick Expelliarmus spell.

Draco's wand fell to the floor, and the stinging sensation of the spell caused his fingers to tingle unpleasantly. "What was that for?" asked Draco in alarm. Lucius calmly replaced his own wand.
"It is always best to be on guard," Lucius told him simply. "Remember that, son."

Then Lucius left ahead of him, sweeping out of the door with one last look at Draco, which his son, in his fury, missed completely. The door closed behind Lucius, and Draco scowled, kneeling down to pick up his wand, only to shake his head when he saw it.

It hadn't been his wand at all, but a toy model from George's shop. Ginny had given it to him the day before, and he'd thoughtlessly placed it in the pocket of his robes. His real wand was in the room.

With a shake of his head, Draco tossed the toy aside and left the study.
Chapter 16

Author's Note: It's time for Ginger Christmas! And wow, so many new readers in the last few chapters. Thank you all for your comments! I get ridiculously excited with each one.

There are two songs I suggest you pair with this chapter. One is "Medicine" by Daughter. The second is the song Vera plays at the end of the chapter, which is Lindsey Stirling's version of "Hallelujah."

Enjoy!

"Goodness, Ginny. What's wrong?"

Hermione stooped down next to the crying girl, her brows pinched with concern. Ginny edged away to hide her tears, but a few sniffles escaped. "I'm alright," muttered Ginny tearfully, a flame in her cheeks. "It's just –"

She paused, another little whimper escaping her. Hermione glanced around the girls' dormitory and then looked back to Ginny with a gentle smile. "There's no one else here, Ginny." She paused, before touching Ginny's arm and asking quietly, "Is this because of Harry and Cho?"

Ginny burst into tears. "It just – it isn't fair. She's so – bloody – boring and – Why does he like her? Why, Hermione?" Wiping furiously at face, Ginny curled her arms around her knees and huffed. "What is it about me that makes him just – not see me that way?"

"Oh, Ginny." Hermione wrapped an arm around Ginny's shoulders. "It's not you. This is just how things are sometimes. Besides," Hermione squeezed Ginny's shoulders, "Harry likes you. He does. You're his family, like Ron."

"I don't want to be JUST his family," whispered Ginny with a frown. "I love him, Hermione. I have since the first day I saw him." Tucking her hands into her lap, Ginny sighed deeply, weary in ways only a forlorn fourteen-year-old could be.

"He means so much to me," she murmured, as Hermione looked upon her sympathetically. "And not as the Boy Who Lived, you know?" Ginny met Hermione's gaze. "As Harry. Just... Harry."

Reaching forward, Hermione swept back some hair from Ginny's face. "Ginny, listen to me. Harry cares for you very much. And maybe... someday, it will be in the way you want." She hesitated then, and her eyes flickered. It was a quick motion, one Ginny caught and wondered about for days after. The look was gone quickly, though.

"The important thing is," Hermione continued, her moment of thoughtful repose passed, "you must remember to live your life fully, do you understand? Don't miss out all the wonderful things life has to offer because you're waiting for that one special thing. You're too amazing for that, Ginny."

The younger redhead gave Hermione a weak smile.

"And who knows," said Hermione, giving the other girl a comforting squeeze, "perhaps the path that seems to take you so far from what you want is really just a more ...scenic route. And one day, it will lead you right back to your heart's desire."

"Do you really think so?" asked Ginny, her eyes wide.
"I do, yes."

Ginny managed a real smile. "Thank you, Hermione."

The two curled into a warm embrace.

"You're welcome, Ginny," whispered Hermione, before wiping away a single tear of her own that Ginny did not see.

Draco left Lucius' study with the ring box in his pocket. It may as well have been a boulder for all the weight it forced on him.

By the time Draco returned to his rooms, his bed was empty and Ginny was, from the sound of it, taking a shower in her own bathroom. Draco exhaled heavily, both relieved and disappointed that Ginny had woken up. If she'd still been wrapped up in the blanket, her face curled against his pillow, Draco might've slipped back into bed and pretended as though he'd never gotten up. Then he could enjoy just a few more minutes of peace. Still, it was probably best Ginny was otherwise occupied.

Draco needed time to think.

Wandering into the room as if in a dream, Draco leaned heavily against his roll top desk and let his head fall back, so that his vacant stare landed on the ceiling.

You know what it is, Draco.

Draco's chest ached. "Fuck," he murmured to himself, reaching rather forcefully into his pocket and withdrawing the box. He opened it and peered at the ring, which was heavily littered with fine, expensive jewels, but still somehow managed to be quite hideous. Draco swept his thumb over the sharp points jutting around the center diamond.

He wasn't sure what Ginny would hate more: what this ring was, in its essence, or what it represented.

Closing his fist around the box, Draco closed the lid with a snap and then thumped his closed hand against his forehead.

You care for her. That is infinitely clear.

And that was supposed to make this easier?

I am not forcing one more thing on her.

With a growl, Draco turned and ripped open his desk drawer, shoving in the box and then shutting it roughly before he locked it with the strongest spell he knew.

Once the drawer was closed, Draco placed both hands on the desk and leaned on it heavily, his head low and his chest moving in sync with a long exhale that brought him no relief. Frustrated, Draco lifted his head, only to spot an envelope sitting at the top of his desk.

The envelope was already opened, and judging from the feral way it had been unsealed, Ginny had gotten to it while he was in his father's study. Merlin forbid she use a letter opener like a civilized human being, Draco thought absentely. Pulling out the already unfolded letter, he read the quick note.
Draco and Ginny,

Just wanted to send you both some shots I took at the dinner party! Can't wait to see you both again!

-Astoria

Behind the letter was a set of magical photographs.

Ah, now Draco remembered – somewhat. Astoria had pulled out her camera at the Burkes' holiday dinner party, though they'd all been several drinks in by that point and Draco hardly remembered actually posing for any. Turning slowly in his spot, Draco perched against his desk and turned over the photographs so he could see them.

The first was an image of all the younger people at the party, crowded together in the room they'd commandeered for their own private celebration. Draco smirked; it was pretty clear everyone in the photograph was sloshed, if their stumbling all over the place was any indication. The image made Draco chuckle a bit, despite himself.

In the group, he and Ginny were near, each holding a glass of Merlin knew what, laughing and smiling with everyone else. It was a wonderfully festive shot, with their haphazard Christmas decorations hanging around them and their elegant dress robes all mussed from various shenanigans throughout the night.

The next photo was of Draco, Blaise, and Theo, all doing their best to look put-together and arrogant, but failing spectacularly, as Draco's photograph-self kept laughing because Theo spilled a drink down his robes.

The third picture was of Ginny dancing with Lavender, giggling madly as they twirled.

And the final photo, Draco saw, was of just the two of them – Draco and Ginny.

Draco struggled to remember when this photo was taken, and he vaguely remembered hearing Astoria's voice shout, "Smile! Picture!" just before this shot was taken. They must've been quite drunk at this point, though, because he certainly would have remembered posing with Ginny like this.

In the photograph, Draco and Ginny were both beaming at the camera, and Draco had wrapped his arms around her entirely, a motion which Ginny tucked into a brilliant smile. Her own arms circled his waist, and the photo-figures of the two kept laughing and looking at one another. At one point, the girl in the photograph pressed her face into Draco's front and his grip on her tightened.

Draco stared and stared and stared.

A physical pain blossomed in his chest, but he couldn't look away. Astoria had called for them to take a picture, and this was what they had done. A feeling of nostalgia for something that had never been made the discomfort in Draco's chest grow more pained still.

How strange, thought Draco, that he should only realize how miserable he was when threatened with happiness.

Finally, Draco let his hand drop, the photograph lingering between the tips of his fingers. Distantly, the sounds of the running water stopped, and Draco knew he should put the photos away. However, when Ginny emerged a few minutes later with damp hair, he was still standing exactly where he'd been, with the photo in his hands.
"There you are," Ginny said with a smile, and Draco looked up quickly.

"Yeah, I – I was talking to my father," he said, clearing his throat a little. "He was just … asking about our plans for today."

"Are you alright?" Ginny asked, noticing his strange mood.

"Fine," he said after a pause. "Just thinking."

Ginny came to a stop in front of him and tilted her head, lips quirked. "Worrying, you mean?" she asked teasingly. "They're not the same thing, you know."

At this, Draco managed a small wry smile. "News to me."

Ginny studied him for a moment but chose not to ask anything further, for which he was grateful. "Oh," she said, looking down at his hand and reaching for the photos, which he reluctantly let her have. "I – " Her cheeks grew a little pink. "I saw these earlier. I don't even remember taking these, do you?"

"Not at all," agreed Draco, watching her face carefully. "But never trust a Slytherin to pass on an opportunity for blackmail. Even the nice ones, like Astoria."

Ginny grinned, looking over the pictures again with an expression Draco dared to think of as pleased. "I could put these in a scrapbook, you know." She was purposefully not looking at him, and he knew it. Ginny's efforts at subtlety had improved during her time at the manor, but not so much that she could fool Draco.

"I'm quite crafty, in case you haven't noticed," she said when Draco failed to respond.

At this, Draco finally straightened away from the desk and shook his head. "Don't fool yourself, Weasley," he said, pulling in an inhale to steady himself. "Everything you make looks like it belongs next to a zoo exhibit, paired with a sign that says 'Daisy the Erumpent painted this with her horn.'"

Ginny gasped dramatically. "How dare you insult my fine art, you ass!" she exclaimed before dissolving into laughter. "Are you ready to go, prat?"

The ring was locked in his desk, and there it would stay. Today was the day Ginny had been looking forward to for months.

And Draco was determined to enjoy it with her.

"I am," he said, already filing away every concern from the earlier conversation, "but you're not." He eyed her wet hair. Ginny responded by picking up her magical towel and pushing it over her dark red hair, so that it dried instantly, shiny and smooth from its fresh wash.

"Ta-da," she said, before wiggling her fingers. "Magic!"

Draco rolled his eyes.

Satisfied, Ginny tossed aside the towel (How did she live without someone to pick up after her, Draco wondered) and picked up her bag. Suddenly, though, Draco wasn't quite ready to go yet. He wanted her to himself for just a few minutes longer. Besides, he had something to give her.

"Wait," Draco said, putting a hand on her arm. "I want you to open your Christmas present, first."
You'll want it when we're at your brother's house."

This got Ginny's attention, and she followed Draco over to the Christmas tree, which was every bit as beautiful as the day they'd set it up. All the presents for her family had been sent over to Charlie's the night before, so it was only their few gifts to each other that remained. Ginny hadn't noticed this one yet, though, so he must've sneaked it in when she wasn't paying attention.

Draco stooped next to the tree and picked up a shoebox-sized gift. "Happy Christmas," he said simply, and Ginny took the box with a smile she tried to hide. Pulling off the bow and wrapping with her usual reckless abandon, Ginny tossed aside the top of the box and paused, peering curiously. The inside of the box appeared dark and empty.

"What the – "

"Just reach inside," Draco prompted her, shaking his head.

Squinting suspiciously at him, Ginny reached uncertainly in the dark box until she grasped something. For a moment, it seemed the gift might never emerge from the magical box. Then, suddenly, it was in Ginny's hands.

"The Pegasus 2000!" shrieked Ginny, pulling the full-length broom out of the deceptive packaging. "Oh my – what – Malfoy, no! I can't!"

Draco surprised himself by laughing at her. "What do you mean you can't?"

"Malfoy, no," she protested, very much in contrast to the way she gripped the broomstick to her chest. It was the same fine model she'd been eyeing for weeks, top of the line, nothing but the best, of course. "I can't – this is too expensive," she told him firmly, even as she tried to fuse the broom to her own physical body.

"It's Christmas," he reminded her sardonically.

"Still – this is – too – I mean, come on this – So expensive."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Honestly, the fact that you keep underestimating my wealth is a little insulting. Still…" he made a move as if to reach for the broom. "I could take it back, if you really wanted – "

Predictably, Ginny held onto the broom like a goblin held onto gold.

"Oh, well – you know, I wouldn't want to trouble you to – you know, return it – that would be – inconvenient and – " She turned the broom over, only to see her name emblazoned on the side. The sight of it brought actual tears to her eyes.

"And it's got my name," she squeaked, bouncing up and down on the tips of her toes.

Draco dropped his hand and grinned smugly, knowing he'd won.

Ginny admired the broom reverently for a moment longer, sliding her hand down the length of the handle and taking in every exquisite detail. Then she looked up at Draco, her lips parted.

"Thank you," she said with all the sincerity in the world.

Then she launched herself at him and pulled him into a hug, wrapping her arms tight around his neck before she pulled away and gave him a bright smile so reminiscent of the one in the
photograph from Astoria. Draco's chest tightened at the sight of it, and some of the pain returned.

"You're welcome," he murmured, from behind a mask of passivity.

Ginny's eyes raked over his face, and he knew – he knew – she could see there was something more going on than what he dared to tell her. Rather than fruitlessly probe him for information, though, she set the broomstick aside and tugged on his sleeve until he sat on the floor next to her, just at the edge of the silly tree skirt Ginny had insisted on.

"I thought we were leaving," he said, but Ginny shook her head.

"Not yet," she said, winding her arm around his. "I mean, I can't let you give me a present like that and then not give you ALL of your presents. So… Charlie and the others can wait a bit." She tilted her head at him, lips quirked. "We'll have our Christmas first."

Draco looked over her face. Later, he would remember that exact moment as the one in which his pain from seeing the photograph faded away, bit by bit.

"Alright, then," he agreed softly.

Ginny squeezed his arm and then called for Bleaker to bring them a "Christmas breakfast," which he agreed to do with all enthusiasm. "And make sure you stick around," she told the house-elf, "because I got you a present!"

Bleaker actually staggered. "A… present, for Bleaker, missus?"

"I swear to Merlin," cut in Draco, "if you got that damn house-elf a single piece of clothing – "

"It's not clothes, shut up. And yes, Bleaker. Christmas!" Ginny tossed her hands in the air, and Bleaker tittered before disappearing, positively jubilant. Draco shook his head at her, completely flabbergasted and enthralled by the person that sat next to him, happily sorting through gifts.

As Draco watched Ginny organize and distribute the remaining boxes, he felt the warmth of the room and the coziness of their spot on the floor. It caused a strange thrill to race through his body, this comfort that came from sitting next to the tree with Ginny. Bleaker returned and gave them their fine trays of food, more festive and extravagant on account of the holiday.

Ginny even turned on the radio, and Christmas music set to a piano carried the room – their room – into a lighter place than Draco even knew existed.

"Here," Ginny's voice filtered into his pensive state. "This one's for you."

Her smile at this was a bit shy, and Draco accepted it curiously. The box was large, and he couldn't imagine what it might be. Still, he opened it – carefully and neatly, much to Ginny's annoyance – only to find a wonderfully superb alchemy set.

"Do you like it?" asked Ginny eagerly, moving to sit at his shoulder with a pastry in her hand.

"I – " Draco actually out a small surprised laugh. He'd forgotten he'd even told her about his love for the study. She'd remembered, though, even when he hadn't. "I… I do, yes," he managed at last, shifting his gaze to her. "Thank you."

Ginny beamed and looked at the alchemy set with him.

"You should do more things that make you happy," she told him quietly, lips quirked in a knowing
smile. "Don't you think?"

He looked over at her, his hands still on the box. "I would like to, yes."

"Well," Ginny said, turning her gaze shyly from his and looking back to the gift. "Now you can start." With that, she let her head fall on his shoulder, and they looked together to the tree.

The other gifts were opened (including Bleaker's gift of his own Exploding Snap cards) and they were all finer than anything Ginny had ever received before, including a beautiful coat and gloves that were, like the broom, far more expensive than Ginny was comfortable thinking about. But she wasn't about to refuse them, and not just because Draco had picked them out himself, but because they were so soft and luxurious, Ginny couldn't help but love them.

A little while later, the two picked up their things and prepared to leave for Charlie's. "We're flying, right?" she asked Draco excitedly. "Right, right?" She hugged her new broomstick.

"Of course," said Draco, a twinkle in his eye. "After all, I have to try out my new broom."

Ginny's jaw dropped when she saw it. "Bloody hell, you bought yourself a Pegasus, too?" She stomped her foot.

Draco raised a brow. "What?" he asked, all too pleased. "You didn't think I was going to let you have the superior broom, did you?"

Rolling his eyes, Draco mounted his broom, winked at her and then soared into the sky.

And Ginny followed, determined to beat him there.

As soon as the pair landed outside Charlie and Fleur's cottage, Ginny was rushed by her brother who scooped her up into a hug. "Happy Christmas!" Charlie declared, squeezing her until she was quite sure her organs had shifted unfavorably.

"Happy Christmas," she told her brother breathlessly, laughing all the while as Draco landed next to her.

"See, Malfoy," she told him smugly. "Same broom, different results. That's what happens when you're a natural."

"I let you win," he told her with an eyeroll. "I saw a flock of birds and I was hoping you'd hit them first."

Ginny stuck her tongue out at him and then took his sleeve, tugging him into the glowing cottage, which was positively bursting with Christmas decorations. It all hit Ginny at once – the smell of baking cookies in the oven, the festive twinkle of magical lights decorating every corner, the too-large Christmas tree garrisoned by a pile of gifts every shape and size.

"Oh, I love this," said Ginny, wrapping her arms around herself.

"Ginny!"

The familiar French accent barely registered with Ginny before Fleur appeared and hugged her, smiling. "I am so glad you are here! And you too, Malfoy," she said with surprisingly sincerity. "Happy Christmas to you and your family."

"Thank you," he said simply, edging away from her in case she tried to hug him.
Baby Margrethe scooted into the room, still rocking back and forth in her efforts to crawl. Ginny scooped her up like Charlie had just done to her and curled the redhead infant in her arms. "Oh, little Margrethe, I do love you," she told the baby adamantly.

"And what about me?" came another voice, and Ginny looked up to see Percy.

"Don't worry, Percy," grinned Ginny. "I love you, too."

"Out of obligation," muttered Draco from somewhere behind Ginny. She shot him a look before hugging Percy and falling onto one of the comfy couches, bouncing Margrethe on her knees as George and Vera appeared from outside.

George was soaking wet and shivering, but Vera was in the middle of attempting to dry him with her wand. "Still!" she kept telling him in her thick accent, but she was laughing too hard to perform the spell correctly, and when she tried to dry George, a puff of smoke appeared around him instead. When it dissipated, George was dry, but his hair was sticking straight up and all his clothes smelled singed. Vera doubled over laughing.

"What on earth happened to you?" asked Charlie, amused.

"Lost a bet," groaned George, fishing five galleons out of his pocket and handing them to Vera. "Just so you know, that pond behind your house is not strong enough to support a strapping young wizard like myself. Not even for a single moment of majestic ice skating."

Vera pocketed her gold and smirked. Then she hopped over to Ginny and happily coo'ed over the baby with her, while Draco leaned against the couch arm next to Ginny and looked at Margrethe like she was a strange alien creature he wasn't sure could be trusted.

"George!" called out Vera. She pointed at Margrethe. "I want one."

George let out a little squeal. "Hey, no – get her away from that baby, someone," he said desperately, even as Charlie and Fleur laughed. "For the love of Merlin, someone help me!"

"Here you go," said Ginny, plopping Margrethe into Vera's lap.

"That's not what I meant!"

At that moment, a knock came at the door and Gabrielle, Fleur's younger sister, peeked her head in. "Hello, everyone!" she called out happily before being overwhelmed with hugs and greetings. Dropping her things next to the door with a dramatic sigh, the pretty teen flipped her hair over one shoulder and came inside, drawing off her gloves as she did so.

"Ze weazer is just unbareable!" she declared, before spotting Draco and Ginny. "Oh! You two! I must speak wiz you."

Ginny and Draco glanced at each other, but Gabrielle wasted no time at all, drawing them away from all the others and squeezing into a distant corner so she could speak in hushed tones. Ginny settled on the floor across from her, legs folded, and Draco sat with his back against the couch and one leg stretched out behind Ginny. She leaned a little into him.

"So what is it?" asked Ginny curiously.

"Oh, it is most exciting," said Gabrielle, peering around the couch to make sure Fleur wasn't listening. The older French witch was busy with something in the kitchen, so Gabrielle looked back
to the other two. "You see, my grandfazzer has arranged a marriage for me!"

"Oh," said Ginny, her eyes wide. "Well, erm, congratulations?" she glanced uncertainly at Draco, who raised a brow.

"What does that have to do with us?" Draco asked slowly, taking a sip from the pumpkin juice he'd been offered by Fleur. Because if Gabrielle meant to tell him that her grandfather had arranged a marriage to him, Draco would happily fling himself into the frozen pond that had nearly swallowed up George.

"Well, ze wizard zat I am marrying is someone you know, I believe," said Gabrielle. "But I have never met him, so I need you to tell me what you can! Please!"

"Alright then," said Ginny, relaxing some and glancing at Draco with a smirk. He wondered if she'd been thinking the same thing he had. "Who is it?"

Gabrielle bit her lip and then leaned forward. "His name is …Blaise Zabini."

Draco choked on his pumpkin juice.

"What, what!" exclaimed Gabrielle, panicked. "Please, tell me what you know!"

"Well, I – shut up," Ginny poked Draco in the ribs, because he was now laughing so hard he might well suffocate. "I – Yes, we do know him, and he's – well." Ginny pause, suddenly thinking about Blaise and trying not to laugh herself.

"Is he kind?" asked Gabrielle, desperate for information.

Ginny thought about this and decided to answer, because Merlin only knew what Draco would say. He was still far too amused. "Well," said Ginny, perplexed as to how to answer, "He's not… cruel."

Gabrielle raised a brow. "So what is he, zen? Tell me!"

Still chuckling, Draco reclined against the couch and gave Ginny a knowing look as the redhead struggled to think. "Okay, well," Ginny said at last, "Erm, he's quite …tall." She paused again. "And… wealthy."

At this, Gabrielle finally smiled, her eyes shining with glee.

"And," said Ginny, hoping to console her further, "he's very handsome."

Gabrielle gasped with delight, but Draco made an indignant noise. "You think Blaise is handsome?" he asked, affronted. Ginny ignored him.

"Anyzing else about zis Blaise Zabini?" asked Gabrielle eagerly, and this time, Draco paused to think, now that he was done glaring at Ginny.

"He speaks French," Draco told Gabrielle with a point of his cup, and she let out a happy gasp. Ginny raised a brow.

"He does?" asked Ginny to Draco.

"His boyfriend is French," Draco whispered dryly.

"Oh… dear," replied Ginny, pressing a hand over her face. Fortunately, Gabrielle seemed to be satisfied, and she thanked them both heartily before moving to jump up.
"Oh, and do not mention zis to Fleur yet," she told them both. "She does not know, and she is going to be... angry." Gabrielle's eyes widened, as if she were visiting in her mind's eye the hell-storm that would occur when Fleur found out what was going on. Then the fear was gone again, and the ecstatic joy was back. Leaping up from her spot, Gabrielle practically danced away, so excited about her future husband.

"Oh, I cannot wait to see that," Draco said to Ginny, and she giggled.

The two rose as well and rejoined the others, keeping near one another, even though Draco talked quite a bit with George and Vera. He seemed to avoid Percy, though, who Ginny noticed was watching Draco quite closely. Rolling her eyes, she decided to ignore it. Percy was always the least hospitable of all of them. It was no surprise that he was lingering on the edges of every conversation, not contributing much or participating in the happy revelry that occupied everyone else in the small but happy cottage home.

For Ginny, however, the day was a one which fulfilled every longing she had felt since the end of the war.

The family talked and laughed, played games and cooked together. And, although Draco was a bit hesitant at first – Ginny could see that whatever had bothered him that morning was still trying to draw his mind away – he grew more comfortable as the time passed. When Ginny wasn't paying attention, he actually walked outside with Charlie on his own, and the two were still talking near the large willow tree when Ginny and Fleur joined them at the snowy tables just outside the home. Inside, Gabrielle fawned over Margrethe, and the others snacked on Christmas treats and talked.

"Pegasus 2000, eh? That's a right nice broom," Charlie was saying. Ginny grinned a bit. Brooms, of course. What else would they be talking about?

Charlie examined Draco's broom with a fine appreciation for it. "I never had a new broom back at Hogwarts, but even the best models back then didn't have anything on these," he said, as Ginny moved to Draco's side and shot him a pleased look.

"I got one, too," she told Charlie. "A Christmas gift... from Draco."

"Wow," said Charlie, gazing longingly at the broom before he sidled Draco with a suspicious look. "That's quite the present. Trying to curry some good favor, Malfoy?"

Ginny flushed a little, making a face at Charlie, but Draco simply lifted a brow and smirked. "Appeasing her simply makes my life easier," he told them, which made Fleur giggle.

"A lesson all wizards should learn," she said, and Ginny laughed at Charlie's rosy-cheeked response. He handed the broom back to Draco.

"I expect there'll be a few of those at Hogwarts next year," said Charlie. "Or whenever it finally re-opens."

Ginny made an aggrieved noise. "There might not even be any Quidditch next year. Bloody Damien Black is changing the whole school."

"It's true," said Draco, eyes flashing, and Ginny secretly regretted bringing up Damien. Shifting to the side, she touched his arm, and Draco relaxed a bit. Charlie and Fleur both seemed to notice this, so Ginny spoke up again to distract them.

"It's not even called Hogwarts, anymore. It's called – Glanfuil, or something."
"Glanfuil?" repeated Charlie in disbelief. "What is that?"

"Scottish Gaelic," Draco informed them, "for pureblood, of course. No mu – " he caught himself, and Ginny felt tremendously proud, even though he had to stumble to cover it up. "Muggleborns," Draco finished at last, clearing his throat as he did so. Inside, Ginny beamed. Draco still used "mudblood" at the manor all the time, even when she told him not to, but at least he made an effort to avoid doing so here.

Charlie seemed to notice Draco's struggle, and he glanced at Ginny; he was at least a little pleased, she could tell.

"Wait, so ze school is changing completely?" said Fleur, frowning deeply.

"Modeling it more after Durmstrang," confirmed Ginny with a scowl. At this bit of news, Fleur said something scathing in her native tongue, and Charlie's eyebrows shot up.

"Well, there's some French we won't be teaching Margrethe," he said dryly.

"Oh, you don't even know what it means!"

"Well, I know it's not nice," countered Charlie, waving a hand. Fleur rolled her eyes and folded her arms, shifting to send him a heated glare.

"Zat is it, Charlie. Margrethe is going to Beauxbatons!"

At this, Charlie's jaw dropped, panic gripping his features. "What! Fleur - No, she's – She's in England, she needs to go to –"

"So you want her to attend zat 'orrible school, zen? Wiz ze hate of ze Muggles?"

"I – " Charlie's face fell, and he whined a little, a real noise of despair. "Well, no… but I mean –" Then he sighed deeply, knowing Fleur was right. "Oh, this is awful. Hogwarts was such a great place. It's… it's home for us."

He looked at Ginny and Draco, knowing that, despite their contrasting experiences at school, they both knew what he meant, and they did. Ginny sighed. "It really isn't going to be the same, Charlie," she told him sadly.

"Are you sure they'll even let your child go to Beauxbatons?" asked Draco after a moment. "They might turn away British students, what with everything going on."

"Hah!" Fleur turned up her chin. "I am zeir champion. Zey would not dare turn away a child of mine!" The elegant witch put her hands on her hips. "I am sorry, Charlie. I know you love your school, but we cannot let her go zere. It is not what it was."

Charlie let his head fall against the tree with a thunk. "She could have been a Gryffindor," he muttered miserably.

A pause followed. "Or a Slytherin," Draco said into the silence, and all three of the Weasleys turned to give him a Look. He shrugged. "I'm just saying, it's a possibility."

Charlie made a childish noise that left no mystery as to his feelings on that idea.

Snickering, Ginny looped arms with Fleur and the two headed back inside as Charlie and Draco followed. As Ginny and Fleur separated and the latter headed into the kitchen, Draco leaned over
Ginny's shoulder and whispered, "Because Fleur would have definitely been a Slytherin, and you know it."

Ginny turned to face him and was shocked by how his proximity affected her, making her want to reach out and touch him, linger at his arm or brush her hand over the front of his coat. "No one asked you," she informed him haughtily, her eyes twinkling.

"A mistake on their part," Draco retorted, lingering very near her. Instead of removing his own coat, Draco reached up and tipped Ginny's elegant black fur hat he'd gotten her for Christmas, so that it fell off her head and landed in his waiting hand. Then he offered it to her, and Ginny took it, never breaking her gaze from his.

For a moment, they quite forgot everyone else in the crowded house.

Then Fleur called out for her, and Ginny reluctantly broke away from him, sliding off her coat and hanging it up on the rack as Draco did the same. She couldn't help but watch him as he did so, and – ahem – perhaps Fleur had the oven too hot, because it was suddenly quite warm in the house, and Ginny hurried away from Draco and in to the kitchen with Fleur.

Together, the two witches put the final touches on a strawberry cake. Now alone with Fleur, Ginny took the opportunity to look over at her sister-in-law and fully appreciate her. "You and Charlie seem to be doing much better," noted Ginny. "I'm glad."

Fleur looked over and nodded in agreement, a peaceful look on her features. "We are, yes. It was very hard at first. Not because we did not like each other, but because… well, we did not really know each other, not like that. But Charlie is an incredible man. And… " Fleur paused, looking thoughtfully at the bowl of cut strawberries in her hands. "And even though I miss Bill so much, I am very grateful to have Charlie here."

"You know," said Fleur, looking back to Ginny with a tender smile, "I love him. Charlie."

Ginny's eyes widened. She hadn't expected to hear Fleur say that.

"I do not love him exactly the same way I loved Bill," Fleur told Ginny softly, their voices low. "But I zink…" Fleur looked out to the living room again, her eyes on the happy pair. "I zink I love him just as much as I loved Bill, in a completely different way. You know?"

Ginny's hands slowed from her task of mixing the icing, and her eyes lowered as she thought.

The two women fell quiet for a moment. Then Ginny spoke again, her hands absently stirring. "So, Fleur, you think… you think it's possible, then?" When Fleur looked up at Ginny's question, the younger witch continued quietly. "You think it's possible to love again, even after experiencing so much hurt?"

At this, Fleur bit her lip, eyes lifting to her small but comfortable home. "I zink," she said, turning to face Ginny, "zat healing is ze most amazing zing a heart can do."

Ginny smiled, too.

Over the constant chatter of the cottage, Ginny heard Draco's voice, talking to George about the shop, and the urge to get out of the home was suddenly overwhelming. "Fleur, how long until
dinner is ready?"

"Mm," said the witch, "about an hour."

Immediately, Ginny put down her things. "I'm going to go out and fly for a bit. I'll be back, I promise." Then she hurried out of the kitchen and found Draco, her hand tugging on his sleeve as she nodded towards the door.

"Come on, let's go fly."

Draco's lips quirked, and he needed no more incentive. Together, the two left the cottage and stepped out into the snowy landscape. They grabbed their brooms and within seconds, they were high in the sky, rising out of the massive forest of snow-capped trees that surrounded Charlie and Fleur's cottage. The higher they rose, the crisper the air became, and Ginny turned her face up into it and welcomed each stinging bite of snow as it pressed against her skin.

Draco flew near her, dipping and diving with all the same exhilaration Ginny experienced. The two rushed through the air, which moved between shades of grey, blue and white as the late afternoon was drawn away by the setting sun. While they still had enough light, Ginny waved Draco over and the two soared over the treetops hundreds of feet above the ground, until the cottage was only a small warm dot in the distance, and only the beautiful landscape rushed by underneath them.

Dipping and turning into each gust of wind, the two flyers flew slowly sometimes and raced the next, always keeping pace with one another. The world below passed by and disappeared, but they remained near one another, occupying only two small spaces in a massive expanse of sky.

Finally, Ginny stopped on a thick branch jutting out from an ancient tree, one which towered above all the rest and overlooked the entirety of the forest. Other taller branches lingered over it, and as Ginny caught her footing, she reached up with her free hand and steadied herself on an overhanging branch. As soon as Draco landed behind her, she propped her broom against the base of the towering tree and then caught the branch above her with two hands, so she could walk steadily down the length of the branch until all the foliage was out of the way, and the view was freely before them.

Draco moved behind her, his own hand hanging loosely on the branch just above his head. He could see over Ginny's shoulder everything that she saw – the wondrous wintery landscape, punctuated often by glimpses of dark green housed in stubborn evergreens, rolling hills of snow and earth, distant villages dotted with lights and, just below Ginny and Draco's high branch, a large frozen lake and its opaque surface.

Ginny exhaled, and it came out as a white puff.

"This is what I love about the sky," she told Draco breathlessly, fighting to take in every detail of what lay in front of her. "Everything is so beautiful from up here."

Just a few inches behind her, Draco looked over Ginny's shoulder and fought to appreciate it, as she did.

"I like seeing things this way," she continued quietly.

"What way?" Draco asked.

Ginny glanced over her shoulder at him. "Remembering how large and grand everything is. I mean, look at it." Together, they turned to face the bed of powdered trees again, the reflective surface of the distance frozen lake below. "When you're on the ground, it's easy to forget how amazing, how
vast this world really is. But up here, I remember that there's so much more to everything than just... war. More than battles. More than prisoners." Her fingers tightened on the branch above her. "More than Voldemort, even."

Instinct and desire made Ginny want to relax against the warm body just behind her, so she did. From where they stood precariously on the tall branch, Draco's torso steadied her.

"Voldemort may think he can have all this," Ginny murmured, eyes on the earth. "But he can't. It's too much, even for him."

For a moment, Draco didn't say anything.

"I wish I could afford to think like that," he said at last.

Slowly, Ginny shifted and turned to face him fully. "You can with me," she told him, and she meant it, every word. Draco's eyes widened a bit, and she saw him cautiously working through her words. Then he shifted in her direction, dropping his head closer to hers as he asked in a quiet murmur.

"Is that so?"

"Yes," Ginny told him.

Then she lowered her eyes, bringing her hand to his and taking his fingers to give them a squeeze. However, before Draco could move any further, Ginny flashed him an affectionate smile – and then turned, running freely down the length of the branch before leaping, arms spread, right off the edge.

"GINNY!" Draco rushed to the end of the branch, terrified as he watched Ginny fall without her broom, her arms wide and her expression serene.

Then, at the very last moment, Ginny gave a quick whistle. Behind Draco, Ginny's broom bolted from its spot and dropped down after her, catching the witch just before she hit the lake's frozen surface. Together, Ginny and the broom lurched back up into the air and appeared at the branch in mere moments.

Draco stared, lips parted, as Ginny laughed, wrapping her arms around herself.

"What, you didn't know about that feature?" she teased, before nodding her head in the direction of the sky. "Come on, then!"

Barely able to calm his racing heart, Draco snatched up his broom. Mental, he told himself, but even he wasn't sure if he meant Ginny or himself.

They raced into the sky again, but this time, Draco pulled out his wand and, as soon as Ginny dropped low over the icy lake, he brandished his wand and melted lines of the frozen lake so that water jumped into the air all around Ginny, the cold air zapping the water into crystalline puffs as Ginny shrieked.

Like birds in the air, the two teens chased and raced each other, diving low this time to dart between trees and skim just over the ground. Ginny turned and followed Draco, who rushed ahead of her and then disappeared around a thicket of trees.

When Ginny appeared where Draco had been, she didn't see him. Landing her broom in a snowy opening, Ginny trotted to a stop and turned in a circle, looking for where Draco had disappeared to.
"Draco?" she called, listening intensely but hearing nothing. Moving slowly over the snow, Ginny propped her broom up against a tree and turned slowly. All around her, evergreens guarded against the heavier snowfall, each needle weighed down with snow, but elegant in its confinement. In the snowy clearing, though, Ginny seemed to be entirely alone, and her lips parted as she turned to look up at slices of sky visible through the branches.

Just then, snow began to pick up around her and swirl into the air, slowly and gently, with Ginny at the center of its vortex. Turning quickly, Ginny laughed a little, reaching out a hand to feel the strange whirlwind as it circled around her and moved high into the sky, so that Ginny could look up and see into its peak. Magic hummed in the strange wind, and when Ginny touched the white powder swirling around her, it made her hands tingle.

It was oddly beautiful, and soon Ginny could see nothing out of the whirlwind as it continued all around her, still gentle, still lovely in its command of the untouched snow. Then, slowly, the whirlwind faded, and the forest around Ginny became visible again.

Only now, rather than simply standing in a clearing, Ginny was in what looked like the most beautiful garden she had ever seen. All around her, the woodsy clearing now housed flowers of every shape and form, all artfully created out of pristine ice. The snow beneath the flowers gave them an added meadow of pure whiteness, and it reflected in each transparent rose, every frost-tipped tulip.

Ginny approached one of the roses in awe, her fingers lifting slowly to brush the petals, which held every detail of its red counterpart. Even the stems, flowers, and thorns were there, cut as if from diamonds, but cold to the touch.

Suddenly, something made Ginny turn, and there he was.

Draco stood at the other end of the garden, his hands in the pockets of his coat and his eyes on her. Ginny's heart leaped into her throat, and her limbs seemed to move of their own accord as she crossed the snowy garden with every effort at preserving it, because nothing she'd seen in her life compared to its beauty.

Slowly, Ginny moved up to Draco with a soft smile, one which did nothing to prove her pounding heart. Each step took her closer to what felt like a dream, and Ginny had quite forgotten everything else in that moment except him.

When she was close enough, Ginny brought up a hand and pressed it against where Draco's scarf lay against his coat. Green, then grey, then green and grey again. His Slytherin scarf. Ginny's fingers curled over the colors there, tracing each one before she lifted her eyes to his.

"Who knew you were so talented?" she murmured.

Draco's eyes remained trained on her. "I did," he responded, but his teasing words were nothing under the weight of the intensity of his stare. Ginny met his gaze.

Then she tightened her hold on his scarf, and the small tug was all Draco needed to lean forward, catching her lips with his in a longing kiss that began slow and then, after a searching moment, picked up again with a sudden passion. Ginny's fingers clenched around his scarf, her lips pressing back into his before he pulled away, only an inch away from her face, his eyes on her expression.

Ginny let him watch her just long enough to know that their distance was the only thing concerning her. Within seconds, Draco brought up both hands and framed Ginny's face with each one, and the two were together again. Liquid heat coursed through Ginny as soon as their lips made contact, and
a small noise escaped her, something between a whimper and a cry as she pulled as close as she could.

Draco tilted his head and slanted his lips against hers, one gloved hand delving into her hair as the other dropped to Ginny's waist and tugged her tight against him. The layers of clothing between them were unwelcome, but even that separation couldn't stop the intensity of their embrace. Ginny's hands moved up and around Draco's neck, a quick gasp escaping her as they parted for only a moment before his arms circled her entirely and their mouths met again.

**Merlin**, thought Ginny, when her mind allowed even a moment of clarity. The air outside was frigid, but heat persisted in every inch of her body. Pulling her lips back from his just enough to breath, Ginny brought up a hand to the collar of Draco's cut and curled tightly there.

"Draco," she murmured, their lips brushing as they kept their faces close. Draco opened his eyes long enough to press his forehead against hers and curl his hands at her back, everything in his body tense in response to hers, but in a way that spoke of efforts at restraint, not anxiety.

When she managed to speak his name, Draco reached up and swept his hand over her face, slowly and carefully, starting at her temple and then drawing down the line of her face, until his thumb moved tenderly under her lip.

Each one seemed unable to speak, but their bodies spoke volumes, unwilling to be separated, even an inch. Together, they held each other for a long moment, their faces pressed very near one another. Ginny felt herself trembling, but then Draco tilted his head and pressed his lips warmly against her neck, and her body relaxed as if into a tub of steaming water, every muscle drawing in to its most natural state.

As soon as Draco's head lifted again, Ginny stood on her tiptoes and caught his lips in a slow kiss that parted his, deepening the motion into a kiss Ginny had none to compare to. Every movement between them was slow but powerful, and they might have never parted if not for the sound of George's voice calling them through the woods.

The haze in Ginny's mind cleared just a bit.

"I think," she whispered, surprised at the sound of her own voice, "that we should... probably get back." The way Draco looked at her – as if she were the only thing that mattered in the world – made it difficult to follow through on her own words.

Finally, Draco tilted his head towards his. "If you insist," he murmured against her lips. Ginny's fingers curled on his scarf again, and when she saw Draco's lips quirk at her poor efforts at pulling away, she felt a slow smile take over her face. Thrilled, uncertain, ecstatic, shocked. None of it did justice to the way Ginny felt in that moment.

"You don't want my brothers coming after you, do you?" she asked, and Draco smiled, fully, for the first time Ginny could remember. It was the most remarkable thing she had ever seen, and she prayed she'd never forget the way it looked on his features.

Draco leaned closer and told her, "You are infinitely more terrifying than all of your brothers combined."

Feeling a bit delirious, Ginny matched his grin and tugged him into one last kiss – for now, which he happily slipped into.

"Yes," she told him with an affectionate brush of her fingers at his jaw. "You are right about that."
The rest of the evening could never have rivaled Draco's dreams, because nothing in his life had prepared him to create something as wonderful as this. Never in his imagination – never in the dreams that hovered in the bare consciousness he kept tucked away – could he properly imagined what it was like to sit next to Ginny Weasley at a Christmas dinner and feel as though everything was more wonderful, more exciting than it had any right to be.

No daydream, no hidden desire could have ever conjured for Draco the sensation of curling next to Ginny Weasley on the couch as she and her family opened gifts, each one of which Draco would have gladly paid for and given himself a thousand times, if only to recreate that night.

Once the gifts were done, and Ginny was coiled on the cushion at his side, everyone looked to Vera, who stood with a violin in hand.

"This," she said in her thickly accented English, "is my gift for you all."

Then she waved her wand, and a charm caused some nearby bells to jingle and a piano to play, all of which accompanied the long slow draw of Vera's bow across the strings. The song was a familiar one, but Vera's version was heartwarmingly tender, so much more so that it sounded, to Draco, like an entirely new melody. The notes lifted into the air alone, and then Vera's charm cued a series of small bells lining the walls of the cottage, each clanging and ringing in tune with the song.

Ginny beamed next to Draco, her sly glance turning to him as the music picked up. Vera turned and danced as the lovely music played, and baby Margrethe clapped her hands happily on the floor as the music continued. Vera, happy to do something that required no translation, closed her eyes and moved with the enchanting music, dipping as the music did and lifting to the tips of her toes on the highest notes.

The small charmed piano accompanied her, the bells chimed just above their heads, and George watched Vera with all the pride in the world.

Looking over at Ginny as the song faded to an end, Draco relaxed against the couch and felt immeasurable pleasure as she sank into his head, her eyes on the violin but her heart and mind feeling so near his.

When the music ended, Ginny clapped enthusiastically next to him, only to resettle her hand over Draco's as soon as she dropped it. Lifting his fingers, Draco laced his through Ginny's and determined that nothing, not a thing in the world, could ever make him let go.
Chapter 17

Author's Note: Hah! Glad to give you guys some real romance (finally, I know). Many of you want to continue seeing Draco and Ginny happy… Well, we'll see. ;)

Christmas Day was bleak.

Never before in Draco's memory had the Malfoy Manor been completely bereft of holiday decorations. Never before had it been left so unkempt, so dreary.

Once, the Malfoys had hosted the most spectacular holiday parties in British magical society.

Now, instead of spending an evening at home with his mother and father, eagerly anticipating gifts and treats and all manner of festive things, Draco was lying on his back in the four-poster bed of his Slytherin dormitory.

Merlin, he hoped his father had no idea what day it was. How would Lucius feel, knowing his wife and son were apart on Christmas, each languishing in their solitary corners, too weary and sick with anxiety to enjoy the holiday?

Draco had stayed at Hogwarts in the hopes of working on that damn cabinet, but instead he was here, with his curtains drawn, praying against the darkness that this day would pass and some miracle would grant him peace.

Surely if some great help were to come to him, it would be on this day?

For the first time in Draco's life, he didn't yearn for a single material thing on Christmas. All he wanted was for all of this to be over. He wanted his father out of Azkaban. He wanted his mother to smile, not quake in fear. He wanted Lord Voldemort out of his damned house.

Because it didn't matter if blood purity was at stake.

It wasn't worth this. It wasn't worth a Christmas alone, in a cold room with a freezing lake wrapped around it.

His mother had probably grown upset when she'd read his letter.

I'm not coming home for the holidays, it read. Draco had hated penning it. But he had to stay. He had to work on the cabinet. He had to finish the job.

And then maybe, if he succeeded, all of this would over.

And if he failed… well, Draco – much to his own shame – found comfort in that, too.

Ginny and Draco left the cottage with lots of hugs and kisses – all of which came from Ginny, of course. Percy seemed to give her a suspicious appraisal before the two parted ways, but Ginny quickly pulled away and didn't give him a chance to comment on her glowing cheeks.

"I'll see you all soon!" she called out to her family before she and Draco picked up their brooms. It was quite late in the evening, so they decided to Apparate back to the manor, rather than fly. With one last wave at her family, Ginny took Draco's hand with a smile and the two disappeared with a pop.
The sky was dark and clear above them when they reappeared in front of the manor, and the twinkling stars gave just enough illumination to allow them both a moment to pause and appreciate the magnificent house in front of them. Then Ginny and Draco moved forward in unison, fingers still curled together as they passed through the threshold of the home.

They'd barely made it inside when Narcissa appeared. "Oh, Draco. There you are! Come, say hello to your great-aunt before she leaves."

Draco balked, still holding Ginny's hand, as if he was afraid she might evaporate if he let go. "Mother," he groaned, because for the love of Merlin, the very last thing Draco had on his mind was talking to an old deaf woman who smelled like expired milk.

In fact, everything that did not revolve around the young witch at his side was very unimportant to Draco at the moment.

"Just come see her," Narcissa told him sternly. "You can bear to be parted from one another for a moment." She cut her eyes at Ginny, who bit back a snicker.

"It's alright," Ginny told Draco, gently letting go of his hand. She took a step back and smirked. "I'll just... wait for you," she said coyly.

The look on Draco's face was priceless, and Narcissa had to practically drag him away. "I'm going to put that old woman in a retirement home," she heard Draco tell Narcissa flatly.

Grinning to herself, Ginny turned and headed back to their rooms, her every step practically floating, nearly as light as her heart.

Still, as soon as Ginny was in the suite, her smile faded away to a more thoughtful expression. She closed the door behind her, leaning her back against it as it shut with a click. A mirror caught Ginny's attention, and she paused to look at her reflection. The necklace Percy had given her shone with a flicker of the bedroom's scant lighting, and the reminder of it made Ginny pause.

Touching the necklace with her fingertips, Ginny pushed herself slowly from the door and moved to her own room, where she opened the doors and slipped inside to the shadowy corner that was hers.

The magnitude of what had happened fell on Ginny like a slow, inundating wave.

Swallowing tightly, Ginny reached up and grasped one of the posts of her bed, her eyes squeezing shut. It wasn't regret that plagued her – she knew that, instantly - but a discomfort was certainly there. Fear and guilt intermingled, taking root in Ginny's stomach and branching out until they curled into every piece of her.

But the growth of those feelings was muted under others, sensations of pleasure and warmth and affection like she'd never felt in her life. A battle raged in Ginny, threatening to suffocate her with the sheer intensity of it all.

Everything she had felt over the last several months – every emotion, both those that uplifted and those that weighed her down – fought now, as Ginny had fought in the war, for strength and position in Ginny's heart and mind.

Lifting her head, Ginny heaved in a deep sigh. It was then that she spotted a small wrapped gift on the table next to her bed. Brows furrowed, Ginny moved over to the table, passing in and out of cool grey shadows created by the filtered moonlight coming in from Draco's room.
It was another Christmas present, and attached was a short note.

_Last one. Promise._

Ginny's lips lifted at the sight of Draco's neat handwriting, even as her hands trembled at the spring of fear and uncertainty in her heart. Her fingers pulled at the wrapping, and when the colorful paper fell away, Ginny's lips parted at the sight of a framed photograph.

It was the Weasley family in Egypt.

All of them, smiling and waving in their new clothes, joyful at their trip. Ginny's eyes instantly filled with tears, and she fell back numbly on her rarely-used bed, a hand moving to her mouth.

Ginny had no photos of her family, as the Burrow had been utterly destroyed by the war. The last image of her family, forever cut into Ginny's mind, were those of their empty gazes and death-stricken faces. Now, though, their smiles and happy waves floated in front of her, jubilant.

Some of Ginny's tears fell on the frame, and she quickly wiped them away, furious that her misery should touch something so pure, so beautiful. With a whimper she couldn't stifle, Ginny swept a thumb over the photograph and made sure to touch each of their faces.

Then she looked back to her mother.

"I wish you were here," she whispered to the photograph, to Molly Weasley's soul, which she could only hope felt Ginny's love, wherever it rested. "I'm so – I'm so confused, and I – I really wish you could talk to me." The distraught witch's voice cracked.

"You would know what to do," Ginny told her mother, shoulders hunched. She bit her lip painfully hard. "You would be able to help me. And I – I'm sorry I never asked you to help me very much before, because… because now," Ginny paused, curling her knees high so they touched her chest and fully engulfed the frame.

"Because now I have so many questions, and I can't talk to you."

A sob threatened to overwhelm Ginny, but she pressed it away, even as tears pushed stubbornly through and fell down her freckled cheeks. "I need you here," she told Molly's likeness in a desperate whisper. "I need you to tell me this is okay. Please."

The picture was devastatingly silent, but it was still the Molly Weasley Ginny wanted to remember, not the cold face of a lifeless woman falling, falling to the ground, never to rise. Ginny held the picture frame to her chest and sat, unmoving and silent, for quite a while.

It was only when Draco returned that Ginny finally lifted her head and looked in the direction of his room. She couldn't see him, but she could hear him moving around, and Ginny knew she wanted to see him. Rising from the bed, Ginny carefully dried her tears and squared her shoulders.

Still holding the picture frame, Ginny slipped into Draco's room just as the older wizard was hanging his cloak on a hook. A fire blazed in the stone hearth, and it added the only light to the otherwise dark room. The flames pressed warm rays of orange against Draco's dark clothes, and as he turned to see her, his lips quirked at a smile. He didn't move to her, though, instead remaining where he was, sliding his hands into the pockets of his robes.

"There you are," Draco said gently, as if he'd been looking for her for a very long time.

Ginny looked over him, her lips parted as she took in the sight of him. It struck her then that she'd
been breathless before, when she'd agonized for air against the power of her sobs, holding the picture frame like it was her only link to life. Now as she looked at Draco, Ginny was breathless for an entirely different reason.

"Thank you," she said at last, her words uncharacteristically soft, "for my picture." Ginny looked down at it again and brushed her fingers over the front. "Where did you get it?" she asked without looking up.

Draco watched her without moving. "Your brother Charlie had it, but it was damaged. He thought it couldn't be repaired, but," Draco's lips quirked. "Let's just say it's amazing what wizard photographers can accomplish when you pay them enough."

Ginny looked over the edges of the photograph and saw where they'd once been burnt. Yes, the Burrow had been set ablaze. It was a wonder anything had survived.

Ginny's eyes flickered to his. "It's amazing," she told him hoarsely. "I can't give you anything that will mean as much as this." Draco didn't respond to this; instead, he simply watched her with a gentle expression Ginny felt, rather than saw.

With a quick glance at Draco, Ginny moved to the mantelpiece above the fireplace and set the photo directly in the center, stepping back to admire it. There was no reason to put it in her own room. She was rarely in there.

The room fell silent, and now Ginny and Draco stood apart.

After a long moment in which neither of them spoke, Ginny turned and looked back at Draco. He was leaned against the arm of the couch, hands still in his pockets, watching her with a hint of cautious regard.

They both knew what had happened in the forest, and neither of them had run from it.

But now, as they stood alone with one another in the space that had become theirs, they both knew there was more to be said, more to be done. "What is it, Ginny?" Draco asked at last, resolve settling into his expression. When Ginny hesitated, the young wizard stood but didn't approach her.

"Tell me," Draco said evenly. He looked like a man facing the firing squad.

Ginny's eyes closed for a moment, and then she spoke before they even opened again, as if she needed to forget Draco's face in order to say what she needed to say.

"I am just so afraid," she managed at last, her words small and cracked, "that all of this is just - for him."

This being every joyful laugh, every shared joke, every comforting touch, every admiring look, every soft word.

Every heart-stopping kiss.

Ginny expected Draco's gaze to drop when she met his eyes with hers, but it didn't.

"And I'm terrified of that, because," she choked out, "I – I feel like I'm only being set up to lose everything again, like one day you'll realize just how much I believed everything you've said and done, and you'll laugh, because it was never for anyone but Voldemort."

Draco straightened from his spot, a thick swallow passing down his throat. "Ginny – "
"And this is what Voldemort wants, isn't it?" cried Ginny, bringing a hand up to her face. "Charlie said it, he said Voldemort wants all the prisoners to – to care for people, so they're weak, and that might be worth it, Draco, it might, if – "

Draco stopped where he was.

" – if, I wasn't so afraid that you're only doing this because it's what Voldemort wants you to do."

Draco listened, his gaze trained on her. At her last words, Draco closed his eyes and looked away, hands flexing at his sides. "This is not about him," he murmured at last, his every muscle taut with tension as he forced himself to look back at her. "Ginny," he said heatedly, "Don't you see? I don't want to do anything for him anymore."

Ginny wanted desperately to believe him, but her uncertainty refused to abate. "Then why did you fight for him?"

At this, Draco's features hardened.

"Bloody hell, Ginny!" shouted Draco, ripping his hands through the air, so that the fire jumped in response to the magical energy and blazed high into the chimney. "Can't you see I hate this world as much as you do?"

Ginny's eyes widened.

"He would have killed me if I had refused!" exclaimed Draco, sounding both irate and distraught, terrified and terrifying. He paced in front of Ginny, his eyes shining, expression beseeching but his every movement a show of hostility.

"And I'm sorry, alright?" Draco hissed. "I'm sorry that I don't share your complete lack of self-preservation, Ginny, really, I am! But when the most powerful dark wizard of all time is standing in front of you with a wand pointed at your entire family, you don't really have any options!"

Draco pointed at Ginny. "And maybe you and other magical children grew up hearing about all the awful things the Dark Lord has done, maybe you've had frightening stories told to you at night, and you've read about all the atrocities he's committed, but I saw them, Ginny. I saw what he did to people who refused him. I saw what he did to my bloody family after a lifetime of service and a single mistake!"

Draco's own hand pressed against the center of his chest with a loud thud.

"He left my father in Azkaban," Draco reminded her ardently, even as his voice trembled. "After everything my father had done for him, the Dark Lord left him in that place just to teach him a lesson. And then he gave me an impossible mission just to punish my family further!" The memory of this caused Draco to step away and turn his back to Ginny.

"You could have gone to Dumbledore," managed Ginny through her tears. "You could have gotten help!"

Draco turned to face her, eye narrowed. "Oh, for the love of Merlin. When are you lot going to wake up and realize Dumbledore was not the bloody saint you all thought he was?"

Draco shook his head. "Dumbledore was just as power hungry as the Dark Lord, that's the whole reason he got tied up with Grindelwald in the first bloody place."

Draco looked briefly at the ceiling, his hands clenched at his sides. "Besides, the Dark Lord would
have hunted us down himself for betraying him like that, and if you think he wouldn't have found us, you're a fool. Because Dumbledore was never interested in protecting any of us. He just wanted his place in history, and to make up for all the equally terrible things he'd done to people in his past."

"So yes," Draco continued heatedly, "I could have gone to Dumbledore for help. I did have options." He met Ginny's gaze with a steely one of his own.

"I could have been murdered at the Dark Lord's feet or martyred at Dumbledore's side."

At this, a pained sound escaped him, and Ginny's eyes welled with tears again as a heavy pause followed. "What kind of decision is that for a seventeen-year-old to make?" Draco asked the air, no longer looking at Ginny.

For a moment, the room fell quiet and dense. Then Draco spoke again, his hands on his hips and his body turned away from her.

"Now," he said quietly, resolutely to Ginny. "Do I still believe Mudbloods are beneath me? Of course I do, it's what I've been told my entire life." Draco paused, expression softening a bit. "But do I know the world was far better off with them in it?"

The question lingered before Draco filled the empty space.

"Yes," he admitted at last.

And then he continued, his words quieter still. "And do I know that my world is far better off with you in it?"

Draco looked to her, and their eyes met. "... Yes," he whispered, his voice strained.

Still several feet away from the stunned witch, Draco stood straight and tall, his brows furrowed as he looked to her face with unprecedented tenderness. "Ginny," he murmured, every word heavy with sincerity and fear, raw with exposure. "You are the only good part of anything that has happened to me since ... before the war, even."

Ginny's lips parted in disbelief, her eyes wide. Draco fell silent then, looking away from her briefly as she watched him. After what felt like decades, Ginny moved to stand in front of Draco, her movements unusually quiet.

Distracted by his vigil of her face, Draco didn't immediately notice when Ginny picked up his wand. Not until she held it up in front of him, firmly in her own grasp, with the wand tip tilting until it pointed at his throat, did he think to tense up. Ginny's every movement was calculated and slow, and he could read the tremble in her fingertips as she held the wand pointed at him.

Ginny's mind and heart warred. But she had to know. She had to know if he would try to take it from her.

Draco's body stiffened, and he looked down at the wand, knowing full-well what she was capable of. She could kill him, and he had no doubt that just six months ago, she would have done so. The moment lingered on, with Ginny holding – in the palm of her hand – all the power in the room.

But Draco, despite his fear, kept his hands at his sides and did not attempt to stop or dissuade her. After several seconds, Ginny blinked away another bout of tears, her hand still firmly on the wand.

"My world is better with you in it, too," she whispered at last.
With a quick wave of her hand, Ginny tossed the wand aside, and Draco matched the movement by catching her face with his hands and pulling her into a deep kiss.

Ginny's arms jumped around his neck and Draco, no longer encumbered by the heavy coat he'd had on before, curled Ginny into his grip and pressed her agonizingly close, so that every curve of their bodies fell together and every inch of space was eradicated. A gasp sounded between them, but only for the scant moment that their lips were parted. Then they were back together again, and Draco's hands fistedin the fabric of Ginny's robes, his grip desperate to feel her.

Ginny's own hands jumped to Draco's hair and her fingers spread, moving from his blond locks down to his neck, where the pads of her fingers left burning trails down Draco's neck. Their lips parted and tongues brushed, bringing further heat to every erogenous part of their bodies and beyond.

Before either of them knew what was happening, Ginny's hands were moving to Draco's robes and he helped her pull them up, over his head, before Ginny's hands jumped under the black undershirt and lifted that, too, her hands pressing fervently against his bare skin as they followed the motion. As soon as those were gone, Draco pressed his lips to Ginny's neck and pressed the two walked backwards. The pair barely made it to the bed before Ginny's robes lifted up and dropped to the floor, leaving her in only the camisole and underwear she wore beneath.

As soon as she felt the back of the bedsheets against her bare shoulder blades, Ginny reached for Draco and he was there, sliding over her with one knee between her legs and the other at her hip.

"Draco," she murmured just before his mouth covered hers again and his body pressed against her, every inch of him hard and welcome, every ounce of weight a deliriously pleasurable necessity to her in that moment.

Everything Ginny had felt over the past year – all the turmoil, all the anger, all the misery and all the wonderful, soul shattering happiness - culminated in the heart bursting sensation of Draco wrapping one strong bare arm around her torso and pulling her away from the bed so he could feel her. His long finger gripped at Ginny's hip firmly, any anxiety or hesitance liberated by passion, desire, and unbridled, unfiltered worship of the feelings between them.

Ginny's body shook, mostly from the call of her body and heart, which yearned for everything Draco had to offer. There was also a tiny bit of fear, because she had never done this with anyone before, but it faded away when Draco slowed and let his mouth drop to her collarbone, kissing there with a reverence Ginny wasn't sure existed anywhere else in the world except between them.

Taking Draco's hand at her hip, Ginny spread her fingers over his and guided his hand up over her stomach and breast, before she laced their digits and turned her head, pressing a kiss to the inside of Draco's wrist.

Their bodies ached for each other, and the physical desire was almost unbearable. Even so, the pair paused to look at one another, fingers curled tightly together. Draco brought up one of their joined hands and pressed a single finger against the line of Ginny's jaw. She could feel his arousal, prompting a liquid heat that made Ginny's toes curl, and yet he still kept the motion as gentle and unhurried as anyone had ever seen.

"I am so glad for everything about you," he whispered against her lips.

Ginny's eyelids lowered as she lifted a leg and slipped it around Draco's, pulling slowly, agonizingly, on their joined hands until his full weight was against her. Then she freed one of her own hands so she could press it, fingers spread, down the center of Draco's back until her fingers
curled at the furthest point she could reach. Draco's response was to press his face into her neck with an open-mouthed kiss, a shudder running through him.

When Ginny brought up her other hand, she used it to gently turn his head, so that his lips were on hers again.

"I don't want to be without you," she told him, her fingers curling into his hair.

At this, Draco's lips shifted into something of a pleased smirk, genuine joy mixed with his characteristic arrogance. "If you insist," he murmured in her ear.

Then he moved away and kissed her fully again, prompting Ginny to respond in kind, never one to be outdone. Together, they reached for Draco's pants and pulled them away, dropping them to the side and grinning as soon as they were rejoined. Each piece of clothing fell aside, carelessly left on the floor, until the only thing shielding the pair from the cold air was a warm set of blankets and each other's bodies.

Ginny's heart hammered in her chest when she felt his bare body fully pressed against hers, but the doubt was gone, and the fear replaced with longing, one which had her reaching for Draco every time he dared to pull away, even for a moment.

One of Draco's hands reached for Ginny's leg under the covers and lifted it just enough to allow him to reach down, pressing between her legs. Ginny let out a gasp and pressed her hand over his, and he paused. However, far from stopping him, Ginny moved his fingers until they reached her core and pressed inside of her, a motion which alone was enough to make Ginny arch her back and catch her lip with her teeth.

Within mere moments, Ginny pulled Draco's hand away and reached up with both hands, tugging his hips forward with a pleading noise that made Draco kiss her to disguise his laugh.

"Always telling me what to do..." he murmured, surprised at the low gravelly tones of his own voice.

Ginny smiled into the kiss and urged him closer even as she chuckled. "You can deny me, if that's what you really want," she told him breathlessly, but Draco shook his head and poised himself between her legs.

"No," he disagreed, pressing into her slowly as Ginny's lips parted against his in a gasp, "I don't think I could."

The feeling of her was overwhelming, and Draco forced his hand away from Ginny's hip and to the bed, for fear he'd leave bruises on her. Instead, his passionate grip fell to the sheets just next to Ginny's head, and Ginny reached up to curl her fingers around his forearm, her eyes closed and her head pressed back against the bed.

"Fuck, Draco," managed Ginny, her digits pressing into his skin as he rocked into her, every nerve in his body alive and focused on the sensation of Ginny beneath him. They kissed again, a delightful kiss into which they poured everything they had endured both together and separately, never to be dealt with alone again.

Draco slowed to make sure Ginny was alright, but every part of her pulled at him, kept him close, and when she whispered his name against his skin, it was only pleasure he heard there. Together, they moved with one another, their hands jumping, exploring, pressing deeply over each curve, every hard surface, every tender spot.
Ginny's hands smoothed over the Dark Mark on Draco's arm more than once, but neither of them paused, nor gave it any consideration. Only the points at which their bodies joined – hands, lips and elsewhere – mattered to them at all. Only hearing each other's name, only taking comfort in every delirious bout of pleasure and pressure.

Ginny's legs clenched around Draco as she felt his thrusts grow faster, more heated, and her body responded in kind, coiling at the center of her stomach and then dropping lower until the tension there gripped Ginny like a sudden vice.

A sharp cry was Draco's only warning before Ginny's body tightened around him and he was forced to release her again, pressing his hand forcefully against the bed as her muscles contracted and, within moments, Draco's body gave the same powerful release.

Panting, Ginny curled her arms in and tucked herself against Draco's torso, even when he turned to the side and pulled just far enough away from her to grab his wand and perform a quick cleaning spell.

As soon as he moved back to her, Ginny was there, entire body flushed red and her eyes looking up at him, the blankets pulled to her chin. Draco only had to reach for her, and she wiggled over the few inches between them to curl into his arms.

Their chests still heaving, Draco and Ginny pressed close.

For a long moment, words failed them. Only the last lingering touches, made leisurely with soft smiles and occasional kisses, persisted.

Draco reached up with a curled finger and brushed a piece of damp hair from Ginny's temple. Just then, the clock on the mantelpiece chimed; it was midnight. This made Ginny smile, and Draco returned it, his thumb sweeping over her cheek.

"Happy Christmas," she told him.

Draco looked over her face, taking in every single detail, memorizing it with every ounce of his strength.

"Happy Christmas," he replied, so softly Ginny nearly did not hear.

A few hours later, after Ginny had been asleep next to him for quite a while, Draco remained awake, unable to take his eyes off her. His finger lifted and traced her neck, moving along a line of freckles down to her bare shoulder.

Draco's lips quirked when Ginny shifted for the millionth time, only to try and find a way to get closer to him, even in her sleep.

Resettling his arm over her, Draco looked to Ginny's face. Then, as he watched her, comprehension shifted his expression into a thoughtful repose. Draco looked up, over Ginny's sleeping form, to where his desk sat a few feet away.

He looked back to Ginny and watched her for a very long time.

Then, his decision made, Draco forced himself to slip away from Ginny and out of the bed, where he slid on a pair of pajama pants. After double-checking to make sure Ginny was still asleep, Draco unlocked his desk and reached inside the drawer to pull out a small square box.
With one last glance at Ginny, Draco quirked his lips and then lit a candle, sitting down at his desk with the box and writing a very specific list of instructions on a piece of parchment. After that, he folded up the letter and attached it to the box, which he walked down to the owlery.

The meanest eagle owl the Malfoys owned was perched near a window, and Draco beckoned it down before attaching both the box and the letter to its leg. "This is very valuable," he told the bird. "So if anyone or anything tries to take it from you, you rip them apart. Understand?"

The razor-sharp beak of the owl clicked in reply, and Draco took a step back as it leaped into the air and flew away. After it was gone, Draco moved to the window and leaned his bare arms against it, watching as the owl took flight over the snow and left with the package, now nothing more than a small distant speck against the sky.

After watching the snowy night for a few minutes, Draco returned to his room and slipped back into the bed with Ginny, who mumbled something in her sleep.

"What was that?" he asked in a teasing whisper.

"Mmph," replied Ginny, before grumbling without opening her eyes, "Not supposed to wear pants in bed."

At this, Draco tucked his head against hers and chuckled.

"Good night," he whispered against her hair.
A strange noise attracted Ginny's attention. After searching through the dour hallways of Grimmauld Place, Ginny rounded a corner to find Nymphadora Tonks, bent over her own lap and crying, although she made every effort to stifle it.

"Tonks?" tried Ginny, frowning. To see the normally bright and cheerful Auror so despondent made panic well on Ginny's chest. She hurried to the other witch, who had grown to be like a sister to her. "What is it?"

Tonks looked up quickly and pushed away her tears. "Nothing, just – more of the same, I suppose." She shrugged, looking off. "Everyone's got troubles and miseries, these days. Just catches up with you sometimes, that's all." She tried to smile, but for a woman who could manipulate her face into any shape she wanted, it was a pitiful attempt.

Ginny noticed then that Tonks' hair, normally vibrant thanks to her extraordinary abilities, was a mousey brown color.

"It's just," said Tonks after a moment, "it's a right punch in the heart, you know?"

"What is?" asked Ginny, taking a seat in front of Tonks.

The young pressed away more tears. "Just – I don't know, I've spent my whole life changing into whatever thing I need to be for the minute, yeah? And then – now I feel like, maybe I know who I really want to be – without all the changin' – and it's not good enough."

"Not good enough for what?" questioned Ginny.

Tonks looked at her clasped hands. "For Remus," she muttered. Before Ginny could reply – though what she would say, she had no idea – Tonks shrugged one shoulder high, looking uncomfortable.

"Sometimes I hate it, being a metamorphmagi. Seems like – I can be everything in the world except what I want to be." Ginny watched as Tonks leaned forward and placed her elbows miserably on her knees. "He won't have me, and I don't blame him. I can barely even remember what the real me is anymore."

Ginny clasped Tonks' hand with her own. "I think you're just tired and stressed, Tonks. Come on, now. You're great."

At this, Tonks lifted her eyes slowly to Ginny's. "How do you know that for sure?" she asked in a strange tone. A chill danced Ginny's spine. "I could be anyone," said Tonks.

"Master."

Draco kept his eyes closed, certain he was dreaming. His body felt wonderful relaxed, while at the same time holding a pleasurable exhaustion. As such, Draco was more than ready to dismiss the annoying voice as a figment of his imagination. Unfortunately, the insistent whisper grew louder, defeating the purpose of using a whisper at all.
"Master. Psssst. Master Malfoy!"

Something tugged on the blankets.

"Master Malfoy," pleaded the voice. "PSSST, MASTER!"

At last –

"What, Bleaker?" Draco finally managed to open his eyes, only to balk at how close the house-elf’s weathered face was to his. Squinting against the early light of morning, Draco let his head fall back against the pillow with a thump.

Soft morning rays trickled into the room from the window, where it managed to press past the thick layer on snow resting on the window sill. The light highlighted dust particles floating through the air, all of which dropped gracefully like individual snowflakes to the luxurious carpet below.

Draco groaned. "What do you want, you stupid elf?"

The house-elf's eyes were wide with terror. "Sir," said Bleaker, looking distraught. "Bleaker is most sorry, but – but – " His wrinkled face pursed with misery as he gripped the sheets, frantic. "Bleaker cannot find Missus Weasley, sir!"

Draco raised a brow without lifting his head from the pillow.

"Bleaker has looked everywhere for her, sir!" the elf whimpered, raking his nails down his face. "Missus Weasley is not – is not in her room, she is not on the couch, she is not the library, she is not – not anywhere, sir!" The house-elf flailed. "Oh, Master! Bleaker has failed you and Missus Weasley!"

Draco let Bleaker panic for a few steps before he spoke. "Bleaker."

" – Master charged Bleaker with Missus Weasley's safety! And Bleaker has failed! FAILED, SIR!"

"Bleaker."

"Bleaker is the worst of all elves, sir! The WORST!" The house-elf then crouched and made a move as if to sprint to the window, where Draco could only assume he meant to pitch himself off the fourth floor and end his miserable life below. Amusing as that might be to watch, Draco knew Ginny would be sore at him for allowing such a thing, so he held up a hand.

"Bleaker!"

The house-elf finally stopped, his lips trembling with sorrow. Rolling his eyes, Draco shifted in the bed and reached over, using two fingers to pull back a bit of bedding to reveal Ginny Weasley, safely tucked at his side and still fast asleep.

He looked back at Bleaker with a slight smirk.

"Oh," squeaked Bleaker, gradually calming. For a moment, he looked confused. Then his cheeks colored a little, and Draco could've sworn the damn little elf smiled a bit to himself. "Oh, well then – Bleaker will just – be on his way, then."

"Good idea," said Draco, relaxing against his bed again.

Bleaker paused again, though. "Oh, and your mother and father are waiting for you when you rise,
Draco raised a brow. "Why? What'd I do?" He tried to think through his various offenses in the last week or so, most of which were probably Ginny's fault. Bleaker tittered.

"Why, for Christmas, Master. Of course." Then he disappeared with a pop.

Draco blinked in surprise and then chuckled to himself, shifting onto his bare back in the bed. He stayed that way for a moment, enjoying the quiet of early morning, before looking to his side and spotting a pair of hazel eyes outlined in freckles peeking at him from just over the edge of a blanket. Even though Draco couldn't see Ginny's mouth, he knew from the crinkle of her eyes that she was smiling.

"Morning," he murmured, shifting in the bed to face her. Their legs intertwined beneath the covers and Draco pushed his arms around Ginny, letting his fingers dance up her bare spine. "Bleaker was very worried about you," Draco told her, amused. Ginny giggled beneath the blanket and Draco reached up, brushing the cover back tenderly so he could see her whole face.

"Was he?" Ginny asked with a laugh, and a wave of relief swept through Draco as he saw her relaxed face. It hadn't yet occurred to him that she might regret what happened, but now he needn't think on that fear, even for a moment. Ginny looked as natural next to him as the sun in the sky.

"Mmhm."

Ginny wiggled close, placing her cheek against his torso, skin to skin. Her fingers found their way to the center of his torso and traced lightly there, sending shivers down Draco's spine. He responded by bringing up his own hand and letting his fingers fall over the hair framing Ginny's face, wild and unkempt with sleep, remarkably representative of her in every way.

"Bleaker said my parents are waiting in the parlor," Draco said after a few minutes. His lips quirked. "We haven't done the whole… sit around the Christmas tree thing in a while, but apparently, they're renewing it this year."

"Oh, right," said Ginny, laughing. "It's Christmas." Then her features shifted and she gave Draco a small smile. "Well, then I suppose you should go…"

"You're coming, too," Draco said, as if it were obvious. Ginny raised a brow.

"Are you sure your parents will want me there?"

Draco's eyes raked over her lovely face. "If they don't, they'll get over it."

Ginny squinted at him, and he knew she didn't believe him one bit, but still, Draco smiled and kissed her forehead before tugging her out of the bed with him. The two quickly put on pajamas – which caused Ginny to flush a little, even though she tried to hide it – and then house robes and slippers. Without bothering to truly tame her hair, Ginny pushed the unruly locks into a braid and walked out of the suite with Draco, unable to hide a bit of her nervousness.

Certainly, she was accustomed to dealing with the Malfoys by now, but she hated the idea of Lucius and Narcissa possibly spoiling the wonderful feeling she'd awakened with.

However, she needn't have worried, because as soon as she and Draco crossed into the parlor where the magnificently large Christmas tree was housed, Lucius and Narcissa looked up at the pair without a hint of surprise.
"Well, it's about time," said Narcissa, though without her usual bite. She was sipping some tea and wearing an elegant silk robe of her own. Ginny had never seen Narcissa so casual, even in her own home, and the young realized she enjoyed the sight of it.

"Indeed," said Lucius, his eyes flickering briefly to Draco. "We thought you two would never rise." The knowing look on his face made Draco clear his throat a bit and Ginny flush, and Draco carefully avoided looking at his father as the two took seats on the couch which had been moved near the tree.

Draco bit back a smile when Ginny sat next to him and folded her legs underneath her.

"Sorry," said Draco as the house-elves brought them some tea. "But we haven't actually gotten up and opened gifts in a few years. I didn't expect it."

"Well, we can always return yours," said Lucius mildly. Draco made an affronted noise, and his father rolled his eyes, making Ginny snicker. Draco was such a spoiled little boy sometimes, she thought with a great deal of affection. The admiration must have read on her features, because Ginny caught Lucius watching her more than once. Narcissa seemed much more interested in the preservation of her immaculately decorated tree than in watching Draco and Ginny, but she did give Draco an odd look from time to time, as if she were suspicious of him but wasn't sure why.

Draco glanced at Ginny as Lucius leaned over and picked out a present for Narcissa, who accepted it with a warm smile at Lucius. Ginny, for her part, watched the whole exchange with a keen interest.

The truth was, as Ginny watched Lucius dole out presents and Narcissa serve bits of pieces of breakfast treats and tea, she felt as if she were seeing the Malfoy family for the first time. True, they still held their aristocratic arrogance and ridiculous disregard for anyone outside their luxurious home, but they were undoubtedly still a family, one heavily layered with love.

"For you," Lucius said to Narcissa, handing her a small box, which Narcissa opened with a smile. When it revealed itself, Narcissa gasped softly and placed a hand on her heart.

"Oh, a new star," she breathed, shifting the box to show Ginny, much to the younger's surprise. Peering into the box, Ginny's lips parted in awe as she saw a stunning rendition of a star, floating just there against a soft satin, as if it were a precious diamond. As Ginny watched, Narcissa took out her wand and moved the star from the box to what appeared to be a charm bracelet on her wrist, one Ginny had never noticed before. As Narcissa placed the star there, the elegant bracelet hummed with magic.

With a flick of Narcissa's hand, a magnificent sky suddenly enveloped the entire room, and Ginny gasped. Narcissa's newest star now shone brightly in the center of a constellation which surrounded them on all sides, one of several bright balls of brilliant illumination set amongst the dark of a deep space sky. Lucius and Draco looked around too, admiring the astounding illusion, though it was obvious they were not surprised and had seen this before.

"Each year," said Narcissa to Ginny, "since the year we were first married, Lucius has gotten me a new star to complete the constellations related to all the Black family names." She pointed at the newest star. "That one," she said, smiling at Lucius, "is Narcissus, the star I was named after."

"Wow," Ginny murmured, her heart thumping, as it appeared all around her as if they were all four standing at the center of the universe, so amazing was the charmed bracelet Narcissa held. Ginny had lived her entire life in the magical world, and yet she had never seen anything like it.
Narcissa flicked her wand again, and the bracelet drew in the universe once more, housing it in each of the charms on the bracelet. Smiling, Narcissa, reached over and touched Lucius' hand. "Thank you." Lucius' response was to squeeze her hand with a small but genuine smile. It wasn't the outpouring of affection Ginny had always seen between her parents, but it was no less potent, Ginny realized.

"Doesn't that mean that you've gotten all the stars from your family?" asked Draco, looking thoughtful. "Narcissus was the last. Now you've gotten the entire collection."

"Oh," said Narcissa, looking surprised. "I suppose it is. Twenty years, twenty stars, for all the Black family names." She looked over at Lucius and said teasingly, "I suppose we'll have to start a new tradition."

Lucius simply smiled.

The rest of the gifts were disbursed, and Ginny was surprised to find that a few were for her. Glancing uncertainly at Draco, Ginny opened the box Narcissa had handed her and gasped when she pulled out a beautiful set of dress robes.

"Wow, these are – very amazing, thank you," she said, looking at Draco with a laugh. "Oh! I remember this pattern from the ones Madam Malkin brought us. This is the pattern I loved."

"Indeed," said Narcissa a bit smugly. "That is why I chose them. And it's about time you start building up a decent wardrobe." Then she muttered to the side, "Merlin knows you didn't have one before."

Ginny pursed her lips but still managed to thank Narcissa again before carefully replacing the dress robes. The pleasant Christmas morning continued, with more gifts, two or three of which were actually for Ginny.

The last, to Ginny's great surprise, was a box containing a simple but remarkably beautiful necklace. Even Draco seemed surprised. "Oh, this is – wow," said Ginny, looking up at Narcissa and Lucius. Narcissa preened smugly, so Ginny knew she must have been the one to pick it out.

"Like I told you before, about the party," the elder witch explained to Ginny, "appearance is everything. You need the best."

It was such a typical Narcissa remark, Ginny might've dismissed the whole thing as yet another gesture of arrogance concerning their wealth and station. But as Ginny looked over the necklace, she could see that it had not been chosen simply because it was lavish or expensive – quite the contrary, it was only a small silver pendant with a ruby in the center, the shape in that of a teardrop and the chain slim and unimposing.

But the necklace was just so Ginny, and Narcissa could have picked a thousand different necklaces of all shapes and sizes, many of which Ginny was sure would have made her terribly uncomfortable and annoyed to wear, and yet it was this one Narcissa had chosen.

"I love it," Ginny told Narcissa, and she meant it. This time, the other witch's smile was less of a smirk and more an expression of sincere pleasure. "Thank you." Ginny glanced over at Draco and smiled, and he returned it, looking as pleased as she'd ever seen him.

Dropping her eyes back to her gifts, Ginny looked over them thoughtfully as they finished with their other presents and then rose to put their things away. "We'll be having brunch in just a few minutes," Narcissa told them, "so don't go too far."
"Also," said Lucius, "we've invited a guest to eat with us." He paused. "Well, a guest and a half, I suppose I should say."

This announcement did not seem to surprise Narcissa, but it certainly seemed to irritate her considerably. The elegant witch seemed to lose all her good cheer in an instant, and she huffed, crossing her arms. "We invited no one, Lucius," Narcissa said, narrowing her eyes at her husband. Draco and Ginny glanced at each other, eyebrows raised, even as Lucius placed a hand on Narcissa's arm in a placating gesture.

"We discussed this, Narcissa."

"Masters." A house-elf Ginny did not recognize appeared at the door. "Your guests are here."

Looking curiously to the door, Ginny waited until the newcomer stepped through. For one terrible moment, she looked at Bellatrix Lestrange – and then the woman smiled, so sweetly that the expression stripped the witch of any likeness to her sister.

"Andromeda!" squealed Ginny happily.

The witch who looked frighteningly like her sister Bellatrix turned at the sound of Ginny's voice. "Oh, Ginny! I didn't know you were here!" The elder witch wrapped Ginny up in a hug, even as the three Malfoys hung back, with Draco looking at his parents with wide eyes. His aunt had never, in his entire life, been allowed to speak to them, much less step foot in their home. It was surreal to see her there.

"I still can't believe you thought this was a good idea," hissed Narcissa quietly to Lucius, looking quite distraught, even as her husband tried to soothe her. "Why on earth you thought she should be here – "

Lucius remained calm. "Her Mudblood husband is gone, Narcissa, and you two were very close once – "

"Twenty years ago, Lucius! And she betrayed me!" snipped Narcissa in a poor attempt at a whisper. Fortunately, Ginny and Andromeda were talking animatedly across the room and didn't seem to hear them or notice Narcissa's distress.

"You said you would give her a chance," Lucius reminded her, his voice soft but firm. Narcissa continued to pout, but her shoulders shifted a little, and when she dropped her arms. Lucius relaxed some. "I would like for you to have her as a confidant again," he told Narcissa quietly, and Draco – who was pretending not to eavesdrop – furrowed his brows.

"She may prove to be a comfort to you some day," Lucius said at last, and Narcissa shifted to give him a curious look. However, Lucius would say nothing more, and Andromeda finally approached with Ginny. She looked a bit nervous – and rightfully so – but it was clear she was happy to see Ginny, at the very least.

"Thank you for inviting me, Lucius," Andromeda said cordially, and even though Lucius was apparently the one who had initiated this visit, he simply nodded in greeting and did not approach her. Andromeda looked to Narcissa, who was determinedly looking in the opposite direction.

"Happy Christmas, Cissy," ventured Andromeda with a small smile. Narcissa sniffed in response, and nothing was said for a moment, with only the uncomfortable shuffling of Andromeda filling the space. Draco looked to Ginny, who'd been so ecstatic at Andromeda's arrival. It was clear the two cared for one another.
So Draco met Ginny's gaze, and as soon as their eyes met, he winked at her with a quirk of his lips. Then he turned to Andromeda, stepped forward and offered her his hand.

"I don't believe we've ever actually met," he said to his aunt. "I'm Draco."

Andromeda was visibly surprised, but she quickly took Draco's offered hand with a grateful smile. "Oh, of course! I couldn't have mistaken you for anyone else. You look so like Lucius did at your age." Tenderly, she said, "It's wonderful to finally meet you, Draco." At Andromeda's side, Ginny beamed with pride at Draco.

"Oh!" said Ginny, peering behind Andromeda's legs when she realized a tiny human was attached to them. "Andromeda, is this – "

"Ah, yes, there he – oh, hang on – " Andromeda reached behind her and pried the toddler off her legs, laughing when she shuffled him forward and the little boy clunged to her kneecaps. "There he is. May I present to everyone – my beautiful grandson, Teddy."

Ginny moved around Andromeda to stand next to Draco, her lips parted. For a moment, unimaginable nostalgia and sadness threatened to breech her heart, as she looked at the tiny incarnation of Tonks and Remus Lupin combined.

As the adults watched, little Teddy pressed into his grandmother's legs and shifted his brown hair to blue to match her robes. Ginny gasped. "Andromeda! He's a metamorphmagus!" The little boy's eyes twinkled mischievously, and Ginny noticed now that one of them – and only one – was bright blue, while the other was green. Teddy blinked, and both became green. Draco could swear the little boy was smirking, as if he knew how unusual he was, even at the age of two.

"He is, yes," said Andromeda proudly as they made their way into the dining room. "Just like his mother." A hint of sadness brushed over Andromeda's tones, but she carefully suppressed it as she helped Teddy into a seat at the table for the brunch.

"That's extremely rare, isn't it?" asked Draco curiously. "Metamorphmagi, I mean."

Andromeda nodded. "Less than two dozen registered in all the magical world right now," she confirmed, sweeping back some of Teddy's hair from his face. The locks were a rich chestnut brown again. "Teddy is so like Nymphadora was. Her hair began changing color the day she was born, and we just knew."

Ginny took a seat on Andromeda's other side, with Draco on her left and Narcissa across from her. Brunch was served, and the family began to eat. Narcissa still had not even looked in Andromeda's direction or acknowledged the child, but Andromeda seemed to have expected this, and she observed it all with an air of exasperated patience as Narcissa cattily made every effort to leave Andromeda out of the conversation, even going so far as to practically befriend Ginny, just so it was abundantly clear that Andromeda was not welcome.

This was such a ridiculously childish thing to do that Ginny almost face-palmed, but all in all, the brunch wasn't that bad, and it was probably more progress than the Malfoy family had made in over two decades, so they all found they were willing to accept it, more or less. As the brunch went on, Teddy delighted (nearly) everyone with his toddler antics, Draco addressed Andromeda when his parents were aloof (because even though Lucius had apparently invited Andromeda, that did not mean he was a particularly gregarious host), and Ginny was just delighted all around.

She showed Andromeda the necklace Narcissa had gotten her. "Oh, that's beautiful. You have a wonderful eye, Cissy," Andromeda told the other woman, who pursed her lips in Andromeda's
direction and said nothing.

Andromeda and Ginny shared knowing looks, and Ginny almost laughed.

After brunch was finished, Ginny and Draco stepped aside with Andromeda and Teddy. "I didn't know you were coming," Ginny told her, "or I would have gotten you and Teddy presents." Andromeda laughed and shook her head.

"Don't worry about it, dear. We're just glad to have others to celebrate with." She paused, her eyes lowering for a moment before she admitted a bit more quietly, "It gets lonely, with just the two of us at home. Everyone else is … gone."

This made Ginny frown, but Draco raised both brows and then leaned over, whispering something into Ginny's ear. The redhead's witch's face lit up, and she tugged Andromeda further from Lucius and Narcissa before she pulled Andromeda close.

"Well, here's a Christmas present for you, anyway," whispered Ginny. "Draco saw your husband, Ted, escape the Ministry during the breakout."

Andromeda's eyes widened, her lips parting in shock.

"He hasn't been recovered by the Ministry," Draco added in a murmur, lips quirk. "And I can't say for sure that he's still out there, but he was definitely alive and free just a few months ago." At this, tears filled the older witch's eyes and she cupped a hand over her mouth before quickly dropping it, in an effort to look less affected.

"Oh, oh – Merlin above – th – " Andromeda swallowed tightly. "Thank you, both. I – I had no idea," she whispered breathlessly. "That is truly the greatest gift I could have hoped for." She clasped both of their hands, and Ginny smiled, tugging the other woman into another hug.

"Please," said Andromeda, looking first to Ginny and then to Draco. "Always feel free to visit my home."

"We would love to," said Draco graciously, and Ginny beamed again, feeling so proud of Draco and his behavior that she could burst. A noise to the left of the trio attracted their attention, and they saw Teddy leaned against a window with his wide eyes on the snow outside.

"Wanna go!" He pointed vehemently, jabbing his little finger on the glass. Andromeda winced.

"Oh, Teddy, it's so cold, dear – "

"I'll go," Draco volunteered, much to the surprise of the two witches. Teddy cheered loudly and began to run for the door, so Draco smirked and left the two women, but not before giving a quick cocky little smirk to Ginny, the simple motion of which made her melt all the way down to the tips of her toes.

As Andromeda and Ginny watched through the window, Draco stepped out into the blanket of snow with Teddy and paused just long enough to make sure the little boy's hat was snugly placed on his head. Then the two began building snow forts, which quickly devolved into snow warfare, which ultimately ended with Draco hiding behind a tree as Teddy did his very best to assault him with snowballs.

After letting Teddy get in a few hits, Draco rushed around the tree and scooped Teddy up, laughing at the toddler's shriek of delight as the two roughhoused in the snow. Teddy fell over multiple times, but he always jumped back up and ran for Draco again, ready to be turned in the air and
"gently" tossed onto the ground, where he gleefully rolled in the snow.

"Oh, if only I could wear out his energy like that," Andromeda said with a laugh. "But I'm too old. Ah, well. At least he'll nap properly today." Ginny grinned, looking out over the pair of cousins as they played in the snow.

"Perhaps we can babysit sometime, give you a little peace, hm?"

"That would be lovely," said Andromeda, still jubilant from the news earlier. Her eyes flickered between Ginny and Draco. "So you… " she paused, as if trying to decide how to proceed. "Are you – alright, here? Are you safe?"

Ginny glanced at the older woman's face and, after a moment, she exhaled and looked back to the pair of boys. "I wasn't at first. It was frightening," she admitted truthfully. Moving to the window, Ginny leaned against it and let her features relax into a smile. "But I'm safe with Draco," she said. "Perhaps I can't trust anyone else here, but … I can trust him."

Andromeda seemed a little surprised by this, but she was pleased, too. "Good," she told Ginny, putting an arm around her. "I'm happy for you."

After another fifteen minutes of playing, Draco and Teddy re-entered, with the toddler rapidly falling asleep in his older cousin's arms. Draco deposited the child in Andromeda's grip. "There you are," he said, shaking some snow off his head. "One exhausted child." He paused. "And also me, equally tired."

Ginny snickered. "Getting old, are you?"

"You try keeping up a two-year-old who can turn the color of snow. I almost had a bloody heart attack out there," he remarked wryly.

With a great smile, Andromeda hugged them both and then gave a short good-bye to Lucius and Narcissa, the latter of which still refused to address her. Alone in the hallway, Ginny turned and slipped her arms around Draco's torso.

"I like you so very much," she told him matter-of-factly, reaching up to brush a last hint of snow from his coat collar.

"Likewise," he informed her, making Ginny giggle.

Lucius entered the corridor then, and Ginny quickly pulled away from Draco, cheeks red. "I'll just – erm, go get our presents so we can take them back to the room," she told Draco, before hurrying off. Sliding his hands into the pockets of his house robe, Draco watched her go as Lucius came to stand next to him.

"I need do some business in Diagon Alley tomorrow," said Lucius. "You should accompany me."

Draco looked over at him in surprise. "Really? You want me to go with you?"

"It won't be all work," Lucius told him. "I think you'll find it enjoyable."

Draco paused. "Will it… just be the two of us? Really?" At Lucius' nod, Draco bit back a smile and instead settled for a look of haughty indifference. "Alright, I suppose that will work."

After a moment, his father asked, "Would you perhaps be reconsidering your earlier decision?"
Draco looked determinedly forward, although it showed him nothing more than the long hallway and its many windows. "I'm considering reconsidering it," Draco said lightly. He glanced out of the corner of his eye to see Lucius raise a brow at him, looking mildly pleased as he did so.

"Good," said Lucius.

Just then, the voices of Ginny and Narcissa sounded from the parlor.

"I'm wearing pajamas, Narcissa! What does it matter?"

"Well, that's no excuse to sit with your legs spread open like some kind of - farmhand!"

"When was the last time you met a farmhand?"

Lucius shook his head, but Draco grinned a bit. At his father's exasperated look, Draco shrugged. "It's too late to rescind your approval now," he told his father wryly, to which Lucius sighed deeply.

"Well, in that case," said Lucius after a pause, "you should probably know that contraceptive spells are very tricky, and it is ill advised to try them on your own."

Draco grimaced at hearing his father say the word 'contraceptive.'

"A girl in school attempted one once," Lucius went on, much to Draco's growing distress, "and somehow she managed to render her internal organs to the consistency of pudding." He paused. "Most unfortunate."

Draco stared. "I would prefer to not have this conversation."

"As a result," continued Lucius, "my advice is to use contraceptive potions instead."

"Can you please stop saying contraceptives?"

"Though I should tell you those are technically illegal now, thanks to the Ministry's efforts to promote growth," Lucius said, ignoring him, "but of course, we are Malfoys, so nothing is truly illegal for us. There's a store of contraceptive potions down in the cellar you can use."

"Wait," said Draco, aghast, "so you … already had some?"

Lucius raised a brow. "Yes."

"But shouldn't they be like … twenty years expired by now?"

Lucius narrowed his eyes at his son. "No, and in fact, they expire in only a few months." He scowled. "Stop making that face."

"I'm trying."

Exhaling, Lucius turned and picked up his walking step. "I'll see you in the morning, son."

That evening, Ginny Weasley stood in front of the mirror in Draco's room, fingers sifting through her hair as she looked over her reflection. Candles burned in their sconces, and the radio played a tune that made her smile. Still, something about Ginny's reflection made her feel odd. Reaching up, she brushed her fingers over the necklace Percy had given her, the 'W'. It was, in many ways, one of the only things she had to remind her that she was a Weasley; and yet she wanted to take it off.
Something inside of her wanted it removed.

Ginny's first thought, as her fingers brushed the clasp and slipped it off, was that it was just a silly necklace, and it really had no sentimental value to her.

*But.*

But, Percy had given it to her for a reason. It had some kind of value, some purpose. It was a link to the revolution yet unseen, perhaps unstarted, but still there. Percy hadn't explained, but Ginny knew that was why he had given it to her. He told her to keep it on at all times, but what did it mean, really?

Was this necklace really a link to the Order of the Phoenix? To Dumbledore's Army? Were those really things anymore, or just memories? Ginny frowned as she observed the small golden W in her palm.

In a flash, Ginny abruptly remembered the weight of the thin chain as it cut into her neck, slicing into her skin and stripping her of oxygen and coherence. Damien had used this necklace against her, and quite suddenly, Ginny didn't want to touch it anymore.

Dashing into her room, Ginny put the 'W' necklace into a small box on her dresser and closed it away. After staring at the box for several seconds, she padded back into Draco's room and picked up the box containing the necklace Narcissa had given her.

"Do you want to wear it?" asked Draco, appearing from behind her. He'd just come from the library, and he set his book aside. At Draco's gentle smile, Ginny relaxed and, after hesitating for only a moment, she handed the necklace to Draco and let him slide it around her neck. Nimble fingers clasped the necklace around Ginny's hair before Draco lightly tugged her long hair out of the chain, reaching around her to settle the fine charm against Ginny's collarbone.

Turning to face him, Ginny reached up to touch the necklace and lifted her eyes to his. "How does it look?"

"Stunning," Draco answered with ease, and Ginny's heart fluttered. She giggled as Draco moved back to the couch and sat against it, tugging Ginny down next to him. However, instead of falling to his side, Ginny shifted and instead slipped one knee to each side of Draco's hips, so that she straddled him.

Shifting her head so that her hair fell back from her shoulders, Ginny tilted her head at him and quirked her lips at Draco's swift physical response to their position.

"I had a very good Christmas," she murmured, dipping her head so that her face lowered to his. To say that Ginny was enjoying her spot was quite an understatement. It thrilled her to look down to Draco, power and desire building into an exhilarating confidence; it was a sensation which drove Ginny to reach down and drag her hands leisurely down Draco's front, dipping past his navel. Her fingertips pressed at his undershirt, which he wore in lieu of robes, and Ginny curled her fingers to apply just enough pressure that Draco could feel every digit as it traced him.

Just before Ginny's hands reached the waistband of Draco's pants, he reached with his own hand and curled his fingers there, stopping her, making Ginny pause and look to him in surprise.

"Wait," Draco murmured before grimacing. "As much as I truly… hate myself for stopping you – and rest assured, I do – I need to give you this first." Holding Ginny in place with one arm, Draco leaned over and picked up a small bag, from which he produced a bottle containing a purple liquid.
"Is that a contraceptive potion?" asked Ginny in surprise. "Oh, good thinking!" She paused. "Did you go and buy that at the apothecary?" she asked incredulously, snickering at the idea of Draco buying such a thing.

"Ah, no," Draco said, looking much aggrieved, "Worse. I obtained this through a very uncomfortable conversation with my father."

"Oh, Merlin," Ginny fell into a fit of giggles and stifled herself in Draco's shoulder before she managed to breathe normally again. "Great. Splendid."

"So," said Draco, making a face, "you better drink this stuff and make it worth my considerable pain."

Ginny took the bottle and studied it. "Do I drink the whole thing? Or just like – "

"How the hell should I know?"

"Huh," Ginny observed the bottle, brows furrowed. "Man, seems like this is something we ought to have learned in school, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes," said Draco with an eyeroll, "because there is nothing I would have loved more as a fourth year than to have Severus Snape explain contraceptive potions to me, the practical application of which I'm sure he had zero experience with."

"Oh, here are the instructions!" piped up Ginny, examining a label on the bottom. "Take one teaspoon a day with food. Well, see there. That isn't so hard."

"Speak for yourself."

"Too bad I don't have any teaspoons on me," said Ginny, before upturning the bottle and taking a swig. "Bloody hell! This tastes awful!"

"Well, hopefully, it's expired."

Ginny corked the bottle and tossed it back into the bag. "I hope you can't overdose on that stuff, because that was WAY more than a teaspoon."

"Bloody hell," Draco dragged his hand down his face, to which Ginny grinned and leaned down, tugging away his hand so she could lower her lips to his. This made Draco quite forget his amused exasperation, and he reached around her, taking both hands and using them to tug Ginny forward until her hips were flush against his.

This finally silenced Ginny, her lips parted and her eyes dancing.

What an amazing wizard this was, Ginny thought, holding her with a wonderfully firm grip and kissing her breathless. In response to Draco's grip, Ginny rolled her hips against his in an instinctive bid to satisfy the craving that had been building inside her all day. This caused Draco to encircle her fully with his arms and, in one powerful motion, he pushed them both up from the couch and carried Ginny to the bed.

Within just a few minutes, only the little silver necklace hanging against Ginny's collarbone remained to cover her body.

The following morning, Draco rose and dressed, ready to go to Diagon Alley with his father. Ginny
was still in bed, but she was awake, watching Draco as he tugged on his robes.

"Are you sure you don't want me to take you and drop you off at your brother's store?" asked Draco, leaning over her. "I can."

"No, it's alright," said Ginny, content to watch him. "Go and have fun with your father. You've been missing him."

Draco scoffed. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to," Ginny said with a smile. At this, Draco gave her a pleased look and sat on the edge of the bed so he could lean over her and give her a kiss.

"Alright then," he murmured. "Enjoy your day with my mother." He smirked at Ginny's wince before rising, brushing his fingers over hers one more time before he gave her one last look and departed.

A few minutes later, Draco left the house with Lucius and the two went to Diagon Alley. Draco wasn't sure what he expected from the day, but as it turned out, it was quite a relaxed time. He and Lucius went on a few errands, including a trip to Gringotts. Draco took Lucius by George's store and proudly showed him how well the store was doing, with the Malfoys' endorsement. Lucius was pleased, and he even had a short conversation with George Weasley, congratulating him on his work.

After that, Draco and Lucius had lunch at an elegant café, and for the first time in ages, they simply talked. Draco didn't tell him any sordid details about Ginny, but he did talk about Christmas at the Weasleys', and about flying and chess and reading and Ginny's various art projects. He told Lucius about all his work on the Malfoy estate, and he preened when Lucius gave his mild but genuine praise.

Lucius reminded Draco of Narcissa's upcoming birthday, which was in February, and he reminded Draco to get her something special for it. He also talked very briefly of Andromeda, stating that it was his hope that she would find a new pureblood husband that might be acceptable. Since all the Muggleborns were now gone, Draco figured that shouldn't be too hard for her to accomplish.

Together, the two wizards left the café after lunch and strolled up and down the bustling streets. Draco was happy to see people recognizing them and, more often than not, approval was back in their faces. The family's reputation had suffered greatly during the second war, but the Malfoys were gradually regaining respect.

This, thought Draco, was a very good thing, and he hoped that Ginny felt the same way.

All in all, it was a wonderful day, although Draco wasn't sure why Lucius had invited him along, because even when everything was said and done, there was no real purpose for his being there. However, Draco quickly marked the day in his mind as one of his happiest in years, so he didn't think too much on Lucius' reasoning.

That evening, Draco and Lucius returned to Malfoy Manor to find Narcissa and Ginny together in the parlor, and they were sewing, to Draco's great shock. However, just when Draco thought Ginny had been replaced by an imposter, she turned her embroidery hoop to show the men her work, grinning devilishly.

In lovely elegant script, outlined in flowers, Ginny's hoop read: WANKER.
"Ahem!" said Narcissa, trying to peer at Ginny's work. "Are you done yet?"

"No, no – not yet, just – a little while longer – "

"Well, do hurry. Dinner is soon."

"Oh, don't worry. This will be my best work yet."

Lucius looked at Draco, as if to say – this is it. This is the woman you are stuck with. But Draco only smiled.

The family had a nice dinner together, Ginny included, and afterwards they all retired to their rooms for the evening. Night fell in earnest, and the Malfoy Manor grew quiet and still.

At an hour just after midnight, Lucius Malfoy rose from his bed, leaving a sleeping Narcissa behind with a soft kiss to her temple. Then he put on his robes carefully, left his briefcase behind, picked up his walking cane and departed the room with every effort at silence.

Lucius then came to Draco's room, where he listened carefully before pressing open the door just enough to edge around the corner and look to Draco's bed. There, he saw his son fast asleep, with the fire dwindling in the fireplace and Ginny Weasley tucked into his arms, buried in blankets and pillows at Draco's side. She, too, was deeply asleep, oblivious to Lucius. He looked to them for only a few seconds before leaving, closing the door quietly behind him.

As he came to the entrance of the manor, Lucius paused. "Bleaker."

The house-elf appeared in the dimly lit foyer. "Yes, Master Malfoy?"

Lucius swallowed. Then, with great difficulty, he told the elf, "Watch over my son."

Bleaker tilted his head. "Always, sir."

Satisfied, Lucius gave the elf a sharp nod and then opened the door, walking out, out into the night, until he disapparated into the air, leaving no hint that he had ever been there at all.
Author's Note: Hey guys! Thanks as always for all your responses and encouragement! Just think… only a few chapters left! Surely I can wrap all this up by then, right? Surely I don't have an entire additional story planned to finish this tale? Hm. Well, I guess you'll just have to wait and see…

Outside the windows of the train car, hills and valleys rolled by in a constant moving landscape, all of which was outlined in the orange of a setting sun. The effect of the train's speed made them look like they were on fire.

The compartment door opened, and Blaise Zabini appeared, looking as haughty and annoyed as usual. However, before anyone could question him on his whereabouts for the last hour, Blaise turned his attention to the compartment door.

"What's wrong with this thing?" Blaise said with a scowl, repeatedly doing his best to shut the door, but something was jammed and it refused to close. After a great deal of bustling, the door suddenly flew open and Blaise landed unceremoniously in Goyle's lap, causing the two to flounder on top of each other rather ungracefully, much to Draco's amusement. Finally, Goyle shoved the skinnier wizard off of him, shut the door, and then resettled in his seat as Blaise straightened his robes with a huff.

Draco rolled his eyes and relaxed into Pansy's lap again. Idiots.

"So, Zabini," he said dispassionately, "What did Slughorn want?"

"Just trying to make up to well-connected people," said Blaise, obviously still annoyed at the door mishap. "Not that he managed to find many."

Draco's brows furrowed. That old bastard Slughorn wanted well-connected people? And he hadn't bothered to call him, Draco Lucius Malfoy, to his little get together? Draco's father had been one of Slughorn's favorites!

"Who else had he invited?" Draco asked sharply.

Blaise glossed over a few people Draco didn't care about. And then, of course – "Longbottom, Potter, and that Weasley girl," finished Blaise with a haughty pinch of his features.

Draco shot up, not caring that he'd knocked Pansy's hand away. Her limited use as a source of comfort and pampered attention was pretty low on Draco's list of priorities. His pride, however, remained always close to the top.

"He invited Longbottom?" asked Draco. "What's Longbottom got to interest Slughorn?" Blaise shrugged in his usual apathetic way, and Draco scowled. "And Potter," he sneered, seething inside as he fell back against Pansy as if she were an annoyingly high-pitched pillow and nothing more. "Precious Potter, of course he wanted a look at the Chosen One." Draco scowled heavily. "But that Weasley girl? What's so special about her?"

"A lot of boys like her," cut in Pansy, who wasn't asked to fucking comment. She was watching Draco to gauge his reaction to his bit of information, although it was no secret that the Weasley girl enjoyed a lot of attention from the boys at school. "Even you think she's good-looking, don't you Blaise?" continued Pansy snidely. "And we all know how hard you are to please!"
Blaise was 'hard to please' when it came to females because they were missing a vital body part he was interested in, but Draco was the only one who knew that at the time.

"I wouldn't touch a filthy blood traitor like her whatever she looked like," replied Blaise smoothly, ever the expert in composed replies. Pansy looked to Draco again, who scowled inwardly. He didn't bother to reply in the positive or negative – the truth was, Weasley was far better looking than she had any right to be, but he didn't care. He had more important things to think about.

Such as the absence of his father, gone from home after the catastrophic attack in the Ministry. Potter – precious bloody fucking Potter. He hated him. As the train ride continued, Draco clued in and out of the conversation that followed, but his thoughts repeatedly turned to his mother at home, where she sat alone without Lucius, knowing he was locked in the most horrific place on earth, surrounded by Dementors, shamed publicly.

The Dark Lord could release him any time. So why did he leave him there? Draco and Narcissa had been allowed to visit Lucius once in Azkaban, and the sight of his father—bedraggled, dirty and already visibly damaged from his stay in the prison—had rattled Draco for days.

So much so that Draco had become determined to free his father. And the only way to do this was to please the Dark Lord, to do whatever was asked of him, so their family could retake their prestigious position within the Death Eater circle.

At age sixteen, Draco had taken the Dark Mark to replace his father. And now, even as he rode on to school and felt fury at the uselessness of it all, he dared not let himself think that he would fail in this.

He only had to gain the Dark Lord's favor, as his father had once done, and all would be well.

Blaise doubted him, and Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy were all too stupid to know just how important this was, but Draco knew. He would succeed, and then his family would be together and Lucius—he would be so proud of Draco, so terribly certain of Draco's great prowess and strength.

The fate of the Malfoy legacy—and their lives—were now in Draco’s hands.

As the train came to a stop, the occupants of the compartment rose to change into their robes. That was when a noise—something caused by Goyle's grappling for his trunk—attracted Draco's attention. A flash of something met Draco's eyes, and he lifted his chin, watching the area for a moment. Then he determinedly looked away, even as his eyes narrowed, unseen.

The others left the compartment—even Pansy, after some prompting—but Draco remained, his features now set in severe lines. For a moment, all he could see behind a red haze of anger was the sight of Lucius Malfoy behind the bars of his Azkaban cell. In the next moment, he could only imagine the stupid, arrogant face of The Chosen One.

Potter.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Just as Draco had expected, a heavy thump sounded just before Potter appeared, in a comically crumpled position, limbs frozen, his features forced into an unwavering mask of surprise. A cold fury settled in Draco's chest as he looked upon the face he hated more than anything else. The Chosen One—chosen to ruin everything! Drawing in a deep breath, Draco peered over Potter's helpless form with a dark delight. Oh, how he would love to kill him.

"I thought so," Draco murmured aloud, grey eyes cold. He could feel his muscles tighten with
anger, just seeing Potter's stupid face and knowing he couldn't pitch him off the train. "I heard Goyle's trunk hit you. And I thought I saw something white flash through the air after Zabini came back..." Potter's eyes moved a bit, and Draco leaned over him.

"You didn't hear anything I care about, Potter. But while I've got you here..."

With Lucius' weathered and dirty face in his mind, Draco brought up a foot and stamped as hard as he could on Potter's defenseless face. A snap sounded, and Draco knew he'd broken Potter's nose. Pity it wasn't his fucking neck.

"That's from my father," he hissed furiously to the immobilized wizard.

It took everything in Draco's self-control not to pummel Potter with his bare fists. How gruesome would Draco's death be, he wondered, if the Dark Lord found out he killed Potter himself? At that moment, Draco felt it might be worth it.

Still, he drew himself away with great reluctance, tossed the invisibility cloak back over Potter, and straightened.

"See you around, Potter... or not."

And then, taking great care to crush Potter's motionless fingers with his shoes as he passed, Draco left the compartment and closed the door behind him.

Early morning light filtered into Draco's bedroom, pressing against Ginny's closed eyes until she opened them with a yawn and stretched leisurely against the cool silk sheets. Her gaze first fell on the window, where a lovely morning waited for them, made brighter by the snow that still blanketed the outdoors. Ginny couldn't wait for the snow to finally go away. As excited as she'd been when it arrived, she was over it now.

Smiling at the thought of a spring to look forward to, Ginny turned on her side and pressed her cheek further into her pillow. Just a few inches away, Draco slept on, oblivious to her (no doubt dopey) smile as it turned in his direction. Ginny didn't often wake up before Draco, so it was rare to see him relaxed in sleep.

Ginny was glad he'd spent the day before with his father. Draco admired the man beyond measure, and even though Ginny certainly didn't plan on favoring Lucius any time soon, she was glad the outing had made Draco so happy. He'd come back home looking positively jubilant, and when they'd gone to bed, he'd held her close and done his best to relay the events of the day to her without showing just how pleased he was with all of it. For whatever reason, Draco didn't like sharing things that made him happy, as if he thought the reveal of any source of joy was tantamount to dangling live bait over a waiting dragon's jaws.

But Draco was getting there, bit by bit, more and more open with Ginny every day. It was a glorious feeling.

Reaching over, Ginny traced along Draco's temple as gently as she could, because he would wake up at a feather drop. It worked; Draco remained asleep, none the wiser to Ginny's perusal. That is, until an owl tapped at the window with a letter clamped in its beak.

"Oh, damn," muttered Ginny, put out that she couldn't watch Draco sleep anymore, because of course, he awoke instantly at the sound of the bird. Blinking dazedly, Draco squinted at Ginny and then grumbled something, turning back into the cushions. Snickering, Ginny tossed off the covers.
"Oh, no, don't rush," she said sarcastically, climbing out of the bed and retrieving the letter before she hopped back into the warmth of the covers. Draco responded by burying his face under his pillows and reaching out with one arm to hook around Ginny's waist as she sat up in the bed and opened the letter.

"It's addressed to both of us," she added after she'd ripped open the paper rather ungracefully. "Oh! It's an invitation to Blaise and Gabrielle's wedding. Look."

She shifted to show Draco, who peered between two pillows, looking unimpressed.

"I guess they decided to go through with it," Ginny said, frowning a little. "I hope they'll be okay. It's bloody awful that they're being forced to go through with this."

Apparently deciding that Ginny would not allow him to go back to sleep, Draco emerged from his pillows and sat up just a little, grunting and letting his head fall against her arm as he looked over the invitation. "They could both do much worse," he commented finally.

"Oh, so you can speak," Ginny grinned, tossing the invitation aside to the table. "And yeah, I guess. Still. Just seems odd, you know." She resettled into the bed with Draco, who had steadfastly kept his arm around her and used it to tug her closer still. "Marrying someone you barely know, I mean."

"It has its purposes," said Draco, looking over her face. "Arranged marriages, I mean."

"Yeah, but," Ginny made a face. "Are they expected to – I mean, you know, have sex and everything? As strangers?"

"Well, I mean, eventually, yeah."

"Gross," said Ginny flatly. "If someone forced me to marry a total stranger, I'd kick him in the kidney before I let him have his way with me." She said this even as she drew her fingertip along Draco's bare collarbone. He said nothing, but she caught a quick glimpse of something in his gaze before Draco averted his eyes and brought up a hand, wrapping his fingers around hers. Then he kissed her fingertips, and Ginny's features softened into a smile and a pretty pink flush.

Shifting forward, Ginny pressed back a few locks of Draco's platinum hair before she leaned down to kiss him, every motion gentle and earnest. Strong arms moved around Ginny's torso and pulled her against his bare chest, making Ginny's toes curl with delight.

Unfortunately, before things could progress any further, the distinctive pop! of a house-elf sounded in the room.

"Ah – Eh – Master Malfoy."

Draco froze, growling when he recognized Bleaker's timid voice. "Bleaker," Draco said, shifting to look past the giggling Ginny on top of him. "I swear, I am going to set you on fire if you don't get out of here."

"Apologies, Master Malfoy, but your mother needs you in the parlor right now."

"What?" Draco groaned, letting his head fall back on the pillow as Ginny snickered. "Why? What does she want?"

Bleaker hesitated. "Sir," he said with large glassy eyes trained on the floor. "You are needed in the parlor. It is most urgent."
This time, both Ginny and Draco sat up in the bed to look at the house-elf, amusement faded from Ginny's features. "Why?" asked Draco again, this time more sharply. "What's going on?"

Bleaker looked up at both of them and frowned deeply, his worn features more morose than Ginny had ever seen them. "Mistress Malfoy needs you, sir. Quite urgently, sir." And then Bleaker disappeared.

Ginny and Draco looked at each other for only a moment before they both hurried out of the bed and pulled on their robes. However, neither of them voiced any specific concerns, as if they were both preparing to laugh off their anxiety later, having been worked up over nothing.

Together, Ginny and Draco left the room and moved down the hallway until they rounded the tall square doorway to the room that had held their Christmas only days before. Draco halted upon entering, and Ginny froze behind him.

There on the lounge, her posture more agonized than seated, was Narcissa. The normally poised witch was sobbing, her spine curled over her lap and her shaky white hands cradling her miserable features. Behind her stood two faces which struck further fear in Ginny's heart – Bellatrix, on one side of Narcissa, patting her back without any real look of sympathy. And on the other side of Narcissa, equally unmoved in his attempts at concern, was Damien.

Narcissa wept on the couch, her knees trembling even though she was seated and they had no weight to support. Both Bellatrix and Damien stood tall, however, looking each very much like the embodiment of Death immortalized in the haunting art of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard.*

"What's going on here?" asked Draco sharply.

As Ginny watched, Damien stepped forward, the very caricature of compassion. "My dear cousin," he said, folding his hands demurely in front of him. "I am afraid something quite terrible has happened." At this, Damien looked to Ginny, and she read clearly the amusement deep in the pit of his eyes.

"For you see," said Damien, looking back to Draco, "it would seem that your father, Lucius Malfoy, has … died."

Fear struck Ginny's chest and pushed back her shoulders under her spine stood straight. Then she quickly looked to Draco, whose own features fell back into a set of hard edges. Stiffly, Draco said, "What are you talking about?" Then he looked to Narcissa.

"Mother?"

But Narcissa couldn't speak, even though she tried. Each time she attempted even a single word, she dissolved into tears again, a reaction that seemed to double in intensity every time she looked at Draco. It must have been Lucius she saw there, thought Ginny abstractly, unable to force herself to react. Meanwhile, Bellatrix patted Narcissa's shoulder in a laughable attempt at comfort.

"There, there," Bellatrix crooned to her sobbing sister, even as she looked to Ginny with her dark eyes twinkling.

Draco was speaking again.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" he said lowly to Damien. "How could my father have – "

"Apparently," interrupted Damien smoothly, "he's been quite sick for a while. Hid it from you all out of concern for your well-being, I suppose. Didn't want you to worry…" Damien sighed, then,
in the state of someone who'd just read a tragic article in the paper and then tsk'ed to the person next to them, as if to say – *Oh, but the state of the world is something, isn't it?*

"He checked himself into St. Mungo's last night," Damien continued. "But unfortunately, the illness was just too much for him, and he passed early this morning."

"You're lying," hissed Draco as soon as Damien finished, but this time, Narcissa managed to speak.

"It's true, Draco. I saw his body this morning," she managed before falling into sobs again. Ginny blinked rapidly, only just now realizing she was crying. Her tears weren't for Lucius, per se – there had been no love lost there. But Narcissa's misery was palpable, and as Ginny turned to look at Draco, who was rapidly doing his best not to show even a hint of despair, she felt very sure her newly repaired heart was breaking in two.

"I need to see him," Draco said at last, sounding very flat. "I need to go to St. Mungo's."

Stepping forward, Draco waved off Bellatrix from Narcissa with a glare and then put his arm around his mother, drawing the grieving woman up from the lounge. "Come on, Mother. I need you to go with me, alright?" His tone was gentler, but supported mainly by a rigid disbelief that saved him from the same fate as his mother. Ginny could only watch from her spot, trembling, as Draco prepared to leave and then finally looked to her, as if suddenly remembering she was there.

"Family only, I'm afraid," cut in Bellatrix, slinking around Narcissa and petting some hair away from her sister's wet cheeks. Her eyes flashed in Ginny's direction, and Draco's jaw tightened. Still, Ginny felt he was barely seeing her when he turned to her.

"Ginny," he started, but she shook her head at him.

"It's okay, go," she whispered, taking his hand for a moment and squeezing it. "I'll keep Bleaker with me." Draco looked to her for a moment, but recognition barely passed over his features. Then he simply nodded and stepped back, taking his mother's arm again.

Fortunately, Bellatrix and Damien moved out of the room with them, but not before they each paused and gave Ginny a brazen, amused appraisal.

Then they were gone.

Ginny wandered into Draco's room in a haze of disbelief. Behind her, Bleaker pattered along, looking more miserable than she'd ever seen him. He even sighed once, as if he could not think of any other way to convey his unhappiness. Together, Ginny and Bleaker sat in the room and waited for Draco to return.

The minutes ticked by, turning to hours. Outside, the sun – unfairly bright and unsuited for Ginny's black thoughts – shifted spots, moving slowly and lazily across the sky and taking the shadows with it, so Ginny had no choice but to watch them as they shifted.

Finally, Ginny went back to the bed and did her best to sleep, ready for Draco's return and terrified of what he was going through.

As she slept, fitful and uncomfortable without Draco at her side, Ginny dreamed.

The dream started in the courtyard, just outside the Malfoy Manor. It was snowing, looking very much like it had the morning of Christmas, with a wide circle of untouched snow all around her. In the dream, Ginny looked down at her feet and wondered absently how she had gotten to that point,
because she could not see her own footprints in the snow, no matter how much she looked.

Surely she must have walked to this exact place, but where she'd come from, Ginny simply couldn't be sure. If she'd left a trail at all, the falling snow had covered each and every imprint she'd left behind. Now she was left with no path to retrace and no idea of where to go from there.

Suddenly, she heard a voice. Looking up, Ginny saw – to her great delight – Percy, her brother, standing nearby. The state of the dream placed everything in Ginny's vision inside a hazy globe, giving it a surreal edge, but Percy was there in perfect clarity, standing at the entrance of a hedge maze. The tall green edges were topped with snow and it made them all look like rows and rows of tall standing cakes.

After getting Ginny's attention with a wave of his hand, Percy's dream-self gestured for her to follow. Then he turned and walked into the maze. Desperate to follow him, Ginny hurried in that direction, stomping through the snow, which seemed to grab at her ankles in an effort to keep her still. She pushed on, though, and soon reached the opening of the maze. She wasn't sure where Percy was – she couldn't see him – but she saw his tracks in the snow, and so she followed them.

Ginny pushed on and on, only spotting Percy on the rare occasion, just before he darted around another corner or seemingly vanished at a hedge wall. But Ginny was determined, and she followed each track in the snow with unparalleled diligence. After what seemed like an eternity, Ginny turned a corner and saw Percy standing just near what appeared to be a dead end.

She called his name, but he didn't respond. He simply watched her.

So Ginny hurried forward, calling his name again. Soon, she was running, hands outstretched to grab him before he could vanish again. This must be the end of the maze, thought the dream Ginny. It must be.

But when Ginny finally reached the spot where Percy was standing, he vanished. Bewildered and suddenly ready to cry in anger, Ginny whirled in her spot and called out for him. This time, when she looked, there were no tracks. The snow had covered them. There was nothing left to follow. Only this dead end, empty.

Closing her eyes, Ginny cried out in frustration. Then she heard Percy's voice, calling out gently for her to look. So she did.

And then she screamed, screamed in terror and anguish this time, because what had been an empty square of snow only seconds before was now a mass grave of bloodied, broken and bent bodies, all of whom had once been her friends and family. The snow was no longer snow, but blood-filled ice, and when Ginny cried out and staged backwards, she fell backwards, only to brace herself on the lifeless and bloody face of her own mother. When she saw it, Ginny pitched herself forward and screamed.

And then she awoke.

Heaving in the bed she shared with Draco, Ginny's teary gaze took in her surroundings – the familiar room, the bed wrapped around her, the fireplace burning nearby.

Her eyes landed on the two chairs near the fireplace, and it was there Ginny saw Draco. A quick glance at the window told her she'd been asleep for hours. Hurrying out of the bed, Ginny pushed away her own fearful dream and approached Draco where he sat in his chair, staring at the fire. A drink from the bar sat near his hand, but the ice was melted and the liquid high, just near the rim.
"Draco," Ginny whispered hoarsely, edging around his chair. "How long have you been back? Why didn't you wake me?" When Draco's eyes flickered, but he didn't answer, Ginny sank into the chair next to his and bit her lip.

"Draco?"

Finally, Draco closed his eyes for a moment and inhaled deeply. Without looking at her, he said, "It was him. I saw him." Draco's grey eyes lifted to Ginny's. "He's really dead."

Ginny felt her chest cave inward, as if the air she could no longer force into it had caused it to collapse. "I'm sorry," she whispered, and she meant it. "I'm so sorry, Draco." Her fingers squeezed the arm of the chair.

"You were right," he murmured after a few seconds of silence. "When you said he looked sick. I refused to believe it, but... he was really ill."

Ginny frowned deeply. She had said that, yes, but something needled in her chest, an unsatisfied bout of suspicion. The way Bellatrix and Damien had looked... But she couldn't speak up, because Draco was talking again.

"Would you believe," Draco said at last, "that I was once afraid of flying?"

Ginny's brows furrowed.

"It's true," he murmured, looking directly at the flames as they popped in the stone hearth. "I got my first broom when I was six years old, you know." He laughed a little, a strangely empty sound. "I had been asking for it for months, but my mother didn't want me to have one." He looked over at Ginny. "She thought it was too dangerous, and I was too young. But I insisted."

Draco's eyes shifted back to the fire. "So my father went and got me one. Top of the line, of course, nothing but the best," he said, with a ghost of a real smirk. "But when he brought it home, I was – terrified, for some reason. I wouldn't go anywhere near it." Draco made a soft sound and shook his head, looking down at his lap. "I don't know why. Children are odd like that, I suppose."

His eyes lifted to the ceiling. "Anyway, I'm sure my father was annoyed. After all, I'd been bothering him for months about this thing, and now he'd gone and picked one out for me, and I wouldn't have anything to do with it. Honestly, if I'd been him, I probably would have just returned it and said to hell with the whole thing." A heavy pause followed. "But that's not what my father did."

"Instead," Draco continued, "Father took me outside into the courtyard, just beyond the garden, and he – he placed the broom on the grass between us, so we could sit, one of us on either side." Draco smiled a little at the fire. "And then we sat on the grass there, together, and talked about all the sorts of things you can only see from the sky."

Draco's brows furrowed, and he stared intensely at the fire.

"And we talked about all the places you can only go on a broomstick, and how different the world looks from up there. We talked about – about all the creatures that can fly and what they must do there, in the clouds. And we talked about how you can only see it if you're up there with them." Draco's features in something of a strange smile. "We must have talked for hours," said Draco, as if in awe.

"And by the time we were done," his voice faded to a whisper, "I had completely forgotten my fear."
Draco fell silent, and for a moment, nothing happened.

Then, as if his resolve simply collapsed all at once, Draco curled forward over his knees and let out a heart-wrenching sob, a great noise of remarkable despair. Ginny shot up from her spot and fell into the chair with him, her arms jumping around Draco as she tugged him against her and pressed her cheek over the top of his head.

"I'm so sorry," Ginny whispered again through her own tears, for she knew the bone shattering misery that took Draco then, even as he fell into her arms without a single moment's care for dignity or appearance, without hesitation or even coherence. She could feel his every poor attempt at an inhale, his every tremble.

There was little she could do but hold him, sweeping her hands through his hair and whispering to him. As is the way with true anguish, the compounding hours did nothing to dissuade Draco's misery. Instead, it was only the weakness of his body that finally took him from tears to sleep.

But Ginny stayed awake, holding him all the while.

Somehow, through the haze of the next few days, a funeral was planned.

If Lucius' sudden illness was a shock to anyone, they dared not show it. Instead, sympathy was given, in the resolute and unemotional manner of the magical elite. In typical custom, many people chose to show their condolences by commenting on Lucius' impress political prowess or the aristocratic integrity of his family. It was all so ridiculously amiss in in the recognition of a life lost, but Ginny could find no real way to comment.

On the day of the funeral, Draco, Ginny and Narcissa left the Malfoy Manor in the finest mourning robes England had to offer. All of magical Great Britain waited on them, gathered together in a terrifyingly magnificent building Ginny had only ever heard of. Even without the dour event of a funeral taking place within its halls, the haunting location – home to bodies upon bodies of lives long lost – gave every air of death. Each high-arched doorway came to a point too sharp for Ginny's comfort, positively lethal in its manner. The stones were darker than those of Hogwarts, and many had permanent shadows cast along them, ashy silhouettes that had somehow become engraved in each of the walls. The strange building was hundreds of years old, Ginny's father had told her once.

The Muggles, Arthur had told her once with great fascination, they call it Durham Cathedral.

But to the magical community of Great Britain, the magnificent building was but a passageway. For beneath it, along each of the ancient Norman designed halls, were great lines of witch and wizard tombs, for this was the ceremonial epicenter for commemorating the most elite of all lives, for even the presentation of death was an effort at maintaining only the best.

Lucius was to be buried with over ten centuries of Malfoys back in Wiltshire, on the very land afforded to them by William the Conqueror. But for now, the great ceremony was to be held here, for all to see. It felt like a cruel show, but it was expected, and expectations were everything in this world.

Hundreds of feet below where choirs of Muggles sang, every prominent face in magical society stood at attention, watching as the Dark Lord himself appeared just in front of the casket holding Lucius Malfoy.

Ginny stood at Draco's side, with Narcissa just at his other shoulder. The three stood on the
foresmost row, as befitting the family of the deceased. This put them all uncomfortably near Voldemort, who acted – in his unparalleled arrogance – as the eulogizer.

"Lucius Malfoy," boomed the dark wizard's voice, even as he extended his arms, "was a great and powerful wizard, one to whom I was always so very … reliant upon."

Draco, Narcissa and Ginny stared straightforward. The aforementioned Malfoys did a much better job of hiding their distaste, but the strain was evident in Draco's trembling fingers, which held tightly to Ginny, as if he had no other means for anchoring himself to the ground.

"His presence here will be sorely missed," went on Voldemort, "but his purpose was – " Silence lingered for a moment " … grand and much appreciated. And now, for all our hard work in rebuilding this wonderful new world, we have the next generation…"

The entire room of some two hundred witches and wizards looked to Draco Malfoy's back. He did not flinch or move his gaze, but his hand in Ginny's reacted, squeezing her fingers almost painfully tight. Ginny didn't attempt to remove her hand, though. She could feel his pulse beat in his palm, pounding rapidly even as Lord Voldemort swept over to the grieving family.

First, he looked to Narcissa, giving her a faint nod, as if this gesture alone was enough to pass along his shared sorrow at their tragedy. Narcissa acknowledged him with a more respectful turn of her head, even as her posture screamed for distance and solitude. Then Voldemort looked to Draco and Ginny.

"Ah," he said, showing his teeth in a grimace meant to be a smile, "young Draco. There you are."

As if the two were settled briefly down for a spot of tea, Voldemort reached out and placed a gnarled hand on Draco's shoulder. To have Voldemort so near made Ginny quake with fear and anger, and although the room was packed with witches and wizards, she felt, saw, and soaked in Voldemort's attempt to isolate the three of them, so that his oppressive intentions were painfully clear.

"It is tragic, what happened to your father, so many tasks left undone," went on the Dark Lord, even as Draco struggled to meet his gaze. "I suppose it will be up to you to carry on in his place." Serpentine eyes shifted to Ginny. "Wonderful that you have such strong… support." The hand on Draco's arm squeezed. "You will need it, now… more than ever," finished Voldemort, leaning closer as he murmured the last words.

Finally, he released Draco and took his place at the front of the ceremony again.

"Let us never forget," Voldemort called out to the room, which was silent and heavy, "how our loved ones lived… " The Dark Lord's eyes scanned the room of pale and uncertain faces.

"Or how they died," Voldemort finished with another show of teeth.

The funeral concluded with the remaining Malfoys – and Ginny – moving to the front of the cathedral, so they could greet, in turn, every single person who had come to pay their respects to the great Lucius Malfoy. Even for Ginny, it was the most grueling event she'd experienced in quite some time.

Judging by the impressively blank masks Draco and Narcissa wore, it was torture for them as well. Ginny could see, with every glance in their direction, how alike they were. Draco had Lucius' looks, and perhaps legendary ambition, but from Narcissa, Draco had inherited a cavernous pit into which he was known to retreat when the pressures of life became too much for him.
That pit was disguised as indifference, and only in his grip on Ginny's hand was his despair at all evident.

It felt odd to stand next to Draco and accept condolences for Lucius, but Ginny dared not leave Draco's side. Perhaps even more odd was the number of people who treated her much like they treated Draco and Narcissa, as if they were not at all surprised to see her there. They certainly noticed, though, and Ginny felt – with a great deal of discomfort – how their eyes lingered on her, and their whispers grew each time Ginny moved in sync with the Malfoys.

None of Ginny's family was there. This was not the sort of event they were invited to. However, Blaise was present, with one of his sisters and his mother. Theo and Lavender were present as well, absent the baby. They watched the proceedings stoically, and when they came through the line, they offered the customary condolences and moved on.

However, once the ceremony was finished, the elite group retired to a large open room fit for socializing. This was the sort of adjournment that normally followed funerals, the type in which grieved family members usually exchange light-hearted stories about the deceased, or comforted one another with food and smiles. At least, that's what was always done at Weasley family funerals, before the war.

Unfortunately, this was a Malfoy affair, and the magical elite took every opportunity – to Ginny's great disgust – to network and scheme. No doubt every polite conversation happening throughout the crowded room (which currently featured over one hundred and fifty witches and wizards) was filled to the brim with conspiratorial politicians and back alley deals, each trying to speculate on how Lucius Malfoy's death could benefit them.

When the twentieth person had done their best to bring up work or politics or some other manner of disrespectful nonsense to Draco, Ginny rudely excused them and then tugged Draco away from the crowds, over behind a large curtain that stood twenty feet from floor to ceiling.

For the entire evening, Draco had remained stoic and curt, even to Ginny. However, as soon as they were alone, eclipsed by the comforting shadows offered by the curtain, Draco's features crumpled and he swallowed hard, unable to say anything. Tears filled Ginny's eyes again, and the power of her own sorrow struck her against her will. Merlin, she felt like she would do anything to help him now, Ginny thought, even as she gently tugged him to her and swept her hands over his cheeks.

"Just take a moment away from everyone," she whispered tenderly, even as Draco leaned into her as if he were a small child. He didn't speak or even cry, but everything in his posture read of agony.

"I don't know what I would do if you weren't here," he whispered at last in a very small voice.

More tears spilled down Ginny's cheeks, and she hugged Draco to her very tightly. "You'd be fine," she whispered back, trying to sound light. It didn't work, and her voice cracked. "I swear it. You're strong."

Draco didn't say anything else, instead choosing to stand in Ginny's arms and do his best to forget the crowds of people still waiting to speak with him, the newest head of the Malfoy family.

A voice floated to Ginny and Draco from nearby, a snide tone that instantly coated Ginny's heart in anger and fear.

"… acting governor, of course, in place of dear Lucius."

Draco pulled away from Ginny and turned his head in the direction of Damien's voice, his grey
eyes suddenly narrowed. Ginny followed his gaze, and the two moved quietly from their spots to peer at Damien, who stood talking to two other wizards.

"Why bother with the governorship?" asked one of them, Dolohov. He sneered. "You're already deputy headmaster of the school. How can you be one of the governors, too?"

"What real power does a deputy headmaster have, under the headmistress?" asked Damien slyly. "No, no. I think it's better I also occupy one of the twelve seats, as a way of ensuring that Umbridge doesn't do anything too out of step."

Dolohov laughed, as if this were the most brilliant thing anyone had ever thought of. He and the other wizard sauntered off, and Draco stepped forward, moving just out of the shadows of the tall curtain. It was then that Damien noticed him. Although the older wizard kept his unsettling smile, he seemed to sense Draco's considerable anger immediately.

"Dear cousin," Damien began.

"What the hell are you talking about, taking the governor position from my father?" growled Draco lowly. Ginny stood just behind him, her eyes wide. Crowds of people waited on Draco just on the other side of a wall, but he and Damien were just out of sight. "That position goes to me. It's a title passed on directly, or have you forgotten?"

Damien observed Draco coolly. "Well, normally, yes. However, I managed to convince the Ministry that you're simply not… prepared for that sort of responsibility. Especially given the unexpected nature of your father's death… as well as your tender age." Damien's eyes twinkled. "Someone such as myself would be far better suited for such an important job."

"You are not," Draco hissed, advancing on Damien, "taking my father's bloody title from me."

Damien raised a brow. "I believe I already have," he said to Draco in a low murmur. He seemed to take great pleasure in Draco's anger. "After all, your father was actually sacked from this position while Dumbledore was still around, wasn't he? So, really, the governorship is mine to take." Damien gestured to himself. "And I am more than happy to establish myself in the role. Don't worry, Draco."

He met his cousin's gaze. "I'll do the position a great deal more dignity than your father ever did."

Ginny stiffened behind Draco, because rather than looking angry, Draco straightened slowly, to his full height, and looked to Damien with the sort of coldness Ginny had never, not once, seen on his face. When the anger seemed gone from Draco's face, Ginny felt true fear.

"What?" taunted Damien. "Are you going to hex me at your own father's funeral?"

"Draco…" Ginny murmured, but it was too late. A sound like the snapping of a rubber band suddenly echoed throughout the room; it was Draco's fist connecting with Damien's jaw in a hit that sent the other wizard to the floor.

"Draco!" exclaimed Ginny before clamping her hands over her mouth. No one was around to see them, but she didn't think Draco noticed or cared, because in the next instant, he was on top of Damien with his fist raised again. Before Ginny could stop him, Draco had pulled his arm all the way back and smashed his fist into Damien's face again with a loud crack.

Damien let out a very brief shout, but it was cut off by yet another punch, and then he could only manage a groan. "Shit," hissed Ginny in a panic, because she didn't have a wand, and there was no hope of physically prying them apart. 
Draco also seemed to have no intention at all of stopping.

Desperately, Ginny turned and hurried out of the corridor, only to snatch the collar of Theo Nott Jr. as soon as she found him. "What the hell," started Theo as Ginny dragged him – with a bewildered Lavender following – to the curtain, where Draco was relentlessly beating Damien into the cold stone floor.

Theo saw them and gave an amused snort.

"Stop him!" hissed Ginny furiously. Theo raised a brow at Ginny before turning calmly back to Draco and Damien.

"Alright then," he said to Ginny, before flicking his wand. Draco, who had pulled back an arm to hit Damien again, was blasted off the other wizard. He landed a few feet away on the ground just as Blaise and an Asian wizard Ginny didn't know appeared.

"Oh my," said Blaise mildly as he took in the situation.

Damien had collapsed against the floor, his face an unrecognizable mess of blood. A few feet away, Draco pushed himself to his feet and yanked out his wand, but Blaise stepped up and pulled out his own wand, lightning fast.

"Tut tut, Draco. Stay just where you are," Blaise said lightly, but Ginny caught sight of his gaze and she knew why Draco balked. Something in Blaise's seemingly casual demeanor belied a truly dangerous air she had never noticed in the other wizard.

Still, Draco held tight to his wand. "Give me one bloody reason I shouldn't kill that fucking bastard right now," he growled to Blaise, who still had a wand pointed at him.

A pause followed, and Lavender cut in timidly from the side. "Because he's defenseless?"

The three Slytherin boys, plus the unknown Asian wizard, looked over at Lavender with varying degrees of amusement and annoyance. "Ah, no," said Blaise with a chuckle. "No one cares. But rather, the real reason," he turned back to Draco, his eyes growing darker, "is because – obviously – the Dark Lord would kill you as soon as he found out, of course. And do not comfort yourself by thinking it would be a quick death, because we all know it would be very gruesome indeed."

Draco opened his mouth, but Blaise interrupted him.

"And if that isn't enough reason for you to lower your wand, although it certainly should be," continued Blaise coldly, "do take care to consider what would happen to those you are responsible for… if you were to be so stupid." At this, Blaise glanced for a split-second at Ginny, and Draco's jaw tightened considerably.

At last, Draco snatched his arm down and shoved his wand away, though he paced like a caged animal as he did so. Ginny watched, stunned. "There's a smart lad," said Blaise softly, though it was without any tenderness. Turning back to the broken body of Damien, he sighed. "Disgusting."

"I think it's fascinating," said the Asian wizard, and Blaise raised a brow.

"You are far too fascinated by blood, Jean," Blaise told him, before adding to Lavender, "He's a licensed Healer. Very odd."

"I just think it's interesting," said Jean lightly.
Ginny nearly pulled out her hair. "Can we please just get him out of here before someone sees?" she shrieked as quietly as she could. Blaise scoffed.

"Relax, Weasley. You act like you've never had to hide a body before."

Ginny and Lavender exchanged glances, even as Blaise gestured to Jean, who quickly leaned over Damien and began to heal his injuries. Theo stepped up without being prompted and pointed his wand at Damien's head. "Obliviate," he said, before letting Damien's head fall limply back to the floor with a crack.

"I just fixed that!" said Jean, looking annoyed as he repaired Damien's skull again. In a matter of seconds, Damien's face was mostly repaired, the blood was cleared and with a flick of Blaise's wand, Damien's body was unceremoniously shoved against the wall.

Theo stepped up and tossed some half-empty liquor bottles over Damien's limp form, smirking.

"Oh, Damien," said Blaise with a flourish. "You silly drunk, you."

After that, Theo took Lavender's hand and led her away quickly, not speaking another word to any of them. Blaise and Jean quickly herded Ginny and Draco away from Damien, who would no doubt wake up soon with a headache and a foggy understanding of the last hour of his life.

Once they were away, Blaise scowled. "Well, I hope you were pleased with that, Draco," Blaise said, and although his words were light, his features were not. "After all," he continued lowly, "it was incredibly foolish of you to act that way."

Draco narrowed his eyes on Blaise, but the other wizard continued, as if Ginny and Jean weren't there.

"I understand this is a difficult time for you," continued Blaise darkly, "but rest assured, you have a social and political position to maintain, and behaving this way is far beneath you. I daresay, even, that Lucius would be quite disappointed."

Draco's glare became even more heated, but as Blaise approached him, Draco's eyes lowered as he listened spitefully.

"You are the head of the Malfoy family," Blaise told Draco, "and your family has suffered much in the lowering of position in the last few years. If you are to maintain any level of notoriety or power, you must do far better than this. Or else the Dark Lord will have more than words for you. He'll have the end of a wand, ready to dispose of you and your remaining family members at a moment's notice. And do not think that you have many allies, if any, who will rise to speak in your favor."

Blaise cocked a brow at Draco.

"Not against Him. So do take care to remember that you have a reputation to uphold, or else you risk bringing further shame to your family, and by extension, any who choose to associate with you."

Stepping back, Blaise adjusted his robes. "You have a lot of work to do, Draco. And do not think I will step in to help you again." His eyes flickered over Draco's face. "Especially not when the Dark Lord is so near."

"He is always near," managed Draco between clenched teeth.
Blaise looked over Draco's face. "Precisely."

With that, Blaise stepped away from Draco and gestured to Jean, who paused near Draco, looking a bit more sympathetic than Blaise. "I didn't heal him as well as I could have," he told Draco in a French accent much lighter than Fleur's. "So he will still have pain tomorrow, if that makes you feel any better."

Jean left with Blaise then, without waiting for Draco's reply.

That night, Draco took hours to fall asleep.

He sat up in his bed, back against the headboard, with Ginny sleeping at his side. Looking down at her face, Draco unwillingly heard Blaise's voice in his head, the one that warned him of the inevitable results of his failure.

Ginny had done her best to comfort him following the funeral, but she knew from experience that words held little weight in a time like this. Instead, she had curled up at his side, seemingly caught up in her own thoughts, even as her hand smoothed over his bruised knuckles.

No doubt she was unnerved by Draco's attack on Damien, but whatever she thought of the violence, Draco could not bring himself to regret it.

However, neither could he banish Blaise's warnings.

Sinking down further into the bed, Draco at last fell against his pillow and curled Ginny to him, desperate to know that she, at least, was alive and safe. Ginny murmured something sleepily and tucked into Draco's collarbone. He responded by lifting a finger and drawing it along the line of her jaw. Every beat of Draco's heart felt like a rhythmic echo of Blaise's words.

And Blaise was right, Draco knew. Lucius Malfoy's death had left a void, not just in Draco's aching chest or in the Malfoy Manor, lonelier than ever.

Rather, it had also left a gaping vulnerability, a disparity in the security of their lives.

"I will keep you safe," Draco promised Ginny in a whisper she did not hear through her sleep. It was a terrifying promise to make, one which brought fresh tears to Draco's eyes.

Because he knew, deep in his heart, that there was no safety anymore, and Death was always present, even in times of joy, like shadows created by the rays of a warm sunny day.
Chapter 20

Author's Note: Thanks everyone! This chapter was kind of hard to write, so it took me a little while longer. Some build up going on here. However, this is the second to last chapter for this story! Exciting things to come!

This was one of the tombs Ginny's mother had warned her not to enter.

Of course, that only meant that young Ginny was all the more determined to find and enter it. Egypt was truly a remarkable place, and it had the most amazing architecture. Ginny wasn't quite old enough to appreciate it all, not really, but it filled her with a sense of wonder that made her want to learn more.

Some of the ancient pyramids were set up for magical tourists, each guided by a peculiar little creature that looked quite like a floating goblin. They were all very nice, with the most unusual of accents, and Ginny liked them. But as soon as the little creatures were preoccupied, giving historical anecdotes and lengthy facts about each spot the Weasley family visited, Ginny snuck off for the creepier locations.

So cool, thought Ginny as she walked along the sand, each footstep slipping and sliding in a way that felt strange underfoot. The sun tilted into the horizon, bright and orange and glaring in a way it never did in England. Ginny tread along the sand just inside of the great orange sphere, a small shadow at the center of a ring of fire.

Ginny would return to her family in a few minutes, but first she wanted a peek in that tomb her mother wouldn't let her see.

Peering inside, Ginny coughed against some dirt as it rose from the ground. No tours entered here, and the path was not so well traveled. Heart pounding, Ginny ventured inside and peered around. The silence was so strange; with no real cities nearby and nothing but miles of empty sand and sparse villages around them, every tiny shuffle in the dusty tomb sounded magnified in an unbelievable way.

Ginny continued, even as the dusky sky behind her began to fade, replaced by the shadows of the crypt.

Pictures appeared on the wall, etched into the stone with stunning detail, and Ginny brought up a hand to sweep her fingers along them, so she could feel every edge. Her breathing sounded loud, and Ginny sucked in a deep breath so she wasn't so noisy.

Some twenty steps into the crypt, Ginny paused. The heated day had shifted to night and the temperature dropped drastically in the last ten minutes, and suddenly Ginny felt as if her venture was a bad idea.

This is a place of the dead.

The thought struck Ginny suddenly, and she frowned. Just then, a noise sounded behind Ginny, and she whirled to face a pair of glowing eyes. Fear gripped her, and she opened her mouth to scream. Then there was a voice.

"Oh, no, please don't scream," it said, and the floating pair of eyes bounced forward – and revealed themselves to belong to a small serpentine creature, which blinked owlishly at Ginny.
However, it was not the creature who had spoken, but the old man holding it.

Ginny shrieked a little and tumbled backwards. "Who are you?"

"Please don't be afraid," said the old man, a wizard by the looks of him. He looked like nearly every other old wizard Ginny had ever seen – white hair, a long beard, and a pair of spectacles. He was wearing a blue coat and, in the hand not holding strange little creature, a suitcase. He set down the suitcase but held onto the creature, which looked a bit like a bird and snake blended together, blue in color and, although small, very fearsome.

The old wizard stroked the animal as if it were a kitten.

"Do you need some help getting out?" asked the old wizard.

Ginny shook her head. "I know the way. I was just exploring."

"You shouldn't be in here," said the old man patiently, taking a seat on a stone even as his bones cracked. "It's a bit dangerous." He sounded English, and Ginny relaxed a little when she realized he didn't seem threatening. She peered at the animal but didn't come closer.

"Why're you in here if it's dangerous?" she asked, folding her arms.

"I'm working," said the old wizard with a smile. "But it's alright. As long as you're safe." He paused and then shifted the creature. "Would you like to meet him? He's quite nice."

Ginny frowned. "I don't like snakes."

"Oh, he's not a snake," said the man cheerfully. "He's an occamy. Beautiful animals, really. And this one's very friendly. Raised him since he was a hatchling." Ginny stared curiously. This man reminded her of Hagrid, and it made her relax further. Taking a seat on a fallen stone near the man, Ginny peered at the animal.

"Is he your pet?"

"No," said the man. "Just a friend."

Ginny raised a brow. Maybe this old man was a bit loonier than Hagrid. "But look at his sharp beak. And his body – that looks like a serpent. Seems a bit scary."

"If you think this is scary," said the old wizard with a laugh, "you should see how big it can grow! It could swallow you whole!"

Ginny's eyes widened, and the man balked, clearing his throat awkwardly. "Sorry, I mean – really, you've nothing to be afraid of." At Ginny's dubious look, the old wizard shifted the creature in his arms and brought up a fingertip to stroke the animal's head. It seemed to enjoy this, making something like a purring noise.

"You see, there are many creatures – including creatures like us – who look quite scary. And sometimes we see them do scary things, and we feel like our fear is justified." The old wizard looked over at Ginny. "Often times, people try their hardest to confirm their own fears, just so they can avoid something that is daunting or difficult or – just plain frightening."

He set the creature in his lap, where it curled up comfortably. "But that's no way to live. It doesn't help you, nor does it give you courage." He paused. "Instead, it's best to make every use of fear, in order to give it true value. Let it push you to learn more and question everything, always learn,
always adapt." The old wizard waves his hands, looking skyward even though they were in the tomb and there was nothing to be seen but rock.

"And remember," he said, before learning over to Ginny to whisper, "even the gentlest of creatures strikes out when it is hurt."

Ginny's lips quirked.

"But," she said, "you said these things get huge. What if it grows up one day and bites your hand clean off?"

The old man laughed. "He might," the man conceded. Then he rose and offered Ginny a hand. She took it and stood, and the old man led her out of the tomb.

"But as I always say," he said, once they'd stepped out into the desert once more, "worrying means you suffer twice."

Then the old man winked at Ginny once and vanished.

The morning after Lucius' funeral, Ginny awoke to find Draco's side of the bed empty.

Brows furrowed, Ginny sat up and looked around the suite. When she didn't spot him, Ginny slipped out of bed and hurried out, more anxious than she cared to show.

"Draco?"

However, instead of Draco, it was Bleaker who appeared to answer Ginny's call. "Master Malfoy is out on business, Missus Weasley," the elf informed her with wide blinking eyes. "He says to Bleaker to tell you he will be back later this afternoon, and not to worry, because Bleaker will stay with you." The house-elf smiled hopefully, and Ginny forced herself not to show any disappointment.

"Why didn't he tell me?" she asked, trying not to as put out as she felt. Lucius' funeral had only been the day before, and Draco was already doing – whatever it was, work stuff. Ginny frowned and pulled her house robe tighter around her shivering form, feeling silly and awkward in her pajamas and bare feet.

"I believe Master only meant to allow you to continue sleeping," consoled Bleaker, and Ginny managed a small smile and a nod.

"Right," she said, before a noise in the foyer attracted her attention. Peering down the staircase, Ginny spotted one of the other house-elves – a female named Minnie – who was doing her very best to accommodate three snooty looking witches at the front door of the manor.

"Please," said Minnie, "Mistress Malfoy has asked that we do not disturb her – she threatens to – "

"I don't care if Narcissa cuts off your head, you stupid little elf," one of the witches sneered. "We are to meet with her for brunch. If you would only tell her we're here, certainly she would accommodate us."

Ginny appeared behind Minnie and put a hand on the door, barring the women from entering even as they tried to forcibly move past the desperate house-elf.

"Who're you?" asked Ginny flatly, as if these women were trespassing in her personal castle.
All three of the finely dressed witches looked to Ginny in surprise. Then the one in the center – a fat lady Ginny recognized as Avery's wife – cleared her throat pointedly. "We are here to see Narcissa. We've had this brunch scheduled for weeks."

"So?" replied Ginny. "Her husband was buried yesterday. She probably doesn't want to have brunch."

"Oh, and I suppose a blood traitor like you speaks for Narcissa Malfoy now?" asked Lady Avery. The other two ladies tittered meanly, and Ginny screwed up her face in her ugliest mock smile.

"You know what? I'll go and find Narcissa for you. Until then, you can wait here."

One of the women frowned. "But it looks as though it might rain – "

"Minnie, don't let them in here," Ginny told the elf, who nodded resolutely even as the witches glowered at Ginny's retreating back. Ginny left the door and stepped down the corridor. Perhaps Narcissa had instructed the house-elves not to bother her, but she hadn't said anything like that to Ginny, not that Ginny would have done as she was told anyway.

After several minutes of searching, Ginny finally discovered Narcissa sitting in the piano room. However, Ginny did not immediately enter; instead, she paused at the doorway and watched in silence as Narcissa sat on the small bench in front of a beautiful grand piano. Every few seconds, Narcissa would raise her hands as if to play. Her fingers would glide on the white and black keys, and she would push back her shoulders as if poised to begin a piece.

Then Narcissa's shoulders would slump again, her features would crumple, and she'd pull her hands away to set them demurely in her lap.

Ginny slipped into the room. It took Narcissa a moment to notice her, but when she did, she simply blinked at Ginny and then turned her gaze back to the piano keys.

"Do you play?" asked Ginny, much more subdued than she'd been with the women at the door. Narcissa smiled. It was the most miserable expression Ginny had ever seen.

"Lucius played," Narcissa said at last.

Ginny lowered her eyes, and the two women lingered in silence. Finally, Ginny sucked in a deep breath. "There's some ladies at the door. Avery's pet cow is one of them." When Narcissa said nothing, Ginny came to stand next to the piano. "They say they're supposed to have brunch with you."

The elder witch sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. "I'd forgotten," she said quietly, her features resigned. "I suppose I should go and greet them."

"Do you want to?" asked Ginny, brows furrowed. "I mean, you're in mourning. It's okay to tell them to buzz off, you know."

Narcissa gave a small shake of her head. "It's not proper," she murmured, fussing with her robes. "If I refused them, there would be talk."

"Talk about what?" countered Ginny. "That you're sad and you don't want to have to deal with people for a few days?"

"It simply isn't done that way," Narcissa informed her stoically. "I must receive them."
"Narcissa." Ginny rounded the piano and sat heavily on the bench next to her. "Are these women your friends?"

"Yes," said Narcissa, but her twisted expression made Ginny feel as if this wasn't the real answer she'd been looking for, so she tried another question.

"Will they make you feel better if you talk to them?"

Narcissa stared. "No," she answered after a heavy pause.

"Alright, then they don't need to be here," concluded Ginny, but Narcissa shook her head.

"It wouldn't be proper to send them away – "

"Well, then let me do it," said Ginny, standing. "No one expects me to be proper anyhow, right?" Narcissa's lips parted, as if to argue, but then she seemed to sense the logic of Ginny's argument, as well as, perhaps, the sincere sentiment.

"No," Narcissa agreed, "I suppose they wouldn't."

The two exchanged looks of understanding. Then Ginny departed, leaving the room and moving back down to the entryway, where the three witches waited impatiently at the doorway of the manor.

"Well?" snipped one. "Did you find Narcissa?"

"Oh, no," said Ginny with a shrug, "I forgot and went to the loo instead. Guess you'll just have to come back another day. Bye!" Then she shut the door in their faces.

Turning back to go to her room, Ginny caught Narcissa peering around the corner of the doorway. When the door was shut and the witches were gone, her pretty features relaxed a bit and she edged out into the hallway.

"Some tea?" Narcissa offered Ginny stiffly, unable to look the younger witch in the face. After a moment of thoughtful speculation, Ginny gave a firm nod.

"Yeah," she said quietly, thinking back to her empty room. "That sounds nice."

Draco didn't return until nearly dinner time, and when he finally arrived, he seemed to have little to say.

"I was just handling some things at the Ministry," he told Ginny after, not looking at her as he took off his cloak. Ginny frowned.

"You could've woken me," she said, folding her arms over her chest in a self-conscious manner. "I was worried."

At this, Draco looked over at her as if really noticing her for the first time since he'd arrived back at the manor. A moment later, he touched Ginny's arms and turned her to him.

"I'm sorry," Draco told her sincerely. "But in my defense…" He paused. "… you are very dangerous to awaken." He put a hand to his own chest. "I was acting in self-defense," he teased gently, and Ginny rolled her eyes at him but relaxed a little.

"Alright then," she said, shrugging one shoulder as she curled her fingers in the front of his robes.
"But still. I missed you." Ginny watched as Draco's features softened and he leaned his head close to hers, so that their foreheads brushed.

"I would rather be here with you," he told her in a whisper, heartbreakingly sincere. "I promise."

Reaching up a fingertip, Ginny gently nudged Draco's chin until their lips brushed. "Then be here with me," she commanded with a soft smile. This Draco seemed more than willing to do, and soon their mouths were locked together and Draco's arms were around her, apparently unwilling to let go.

Each night with Draco was exhilarating, but that evening, as Draco's fingers raked down Ginny's bare arms and his lips moved over the skin of her neck, breasts and stomach, something in his hold trembled. He felt desperate to keep her there, it seemed to Ginny, or anxious that she might up and vanish.

Before they fell asleep, Ginny turned into him and placed her cheek at the joint where his chest met his shoulder, in the small dip of skin that seemed so perfect for her to press.

"Are you alright?" she whispered.

"I'm getting there," Draco told her after a pause. Sweeping back her hair from her face, he leaned over and pressed a remarkably tender kiss to her lips. The look of adoration in Draco's features took Ginny's breath away, and her heart pounded.

"I'm here if you need me," she reminded him, pulling her fingers over his.

A wandering hand made a slow trail up Ginny's spine. "There is no if," Draco corrected very softly. Ginny looked up over his face, but Draco simply tucked against Ginny and closed his eyes to sleep. After watching over him for a few minutes, Ginny forced herself to relax and fell asleep.

Despite Draco's tenderness at home, Ginny felt as if each day was becoming more and more tense. Rather than healing from Lucius' passing, the Malfoy Manor and everyone within it seemed only to grow more anxious and unwell, like a festering wound.

Draco came home later and later over the course of the two weeks, each time saying he was at the Ministry or in Diagon Alley, finishing up "business." What was worse, Damien was back in the house, and Ginny was more frightened than she wanted to admit. She felt relatively safe with Narcissa, so she sometimes sought her out, but for the most part, Ginny simply waited in their room until Draco came home.

Unfortunately, he often had little to say when he finally arrived, and Ginny had to force herself not to try and pry him for information. Staying at the Manor day in and day out was grueling, and Ginny wondered how Narcissa managed it.

Unfortunately, Ginny also discovered in that time that Narcissa actually did a lot around the house, from planning the dinner menus to corresponding to letters to managing the house-elves. And since Narcissa was essentially in a self-imposed solitary confinement, the house-elves, owls, groundskeepers, accountants and whoever else all kept coming to Ginny, who had no idea what to tell any of them.

"Just cook something, I don't know," Ginny told the house-elf Linny for the millionth time. "Just – do what you normally do."

Linny looked alarmed. "But – Mistress Malfoy – she directs us on the courses and the side dishes
and the desserts and the tea and – "

Ginny dragged her hands down her face. "I don't know, alright! Just figure something out!"

This declaration seemed to only further panic the house-elves, and Ginny stomped out of the kitchen, leaving the rudderless servants behind. Sighing heavily, Ginny made her way back to her room, only to trip over a pile of folded newspapers near the front door.

Scowling, Ginny picked herself up. Apparently, without Lucius around, no one had bothered picking up the daily copies of *The Prophet*. Suddenly realizing she had access to the news, Ginny picked up the top newspaper and took it with her to Draco’s room. Untying it hastily, Ginny flipped it open – only for her eyes to land on one glaring headline that stopped her in her tracks.

Ginny’s heart plummeted painfully into her stomach as her eyes scanned the bold face type.

Then, with a stunted shuffle, Ginny made her way over to the couch and sat down, paper in her hands. As she scanned the article in disbelief, Ginny's lips parted and her chest tightened.

It was this way Draco found her when he returned home over two hours later.

"Evening," he greeted as he hung up his cloak. Ginny was still on the couch. He paused when he saw her, as she hadn't greeted him or even looked in his direction. "Ginny?"

Her eyes lifted to his, and he stopped a few feet away.

"You," Ginny said, her voice cracking, "You're the new Head of Muggleborn Registration?"

Draco’s eyes widened minutely, quickly dropping to the newspaper in Ginny's grip. The large headline detailing Draco's new position seemed outright vulgar in its abrasiveness. For a moment, Draco said nothing. Then he turned and shifted his briefcase to the spot next to his chair. Even the thump of the leather hitting the floor sounded tired.

"Yes," he answered at last, his eyes averted.

"Please," said Ginny, moving the paper aside and standing. "Please tell me you're doing this so you can destroy it – "

"Ginny – "

"Are you really doing this, Draco? Are you really going to be the one who rounds up and kills Muggleborns? After *everything* that's happened?"

"Ginny, listen to me," Draco stepped closer, "Damien was going to take my father's governorship away from me. I had to do something to prove I'm capable – "

"Capable of what?" exclaimed Ginny, pulling away from him. "Of *slaughter?*"

Draco growled and shook his head. "This is what I have to do, Ginny. This is what I need in order to keep all of us safe – "

Ginny's expression turned furious. "You said you didn't want to do anything for him anymore, Draco! You said that to me!"

"I don't!" countered Draco heatedly, grey eyes blazing. "I don't want to do it, Ginny, but I have to!"

"No, you don't!"
"YES, I do!" he bellowed, and for a moment, the argument came to a baleful standoff. Ginny watched as Draco swallowed tightly, and perhaps if he’d shown some kind of remorse, some kind of misery at his position, she might have been able to calm – but Draco had pushed it all back behind a hard mask, and even though Ginny knew it for it was – a well-practiced cover-up – it infuriated her all the same.

"How can you do this?" she asked through hot tears. "And you lied to me – "

"I didn’t lie to you," Draco argued. "I told you I was working at the Ministry, and I am." Ginny’s jaw tightened, and she glared at him.

"How could you do this?" she asked, and the pure anguish in her tone made Draco look away, even as his fingers clenched. "You know how awful this is, Draco! You know it and you’re still doing it! You’re still just – His slave!"

"For the last time," Draco shouted, "I am doing this to keep my FAMILY safe!" He thumped a hand against his own chest. "My father nearly lost ALL of our credibility with the Dark Lord! And that was all that was keeping us from being killed, Ginny! Bloody hell, how hard is that to understand?"

"So you’re still willing to kill innocent Muggleborns to save your own skin?" hissed Ginny.

"Not MINE!" Draco shouted. "Yours!"

Ginny took a step back, her eyes wide.

Eyes casting darkly around the room, Draco breathed in and shook his head, letting out an angry huff. "Yours, and my mother’s. My family. Do you understand?"

Ginny blinked, teardrops sticking to her eyelashes as she grimaced and looked away, eyes falling to the fire. "It still doesn't make it right," she said after a long while, sounding hollow even to her own ears. She looked to Draco, who glared at her. "And if your decision to kill hundreds of innocent witches and wizards is based trying to keep me safe, then let me die."

Draco narrowed his eyes deeply on Ginny. Hands on his hips, Draco sighed heavily and looked to the ceiling, as if it could grant him the power to understand the woman in front of him. "Of course you would say that," he said lowly, anger reading clearly through his body. He looked back at Ginny, giving her a look dangerously close to the fury she’d witnessed in him before they’d grown close.

"And let me guess – you'd rather I sacrificed myself, too? Like your precious Potter?"

Ginny’s heart seized. "Don’t," she warned, though her voice trembled.

"You would, wouldn’t you?" growled Draco. "Bloody hell, all of you are so damn saintly, it’s a wonder any of you made it out of the damned war at all!"

"You do NOT have to act like this in order to survive!" Ginny burst out. "You don't have to kill or betray or manipulate other people!"

"Do you honestly think," hissed Draco, "that your own bloody parents wouldn't have killed or betrayed or manipulated people in order to preserve your life if they could’ve?"

"I – " Ginny swallowed tightly. Her first inclination was to say no, but something stopped her, a seed of doubt. Something in her mind’s eye showed her Molly Weasley, dueling Bellatrix to the
death in order to try and save Ginny. "I don't know," Ginny managed at last, angry at her own uncertainty. "But that doesn't matter."

"It does matter," Draco said gruffly, turning away from Ginny. "And I don't bloody care if you don't want me to do it or not, because it needs to be done."

"Is this because of what Zabini said at your father's funeral?" asked Ginny angrily. "Because he shouldn't have said those things, he isn't your friend if –"

"Blaise is my friend, and he was exactly right," interrupted Draco heatedly. "My friends don't try and comfort me, they try and make me see reason. And right now, that's what I bloody need."

Ginny closed her eyes for a moment, tears running down her cheeks. "I'm sorry about your father, Draco, really, I am. But just because Lucius is gone doesn't mean you have to become him."

Draco's shoulders tightened, and even with his back to her, Ginny could see him frown deeply. Then he turned swiftly to face her again, his features hard. "I wish that were true," he said stiffly. Then he looked away.

"And I'm sorry that I can't be a hero like your beloved Potter," Draco said flatly to the empty air beside him.

"Stop it!" Ginny cried out.

"But Potter is dead!" finished Draco in a sudden yell, and Ginny's eyes widened, her words dying on her lips. The look of stony fury on Draco's features kept Ginny frozen to her spot. "And there aren't any bloody heroes left anymore! So just forget it!" Draco's voice trembled just a bit, but Ginny missed it, inundated by misery as she was.

"This is the way things are," said Draco as firmly as he could, jabbing a finger at the ground. "This is what I must do."

But Ginny simply shook her head, unable to speak anymore, her lungs stripped of air. Her body felt strangely heavily, as if every vein was suddenly laced in a new, unwelcome weight.

With one last tearful glare at Draco, Ginny turned and moved past him, out of the door and into the corridor, where she slammed the door behind her in one great booming, final noise.

As soon as Ginny was gone, Draco moved slowly over to his desk, where he sat in the chair in front of it. Then he bowed his head into his arms and covered his face, praying for the darkness to take him away entirely.

Ginny stayed away from Draco the rest of the night and the following day, and even when night fell once more, she didn't return to the room. Draco wasn't worried that she'd left the manor, mostly because he knew she couldn't. But he sent Bleaker at least several times in the day to make sure she was alright.

"Stay with her," Draco commanded the house-elf in a hoarse whisper. He hadn't moved from his chair in front of the fireplace in hours. The night before, he'd slept alone. It would seem that Ginny intended to remain away again, much to Draco's misery. How empty and quiet his suite felt without her.

"Yes, sir," said Bleaker, looking quite sad. "She is in one of the guest rooms on the second floor." He paused. "Are you sure you don't want me to ask her to come back here?"
"No," Draco murmured. "Let her stay where she is."

Bleaker nodded and disappeared, leaving Draco alone with his thoughts once more. The room without Ginny in it was oppressive, suffocating even. Nearby, the Christmas tree they'd decorated together remained, not yet taken down from the holiday. Draco wished to set it on fire, but he didn't have the energy.

Instead, he got up and wandered the hallways of the manor, each one gloomier than the last. After a while, Draco came to the parlor, where he was surprised to find his mother at a table, writing on a piece of parchment. He came up behind her and peered over her shoulder.

"Who is Algernon?" Draco questioned, and his mother jumped before looking up from her letter.

"Oh," Narcissa said, wiping at her face and pushing the letter aside. "Just an … old friend from school. I thought he should know of your father's passing." Draco raised a brow, but he wasn't up to asking any more questions, so he simply took a seat on the other side of the narrow table. His mother put down her quill and parchment and regarded him with sallow and sunken features of her own.

She tried to smile to Draco, but it was a pitiful attempt.

"You should sleep," she told Draco. He looked up at her with blank features.

"You should eat," was his flat rebuttal.

Narcissa frowned; it was true she'd eaten hardly a thing since Lucius had died. Draco sighed heavily and leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Well, at least now I know where I get all of my unhealthy coping mechanisms," he said dryly to the table. Narcissa reached forward and put her hand over his.

"Why are you here with me, son? I thought surely Weasley…"

"She's angry with me," Draco whispered to the table, grey eyes shining. He blinked, and a tear fell to the table, even as his features remained impassive.

"What?" questioned Narcissa. "Why?"

Draco took a moment to answer, his listless grey gaze still on the table. "Because," he managed at last, "I took Father's old job at the Ministry, as Head of the Muggleborn Registration Commission." Narcissa's gaze shifted into understanding, even as she squeezed Draco's hands.

"That makes sense that you would do so," said Narcissa, and Draco's lips quirked at a humorless smile.

"Not to her," he murmured. He lifted his eyes to Narcissa's. "Mother, I don't want to do anything for the Dark Lord anymore. And I've told her so before." Narcissa did not seem to find this surprising, but her features creased further with anxiety.

"And I was telling the truth," Draco told Narcissa earnestly. "I hate it. I hate – what all of this has become. Not – not really about the Mudbloods, but about the magical world as a whole. He's destroying it. And I know that."

Draco pulled a hand away and gestured to himself. "But this is the only bloody way I know how to act, Mother. This is the only thing I was ever taught about keeping those I care for safe. This is all I know." His mother lowered her eyes at this.
"Taking Father's position at the Ministry is the surest way I can think of to keep all of us from becoming targets," Draco croaked, his fist loosening against the table. "But I'm not even sure it's worth it."

Draco looked to Narcissa. "Because the closer I get to the Dark Lord, the further I get from Ginny." His voice cracked at her name.

A heavy pause followed. "Draco," said Narcissa, her brows furrowed. "Does the girl really mean that much to you?" she asked in wonder.

Draco didn't hesitate. "Yes," he told her in a soft but certain whisper.

Narcissa simply nodded in reply, and she took Draco's hands in hers and gave them a comforting squeeze.

In the hallway, just outside the door to the parlor, Ginny pressed her back against the wall and brought up her hands to stifle the tears that threatened to choke her. She could hear Draco and Narcissa rising from their chairs, so she turned quickly before she could be discovered and returned to the room she'd commandeered, one of the many empty guest rooms housed in the manor.

For hours, Ginny grappled with sleep and wakefulness, never fully allowed to commit to either. After some time, Ginny awoke to find it was still night, and the moon lingered even now in the window, ignorant of the woes of the people it overlooked.

Turning in the bed, Ginny tugged herself from a restless sleep only to find herself staring at an empty chair, ancient and dusty in the forgotten guest room. Numbly, Ginny pulled herself out of the bed and padded across the floor.

Without consciously deciding where she was going, Ginny moved down the corridor and up the stairs. Eventually, she came to the double-doors that led to Draco's room, the one which felt to Ginny, for all intents and purposes, like home.

She pressed her hand against the door and it opened with a soft whine.

The hour was late, after midnight, and Ginny expected Draco to be asleep. Perhaps if she could just look in on him, then she could return to the guest room and sleep.

But Draco wasn't in bed. He was seated at his desk, hunched over, without anything in front of him to read or write or review. He was simply sitting in the semi-darkness, looking at nothing.

Ginny hadn't come there to talk to him. She wasn't sure what she had intended to do.

But now, as she looked at Draco's forlorn profile where he sat, Ginny knew she couldn't simply leave again. Moving away from the door, Ginny moved behind Draco without a noise to give her away. Then she reached over his shoulders and slipped her arms around him, tears wetting her cheeks again even as his cracked voice echoed in her head.

Yes.

Draco jerked, startled at the sudden feeling of arms around his neck. But then he turned and saw that it was Ginny, and he leaped up from his seat, pulling her into a tight embrace with a strangled noise of anguish. Ginny returned it fiercely, even as she knew, in her heart, that things were still not okay.

Not because of Draco, or the decisions he was forced to make. But because this cruel world
"You didn't come and find me," Ginny murmured against her will. "Why?"

Draco pulled away enough to look at her. "I didn't want to face you," he admitted candidly, looking strangely vulnerable. "I still – I can't – I can't change anything –"

"I know," said Ginny, lowering her eyes. The tears fell away, and the heaviness in her heart, rather than abating, simply hardened into something firm and unyielding. "I can't say that you doing this horrible job is alright, because I hate it too much," she told Draco, and his eyes flickered.

"But that doesn't mean I don't care for you," she said, her voice small. "And it certainly doesn't mean I expect you to… to be Harry." Ginny's brows furrowed. "Or Lucius, or anyone else, for that matter. Just – be honest with me, Draco, please. Because you are the only person I can rely on. And you are the only person I want at my side."

The impact of these words passed over Draco's features in such a visible way, it fascinated Ginny to watch. Still, Draco turned his troubled gaze away.

"I can't change what I have to do, Ginny. And it will mean that you – you will have to play along, you'll have to –"

"– become a functioning member of pure-blood society," finished Ginny dully, and Draco frowned deeply, falling back to lean against his desk. The two kept close, with Draco's desperate grip still curled around Ginny's pajamas. "I know," Ginny said again, shaking her head. "Voldemort wants me to get along, and you need me to play nice –"

"I want you to be happy," Draco told her vehemently, and Ginny's eyes wet again as she looked up at his earnest features. "But the first part of that is staying alive. I just," he scowled, even as he pulled her closer. "I just hate that…"

"The closer you get to Voldemort, the further you get from me?" finished Ginny weakly, and Draco's eyes widened. Ginny looked up to him. "Why can't you be as honest with me as you are with your mother?"

Draco's gaze settled on Ginny. "Because," he murmured, "it's a lot easier to look weak and afraid in front of your own mother than it is in front of the person you – " he stopped here, before amending quietly, "– in front of you."

The two fell silent, each mulling over their own thoughts, even as Ginny let herself slip further into Draco's arms.

"Draco," said Ginny after a long moment. She turned her face up to meet his. "I know there's a lot more going on out there than you want to show me. "I know there's a lot more going on out there than you want to show me." Draco's gaze flickered, further confirming Ginny's suspicions.

"I'll do as you like," she told him, firmer now. "I'll play nice with the Death Eaters, and I will pretend this sick society isn't a travesty. But believe me when I say this, Draco." She leaned close.

"This world will burn."

Draco looked over her face. "And you and I?" he asked. "Will we burn, too?"

Ginny took her time answering, her hands moving up between them and pushing over Draco's front until her fingers curled near his neck. She kept her eyes on them, as if observing the differences
between their two skins.

Then she looked back up at Draco. "I can't bring myself to be grateful for the war, or for what it brought. So if I could change the outcome of it, and have all of my friends and family alive again, I would."

Just as Draco's gaze dropped, Ginny took his collar and lifted a fingertip to his chin, so that he looked at her.

"But then, after all the others were alive and safe and with their loved ones once more, I would come and find you, Draco," she told him in a whisper.

"And I'd bother you into caring for me all over again," she told him emphatically.

Draco's lips parted in surprise, even as Ginny tugged him close and pressed their foreheads together. "Even if Harry came back, too," she whispered, falling quiet as the two teens let the words sink in.

"So, if we are fated to burn in this hell Voldemort has created," continued Ginny, pulling back to look to Draco with determined features, "I take comfort in the fact that it will be the two of us together." Her eyes met his. "Is that alright?" she asked very softly.

He looked over her, before reaching up a hand and brushing a thumb over Ginny's cheekbone. "Yes," he agreed, in the very same tones he'd used earlier with Narcissa.

"Good," murmured Ginny. "Because now I want you to remember something… something your family has forgotten in the last few decades."

Pulling up her hands from Draco's front, Ginny rested them on either side of Draco's neck, so that her warm hands spread fire through his veins.

"You are a Malfoy," Ginny told him in a fierce whisper, "and Malfoys are servants to no one."

The first rays of light had begun to lighten the night sky when Ginny and Draco finally got into bed, together once more, each desperately seeking out the rest that had evaded them the past few days.

Outside the window of Draco's room, the wings of a fearsome looking eagle owl beat against the periwinkle sky, flapping furiously when the owl came to land at the window, bearing a package under its sharp talons.

It pecked at the window, but for once, Draco didn't awaken at the sound, and neither did Ginny. They were each too enveloped in their dreams and each other's arms.

So the owl remained, carefully guarding the small package and waiting for his master to wake.
Chapter 21

Author's Note: Thank you all so much for hanging with me through this rollercoaster of a story! This chapter contains some M rated content of various subjects…

Also – if anyone is interested, I have a separate fic of "missing moments" canon to this story which has started with Blaise and Gabrielle's first meeting. Head on over and take a read!

Anyway… Here is your last chapter…

Right?

___

Harry Potter was escaping.  

Harry Potter was escaping, and it was all Draco's fault for his hesitation. The Manor was in chaos. Bellatrix was shrieking. The Dark Lord hadn't arrived yet, and everything was going to hell. All because of Draco. Why had he lied?

Why had he fucking lied? It was a question that would circle Draco's mind like a vulture for months afterwards.

That was when Harry Potter leapt at him, making a reach for Draco's wand. For a split-second, Draco failed to react. Then he yanked his arm back and shoved at stupid Potter with all of his strength.

Potter's hand missed Draco's wand, and he tumbled to the floor. However, the Gryffindor managed to snatch up a different fallen wand, and that seemed good enough for him.

And seconds later, Harry Potter was gone.

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When Draco awoke the next morning, the first thing he did was reach over to feel for Ginny's side of the bed.

His wandering arm found her immediately, curled up in the blankets and still fast asleep at his side. Draco exhaled, his entire body relaxing back into the bed. Waking up without Ginny for the last two days had been wounding in a way Draco couldn't have foreseen.

Things were still up in the air; not about his and Ginny's relationship necessarily, but about what their lives would be like. A heavy cloud of uncertainty hovered over the Malfoy home, one which seeped into corners and inside shadows. The deceptively beautiful morning seemed to act as its own form of procrastination. Darker thoughts – anxieties, terrors, and all the rest – remained, but it was terrifyingly easy to push them away in favor of the bold sunshine.

Besides, Ginny was at his side again, and Draco could not bring himself to succumb to his fears at that moment. She didn't hate him, even though she hated what he did, and that alone was enough to strike Draco as something amazing.

Shifting in the bed, Draco looked over her sleeping face, which was so far from elegant that it made him chuckle. Ginny was nothing if not entertainment value, he thought wryly, even as his heart swelled with adoration.
Draco’s thoughts returned to the night before.

Ginny clearly despised the Muggleborn Registration position he'd been forced to take, and she no doubt felt angry and hurt at what Draco was doing. She didn't understand his lifestyle, and often, his motivations were unclear and senseless to her. After all, Draco was not the heroic figure that Harry Potter had been. He wasn't known for acting selflessly – not now, not ever – and Draco doubted he would ever become the altruistic do-gooder that Gryffindors traditionally aspired to be.

But Merlin, could he love.

And Ginny, with her peculiar ability to see people, seemed aware of that. But Draco also knew that Ginny's decision not to hold his work against him was not because of Draco's great qualities, but because of her own. As emotionally volatile as Ginny was, she had a great depth of understanding for other people. She was empathetic without being condescending. She understood practicality over rashness, something few of her fellow Gryffindors shared. She wasn't all that patient, but Merlin, she was smart and frighteningly powerful.

Draco loved her. He realized this at that very moment, looking over at her strewn hair and sun-kissed face as they lay in bed together. And the reason he knew it was true was because the tangle of misery in his chest finally unraveled, and he felt as if he could see it, floating right in front of him, now several individual pieces that slowly but surely fell away.

They didn't vanish – misery was, unfortunately, a part of life - but Draco hadn't had the strength to pull them apart, not on his own, and only with Ginny's hands had the web finally broken. Draco didn't expect things would get easier for either of them from this point on. If anything, their work was only just beginning.

But to know he had Ginny with him, even when she so vehemently disagreed with his decisions, was the most remarkable and uplifting feeling Draco Lucius Malfoy had ever known. How could he deserve such a companion? And how he could make himself as valuable to her as she was to him?

Months ago, that question would have filled Draco with fear. Now, however, he felt only determination.

_Tap tap tap._

Draco glanced up to see an owl at the window, and not just any owl – the eagle owl he'd sent off. Draco’s eyes widened, and he hurriedly looked to Ginny, who was snoring into her pillow and dead to the world. Carefully, Draco extracted himself from her and went to the window, where he let in the owl and took the package in shaking hands. The owl nipped crossly at Draco before taking back off for its spot in the owlery, and Draco took the small wrapped box. After one last glance at Ginny, Draco slipped into her old room, out of sight.

There, he tugged on the brown string and unwrapped the box. Inside was an overly long note from the jeweler espousing the virtues of the Malfoy house, and Draco tossed it aside. Then he pulled out the ring box, paused to suck in a breath and opened it.

He immediately shut it again.

It was … perfect.

Swallowing, Draco opened the box again and observed the ring. Each jewel had been finely polished, detailed and reset in exactly the manner Draco had requested. It was finer than any ring
Draco had ever seen, but more importantly, it was far more suited to Ginny.

Heart pounding, Draco closed the box and curled it in his fingers.

*In just a few days,* he promised himself. He needed time to plan. This wasn't going to be an "agreement" like Blaise and Gabrielle's wedding, or an arrangement like Charlie and Fleur's. No, this was going to be a proper proposal. And he'd need a few days for that.

Also, Draco might have been procrastinating out of nerves just a little.

Besides, today was Blaise and Gabrielle's wedding today, and it wouldn't have been proper for him to give Ginny an engagement ring on that day anyway. Just letting those words run through his head was enough to make Draco feel like flinging himself out of a window rather than dealing with the anxiety it brought. Ignoring anything even mildly bothersome was basically Draco's Modus Operandi at this point in his life.

But he would do it, for Ginny. Just not right this second.

Sneaking back into the bedroom, Draco locked up the ring. Then he wandered back to the bed and kissed the top of Ginny's head. She wouldn't be awake for a while, as it was quite early, and he was content to let her sleep. However, he had no hope of returning to sleep himself, so Draco took a seat in his chair, ready to read, until he spotted something near the Christmas tree.

Oh, right. The alchemy set Ginny had given him for Christmas. Draco's lips quirked.

*You should do more things that make you happy.*

If Ginny believed in Draco enough to be with him, even when the outside world had gone to hell, then Draco would do as she asked. Their lives could be okay. They could be happy. They would be. Draco was determined.

And so, an hour later when Ginny finally rose from bed and shuffled across the room on bare feet, it was in her old bedroom that she found Draco, working studiously over his alchemical ingredients, a book in hand.

Draco didn't notice her at first; he wasn't working so much as organizing. He'd put on an undershirt, but he was still wearing pajamas, and his hands constantly swept over the various ingredients and chemicals, little bottles filled with purple liquid and others filled with what appeared to be smoke. A few loose plants dotted the edges of the impressive stone table, and Draco's wand occasionally flicked at a different book propped up nearby, which turned page after page of complicated equations and symbols. Every few minutes, Draco would pick up a quill and jot a few notes, his gaze thoughtful and focused.

Ginny leaned against the door and watched him, her arms crossed loosely and her legs bare.

If Draco had bothered to look, he might have seen the look on her face, the one which confirmed that his value to Ginny was in no way less than her own.

Still, even though Draco didn't spot Ginny's soft appreciative smile, he couldn't miss the arms which appeared from behind him while his mind was distracted. Small hands moved down Draco's bare arms, fingers spread, until they reached his own larger digits, and Draco turned just enough to see Ginny at his shoulder, her lips quirked.

"Good morning," he said, features relaxing into a smile. Ginny's hands on his arms created an altogether more powerful reaction than anything Draco could hope to create with potions and
"Am I bothering you?" asked Ginny, her voice still a little hoarse with sleep. "I can leave you to work."

But Draco shook his head, turning slowly in her grip and pulling his arms around her torso so that his clasped hands sat at the base of her spine. "Just getting to know my new tools," he said, even as Ginny placed her chin on his chest and blinked up at him with hazel eyes.

"Good," she said lightly, before shifting her head down. Even through the soft material of his undershirt, Ginny's lips at the center of his chest felt delightfully thrilling. It must have shown briefly on Draco's face, because Ginny's eyes twinkled before she shifted her head further down and she kissed him again, as if the shirt was no impediment at all.

Of course, it was only a few seconds into Ginny's seemingly innocent kisses that Draco felt himself grow very hard, something his pajamas did a rather poor job of hiding. And when Ginny lifted the bottom of Draco's shirt and placed a kiss on his bare stomach, Draco sucked in a deep breath. Merlin could only hope Ginny never did this and then asked him for something important, because she would get whatever the hell she wanted, Draco knew that much.

"Are you sure I'm not bothering you?" she asked again, nearly on her knees, her fingers gripping at his waist. "Because I can leave."

Before Draco could even properly reply, Ginny did something she had never done before, and pulled down the waistband of his pajamas to take him into her mouth.

"Fu – uck," Draco exhaled in surprise, his lips parted.

If Bleaker popped in here and ruined this, Draco would literally kill him on the spot. Fortunately, the house-elf didn't appear, and instead it was Ginny who enjoyed Draco's full and undivided attention, though it was very clear she was the one in control. Tilting back his head, Draco closed his eyes and reached forward, touching Ginny's bright red hair as she coaxed noises out of him that he'd never made before in his life.

Then she pulled away, taking all of Draco's energy with her until she appeared in front of him and pulled his lips to hers. "Sorry, but I need you," she murmured breathlessly, and Draco quickly turned her in his arms, pulling her up onto the edge of the alchemy table, which was thankfully free of any ingredients or cumbersome objects, because he would have flung it all to the floor anyway.

"No apologies necessary," he murmured, pushing up Ginny's sleep shirt so he could take her hips and pull away any remaining fabric, anything that stood in the way of feeling Ginny in his hands. Their mouths crashed together again and Ginny' fingers curled at Draco's shoulders, her legs wrapping tightly around his waist and urging him with every movement of her body, every desperate and breathless noise.

Merlin, she felt so amazing beneath his hands, like fire personified. It was in her movements, too, which could go from slow and gentle to heated and explosive in mere seconds. With one movement of his hips, Draco pressed into Ginny just as he moved an open-mouthed kiss to her neck and then further, down the slope of her chest and between her breasts, all the while moving in and out of her at a pace that made them both verge on delirious.

There was never a doubt in Draco's mind that Ginny was as wild about their union as he was. Every lurch of her body against his, every gasp, every grip of her hands was just as hungry as his own, as wanton and loving and desirous.
Draco wrapped his arms fully around Ginny and, just towards the end, slowed each thrust so that it was deep and drawn out, tantalizing but almost unbearable in its pleasure. It was then that Ginny's muscles clenched around him, and Draco was forced to grip the table, his knuckles turning even whiter than usual as he followed suit.

Together, they rode out the waves of pleasure until it finally subsided, with Ginny's breathing hard against Draco's shoulders.

After several moments of silence, she pressed her cheek against his shoulder and said, "Not exactly what I had planned for this table… but I have to say," she glanced down at it. "Sturdy."

"Says you," Draco smirked. "It's definitely what I had planned for this table."

Ginny grinned, letting Draco pull her down on wobbly legs before a voice sounded from their bedroom. "Uh, Master Malfoy? Missus Weasley?"

Fortunately, Bleaker couldn't see them. But he no doubt would before long.

"Breakfast?" asked Ginny, giving Draco one last soft kiss.

He nodded, and so they did. But rather than eating in the bedroom, as they often did, Ginny and Draco dressed and went to the dining room to eat breakfast with Narcissa, who raised a brow at their smiles but said nothing, obviously deciding she'd rather not have any sordid details.

Ginny took a seat, though Draco paused. He eyed the many chairs and the long dining table. After a few moments of deliberation, he sat at the very head of the table. Ginny's lips hinted at a smile, as did Narcissa's. However, when the food appeared on the table, Narcissa's placid expression instantly became aghast.

"What in the name of Merlin is this?" Narcissa shrieked, sounding more emotive than Ginny had heard from her in days. Draco looked equally baffled, and Ginny's lips parted – before she cringed and shot them both a sheepish smile.

"Uhhh…"

The 'breakfast' looked more like a dessert table – cakes and sweets and candies and some things that vaguely resembled breakfast, but with a lot more whip cream and chocolate than normal. There was a pile of lemon tarts stacked high and a frosted donut cake, plus a blueberry cream cheese muffin pyramid and a bowl of accompanying sprinkles, waffles piled on top of sweets and more syrup than pumpkin juice. Strawberry stuffed French toast, peanut butter chocolate chip pancakes, and blueberry scones also made the occasional appearance.

"I'm sorry, okay!" Ginny burst out. "The elves kept coming to me and asking me questions, and I didn't know! I panicked! So, you know, I just thought – " She gestured lamely. "… Comfort foods, right?"

At the head of the table, Draco pressed a hand over his face to stifle his laughter. Before he could say anything, though, Narcissa made an indignant noise – and then reached forward, taking a pile of chocolate-chip pancakes and putting them on her plate.

Ginny and Draco stared.

"What?" the pristine woman asked after taking a bit. She couldn't quite hide her smile. "I haven't had these since I was a child."
Then she proceeded to eat a full meal for the first time in days, and Draco and Ginny exchanged grins before picking out their own food from the dessert-breakfast-monstrosity and enjoying their meal quite a bit.

The day passed on, and sooner than Ginny would have liked, it was time to prepare for Blaise and Gabrielle's wedding. Narcissa was attending too, of course, and she helped Ginny get dressed in the new robes she'd gotten for Christmas. The robes paired beautifully with Ginny's new necklace, and Narcissa looked over her with a pleased nod before sending her away to finish getting ready.

Ginny went back to the suite she shared with Draco, her fingers brushing on the necklace. The one Percy had given her was still locked away, but she felt a tremendous amount of guilt at leaving it off. Biting her lip, Ginny went and got out the necklace, holding it in the palm of her hand.

It wasn't Percy's fault that Damien had used this necklace against her. She shouldn't be so wary of it. Sighing, Ginny ended up tucking the necklace into her pocket. Maybe she wouldn't wear it, not today, but she'd keep it with her. That should be good enough for now. It wasn't forgotten, and as soon as the wedding was over, she'd wear it again.

Draco appeared then, looking dashing in his dress robes once more.

"Look at you," remarked Ginny, reaching over to touch his front. "I always knew you were handsome, you know. Now I just don't feel like a prat for admitting it."

Draco rolled his eyes at her and gave her a soft lingering kiss. "Am I as handsome as Blaise, though?"

"Oh, Merlin," Ginny made an exasperated noise as Draco snickered. "I was just trying to make Gabrielle feel better!"

"Well, what you should have told her is that Blaise's boyfriend thinks he's quite handsome, too. And also that Blaise has been irreparably damaged by all the women in his life and is therefore going to make a terrible husband."

"Oh, I'm sure she'll figure that much out," said Ginny, linking arms with Draco. "But who knows? Maybe they'll be happy."

Draco looked over Ginny's freshly cleaned face, played up a little with hints of makeup applied by Narcissa. "That's true," he conceded. "You never know who will prove to be the most remarkable parts of your life."

Flushing, Ginny curled her fingers in his. "That almost sounded optimistic. I'm proud of you."

"Well, good, because I'm done with it for now," he informed her stoically, making Ginny snicker. Together, they collected Narcissa and then departed the manor.

Blaise and Gabrielle's wedding, as it turned out, was quite the affair.

Housed in a luxurious sweeping country estate, the magical venue was a great cluster of activity, with every major British magical house in attendance in some form, as well as some French. The sprawling grounds were nearly on the level of the Malfoy Manor in terms of opulence, and although it was styled differently, it contained the same standoffishness that Ginny found so unlikable about the mansion. As strikingly beautiful as the grounds were, there was nothing inviting about them.
In fact, the whole thing seemed outrageously impersonal for a wedding in Ginny's opinion. There were so many guests, and even more servants, from house-elves to paid witches and wizards. The ceremony was to take place inside, but the outside was landscaped to every detail, with perfectly placed flowers that seemed artificial in their perfection.

Draco, Ginny and Narcissa passed through the foyer, where they were forced to surrender their detailed invitations. Without them, one was not admitted, as this was for only the finest of the wizarding world. As Narcissa had told Ginny more than once, this was yet another opportunity for the magical elite to outdo one another, and it was evident in the robes they wore, the gifts they brought, and the guests they walked with.

The event itself, of course, was even more of a statement. The Zabinis were a very prominent family, and Blaise was the only son. This was to be the grandest affair of the year, and Blaise's mother seemed intent on making certain every person in attendance was aware of the great honor being bestowed upon this French witch, who was to receive her son as a husband.

Ginny wasn't sure of Blaise's mother's name, and she had never seen her before, but upon spotting her, Ginny had no doubt as to who she was. Stunningly beautiful, and wearing silk robes like Ginny had never seen, Blaise's mother moved in and out of the crowds with all the grace and haughtiness of a queen surveying her kingdom. She was certainly in her fifties, given the age of Blaise's oldest sister, but she looked not a day more than thirty, and her newest husband was only a few years older than Blaise.

"Poor bloke," Draco muttered to Ginny as they looked at the couple. "He better watch what he drinks around that woman."

Ginny snorted. "Seriously, mate, read a book. Or the newspaper. You are not Lucky Husband Number Six."

"Both of you stop gossiping," snipped Narcissa from behind, subtly fixing Draco's sleeves before pressing a wrinkle out of Ginny's collar, much to both of their annoyances. "Ginny – "

The redhead snapped to attention, a bit distracted by the fact that she wasn't sure if Narcissa had ever addressed her by her name.

"Chew with your mouth closed."

Ginny scowled.

"And Draco," Narcissa said, her gaze shifting. "Remember… this is your first public event since your father. You're in charge now." She pressed a hand lightly to his front. "Show them," she said with meaning.

Draco paused before giving a firm nod. "I understand," he told his mother. Then he turned and offered Ginny his arm. Narcissa walked on his other side, and together they entered the banquet hall, where the guests were gathered. The chilling atmosphere swept over Ginny immediately – it did not feel like a wedding to her. In fact, it had the same aura the funeral had. This was not a time to celebrate or mourn, but to network and preen. Perhaps even more disturbing was how the entire affair was more than a pompous show of wealth and prestige; it was, in every sense, a massive chessboard.

Focus. Not just on your pieces, but on the whole board.

Ginny and Draco looked at each other, and with newly renewed confidence, they entered the room
together. People greeted them with various reactions – some were surprised, as they hadn't even known Ginny was with the Malfoys, much less that she would be walking amicably on Draco Malfoy's arm. Others were polite enough, while still more began the conversation by rudely ignoring Ginny – and sometimes even Draco, if they were feeling brave.

After all, there were those who had envied Lucius' wealth and position for decades. To see him gone, only to now be faced with his offspring, was an opportunity to take advantage.

As Ginny watched, though, many seemed to sense rather quickly that Draco was not the pushover they had hoped for.

"I heard Damien has taken over the governorship from you father," said one smug wizard. "Such a shame. Lucius' holdings certainly seemed to dwindle substantially just before his death."

"I've taken the governorship back," replied Draco smoothly. "Damien held it for mere moments, while I was distracted with arrangements for my father's funeral. But I can assure you, that title – and many others – are rightfully mine." He cocked a brow, looking so much like he had in school that Ginny couldn't help but stare. "And now that it's resolved, Damien can return to being a … what was it? A school teacher?"

Draco smirked, and the smug man actually laughed, crossing over to Draco's side in an instant. How fickle these people were, thought Ginny.

"True enough," the other wizard agreed. A much older wizard joined them and nodded heartily. "I knew Abraxas in school, young Malfoy, and you are him, through and through!" he exclaimed, and Draco squared his shoulders.

"Of course," Draco said, "After all, I am his only heir. And I have no intentions of losing anything my beloved grandfather left to me." He paused. "Not to anyone," he added with a flash of his grey eyes, and Ginny fought a mixture of pride at Draco's confidence and fear at how easy it was for him to assume this role.

Still, she would support him here, for now, even as scummy as it made her feel to smile and wave at these people. To combat her feelings, she reminded herself of people like Astoria, who was in attendance with her sister and was very kind, as well as others, those who had been forced to go along and get along, but were not malicious.

And of course, Draco was not malicious either, though Ginny quickly saw how very excellent he was at pretending to be. Each time they moved on to a different conversation, the beginning interactions inevitably shifted from uncertain and sometimes outright rude to more considerate and respectful, even though sometimes it seemed to Ginny to be a reluctant shift. It did not take long for the aristocratic witches and wizards to determine that staying in Draco's good favor would benefit them.

If people were expecting Draco to lie down and disappear after Lucius' death, they were quite wrong.

Still, Ginny couldn't help but feel annoyed that her main role in this was pure, unadulterated acquiescence. It helped Draco tremendously for Ginny to appear demure and reticent, neither of which she was in the slightest, so she did her best. Even pretending was hard though, and so she often looked to Narcissa, who had already taught her so much about subtlety and elegance.

Fortunately, Narcissa was, in truth, no more of a pushover than Draco was, and Ginny felt real
"I don't speak French," Narcissa interrupted with elegant disregard. She wasn't even looking in his direction.

The wizard balked. "Well, zat is fine – because I speak English – "

"And your country is terrible."

Ginny bit her lip to keep from laughing.

The wizard started to speak again, growing purple in the face, but apparently determined to put all his pride on display for Narcissa to ruthlessly consume. "You will have to submit to a new husband eventually, just like any other witch – or you'll have a hefty fine to pay!"

At this, Narcissa turned in the French wizard's direction and set a withering glare on him so decidedly that the man instantly deflated, as if he were a freshly pricked balloon.

"I am a Malfoy," said Narcissa in deceptively calm tones, her eyes flashing. "I will gladly pay that fine. Then I will take my considerable gold and I will purchase your childhood home, which I will then raze to the ground and replace with a nunnery, where I will gladly commit myself for the rest of my years before condescending to marry a nobody such as you."

Then she turned back, and Draco and Ginny stood with their lips pursed tightly until the man made a distraught noise like a whine and then hurried off. Narcissa stared on, and Ginny made a few mental notes before they all took their seats.

The ceremony began a few minutes later.

It was lovely, truly it was, but Ginny couldn't help but feel like the entire thing was a very expensive but utterly impassionate play. A few aisles down, Ginny spotted Jean, sitting in his fine robes and looking positively miserable as he watched the ceremony alone. Ginny felt very sorry for him, and she wished they had sat next to him so he wasn't by himself.

When Blaise appeared at the front, he appeared rather calm, but Draco murmured that he seemed more uncomfortable than Draco had ever seen him. And Ginny knew why.

Every Death Eater was in attendance, and although Voldemort himself was not present – certainly funerals were more his preferred environment – his presence was everywhere. The Death Eaters even wore their regalia, and Ginny was silently grateful Draco had managed to get out of having to do so as well. To see him stand at the front of a wedding ceremony, which was meant to be beautiful and loving, wearing that horrible mask – Ginny shuddered at the thought.

It was terrible enough that Blaise stood there, looking stiff and uninterested as the Death Eaters aligned at the front like a human barrier. Their black sweeping robes seemed so out of place against the lovely and elegant backdrop, but there they were, a constant reminder of the penalty of disobedience.

This was not a union between two people who loved one another; Voldemort and the Ministry had effectively crushed that. No, it was yet another demonstration of the pervasion wrought by Voldemort's never ending vigilance. The message was clear – everything that had once been personal or heartfelt was now nothing more than a demonstration of Voldemort's supremacy. Fleur and Charlie's wedding had been professional and quick. They were not important enough to merit a
public viewing.

But this was exactly what Voldemort wanted – a carefully constructed union between those of pure blood. Ginny was again reminded of the chessboard.

Voldemort loomed over them all, manipulating each and every player to his satisfaction. The main difference was that he had no real opponent. Instead, he was able to move and create and destroy as he wished.

*For now*, thought Ginny, as Gabrielle appeared at the end of the aisle.

The sweet French bride looked absolutely beautiful, as one might expect, but Ginny's heart sank as she thought to how young she looked as well. True, Gabby was only just younger than Ginny, but it was the terror in her face that gave her every appearance of a child. Sure, Gabrielle had been excited about the prospect of marrying, but it was likely she hadn't envisioned this, coming down the aisle on the arm of her father as a line of Death Eaters stood on each side of her very unfamiliar husband, who appeared not at all excited or happy to see her, even as lovely as she was.

Fleur was doing her best not to cry. Unlike many other weddings, they were not tears of happiness she stifled. Charlie comforted her with a hand to her arm.

Ginny reached for Draco's hand, only to find that he'd already reached for her, too. Their fingers clasped. "No one should look that scared on their wedding day," she whispered to Draco, feeling her throat tighten.

"She's just afraid of the Death Eaters," Draco whispered back. "Blaise won't hurt her."

Still, he squeezed Ginny's fingers.

Gabrielle came to a stop in front of Blaise, and the two turned to one another as their stiff vows were read by someone else in white robes. Ginny chanced a glance at Jean again, and saw that he could not even bear to look at the proceedings. His head was bowed and he worked his hands over one another, shoulders slumped.

At the front of the massive room, where candles hovered in the air and elegant tapestries layered every available surface, two young people who scarcely knew one another exchange rings and a light kiss. The applause that followed was stilted, and the departing couple took hands without looking at each other and moved down the aisle, disappearing out of the door without so much as a glance at anyone else.

The ceremony seemed to drag on forever, but finally, Blaise and Gabrielle retreated from the front and the guests were adjourned to the banquet hall for food and drinks. Ginny and Draco sat with Narcissa, as well as Fleur and Charlie. Together, their table watched – with the whole of the guests – as Blaise and Gabrielle shared a formal dance, during which neither of them smiled or spoke. Then the air became slightly less rigid, and people were allowed to disperse and talk and eat. A mountain of gifts sat nearby on a table, and Ginny could see Blaise's mother, looking more smug than anyone Ginny had ever seen, sitting at a table surrounded by her daughters and their husbands.

"Come on," said Draco after they'd eaten. He tugged Ginny up to dance, and Ginny was selfishly glad to get away from the table. Fleur was doing her best not to show how distraught she was, but there was no comforting her. Ginny wanted to help, but nothing anyone said could lift the French witch's spirits.

Pulling her into his arms, Draco paused for just a moment to lean his forehead against Ginny's,
hoping for a small smile. It worked, and Ginny relaxed a little, finding comfort in his touch as they moved around the dance floor.

After a long pause, Ginny leaned her head against his shoulder. "Do all weddings have to be like this now?" she asked, not looking at him. "I mean… the important ones?"

She would not let herself think on why she cared.

Draco took a moment to answer, as if he, too, were caught up in all the unspoken questions which hovered around this one. "It's supposed to be this way now, yes," he admitted quietly, drawing circles on her lower back as they danced. "But… " Ginny's eyes flickered up to his face as he dropped his voice. "But I hate it, too," he whispered. "And I wouldn't want it for myself."

Piano music guided them in their dance. Ginny didn't respond, except to pull herself tighter in his grip.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the Ministry job," said Draco after a few minutes of dancing. "I should have. You deserve to know."

Ginny thought about it. "Some part of me wants to say it would've been easier for me not to know," she admitted, frowning. "But I don't want to be like that. I never want to shut my eyes to what's going on around me, even when it hurts. Not because I'm – special or strong or whatever. I just don't want to be unaware. That seems… " she paused "… more frightening, than seeing the scary truth." Her eyes flickered up to his. "And that's what Voldemort wants, you know. He wants people to become so afraid, so tired of fighting that they just shut off all the horrible things so it's all easier to accept. And I don't blame people for doing that. It's so much easier."

Draco listened thoughtfully as Ginny continued.

"And people look for ways to justify it, you know. Maybe – maybe what Voldemort is doing has been done before, or the anti-Muggleborn sentiment isn't entirely new. Maybe people, even non pure-bloods, think that it'll all just… blow over. So they try to wait it out, rather than fighting it. And I get that. It gets exhausting, fighting all the time," Ginny said, her unfocused gaze on Draco's front.

"So how do you manage it?" Draco asked, smiling a little as if he were teasing her. In truth, though, he wanted to know. Because he'd knew he could give up a thousand times in the instant it took Ginny to persevere.

Ginny made a small motion like a smile, though there was little humor in it. "I don't know," she admitted. "Probably I just don't like losing." She shifted to cock a brow at Draco. "I can be a little vindictive when the situation calls for it, in case you haven't noticed."

"You tried to crush me with a bookshelf," Draco reminded her. "I noticed."

At this, Ginny grinned fully.

The two continued to dance, and after a while, Draco looked up and seemed to spot something. "Ah," he said looking amused, "exactly as I thought." Ginny looked up to follow his gaze, and saw he was watching Blaise make the slightest nod to Draco and then disappear with Gabrielle through a door towards the back of the banquet hall.

"Is he ditching his own wedding party?" asked Ginny in a whisper.

"Of course he is," remarked Draco. "Come on, let's go." Together, they moved to follow Blaise and
Gabrielle out of the stuffy banquet hall. They also paused to grab their wedding gift, though they got stopped by some old Ministry dignitaries on the way out and were forced to make conversation for over twenty excruciating minutes before they could duck out.

By the time Draco and Ginny finally got away and made it to the door, it took some searching before they found where Blaise and the others had slipped off to. At last, Draco came upon a door and tapped on it three times. Loud music pulsed on the other side, and Ginny snorted when Blaise threw open the door to unveil what was clearly a raucous party going on behind him.

It was also pretty obvious he was already drunk.

"There you two are!" Blaise said grandly, waving an arm. "Do come in, come in…"

Ginny and Draco exchanged amused glances before they entered, finding quickly that everyone else of their own age or close to it was already there. Blaise lingered near the door with them. "Where's Gabrielle?" asked Ginny, and Blaise turned and looked over his own shoulder, to where Gabrielle and Jean were sitting on a couch together, laughing and speaking rapidly to each other in French.

"They have now officially met," said Blaise, slurring a little. "And honestly, I think they like each other better than they like me."

"Who could blame them?" asked Ginny just as Draco said wryly, "What a shock."

Blaise made a face at them. "Oh, you two are just a pair, aren't you? Just a couple of – bitter, angry – pasty – "

Draco held up his gift of very fine liquor.

" – friends of mine, who I do so appreciate," finished Blaise, taking the expensive bottle with a greatly appreciative stare. "Oh, yes. This will do very well." He poured some into three glasses with remarkable accuracy considering his state, and he gave the other two to Ginny and Draco.

"Cheers," he said as their glasses clinked. They all tossed back their drinks and then Blaise picked up the bottle, carrying it and his empty glass with a great deal of swagger as he went back over to the couch and plopped between Jean and Gabrielle. "Here you go, loves," he said, giving them some drinks. "Cheers to my lovely French pair!"

"Oh good lord," Ginny muttered, slapping a hand over her face as Draco fought the urge to laugh uncontrollably.

"You lot are all mad," Ginny told Draco, pointing with the fingertip not wrapped around a glass. "Just a bunch of wasteful rich kids, you know that?"

"So?" Draco asked, getting some Firewhiskey and then placing a glass in Ginny's hands with a smirk. Grinning, Ginny shook her head at him and they fell into the throes of the party, which was a hundred times livelier than the celebration up front. Ginny relaxed a little when it became apparent that Gabrielle was feeling much better than before, and the group of twenty or thirty teens played cards, ate sweets, danced and drank to their heart's desire.

"Your mum is gonna kill us if we're too drunk to Apparate," Ginny told Draco, blinking against dizziness sometime in the second hour of the party.

"We can stay here," Draco told her from his spot on the couch. "There's rooms – or something – beds somewhere, I'm sure – "
"Yes!" boasted Blaise, now more than reasonably drunk. "Sleep here, trash it – fuck it, I don't care – " Jean slammed down a card onto the table to win the whole lot and deafening cheers rang out. Theo, meanwhile, leaped up from his spot at the table when he saw Marcus Flint cornering Lavender.

"Aw, come on, Brown. You can just… come on home with me – "

"Really, Flint, just leave me alone," said Lavender, a bit sauced and unable to get away from the leering Slytherin.

Flint opened his mouth to speak further but Theo kicked him in the back of his right knee and then shoved him into what turned out to be a dumbwaiter shaft. Flint crashed after not too long a time, so it probably hadn't been that deep of a shaft. Theo shut the door then, as if nothing had happened, and returned to his seat. "My turn?" he asked, picking up his cards.

Ginny and Draco laughed uproariously at this, and Jean stacked the cards with a grin. "Not fixing that one," he muttered, knocking the cards on the table. Then he turned and, together with Blaise, they instructed Gabrielle on how to play cards, too. Ginny and Draco joined in, and the game continued for another hour.

It was the most fun Ginny had had in a while, much like the Christmas party but even wilder. At one point after the card game, Ginny and Draco spotted Blaise leaving the room with both Jean and Gabrielle, all of them looking very drunk and very … handsy with one another. Ginny's bleary mind registered some amusement at that, and she stumbled away from Draco to go to the bathroom.

"Drink some water," he instructed from where he'd turned to fall onto the couch. Many others around them had dropped, too, with only a few actually making it to beds or couches.

"Okay, shut up, okay," Ginny grumbled, finding the bathroom at last. To her surprise, a cup of water was already waiting for her there. Had she been in her sober mind, she would have never drank something just sitting out at a wild party, but her drunken mind thought nothing of it, and she immediately drank it down to the bottom.

All at once, Ginny was sober.

"Whoa," she said, reaching a hand up to her head. Blinking rapidly, Ginny looked down at the water, her brows furrowed. Her head had cleared instantly, and she wasn't even the slightest bit drunk. She inspected the cup but found nothing strange.

Something told her she was being watched, and Ginny turned, squinting down the elegant hallway. There, just beyond the arched doorway, stood Percy.

Ginny's eyes widened. Looking back down at her cup again, Ginny tossed it aside and then moved down the hallway with quick short steps. She hadn't even realized Percy was at the wedding, though it made sense that he would be. Still, he hadn't appeared to her or spoken so far, and yet there he was, waiting for her away from everyone else.

Ginny ducked in and out of shadows and left the remaining noises of the party behind. Turning one corner after another, Ginny finally came to an empty hallway, where Percy stood directly in the center.

"There you are," he said, relieved. "I was worried the potion didn't work."
"Did you do that?" asked Ginny, approaching.

"Of course I did," said her brother, frowning deeply. "What sort of fool would let herself get so carelessly drunk in the middle of a bunch of Death Eaters? Honestly, Ginny!"

Ginny flushed. "I – I was fine, Percy. I mean, those were just other kids – "

"Oh, you mean like Draco Malfoy?" he asked, folding his arms. Ginny shifted her eyes to the side, lips pressed, and said nothing. Then Percy spoke again, sounding panicked. "Where is your necklace, Ginny?"

Ginny's head snapped up. "Oh, I – I have it right here, Percy. Honest." She pulled it out and showed it to him in the palm of her hand. "It just – well, it didn't look – right, with these robes – "

"I told you," he said, advancing on her with wild alarm, "I told you to keep it on at all times!"

"I'm sorry!" Ginny yelped. "Look, I'll put it on right now! Alright?"

"Yes, do it," Percy commanded, looking all around, as if he expected that they were being watched. "Hurry, fast! We don't have much time!" Ginny paused her motion of looping the necklace around her neck. At Percy's beckoning, she fastened it quickly and let the small golden 'W' drop.

"Honestly," Percy breathed out a sigh. "I gave you that for a purpose, Ginny. And you forfeited it for what – some Malfoy trinket?"

"It was a Christmas present," Ginny muttered, burning with shame. "I wasn't trying to – "

"Just forget it," said Percy, taking her arms in his hands. "Listen to me, I gave you that necklace for a very important reason. And now is the moment that you use it."

"Ginny, tonight is it."

Her brother looked to her, eyes wide. "Tonight is the night I free you."

Explosive fear burst into Ginny's chest. "Wh – What?"

"All you have to do," said Percy excitedly, gesturing to the necklace, "is Disapparate from here. You don't have to envision anything, and you don't have to strain very hard. That's what the necklace will do. It will allow you to be transported instantly to a very specific location, a safehouse." Percy glanced up at the ceiling. "I couldn't manage it from the Malfoy Manor, too many barriers, but from here, a public place, you can bypass any wards and go directly to them."

"To who?" questioned Ginny in a hoarse whisper. "Where – Where am I going?"

Percy smiled. "To the Order, Ginny. The Order of the Phoenix. They're waiting for you."

All of the air left Ginny's body. Her heart pounding painfully, and she felt her rib cage as if it were moving in towards her heart.

"I – I don't understand," she said, tears burgeoning. "Who is in the Order? How could anyone still be alive?"

"We're here, aren't we?" asked Percy. "Ginny, there are others. Many others. And maybe Potter's still gone, but we still have a chance. Dumbledore's Army, the Order of the Phoenix, even some help from outside of England. They're all there. They know you're coming tonight, and they're waiting for you."

"Exactly," said Percy, smiling at her again. "You can finally be free of the Malfoys. And you won't have to do that terrible marriage tax or anything. We're fighting it. All of it."

Shakily, Ginny looked back at the hallway. "And – and what about Draco? What happens to him if I vanish?"

Percy's brows furrowed. "What? Ginny, I don't – I don't know, does it matter?"

"I – Yes," Ginny said, looking back to Percy. "If I go, Voldemort will kill him for losing me."

Percy stared at her as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Ginny," he said slowly, looking as severe as she'd ever seen him, "Draco Malfoy is a Death Eater. He let those monsters into our school, the very same ones who killed our mother and father and brothers."

"I know," Ginny murmured, trembling.

"And his bloody father nearly killed you in your second year, not to mention all of the other horrible things he's done. Draco Malfoy is a coward and a snake, and he's nothing but your keeper, Ginny!" Her brother shook her a little, "Whatever happens to him, it's his own bringing. It has nothing to do with you. He chose to side with a maniac, not you. Please, Ginny. Just go already before it's too late!"

Tears spilled down Ginny's cheeks. "Percy, I – I just – Let me talk to him –"

"He is your enemy!" Percy exploded. "He is a murderer and a liar! Whatever you think he's giving to you, you're wrong! He is keeping you as his prisoner, and anything you think he's told you or felt for you – it's all for You-Know-Who!" Ginny shrank back from the volume of his voice, but Percy pulled it back, his eyes shining with desperation as he shifted in front of Ginny's view and pleaded with her.

"Ginny, please, I may never be able to put you in this position again. The Order of the Phoenix is waiting to keep you safe, so we can fight against all of this again! Please! If you do this, I'll be able to get the others, too, and we'll all be together again!" Percy's head dropped, and he angrily pushed away his own tears.

"I just want you to be safe," he whispered, and Ginny's heart splintered.

"Percy," she said, moving to hug him tightly. "I'm sorry, I – Yes, alright. I'll do it."

Her brother looked up and his tears dried instantly. He backed away from her. "Just… don't focus on any specific place. The necklace will guide you. Hurry."

Ginny did as she was told, taking a step back and swallowing a deep breath. Safe. She'd be safe, with the Order. It's what she had wanted, hoped for, fantasized about. Biting her lip, Ginny closed her eyes and concentrated.

But just before it happened, she heard laughter down the hall – Draco's laughter. He was teasing Theo about something.

And Ginny's resolve broke. "I'm sorry," she said, exhaling and opening her eyes. She tugged off the necklace, unable to look at Percy's shocked face. "I can't leave Draco, Voldemort will kill him –"

"Ginny, please," croaked Percy. "Forget Malfoy –"
"I can't," she told Percy, holding the necklace tightly in her fist. "Maybe – if I knew he was safe... if I knew I could get back to him – but he would be tortured and killed. And I can't do that."

Another tear dropped down the slope of Ginny's cheek. "I can't, Percy. I... I care for him too much."

Stunning, Percy could only stare as Ginny coiled up the necklace and offered it to him. He refused to accept it, though, his jaw locked and his eyes finally moving to the floor. After a few moments, Ginny turned stiffly and placed the necklace on a side table holding some flowers. The small chain coiled around the W like a resting serpent.

"I'm sorry, Percy. I love you," she told her brother. "But I've lost too many people I love to Voldemort. And I am not giving him one more."

"You will never be able to undo this," managed Percy through gritted teeth. "And I may never get you out of here." He looked around. "But I guess that's just fine with you, huh? I guess you're suited to it now, the life of the aristocracy. You enjoy it too much to give it up."

"It's not like that," argued Ginny through hot tears. "I don't give a damn about the gold or any of it -"

"You should be ashamed," Percy told her. "Mother and Father – they would be sick to see you right now."

This pierced Ginny anew, but she only shook her head. "You're wrong," she told Percy, even as her confidence waned. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, though. Truly."

Percy moved to loom over her. "You have one more chance, Ginny. Pick up the necklace and leave here." But Ginny shook her head, stepping back away from him and turning.

"I'm sorry, Percy," she said again, but she had stopped looking at him. "I'm not going anywhere."

Then, with footsteps as heavy as her stone heart, Ginny left the corridor and Percy behind.

When Ginny found Draco again, he was asleep in a chair, limbs mangled in the sort of awkward positions that would certainly produce stiff joints in the morning. It was such a ridiculous image, especially considering the heaviness of Ginny's mind, that she let out a little incredulous laugh.

It didn't reach her heart, nor did it dry her tear-stained cheeks, but it did help a little.

Unable to think beyond what was right in front of her for fear she might collapse, Ginny tugged Draco up from the chair and reached in his pocket, taking out his wand. Then she used a combination of magic and sheer strength to get Draco to a bed, where he sleepily thanked her and curled her up in his arms as soon as she was within reach.

Another teary chuckle as Ginny tugged off his shoes and then her own before flopping back into the bed, fully clothed, unable to comprehend how her life was to continue. It all felt so outrageous and terrifying that a hysteria threatened to take over Ginny completely.

But the sprawling estate was finally quiet, and Draco was safe at her side, so Ginny slowly let herself relax into sleep, partly because she feared what she might do if she stayed awake.

Ginny awoke early the next morning, at nearly the same moment Draco was pulling himself up out of the bed with a groan. Some thoughtful servant had placed hangover potions and waters in all the
guest rooms, so the pair leaned heavily on each other and drank them.

Ginny didn't have a hangover because of the potion Percy had given her, but she was nauseous all the same. Besides, Draco didn't know about the incident with Percy, she drank the potion rather than explain. Ginny didn't know when – or if – she was going to tell him. An uncomfortable feeling welled in her chest, and for the first few minutes she was awake in the cold and unfamiliar room, windowless and bereft of warmth, Ginny felt unmistakable misery.

It was not remorse, but it hurt just as much.

Then Draco returned from the washroom, drying his face with a towel and still wearing his rumpled dress robes from the night before. He sat down next to Ginny, and seemed to take her drawn and weary features as a symptom of a long night of partying. Then he shifted to face her, his grey eyes light.

"Look what I found," he said, holding up the necklace Narcissa had given her for Christmas. "You must've taken it off before bed last night." Ginny's eyes moved to the necklace, and for a moment, her vision centered around it, surreal and blinding. Then, just beyond that strained focus, she saw Draco's face, looking over her with the gentle expression he reserved specifically for her.

The world sharpened into clarity once more, and Ginny's lips quirked. "I did, yeah. Thanks." She took the necklace and clasped it around her neck again, content to leave it there.

"Are you alright?" Draco asked, reaching up a hand and sweeping a thumb over her cheek. "We can go back home and rest." He paused. "Naked, even. If you prefer."

A real smile threatened on Ginny's dour features, though it worked against a considerable weight. "That sounds nice, but… let's not go back to the Manor yet. Please. Let's just – get out of here. And go do something, just the two of us." Returning to the Manor felt like torture at that moment, and Ginny wasn't sure if she could handle it.

"In our rumpled dress robes?" Draco asked, laughing. "And what will people say?"

Ginny stood and pulled Draco up with her, wrapping his arms around her waist, which he gladly complied to. "Who gives a damn," she said resolutely. "Come on. Breakfast. A totally unhealthy, Ginny Weasley-esque breakfast. Just you and me. Right now."

Draco smirked. "Alright," he said after a moment.

So they left the venue, where hundreds of other people slept off their physical and mental burdens, and together they absconded to a little Wizarding place in the south of London, hidden between a bakery and a series of flats. The magical café featured a balcony set just on the edge of the River Thames, and at such an early hour, Ginny and Draco were nearly the only two people there, so they sat out there together by the river and watched as the sky shifted with every movement of the morning. They ordered a ton of food and shared with each other, with Draco laughing tremendously at Ginny when she discovered she did not like mushrooms. Though the café balcony shielded from Muggles, they could still see all the Muggle historical landmarks so near them, and together they watched boats moving by, slow and easy in the water as they glided over the glassy surface.

"You know," said Draco, "This reminds me of a place my family has on the coast of Ireland."

"A place?" asked Ginny. "You mean like a rental property?"

"Oh, no. It's another one of our homes, a vacation spot," said Draco, missing Ginny's look of shock.
Sure, she knew Draco's family owned multiple rentals, but she hadn't even though they had another home besides the Manor. "It's in Dalkey, a suburb of Dublin. I think loads of Muggles have a home there, too, but there's a section hidden away just for us. My parents and I used to visit there often when I was younger, but we haven't been there since I was thirteen or so." He leaned back in his chair and looked out thoughtfully to the river. "I loved it, though. Simple home, but it was enough." Ginny snorted at this. She doubted the home was 'simple' by nearly anyone else's standards.

"And it was right there on the coast," continued Draco. "The home has white walls and beautiful crown molding, and these great pavilions which drop down and down until they reach the water. There are spots for flying and spots for games, gardens like you can't have here in England. And the water is the most beautiful I've ever seen, crystal clear."

Ginny smiled, sitting back in her own chair and watching Draco reminiscence, even as she realized her own heart had lifted considerably.

"That sounds amazing," Ginny admitted. "I've never seen such a thing."

Draco shifted to look at her and, after a moment's pause, he reached over and took her hand on the table. "Then I'll take you there to see it. Next weekend, we'll go." Ginny balked, then laughed, surprised at the sincerity of the sound.

"Really?" she questioned in disbelief. At Draco's nod, she smiled, before clearing her throat and shrugging casually. "I'm not impressed by your fancy beach home."

"Not yet, you aren't," Draco said cockily, making Ginny roll her eyes grandly, just to make sure he saw. "But you will be," he continued, lowering his eyes and looking at their joined hands. "I promise you'll love it. And then you'll want to go there all the time. It'll suit you better than the Manor does, I think."

At Ginny's curious look, Draco lifted his eyes to hers. "It's much more open there, lighter, freer. It's a place that can change in a moment's notice, from peaceful and calm to a raging storm in seconds. And its power is really only half of its beauty…"

"And the rest?" asked Ginny, watching him carefully.

Draco's eyes twinkled. "Guess you'll just have to come and see for yourself."

Together, they left the café and wandered around for the rest of the day, managing to waste all the daylight in the most enjoyable of ways. Night had fallen by the time they finally returned to the Manor, hand in hand, still laughing about something ridiculous and silly.

Ginny gasped for air and turned in Draco's grip. "Oh, that was – awful but hilarious, bloody hell – "

"I wonder how Blaise is feeling today," said Draco distractedly, grinning as they entered the foyer and then passed on to the parlor. "I bet he's sick, the idiot – "

Draco and Ginny pressed through the doors and into the Manor's parlor. It was then that they came to a stop, feet instantly still and smiles gone.

Gathered at the center of the parlor, shrouded in shadows, was Voldemort, Bellatrix, and … Percy.
Ginny froze, her spine painfully straight. Draco's eyes flickered around the room, his hand on Ginny's tightening even as he assumed a confident stance, his expression free of fear as he could manage.

"My lord," Draco said, ignoring the other two and looking to Voldemort. "I wasn't expecting you –"

"No," said Percy, looking directly at Ginny. "You wouldn't have. But of course, he is your lord, and so whatever is yours… is also his."

"Percy, what are you doing here?" asked Ginny, letting go of Draco's hand to take a step forward. "What's going on?" At this, Bellatrix giggled from her spot, crudely loud. Voldemort stepped forward and put a hand on Percy's shoulder. The single movement was enough to pinch Ginny's features with the effort not to cry.

Percy had betrayed them?

"My lord," Draco stepped forward with more authority than before, but Voldemort cut him off.

"There's no need for either of you to worry," the Dark wizard assured them both, and his very words chilled the air, so that a cold sweat broke out on Ginny's skin and drenched her body with liquid fear. "This, dear Draco, is a day to celebrate. For you see…"

That was when Percy stepped forward, and Draco and Ginny both shifted to watch him glide in their direction. As he did so, his features began to tremble and move. That was when his noise changed shape, his skin shifted shades, his freckles disappeared and his hair darkened.

Ginny fell back against the wall, her knees buckling. In front of her very eyes, Percy was changing and shifting, until the man who stood before her was not her brother…

…but Damien Black.

He had changed his appearance, not with the help of a potion, but on a mere whim.

Draco's lips parted in a horror that mirrored Ginny's. "You're a metamorphmagus," he managed, to Damien's malicious delight.

"Astute observation," said Damien, taking obvious pleasure in their terror. His grey eyes, darker than Draco's and hollow like the deepest pit, shifted to Ginny's face and drank in her fear. "Useful gift, don't you think? Little sister?"

"Where is Percy?" Ginny managed at last, her hands gripping the wall behind her like a terrified cat. "Where is Percy?" she screamed suddenly, her eyes wild. Damien chuckled darkly.

"Oh, I'm afraid he's quite dead."

Ginny's mouth snapped shut, her eyes wide and shaking.

"You see," said Damien, moving between Draco and Ginny as Voldemort watched on like a proud father. "When my dear cousin sought to gain the freedom of your brothers, we already had your brother Percy in our custody. He was privy to a lot of Ministry secrets we needed, and we'd been working with him for a while. But, shamefully, he was determined to hold onto those secrets, no
matter how much we attempted to … persuade him."

Ginny clenched her eyes shut.

"Ultimately, we forcibly extracted his memories and sifted through them for the information we needed. By the time Draco came looking for him, he was already nothing more than an empty shell. But alas, that's the penalty for a lack of cooperation," continued Damien. "Honestly, little sister, you should be proud of him. He held his resolve until the very end, refusing to give us even the slightest bit of help, no matter the incentive offered. He died a true… fool."

At this, Damien flashed his peculiar smile. "And then Draco came looking for him, and so our Dark Lord determined that this was to be the way which both you and Draco were tested. I took the place of your brother from the very beginning, exclusively for the purposes of determining Draco's worthiness… and your willingness to conform."

"This is impossible," Ginny whispered to the ground. "That would mean you were – "

"- in your room with you alone," cut in Damien, delighted. "At your sweet little holiday, holding your precious niece. Oh, yes. I was everywhere you thought Percy was. And you were none the wiser."

"Damien made a tutting noise. "You thought your brother had gone over to us, didn't you? Shame on you, Weasley. Your brother held out till the very last."

"Why reveal yourself now?" asked Draco finally, his voice low and hoarse. "What purpose does it serve?"

"Damien's purpose," cut in the Dark Lord as he loomed nearby, with Bellatrix leering from behind him, "was to evaluate you, Draco. After all, there have been times when your loyalty has been called into question… your usefulness doubted, particularly after the fiasco of losing Potter during the war." Serpentine eyes narrowed for a moment, before Voldemort showed his teeth in a smile and swept out his arms.

"But even under the guise of conversation with her brother, never once did Weasley indicate that you were anything less than the most … trustworthy of servants to me." Draco shifted his eyes to look over at Ginny, but she was determinedly staring at the ground. Damien, however, seemed briefly irritated, as if Draco's success as a Death Eater was chafing to him.

"And, in addition to that," continued Voldemort, "Damien proved to us all tonight that you have successfully ensnared Ginny Weasley to our cause."

Draco's brows furrowed, and he snapped his head up to look at Ginny, who was still staring at the ground, her shoulders trembling. "For you see, just last night, Ginny Weasley was offered her freedom," continued Voldemort, moving over to Ginny and reaching up a fingertip to draw her chin up. "She could have gone to what she thought was the Order of the Phoenix."

Draco's eyes widened, and his resolve to stay where he was nearly crumbled as he watched Ginny fall to pieces right in front of them. She could barely stand. Meanwhile, Bellatrix laughed loudly.

"But she refused," continued Voldemort. "For love of you, it would seem."

"Pity," said Damien after a pause. "Because if she had done as I so desperately asked," he said, laughing a little to himself as he held up the 'W' necklace, "and disapparated while wearing this necklace, it would have splinched her a thousand times… in the most painful and grotesque of ways."
Damien made a slow loop around Ginny and then tucked his head in Draco's direction, leering. "You would have seen her next in a very, very, very small box. Right before we threw her away in the rubbish bin."

"Fortunately, such a thing was not needed," said Voldemort, looking between the pair as if they were not both standing with their heads bowed and their shoulders trembling. "And what a joyous moment that was for me, of course, to know that I have two such faithfully devoted young servants to lead their generation."

The Dark wizard then reached for both Ginny and Draco's hands and brought them together in front of him.

"I've no doubt at all, now, in the two of you. You will remain at my side, as the exemplary pair of pure-bloods. You will lead the others of your age, and you will remain as devoted to me as you are … " he looked between them. " … to each other's safety."

Voldemort looked up to Draco's face. "Isn't that right, young Malfoy?"

Draco fought to keep his head up. "Yes, my lord."

"Good," said Voldemort, with every undercurrent of threat laced in his deceptively light tones. "Because it would be tragic for either of you to lose one another… and I would hate for that to happen."

Then he let go of them and moved away, with Bellatrix pausing only long enough to send them a sickening grin before she turned to follow. Damien remained for a moment, his features twisted into a smirk.

"And if there is any doubt at all of your loyalty," he told them in low tones, grey eyes flashing, "Just remember… I can be anyone, anywhere, at any moment. In mere seconds, I am your mother…" Narcissa appeared in front of them, causing both Ginny and Draco to stagger back. " … or your brother…" Percy appeared again, and then shifted to Charlie effortlessly.

"Anyone I like," said the face of Charlie, before it sank back into Damien's dark features. "And there is nothing you can do about it."

His eyes flickered up and down Draco's face; it was clear that Draco's successful "test" did not sit well with him.

"So be on your watch, for you never know," Damien said, turning away, "who may be watching you."

After that, Damien slipped away, and Draco and Ginny were left alone in the parlor. In the distance, a clock chimed. It was eight.

Ginny was too numb to move, but at last, Draco grabbed her and pulled her out of the parlor and into their room, where he shut and locked the door with the most powerful spell he could think of. He stood facing the door for a few minutes longer, though, unable to turn around.

"You thought you had a chance to escape to the Order of the Phoenix?" he asked quietly. "And you didn't?"

Ginny stared at the empty fireplace. "I couldn't leave you." Her words were toneless.

At this, Draco turned and looked at Ginny across the room, stricken by awe and terror and a combination of every other tumultuous emotion it was possible to conjure. For a long moment, nothing was said. Then Ginny spoke again.
"My brother was dead the whole time. I doubted him, and he died while being tortured."

"You couldn't have known that," said Draco, moving cautiously to her.

"Did you know?" Ginny looked up at Draco, and her expression was difficult to believe. "Did you know about any of this?"

Draco moved to stand in front of Ginny and squared his shoulders. "I knew nothing about Damien's ability, Ginny," he said stoically. "I swear on my father's grave. I had no idea what was going on... nor what the Dark Lord apparently aimed to prove."

"This is it," said Ginny, her eyes low and unfocused. "This is exactly what Voldemort wants. He plans to use us just the same way he's used everyone else. He's taking our feelings for each other and using it to hold us both hostage. Just like Charlie said."

Draco didn't embrace her, even as his limbs jumped to do just that. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I had no idea – I – I only knew he meant to make all of the prisoners compliant, I didn't – I didn't know any of this."

"It doesn't matter," said Ginny hollowly. She looked up at Draco. "He's won, now. He knows neither of us are going anywhere. He feels he has your unwavering loyalty, and because of that, he has me, too. So long as he believes you're his, I'm his, too."

"I'm not his, though," said Draco, stepping forward and pressing his hands to her face at last. "I'm yours."

Ginny blinked, and some of the numbness faded away, replaced by searing pain. Ginny wasn't sure which was worse. "But – but Draco are you – are you sure – " Damien's words, disguised as Percy's, haunted her.

"I don't know how to fight this," Draco admitted in a heated whisper, pressing his forehead to hers, "but I know if I had woken up this morning and you were gone – if you'd disappeared or that son of a bitch Damien had managed to - " Draco's face contorted with fury " – I would be dead right now, from misery or foolishness, I'm not sure, but I would be gone from this earth in an instant."

Ginny reached up and covered his hands with hers. More of the numbness faded away and crumbled to ash, more tears welled. Sobs bubbled to the surface of Ginny's chest like a series of disturbances from a crack in the deeply set ocean floor.

"Draco, I – " Ginny succumbed to tears again, horrible sobs. "I couldn't leave you knowing Voldemort would kill you if I was gone, knowing I might not – see you again – and Percy was saying that Mum and Dad would hate me for it, and – " She curled her hand into a fist and pulled away so she could shriek into her closed fists. The room hummed with energy and the fixtures trembled.

"They killed Percy!" burst out Ginny, eyes blazing. "They killed him and dared to impersonate my brother! To use his face against me! To try and get me to kill myself just to prove one more loyal soldier for Voldemort's cause!"

Nearby, chess pieces that had been sitting placidly on the board fell over. A few black pieces rolled off the ends and cracked on the floor.

"Ginny," Draco called to her, but Ginny lashed out her arms and a portrait cracked and fell. Glass began to splinter and crumble. That was when Draco grabbed both of Ginny's hands and pulled them down, his fingers curling over hers and his grey gaze boring into her own.
Ginny's wild gaze met his and calmed, slowly but surely, into a smoldering burn. It would not last forever, Draco knew, that yielding simmer in Ginny's eyes. Soon enough, it would boil over.

But for now, he could only coax her into calming, desperate to keep her there, to keep her from slipping into the never-ending slope of blind rage. It was one he knew quite well. After several seconds of silence, in which Ginny gripped Draco's robes and squeezed her eyes tightly shut, she turned up her head just a little and their trembling mouths pressed together for a brief kiss.

Finally, Draco spoke.

"...They were unwise to provoke you," he told her in an awed whisper.

Ginny's eyes slid open, dark and furious. "Yes," she agreed in a low murmur. "They were."

Somehow, despite the tribulations of mortals, time meandered on in its usual impassive way, larger and grander than even the most devout of miseries.

Ginny and Draco went to bed and each lay awake for hours in each other's arms but feeling little comfort. There was too much fear; the Manor no longer felt safe, and each moment shared with others now warranted investigation. Had it been Damien? How much had he seen? The prospect was haunting.

A little after dawn, Ginny drew herself from the bed and padded numbly across the floor. As fearful as she'd been the night before, a lack of sleep had caused her to have no fear of wandering the manor, in a manner much like sleepwalking. She was awake, physically, but every movement was automated and aimless.

Eventually, though, Ginny's mind tuned to the sound of a voice. It was Damien.

Eyes narrowed, Ginny moved silently down the hallway, in the direction of Lucius' old study. Inside, she could hear shuffling in different directions. It was not only Damien who was perusing Lucius' old things.

"What exactly are we lookin' for?" asked one voice, annoyed. Ginny thought it might be the male Carrow, but she wasn't sure. "I don't get this."

"Anything referring to the Elder Wand," came Damien's voice. He paused, and Ginny spotted his shadow looming out of the cracked doorway. "Lucius Malfoy claimed he was in control of it, thanks to some ridiculous fluke..."

Ginny's brows furrowed. Lucius had said what?

"... and so the Dark Lord had no choice but to eliminate him," continued Damien dryly. Ginny's eyes widened, and she nearly fell over in her hiding spot, her lips parted. "However," continued Damien, "although the Dark Lord took him at his word, I have a feeling there is something … more … going on here."

He stood near the door, and Ginny edged away for fear of being caught.

"No," mused Damien, and Ginny could see his sneering face in her mind's eye. "There is something not quite right about Lucius' sudden attack of conscious for his many lies. And I will discover it." He paused, and Ginny pressed flat against the wall to avoid being discovered.

"Even if I have to kill everyone in this monstrosity of a house myself," finished Damien in a hiss.
"Now look!"

Her heart pounding, Ginny pulled away from the door and hurried down the hallway, tripping over her own feet as she raced back towards the room. Draco, Draco, Draco. She had to find Draco. She had to tell him –

But when she rounded the corner to the bedroom and pulled open the door, she balked.

Draco was standing in front of his desk, holding a small box in his hand. Ginny couldn't see what was inside it, but she knew instantly what it was. His forlorn expression as he looked over it, features unbearably pained, spoke volumes. As Ginny watched, Draco looked over the box with a sigh and then pressed it closed with a soft snap. His eyes closed as well, head bowed.

Ginny moved at the door, and Draco's eyes snapped up. He instantly shoved away the box, hidden in the pocket of his pajamas. Ginny slipped inside, moving slowly.

"What was that?" she asked softly.

Draco met her gaze with a long, lingering look which Ginny could not define. At last, he worked his features into a painful mockery of a smile. He seemed to decide something, then.

"Nothing," he told her. "Nothing at all."

Ginny waited, but Draco said nothing more, and so she moved further into the room and came to stand in front of him. Together, they stood just in the center of Draco's sunshine warmed window, which sat tall and pointed in the fine walls of Draco's room. The peak of it rose just above their heads, sharp and angular.

"Draco," murmured Ginny, setting her eyes on his and mentally begging him not to look away. "Show me."

For a moment, she thought Draco might refuse. He bit his lip and looked away, perhaps thinking as to what excuse he might make. Then, instead, he reached into his pocket and drew out the lovely box. After a shaky pause, Ginny reached up and pressed her fingers over his. Together, their hands opened the box.

The ring inside was like nothing Ginny had ever seen. The band was white gold and designed to look like slim branches, with fine details marked into it so that each branch twisted around the main stone, a stunning light blue sapphire beset by smaller but no less fine diamonds. Even the texture of the outside of the band was reminiscent of the forest, and Ginny brushed a fingertip over it in wonder.

"The stones came from my grandmother's ring, but I had them reset," Draco whispered, looking at the box and not daring to gaze upon Ginny's face. "You would've hated it before," he finished weakly.

Ginny's eyes moved over the blue stone, set atop the white gold branches, some of which held tiny gold cuts of leaves, which pressed around the center stone in the loveliest manner.

"And how did you come to this?" she managed in a tiny voice, filled with wonder as her fingers grazed the heartbreakingly beautiful blue stone.

Draco managed the tiniest of smiles. "You said you liked seeing things from the sky."

Ginny's eyes lifted to his, and she pulled back her hand. Draco shut the box quickly and lowered
his hands, though he kept it in his grip. "Were you planning on giving it to me?" she asked.

Draco fought to meet her gaze. "I – I was, yes, but … but after what happened with your brother, I – " He bit his lip, hand curling tightly over the box, so that his knuckles grew whiter. When he finally managed to speak, his voice cracked.

"I don't want you to feel forced," he whispered. "I don't want you to agree because you're afraid or you think you've no other options. You do, Ginny. I'm not sure what they are, but I'll help you figure it out before I trap you further."

Fresh tears poured down Ginny's cheeks. "I'm not trapped, Draco. I had a chance to leave, and I refused." His grey eyes flickered at this, and Ginny glanced down at the box before looking up at his face again. "If you truly want to prove that I do have options, then… just ask me," she murmured, stepping closer with a determined gaze. "And let me decide."

Draco stared at her, unable to hide his surprise. He looked back down at the box.

"But only do it," said Ginny, "if it's what you want, too."

Draco drew in a shallow breath. "It is the only thing I want," he admitted to her earnestly. At Ginny's soft look, Draco looked back down at the box in his hands and took in a deep breath. As afraid as Ginny had ever seen him, Draco slipped down onto one knee.

"Ginny Weasley," he said, smiling a little now because, even through his fear, they both knew how strange this would have all seemed a year ago, "Will you marry me?"

Ginny paused to take in every feature on Draco's face, every shade of grey in his eyes, every tremble in his fingers. And she knew – despite everything else that seemed so uncertain and unfair and terrible – that her answer was the first in a very long while in which she had no doubt.

"Yes," she said, with a slow tender smile. "I will."

For a moment, neither of them seemed to believe it. Then Draco rose carefully from his spot, slipped the ring onto Ginny's finger and then looked into her eyes. "I am so glad for everything about you," he told her, and this time, Ginny's smile bloomed into a real, true beaming expression, which filled the void between them with a sea of warmth.

Ginny's hands reached up and circled Draco's neck, fingers slipping into his hair. "And my life is better with you in it," she murmured in return, catching his mouth with hers and letting herself fall into the kiss, fully encircled in Draco's arms.

He pressed her close, coiling her tight in his arms. After a moment, Ginny pulled away only a little, and he saw how her features became set and determined. Then she leaned very close and spoke for his ears only.

"Now," she whispered fiercely. "We need to get the hell out of here."

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On the coast of Ireland, there sat a house with whitewashed walls and beautiful crown molding. Pavilions traveled down the side of the majestic home, dropping from one level to the next, until at last they came level with the ocean as it crashed ashore and grabbed at the landscape, pulling back a little with it each time.

The sky was a lovely shade of blue, with only a hint of clouds to dot it, and the call of birds combined with the roar of the ocean to create a soundtrack unique to nature. This soundtrack,
beautiful as it was, had a grander purpose that day, though.

For the crashing of the ocean and the cawing of the birds covered up the hushed words of a certain redhead, who sought to avoid being overheard. Away from all others, cocooned in the crisp white sheets and surrounded by salty air, Ginny Weasley turned Draco Malfoy, took his hand in hers and then leaned over to whisper in his ear what had been too dangerous to say aloud in illustrious Malfoy Manor.

Beneath the bedroom pavilion, ocean waves continued their onslaught of the shore, and water sprayed the balcony determinedly. However, their impressive onslaught was paltry compared to the cold fury hovering just inside the home so nearby.

Moments later, a pair of bare feet moved out onto the balcony, each step slow and deliberate. When Draco reached the balcony's end, his torso and arms bare and every muscle clenched, he reached out and gripped the railing.

The wood groaned beneath his grip and his skin broke, dotting the beautiful design with speckles of blood. But still his terrifying gaze remained on the horizon.

And behind him, observing from the doorway, Ginny Weasley watched with her chin high and a chess piece dangling in her fingertips.

Game on, Tom. Game on.

END

… of Part I.

Well, of course, I couldn't just leave it there, right? Oh, no. This story is only just beginning… Keep an eye out for Part II, coming very soon.

(This will not be a separate story, as I had originally planned, but simply added on to this one.)

Thank you all for reading, and I hope you continue!
Chapter 22

Author's Note: Welcome back everyone! Sorry about the wait. This has been a greatly transitional year for me, and it's not over yet. Please be patient between updates, but ALWAYS feel free to drop me a review or pm to talk about the story! I may not be able to respond immediately, but I will as soon as I'm able.

Hope you guys are ready for Part II, because it's going to be intense.

Also, two side notes.

This story will feature a lot more narrative involving characters other than Ginny and Draco. That is, you'll see scenes that don't involve them at all, which is different than Part I.

I am also uploading a different but related story that revolves around Narcissa Malfoy, starting with her time at Hogwarts. It will eventually catch up with and overlap this story, so if you've enjoyed seeing her and Lucius in this story, I highly recommend you give that story a read as well! I'll try to update both stories in equal installments.

As always, thanks so much for sticking around, and I hope you enjoy!

PART II

Prologue

In the desolate area of Wiltshire, the Malfoy Manor sat unchallenged in its great size and impressive grandeur. Nowhere else was there a more majestic home.

From the tops of the angled peaks, where daunting black edges jutted from the roof, to the arched windows which sat in faultless alignment on all sides of the home, each sequence was flawless in its uniformity. Around the gray walls creeping vines inched up, sometimes shifting in the direction of any who passed by, as if curious. Every door was large, dark and heavy, but exquisite in its attention to detail, particularly the large brass handles and the finely sculpted doorways in which they sat.

The interior of the home was decorated in shades of black, grey and silver, with the occasional hint of gold to highlight the opulence which existed there. Portraits as tall as the people who painted them adorned the walls, and the fireplaces engulfed whole walls, with priceless trinkets lining the mantles.

Even the floors were refined, sometimes marble and other times wood, but never anything less than the most expensive, highest quality taste, for this was the Malfoy Manor, and it was nothing if not the best.

It was here in the most elegant of homes where the most aristocratic and pridefully pure-blooded family of all Great Britain resided that Draco Lucius Malfoy led Ginny Weasley through the corridors and down flight and flight after flight of dark and narrow stairs.

"Where are we going?" asked Ginny breathlessly.

Coming back from Ireland only to immediately dive into the bowels of the Malfoy Manor was
jarring, and a wave of fear swept over Ginny, catching her by surprise. But Draco was determined to move forward, and he only stopped to look back on the path they'd left, as if he expected they were followed.

At last, he paused in front of a flat grey wall.

"You said Damien was looking my father's study," Draco whispered to Ginny, grey eyes alert. "But if my father had something to hide, he wouldn't keep it there."

Draco pulled up his wand and counted the stones in the wall until he found the one that he wanted. Once he seemed satisfied with their position in front of the wall, Draco pulled out a small knife and cut his hand. He pressed it against the wall, and for a moment, nothing happened, and Ginny could only stare uncertainly.

Then the wall began to tremble and shift, and a narrow opening appeared slowly, soundlessly, seemingly into an endless void of darkness. Draco quickly healed the small cut with his wand and then looked back to Ginny, pressing a hand to her shoulder and pushing her through first.

"Come on. Let's go."

They crept into the opening and the wall closed behind them. "Lumos." A light appeared at the end of Draco's wand, and he shifted in front of Ginny to lead her forward. The passageway was damn suffocating to Ginny, but she kept her mouth closed. At last, they emerged into a wide open room, though Ginny couldn't see what it contained.

A hiss sounded, and Draco appeared next to Ginny just as flames burst to life in sconces lining the room's walls. Draco straightened next to Ginny, and together the pair looked all around the room.

"What is this place?" asked Ginny, her eyes wide. The room was positively filled with oddities of every kind, reminiscent of the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts. There were simple baubles, mostly dusty and aged, and furniture that appeared from nearly all eras of human habitation. There were antique chests filled with treasures likely worth hundreds of thousands of galleons, and gold with strange carvings on them pouring out of containers. Peculiar rugs that couldn't have come from England covered something large and square, and when Ginny curiously lifted the dusty fabric, a row of horned skulls caused her to jump back in alarm.

Other items Ginny dared not identify, instruments that were undoubtedly Dark in nature, also appeared often. A smear of old dark handprints that looked suspiciously like blood lay on one of them.

Draco looked around thoughtfully for only a moment. "This is where we keep it all," he said, before moving forward and pushing his way through the various obstructions. "The items we didn't surrender over to the Ministry when the International Statue of Wizarding Secrecy was passed centuries ago." Draco pulled off a tarp to reveal a large cabinet, but it obviously wasn't what he was looking for, as he continued on.

"But where did it all come from?" asked Ginny, edging away from what appeared to be some sort of ancient torture device. There were marks in it that looked like the trails left behind by clawing fingernails.

"Lots of places," answered Draco, frowning as he pushed aside some things. "William the Conqueror gave my family this land, and for years my ancestors were able to manipulate the Muggles around them into handing over whatever they had. Before wizards were a secret, the
Muggles knew they had to follow us. So my ancestors spent several years annexing the Muggle lands in order to build up our wealth here in England."

Ginny carefully replaced a shrunken head bejeweled with real sapphires. "Lovely."

"The Minister of Magic commanded us to give it all over when the Statute passed, but we moved most of it down here," said Draco, scowling as he turned to look around. "This is the most secure place in all our lands. If my father had something…"

"Damien said," Ginny rounded a table, "that it had to do with the Elder Wand. He said your father claimed he had control of it, and that's why he surrendered himself to Voldemort. Voldemort believed him, and that's why he – " she stopped, frowning. "It doesn't make any sense. Why would Lucius think he was in control of the Elder Wand when Snape is the one who killed Dumbledore? And why would he willingly give himself up after nearly a year and a half?"

"Well, that's what Damien wants to know, isn't it?" asked Draco, his eyes dark. "He doesn't believe my father was telling the truth, either."

Scowling, Ginny leaned against the table and folded her arms, eyes lifting to drift around the room. Something caught her attention. "Draco, did you mess with this bookshelf?" she asked, moving over to a spot where the dust had been disturbed. Her eyes lifted to a book there, one of many ancient looking leather bound copies on the shelf. The spine had no words on it.

Draco appeared behind Ginny, his brows furrowed. "I didn't, no." Reaching over Ginny's shoulder, Draco pulled the book off the shelf and pressed his fingers over the well-aged cover. Like the spine, it had no words, but it did have a symbol.

"The Deathly Hallows," Ginny breathed out, looking up at Draco. The two looked to one another for a moment before finding a table and setting the large book on it. When Draco opened to the first page, they found it to be blank – but only for a moment. Then words spread out on the parchment, old and worn and faded like the book.

_Antioch Peverell_

_Obtained by means of cheating Death_

_1251 – 1254_

Draco's eyes moved over the entry. "Antioch Peverell was the original owner of the Elder Wand," he said, before looking to the other entries. Directly following Peverell's, the book read:

_"Emeric the Evil"

_Obtained by means of Murder_

_Throat Cutting_

_1254 – 1255_

_"Egbert the Egregious"

_Obtained by means of Murder_

_Decapitation_

_1255-1260_
Alain Duponte
Obtained by means of Murder
Killing Curse
1260-1262

Cereille de Medici
Obtained by means of Murder
Poisoning
1262-1268

Godelot Plantagenet
Obtained by means of Murder
Torture
1268-1290

Hereward Plantagenet
Obtained by means of Murder
Confinement until Death
1290-1312

And on and on went the listings, with entry after entry detailing the violent historical journey of the Elder Wand. Never before had Draco seen or heard of anything like this, anything with this much information on the Elder Wand.

"Flip to the end," said Ginny at his side, stiff.

Trembling, Draco turned the pages, passing columns and columns of names and deaths, each one more grisly than the last. Murder by live burial. Murder by arson. The wand rarely stayed in one place for very long, and when it did, the ownership ran parallel to the a particularly bloody section of history.

Finally, Draco came to the last page.

Mykew Gegorovitch
Obtained by Murder
Suffocation until Death
1899-1920

Gellert Grindelwald
Obtained by Victory in Battle
Stunning Spell
1920 – 1945
Albus Dumbledore
Obtained by Victory in Battle
Gubraithian Fire Spell
1945 – 1997

Draco's finger slipped down each entry against the weathered parchment, until it finally came to
the very last entry.

Draco Malfoy
Obtained by Victory in Battle
Disarming Spell
1997 –

Draco's hand slipped away from the book and fell to his side, strangely numb. At his side, Ginny
stared long and hard at the page, unable to believe the letters marked in swirling black ink.

Moving away from the book, Draco turned his back to Ginny and put his hands against an antique
chair. The firm grip he had on its elegant wrought iron back did not quite hide the tremble in his
fingers.

"Draco…"

He closed his eyes, but he could see Ginny behind him, her stricken face, as clearly as if he were
standing right in front of her.

"You - You're the true owner of the Elder Wand," Ginny stammered, lips parted. "Nearly everyone
else killed their adversaries, but Grindelwald didn't, and neither did you. You got the wand from
Dumbledore when you disarmed him."

Silence floated between them.

"This is what had my father so sick," Draco managed at last, his features tight. "He knew… He
knew that night I told him about the duel in the Astronomy Tower." After a moment, Draco
managed to pull himself away from the chair and turn to face Ginny. "Or at least, he suspected
enough that he needed proof."

"You think that's what he was so busy doing?" asked Ginny. "Trying to find this book?"

"This text can't be common knowledge," Draco managed stiffly. "Otherwise, the Dark Lord would
already have it." He paused, grey eyes flat. "And I'd already be dead."

"This is insane," murmured Ginny, her heart pounding. Fear and shock tangled powerfully in her
chest. "No wonder the Elder Wand wasn't working for Voldemort. It belonged to you all this time."

"Yes," said Draco darkly, "and I can't imagine that simply disarming me to take possession of it
would be the Dark Lord's plan after discovering the truth, either." He paused, his eyes suddenly

"What, what?" asked Ginny worriedly.

"My father," Draco pushed a hand over his face. "He – he tried to disarm me a few days before he … went to the Dark Lord." Draco sank into a chair, his eyes low. "He did it, but I – I wasn't carrying my real wand. It was just a silly toy you'd given me from your brother's shop."

Ginny lowered herself into the seat next to his. "So you don't think it worked, then? You believe you still have control of the Elder Wand?"

Sighing, Draco looked to the book again and ran his hand over it. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "I don't think this book is enchanted to update on its own." He shifted to look at Ginny and ran a finger slowly across the aged parchment with his name on it. "Look at the script. The handwriting differs often."

"So someone was recording this by hand," concluded Ginny. When Draco said nothing, Ginny leaned forward. "Draco, we need to discover who's been keeping this information. Because if Voldemort truly gained control of the Elder Wand… I don't know what can be done to stop him from continuing this hellish joke of a society he's created." She paused, tilting her head as Draco looked to her with wide fearful eyes.

"But," she continued softly, urgently, "if you still retain power over the Elder Wand, that means we have a chance."

"A chance to do what?" asked Draco dully, suddenly both exhausted and terrified.

Ginny squeezed his fingers. "A chance to make that sick bastard pay for what he's done. A chance to avenge my family and your father and everyone else he's taken away from us."

At this, Draco's eyes lowered to Ginny's left hand, where the beautiful ring he'd designed just for her sat on her ring finger. Ginny smoothed those same fingers over Draco's knuckles. "Lucius did everything he could for Voldemort," Ginny reminded Draco very softly. "The only thing he wouldn't give him is you. And still Voldemort took his life."

Draco lifted his gaze to Ginny's determined hazel eyes.

"Are you ready to fight, Draco?"

A long pause.

"Together?" asked Draco almost timidly.

Ginny's expression split into a grin. "Isn't that the way we do everything?"

At last, Draco's lips quirked and he turned his hand so their fingers laced. Then he lifted their joined hands so he could press his lips to Ginny's knuckles.

"I'm ready," he whispered.

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Two months later

In the first days of March, the weather grew considerably more pleasant.

Walking together down one of the busier streets in Diagon Alley, Draco Malfoy and Ginny
Weasley paused occasionally to peer in shop windows or talk to those who recognized them. Many of the shops had reopened, and the *Daily Prophet* boasted of the economy's great leaps in progress.

The truth was, many of these shops were being propped up by Ministry gold, and ownership of the shops was rarely in the hands of everyday British magical citizens. Instead, it was government controlled, and thus, much of the stock in any given store was both heavily taxed and over regulated.

But for all appearances, Diagon Alley was doing very well, and Draco and Ginny's happy stroll contributed further to the merry image the Ministry of Magic was determined to convey. Of course, Draco and Ginny – being good and ideal magical citizens – were more than happy to play their part in encouraging compliance and faith in the Ministry's efforts.

Together they passed yet another *MAGIC IS MIGHT* sign.

At last, the pair came to the tea shop they'd been looking for and, after searching for a few moments, found the table they needed and fell into their seats.

"Well," said Blaise Zabini, "it's about time. What were you two doing? Cutting out paper valentines for one another?" He rolled his eyes.

"Hello to you too, prat," greeted Ginny before ordering tea along with Draco. Her fiancée snorted.

"You seem a bit more on edge than usual today," Draco noted to Blaise as they received their tea. "What is it? I thought things were going rather well for you."

Blaise sighed heavily and swirled a stirring spoon in his tea. "Actually," he said, shifting back in his seat and raising both brows, "Gabby is pregnant." Both Ginny and Draco raised their brows in surprise, before Draco laughed.

"Already? You just got married two months ago."

"Also, shouldn't you be happy?" asked Ginny curiously. "I mean, this is exactly what you need in order to get your grandfather off your case. I thought you'd be pleased."

"Well," said Blaise, looking uncharacteristically hesitant, "I would be… If I were one hundred percent sure the child was mine… and not Jean's." He dropped his stirring spoon with a clatter, his lips pursed in haughty annoyance. "And seeing as how Jean is Asian and I am black," he continued testily, "I feel like it's going to be pretty obvious if the child is not mine."

Ginny and Draco stared for a full sixty seconds, their lips parted.

"Go on then," sneered Blaise. "Let it all out."

Both Ginny and Draco burst out laughing, Draco so uncontrollably that he actually held his stomach to ease the pain. Blaise, meanwhile, sat and scowled at his tea. "Yes, yes," he said after a moment. "So glad my terrible misfortune could prove so amusing for you."

Draco breathed in deeply. "I'm sorry, but what kind of idiot has a threesome on his wedding night?"

"Well, the drunk kind, obviously!" snapped Blaise, waving his hand. "And just where were you two when I was making this horrible mistake? You could have stopped me!"

"Where's the fun in that?" asked Draco, as Ginny cut in.
"We were busy that night," she said, her laughter dying as she forced herself not to recall the events that followed Blaise's wedding. When she and Draco had sat down with Charlie and George soon after and told them the truth about Percy – that he had been tortured to death and replaced by Metamorphmagus Damien Black – Ginny had been forced to watch them lose a brother all over again.

Damien had finally left the Malfoy Manor, but he was still skulking around. The school was not to reopen until September, and he was often back and forth between there and Merlin only knew where else. They had not seen him – that they knew of – but he was still a readily available threat.

"Yes, well, whatever," said Blaise flatly. "It's done."

"So," said Draco, recovering his breath at last, "is there – any chance at all that the child is yours? I mean, what's going to happen if Gabrielle gives birth to Jean's child?"

"Do you think he'll take it back to France or something?" asked Ginny, brows furrowed. She couldn't imagine dealing with such an unusual and delicate problem.

"The baby?" asked Blaise. "Oh, no, I'm not afraid of what Jean or Gabrielle will do. See, we don't care who the father is," he said, gesturing to himself and obviously meaning the other two as well. "No, it's my grandfather that continues to be the problem. Because if he sees that my wife has had another man's child, he won't allow it to inherit a single thing, even if I tried to claim it. Which I would, because obviously it would be better off as a Zabini." He sighed dramatically.

"Unfortunately, it won't be easy for me to claim it if it truly is Jean's, and my grandfather will want to see it as soon as it's born because he's a paranoid old codger." Blaise brought up a hand and studied his fingernails. "Not that I blame him, after everything my mother has done. She has effectively drained him of any patience he might've ever had."

"Wow," said Ginny. "Would Jean really not care if you claimed his child?"

"Why should he?" asked Blaise, eyebrow raised. "Jean's family is nice, but their name has no importance. If it weren't for my grandfather, I'd claim the child no matter what and dare anyone to question me on it. I don't give a damn whether I made it or not." Just when Ginny seemed to think this was noble, Blaise continued airily, "After all, pure-bloods leave most of the child-rearing to servants anyway. I might see the child so little that I even forget what it looks like."

Ginny's expression soured, and Draco smirked.

"So," he said, "is there a chance at all that the child is yours, Blaise?"

Blaise thought about this. And then thought about it some more. Ginny and Draco stared as he twisted his head towards the ceiling and appeared to reminisce very thoroughly.

"Possibly?" he said at last, and Draco snorted.

"That took far too long to answer."

"Shut up, I don't care," Blaise sighed. "Right now, the plan is continue with the pregnancy and pretend nothing is amiss. Then, when the child is born, we'll just… hope for the best. And if it comes out looking like Jean, well then, some lucky St. Mungo's employee might receive a very large monetary incentive to keep their mouths shut and maybe forge a document or two."

"Sounds like a winning plan," remarked Ginny dryly.

"I agree," smirked Blaise. "Now, enough about me. After all, you two have a very special day
tomorrow."

Ginny and Draco exchanged smiles, and Draco curled his fingers over Ginny's hand under the table. "You did remember to keep it all quiet, didn't you?" said Draco, looking to Blaise. "Only a very few select people know about the ceremony at all."

"Yes, yes," Blaise said, waving a hand. "Though why you're keeping it a secret I have no idea. Everyone knows you two are engaged."

"This ceremony isn't going to be about 'everyone'," said Ginny pointedly. She looked to Draco and her lips quirked. "It's going to be about us."

"Endearing," said Blaise, while also managing to gag at the same time. "Well, me and mine will be there, with no word to anyone else. I swear it." He drained the last of his tea. "After all, I would hardly inflict your disgusting sweetness on anyone who wasn't forced to witness it."

Ginny and Draco spent the night apart for the first time in months.

The day that dawned afterwards was remarkably beautiful. The last of the snow had melted away, leaving the forest surrounding Charlie and Fleur's simple home pure and fresh, with newly born flora pushing its stubborn way up from the dirt to bloom against the crisp clear air.

In a clearing that had once been the sight of a beautiful garden of ice and snow, chairs sat arranged in rows, split down the middle by a simple green carpet set against earthy forest floor. White flowers tinged with blue made loops around the rows, occasionally accented with bits of yellow ribbon. An outdoor archway covered in the same lovely foliage sat at the front of the carpet, with long tables on either side which would soon be covered with food, and a third table outside the circle that was home to several wrapped gifts. A colorful maypole took up the remaining space that was not set aside for dancing.

Petals fell often from the trees surrounding the site, littering the ground with tender dashes of color that brightened up the warm tones of earth.

As the small but excited crowd gathered, Ginny Weasley stood several feet away, hidden by a white tent set up somewhere behind the guests. Her brother Charlie was just finishing adjusting the sleeves of his robes. Anyone who knew him could see that his nerves were nearly as bad as Ginny's – after all, this was the fifth time he'd fussed over his sleeves, and Charlie was not a fellow all too concerned with appearances.

Fleur reached over and put a calming hand on Charlie's jumping fingers. Her touch paired with a soft smile finally stilled him a bit, and together they looked to Ginny.

"Oh, Merlin," exhaled Ginny shakily.

"Ginny," Fleur crossed the tent to stand in front of the younger witch. Her eyes clouded with tears, but these were, at the very least, happier than those she'd shed for Gabrielle. "You look so beautiful," she murmured thickly, sniffling. "So – so very beautiful."

Then Fleur reached her and pulled out a box, which she opened to reveal the tiara Molly Weasley had given her to wear for her wedding to Bill. Ginny let out a whooshing breath, wiping furiously at her face. "Are you sure, Fleur?"

"Oh, yes," said the French witch graciously, taking the tiara and placing it on top of Ginny's hair, which she'd left mostly down and curled by Fleur. "Zis is ze Weasley heirloom. And you are
getting married today. It is yours to pass down as you see fit."

Ginny turned to look at herself in the mirror and her breath caught in her chest.

The robes she wore were white in color with accents of silver, designed entirely by Narcissa. Rather than having the high neckline of her Christmas robes, Ginny's wedding robes had no collar at all, and instead sloped off both shoulders with a soft, loose material that seemed to shimmer over the more figure-hugging fabric that started underneath it and then drifted softly over Ginny's curves, all the way to the floor. Around her neck, Ginny wore the necklace Narcissa had given her for Christmas. It sat beautifully against her bare collarbone.

"I wish they were here," whispered Ginny, unable to look away from her reflection.

"So do I," said Charlie, appearing at her side. The last of his tears seemed to have dried, but Ginny did not miss the way he looked at her reflection, as if he could not reconcile the sight of her with the little sister he knew. He turned to Ginny, his features serious.

"Ginny… You are sure this is what you want to do?"

"Yes, Charlie," said Ginny, taking her brother's hand. She paused, and a slow smile spread over her face. "He gave me options. He told me I could say no. But I chose him." She paused, before going on in a whisper, "I chose him more than once." She looked at her brother.

"I love him," she murmured, looking surprised, so that Charlie actually smiled a little at her obvious confusion. "I love him, and I haven't even told him that before."

"Today might be a good day," Charlie told her with a chuckle.

"I think you're right," agreed Ginny, before looking up as music began to play outside. Fleur slipped out to wrangle Margrethe, who was determined to dump her flower basket full of petals on Teddy's head. Her heart pounding, Ginny looked back to Charlie, who straightened to his full height and offered his arm.

"Are you ready, Gin?"

Ginny simply grinned.

Outside, the gathered crowd looked on in anticipation down the aisle. First came Margrethe, freshly two years old, toddling into view with her dress robes and flower basket and too large hair bow. Teddy stood at her side, and when the two were prodded into walking, Teddy paused and looked at Margrethe's bright red hair closely. Then his hair shifted to match her shade exactly, and only then was he content to walk forward as ring bearer.

The crowd giggled and in the second row, Astoria Greengrass jumped up to take a snapshot of the cute pair with her magical camera.

Once the two children had made it to the front and were corralled by their respective parents, the music changed.

At the front, Draco Malfoy emerged and stepped shortly to the front, his hands crossed in front of him and his shoulders squared. In the very first row, Narcissa Malfoy looked upon her son's proud features and a true smile found its way onto her normally severe features. At Narcissa's side, Andromeda sat and looked upon her nephew with all the admiration in the world.
At the end of the aisle, Ginny Weasley appeared, escorted by Charlie.

The crowd turned to look as Ginny moved, guided by Charlie. As soon as Ginny's eyes met Draco's down the aisle, a broad unstoppable smile stretched her features, and Draco's instantly matched, enthralled and jubilant at the same time.

Moving slowly, Ginny giggled, cheeks flushed, as George and Vera leaned over far in their seats and flashed her thumb's-up signs. As they neared the front, their walk slowed, and Charlie couldn't help but heave a little sigh, looking back to his little sister almost mournfully.

Ginny reached up and touched his face, and Charlie relaxed, giving her a small tearful smile. *I love you,* he mouthed to Ginny, and she responded the same, blinking back more tears even as she smiled. Finally, Charlie turned to Draco, who was staring at Ginny as if he'd never seen such a magnificent sight in his life.

"Take care of her," said Charlie, extending a hand to Draco.

Draco looked to him, and he immediately nodded, taking on his most refined pose, as if he felt the transfer of concern for Ginny fall directly on him and was determined to prove himself worthy. "I will," he promised Charlie, shaking his hand. Charlie seemed to relax then, and he bowed his head to Ginny once before stepping away.

Together, Ginny and Draco turned to face one another and their hands slipped together.

The broad smiles returned, and they both laughed a little as the administrator of the ceremony – a well-paid confidante of the Malfoys – read the official decrees between them, the ones which bound them – officially, spiritually and magically – together for all eternity.

Taking a long piece of cloth, the administrator wrapped it slowly around Ginny and Draco's joined hands as he recited the oath.

"This knot symbolizes the unity of two persons, forever bound," said the wizard, "in matters of all mind, love and magic. May this unity never be disrupted by anger or false words, nor may it be tainted by misuse of the love between them."

Another cloth, this one crimson, moved over the first, overlapping Ginny and Draco's hands.

"This cloth represents blood, which the two of you now share, forever symbolizing the ever-enduring nature of your clan."

A different cloth, this one ivory.

"This cloth represents the purity of the love between the two of you, as well as your vow to preserve it."

The next cloth was gold.

"This cloth represents prosperity, which you now share between you, as all things that were once yours are now another demonstration of your unfailing union."

The final cloth was blue.

"And this cloth represents magic, which you, as a witch and wizard, now make and grow together, for no magic is ever more powerful than that which is created by love." Ginny and Draco's expressions melted into one another as the other wizard continued, "And may no manner of magic,
whether harmful or benign in nature, ever come between the two of you."

He looked between the pair.

"Do you, Draco Malfoy, accept Ginevra Weasley as your lawfully wedded wife?"

Their eyes met. "I do."

"And do you," said the other wizard, "Ginevra Weasley, take Draco Malfoy to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

No hesitation. "I do," she said softly.

The wizard then took out his own wand and touched it to the top of Ginny and Draco's bound hands.

"By the Order of Merlin," he said loudly for the audience, "I decree that you, Draco Lucius Malfoy and Ginevra Molly Weasley, are now bound in legal, spiritual and magical matrimony, until the end of your days."

Under the wizard's wand, the binding on their hands glowed and then seeped into their skin, leaving their hands luminous for a moment before it faded away. The administrator paused for just a moment before adding cheekily, "You may kiss the bride."

So Draco took Ginny in his arms and swept her up into a kiss, which Ginny returned fully, her arms wrapping around his neck as the audience clapped and cheered furiously.

After the newly married couple pulled apart, their faces flushed, they took one another's hands and walked down the aisle, much to the happiness of everyone present.

The ceremony didn't end there, of course.

From that moment on, the simple country site was full of music, laughter and food. Ginny and Draco rounded to their friends and family and met with each one. Narcissa hugged Draco first, and then even Ginny, though paused to make a comment about how Ginny should've worn her hair differently first. Ginny rolled her eyes.

"Oh, I'm so happy for you two!" exclaimed Andromeda, hugging them both.

"Thanks for letting Teddy be in the wedding," said Ginny, grinning at the little boy, who was following Margrethe everywhere, which the little girl did not seem to mind. She kept picking up flowers and then piling them into Teddy's arms, which he determinedly carried behind her, one step from her heels every moment.

Lavender appeared as well, with Parvartus tucked into her arms. She squealed and hugged Ginny. "You look so beautiful!" she said tearfully, "Doesn't she look beautiful, Theo?"

The tall lanky Slytherin looked over Ginny impassively. "Mm," was his response, though he congratulated Draco with a handshake. Astoria and Daphne Greengrass were also there, and Astoria promised Ginny she'd gotten a hundred photos.

"I'll send them ALL to you," she promised Ginny with a bounce. "They're going to be so lovely!"

"Thank you," said Ginny, laughing. "I appreciate it."
Dancing began then, and Vita, Vera's younger sister, was the first to start, dragging her sister and George onto the forest floor that served as their dance area. Vita was very much like Vera in personality, but perhaps even more wild, with an amazing amount of energy. Both the Russian witches had improved their English much during their time in England, and Vita was happy to talk to anyone who would listen, just so she could use it.

She also seemed to be eyeing any male in the area, including Blaise and Jean, before she realized that was unlikely to go anywhere. However, she wasn't the only one with her eye on someone.

"Just go and ask her to dance," prodded Lavender in a whisper. Theo squirmed in his seat and pretended as though he hadn't been watching Astoria where she stood at the food table, chatting with Narcissa. She certainly looked beautiful. "Theo, she'll say yes! Just go ask!"

"You don't know that," muttered Theo, his narrow face turning a bit bed. "Besides, she's busy. And what if Parvartus needs me?"

Lavender made a face and looked at the baby, who was sitting contentedly on a blanket and playing with a toy. "He's fine, Theo. Just go!" When Theo still refused, Lavender leaned forward and put her chin in her hands. "Theo," she said, drawing out his name in warning, "Do you really want to find out just how long I can continue to talk about something?" She paused, letting the horror of this sink in, which it seemed to do, given Theo's wide eyes.

"Because," she continued merrily, "I can talk for a long long long long long long long long long loooooooooooooooong –"

"Oh, alright!" snapped Theo at last, standing up from the table and doing his best to ignore Lavender's smirk. Greatly uncomfortable, Theo moved around the other dancers and shuffled over to Astoria, who turned to face him just as he appeared. She smiled brightly.

"Oh, hello Theo!"

He paused. "Hullo."

Nothing more was said. Astoria glanced around, as if waiting for something to happen. When Theo did nothing, Astoria continued sweetly, "Lovely wedding, isn't it?"

Theo shifted to look at the dancers, and Draco and Ginny, who were finally sitting down and eating. "Erm," he said. "Yes, I suppose."

Astoria bit her lip, her cheeks rosy. "Dancing sure looks fun."

Theo hunched his shoulders a bit and said nothing in response, now looking at the punch bowl. Finally, Astoria tilted her head at home. "I – I suppose I should go sit down," she said, when Theo refused to say anything further. When she turned away, she gave him another smile. "It was nice talking to you –"

"Would you like to dance?" rushed out Theo.

Astoria's features lit up. "Oh – Really? Yes, I would love to!"

Theo stared, as if he hadn't expected such a response. Fortunately, Astoria held out her hand for him and he only had to take it to continue, rather than say anything. Together, the two moved out to the other dancers and began their own, with Astoria easing Theo's hands into the right places.

Gradually, Theo relaxed, and Astoria's smile grew even more.
Meanwhile, Blaise was standing as still as he possibly could, so that no one could mistake him for the dancing sort. Unfortunately, both Gabrielle and Jean loved dancing, so they bounced all around him with ribbons from the maypole and slowly wrapped him up in colorful fabric until he began looking quite like a rainbow mummy.

This Blaise endured with a comically deadpan expression, which was gradually being lost to fabric.

"I hate both of you," he told them.

Soon, Ginny and Draco joined the dancing, smiles never leaving their faces as they curled in one another's arms, bodies warm and close. Ginny tightened her arms around Draco's neck so that their faces were close, lips brushing.

"So I have you all to myself now," she murmured against his lips.

"For all our lives," he confirmed, curled finger moving over her cheek. "Though knowing you and your affinity for trouble, that probably won't be long."

"Too bad. You're stuck with me now, Malfoy."

"The same could be said of you," Draco paused before adding pointedly, "Malfoy." Ginny grinned and kissed him, pressing their lips together and then pulling back just enough to whisper.

"I love you, Draco."

Draco's eyes widened.

"I knew it when I couldn't leave you behind," she confessed in a whisper. "When the thought of being without you made me feel like I'd lost my family all over again. Because that includes you now. You make me stronger and better and wiser and more loved. More capable of love, really."

Her eyes flickered over his face.

"And I suppose if I had to go on living without you, I could," she murmured. "But I chose not to… because that's not the life I want." Her hands moved to his front, over his pounding heart. "This is," she whispered.

Draco's response was to catch Ginny's lips with his in a searing kiss, one which pulled them together in a passionate embrace. When they parted, Draco looked to Ginny's eyes.

"I love you too," he murmured back, simply, unable to say anything else because all of his heart and mind were living in Ginny's words, content to never leave.

From there, the two simply looked upon one another before the clamor of the party drew them away again, and they smiled, going back to their guests with their hands clasped. Teddy, who had grown to adore Draco, ran to him and demanded to play, which Draco happily complied to.

After a while, everyone settled down to blankets or chairs, content to relax with one another under the slowly fading light of day. Night overtook the forest, but candles and lanterns protected their ring of celebration against the growing darkness.

Blaise took a seat on a blanket, long legs folded up and Gabrielle leaned against his shoulder as Jean stretched out over both of their laps. Theo and Lavender sat with Parvartus, and Astoria and Daphne sat next to them, laughing and playing with the baby under the warm glow of the candles.
In the center of the gathered circle, Teddy and Margrethe played and danced and giggled under the watchful eye of Fleur, Charlie and Andromeda. George, his wife Vera and her sister Vita looked on and made sure all the wine was drunk and all the sweets were eaten, grinning all the while.

As Draco and Ginny took their spots relaxing on the forest floor, Narcissa looked over at her son’s happy expression and felt a tendril of true peace. At her side, Andromeda touched her shoulder, and Narcissa looked to her sister and lightly touched her fingers.

The evening drifted by peacefully and comfortably, and eventually, it came to its conclusion and Draco and Ginny said their good-byes before rushing off, back to the beach home in Ireland, where they stripped off their fine dress robes and fell into bed together, hands roaming one another’s bodies, mouths desperately seeking any amount of available skin for kissing.

They finally came to a stop in the early hours of the morning, just as the sky began to lighten into shades of clearer blue, the stars fading back into their hiding places in the burgeoning day sky.

Draco shifted in the sheets, his bare body against Ginny's, arms wrapped firmly around her torso.

"I found him," he whispered against his wife's lips.

Ginny's eyes widened. "You did?" she whispered. "Where is he?"

"The Dark Lord has him still," Draco informed her quietly. "But I'll get to him. Soon." The two curled closer. "He's the one who's been keeping the records in the book. He has to be." Ginny nodded.

"No one knows wands like Ollivander," she agreed. Draco clasped his hand over hers, and Ginny leaned closer, her eyes glinting.

"Now, my husband," she said slowly, drawing herself up to him and meeting his gaze with a fierce look of determination.

"Shall we begin?"
Chapter 23

Author's Note: Thanks for the reviews, guys! Buckle up. This is going to be one hell of a story.

"The wand chooses the wizard. That much has always been clear to those of us who have studied wandlore… The strongest affinity between a wizard and a wand… These connections are complex. An initial attraction, and then a mutual quest for experience, the wand learning from the wizard, the wizard from the wand."

– Ollivander, HPDH

Draco Malfoy scanned the Minister of Magic's office.

Subtle changes had taken place since the last time he'd been there, and Draco made note of them. However, his attention became reasonably diverted when Lord Voldemort entered, tailed by a tall lean wizard with grey eyes and a narrow face which – Draco now assumed – had been intentionally sculpted in order to resemble Tom Riddle in his youth.

This, of course, was Damien Black.

"Tell me again," said Voldemort to Damien, "why you have bothered to bring Draco Malfoy to me?"

"My lord," said Damien, barely able to keep his smug expression under wraps, "Draco Malfoy has defied you." He paused, perhaps to let the fear sink in, though Draco's impassive face showed nothing. "He has gone and married Ginny Weasley without proper ceremony… and without asking your express permission."

Damien placed his hands behind him and looked expectantly to the Dark Lord, whose serpentine eyes cut in Draco's direction.

"Is this true, young Malfoy?"

Draco didn't hesitate. "Yes, sir. I apologize for not making the public announcement." He inclined his head calmly in the Dark Lord's direction. "We didn't want a large ceremony because I have been very busy integrating into my father's old position as Head of Muggleborn Registration. Work simply overtook pleasure, in this case."

"As it should," snapped the Dark Lord. Damien balked a little. "There are far more pressing matters to deal with than your ceremonies and parties." He turned to Damien. "You dare, Damien, to waste my time with such reports? I already dispensed permission to Lucius Malfoy for this union to take place months ago. It is hardly against my wishes."

Damien pursed his lips very tightly and Draco bit his own tongue to hide a smile.

"My lord," started Damien hesitantly, "I only thought – before you had asked that everyone – "

"I have more pressing things to attend to!" shouted Voldemort quite suddenly, eyes blazing, and Damien froze and immediately fell silent. "Your personal rivalries mean nothing to me. Get out.
Both of you.

Both Damien and Draco nodded their heads and moved out of the office, shutting the door behind them. As soon as they were out in the corridor of the bustling Ministry, Draco turned to his older cousin and smiled.

"It is a pity, isn't it," said Draco to Damien, "how very terrible you are at your own game."

Damien narrowed his eyes. "You should be more careful, Draco," he said. "You remember, of course, that I am watching you. And the first moment you and that blood traitor wife of yours slip up, I will be there."

"Well," said Draco, "I hope that report goes better for you than this one did. Honestly, telling the Dark Lord that I did exactly what he wanted me to do, and hoping I'd get punished?" Draco slipped his hands into the pockets of his robes. "I thought people said you were clever." He paused. "But perhaps that wasn't really anyone but you, pretending to be a lot of different people and giving yourself praise. Seems like the sort of thing you'd do."

Damien's jaw twitched. Then he forced a twisted smile. "Mock me if you like. Your little false marriage to a prisoner of war isn't going to keep you in the Dark Lord's graces for very long."

"False marriage?" Draco repeated. "Are you suggesting that my relationship with my wife is inauthentic?" He looked amused. "Because I can assure you, it is very real. In fact, I daresay it's much more real than anything you could procure. And why haven't you married yet? Can't find a witch willing to stand still long enough for you to Imperius her?"

Damien's nostrils flared. "I have a wife," he said coolly. "She lives in St. Petersburg."

At that moment, a crowd of Ministry officials parted and Ginevra Molly Malfoy (néé Weasley) entered, moving through the people with her head held high, bright red hair down, soft and wavy, and wearing a set of strikingly beautiful cream colored robes, handpicked by Narcissa.

To Damien, who had rarely seen Ginny in the last few months, she must have looked astonishingly more elegant than ever before, with a carefully crafted air of importance also courtesy of Narcissa.

This young powerful witch was no longer a "prisoner of war." Instead, she was the Lady of the most important magical house in Great Britain, and there was not a soul in the large room who did not look at her as she passed.

This time, Draco didn't bother to disguise his smile. "Hello, love," he said as Ginny came to his side, beaming at him.

"There you are," she said, before shifting to look at Damien, who seemed to be increasingly losing his patience with his day, as if he was ready to go to bed even though it was only ten AM, because nothing was going right for him at all. "Ah, Damien." Ginny flashed him a mocking smile.

"Would you believe it," said Draco to Ginny, with a fake air of surprise, "Damien claims he has a wife back in St. Petersburg."

"Is that so?" said Ginny, before shifting to look at Damien. "You do realize that shape-shifting into a woman in front of the mirror and touching yourself doesn't count, right?"

Draco snorted, and Damien turned every shade of red before he at last snapped his gaze in the opposite direction with such force that he might have severed his own spinal cord. With one last glare in the couple's direction, he stalked off.
Both Ginny and Draco laughed, linking arms and walking off. Ginny's smile faded quickly, though. "What was that all about? What happened?"

"Damien is an idiot," said Draco lowly to his wife as they walked. "He tried to get me into trouble with the Dark Lord for our private ceremony, but the Dark Lord had other things on his mind. He ended up telling Damien off for bothering him with such nonsense."

"Good," breathed Ginny in relief. She paused. "What's the Dark Lord worried about?"

Draco guided Ginny along the Ministry, as this was her first trip there since the end of the war. "I have some guesses," he murmured. "But nothing we should discuss here." Ginny nodded quickly.

"I suppose it's unwise of us to insult Damien," she admitted with a scowl.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," said Draco. "Now that the Dark Lord feels he has our unwavering supporting, he doesn't care that we like Damien all that much. Besides, the Dark Lord was a Slytherin. Slytherins are ambitious." Draco looked over at Ginny. "Ambition breeds competition, and competition sparks animosity. It's hardly a surprise to anyone that Damien and I aren't exactly civil towards one another."

"So that means – "

"No, Ginny, that does not mean we can kill or maim him."

Ginny scowled again. "Says the man who tried to pound Damien into soup." After a few minutes, Ginny looked up at the sound of a clock chiming. "It's almost time. Do you know what this press conference is about?"

"No," admitted Draco, frowning. "I should have paid more attention to my father. He always knew what was going on before anyone else. He'd have all the details already, I know it." Ginny smoothed a hand over Draco's knuckles as he scanned the room worriedly. "I wish I could talk to him."

"I know the feeling," said Ginny softly. Draco squeezed her hand in response. Together, the pair walked into the large open conference hall, just beyond the main lobby of the Ministry. They passed the large flat grey statue bearing the Ministry's new symbol and slogan – MAGIC IS MIGHT. Similar signs and tapestries seemed to be everywhere now. It was impossible to escape.

Ginny and Draco reached the gathering crowd at last, all of which was formed in front of a large stage.

On the stage, Pius Thicknesse, Minister of Magic, stood behind a podium.

"I don't understand the point of having a Minister of Magic," muttered Ginny to Draco, eyes narrowed. "Everyone knows he's just a puppet."

"It's all about the illusion," said Draco, eyes sweeping the gathering crowd. "Thicknesse was a prestigious Ministry official before the war. The Dark Lord knows he's better for the public image. If people still believe they have a government, they're going to turn a blind eye to most everything else." Draco looked darkly upon the stage.

Ginny frowned. "Normal is just what you're used to, no matter how terrible it is," she murmured.

Minister Thicknesse placed his own wand to his throat. "Sonorus!" His voice became magnified, and the large group of witches and wizards stilled and grew quiet. Nearby, a small herd of
photographers from the *Daily Prophet* took up their cameras and charmed notepads and quills. Everyone present became rapt with attention.

"Good morning," said the Minister, strange features looking out over them all. He was Imperius'ed, and had been so since before the fighting broke out. Supposedly, the curse was impossible to detect, but Ginny felt as if she could see it, written on his strained features. He went on, "We have gathered here today to celebrate a momentous occasion, as well as to announce many exciting new developments for our great country."

"First," said the Minister, "Let me be the first to congratulate our Ministry of Magic on moving forward with every initiative we've proposed, in order to make our magical community safe – safe from Muggles, and from the theft of magic they pose!"

Scattered applause was drowned out by the more enthusiastic responses of prominent pure-blood officials gathered at the front. Others quickly felt obligated to join in.

"Our country is now on track to become the greatest this world has ever seen," continued the Minister. "For we have every measure in place to eradicate those thieves who dare call themselves witches and wizards, and who threaten our very culture and way of life in every possible way. To combat this, we are utilizing our Department of Muggle-born Registration Commission, now led by Draco Malfoy!"

More applause, and Ginny and Draco both forced smiles and waved as the photographers turned to them for a moment. Thicknesse nodded to them before continuing.

"Additionally, we have new measures in place to secure every magical area in Great Britain from the infestation of Muggles, some of which extends even into the Muggle government itself." At this, some people looked at one another in surprise. Others nodded heartily; magical interference in the Muggle governments was not entirely new, so while some were unsure, most others seemed to find it encouraging.

"Soon enough," said Thicknesse, as the photographers snapped away, "We plan to permanently... assure our safety from Muggles and their disgusting brethren, so that our people and our culture is safe from their meddlesome interference and degradation."

Ginny raised a brow at Draco, but he could only shake his head. He had no idea what the Minister meant by that either, but it didn't sound good.

"The first step to preserving our magical purity," continued the Minister, "as well as our safety from the threat that Muggles and Mudbloods pose to us and our children, comes to us in the form of a brand-new security measure." Turning, the Minister gestured, and on the stage marched a long line of wizards – no witches among them – wearing black, close-fitting robes and matching expressions of steel.

"I am proud to present to you all, our replacement for the Ministry's outdated and useless league of Aurors! This is the magical law enforcement of the future! These are our protectors!"

The stiff line of wizards snapped to attention and faced the crowd, many of whom balked and backed away from the stage.

"This group of highly skilled and deadly law enforcers are called Regulators," said Thicknesse as the cameras flashed away at high speeds. "And they are here to be the eyes of the Ministry." He paused, as the heaviness of this implication swept over the crowd and settled. "They will ensure your safety by personally handling any infraction, any breech of law against our beloved Ministry."
A few brave people whispered and looked around, but everyone else kept hushed and still.

"So for those who would seek to hurt us, this great society of magical blood," continued Thicknesse, "The Regulators will deal with them… swiftly and effectively. In order to ensure that they are able to their jobs well, we must ask that you comply with their every request, for they have only you and your familes in mind."

Ginny and Draco's eyes both widened, and Draco scanned the row of wizards before leaning over to Ginny. "They're nearly all foreigners," he whispered darkly. "Guess no one figured they could trust that many Brits to turn in their own kinsmen."

"Rejoice in your new protectors," exclaimed the Minister, waving his arms at the straight-faced group of wizards, all of whom looked out coldly over the crowd. "While the Muggle-born Commission tracks down and eradicates the Muggle threat, and the Snatchers bring them to justice, you have these fine wizards…” he gestured "… waiting nearby, always, to ensure that the law is being kept."

Just then, the line of wizards clamped their hands, wands wrapped tightly in their fingers, over their chest in a sudden motion that jarred the rest of the room.

"Our new Ministry is now stronger than ever!" called out the Minister. "Without the taint of Muggles, we grow more powerful every day!"

Somewhere down the line, some Ministry official was passing out yet more of the Mudbloods and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society pamphlets. The brightly colored sheets of parchment scattered in the hands of the crowd.

"With your help," the Minister said to the crowd, "we can preserve our way of life! This country is yours! And it is your duty as a true witch or wizard to guard it against any who would see it weakened!" He looked out into the crowd. "It is up to you to report any infractions you witness. For if you do not, it is YOU who is bringing about the downfall of our great magical civilization. And it is you who will pay the price."

Satisfied with the attention of the crowd, the Minister straightened behind the podium and smiled slowly.

"Remember, if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear."

Ginny's hands clenched over the obnoxious pink pamphlet.

Then the Minister raised his wand in the air. "MAGIC IS MIGHT!" he exclaimed, and the Death Eaters gathered at the front of the crowd chanted with him. Soon, the whole crowd joined in, and each word grew louder and louder as Ginny and Draco turned slowly in their spots, eyes wide.

The shouts echoed throughout the Ministry.

"MAGIC IS MIGHT! MAGIC IS MIGHT! MAGIC IS MIGHT!"

That night, Draco re-entered the Ministry unseen and slipped past the paltry security at the front of a long corridor filled with cells. It hadn't been hard; the Ministry likely assumed that few people would have a reason to sneak in and speak to Garrick Ollivander.

When Draco found him, hunched in the corner of his cell, he paused for a moment, as he wasn't sure whether or not the old man was alive. Draco came to the bars of the cell and leaned against it,
a heavy knot forming in his throat. He remembered so clearly the day he's gone to Ollivander's for his own wand. It seemed so distant, now, the day this crumpled version of a wizard had been strong and certain enough to stand up and navigate his shop with astounding skill.

"Draco Malfoy," said Ollivander, his voice hoarse with disuse.

Draco hadn't spoken, and he hadn't seen Ollivander look up from where he was hunched over his knees, so the voice caught him off guard. He swallowed and glanced at the entrance from which he'd come, but he felt relatively secure, and so he knelted in front of the bars.

"Yes," he said to Ollivander.

At this, the old wizard lifted his head, and Draco fought the urge not to flinch. Incarceration had not been easy on Ollivander, and this was not even the first time the Dark Lord had kept him locked away to abuse and torture. It seemed that any breath the old wizard breathed might be his last. His hands were gnarled and skeletal, and his face sunken. At the sight of Draco, however, his blue eyes lit up a bit, and Draco saw a spark of life there once more.

"I suppose you're here about the Elder Wand," croaked Ollivander.

Draco felt his heart pound. "Yes," he said again. Then – "Did you write the book? The one on the wand?"

"Every wandmaker in my family has kept that book," said Ollivander, shifting slowly on the dirty floor to face Draco. "We've been making wands for centuries… to know the location and owner of the most famous and powerful wand of all time… Well, it seemed logical to my ancestors, I suppose."

"How could you know for sure?" asked Draco, his brows furrowed. "How do you know where the allegiance of the wand lies?"

At this, Ollivander looked, for a moment, like his old self, sly and wise and a bit mischievous.

"My family has always had a special talent with wands, young Malfoy. The relationship between a wand and its owner is a terribly… complex thing, remarkable in its depth, really." He lifted a hand, index finger extended, and his eyes turned to it, as if it were a wand and he were casting a spell.

"Voldemort wants the complete allegiance of the wand, but… alas, it seems he may never have it."

"He will if he kills me," Draco murmured, eyes flickering.

Ollivander fell quiet for a very long moment. Then he said, "Perhaps."

Draco raised a brow. "Perhaps? Are you saying the Elder Wand doesn't work the way we think it does?"

"Wands, young Malfoy, are as fickle and unpredictable as those witches and wizards who wield them. Sometimes, it is simply not possible to predict what one might do, particularly one which is as old and experienced as the Elder Wand."

Draco listened intently as Ollivander leaned forward and continued in a raspy whisper, "Tell me, Draco. What does the Dark Lord seek above all else?"

Draco frowned. "Power… Domination…" Ollivander seemed to be waiting for something else. "Immortality," Draco said at last, and Ollivander actually smiled, wiggling his finger.
"Yes, yes… Voldemort seeks to cheat Death. But the Elder Wand… was created by Death, and therefore, does not like to be robbed of souls any more than Death itself does." Draco's eyes lowered, his throat dry as he mulled over Ollivander's words. The old man sighed. "I always thought that Harry Potter would be the one to take control of the wand… to put an end to Voldemort, so Death could have him."

Draco's eyes flickered back up, darkening for a moment at the mention of Harry, the Boy Who Died and left everyone in hell.

"Why didn't he?" asked Draco, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "He was supposed to save us all."

Ollivander's face pinched with sorrow. "He was too much a part of Voldemort, I think, to live… he had to be destroyed, or there was no hope of Voldemort's eventual demise." Ollivander tilted his head. "But you, Draco Malfoy, you have a connection with this wand now. You have the potential to truly use it, in a way that has so far eluded Voldemort."

"Only because I disarmed Dumbledore," said Draco. "It could have been anyone in my place."

Ollivander's eyes twinkled. "The wand chooses the wizard, Mr. Malfoy. Even the wand of Death."

Draco fell silent at this. Finally, he stood. "Thank you, Ollivander." He paused and looked over the man's conditions. "I wish I was able to free you."

Ollivander shook his head. "Do not fret," he said calmly. "I am dying, and it will be over soon."

Draco frowned. After a moment, he reached in the pocket of his robes and pulled out a small potion bottle, which he extended to Ollivander through the bars.

"Ah," said Ollivander, leaning weakly against the metal. He smiled at Draco, even as his eyes drooped. "Thank you, young sir." Then, without a moment's hesitation, the battered wizard drank the potion down to the last drop and extended the bottle back to Draco, who tucked it into his robes.

"Now," said Ollivander blissfully, "I can finally rest."

With one last curt nod, Draco rose from his spot and left the corridor. When he paused at the door to look back at Ollivander, he saw that the man was slack against the bars and his eyes were closed. One limp hand lay on the ground, knuckles against the grimy floor.

So Draco turned and left, without looking back again.

Before Draco returned home to the Manor, he stopped by a different department of the Ministry, where he at last managed to complete a lengthy set of paperwork he'd been working on for a month. With his new prize in hand, Draco returned home to the illustrious Wiltshire manor he and his family inhabited.

There, sitting in an armchair by the fire, he found his wife.

"Well?" said Ginny, looking up excitedly. "What did you find out?"

Draco waved off her question. "In a moment," he said, moving to rest on the arm chair. "I have something to give you." Ginny raised a brow at him before looking to the box. At Draco's prompting, she took it from him and opened it slowly.
Inside lay a Yew wand, 12 inches in length, slightly bendy and with a dragon heartstring core.

"Draco…" Ginny's eyes widened, and she took in her hand the wand she'd been stripped off nearly two years before. She stood, grasping it firmly in her hand, and then she faced Draco with her features ablaze with determination.

Draco watched without rising. "They were unwise to provoke you," he said, just as he'd said to her that night.

Ginny smoothed her fingers over the length of the wand and did not take her eyes off it.

"Yes," she said. "They were."

Author's Note: I realize this chapter is shorter than pretty much all others, but I felt this was a good place to end it. More action coming very soon.
Chapter 24

Author's Note: Thanks for the reviews, guys! Sorry this update took a minute. I've been transitioning into a new job in addition to planning for DragonCon.

Also, don't forget to check out my other story The House of Black to read more about Narcissa and her early years (starting from school and going on into her marriage with Lucius). That story will eventually catch up with and overlap this one.

Also also, I plan to write the moment Ginny and Draco unveil the truth about Percy to Charlie and George, but I didn't include it in this story because chronologically, I wanted to start Part II at the point I did (and the talk would have had to take place earlier).

Anyway, enjoy!

"Harry found himself taking [the Marauder's Map] out simply to stare at Ginny's name in the girls' dormitory, wondering whether the intensity with which he gazed at it might break into her sleep, that she would somehow know he was thinking about her, hoping that she was all right."

– HPDH, pg 256

Harry Potter was standing at the foot of their bed.

Ginny bolted upright, blinking furiously against sleep and trying to clear her eyes. Even after a few seconds, he was still there, just watching her. He looked so out of place against the backdrop of the luxurious Malfoy Manor's master bedroom, where everything was dark and refined and stylish but also austere and unapproachable.

Harry looked exactly like she remembered him – shaggy, uncombed black hair, round spectacles, curious green eyes. For a moment, Ginny was frozen in her spot. Then she tried to say his name.

"Har – "

He was gone.

Slowly, the world around Ginny came back to life. The sounds of early morning in Wiltshire, England filtered back into Ginny's consciousness. The room became sharper. She felt the elegant silk sheets around her and the luxurious pillows at her back.

Ginny swallowed tightly.

Had he really been there? Had she – really – or had she been asleep? She was in bed, after all… Swallowing thickly, Ginny looked over to the other side of the bed. It was empty. Draco had been going in early to the Ministry every day for the last week.

Shaken, Ginny forced herself out of bed and then nearly jumped out of her skin when Bleaker appeared with breakfast. "So sorry, Mistress Malfoy," said Bleaker, despairing that he'd caused her even a moment's grief. Ginny looked over at the elf, unsure of what to say for a moment as she fought off the last of her trembles.

"It's alright," she managed at last. "I just had a strange dream."
When she looked at the food, she found she didn't want to eat, and she told Bleaker to take it away. However, Bleaker hesitated.

"M'am, remember you must take food with your potion." He pointed to the small bottle on the tray. Oh, right, thought Ginny. The contraceptive potion she'd been diligently taking since getting together with Draco required food, and she knew she couldn't skip a day of that, so Ginny forced herself to eat some fruits and crackers before gulping down the potion.

Contraceptive potions were currently illegal, thanks to the Ministry's determination to micromanage the lives of every British magical citizen. This filled Ginny with a rage she could not properly express without resorting to violence. After all, even *speaking* of contraception in any form was considered treasonous and a reportable offense to the Ministry. A few witches had already been imprisoned in Azkaban for proven cases of it, or so Ginny had heard.

Still, the Malfoy family was expert in all things illegal, and so they had a great stock of illegal potions, these in particular being among them. That was certainly a good thing. Ginny had other things on her mind.

After getting dressed and wandering down the hallway, Ginny found Narcissa Black sitting in the drawing room, writing a letter. Ginny sat down across from her.

"You certainly write a lot of letters," said Ginny.

Narcissa paused and then continued writing. "It is infinitely preferable to the alternative."

Ginny paused. "You mean… talking to people in person?"

Narcissa smiled tightly. "Precisely." She continued writing, and Ginny leaned back in her seat. The truth was, Ginny felt antsy. She and Draco now had their objective, and they both knew that, sooner or later, they would be fighting their second war in as many years. But for now, Ginny had no real resources or plans to act on, and so all she felt was anxiety.

Narcissa was not privy to their plans, but something told Ginny the elder witch had her suspicions. Narcissa was as sharp as she was arrogant, and that was quite a feat. However, because Narcissa wasn't outwardly aware of what Ginny and Draco planned to do, Ginny thought it best to establish a cover. At least it would make her feel like she was doing something.

"I think I might go back to working at my brother's store in Diagon Alley," mentioned Ginny. "I miss it."

At this, Narcissa sighed that sigh she reserved specifically for Ginny. "No."

"No?" Ginny repeated. "What do you mean, no? I can work for my brother if I want!"

"You're a Malfoy now," said Narcissa. "You're not supported to work like a common grunt." She continued to write, and Ginny scowled.

"Well, then, what the hell am I supposed to do all day? Sit around and write letters?"

Narcissa narrowed her eyes and put down her quill so she could deliver the full force of her cold appraisal directly at Ginny. "You're the mistress of the most powerful household in Britain. You are expected to maintain a social presence now, Ginny."

Ginny made a face. "What's that even mean?"
"It means," said Narcissa with what she must have thought was a great deal of patience, "that you need to start making connections. Friends." She looked back at her parchment and blew on the wet ink. "Without friends, you will drown."

"I have friends," Ginny pointed out. "Loads of them."

"The ones in prison don't count," countered Narcissa dryly.

This time, Ginny screwed up her face in a greatly ugly grimace. Then, when Narcissa continued to ignore her, Ginny stood up from the table with a heavy sigh. "Well, this has been grand, as always," she told Narissa flatly, dragging herself away from the chair.

Before she made it out of the room, however, Narcissa called to her.

"Ginny," said Narcissa, settling a look on Ginny that intrigued her. "Do try and do as I said. After all, friends can prove to be very useful." She paused. "Particularly when it comes to …information." Then she began writing again, and Ginny left the room, thoughtful.

Some time in the afternoon, Draco returned home.

As soon as he entered their suite, Draco looked excitedly to Ginny and then laid out a long scroll, which he spread out with his hands. "Here it is," he said to Ginny, who rushed to the table. Draco looked up at her, grey eyes flashing. "This is the entire list of prisoners still in Ministry custody as of the time you were released nearly a year ago."

Draco straightened from the table. "It wasn't easy to get, considering I had no professional reason for obtaining it, but I managed. Now," he said, pointing to the parchment, "I also know the Ministry plans to release a second group of prisoners in just a week or two. Unfortunately, I don't know who it is or where they're going."

Ginny fell into a seat and tugged the parchment near her. "We'll have to find out, somehow," she said, before looking to the list of names. "So, now we just need to sort through here and figure out who is where."

"And whether or not we can recruit them to help us," added Draco. He got out a quill and ink pot and sat on the table next to Ginny.

"Alright," said Ginny, scanning the list of names. "So let's see who's accounted for already. There's me, of course. Then Charlie… George…. " Draco made notes next to the names. Ginny paused. "Percy," she said, before sighing and then crossing out his name. Percy was gone. She looked to the top of the list.

"Hannah Abbott," read Ginny. "She was with Rookwood, I think."

"And Ernie Macmillan was with the Carrows," said Draco, looking at the name on the parchment. "Do you think we can recruit either one of them?"

Ginny thought about it. "They were both in Dumbledore's Army in school. They're very close, and they're desperate to be together again. If we can convince one, we can get them both."

Draco smirked. "Ah, manipulating their bond for our benefit. I like it."

Ginny made a face at him. "Anyway," she said pointedly. "We need to figure out how to talk to them without their keepers around. It'll take some work." They made a few notes on the parchment.
"And then of course, there's Lavender, who's with Theo."

"Do you believe she'll fight again?" asked Draco

Ginny hesitated. "I'm not sure. Let's wait to approach her." Then she looked curiously to Draco. "And what of Theo? Do you think he'll join us?"

Draco twirled his quill in his fingers. "Theo was never a Death Eater," said Draco cautiously, "however, he learned at a young age to lay low and avoid conflict at all costs. He's not going to fight, no matter what incentive we give him."

Ginny frowned. "Would he rat us out if he knew?"

Draco thought about it. "He might, if the alternative is being tortured or getting Lavender Brown taken away from him. Remember, they have the child to worry about, too."

"I know, I know," said Ginny impatiently. She wanted to know who WOULD help them, not who they'd have to worry about. She wanted to know their strengths, she wanted fighters. "What about Zabini?"

"Most definitely not," said Draco. "Blaise and his family have made dodging conflict an art form. I would like to tell him what's going on when the timing is right, so he can be prepared in case there's any backlash, but... there's not a single thing in this world that would make him fight with us."

Ginny made a face before she brightened up. "Oh, but I bet Gabrielle would help!"

"She's pregnant," Draco reminded her.

"So?" Ginny responded. "Maybe she'll have some physical limitations a little later on, but she can still work for our side, she can still -- "

"Ginny," interrupted Draco, suddenly firm. His expression softened at Ginny's obvious confusion, and he slipped down from the table and settled into a chair next to her. "You cannot go into this believing that everyone who hates Death Eaters will also want to fight in a war against them. Abbott, Macmillan, Brown – anyone and everyone on that list, they've all been prisoners now for years."

"They all also fought with Dumbledore's Army," argued Ginny. "Shouldn't they want to fight again? To save themselves and their families?" She waved her hand at the parchment. "These people should be angry, they should be ready for someone to lead them away from the abuse and the torment -- "

"Ginny, of course they want it to end, but you said it yourself. Normal is what you're used to," Draco studied her. "Most of these people have been in captivity for a while. And they weren't treated like you were," he reminded her. "Even when you and I were far from friends, I never treated you the way the Carrows treat Macmillan, or the way Nott treated Lavender Brown."

Ginny shifted, dread filling her stomach. It was tinged with the familiar layer of guilt. "I know that," she said stubbornly. "But that should be all the more incentive for them to fight back, shouldn't it? Why shouldn't they join us?"

Draco took a moment to look over Ginny's face, and perhaps arrange his words carefully. "People are tired, Ginny," he said at last. "Especially the ones who lost. There's been two wars in twenty-five years, and a lot of dead from both. Can you blame them for not wanting to fight anymore?"
Ginny's eyes dropped, and she remembered Lavender, slowly recovering from her ordeal with Nott. Lavender was finally at a place of peace.

"But…" started Ginny weakly. She hadn't counted on this. "But I – "

"You're stronger than most," Draco said. "Not everyone can be like you."

Ginny frowned, curling her fingers on the table. Suddenly, Charlie's words from months before floating back into her mind. But those of us who have someone waiting on us to come home… We can't afford to act rashly. We can't afford to fight. We can't afford to lose again.

Seeing Ginny's downcast expression, Draco reached across the table and covered her hand with his own. "That doesn't mean we can't win this. I just don't want you to expect more than we might get, that's all."

"But how are we going to fight them if we can't get more people on our side?" asked Ginny weakly. Her fingers slipped into his, lacing together. "We need all the support we can get. And it's dangerous to go out campaigning."

Draco shifted his eyes to the parchment. "We have a whole list to go through," he said, before rolling his eyes. "I'm sure some of these will be as stubborn as you." He quirked his lips a little, and Ginny relaxed just a bit, her freckles crinkling into her small smile.

"I suppose we'll just have to start here and then hope for the best, right?"

"Blind optimism it is," agreed Draco. "Now, let's see…" He turned back to the parchment. "Many more of these are already out but unaccounted for. And honestly, I'm not sure I can find out their locations and statuses without arousing suspicion from the Ministry. However," he smirked at Ginny "I am willing to bet those gossipy witches you holed up with at the Christmas party might know."

"You think so?" asked Ginny, before groaning. "Oh, that means I have to talk to them."

"And you'll have to be cautious about it," Draco reminded her. "Anything suspicious can now be reported directly to a Regulator. And I heard they've already started snatching up witches and wizards of all standings, just for saying something negative about the Minister or some rubbish. It's ridiculous."

"Not to mention," added Ginny with a scowl, "Damien could be lurking around anywhere, looking like anyone."

"Exactly," said Draco, leaning back in his chair. He rubbed a hand over his face. "I wish I could just tie him to a branch of the Whomping Willow and watch him die."

"That would only be fun for a little while," said Ginny. "He'd probably die on the first WHACK. No, I think surrendering him to the lake mermaids would be better. They'd take it slow."

"We could also just drop him in the Forbidden Forest," noted Draco. "Tie his legs together and let him crawl." Draco pointed. "There is some terrifying shit in there."

"These are all good plans," grinned Ginny. "However, we're getting off topic." She looked back to the paper. "What we need to do now is find out where these prisoners are and how we can talk to them, so we can at least make the offer of having them on our side. We also need to try and find the Muggle-borns who escaped the Ministry during the breakout. Many of them were good fighters."
"And the ones that aren't? The children?" asked Draco.

Ginny took in a deep breath. "We need to get them out of Great Britain."

Draco tipped back his head and groaned. "So in addition to gathering a sizeable force, now we are transporting children?"

"Yes, Draco," said Ginny emphatically. "So that means – and I can't believe I'm saying this – but you need to start actually doing your job at the Ministry. Find the Muggle-borns."

"Mm," said Draco. "That is… unfortunately, easier said than done." At Ginny's confused look, Draco leaned forward. "The way the Muggle-borns were identified before the war was a heavily guarded secret. It's the very same secret I believe your brother Percy was killed over. I believe he refused to let Damien and the others know how the Ministry found Muggle-borns for the school."

"Really? There isn't a department or something?" asked Ginny, brows furrowed.

"No," said Draco, "or at least, not a traditional one. It's not public and never has been. Only the highest ranking Ministry officials knew anything about it, and I'm not even sure my father was completely aware of what it was."

"Does Umbridge know?" asked Ginny. Draco shook his head.

"No, I believe she only rounded up Muggle-borns who were already old enough to register, meaning they'd already been identified long before. No, there's something the Ministry has that locates Muggle-borns before they even become aware of their magic." Draco toyed with a quill, looking thoughtful. "You're sure we can't just leave the Muggle-born kids to their own devices? Surely they're safer that way."

"Uneducated magical children with muggle parents, safe?" questioned Ginny skeptically. "Think about it, Draco. What happens to magical children whose abilities go unchecked and unused?"

Draco paled. "Obscurials," he said, and Ginny nodded. "But those are incredibly rare."

"Perhaps," agreed Ginny, "but leaving an entire generation unsupervised means the chances of one happening are greater." She waved a hand. "The world is already going to hell, and even the Muggles are starting to notice. The Ministry is trying to take over their government. The last thing we need is a bunch of magical children carrying around dark parasitic magic that wreaks destruction and mayhem at a moment's notice," she pointed out. "That could be just the sort of chaos the Ministry needs to move in on British Muggles and take over them entirely."

Draco was quiet for a moment. "Damn it," he muttered. He dropped his hands to the table with a thump. "We need more than fighters, love. We need help on all sides."

"Then we better get to it."

Nodding, Draco stood up from his chair. "Well, in that case, I'm going to go take a shower and perhaps drown." He leaned over to kiss Ginny's hand, which she watched with a soft smile. Before he could go too far, she called his name.

"Yes?" He turned around to face her.

Ginny let her eyes fall over him appreciatively before speaking. "Thank you," she said tenderly. "You're putting yourself at great risk for all this. You really are brave, you know." She stood away
from the table and moved up to Draco, sliding her arms around him. "I might even be willing to admit I'm a bit Slytherin… if you'll say that you're just a little Gryffindor, deep down."

Draco thought on this as he drew circles on Ginny's lower back, his eyes sweeping over her face with all the admiration in the world. Finally, he leaned close, brushed her lips tenderly against hers, took a deep breath and said –

"Mmmm... no."

Then he kissed her and pulled away, smirking at Ginny's expression. "You prat!" exclaimed Ginny, laughing as Draco sauntered away. She turned back to the parchment, lips still quirked and let her head fall into her hand, gaze thoughtful.

Unfortunately, it did seem that Ginny's best chance at finding out information was – as Narcissa had predicted – by associating herself with the socialites Ginny despised. Since Ginny's marriage to Draco, letters and invitations had flooded the Manor, all from various witches and wizards who wanted a moment of Ginny's time to claim as their own. Of course, none of these people had given Ginny the time of day when she'd been a Weasley, both before the war and after, but now that she was head of the Malfoy family along with Draco, Ginny was suddenly quite important.

Eugh. It all made Ginny want to punch something.

Still, this was the path she needed to take. However, instead of trying to figure out the confusing mess of invites and so on, Ginny took the entire armful of envelopes and letters, ran to Narcissa and dumped them all in the other woman's lap before attempting to run off.

Narcissa caught her, of course, and then forcibly dragged Ginny (by magic) back to the sitting room, where she forced Ginny to sit with her and sort through the pile of post piece by piece.

"No... no... no... hardly," said Narcissa, perusing through each piece of mail before casting it aside. Ginny was sitting opposite her mother-in-law, slumped in a chair and staring at the ceiling. This was supposed to be important, Ginny knew, but they'd been at it for a half hour already and all Narcissa had done so far was dismiss each invitation with a scathing retort.

"No... no... Oh, who does she think she's fooling?" Narcissa scoffed, casting the letter aside. "No... no... Oh!" Ginny jerked her head up. "This stationary is lovely," said Narcissa, and Ginny stared in disbelief as the elder witch called for her house-elf. "Go and purchase this stationary from Diagon Alley," Narcissa told the nervous elf. "Oh, and make sure to buy all of it. I don't want anyone else to have it."

The house-elf nodded and disappeared while Ginny watched with a squished expression of annoyance.

Narcissa went back to her perusal of the mail, casting off many of the invitations instantly.

"Uh, isn't the point of this to accept some of them?" asked Ginny. "I'm supposed to be making friends, remember?"

"You're a Malfoy now," said Narcissa, eyes still on a letter. "Your time must be exclusive. You can't just accept any rubbish that comes your way." She paused at small envelope, and Ginny braced herself for yet another thrilling diversion concerned with artfully decorated parchment. "Look at this," said Narcissa, finally giving Ginny her attention. "An invitation for a garden party... from Pansy Krum."
Ginny sat up straighter. "You're joking. She hates me! What on earth would Pansy want me at her garden party for?"

Narcissa inspected the brief invite. "Well, to cause you harm or humiliate you, of course." She said this calmly, as if Ginny was not staring at her in alarm. When she finally noticed Ginny's look, Narcissa added, "It's unlikely to be physical harm, if that makes you feel any better."

"It," said Ginny, "does not." After a moment, she said, "So I should decline, right?"

"Oh no," said Narcisa. "This one you should most certainly accept." She wrote quickly on the parchment and tucked it back into the envelope. "If this little pug-faced girl wants you at her party, she obviously means to surpass you in some public way to establish herself as your superior. It's all a competition, remember?"

"So you're saying I should just go and... what?" asked Ginny. "Push her into a patch of thorny bushes?"

Narcissa rolled her eyes. "You should watch her, of course. And then, whenever you've figured out what she means to do to you, simply turn it back on her. Be vigilant, be cautious, and above all, maintain your position." Narcissa handed Ginny back the envelope. "This is your chance to establish yourself. A name can only do you so much good. You must live up to it."

Ginny looked at the letter and grimaced. "I had no idea garden parties were such a dirty affair," she muttered dryly.

"Everything is dirty," said Narcissa, "if you look at it long enough." Then she picked up the book she'd been reading when Ginny entered. "Now, if you have any hope to accomplishing your task, you will accept that invitation, attend that garden party, exact revenge on the ugly little Parkinson girl, and for the love of Merlin, wear some blush, because your complexion is... terrible."

Then she started to read and ignored Ginny until the younger girl finally got up and walked away in a stupefied daze.

While Ginny was working on preparations for Pansy's malicious invite, Draco was forced to scour all available information on Muggleborns and their identification by the Ministry. Unfortunately, it was proving to be quite difficult. The secret of how Muggleborns were discovered by the Ministry had been a secret long before Voldemort had taken over. If he and his henchmen hadn't figured it out yet, Draco felt it was unlikely that the answer would simply fall into his lap.

Fortunately, Draco was at least able to determine something rather valuable.

"I've got a place," Draco told Ginny one night. "Once we start bringing people in to help us, they can stay at a place called Steep Park House in Crowborough." Draco pulled out a map and showed it to Ginny, pointing to a spot in the countryside. "I believe it's in pretty bad shape, but it's a good spot because it's isolated and the entire surrounding area is abandoned. The house hasn't been used in years."

"Who owns it?" Ginny asked, brows furrowed. "Because if it's one of your properties -"

"It's not," Draco reassured her. "Not technically, anyway. Steep Park House was one of those properties we acquired from Muggles a few centuries ago. Instead of giving it up to the Ministry like we were supposed to, we just took it off the record. No one's bothered to give it a moment's thought in over a hundred years, including us. But I went there myself today and set up some basic
"Good," said Ginny with a firm nod. They went to bed that night at least a little comforted.

The next day, Ginny rose from bed, put on one of her more fashionable sets of robes, dabbed on a bit of blush and then set off for Pansy Krum's stupid party.

Admittedly, the Krum home was lovely, a quaint countryside manor that was far too beautiful for pug-faced Parkinson. Ginny could instantly see the appeal of spending time in the gardens; magically-maintained plants of all varieties blanketed the area, freshly bloomed into the spring air, still damp with dew. A few pixies swarmed nearby, always happy to hide in the flowers and sting people when they weren't paying attention. In the distance, some house-elves tried to chase them off with little zaps of magic.

As Ginny arrived – fifteen minutes later than the invitation called for (Narcissa's suggestion) – she took careful note of everything around her, from the lush green grass to the sharp gardening tools nearby. The wand in her pocket felt outrageously reassuring. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed it until the power was back in her hands.

Before long, a set of white wrought-iron tables and chairs came into view. Most of the other witches – no more than five, including Pansy – had already arrived and were walking along the stone paths, admiring the foliage and tucking flowers into one another's hair. Ginny paused for only a moment to steel herself. She would not let these aristocratic, snippy witches intimidate her. Channeling her inner-Narcissa, Ginny lifted her chin, pushed back her shoulders and glided towards the other witches with smooth, assured steps. Daphne Greengrass was the first to notice her. "Ah, look who it is!" she exclaimed. "The new Mistress of the Malfoy house!"

Ginny smirked at Daphne, careful to remain subdued and coy. It was a pity Astoria wasn't there, but Daphne was almost as good. The other witches all turned as well, looking over Ginny with a great deal of interest.

"Oh, Ginny!"

"How wonderful."

"I was hoping you'd come."

Ginny carefully contained a grimace. The last witch who'd spoken had once called Ginny a dumpy ginger harlot back in school, but she seemed to have conveniently forgotten that now. "Ladies," she greeted simply, inclining her head. Then she turned to Pansy.

"Thank you for the invitation," she said crisply as Pansy turned slowly to face Ginny. The calculated flash in her eyes instantly put Ginny on the defensive. Damn, she hated it when Narcissa was right.

"Of course," said Pansy sweetly. "It surely wouldn't be a good time without you."

The other witches exchanged curious glances, but because most of the malice expressed between witches of this status was so veiled, none of them bothered to point out Pansy's two-faced behavior outright. Together, the group moved into the garden further, admiring the colors and textures of the impressively diverse garden.

At last, they settled together at the tables, ordering tea and snacks from the help as they discussed
such fascinating topics as their newest skin care cremes ("The scent is nice, but it seems rather cheap, don't you think?") who was cheating on whom ("I heard she's a stone in bed anyway, who can blame him?") and the fabrics of their robes ("It comes from Italy, I'm not surprised you haven't seen it yet"). This Ginny endured with a patience of Nicholas Flamel choosing a coffin, or at least, that was how she judged her astounding tolerance.

As Daphne began talking with Gemma Farley, who'd been in Slytherin a few years ahead of Ginny, Pansy rose from the table to address the house-elves. Though the other girls hardly noticed her absence, Ginny was on high alert. Pansy had disappeared around the corner ("The house-elves around here need constant direction," she complained to the others), and Ginny could not hear or see her anymore, but she managed to slip one of the twins' Extendable Ears out of her pocket. With a flick of her wand, she sent the ear to the other side of the garden, near where Pansy stood berating the house-elves.

"... just make sure you give this one, here on the corner, to the red-haired witch. And you mess this up, I'll personally have your head!" There was a clatter of tea cups shuffling around on a tray, as well as the mumbled words of the house-elf. Just before Pansy re-appeared, Ginny snapped back the Extendable Ear and tucked it into her pocket just as Tracey Davis addressed her.

"Ginny? Don't you agree?"

The redhead looked back to the group. "Hm?"

"I'm sorry about all that," piped up Pansy as she reappeared, looking all too cheerful. "These elves are ridiculous. Viktor seems intent on finding the dumbest creatures he possibly can to help me around here."

"Oh, that's such a shame," said Daphne. "There's nothing worse than a deficient house-elf. My father got rid of three in the last year because none of them could make a proper biscuit. A crime, really." The witches all giggled as the house-elves appeared with the trays, one of which contained the tea and the other holding sweet treats.

"Oh!" exclaimed Ginny suddenly. "Tracey, that necklace is to die for! Where did you get it?"

Predictably, everyone – including Pansy – looked over at Tracey's necklace. With a quick flick of her wand, Ginny switched the tea cup in the corner with another in the middle. The nervous house-elf did not appear to notice, and neither did Pansy. However, as soon as the tray arrived at the table, she watched intently to make sure the tea in the corner was given to Ginny.

Ginny accepted, smiling appreciatively at Pansy before offering up her cup. "To Pansy, for a wonderful party."

"Very much!" said Alaine Vaisey, who'd been in Slytherin two years ahead of Ginny, nodding to the others as they lifted their tea cups and then took sips. Ginny, true to form, drained her tea cup all the way down to the very last drop. This Pansy watched with a great deal of smug pleasure, so much so that even Daphne looked at her oddly.

The group of witches talked casually for a few minutes, saying nothing of any importance. Then Pansy shifted in Ginny's direction.

"So," said Pansy, eyes glimmering, "Tell me, how is your relationship with Draco going?"

Ginny spoke up immediately. "Oh, it's great. We fuck all the time." Then she clapped her hand over her mouth. "Why on earth did I say that?" she exclaimed, her cheeks flushing red as the other girls
laughed and shrieked in surprise. Pansy seemed surprised by her answer, but at Ginny's "embarrassment," her arrogance grew.

"And," said Pansy, "does that mean you have completely renounced your old blood traitor ways?"

Ginny took in a deep breath, her eyes wide and her expression stricken. The other girls looked to her in surprise, waiting for her answer. For a moment, words seemed to lodge in Ginny's throat. However, just when Pansy's satisfaction threatened to boil over, Ginny leaned back in her seat, calming her expression in an instant.

"Of course," answered Ginny demurely. "I am a Malfoy, after all."

Pansy stared.

"And on that note," continued Ginny smoothly, "it really is unwise of you to try and trick a Malfoy." Ginny thumped her teacup with a fingertip. "Veritaserum, I'm guessing?"

The other ladies gasped and looked to Pansy, whose eyes widened and cheeks flushed. Suddenly, she was furious.

"Yes, it was Veritaserum!" Pansy exclaimed hotly, before she jerked back in alarm, only then realizing she had received Ginny's cup. The other witches seemed to catch on instantly, and some of them were doing their best to stifle their malicious delight at Pansy's expense.

"I meant," said Pansy, trying to cover it up, "I – the tea – " She couldn't lie, but Ginny was more than satisfied to watch her try.

"Tell me, Pansy," said Ginny with a cocky twist of her head, "What was it that you hoped to accomplish?"

"I wanted to get you arrested because I hate you!" Pansy practically shouted, before clamping her hands over her mouth.

"Pansy!" admonished Daphne. "That's low, even for you!"

Because she was having fun, Ginny continued, "Do you still love Draco?"

"Yes," Pansy cried out, "and it drives me insane to see him with a dirty blood traitor like you!"

Tracey and Gemma exchanged open-mouthed stares of disbelief, while Daphne, seizing an opportunity, suddenly leaned forward. "Pansy, did you take my diamond bracelet in third year?"

"Yes!" shrieked Pansy through her hands.

"Why?" exclaimed Daphne, outraged. "What did you do with it?"

Pansy looked like she was about to pass out. "I threw it in the lake because I was jealous!" she squealed against her will.

At this, Tracey and Gemma both burst out laughing while Daphne shrieked indignantly. "That belonged to my grandmother, you bitch!"

Finally, Pansy jumped away from the table and fled, her hands still clamped over her mouth. Ginny waved as she passed.

"Well," said Ginny once Pansy was gone, "I do love a good garden party."
And just like that, Ginny had three new friends.

Or at least, whatever companionable Slytherins counted as.

Over the next two weeks, Ginny spent a great deal of time with her newest companions, accompanying them on more garden parties, wine tastings, and all other manner of ridiculous things that grew more boring to Ginny each time they did them.

All the while, Ginny listened in on chatter, encouraging newcomers to come along for more potential information, though Narcissa insisted Ginny only invite witches of a certain status. It was true all the other witches did was gossip, but it was rarely anything interesting and so far, none of it had been helpful in the least for Draco and Ginny's purposes.

Ginny nearly always returned home with a desperate desire to see Draco, because he was a thousand times more fun to talk to (and do all sorts of things with) than the girls. Not because Ginny didn't like hanging out with other girls – there were plenty of females she'd loved at Hogwarts – but those had been witches like Hermione and Luna and Angelina and Alicia. It was never a dull moment with any of them. Unfortunately, most of the time, all the witches of this group wanted to talk about was marriage, shopping and parties.

"I feel like I hardly see you," Ginny whispered to Draco one night in bed.

"You see me every day," he reminded her, amused. He slipped into bed and pulled her into his arms, letting her snuggle close.

"Yeah, but," Ginny tucked under his chin, "it's just, you know, you're at the Ministry all day and I'm at dumb tea parties and it's just… bloody dull without you there."

Draco's lips quirked, and he brought up a finger to brush along Ginny's jaw. "I know. I miss you during the day, too. If it weren't for this new government the Dark Lord's established, I could just sit around all day like a regular rich person. Alas." He waved his hand. "I must do my part."

"So then," said Ginny, curling even closer, "after all this is over, you won't be gone every day?"

"I should hope not," said Draco indignantly. "I wasn't born a Malfoy so I could work for a living. That's for poor people to do."

Rolling her eyes and grinning a bit, Ginny leaned over Draco and pressed a kiss to his lips. "Still a prat, aren't you?" she asked affectionately, brushing his hair from his face. "You're just my prat now."

"Exactly," he agreed, curling his hand over hers and drawing her up against him. "So." He paused. "Tell me again about the garden party with Pansy."

Ginny giggled. "I've already told you like six times!"

"But it's so good," said Draco. "Tell me again. It's become my new favorite bedtime story."

"Oh, alright," said Ginny, before tucking against his shoulder and laughing. "Okay, so we were all at this stupid party, and Pansy thinks she's being slick, right? …"

It took nearly a week more, but finally, Ginny's vigilance paid off.
The day began with Ginny determining that she could not take one more shopping trip, one more mild-mannered tea party in the garden. Instead, Ginny at last managed to convince the other witches – Tracey, Gemma, Alaine, Daphne and Astoria – to all attend a game of Shuntbumps with her.

"What on earth? I thought that was just a silly children's game," said Tracey disdainfully when Ginny brought it up.

"They've brought it back as a real sport again," said Ginny, "Who doesn't want to watch two people joust on broomsticks?" It sounded like a damn good time to her. Unfortunately, the other witches were extremely hesitant. Even attending a Quidditch match without their male companions seemed untoward for most of them, not nearly as elegant as their usual activities. So Ginny changed tactics.

"Well, I suppose we don't have to go," she said, "It's just such a shame. I hear the England's new team is pretty good, and they're all rather strapping young wizards, from what I've seen."

This caught Daphne's attention immediately. "Oh?" she questioned lightly. "How strapping?"

Ginny smirked suggestively. "Well, let's just say this sport is more about muscle than magic."

Suddenly, attending the Shuntbumps was within the acceptable parameters for an afternoon. Together, the ladies left Tracey's home and traveled together to the newly built fields, where England's new team was in fact practicing for the match. The attendance was sparse, and there were no stands, so the witches spread out blankets and reclined in the warm spring weather to watch as the team of handsome wizards in short sleeves stretched and practiced.

"Now this is a view I like," remarked Gemma, and the others laughed. After a little while, Gemma and Tracey walked off to buy some treats from a trolley making its way around the area, and the others remained behind on their blankets.

Together, the witches watched as the game progressed, and Ginny found herself finally interested in something that was going on. In fact, she became so involved in the new game – and explaining what she knew to the other witches – that she nearly missed the figure hovering nearby.

He seemed to be there for just a moment – and then he was gone. But still, Ginny's heart raced. She'd thought it was just a dream before. But somehow – and suddenly her limbs felt like liquid – somehow, Harry Potter was there again, watching them from a distance. Ginny stared, her throat suddenly dry.

"I'll be right back," she said to the others, rising from her spot and wandering towards the figure of Harry. He stood just inside the tree line that edged the clearing where the new field was set. As Ginny approached, he did not seem to move or react. Ginny's feet shuffled stiffly in his direction.

That was when Tracey and Gemma's voices nearby distracted her.

"Oh, look, it's Marcus Flint over there watching the match. He is atrocious."

"I know, isn't he? You know, he has an older brother who's quite handsome."

"Pity for him, then," said Tracey, laughing. "He's the ugliest bloke I ever saw!" A pause, and then, in hushed tones, Tracy continued, "You won't believe what I heard."

"Oh, what?"
"Flint is getting one of the prisoners being released in just a few days. And you will die when I tell you who!"

Ginny halted to a stop and remained out of sight, just behind a tree. For a moment, she forced herself to think past the figure of Harry.

Tracey leaned close to Gemma, pausing for dramatic effect. "Flint… is getting Looney Lovegood!"

Ginny's eyes widened.

Gemma gasped. "No way! She's barking!"

"I know, isn't that insane? I can't wait to watch that!" Tracey snickered. "I don't know who I feel worse for, Flint or her."

"Well, I heard Flint is rather… rough, if you know what I mean. She'll probably end up a bit worse for wear."

"Mm," said Tracey, not sounding at all sympathetic. "Guess she should have thought about that before fighting on the losing side." Gemma agreed with a laugh, and the two strolled back towards the blankets. Ginny, trembling, straightened in her spot and turned slowly.

The spot where Harry had been standing was empty… as if he'd never been there at all.

That night, Ginny told Draco what she overheard. She did not tell him about seeing Harry.

"It's time to talk to your brothers," said Draco, grabbing his cloak. "Come on." He seemed to notice Ginny's shakiness then, which had not fully faded from the afternoon hours. "Are you alright?" he asked, frowning. "We'll get Lovegood out of there. I promise."

Her eyes flickering to him, Ginny nodded stiffly and tried for a smile. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right."

Together, they left the house and journeyed to Charlie and Fleur's, where they called for George and Vera as well. Once they were all settled in the living room of the cozy cottage, Draco and Ginny took a seat across from the other four.

"This looks serious," noted Charlie with a hint of concern.

"It is," said Ginny, finding her voice at last. "But it's not bad news." Not again. The conversation about Percy's death had been one of the hardest things Ginny had ever had to discuss in her life. She was glad tonight would be different. However, that still didn't mean it was easy.

Draco waited patiently for Ginny to speak, and she did.

"Guys, we're fighting." She looked to her brothers, eyes set and determined. "Draco and I are going against Voldemort, and we're actively working towards overthrowing him and the Ministry. We – " she paused, biting her lip, because she couldn't help but think back on Charlie's words again. "We are here to let you know what's going on, so you can either… save yourselves by pulling away from us… or – "

"We'll fight," said Charlie. Ginny had missed his quick look with Fleur, who lifted her head with the same determined conviction as Charlie. Ginny balked, and she and Draco exchanged glances.

"Are – are you sure, Charlie, Fleur? I mean, after…e verything that's happened – and you have Margrethe – "
"We are fighting for Margrethe," said Fleur confidently. "Not in spite of her. We are wiz you, Ginny."

Air seemed to fill Ginny's chest for the first time in days. "Thank you," she murmured. Then she looked to George, who looked at his brother and sister both before nodding firmly.

"I'll fight, too. Whatever I can do to ruin You-Know-Who's day, you just let me know." Shifting, George looked hesitantly to Vera. "I'm sorry, I don't want you in danger, so... if you need – "

"George," said Vera, eyebrows raised. "I fight with you."

George looked surprised. "Vera, are you sure?" Concern creased his features, an anxiety Ginny had never witnessed in him before the war. "This is – you weren't here for the last war, Vera. It was..." George paused to clear his throat before continuing shakily, "We lost people."

"I know," said Vera tenderly. "But that is why I fight. You go, I go." She took his hand in hers, fingers wrapping tightly around his own.

"I am a Weasley," Vera said proudly, as if that was all the explanation anyone needed.

At this, George's eyes shone, and he seemed at a loss for words. Instead, he wrapped Vera up in his arms for a brief hug before pulling away. "Looks like were all with you," he said to Ginny, clearing his throat again.

"Vita will fight, too," said Vera. "She hates the Dark Lord and his rules."

Ginny exhaled, relief filling her. She looked over appreciatively at Draco, who winked at her.

"Thank you. I know this is going to be hard... I know – I know it will be difficult to fight again. But we can do it this time."

"Any particular reason for your confidence?" asked Charlie. "Not that I'm doubting you, but it would be nice if you knew something we didn't."

"Actually," said Draco, leaning forward with an expectant look at Ginny, who nodded. He looked to the others. "It turns out... I became the true owner of the Elder Wand after Dumbledore's death."

The four witches and wizards across from them stared, stricken.

"You..." said George in disbelief. "You're the rightful owner of the most powerful wand in all history?"

"It would seem so," said Draco. "Unfortunately, the Dark Lord still has the wand, even if it doesn't work properly for him. He doesn't know I have some measure of control over it. If he ever finds out, he'll kill me immediately, and then he'll have full control and there's no hope for anyone."

"But if we can keep him from realizing what's happened until the final confrontation," said Ginny, "We stand a real chance of beating him."

"It's going to be a long process, though," continued Draco. "The Dark Lord is in deep at the Ministry. He's sunk in, and we've got to start removing him now if we're ever going to have any hope of finishing him off for good."

The others nodded in understanding, but George seemed cautious.

"So, Malfoy," he said to Draco. "Let's say we do win this war, and you get the Elder Wand in your
possession." He eyed the younger wizard. "What exactly do you plan to do with it?"

Draco met George's gaze evenly. "I plan to break it off in Tom Riddle's heart."

Nothing was said for a moment. Then Charlie raised a brow, lips quirked and said, "Sounds like a plan to me."

As Ginny and Draco left Charlie's house that night, a thought struck Ginny.

"Draco, has Marcus Flint ever seen anyone die?"

Draco paused, eyebrow raised. He thought about it. "I don't believe so, no. He didn't fight in the Battle at Hogwarts, and he's too much of a coward to watch someone die anyway. Why?"

Ginny picked up her broom. "I think I have an idea."

Two nights later, the very same manor from which Ginny had been released into Draco's custody a year before loomed over dark grounds lush with grass and hedges.

Most of the windows were dark, but a few shone with warm orange light. Shadows moved within, though only one pair at a time exited through the large front doors to reach the apparition point.

From the door emerged Marcus Flint, ugly face screwed up in a grimace that passed as a smile. He seemed delighted at his task of pulling along the bound witch behind him.

"Come on then, Looney," he crowed at his prisoner, who struggled behind him. "You and me are gonna' have some real fun tonight."

Luna Lovegood, severely thinned thanks to neglect and two years of imprisonment, stumbled behind Marcus Flint with her wrists magically bound and her once-white hair matted and dingy. Still, she turned her face up against the wind and enjoyed the sweeping caress of the gentle breeze. Flint snatched at her again, and Luna nearly fell, though she kept from making a noise.

As she lifted her head to follow along with her captor, Luna's eyes shifted over the dark grounds and spotted something moving. After a moment, it became clear to Luna that this was the dark-skinned, leathery body of a thestral.

Curious, Luna watched as she and Flint walked along, with the latter leading her as roughly as possible. With every step they took, the thestral took three, advancing on them slowly and watching Luna with a knowing gaze. The two shared a moment of appreciation, and Luna tilted her head. That was when she noticed, in the hairy mane of the thestral, a charm hanging near the creature's eye.

It was the symbol of the Deathly Hallows.

Looking slowly to the back of her captor, Luna blinked at him before looking back to the thestral, who continued to approach. Flint did not seem to notice the beast at all, despite its great size. Soon enough, the thestral was right next to them, facing Flint.

Luna watched with no reaction, no hint of what she saw. Finally, Flint paused at the apparition point and turned to face Luna with a smarmy grin. "Alright, Lovegood," he snarled. "Time to – "

The thestral reared up and kicked Marcus Flint square in the ribs, launching him across the
grounds so that he landed in a pond several feet away. Luna followed the arch of his rise and fall with a tilt of her head, blue eyes twinkling. After that, she stooped down calmly and picked up his fallen wand.

Flint was struggling in the water. It was obvious he was injured, and he began to drown. Luna looked at the wand in her hand, and then back at Flint, who gulped down some water as he thrashed. Then he opened his mouth to call for help.

Luna pointed the wand. "Silencio," she said in her dreamy voice.

Flint's cries for help were instantly erased, with only the sound of his thrashing to indicate that he was even there at all. Luna turned to the thestral, smiling at the beautiful creature and stroking its neck, her fingers gliding over the charm.

"I have friends," she whispered to herself, eyes gleaming with tears.

Luna mounted the beast, and the thestral turned, taking a few hopping steps before it leaped into the air and spread its leathery wings, beating them against the air to bring them high into the air. As the pair circled the manor, another Death Eater appeared at the door. Behind him, he dragged Xenophilius Lovegood.

"Can you get him, too?" asked Luna politely, pointing.

The thestral seemed to understand, because it turned and swooped down on the Death Eater. Before the Dark wizard could even react, the thestral landed directly on top of him, stomped a few times, and then accepted the stunned Xenophilius on its back before taking off again.

Together with her father, Luna rose into the sky atop the thestral, so that the wind rushed by them in cool pleasurable bursts and the moon highlighted their every move.

"Oh, my Luna," cried out Xenophilius, hugging Luna desperately from behind. "My Luna!"

Luna curled her arms around her father's and laughed, heartily and loudly. "I'm glad to see you, too, Father," she told him. Then, as the thestral rose higher and higher and the moon encircled their silhouettes completely, Luna stretched out her arms and leaned back, embracing the air itself as they flew.

"I have friends!" she told her father, tears streaming down her face. "My friends are here!"
Chapter 25

Author's Note: Hey guys! Sorry about the wait. I live in Georgia (USA) and we were without power for a few days. Hope you enjoy the chapter, and don't forget to check out The House of Black for the companion fic to this one, focused on Narcissa's early days.

Enjoy.

"[Harry] sat up. Malfoy's gaunt, petrified face seemed branded on the inside of his eyes. Harry felt sickened by what he had seen, by the use to which Draco was now being put by Voldemort."

- *HPDH, Chapter 9*

Just as the early morning sun began to brighten the sky, Luna Lovegood and her father landed, still atop their thestral companion, just in front of an old and nearly ruined home on the outskirts of a long-abandoned countryside.

Waiting for them was a pleased redhead witch with a twinkle on her eye.

Ginny watched their descent, and she saw – with a bubble of laughter rising in her throat – that Luna appeared, as always, completely nonplussed and unsurprised to see Ginny there, even though the night had certainly been strange for her. Sliding down from the thestral and giving it one last affectionate pat, Luna turned to Ginny and let a bright smile take over her face.

"It is good to see you, my friend," Luna said with a tilt of her head.

Ginny grinned. Then, without warning, she launched herself at Luna and pulled the other witch into a tight hug, which Luna returned with a giggle. "Thank you," said Luna, as Xenophilius approached, moving in that same bewildered way Luna often did. Despite his scraggly appearance and too-thin face, his elation was obvious. Behind the trio, the sun peeked over the horizon and spilled rays of warmth into the cool night. "I had no idea you were on such good terms with thestrals," said Luna.

"That was mostly my brother Charlie's work," said Ginny with a laugh. She patted the creature on its head and handed it an apple. "I wasn't sure it would work, but I knew I had to try."

"We are forever in your debt, Miss Weasley," said Xenophilius graciously. Ginny kept smiling, but she did bite her lip and duck her head a bit.

"Actually, it's… not Weasley, not anymore," she admitted, before shifting to look over her shoulder. From around the corner of a long-forsaken courtyard, Draco appeared, hands in his robes. He was hesitant, Ginny knew, but he walked up to the other three and stood at Ginny's shoulder with a polite nod in the Lovegoods' direction.

"I'm glad you both made it safely out," he told them.

Xenophilius, predictably, seemed troubled by Draco's appearance, and when Luna stepped forward, he reached out to stop her. However, Luna gave her father a soft smile, and he dropped his hand, allowing her to approach Draco.

Draco seemed even less certain about Luna's approach than Xenophilius, and he eyed Ginny as the
blonde witch approached him. When she stood directly in front of him, Luna leaned forward and peered closely at Draco's face.

"None of this would have been possible without him," said Ginny, taking Draco's hand and squeezing it. "He's helping us, Luna. And… he's my husband, now."

Luna seemed to think on this, but instead of responding, she continued her inspection of Draco until at last he met her gaze. When he did so, Luna studied his face and then leaned back, her fair features relaxed.

"Your eyes are different," she told Draco.

He raised a brow. "How so?"

Luna's lips quirked. "They're open."

Ginny grinned again, and she shared an appreciative look with Luna, whose hand she took in her free palm. Together, the four of them looked up at the dilapidated house, which had once been a fine manor, filled with a surplus of guest rooms, lounges, sitting rooms and dining halls. That had been many, many years ago.

"Where are we, exactly?" asked Xenophilius.

"Our base of operations," said Draco at last, squeezing Ginny's hand as they all looked up at the enormous structure. "And your new home, for the time being."

At that moment, a creak of old wood sounded and a part of the front structure collapsed into a cloud of dust.

"I like it," said Luna.

With their two first allies on board, Draco and Ginny's work began in earnest.

With some difficulty, they managed to contact both Hannah and Ernie, separately. With a little white lie to Hannah, they were able to convince her to join the cause, which for Hannah meant remaining where she was and keeping a close eye on her captors for possible information.

After that, it was easy enough to convince Ernie. Ginny wished they could free them, but neither were being greatly abused, and to free them would mean further suspicion. Hannah and Ernie both assured them that they were getting along well enough, and Draco was satisfied to leave it at that.

After Hannah and Ernie, the pair began to go further through their list of Ministry captives from the war. From there, they discovered the locations of Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson, both of whom immediately agreed to fight again. They also discovered Alicia Spinnett, but she'd received such severe injuries from the battle at Hogwarts that she was now a long-term patient in St. Mungo's.

"I want to fight," she told them both, tears in her eyes. "But I – "

"No, you … you rest," Ginny had told her, fighting back tears of her own.

That had been a very difficult day, and Ginny had spent the rest of her afternoon and evening in deep thought. Draco, not knowing what to say or do to comfort her, had simply stayed by her side and held her on into the night.
During their investigation, the pair also discovered something much more heartening – apparently, Minerva McGonagall had been a prisoner for all of thirty-six hours after the end of the war. From there, she had been temporarily imprisoned in a house as she awaited her transfer to Azkaban. However – and witnesses differ in their exact accounts of what actually happened – a series of events somehow led to the house burning down, with two Death Eaters barely escaping for their lives, and in the midst of all the chaos, Minerva McGonagall escaped.

Some neighbors claimed they saw a tabby cat walking away from the blaze, looking a little too satisfied for a simple animal. But no such cat was ever recovered, and Minerva McGonagall remained at large.

Additionally, Horace Slughorn escaped imprisonment as well. The official Ministry explanation is that McGonagall helped him escape, but others maintain that Slughorn slipped away from his captors in the form of a rather shabby sofa.

The two former professors were considered by the Ministry as Wanted, Dead or Alive.

Unfortunately, Draco and Ginny were having just as difficult a time locating them as the Ministry was, and many more of the people on their list were either still sequestered away in cells or tucked away from all possible friends and family, presumably to keep them from doing exactly what Draco and Ginny were attempting to accomplish.

As such, the process of locating and persuading allies to their cause was proving as difficult as Draco’s pessimism had predicted. And if they approached someone who refused to help them – as had already happened once or twice – Draco had insisted on Obliviating them.

"We can't risk it," he told Ginny before they moved on.

It left Ginny with an uneasy feeling, but she saw the logic behind it. As Luna and her father carried on Steep Park House, repairing what they could and preparing the home for what would hopefully be a sizeable lot, Ginny was forced to continue with her various social obligations. As a Malfoy, she was expected to participate a great deal anyway, but at least her purpose now was two-fold. Those idiots had already given her the tip she needed to save Luna. She had to believe that they would give her more.

But that afternoon, a few days after Luna's rescue, the conversation proved just as mind-numbing and uninteresting as usual, and Ginny left the exclusive little boutique in Diagon Alley with a growing headache and a desire to pitch herself off the Astronomy Tower at Hogwarts.

The day was pleasant, and the air had grown considerably warmer, so Diagon Alley bustled with its usual activity. The Daily Prophet regularly ran articles espousing the victories of the Ministry, boasting of the great economic strides that had been made in the last year. It was true, to a certain degree. The alley was once more filled with witches and wizards, many of whom spent their gold and worked their jobs and did as they normally would.

However, as Ginny waded her way through the crowds and observed her peers with a critical eye, she knew things weren't as they seemed. Regulators decorated every street corner, looking tall and imposing and foreign, with their hard faces and unfamiliar names. Never before had there been such a military-like presence in the magical world, and the atmosphere because of them was considerably different.

Regulators, as Ginny had noticed upon their first appearance, were not British. That in itself was not inherently bad, but as Draco had pointed out, this had probably been done because the major role of a Regulator was to force a strict code of conduct upon the British magical citizens, a code
which was not only difficult to maintain, but outright invasive. Other British citizens could hardly be trusted to adhere to such absurd laws, and only the small group of elite Death Eaters could be expected to turn in their neighbors for breaking such trifling and ridiculous rules.

Regulators, however, had no such connections to impede their distribution of the law. They were oddities, paid and ordered to – not keep order, as the Ministry claimed, and certainly not to provide safety – but to be the eyes and ears of the Ministry, so that even the smallest infraction against those in charge did not go unpunished.

Ginny scowled.

Moving down the street, Ginny kept her eyes forward, rarely taking the time to stop and speak with anyone. Many of the other Diagon Alley patrons were much the same, and when they did pause to talk, their conversations sounded to Ginny like stilted, rehearsed lines. Whatever semblance of "normal" that was possible under the pureblood regime had effectively evaporated under the growing paranoia of the Ministry. And it seemed to grow worse with each passing day. Ginny kept going, ready to be out of the public.

Then, just as Ginny turned to visit her brother's shop, she – and several other patrons – looked up when three Regulators appeared from seemingly nowhere. Between them, they were dragging a panicked middle-aged wizard who was struggling to hold on to his shopping bags.

"Please, no – " protested the wizard, but the Regulators heaved him to his feet, dragged him to the corner of an alley and then shoved him into a black carriage. "Help me!" the wizard shouted. "I've done nothing wrong!" One of his bags fell from his arms, but the Regulators paid it no mind before shutting the door soundly. The horseless carriage then shifted forward and turned, disappearing down one of the narrow streets which led to Knockturn Alley.

The man and the carriage were gone as soon as they'd appeared. The Regulators remained, eyes scanning the crowd, daring anyone to speak up.

And, as Ginny watched in horror, all the patrons who had witnessed the event turned back to their bags and their shopping, shuffling away from the Regulators without a word or a wave. No one spoke, and no one followed the carriage.

Satisfied, the expressionless Regulators left, disappearing into the crowd.

Ginny turned, looking all around at the others, even as trembles ran through her body. It was as if this man's abduction had been just a pebble tossed into a river. It had made a ripple for only a moment, but then the current continued on, and the fish in the stream were none the wiser.

Swallowing tightly, Ginny moved over to the spot where the captured wizard had dropped his bag. In it were some usual shopping items – a few quills, a new novel, and then, from the apothecary, a small potion. Ginny's brows furrowed as she inspected the bottle. It had a faint blue smoke to it, and no label.

"Ginny?"

She looked up at the sound of her name, and saw George peering out of his shop. She wasn't sure if he'd seen what she'd seen, but he looked concerned anyway. Ginny quickly gathered up the potion and the bag and stuffed it into her own before rushing to join George in his shop.

At the same moment, Draco Malfoy sat in a chair in his office, the very same his father had
occupied only a short while before. He put his face in his hands and groaned loudly.

He had to figure out how the Muggleborns were tracked. He had to!

Not only because it would help him find the children before they were happened upon by Snatchers or - Merlin forbid - turned into Obscurials, or abandoned by Muggles who feared them, or any other endless list of terrible things - but because he needed to produce soon for the Ministry, or he would be out of a job and his efforts to keep a foothold in the magical elite would be severely damaged.

Of course, Draco also had to figure out what to do with the damn Muggleborns when he found them, because obviously Voldemort would want them dead (Draco did not believe he would make the mistake of keeping them around a second time), but that would be counter-productive for the war effort. No, they needed Muggleborns who could fight to join them, and those who couldn't fight to get safely out of England.

Draco groaned even louder.

Then he dropped his hands and scanned the office. Lucius Malfoy had been an exceptionally clever man. If he'd held this position for over a year, he had to have at least discovered a clue to the truth behind the Muggleborn registration. Voldemort may have been satisfied with locating the already-identified Muggleborns up until now, but sooner or later, he would expect new results. Lucius had to have known that.

Draco stood up from his desk to look through the office again, even though he'd thoroughly searched it more than five times. As he did so, however, a knock came at the door. Rather than waiting to be let in, the door swung open and Damien Black stepped inside.

"Cousin," he greeted, lips curled in his unusual smile.

Draco narrowed his eyes and straightened. "Damien," he greeted evenly in return. "What're you doing here? Hogwarts still outsmarting you?"

Damien's smile tightened. "Actually, we are making great progress. The school will be ready in September for the children to return." He entered Draco's office, sweeping his finger over a neglected shelf. "There are just a few more things I need before we can begin… a security measure, which Umbridge has so thoughtfully arranged." He met Draco's grey eyes with his own. "Wouldn't want any of our children getting hurt now, would we?"

"Beyond the damage you'll do as Deputy Headmaster, you mean?" asked Draco, before taking his seat again and pulling at some papers that meant nothing to him. "How long do you plan to linger, Damien? I have work to do."

"Oh, I know you do," said Damien smoothly, not making a move to leave. "After all, it's been how many months, and you haven't gotten any closer to discovering more Mudbloods? I hear your Snatchers are just wandering around aimlessly, catching them where they can. In fact," Damien moved in front of Draco's desk. "There was an incident just yesterday where they took out their boredom on some poor, unsuspecting Muggles."

Draco's jaw tightened a little. He didn't really care about the Muggles all that much, but those idiot Snatchers were his responsibility. He couldn't have them running wild.

"All in good fun, of course," said Damien when Draco didn't respond.

"I'll have to address their fun, I'm afraid," said Draco. "We do have a Statute of Secrecy to worry
about, after all."

Damien chuckled. "For now, yes."

Draco's insides clenched a little. Damien must have sensed his panic, because he grew even more amused. "Do you know, when I was a young boy, my older brother Lucien was exceptionally bright. All his tutors and professors told him he was going to be great. But my father warned him not to grow too arrogant. He told him, Lucien, you are a big fish in a little pond." Damien's eyes swept over Draco's stony features. "But when you go into the large pond," continued Damien, "You will only be another fish."

Damien paused, feigning thoughtfulness. "My brother never believed him. And when his world grew and his brilliance was overshadowed by so so many others who were in fact, his superiors, he found himself… lost. Aimless. Average." Damien locked eyes with Draco. "Inferior, even." Reaching up a hand, Damien plucked at the corner of a book. "It destroyed him."

"Your point?" asked Draco icily.

Damien inhaled deeply, as if he were taking in the fresh air of a spring meadow instead of a dusty government office. "Just that – you may feel like the big fish, cousin, because we are yet such a small group. But when our world grows, you will see that your power… your gold …. Everything you think that makes you special – is really just … nothing."

Draco's throat tightened a bit.

"Our world isn't growing," said Draco. "It's shrinking."

This seemed to delight Damien, and his peculiar smile grew. "And when Alexander saw the breadth of his domain, he wept," said Damien dreamily, "for there were no more worlds to conquer."

With that, Damien turned one last dark look on Draco and left, leaving the door open when he did so.

Draco got up and slammed the door shut, regretting it as soon as the loud slam echoed in the corridor. Fucking Damien. Scowling, Draco returned to his seat and fell into it with a heaviness of the mind that pressed on him like an ever-increasing weight. Unfocused eyes settled on his desk, and for a long moment, Draco did not move.

Then something caught his eye.

On a high shelf in the corner of the office, a small box sat under a pile of papers and books. It might have seemed insignificant if not for the magical blood seal on the front. Draco's brows furrowed, and he pushed himself up from his chair and reached over, climbing on top of a box to reach it. When he pulled it down, he pressed his finger over the blood seal and then looked back to his desk.

Surely not…?

Draco grabbed a letter opener and pressed it to his thumb. As soon as the bright red liquid was visible, Draco pressed it against the seal. The box groaned for a moment, and then the lock shifted aside and the box opened.

Inside was a single small bit of a torn parchment. Draco reached inside and pulled it out, unfolding it with a flick of his still-bloody fingers.
Draco stared. "A fucking riddle? Are you serious?" he exclaimed incredulously. "Where's a damn Ravenclaw when you need one?"

He tossed the box down on his desk and fell into his seat again, letting his head fall on the desk with a loud *thump*.

"Hey, George," Ginny leaned over the counter and showed him the bottle containing the unlabeled potion. "Any idea what this is?"

She was still waiting on Draco to meet her for lunch, but she couldn't shake the memory of the random wizard's abduction only an hour before. George took the potion and examined it. For all the messing around he and Fred had done at Hogwarts, George was brilliantly observant. He also knew more than a little about Potions, considering all the testing he and Fred had done.

"Well, it looks like… " He took off the stopper and sniffed at it, before screwing up his face in a grimace. "Oh, yeah, definitely." He capped it again, before shifting the potion onto the counter. "It's Wolfsbane Potion."

"What?" asked Ginny, surprised. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, the stuff is rancid," George said, raising a brow. "It's also crazy expensive. Where did you pick that bottle up?"

Ginny inhaled deeply, cast a nervous look around the store and pulled George into a more secluded spot. "Those Regulators just attacked a wizard on the street and dragged him away. That potion was in one of the bags he was carrying."

George balked. "They… just took him?"

"Yeah," whispered Ginny animatedly. "And no one did a damn thing! Even – even me." Her face crumpled with shame. "It was just – so weird. I mean, if he was a criminal, surely the Aurors would have come for him? And they wouldn't have tossed him in a carriage and taken him to Knockturn Alley, either, right?"

George folded his arms, freckled face serious. "No, they bloody well wouldn't. Merlin, this place is hell." He pushed a hand through his hair. "Gin, if that guy was putting down the gold to buy Wolfsbane Potion, he was probably a werewolf."

"So?" said Ginny. "Lupin was a werewolf. That doesn't automatically make him a criminal."

George's gaze darkened. "It might, according to the new Ministry."

Ginny scowled and uttered a very unladylike curse.

"Well, that certainly sounds like my love," came Draco's voice, and Ginny turned to see him leaning against a counter. "Wherever crass words can be heard, Ginny Malfoy is sure to be found."

Despite her anxiety, Ginny smirked just a bit. "You bet," she agreed. Giving a quick nod to George, Ginny hurried to Draco and linked arms with him.

"What's going on? You look worried," murmured Draco to Ginny as they walked, hand in hand.
"I'll explain later. Some real Ministry shadiness going on," whispered Ginny in reply, even as she smiled and waved to patrons of the shop.

"Go figure," muttered Draco. "I, too, had a creepy encounter with a certain shapeshifting, Ministry-loving, Dark Lord-cock-sucking son of a whore."

Ginny let out a very loud and sudden laugh. "I think I'm starting to rub off on you, Draco."

"Oh, please," he said. "Don't give yourself so much credit." The two exchanged real smiles, and Ginny marveled at Draco's ability to cheer her even when everything around them seemed so dark. Ginny may have been forced to feign a great deal for the public eye, but her love for Draco was most definitely not a part of the act.

The two ate at Diagon Alley's most expensive restaurant, which provided them with a very rooftop table where they would not be overheard. During the lunch, Draco gave Ginny the piece of paper with the riddle on it. She scowled. "Damn, a riddle. Where's a Ravenclaw when you need one?"

"Exactly!" said Draco emphatically.

"Oh, wait," said Ginny, her eyes lighting up. "We have a Ravenclaw! I can give this to Luna!"

Draco made a face. "I didn't intend to actually ask," he muttered, rolling his eyes.

Ginny folded the paper and put it in her pocket. "Draco, if I have to learn how to be patient, then you have to learn how to be a part of a team. That means asking for help when it's needed."

Draco mimicked Ginny under his breath, and Ginny kicked him in the shins. After finishing their food, they left and wandered the streets, making their presence known and their gold a part of the local industry, as everyone expected.

After a little while, Draco spotted a familiar face, bored and apathetic as always.

"There's Blaise," said Draco, nodding his head. He paused, and then went on, "I think I should talk to him today. Alone."

"Are you sure?" asked Ginny. "We've always talked to the others together."

"I know," said Draco, turning to face her. "But Blaise is different. He won't really talk, if you're there. Just... trust me to handle this one. Please." Ginny paused, her eyes shifting mistrustfully to Blaise's figure.

"You said we had to Obliviate everyone who refused us," pointed out Ginny. "And now you want to tell Blaise what we're doing, knowing he won't agree to help us. Why?"

Draco paused. "I... owe Blaise a lot," he said at last. "He won't betray us. Take my word for it. But I need to let him know what's going on. He needs to be prepared, in case there's any fallout. It's the best I can do for him." His voice begged Ginny to trust him, and even as she hesitated, Ginny knew she would give in.

"Alright," she agreed. "You go and talk to Blaise alone, and I'll take this riddle to our friend."

Draco nodded, and the two pressed close for one kiss before Ginny reluctantly parted, leaving Draco alone once more. Once she was out of sight, Draco approached Blaise, who was still standing alone in front of some sort of boutique.
"Draco," greeted Blaise. "Please kill me."

"Well, it's no fun if you ask me to do it," pointed out Draco wryly, even as Gabrielle and Jean appeared, each holding different nursery decor so Blaise could see it.

"Green or purple?" asked Gabrielle, pretty in her blue robes and growing pregnant belly.

"Green, of course," said Blaise, and Jean cheered while Gabrielle groaned.

"Two to one! I win!" said Jean, as he and Gabrielle disappeared back into the shop. Blaise turned a smirk in Draco's direction.

"It is very easy to solve disagreements in my house," he noted, and Draco chuckled.

"I'm glad things are going so well for you," he noted. "But you and I need to talk." Nothing more needed to be said; Blaise understood the shift in Draco's tone, and he nodded briefly before turning back to the store, where Jean and Gabrielle were comparing two different baby blankets.

They looked up as Blaise and Draco approached.

"Draco and I have some business to discuss," said Blaise, looking meaningfully to Jean, who seemed to catch on immediately. "Give us an hour."

"But we were supposed to go to lunch!" protested Gabrielle, pouting. Jean looped an arm around her shoulders.

"We can still go," he told her swiftly. "And since Blaise won't be there, we can go to Pierre's café. Come on."

"Oh, alright," conceded Gabrielle, still looking put-out. "We'll see you at home," she said, standing on her toe and pecking Blaise's cheek with a kiss. To Draco's surprise, Blaise even stooped a little (he was very tall) to allow her to do so, even if his expression was completely deadpan as he did so. Jean exchanged one last look with Blaise before guiding Gabrielle to the register to check out their purchases.

Draco and Blaise left the store, and within moments, they had Apparated into a completely different street.

"Our new house," Blaise explained as the two walked the street, which was lined with luxurious townhomes guarded by high wrought-iron fences. "The street is called Myrddin. Very posh."

"So I see," said Draco, looking over the neighborhood appreciatively. He'd heard of the locale before. It was becoming very popular with the younger generation of magical elite, and the entirely-magical neighborhood on the West side of London enjoyed its own small walkable square of shops and cafes.

"Gabrielle wasn't a big fan of the manor," Blaise went on as they walked. "Too isolated. But I can't say that I blame her. The only home nearby was the one currently occupied by my mother, and she hardly counts as human companionship."

"So, that was all the incentive you needed to buy an elegant new home, conveniently far away from your mother and sisters?"

"Indeed," said Blaise with a smirk. "And since we're further from my nosy kinsman, Jean can stay with us here." The two came upon one of the largest and finest townhomes, and Blaise entered...
through the front door, which opened without him touching it. Draco came in behind him. The home was beautiful, not as stately as the Malfoy Manor, but far more modern – or as modern as witches and wizards tended to live.

"I'm happy for you," Draco told Blaise sincerely. Some house-elves brought them tea. "I remember how you felt when the marriage was first arranged, but you seem to be … doing rather well."

Blaise's lips twitched at some hint of a smile. "It's not terrible."

Draco chuckled. That was as good as an elated scream from Blaise. For a few minutes, the two drank their tea and continued to chat, before at last Blaise set aside his cup, folded his fingers across his lap and looked directly at Draco.

"So, Draco," he said. "Dare I ask what you've come to discuss?"

Draco slowly placed his teacup back on its saucer. For a long moment, he said nothing. And then he did. "Blaise..." Draco forced himself to look squarely at the other wizard's face. "The Dark Lord cannot be allowed to continue what he's doing."

Blaise remained expressionless, but Draco saw the hardness creep into his dark eyes.

"Ginny and I are planning to overthrow him, by whatever means necessary," said Draco, shifting to face his friend. "He is destroying our world, and you know it."

"All I know," said Blaise, his tone carefully even, "is that you were supposed to assimilate Ginny Weasley, not let her do the same to you."

"This isn't Ginny's fault."

"Like hell it isn't," said Blaise, his words deceptively soft and dangerous.

Draco steeled himself. "Blaise, do you not see what's going on? The Dark Lord is fooling us. He's fooling everyone around us. He doesn't care about blood purity, he doesn't care about the preservation of our culture. He wants power, and that's it."

"And you think that you can stop him?" sneered Blaise. "Because of what – your all-encompassing love for a Gryffindor?"

Draco kept the truth about the Elder Wand to himself. He could not trust Blaise with that. "We have a plan," he said instead. "And we are gathering allies as we speak."

"You're gathering corpses," snapped Blaise. "And you and your fool wife will join them. And for what? Mudbloods? Really, Draco?"

"This isn't about the damn Mudbloods," said Draco, eyes narrowed. "I don't care to see them tortured and killed, but they're not my real concern."

"Does your wife know that?" asked Blaise coolly.

Draco hesitated. "She knows I ... haven't changed my entire outlook on life. She's smarter than that."

"Obviously not," said Blaise. "Considering she's convinced you to commit yourself to death."

"This wasn't her doing!" argued Draco. "Bloody hell, Blaise, if anyone knows how miserable I've been for the last several years, it's you! You know I didn't want to join the damned Death Eaters!"
You know I had the Dark Lord living in my house and breathing down my neck, threatening my parents every time one of us dared to look at him wrong! I may not be the bloody hero, but I did not volunteer to be the villain!

"And yet you did it anyway," pointed out Blaise. "Because you knew that was the smart thing to do. That was what kept you alive. And now what? You've only gotten everything you wanted. Your titles, your inheritance, your stupid Gryffindor wife. All so you can lose it by pitching yourself headfirst at the most powerful Dark wizard to ever exist." Blaise scowled, his disgust obvious. "All so you and Weasley can restore peace and goodness to a world that never really had it in the first place."

"I want to keep my family safe," hissed Draco. "That's why I'm doing this. Not for the Mudbloods, not for the glory."

"Draco – "

"He killed my father, Blaise."

Blaise stopped, his brows furrowing for a moment, infused in a rare look of surprise. It was quickly swept away by suspicion. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," said Draco flatly. "My father served him for his entire life, and as soon as the Dark Lord felt his usefulness had been exhausted, he killed him and then dared – dared – to pretend to mourn him. He lied to us all, and he did it without a hint of remorse because no one who serves him, no matter how faithfully, is worth a damn in his eyes."

Blaise settled back in his chair and observed Draco critically.

"I am not doing this because I've suddenly realized the error of our ways," said Draco. "I am doing this because I am tired of living on the edge of the Dark Lord's blade. I am tired of doing his bidding. I am tired of fearing, day in and day out, what will happen to the few people I have left to care for in my life."

Draco leaned close. "But most of all, I am doing this because I am a Malfoy. And Malfoys are servants to no one."

Silence fell between them. Blaise's eyes lowered thoughtfully, before he shifted them towards the setting sun, which revealed itself through the large glass planes of his sunroom, large and colorful as a portrait.

"And you are telling me all of this because…?"

Draco eased a little. "Because I know you have a family of your own to care for. I don't want you getting caught in the cross-fire." He frowned. "So if you need to separate yourself from us… now is the time."

Blaise considered this quietly for a while. The sun continued to fall, pulling the warmth of the day down with it as it disappeared beyond the horizon.

"Well," he said at last, with a sigh, "you may be a Malfoy, but I am a Zabini. And we associate with whomever we damn well please." He looked over at Draco. "I suppose I'll stick around with you for a while, yet. If things start to heat up, I'll take Gabby and Jean out of England. Make a vacation of it, or some sodding thing like that." He drank his now cold tea.

Draco felt appreciation rise in his chest, but he dared not show it. "Alright, then."
Together, they watched until the sun set completely, and then Draco rose to leave. As he headed for the door, Blaise called out his name. Draco paused and shifted, so that he looked at Blaise over his shoulder.

"This isn't what Lucius would want," Blaise told him stoically.

"I know," Draco said. "It's what I want."

Then he turned and left, closing the door behind him.

Blaise watched the closed door for a few minutes, still standing. Without turning around, he said, "I told you both to give us an hour." He shifted to see both Jean and Gabrielle standing uncertainly in the doorway.

"Her feet were hurting," said Jean. He kept his eyes cast to the side, dark and narrowed, but Gabrielle stepped forward immediately.

"Blaise, you cannot zink to let zem do zis alone, can you?" she asked, eyes filled with concern.

"I most certainly can," said Blaise, looking down at her expressionlessly.

"But – but zey are our friends! And zey are fighting for what is right, we must help them – "

"No," interrupted Blaise flatly. "We will not."

Gabrielle's lips parted. "My sister will be fighting with zem, Blaise! Zey need us!"

"Draco and his comrades are digging their own graves," said Blaise evenly. "And we will not join them in such a foolish endeavor."

"You heard Draco!" exploded Gabrielle. "Ze Dark Lord killed his Fazzer! No one is safe from him, Blaise!"

"Which is precisely why we do not need to provoke his wrath," refuted Blaise, his voice growing louder and more heated. He lowered it immediately to a low dark tone. "I am sorry that your fool sister and her equally stupid husband are probably working with Draco in the hopes of being tortured to death, but we will not be joining them."

"Ginny is my family! And my sister, Fleur – "

"They are not your family," said Blaise with such force and volume that Gabrielle shrank back. "We are. And you are pregnant, Gabrielle. If you have any hope of living long enough to give birth to that child, you will do as I say and stay out of this ridiculous effort."

Gabrielle, only temporarily cowed, straightened her spine again and met Blaise's fearsome gaze squarely. "And what sort of world would we raise zis child in? Ze one of Voldemort? Because zat is not good enough for my child, and it should not be good enough for yours eizer!" she yelled.

"We are not FIGHTING!" shouted Blaise.

"YES, WE ARE!" countered Gabrielle, just as loudly.

The two fell silent, heated glares pinned directly on one another. Then, in unison, they both looked to the side, where Jean lingered.

"Well?" said Blaise tightly. "What do you say, Jean?"
Gabrielle folded her arms expectantly. Jean, who looked as if he would rather be anywhere else in the world, glanced between the two and shuffled forward. Reaching up with one hand, he made an aimless motion before dropping it. Then he looked to Gabrielle.

"I'm sorry, Gabby," Jean said to her, voice cracking. "But Blaise is right. It would be suicide."

Blaise looked to Gabrielle. "There," he said smugly. "Two to one."

Gabrielle's features contorted with tears, and she looked from Jean to Blaise one last time before she pushed back a sob and thrust her chin up in the air. "Fine," she said, body trembling. "I'm sure zey do not need a bunch of cowards like us anyway!"

She turned and fled from the room, crying.

Blaise watched her go and let out a long slow breath. When he turned to commiserate with Jean, however, he saw only his retreating back. The other wizard walked away in the opposite direction without a word and closed the doors quietly behind him. Blaise was left alone in the center of the room.

After a moment, Blaise turned and walked across the marble floors, footsteps echoing loudly. When he came to the wall framing his sunroom, he brought up an arm near his head and leaned it on the glass, so he could glare hatefully at the beautiful night sky.
Chapter 26

Author's Note: Hi guys! Forgive the wait on this one. I've had a lot going on, and it's hard to find time to sit down and write. Hopefully this chapter will make up for it.

Enjoy!

"The thing about growing up with Fred and George," said Ginny thoughtfully, "is that you sort of start thinking anything's possible if you've got enough nerve."

-HPOP, 578

While Draco was finishing up with Blaise, Ginny headed to the dilapidated country manor where Luna and her father were being kept. Vita, Vera's younger sister, had also come to stay after agreeing to help with their cause. As it turned out, she was as much against Voldemort as her sister, and she was more than happy to hang around and help the Lovegoods fix up their new home.

However, Vita was not the one Ginny was seeking.

"Luna," said Ginny, appearing at the door and then balking. "Wow, you guys have done … a lot."

The house – which had been close to unlivable when they'd first arrived – was now much repaired and furnished, partly due to the generosity of George and Vera. Luna, who had been setting some flowers in a vase when Ginny entered, smiled. "My father says he got very good at repairing spells while my mother was alive," said Luna.

Ginny took a seat at a table and pulled out the paper containing the riddle from Draco's office. "And how are you two? Are you feeling alright? Need anything?"

Luna sat next to Ginny. "No, thank you," she said. "It's just nice to see sunshine and sleep somewhere that isn't a cold floor."

Ginny fought a frown, because she knew Luna was being sincere, but it was hard to forget the fact that Luna – like Ginny – had been held and tortured in a dark cell for quite a long time. Luna's fair skin still bore signs of mistreatment, and there was a limp to her walk. She and her father also both had a hard time eating, and they'd spent their first week of freedom vomiting whenever they tried. However, Luna seemed to take this all in stride.

"I'll get you both some wands as soon as we can," Ginny promised. "That way you won't have to keep borrowing Vita's."

"That would be nice," conceded Luna. "But please do not put yourself in danger. I would rather have you than a wand."

Ginny smiled. "I'd rather have you, too, Luna." Unfolding the parchment, Ginny shifted in the direction of her friend. "And right now, I need your clever Ravenclaw mind. See this here?" Luna peered as Ginny showed it to her. "Draco and I are trying to figure out how the Ministry locates Muggleborns. Voldemort wants to find out so he can kill them, of course, so it will help Draco's image to discover the truth. But if we can find out what sort of magic locates them before someone else at the Ministry, then maybe we can find a way to save them instead."
"And you believe this parchment has the answer?" asked Luna curiously.

"We think so," said Ginny. "Draco's father might've known the truth, and left this as a clue. Whatever is used to find the Muggleborns was a heavily guarded secret, though. No one at the Ministry currently knows, and we need to figure it out as soon as possible. Any ideas?"

Luna took the parchment and read it aloud. "The answer you seek lies in the sky, but not the one in which you fly." She paused, pursing her lips thoughtfully. "Intriguing." Then she sat in complete silence for several seconds.

Ginny's eye twitched. This was why she was not a Ravenclaw. Brilliant though she may be, she had no appetite for puzzles, and only so much available attention to give. When Luna failed to respond, Ginny dropped her hands on the table and groaned. "What sort of sky could it be talking about? Do you think it's maybe on top of the Ministry?"

"I think the top of the Ministry is a loo," pointed out Luna.

Ginny blinked. "Oh. Right." Tilting her head, she screwed up her face in thought. "Could there be a sky in that?"

"Perhaps," said Luna, probably because she was to kind to shoot down Ginny's idea openly. "Whenever we had a particularly difficult riddle at the Ravenclaw tower, we often tried asking ourselves questions, rather than providing answers. Sometimes it's easier that way."

Ginny worked her expression into one of patience with a great deal of effort. "Okay," she said. "So what could it mean by sky?" Luna pointed up, and Ginny nodded. "Yes, the actual sky. But you can fly in that. So what other kind of sky is there?"

Luna fell silent. And then – "An artificial sky. Like a painting."

Ginny tilted her head. "Do you think the key to this might be a painting in the Ministry?" She tried to think of any she'd seen, but none sprang to mind. Luna fell silent again for so long that Ginny wasn't sure Luna had heard her.

At last, Luna asked, "Are you sure that what we are looking for is actually … at the Ministry?"

Ginny's brows furrowed. "Well… I suppose not. But where else would it be?"

"What other location in Great Britain would be interested in knowing where the Muggleborns are?" asked Luna, in a tone that implied that she already knew the answer. Ginny stared.

"Well… Hogwarts."

Luna raised a brow.

And then it struck Ginny. "The answer you seek lies in the sky…" she recited, standing away from the table, her eyes wide. "But not in the one in which you fly." She looked up to see Luna grinning. "The Great Hall! The enchanted ceiling, it looks like the sky!"

"But not the one in which you'd fly," pointed out Luna. "That would end badly."

"That's great! Luna, you're brilliant!" exclaimed Ginny, ecstatic. "Now, we just need to – " In an instant, her excitement vanished, and she sank miserably back into her seat. "Now we just need to… break … into Hogwarts," she concluded dully.
"That will be difficult," mentioned Luna unnecessarily.

"On a normal day it would be difficult," groused Ginny. "Now that Draco's creepy bastard cousin is there, it's going to be damn near impossible." As Ginny started to succumb to her misery, Xenophilius entered with Vita.

"What is it?" he asked Luna, concerned at Ginny's expression.

"Apparently, we must break into Hogwarts to help save the Muggleborns," Luna told him, blinking owlishly.

"Oh," said Xenophilius. "That will be difficult."

Ginny dragged her fingernails down her face.

After a pause, Xenophilius moved into a seat at the kitchen table and touched Ginny's shoulder. "You know," he told her, "I have friends, too."

That evening, Ginny crawled into bed with Draco. They pulled the fine silk sheets up to their shoulders and curled close, an end of the day ritual that always made Ginny smile.

Because Ginny had had several boyfriends in the past, she had naively assumed that being married would be essentially the same, only more long-term. However, each new day proved her wrong—and she was glad for it. Instead of proving to be more of the same, Ginny's married life with Draco had introduced her to an entirely new level of intimacy.

Sex was certainly a part of their relationship—that had not cooled any, and it remained one of their favorite ways to pass the time—but now Ginny had even more to look forward to. Small, tender moments like these were just as pleasurable, intimate and satisfying as sex, because they were private, shared between only the two of them. Each night, when they climbed into bed together with their curtains drawn and the room dark, it was like being a little kid again; they whispered, giggled, and traded stories. They cuddled sometimes and ended up wrestling (yes, actually wrestling) others. They held each other and talked about their days, exchanged their worries and traded fears, and mused on the future.

It was Ginny's favorite time of the day, every day.

No matter the strain they felt at their furtive mission, so long as they were able to be together like this at night, they were grateful. It gave them a center, a place of retreat. They were each other's shelter.

"I think we figured out the riddle," whispered Ginny, looking over Draco's face where it was shaded in silvery light streaming in through the window.

"And?" asked Draco, fingers walking up her freckled shoulder.

"We think it's Hogwarts," admitted Ginny with a wince. "In the Great Hall."

Draco's fingers stopped. "The Great Hall? Are you serious?" He groaned and rolled onto his back. "Bloody hell. That's going to be impossible to get to!"

"Not impossible," said Ginny, turning in the bed and shimmying closer to Draco's bare side. "Luna's father thinks he knows someone who can help. But he had to write them, so no word yet." Draco obviously did not think there was much stock in that, so he simply grunted and turned so he
could bury his face in his pillow.

"Well, don't go and suffocate yourself now," said Ginny wryly. "We've got work to do."

"And?" Draco muttered, turning only half of his face out of the pillow.

"And I love you, so please don't die," she added, smiling. At this, Draco's lips quirked and he shifted to face her again. Beneath the covers, his arms moved out and slid around her, an embrace which Ginny happily slid into it.

"I suppose that's worth staying alive for," he admitted.

"You're damn right," said Ginny, pressing her lips to his.

The following morning, Draco rose and left for the Ministry, so Ginny got up and wandered into the dining hall to have breakfast with Narcissa, even though her stomach had been churning with anxiety lately and it was hard to eat. There usually wasn't much conversation when it was just the two of them, but Ginny truly believed that Narcissa preferred to have her there, so she went anyway.

That morning, however, Narcissa seemed especially quiet and cool. At last, Ginny put down her fork and leaned back in her chair. "You and Draco both have the same look when you want to say something. So out with it, then."

Narcissa placed her fork next to her plate and set her blue eyes on Ginny. "I know you're up to something."

Ginny raised a brow.

"And don't try to pretend you're innocent," continued Narcissa evenly. "You've been sneaking around. And I know that Lovegood girl and her father escaped Ministry custody." Ginny kept her features carefully composed, but inwardly, she scowled. Narcissa was too damn good sometimes. Ginny never even saw her leave the damn house, and yet she knew all that.

"What makes you think that has anything to with me?" asked Ginny. "The Ministry is full of idiots. They lose people all the time."

"You and the Lovegood girl were both at the Ministry when Lucius was arrested. I know she worked closely with you." Narcissa did not begin eating again, even when Ginny did. "The very fact that you neglected to mention her escape to me is a sign that you were involved. Otherwise, you'd surely have been gloating."

Ginny paused. Well, that much was true. Still, Ginny felt some suspicion of her own. "What was the last star Lucius gave you?"

Narcissa frowned. "Narcissus. My star."

Ginny calmed a little and ate a mouthful of food. "What's the purpose of all this, Narcissa?" she asked at last. "You going to turn me in just because of your suspicions? Seems like that's the way the Ministry operates nowadays."

"Of course I'm not going to turn you in," snapped Narcissa. "That would break my son's heart, and possibly even draw him under more suspicion." Her eyes sharpened on Ginny. "However, I will warn you. If you and your foolish efforts somehow put him in danger…"
"Narcissa, if there was anything on under this roof, do you really think Draco wouldn't know?" asked Ginny. This caused Narcissa to breathe in sharply, and Ginny finished her food.

"I love Draco, Narcissa. You know that," said Ginny firmly. "I wouldn't do anything without his knowledge that would put him in danger. Ever." She met the other woman eye to eye. "Are you going to put him in danger? By drawing even more attention to us?"

Narcissa's jaw tightened. "No."

"Good," said Ginny. "Because I'm bloody well playing nice, wearing fancy clothes, brushing my hair and wearing blush. So don't ask any more of me, because I seriously cannot handle it." She pushed her plate away and stood. Somehow, eating had made her stomach feel worse than before, and it churned uncomfortably. She hoped Narcissa and Draco's unhealthy habit of not eating while under stress was not rubbing off on her.

"Ginny."

The redhead paused.

"If I have to sacrifice you to keep Draco alive, I will. But I don't want to," said Narcissa expressionlessly. "Because he loves you."

Ginny had no response to that, so she simply turned and left.

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A week went by before word returned to Xenophilus Lovegood from his "friends." As soon as Ginny got the news, she rushed home to the Manor and waited anxiously for Draco, practically rocking back and forth with anticipation. Draco had barely entered their room before she exploded with the news.

"DRACO."

Her husband paused and then slowly pulled off his cloak, purposefully taking his time so that Ginny's eyes grew wider with every passing second. Then, after he was satisfied he'd made her wait, Draco walked calmly over to the table near the fireplace and sat down. "Yes?" he asked sweetly.

Ginny dropped ungracefully into the seat across from him. "We need more people for our cause."

"That is not news to me," he responded.

"But it's hard to find everyone who's been imprisoned or scattered, right?" asked Ginny, before barreling on, "So… what if we found people to fight with us who weren't there before? People from outside of Great Britain?"

Draco raised a brow. "What're you talking about? Everyone is afraid of Voldemort. Who could we ask to fight with us?"

"Think Draco," said Ginny, leaning over the table. "What country do we know of with a high magical population AND a fanatical, borderline psychotic desire to play the hero?"

Draco thought about this and then his eyes widened. "Ginny, no."

"GINNY, YES!" she shrieked, jumping up.

"Please," groaned Draco, reaching across the table frantically, "For the love of Merlin… anyone
Ginny leaned close, a terrifying grin splitting her features. "It's too late, Draco," she whispered, and Draco groaned again. "Prepare yourself," she told him grandly. "Because you're about to meet Ilvermorny's finest!"

It took another week for their plan to come to fruition, but as soon as Ginny and Draco received the word, they left Malfoy Manor and – after a great deal of effort to make sure they weren't being followed – traveled to a desolate village in an English moor. The Steep Park House where Luna was being kept was heavily guarded by enchantments, and Ginny couldn't have risk bringing strangers there yet. Their first meeting place would have to be somewhere different.

First, they had to talk.

Draco and Ginny entered the quiet village, which was unremarkable in every way – or so they hoped. Down below its empty streets, however, a dangerous group assembled, waiting for Ginny's arrival. Together, the Malfoys passed through a dark doorway and down a set of stairs that appeared only to those of a magical eye. After that, a set of spells was necessary to pass through the doors, and yet more barriers needed to be passed before at last, Ginny came to a dark door outlined in light. Behind it, she heard the muffled sounds of talking.

For a moment, Ginny hesitated. In her excitement, she had forgotten all the potential danger involved in this, as well as the magnitude of it all. Suddenly, she was afraid.

Draco took her hand and squeezed it.

Ginny's eyes flickered in his direction, and a new spring of courage worked its way up into her chest. With newly formed resolve, Ginny pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

The first person she spotted in the group was a tall witch with dark hair in a tight ponytail and a set of equally dark eyes. As soon as Ginny entered, the tall American witch stood – unhurried, calm, confident – and moved over to them. The rest of the room, which held some thirty people, fell silent.

"You must be Ginny Malfoy," said the witch.

"I am," Ginny answered, even though it was still strange to be addressed as a Malfoy. "Are you here from MACUSA?"

At this, the American witch smirked. "Of course not," she replied, before saying loudly over her shoulder, "After all, the American government is NOT getting involved in a foreign war, right guys?" The others snickered, and the woman gave Ginny a grin. "With that being said, hello, I am here on behalf of the American government." She looked between them. "What can I do for you?"

Ginny felt herself grin, too. She liked this witch. "Actually," she said, glancing at Draco before tossing up her hands, "We need to break into the most heavily guarded magical location in all of Great Britain."

"Oh," said the witch. "And here I thought this might be boring."

She jerked her head in the direction of the group. "Come on, I'll give you an overview of what we've got." Together, the trio approached the group, all of whom were sitting or lounging in relaxed positions around the basement-like room. They had begun talking to one another again, and they didn't seem to be paying much attention to the three moving at the front. However, Ginny
noticed that many were actually watching them very closely, all the while expertly feigning disinterest.

"Now, the Magical Congress of the United States of America has wanted to help for a while, but to get officially involved in this war was against public interest. So instead, they answered your friend Lovegood's call with a compromise," said the American witch. "We can't give you numbers, but we can give you skill. And I promise you, every single one of these guys is worth ten of whatever Voldemort's got." She paused and pointed. "We've got three code breakers, three healers, five Dark Arts experts, one Metamorphmagus, two Legilimens, three Potions masters, two magical beast experts, three transfigurationists, two herbologists, five stealth experts and then me," she faced them again. "All around badass."

Ginny smirked. "So you're Agent Blanca Ramirez, Head Auror, I'm assuming?"

"That's me," Blanca replied.

Draco, who had been quiet until now, looked over at two Americans lounging in the corner. "You didn't mention them." He looked over at the young American pair. "Are you two Aurors?"

"We used to be," said the witch, shooting a dirty look at her companion.

"Damn, Mary!" said the wizard at her side. "How many times do I have to apologize?"

"I don't know, Matt! How long does it take for an endangered species of water pixies to repopulate?" snapped Mary.

Matt looked up at Ginny and Draco. "I blew up a lake," he explained.

"A lake?" Draco repeated incredulously.

Ginny raised a brow. "So what do you guys do, exactly?"

"Uh," said Matt, "Basically, you point in any given direction and we proceed to, uh," he exchanged grins with Mary, "fuck shit up in that direction."

"That is the most American thing I have ever heard," muttered Draco.

"Look," said Blanca, shifting to face Draco and Ginny, "what matters is that these two volunteered to come here so they could help you guys. Past indiscretions aside, they're damn good duelists. In fact, everyone here is a top-tier fighter with a specialty to add to it, and they're ready to work. Is that good enough for you?"

"Yes," said Ginny immediately, and Draco made a face.

"Good," said Blanca, before turning to face the group, which had grown quiet again. It seemed that, despite their apparent lax behavior, they had the ability to transform instantly into a mass of rapt attention without Blanca ever needing to say a word.

"Listen up," said Blanca, moving in front of the group. "This is Ginny and Draco Malfoy. They're the ones leading this initiative, and they're the ones we'll be following in our time here. You listen to them, you learn, and you help the best you can. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am!" rang the chorus of voices, startling both Ginny and Draco a bit. Blanca looked over, only a thin glimmer of pride visible in her dark eyes.
"They're all yours, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Ginny, please," she said, before taking one last glance at Draco, who nodded her on. Ginny stepped away from Draco and took Blanca's place at the front of the room. She wasn't sure what she needed to say; she hadn't planned, necessarily, to speak to them this way. But now, she felt as if she had no choice. They needed to know what was going on. They had travelled this far. They deserved to know the truth.

"First and foremost," said Ginny, "I want to thank you all for being here. I know this wasn't an easy trip to make. Voldemort is watching every border, every Apparition, every inch of the sky for anyone entering or leaving. But you all made it here, which means you're already in danger, and we haven't even started."

"This will be a difficult mission for you," continued Ginny, her eyes scanning the group slowly. "I have no doubt that you are all highly experienced and greatly skilled." She paused, fighting against the images that circled in her mind. "…But you have never seen a Dark Wizard like Tom Riddle."

Draco watched from the side, arms crossed.

"I know you've heard the tales, and you were briefed on what you might encounter while you are here," said Ginny. "But if you truly want to know what it's like to stand in front of him, I want you to imagine standing toe to toe with a Dementor… and then watching as a line of all your loved ones – everyone you have ever cared for – comes to that Dementor and allows it to turn them into hollow, lifeless husks right in front of you.

…Just one year ago, I had a family of nine." Ginny swallowed thickly. "Now, I have only two brothers left. My parents, and all my other brothers, are gone. My husband's father was killed as well. Many, many more families were destroyed entirely."

Ginny's brows furrowed. "And those who managed to survive are doing so by languishing away in dark cells, where they are being tortured and raped every single day by Death Eaters and their kinsmen," she said, her voice hard. "I should know. I was in one of those cells for eight months. Others remain in there still.

The only reason I am standing in front of you now is because Voldemort prioritized my pure blood over my past allegiances, and he released me and a select group of others to his followers, so they could torture or rape us into submission. Voldemort's hope was that we would be so beaten, so downtrodden, so severely abused that we would give in to his demands rather than suffer any longer."

Ginny's jaw tightened. "His mistake came when he released me to Draco Malfoy." Her eyes flickered at Draco. "I know you've heard of Draco's family… but make no mistake. Draco is not your enemy any more than I am. And no matter the illusion of safety provided to us by our pure blood, we both know that this corruption by Voldemort cannot be allowed to continue. He must be stopped."

Ginny stopped at the center of the room. "Voldemort does not care about pure blood. He does not care about the magical government, he does not care about its people, and he does NOT care about his followers. The only thing that concerns Voldemort is power.

And he will not stop with England, Ireland, and Scotland. As soon as he can, Voldemort will move on and claim more and more territory, all with the knowledge that he will live forever thanks to the Horcruxes he created."
This caused some of the group to look alarmed, particularly those who had been mentioned as Dark Arts experts.

"Yes," said Ginny stiffly. "Voldemort split his soul six times. One of the pieces was embedded in a journal, so powerful that it possessed me when I was only eleven years old and used me to attack students at Hogwarts." She narrowed her eyes. "And I will never be able to forget that, nor will I ever be able to allow myself to exist in a world where a wizard like that has control of the country and the people I love."

Ginny paused, initially unable to say his name aloud. But then –

"Harry Potter was supposed to defeat Voldemort," she said quietly, her eyes lowered for a moment. "But for reasons I still don't understand… he had to die. And after the other Horcruxes were destroyed, that left only one remaining piece of Voldemort's soul, the one buried deep in his body." Ginny looked back up. "I think we can all agree that he must die."

She scanned the room. "There is no Azkaban for Voldemort. There is no mercy or justice. There is only our last, desperate attempt to undo as much of the damage as we can. Voldemort has already murdered hundreds of Muggleborn witches and wizards – those you call No-Majins – and he is looking to kill more. Small children, with no idea of what's going on or what this war is even about. And so, I must ask you to do something that no one should ever ask of their friends – to leave your country and your families," said Ginny, swallowing thickly, "So that we may have a country and a family of our own."

"This is not your war," continued Ginny. "That much is true. But if you help us reclaim our land and our loved ones… if you help us free our families," she said, voice cracking, "then I swear to you, that will never, ever be forgotten. And both of our families – the Malfoys and the Weasleys – will always come to your aid, whenever you need, for as long as our clans exist."

As Ginny watched, the resolve in the room seemed to lift and solidify. The American witches and wizards sat up straighter for her, as they had done for their leader, Blanca.

"And what about the Elder Wand?" asked one wizard. "Is it true Voldemort has it?"

Ginny looked at Draco, who moved forward, his hands in the pockets of his robes as he moved his cool grey eyes over the group.

"He holds it, yes," said Draco, as the wizards looked nervously at one another. "But he does not truly possess it." Draco paused, jaw tight. "I do."

Blanca raised a brow from her spot. "And how'd you come to that?"

"I disarmed the last owner," said Draco. "And even though Voldemort doesn't know it, that wand belongs me. It will never be true to him until he defeats me… and our biggest advantage is that he hasn't any idea of that at all."

"When the time comes," said Ginny, looking over at Draco, "we will put our lives on the line to fight Voldemort and overthrow his position here. One way or the other, we will meet him in battle. That is a promise Draco and I have made to each other." She looked back at the group. "Will you be there with us?"

Blanca looked back over her group, all of whom looked to their leader with calculated gazes. She seemed to collect something from their wordless exchanges, and then she looked back at Draco and Ginny.
"Time to work," confirmed Blanca.

From there, the American Aurors were taken to Steep Park House, where Luna, her father, and Vita awaited. The massive house, which had been little more than an empty frame when Luna and her father had arrived, was now a sprawling home with enough bedrooms to house them all comfortably. Ginny introduced Luna to Blanca, together, they met with Xenophilius, whose connections from his publication work had given him the edge needed to contact MACUSA.

"Welcome," he said graciously, shaking Blanca's hand.

Within a few days, many of the other allies came to meet the Americans. George and Vera arrived, as did Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson. As soon as Angelina spotted George, she ran and jumped in his arms. "GEORGE!"

Out of all the people who'd arrived, she was the only one who knew George from Fred without a moment's hesitation. George returned the hug tightly, holding on to Angelina for as long as he dared. Then he pulled away and introduced her – haltingly – to his wife.

Angelina's face fell; she and George had not been officially "together" when the battle ended, but there had been no denying their closeness and past relationship. Still, Vera stepped forward and met Angelina with a bright, genuine smile, and as Ginny watched, Angelina made every effort to do the same, although there was a definite dimness in her eyes that had not been there before.

George caught Ginny's eye from across the room, and a hint of suffering passed between them, shared and therefore made at least a little more tolerable. Fortunately, there was no confrontation to be had. Larger, more pressing issues weighed.

"Ginny," came a voice, and she turned to see Andromeda Tonks standing nearby. She opened her arms to Ginny, and Ginny curled her close into an embrace.

"Thank you for being here," said Ginny. "I know you have Teddy to care for, and this is all so… uncertain."

"There was no way I couldn't," said Andromeda. "Ted fought, and I will fight, too. Always."

Ginny smiled a bit sadly. "I hope there's something more than fighting in our future."

"There will be," Andromeda promised softly, sweeping her hand over Ginny's red hair. "I promise."

Leaving Andromeda in the sitting room, Ginny passed through room after room, marveling at the way the house Luna and her father had so painstakingly repaired had come to life with its new occupants. Each room was filled with talk, work, and laughter; even if the Americans had no plans to fight, their mere presence – their companionship and comradery – was enough to spur Ginny on with confidence and zeal.

In the dining room, Ginny found Luna sitting at the kitchen table with Blanca, turning something over in her hand. "What's that?" Ginny asked, sitting next to her friend. Blanca peered closely, obviously curious as well.

"It's the DA coin," said Luna, rubbing her thumb over the engraved numbers.

"You still have yours?" asked Ginny, astonished. "Mine was confiscated before I got put in the cell. How did you manage to hide yours?"

Draco appeared then with a pot of tea and several cups, and Ginny looked up at him appreciatively before accepting her own. When she offered some to Blanca, the other woman waved her hand. "Yeah, no thanks."

The three English folk stared, and Blanca drummed her fingers on the table. "I've got a Mountain Dew," she said at last, waving her green bottle.

"Right," said Draco, eyebrows raised.

"So what is that?" asked Blanca, pointing to Luna's coin.

"When we were in our last normal year of school, we formed a group called Dumbledore's Army," explained Ginny. "It was a secret group devoted to learning defense against the Dark Arts. We knew the war was coming, but the school wouldn't teach us anything practical, so we had to hide. Those coins helped us know when to meet."

"It's a fake Galleon," said Draco, leaning back in his seat. "The numbers are supposed to be the serial code from Gringotts, but instead it's charmed to give a time and date for their little 'meetings'."

"How do you know that?" asked Ginny. "You weren't in the DA."

"Obviously," he said with a snort. "But I figured out Granger's little trick. It was a good one, I'll give her that. I used the same one on Madam Rosmerta. It wasn't easy, though. Protean charms are very difficult."

"And yet you managed to copy it," said Ginny, surprised. She really shouldn't have been, but sometimes she forgot how clever Draco really was.

"Brains and looks," said Draco with a smirk. "A total package, if you will."

"It's too bad," said Luna. "Harry had the master coin. Otherwise, we might be able to use these to find any other members of the DA who are still out there." She sighed softly. Blanca, who had been looking over at the coin thoughtfully, extended a hand.

"Mind if I take a look?"

Luna handed over the coin, and Blanca peered at it before squinting with one eye. Then she leaned back in her chair, so that two legs came off the ground and she could see through a doorway into the next room.

"ALEC!" she bellowed.

A young brunette wizard entered with a tall dark-skinned wizard of a similar age. "Yeah?"

Blanca turned the coin between her fingers. "Think you can manipulate this into the master coin of a Protean charm that's already in place?"

Alec let out a low whistle and took the coin. "That'd be pretty damn hard," he admitted. The other wizard laughed.

"I bet you can't do it," he told Alec.

"Oh, yeah?" asked Alec. "What do you bet, smart ass?"
"All the Doritos I brought with me from the States."

"Oh, you're on," said Alec. He gripped the coin in his palm. "Let's go." Together, the two wizards left quickly, and Blanca waved an arm.

"That wasn't really what I meant when I said motivate each other!" Blanca called after them. Then she dropped her chair to the ground again and smirked. "But hey, whatever works, right?"

Two days later, Alec returned the coin to Luna, flipping it up into the air from his thumb and letting her catch it and pull it into her chest.

"Might want to use geographic coordinates and hope they get the message," he said smugly.

Luna let out an incredulous laugh, hugged Alec and then called on Ginny and Draco, who arrived from the manor as quickly as possible. "Let's hope this works," said Ginny, touching the fake Galleon with her wand. The coin trembled, growing hot, and then the numbers changed according to Ginny's demand.

"Oh, I hope someone still has theirs," murmured Luna.

Together, the group looked out to the wide-open field in front of the manor. The sun was setting, and the green grass looked warm and orange. The house suddenly felt suffocating, so Ginny, Draco, Luna and a few others stepped outside.

Minutes ticked by. Nothing happened.

"Please, please, please, please," whispered Luna over and over again, clutching the coin to her chest. "Please, let our friends see it and understand."

Blanca and many of her Aurors watched from the windows. Luna stepped out ahead of Ginny and Draco, so that the grass was nearly to her knees and swaying gently in the wind. The sun continued to set.

"Please, please, please…"

Ginny's throat felt dry. It was so unlikely anyone still had their coins… and even if they did… She gripped Draco's hand, and he squeezed in return.

Ten more minutes went by with no response.

Then, before the warmth vanished entirely, a pop sounded in the distance. From the tall grass ahead of them, a hand slipped out and pushed aside the blades shielding the newcomer from view.

First came a cautious hand holding a wand. After that, a body emerged, hesitant and poised to fight.

Ginny's breath caught in her throat, and Draco jerked at her side, startled. "TED!" Ginny shouted, and the wizard spotted them all at the same time. His eyes widened.

"Ginny?" he questioned, shocked. Luna shrieked happily, throwing up her arms.

"I do not know you, but I am glad to see you!" she declared to Ted, who looked beyond Ginny, Draco and Luna to see countless more people gathered at the front of the manor – George and Vera and Charlie and –
"… Andromeda?" he said, his voice cracking.

From the home, bewildered and uncertain, Andromeda had emerged to see what the commotion was about. When she spotted Ted, her hands shot to her face, her jaw dropped and she let out the most incredulous, disbelieving cry of joy there ever was.

Suddenly, Ted was sprinting across the open field, and Andromeda was doing the same, until they both met in the center of the sun-warmed grass and Ted pulled Andromeda up into his arms with an elated shout that transformed into a sob shared between them.

"Ted, oh Merlin, I thought you were gone," cried out Andromeda, sinking into her husband's arms.

Ted couldn't manage words. Instead, he clinged to Andromeda with full tears streaming down his face, unable to let her go. At last, he managed to part from her long enough to look around him.

"This is a safe place," Ginny told Ted, tears of her own threatening. "We have help, Ted. We're fighting."

The astonished wizard looked all around before he reluctantly pulled away from his wife. "One moment," he said. "I swear, just – wait – " And then he vanished again. Ginny, Draco, and all the others waited.

A pop sounded to their left, and it was the Creevey brothers.

"GINNY!" cried out Colin.

Another pop sounded to their right, and the gathered group looked up to see Lee Jordan and Oliver Wood. "BLOODY HELL!" shouted George, racing to the two wizards and tackling them, with Katie and Angelina on his heels. Ginny let out an amazed laugh, her mind racing and her heart pounding as she spun, over and over again, each time a new person or group appeared.

Anthony Goldstein, Cho Chang, Michael Corner, and Terry Boot all appeared in the same group. Marietta Edgecomb and Susan Bones popped up right next to Draco, hands laced together. Justin Finch-Fletchley Apparated a few feet away, and Madam Hooch was with him, as well as Sybil Trelawney. Zacharias Smith appeared next to Hagrid and Professor Sprout.

"Hagrid!" shouted Ginny, rushing over to let the half-giant pull her into an equally massive hug.

"Oh, Ginny," said the large wizard gruffly. "Blimey, it's good to see your little red head!"

Nearby, even more people appeared. A few Ginny recognized from Quidditch – Jimmy Peaks and Ritchie Coote and Cormac McLaggen.

There was also Romilda Vane. Penelope Clearwater. Eloise Midgen. Others, Ginny did not recognize at all; they were older witches and wizards, probably Muggleborns, and some of them were clutching the hands of children, many of whom looked frightened and too young for Hogwarts. "These are the people who escaped the Ministry," said Draco at her side in awe.

Many more appeared, Muggleborns who'd been fleeing the Ministry.

Ginny looked back to Ted in surprise, her mouth open to speak. But people were still appearing, and just as she was about to ask where all of these people had come from, two more figures Apparated directly in front of them.

"Hello, Miss Weasley," said McGonagall with a knowing smile.
"I knew you were special," said Slughorn animatedly, pointing at Ginny. "Didn't I say it, Minerva? This one is going on the shelf for certain!"

Ginny let out the loudest, most joyful laugh she'd ever heard in her life.

Without responding further, Ginny turned in a wide circle as more and more people appeared, Apparating into the meadow in front of their safe house and joining the Americans who'd slipped outside curiously.

The sun was finally set and the sky had grown dark, but Ginny had never felt more alive.

"OUR FRIENDS ARE HERE!" called Luna from somewhere in the distance.
Author's Note: Thanks as always for the support! I'm glad you're all enjoying this story as much as I am. Prepare for a helluva' chapter.

"Yeah, size is no guarantee of power," said George. "Look at Ginny... You've never been on the receiving end of one of her Bat-Bogey hexes, have you?"

HPOP, Chapter 6

With the newly assembled forces gathering numbers and strength, there was suddenly much to do at Steep Park House. Blanca immediately began setting up posts for her Aurors, something she accomplished with an ease and confidence Ginny envied.

"Adams," Blanca said sharply, addressing her group of assembled witches and wizards. "We've got you an identity in the Ministry, you're going to be our other insider besides Malfoy. The briefing is here." She tossed a scroll to a middle-aged wizard with long black hair tied in a ponytail. He caught it smoothly, nodded, and immediately left to familiarize himself with his new position.

"Simmons, Fitzpatrick, Mallari and Jones, you're on perimeter," she told another small group, all of whom quickly nodded. "And when I say I want this place airtight, I mean it. You set the wards, you keep them up, and you switch up with B team on schedule, not a second later. You keep one eye on the horizon and the other on this house." Blanca set a fearsome glare on the group. "If so much as a grasshopper gets past those shields, I'm on the hunt. Got it?"

"Yes ma'am!" they chorused firmly, making all the British witches and wizards jump a little at the sudden boom of their voices.

Blance turned to look at another trio of Aurors. "Bennett, you and your team are going to work with George Weasley on plans to infiltrate Hogwarts. We're probably going to need some curse breaking, but the most important thing is figuring out how to get us in and out fast. No Apparating on school grounds, so we need a path on foot. Make it happen."

They nodded and left.

"Last," said Blanca, looking to her other Aurors. "Elliot, you and your team need to find a safe route of Great Britain. We've got some here who can fight, but the others can't stay for long in case things go south." At this, Blanca scowled. "Now look, this Dark Lord bastard has put Regulators on all the borders and a shitshow of anti-Apparition wards everywhere else, so you guys are going to have to find me a path out of this country on the ground. We've got twelve kids, ten seniors and five injured witches and wizards who all need to get the hell out of here. Think you can handle it?"

Alec Elliot, the wizard who'd helped with the Protean charm, nodded sharply. "We'll get it done."

"Good," said Blanca sternly. She turned to the remaining members. "Ben, you're with me. Everyone else, make yourself useful to the newcomers. If I see anyone sitting around not contributing, you will find me -- " she pointed to her own eyes with two long fingers " -- in your face, making your day a living hell. Is that clear?"

"Yes ma'am!"
The Americans dispersed, and Draco raised an eyebrow, impressed. Blanca was a touch scary. He didn't blame the Americans for their efficiency.

"Everything still alright on your end?" asked Blanca as she and Ben approached Draco. "Any updates at the Ministry?"

"The usual debauchery and mayhem," answered Draco dryly.

"Good," said Blanca. "This is Ben Jankowski. He's going to be part of the team infiltrating Hogwarts with you. Get to know each other." Then she disappeared into a crowd, leaving a trail of straight spines in her wake as she passed any of her own Aurors. Draco looked to Ben, who appeared to be a pleasant looking young man in his thirties.

"So," said Draco. "You're the metamorphmagus, right?"

"I am," said Ben.

"I have a question for you."

Ben leaned on a table. "Yes, I can change the appearance of my dick. No, I don't have to. It's fine the way it is."

Draco stared. "That was so far and away from what I was planning to ask."

"Oh," said Ben, before chuckling. "Sorry, that's usually the first question I get."

Draco paused for a long moment. "What in the hell kind of people – you know what, never mind." He walked away from the crowd with Ben. "Look, the Dark Lord has a metamorphmagus working for him, too. His name is Damien Black, and he's very good at what he does. He posed as Ginny's brother for several months without us noticing, and he nearly got us both killed for it."

Ben frowned. "Where was her real brother?"

"Dead," Draco answered quietly. "Damien is a fanatical supporter of the Dark Lord, and he hates Ginny and me for a myriad of reasons. He suspects we are working against the Dark Lord, and I expect he's going to use every available opportunity to try and trick us." Draco raised a brow. "What I want to know from you is... How can either of us know of he's impersonating someone we know? Is there a way to tell a metamorphmagus from the real person?"

"Unfortunately not," said Ben. "Especially if he's any good at it. Who all do you talk to about what's going on here?"

"Only Ginny, my wife," he answered.

"And you don't think you'd know your own wife from an imposter?" asked Ben lightly.

Draco folded his arms. "I am not so sentimental that I'm willing to take that risk."

At this, Ben smirked. "Smart kid."

Draco bristled at being addressed as a kid, but Ben went on, "Alright, so there's really no physical indicator of a metamorphmagus, which can make things really hard. But there is a trick I can show you."

Reaching over, Ben picked up a small pot of ink and showed it to Draco. "If you're worried about Damien impersonating your wife, then each morning when you two wake, take some ink and make
a mark on your body – either on the inside of your wrist or high on your arm, near the bend of your elbow, somewhere not obviously visible to others. You have to remember to do it every day, and you don't need to talk about it. Just do it." Ben pointed. "Now, as a metamorphmagus, I know to take on your appearance, but something like that – Well, I wouldn't know to replicate it, right?"

"Ah," said Draco in understanding. "So if I see Ginny, and she doesn't have the ink mark…"

"Then it's not her," confirmed Ben with a nod.

"Neat trick," said Draco.

"It wasn't my idea," admitted Ben. "My siblings got tired of me impersonating my mom and making them do chores when they were all younger." He shrugged, and Draco snorted.

"Thanks all the same," said Draco, and the two returned to the living room area, where many of the newly arrived British magical refugees were lounging and recuperating from their time on the run. Just then, Ginny appeared, making her way through the crowd with ease. At first, Draco thought she might be coming to talk to him, but her expression was predatory and he knew (or at least hoped) that it wasn't for him. He was proven correct.

"…Marietta Edgecomb," said Ginny, and the girl in question looked up. Her face took on a shade just short of ghostly at the sight of Ginny.

"Oh, hell – hello, Ginny," said Marietta uncertainly. A small circle had cleared in the crowd, and Ginny moved in it before pointing to a chair.

"Take a seat," she told Marietta. It did not sound like a request.

After a pause, the curly-haired witch edged forward and took a stiff seat in a dining room chair. Ginny, without breaking eye contact with Marietta, grabbed a chair of her own, swung it around and sat in it backwards, so that she was leaning on the back of it and looking directly at Marietta. She said nothing for a moment, instead letting the other girl squirm under her stare. The room had gone quiet.

"Ginny, if this is – about – what happened at Hogwarts – "

"When you ratted out the DA to Umbridge, you mean?" asked Ginny, cutting her off. Nearby, Cho took a hesitant step forward.

"Ginny, I don't think that's – "

"Was I talking to you?" cut Ginny sharply, shifting her narrowed eyes to Cho. The former Ravenclaw balked and then shuffled back into the crowd. Ginny looked to Marietta once more. "I swear," said Marietta, trembling. "That won't happen again. I won't betray you – "

"Oh, I know," said Ginny smoothly, hazel eyes unblinking. "And I know that because you are not leaving this house until it is absolutely necessary. Nor will you have any opportunity to escape or pass along information." Suddenly, Ginny pushed the back of the chair so that she was leaning on two legs and her face was very close to Marietta's.

"And if I even think," hissed Ginny lowly, "that you are going to betray us… I will make you long for the company of dementors. Understand?" Ginny stayed where she was for a few seconds to let that sink in.
Trembling, Marietta nodded jerkily. At this, Ginny stood abruptly from her chair, spun it around to its proper place and then left the room.

The crowd remained quiet, with only muffled words resuming chatter. Ben looked to Draco next to him. "So on a scale of one to ten, how turned on are you by your wife right now?"

"Like fifty," said Draco in awe, "… thousand."

A little while later, the atmosphere of the hidden home became considerably more relaxed as day darkened into night and many people turned in to real beds with full stomachs for the first time in ages. Two bedrooms were littered with children, exhausted and happy to feel safe, sleeping next to one another under the supervision of a few witches and wizards who checked in on them ever so often. Many of the children were orphans, Draco and Ginny learned. Their families had either died in the war or their muggle parents were killed trying to defend them from Snatchers.

While Draco and Ginny spoke with Blanca on how best to deal with all this, Lee Jordan sat with George and Charlie Weasley.

"So," said Lee, sipping from a cup of strong coffee. "Tell me, George. Why in the hell did you let Ginny marry Draco bloody Malfoy, the great bouncing ferret?"

George glanced up from the supplies he was sorting out of boxes from his store. "I didn't let Ginny do anything, mate. She's of age."

"Draco… fucking … Malfoy," Lee repeated slowly, eyebrows raised. "One of the biggest scum piles this planet has to offer."

George heaved the box aside and Charlie took over. "Look, he's not that bad, alright? He's changed – well, I mean, he's still a git, but he's changed enough."

"Bollocks," said Lee. "A dragon doesn't change his scales, George."

"They do, actually," piped in Charlie. Lee made a face, and Charlie simply shrugged and continued his work, while George rolled his eyes.

"He's a prat, yeah, but the skinny little bastard loves Ginny, and she loves him. They treat each other well, and that's good enough for me."

"It shouldn't be," said Lee darkly. "No telling what sort of madness is up his in-bred, bloody purity loving sleeve."


"Actually," jumped in Charlie again, and both the other wizards shot him dirty looks. He cleared his throat. "Nevermind."

Lee looked back at George. "Have you forgotten all the times it came to fists with that slimy bloke? Come on, George, what would Fred say?" At this, all three of the young wizard men stopped, and Lee paused, misery crumpling his features. "Sorry," he murmured, as sad as the other two Weasleys.

George cleared his throat and forced his hands to continue sorting. "Fred would feel as I do. It's Ginny's choice." He tossed a box of toothbrushes more harshly than necessary into a bin. Lee finally let the topic drop, and instead, he reclined on his back and looked across the room.
"I can't believe you're married," said Lee after several minutes. "You do know she's too hot for you, right?"

George relaxed and smirked a little. "Yeah, I do."

"I mean," said Lee, "like… way too good looking for your ugly arse. It's a crime, it is."

"Thanks, mate," said George wryly.

"While I'm over here," said Lee, "strapping as ever, single as can be. What's wrong with the world?"

George hefted a box of supplies on top of the counter and turned to Lee. "Well, maybe I can help you out with that." He leaned over, hands on his knees, to get on eye level with the resting Lee. "You see, my wife has a younger sister." He nodded in Vita's direction, and Lee followed his gaze to see the striking young witch.

Immediately, Lee bolted upright. "Merlin's tented trousers!" he exclaimed, before clapping a hand on George's shoulder. "You've redeemed yourself, Weasley." Then he hopped up and sauntered in Vita's direction, where she was standing talking to Xeno Lovegood.

Snickering, George returned to his work. Hesitating as another wave of sadness swept over him, he continued only when his older brother Charlie took a moment to wrap an arm around his shoulders in a comforting squeeze.

Things were going so well at Steep Park House, Ginny couldn't keep the smile off her face all the following week. Not even her now-regular afternoon tea with The Ladies could dampen her spirits, although Pansy Krum showing up certainly threatened to put a crack in Ginny's iron-clad pleasure.

"That whole business with the tea was just a silly joke," said Tracey Davis with sickening sweetness. "Pansy meant no harm. Isn't that right, Pansy?"

Ginny turned her unimpressed gaze in Pansy's direction. "Of course," said Pansy slowly, her features comical in their tightness. She looked like a poorly painted doll face. "All in good fun."

"Well then," said Ginny with an exaggerated wave of her arm, "I suppose there's no harm, then!"

"Good!" said Gemma Farley, clapping her hands together, as if no one had noticed Ginny's sarcasm (which they usually did not). At least Daphne and Astoria were both there, and they seemed to have trouble suppressing their amusement at Ginny's deadpan expression.

As Ginny counted down the minutes until the tea was over, the other witches – true to form – began talking about wizards and courtship and making babies.

"How goes your courtship with Theo Nott?" asked Gemma to Astoria. "I hear you went on another date!"

"We did," said Astoria, pleased. Her cheeks puffed a little with pink, and Ginny smiled. This relationship, at least, she wholly approved of. Astoria continued, "Because both of his parents are now passed, we're planning to meet with his maternal grandparents for dinner next week."

"So exciting!" said Gemma excitedly, before Tracey leaned in.

"Isn't it strange, having Lavender Brown there?" She turned up her nose. "I wouldn't dare court a
man who's harboring another woman! Let her go live her own life, already."

Ginny's hand tightened on her teacup, but she said nothing, waiting for Astoria's response.

"Lavender," said Astoria politely, "is lovely, and she is like Theo's sister. I've no reason to wish her
away."

"I'm just saying," cut in Tracey, "I wouldn't stand for it. Another woman living with the man I'm
courting – how scandalous!"

Ginny clicked her tongue loudly, seconds away from ruining the tea party with some scathing
comments (and not for the first time). However, Daphne – who was commonly on damage control
whenever Ginny was around – quickly changed the subject. "Did you hear?" Daphne rushed out
excitedly. "Isabella Scott is with child! She's one of dear Blaise's sisters. Isn't that so exciting?" She
put her hands over her heart longingly.

Meanwhile, Ginny leaned back in her chair and grimaced. The tea had unsettled her stomach, and
she hoped Pansy's sneaky arse hadn't put something in it again. Astoria frowned and leaned over,
placing a hand on Ginny's arm.

"Are you alright?" she asked, concerned.

Ginny grimaced and nodded. "I'm fine, thank you. I've just been having some nausea lately. A little
heartburn as well."

At this, Alaine Vaisey looked up. "Oh? For how long?"

Ginny frowned, wondering what Alaine's angle was. There was always an angle. "A few weeks. A
month, maybe."

At this, the other girls all gasped, including Astoria. "Oh, do you think you might be pregnant?"
asked Daphne, and Ginny blinked before letting out a very unladylike laugh.

"What? No!" she answered.

"How can you be sure?" asked Pansy, speaking up for the first time, her expression glinting with
malice. "After all, you are married… and I'm sure you and Draco sleep together, don't you?" Ginny
paused and carefully shifted her expression in Pansy's direction.

"Of course we do," said Ginny when Ginny didn't answer. "After all, I dated Draco for quite a
while, and I happen to know he has quite the … appetite."

Murder flashed in Ginny's eyes, but she kept her expression balanced. She knew the girls were
wrong, because she had faithfully taken her contraceptive potion every single day since she and
Draco had started sharing a bed. However, contraceptive potions were illegal, and even mentioning
the use of any preventative methods was a punishable offense under the new Ministry. Therefore,
Ginny was not at liberty to reveal the reason behind her confident denial.

"Of course we sleep together," said Ginny at last, smoothing her features into a pleasing smile that
hinted at danger. "We're husband and wife."

"So it's possible, then?" asked Tracey excitedly. "You could be pregnant?"

"I suppose," said Ginny through clenched teeth.
"Gemma," said Pansy, cocking her head in the host's direction. "Do you have any Brisby potions here?"

"I do!" said Gemma, calling for a house-elf. Ginny felt her insides tighten. Brisby potions, named for their creator, were as good as a physical exam for determining pregnancy. Within seconds, the house-elf returned with a small blue bottle. Gemma took the potion and handed it to Ginny. "Take it now! We must know!"

"How exciting," said Tracey. "Just imagine! We could witness the first sign of a new Malfoy heir!"

Pansy's eyes settled on Ginny, and it was clear she relished in Ginny's discomfort.

Taking the potion bottle uncertainly in her fingers, Ginny looked around at the group of gathered witches before forcing herself to smile and laugh. "That would be exciting, wouldn't it?" she asked, before pushing back her nerves. *Nothing to be afraid of,* she told herself.

Ginny tossed back the potion, swished it around in her mouth and then spat it back in the bottle.

"If it turns red," explained Daphne to Astoria, "that means there's no pregnancy. But if it turns purple…"

All eyes turned to the small bottle, which swirled in its small glass prison. For several seconds, nothing happened.

And then the color changed.

______________________________

That same afternoon, Narcissa Malfoy made a rare personal appearance in Diagon Alley, where she enjoyed spending a great deal of gold and upstaging anyone who dared to stand near her. After she was finished – and after she made certain to let certain important people see her – she returned to the Malfoy Manor feeling invigorated.

She did not care nearly so much as she had during her younger years, but remaining the focus of admiration was still nice.

However, as Narcissa entered her home and went to her small suite to drop off her purchases, she found the room was already occupied.

Ginny stood in Narcissa's private room, her back to the door and her hands gripping a low table where Narcissa kept all her perfumes and beauty ointments. If it wasn't for her unique shade of red hair, Narcissa might not have recognized her, standing as she was.

"Ginny?" questioned Narcissa, placing her bags to the side.

The younger witch straightened from her spot and turned to face Narcissa. Instantly, Narcissa took in Ginny's strained features, flushed skin, and freshly damp cheeks. Rather than looking tearful, however, Narcissa's daughter-in-law appeared quite venomous.

Narcissa lingered near the door. "What are you doing in here?"

"You … You did it," answered Ginny. Narcissa raised a brow.

"I did what? What are you talking about –"

Ginny's wand slashed through the air and the entire table of bottles and perfumes exploded in a burst of magical energy, causing Narcissa to jump back in alarm. "YOU DID THIS!" screamed
Ginny quite suddenly, fury radiating from her in waves.

"What on earth are you talking about?" exclaimed Narcissa, thrusting her chin up in the air in an effort to maintain her dignity. However, she reached back and put her hand on her wand, although she knew she was no duelist and Ginny's reflexes were likely much better than hers. "Calm down!"

"NO!" shrieked Ginny, advancing on Narcissa with her wand raised. "You knew what we were doing, and you wanted to stop it! You would do anything to protect Draco! You told me you would, and now you've gone and ruined EVERYTHING!"

"I don't know what you're – "

"YOU SABOTAGED MY CONTRACEPTIVE POTION!"

Narcissa balked, brows furrowed for a moment as the words sank in. Then her blue eyes widened. "Are you… pregnant?" she asked faintly.

Very suddenly, Ginny's furious expression melted away into one of fear, and she pulled away from Narcissa with an anguished sob, her hands jumping to her head. "Stop pretending like you don't bloody know!" exclaimed Ginny at the floor, before she turned her glare up to Narcissa again. "You did this to me because you knew it would hold us back!"

"I did… no such thing," said Narcissa, regaining her calm, even as her own insides began to tremble with anxiety at such news. "I can assure you, I would not – "

"It had to be you!" exclaimed Ginny. "I took that damn potion every single day with my breakfast, it was ALWAYS there!"

"Stop LYING!" screamed Ginny again, but at that moment, a clatter to the side alerted both of the witches to the presence of Bleaker. The aged house-elf had entered the room with a tray of freshly refilled bath products. However, he'd run directly into the bookshelf, and they'd all fallen over. As he scrambled to right them again, Ginny and Narcissa watched as he picked one up and then brought it very, very close to his face, so he could squint at the text. Then he paused uncertainly and replaced it before shuffling off.

Ginny and Narcissa both stared, with the former letting out a choked noise of despair.

Narcissa, with only a hint of satisfaction, looked back to Ginny. "You were saying?"

Before Ginny had a chance to answer, Draco entered from the corridor. "What on earth is all this yelling about?" he asked, waving an arm. However, neither Ginny nor Narcissa responded. Instead, Ginny turned her face from Draco and hurried out of the room, even as he attempted to stop her. She ran out, hurrying down the hallway and down to the stairs.

"What's going on?" asked Draco heatedly to his mother. Narcissa folded her hands in front of her and looked over her son's face, seemingly to inspect every detail there.

"You should go and talk to her," Narcissa said softly, instead of answering his question.

Frowning, Draco turned and quickly left the room. Though Ginny stayed out of sight, Draco managed to follow her footsteps down the stairs and into the lower parts of the manor, where they kept all the illicit items their family hid from the Ministry.
Turning, Draco continued on Ginny's trail of quick, shuffling steps until he found her in the room where the illegal potions were kept. Ginny was frantically searching the shelves, pushing aside bottles and not caring when they broke. Draco slowed to a stop and watched her, confused.

"Ginny, what're you…"

Then she pulled out a bottle, orange in color and with a foul-smelling liquid inside. Though Draco had only seen such a potion once – during his time at Hogwarts – he knew immediately what it was. His eyes widened, and he took an uncertain step forward.

The world around them seemed surreal in that moment; Draco could scarcely breathe.

"Ginny…"

He could not think of what he was more afraid of – her taking the potion, or deciding against it.

"Ginny, are you… are you pregnant?" he asked, his voice very small. In front of him, his strong wife trembled, so severely he was afraid she might fall. Her hold on the bottle quivered.

"Yes," she whispered without looking at him.

"How?" he questioned, not moving any closer to her. He felt rooted to his spot.

Ginny swallowed. Her eyes were still on the orange bottle in her hand. "Bleaker… he must have mixed up the potions." She closed her eyes then, but the tears leaked through. Draco could not find the strength to speak, although a thousand things rushed through his mind.

He reached out to Ginny, but as he did so, she took the orange bottle and hurled it at the wall. The glass shattered instantly, the liquid fell to the floor. Some part of her Draco – a part he was surprised by – breathed a sigh of relief. However, one look at Ginny took his breath away again.

"I can't stop the pregnancy," murmured Ginny, her shoulders hunched. "All the girls were there, they saw the results from the Brisby potion." At last, she looked up and met Draco's gaze. "If they suspect I got rid of the pregnancy with a potion, I'll be arrested."

Draco could not think of anything to say, so he simply nodded. It was true; the Ministry had made examples of many other women so far that year.

"I can't do this, Draco," said Ginny, her jaw clenched. She did not move closer to him, but instead remained curled up, even while standing, as if her body was collapsing in on itself. "I can't, I can't – we have a bloody WAR to fight, Draco!"

"I know," he said, before taking a step towards her. Even as his heart pounded, he forced himself to speak, praying for comforting words to make their rare appearance on his tongue. "Ginny, we'll figure it out – please, just – "

"We can't figure this out, Draco!" snapped Ginny, instantly hostile, even as her eyes shone with hot, angry tears. "We can't! We can't do this! Bloody – fucking – FUCK!" Ginny gripped her hand for a moment before letting out a sob and slamming her hand on a nearby table. "We have a HUNDRED bloody people at that house, depending on us to get them through this war! That's a hundred lives that are DIRECTLY on me, Draco! I can't handle one more! I can't!"

"You don't have to handle it alone, Ginny," Draco told her earnestly. "You aren't alone, you have me and everyone else, and we'll figure this out! This isn't the end of everything – "
Ginny advanced on him, beckoning madly to herself. "How am I supposed to fight while I'm pregnant, Draco? You said it yourself with Gabrielle – things are DIFFERENT this way!"

"You may not be able to fight in the very end," admitted Draco, exasperated, "but this – this isn't a death sentence, Ginny. I know you think we can't do this, but we can –"

"That's easy for you to say!" snapped Ginny furiously. "You're not the one who will be pregnant! You're not the one letting everyone down!"

Draco took in a deep steadying breath. "I know, but –"

"I CAN'T DO THIS!" Ginny screamed, before she pushed her hands over her face and sank back against the wall. Slowly, she slid to the ground. "I – I don't even know –"

Suddenly, her voice became very small and child-like. "I don't even have my mum," she whispered. Her tear-stricken face looked up to Draco, and the anger seemed to leave her in that moment, overwhelmed by misery. "I don't know how to do this, Draco. I don't know how to –" Words failed her then, and she began weeping into her knees.

Draco, much to his own shock, felt like crying himself. However, he simply dragged a hand over his face, inhaled deeply and then got on the floor with Ginny. Fear that she would push him away made his chest tighten painfully, but when Draco slipped his arms around her, Ginny fell against his chest and gripped his robes as if she never planned to let him go.

"It will be alright," he assured her, pressing his lips to her temple. "I can't explain to you how I know that, other than that I know I would never let any harm come to you."

"Draco," murmured Ginny, swallowing another sob. "I was prepared to die for this war." She looked up to her husband's stunned expression. "How can I do that now?"

Oddly, Draco's lips quirked. Of course Ginny had been ready to give her life for this cause. He should have known. That was why, despite Draco's insistence otherwise, she was a true Gryffindor. Ginny had made the choice to be brave a very long time ago… and she had never broken that promise. Not once.

"I don't know," he admitted softly. "But it was always my plan to keep you alive at all costs. That has not changed."

"I don't want this child to be an orphan, Draco," said Ginny tearfully. "It could wind up like Teddy or – or Harry." Her face crumpled. "You don't know what Harry had to go through without his parents, Draco," she said, before crying again. "We're fighting a war, and now – now there could be one more orphan, one more life at risk and I just – I don't even know what to expect, and I've never…" Her eyes widened.

"I have never been so scared in my life," she said, as if the revelation had only just come to her.

Draco shifted a little so he could look directly into her eyes. "Look at me," he told her, and Ginny reluctantly met his gaze. "I know this isn't ideal, but our child will not be an orphan. We will win this war, and we will live, and this world will be a better place for it. Do you understand?"

Ginny hesitated, before she gave a jerky nod.

"Now," said Draco, breathing in deeply, "please… go and talk to my mother." At Ginny's instant look of anger, Draco continued quickly, "Love, I don't know enough about pregnancy to comfort you or set your fears straight. And I don't want to lie to you and pretend as though I do. So,
please… go and talk to her. She'll know what to do."

Ginny lowered her eyes as she considered this.

"My mother cares for you," Draco told her. "She does. Please… just try."

After a long moment, Ginny nodded and pressed her face into Draco's front. "I love you," he murmured to her, hands stroking her head. Ginny stifled a whimper.

"I love you, too," she whispered back.

Xx

A little while later, Ginny re-entered Narcissa's private quarters, where the elder witch was sitting at her window and looking out into the courtyard, clearly deep in thought. Ginny entered alone, her cheeks still damp with tears. When she appeared, Narcissa looked over at her and then, after a pause, beckoned to the seat next to her. Ginny took it, folding one leg under her. Looking to the same window as Narcissa, Ginny said, "I don't know what to do."

"Did you not take the potion?" asked Narcissa tightly.

"No," admitted Ginny. "There are others who know. I can't stop the pregnancy." Her voice was even, but it threatened to crack at any moment. Her entire body trembled violently. "I – I don't – " She paused, before squeaking out, "I need my mum." Her voice did falter, then, as Molly Weasley's face floated in Ginny's mind's eye.

After a moment, Narcissa reached over and touched Ginny's hand.

"I know," the other witch told her. "And I am no replacement for your mother. But at the very least, I can prepare you for what is to come."

"There's more to it than that," admitted Ginny, looking to Narcissa. "We are going to have to fight, Draco and I. I don't know how to do that with a new baby here. How can we hope to keep it safe? What will happen to it if we fail?"

Narcissa fell silent as she pondered this. Again, she looked out to the courtyard. Then, as if her decision was made, Narcissa shifted back to Ginny.

"Have the baby," Narcissa instructed. "Go through everything as normally as possible. And then, when the baby is born…." She met Ginny's gaze. "I will take it, and I will leave the country to a safe place in Sweden, where I have a close friend waiting for me."

Ginny's eyes widened. "You'll… take it? You can get it out of England?" At Narcissa's stiff nod, Ginny fell silent and considered this. "Voldemort might notice you're gone. He could catch you. Is your friend willing to take that risk? Are they trustworthy?"

Narcissa did not hesitate. "I trust him more than anyone yet living."

Ginny leaned back slowly. Exhaustion began to seep into her bones. "And you? Are you willing to protect this child, even against Voldemort?"

Narcissa raised a brow. "It will be my grandchild, Ginny. I would give my life for it, as I would for Draco."

Instantly, Ginny believed her, and knew her words to be true. "And… if we win, you'll bring it
"Of course," said Narcissa softly.

"What happens if we fail?" asked Ginny stiffly. "If we're lost…"

"Then I will raise it. I swear it to you," Narcissa promised, her spine straight and her shoulders squared. "I will give it the best life possible, befitting such an important child."

Ginny fell silent for a while. At last, she nodded. "Thank you," she said to Narcissa, unable to look at the older witch for a moment. "I… I just…"

"I know," said Narcissa. "Go and sleep."

Numbly, Ginny rose from her spot and made a motion to leave. However, before she did so, she turned to Narcissa and the other woman pulled her into an embrace without being prompted. It was the first and only time Narcissa had ever done so. The touch lasted only a few seconds, but it was enough.

Ginny nodded to Narcissa without looking at her, and then she left the room.

Narcissa watched Ginny go. When the door closed behind her, Narcissa exhaled shakily, putting her hand over her mouth. After taking a moment to gather herself, Narcissa moved to her writing desk and pulled out a piece of parchment and some ink. Quickly, she sat down to write.

*Algernon,*

*I need your help.*
Chapter 28

Author's Note: Welcome back everyone! Can you believe that this fic is a year old this month? I have never, in my fifteen years of writing fanfiction, written the same story for an entire year (not including rewrites). This is also my longest story ever in terms of word count, and it still has a wayssss to go.

So enjoy.

The morning after Ginny's shocking news, Draco awoke with an immediate feeling of dread; not even one blessed moment of forgetfulness greeted him. Instead, the anxiety was an instantaneous stranglehold on his heart. When Draco cast his head to the side and realized Ginny was not sleeping next to him, the curling fear, raw and potent, grew even more intense.

Pushing back the covers, Draco walked away from the bed and into the spare room that had once been his study, and then after that, Ginny's room. It now mostly served as his alchemy room, as Ginny hadn't used it since they'd married. However, she was in there now.

Instead of sleeping, though, Ginny was standing with maps, charts and lists spread over his alchemy table, her expression dark and serious. Draco walked up slowly, and even though he was directly in front of her, Ginny did not look up or acknowledge him. He glanced at the various bits of parchment; it was all related to their mission notes on Hogwarts or those they had staying at Steep Park House.

"Good morning," Draco dared at last, his tone even.

Ginny glanced up at him before looking back to her parchment. "Morning," she greeted, eyes on the ink. She picked up one and showed it to him, the notes on Hogwarts. "I got George to write down the various ways in and out of Hogwarts. If anyone is going to get us in there without Damien knowing about it, it's him. He'll have to be part of the team."

Draco forced himself not to sigh. "That makes sense," he responded in what he thought was a very patient and gracious manner. He did not want to talk war strategy right now. His beloved wife, normally so ready with a smile and a laugh, had just found out she was pregnant with their child, and that, to him, took priority.

He waited for Ginny to bring it up, but she didn't. Instead, she kept flipping through parchment, making notes. When Draco lingered, she glanced up again, and something strange flashed in her eyes. "If you're waiting for me to go to breakfast, you can go on," she said dismissively. "I'm not hungry. I want to work on this."

Draco's brief but valiant struggle with patience snapped. "Are we not going to talk about this?" he asked testily.

Ginny's fingers stayed on the paper, sliding down a list of names. Draco could spot the stiffness in her features, though, and how they hardened further at his words. "Talk about what?" she asked.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Don't act stupid, Ginny. You know damn well what I'm talking about."

"There's nothing to discuss," said Ginny, straightening at last. "What more do I have to say? I already told you what happened. Bleaker mixed up the potions." She shrugged crossly and moved to another piece of parchment. "Don't punish him. He's old."
"I wasn't planning to punish him," said Draco, matching her every step. "But I do think there are things we need to plan for, things that – "

"We don't have to plan for anything," Ginny snapped, cutting him off. "I'm going to have the baby, and your mum is going to take it to Sweden, remember?"

"And you settled that without me, did you?" asked Draco. "I don't even know who the hell she's talking about going to."

"She said it was a friend she trusted with her life. I believe her," said Ginny. "Don't you? She's your mother, Draco."

"I believe she wouldn't intentionally put our child in danger," agreed Draco sharply, "but that doesn't change the fact that I don't know this person – "

"She said she can trust him, alright?" exclaimed Ginny. "Just drop it!"

"Him?" Draco repeated. "This is a man, she's talking about?" He could not possibly imagine what wizard he knew of whom his mother could be so close with.

"That's what she bloody well said, and that's all I know. Now just go to breakfast already," said Ginny, pointedly pulling up some more parchment. Draco felt every muscle in his body tighten.

"Don't do this," he hissed, suddenly furious. "Don't pull this Gryffindor bullshit!"

Ginny's features morphed into sharp, angry edges. "What the hell are you talking about?" growled Ginny. "What Gryffindor bullshit?"

"This!" Draco exclaimed, gesturing. "This self-sacrificial, stubborn idiocy! Bloody hell, every time you lot think you're at some kind of disadvantage, you ALWAYS respond by just barreling forward anyway, determined to just knock down anyone or anything in your path, never mind the damage it does to you! You won't listen to reason, you won't strategize, you just ignore everyone and everything else and hope that works out for you!"

"What do you want me to do, Draco?" Ginny yelled.

Draco opened his mouth to yell back, but for whatever reason, he found that he couldn't. Instead, he stared at Ginny long and hard, fighting the dryness in his throat and the concave suction in his chest, the one which reached the pit of his stomach and made him feel weak.

Draco asked quietly, "Are you not happy about this… at all?"

The woman in front of him trembled but only for a moment. Her hazel eyes flickered and looked away, before they eventually hardened once more, cast dimly on the parchment. "No," she said stiffly, in one grunted syllable.

At this, Draco swallowed over the lump in his throat and instead nodded, in a way that showed he understood, in the same way one understood that people must die, but did not appreciate having to admit it at the funeral of their loved one.

"Fine," he said, before turning and walking out.

At breakfast, Draco sat with his mother, who ate quietly. She did not question where Ginny was, and he did not bother her about the mysterious friend overseas.
"Are you alright?" Narcissa asked at last.

Draco kept his eyes forward as he sipped pumpkin juice from the beautiful glass goblet. "No," he said, before setting his cup down roughly. "And no, I don't want to talk about it." He finished his few bites of food and stood, nodding to his mother. "We are going to be out today," he told her, before giving her a stiff kiss on the head. Then he turned to head out.

However, he paused at the door to the dining room, and after a moment's hesitation, he returned to the table long enough to grab a breakfast roll, which he wrapped in a cloth napkin and tucked into the pocket of his robes.

Just an hour later, Draco and Ginny left the house in complete silence.

Their visit to Lavender had been planned for a week, and they did not need to cancel it. However, neither were too keen on communicating with one another, so the normally animated couple said nothing to one another for the half-hour trip. Once they arrived, they found Lavender alone, as they had expected. Theo was out, which made the timing of the conversation as ideal as it would get.

"Come in, come in," said Lavender, smiling. Both Ginny and Draco managed small fake smiles, and Lavender took them both into the sitting room for some tea. Ginny did her best to keep up with her talkative friend's conversation, but it was difficult. She did not want to look in Draco's direction, because she might either cry or fly into a fury, even though she had no real anger for him, not at all.

Instead, she took a seat and accepted Lavender's tea while the other witch chatted amicably about this and that. Ginny's hands on the saucer trembled some, and the delicate glass made the occasional rattle as a result. When Ginny could no longer stand the idle chatter, she set the tea aside and turned to face Lavender.

"Lavender, Draco and I want to talk to you about something," said Ginny, wishing she felt more prepared for this conversation. At her friend's worried look, Ginny squeezed her own kneecaps and cleared her throat. "Draco and I… are fighting the Ministry." She lifted her eyes to Lavender and tried not to feel guilty as a cold wave of fear washed over Lavender's features. "We are starting another war, so we can defeat Voldemort, once and for all."

Glass on the saucer rattled again, but this time, it was in Lavender's hands. Her eyes watered instantly, and Draco leaned forward, doing his best to remain even and patient.

"We understand the war was very traumatic for you," he said tonelessly, "but we wanted to give you the chance to fight in this one. We have a safe house, and we have a large group of people who are here to help. Friends of yours, possibly. People you would like to see."

Lavender looked down at her teacup, terror etched into every stiff movement of her body. After several seconds of silence, she put down her teacup and breathed in sharply. "Well, now I know why you didn't mind that Theo wasn't here today," she squeaked out, tears already dropping down her cheeks.

"He won't fight," Draco acknowledged. "And that's alright, but you can't tell him what we're doing. I am afraid he might do … something … to protect you and your son, and I'd rather he was kept in the dark about this."

"But you," said Ginny to Lavender, reaching for her friend's hand. "You fought in Dumbledore's Army. I thought – I felt like – maybe … you would want this chance, to fight again." But even as Ginny said it, she knew it was impossible. Every terrible emotion seemed to overwhelm Lavender.
in the same moment, and she was instantly in tears, shaking like mad and preparing to convulse.

"Lavender, it's okay – "

"I'm sorry," the other witch sobbed, reaching up one of her own hands to brush at her collar, where Ginny knew deep scars left by Fenrir Greyback lay. Ginny's heart twisted painfully. They shouldn't have done this, she thought angrily. They should have known Lavender was in no condition to fight. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," said Lavender over and over again. "I just – I can't – I'm – I'm just… too afraid," She breathed in, but it did nothing to calm her. "Oh, Merlin!" She covered her face with her hands. "I'm a coward! I'm a disgrace to Gryffindor!"

"No," said Ginny firmly, grasping Lavender's hands. "No, Lavender, you've done enough, you – " Suddenly, Ginny felt her own distress threaten to strangle her, the heavy weight of the day already bearing down on her, and it wasn't even noon. "It's alright, really. We just – " Ginny paused and clenched her eyes shut before going on, " – We just wanted to offer."

"I'm sorry," murmured Lavender tearfully one last time. "I'm shameful… I'm weak – "

"You are not weak," Ginny told Lavender forcefully. "You are strong, and you've endured enough, alright? Just – calm down, it's alright… nothing's going to happen to you… we promise."

In his chair, Draco leaned back and sighed heavily, already feeling at his wit's end with the day. It took nearly twenty more minutes to calm Lavender down, and Ginny and Draco finally left, the door closing behind them with an ominous click.

For whatever reason, Ginny felt as if she could not take another step at that moment, and so she moved shakily down the stoop and sat on the last step, her elbows on her knees. Draco hesitated and then sat right next to her.

"That went well," murmured Ginny, the very first thing she had said to Draco since her argument.

Bringing up a fisted hand, she smashed it against her eye in an aggressive attempt to hide her own tears. Draco made a noise of agreement but didn't say anything, and for a few minutes, the only sound was the whistling of the wind and the rustle of leaves in the branches of trees nearby.

After a few minutes, though, another sound joined the natural symphony – the sudden loud growling of Ginny's stomach. Draco glanced to the side as his red-faced wife set her stubborn glare anywhere other than on Draco. He watched the back of her head and the corner of her angry eyes for only a moment. Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out the napkin bundle, which he wordlessly deposited into Ginny's hand.

Shifting, Ginny turned her furrowed gaze to the napkin and unwrapped it. When she found the biscuit, her features pinched with the effort not to cry. After a moment, in which only a tiny squeak escaped her, Ginny broke off a big piece, put it in her mouth and then tilted her head to the side, so that her temple fell on Draco's shoulder.

"I don't deserve you," whispered Ginny when she'd finished the biscuit.

Draco turned so that his lips brushed the top of her head. "I deserve you even less," he murmured in reply.

As Draco and Ginny left the Nott home, a trembling young witch made her way into her personal rooms. Removing part of her robes, she looked at herself in a tall mirror, fingers tracing the deep scars ingrained in her flesh.
Hysterical sobs overtook her, and she stayed that way for nearly an hour, until the front door opened and closed and a voice called out to her.

"I'm home, Lav," said Theo. "Astoria says hello –"

He stopped at her door, where Lavender was slumped in front of her mirror, a hysterical mess of tears and violent shivers. "What is it?" asked Theo immediately, hurrying into the room. He reached for a blanket and pulled it around Lavender's shoulders. "What's wrong? Tell me."

"I – I –" Lavender started, before her tearful eyes lifted to Theo's. "I… Oh, Theo… I'm so afraid!"

Bewildered, Theo lowered himself to the floor next to Lavender and let her whisper her fears.

The argument between Ginny and Draco concerning the pregnancy was not forgotten, but it was, at least, set aside to make room for more urgent matters. The very next day, Draco and Ginny both returned to Steep Park House to deal with a number of issues, one of them being that some of their own scouts had come across a pair of Snatchers transporting three Muggleborns back to the Ministry for execution. Fortunately, the scouts – Vita, Xenophilius and an American called Richard – had managed to rescue the three Muggleborns and kill the two Snatchers, who had been of low importance.

However, this now meant that there were three more young Muggleborn children at Steep Park House, and things were starting to get crowded. Blanca, the head American Auror, had started using some of her own people to work as caregivers for the children, now that the number of them had swelled to nearly a dozen, with many more fugitive adults living there as well.

While Ginny talked with Blanca, Draco went to the large dining hall of Steep Park House, which had been cleared out and made into a general room with couches, chairs and tables. It was one of the few in the home large enough to accommodate all of safe house resident if necessary, and it had become a den of sorts. It was usually a chaotic section of the house, and today was no exception.

Unfortunately, Draco found he could hardly concentrate on accomplishing much of anything. Between the excessive noise and his own troubled thoughts, all he could manage to do was give some vague direction to those who asked and otherwise sit and brood.

He hadn't brought up the pregnancy to Ginny again, and their conversations were intact, but they were hardly what Draco wanted. Ginny was still being aloof, and she refused to acknowledge the pregnancy at all. This bothered Draco more than he could possibly commit to words.

"Malfoy?"

Draco's razor-sharp glare lifted to the American witch who dared to distract him from his self-pity, one of his most prized possessions. "What?" he asked dully, turning his gaze back to the window near the table at which he sat.

The American witch – Jenny? – faltered. "Uh, I was hoping you could help me with one of the No-Maj'ins kids here, a little girl. I'm having trouble figuring out who she is and where she came from."

Draco sat back in his chair and settled his impressive glare on her. "And why is that? She's a child. Make her tell you."

"I'm trying," said the witch impatiently, "but – well, I mean, she's crying and – I'm not good with
kids and – " At last, she shrugged awkwardly and admitted, "Okay, fine! You got me. The kid's got this crazy thick accent, and I can't understand a word she says." At Draco's raised eyebrow, the American witch shrugged again and said, "She's like… I don't know, maybe Scottish or Irish?"

"You really can't tell the difference?" asked Draco.

"Will you just go and talk to the kid please?" snapped the witch.

Scowling, Draco stood up from his chair. "Which one?" he asked flatly. The American witch pointed, and Draco growled softly when he spotted a small girl huddled in a corner, face hidden in her knees. Stomping away from the American, Draco moved to the little girl, who shrank away from the sounds of his footsteps.

"You there," he said more gruffly than he intended. "What's your name?"

The little girl responded by kicking at him, but she didn't lift her head. Praying for the sweet release of death, Draco lowered himself to the floor next to her and prodded the little girl's knee with one bony finger. The poke was hard enough to make the little girl look up angrily, and Merlin, did she look furious. The flurry of low-brow curses that left her in that same moment were another big hint as to her mood, and Draco lifted both brows.

Definitely Scottish, he determined. She was also younger than he'd anticipated – perhaps no more than seven. Her magic must have been very evident for the Snatchers to have noticed her at such a young age, even without whatever magical device kept track of Muggleborns at Hogwarts.

"Watch your mouth," said Draco at last, and the little girl stuck her tongue out him. "And tell me your name."

"No!" she shouted, before baring her teeth. Draco summoned all his patience, not surprised to find that it had thinned to a mere trickle.

"If you do," he said through gritted teeth, "I'll tell you mine."

"I don' care!"

Draco leaned forward. "Well, you should," he told her. You dirty little mongrel, he added in his head, because she really was filthy, and her face was smeared with tears and Merlin only knew what else. She wasn't a very pretty little girl. "My name is very special," he told her.

"I bet it's not," she spat out in her thick lilt. Draco honestly felt a little bad for blaming the American; this little girl had the accent of a rural sheep herder. No wonder she hadn't understood her. Scowling again, Draco resettled his long legs on the floor.

"It is, actually. You may not have heard of me, because you're a Muggleborn, but my name is Draco Malfoy." He paused and added peevishly, "And I am a very important person."

The little girl made an unimpressed sputtering noise. 'Thas' a stupid name," she muttered, wrinkling her nose at him. Draco scowled inwardly, and the slur he'd promised Ginny just a few weeks ago that he would never say again came immediately to mind. He pushed it away with a great deal of effort, but the sentiment lingered, and he wondered if it was even worth it for him not to say it, if he still thought it so heatedly.

"I'm sure it's better than your name," Draco retorted. "I bet yours is the stupidest name there ever was."
"It is not!" shrieked the little girl angrily. "I was named after me Nan!"

"Oh?" said Draco. "And what was your Nan's name?"

"Maggie!" exclaimed the girl.

Draco smirked. It took the little girl a moment to realize what had happened, but when she did, her face turned a furious shade of red and she positively trembled with rage, even growling loudly before she wrapped her arms and fell right over onto her side, looking quite like an angry little egg.

"Come on, now," said Draco, rolling his eyes. "Sit up. If you just tell me where you came from, then you can go and play with the other children."

"I don' want to play with the other children," said Maggie through a fresh wave of tears. The anger seemed to seep out of her as she lay against the cold floor. "I want ma' Pa."

Draco frowned. "And where is he?"

Maggie's features crumpled against the floor. "They killed him," she whispered, now looking very sad. "The bad men in the robes." A shaky little hand reached up and smashed at her tears. "He was jus' trying to … protec' me…"

A long slow exhale left Draco. "Do you have anyone else? Any other family? A mother?"

Maggie shook her head, even though it was against the floor. "Just my Pa."

Great, thought Draco. Reaching forward, he gently pried the little girl from the floor. He expected her to fight him, but instead, the exhausted child became a limp noodle in his grip. Her head even rolled to the side, as if every last ounce of resistance had been zapped all at once. Draco paused, glancing around the room before he edged a little closer.

"Maggie."

She looked up with large eyes, red with tears.

"I – " Draco paused and cleared his throat, before going on tensely, "I lost my father to the bad men, too."

Maggie's eyes widened. "Really?" she asked in a tiny voice. "Who's taking care of you?"

Draco's lips quirked just slightly. "I'm an adult. I take care of myself." He paused, before going on, "But I still have my mother, and my wife as well."

Maggie sighed, eyes lowered. "I don't," she murmured very, very softly. "Not got no one."

Draco shifted his grey-eyed gaze to the side, stalling as his own heart pinched a little at the tiny girl's despair. Before he could prepare a response, Maggie asked, "Do you miss your Pa?"

Draco looked back at her and hesitated before answering. "Yes," he answered. "Very much."

Maggie seemed to consider this. "I don' understand," she admitted in a small whisper. "Why did they hurt my Pa? Why did they want to hurt me?"

Draco paused. "Because… they are bad, and sometimes people just want to cause pain." He dropped his hands from her arms. "But we're going to stop them."
Maggie seemed to consider this. "They could do stuff. They could make bad things happen," she murmured dully, as if she could not fathom what Draco might do in response to such power. Draco wondered just what she had seen. Her eyes spoke of a haunt that may never leave her.

For whatever reason, that made Draco angry all over again – angry at the damned Snatchers who'd gone out of their way to track down Muggleborns, presumably for fun, angry at the loss of his father, angry at everything going on with Ginny. Reaching forward, Draco put a fingertip under Maggie's chin and lifted her gaze to his.

"Don't worry," he told her, eyes dark. "When someone hurts the people I care about… I can make bad things happen, too."

Eventually, Draco managed to convince Maggie to let one of the Americans look her over. "She's a Healer," Draco told the girl. "Let her take a look at you."

"Wassa' Healer?" asked the little girl, who kept pace with Draco and slipped her hand into his before he could stop her.

Draco rolled his eyes and tried to pry his hand away, but the little girl suddenly had a vice grip on his fingers. "It's a – a Healer," he said, frustrated. "Someone who makes you feel better when you're sick."

"Like a doctor?"

"Sure, whatever." Finally peeling her fingers off his, Draco prodded the little girl in the direction of the American witch, who greeted Maggie warmly and lured her up onto a table so she could make sure she wasn't injured. Draco moved to leave, but Maggie called out to him.

"Draco?" She put a hard roll on the 'R' in his name.

He sighed, turning to face her. "Yes?"

Maggie bit her lip. "Will you be here tomorrow?" she asked in a small voice. Draco hesitated, letting his eyes flicker over her flushed, tear-stained cheeks.

"Yes. After lunch time," he told her.

"Okay," she whispered in response. Draco watched her for just a moment more before he left, crossing through the large, busy house. At one point, he spotted Vita and Xeno Lovegood, sitting in different chairs next to a small table. Apparently, Xeno had been wounded in the skirmish with the Snatchers, because Vita was applying some salve to a magical burn on his arm. Draco paused in the doorway and watched as Vita tenderly care for the wound. She and Xenophilius sometimes paused and gave each other affectionate looks that made Draco blanch.


He turned and went through another corridor, eventually finding Ginny talking to Blanca. As soon as he approached, Ginny faced him. "We're infiltrating Hogwarts in four days," she told him. "All the staff is gone until start of term, with the exception of Damien, Umbridge and maybe a few others."

"Fine," said Draco distractedly.

"My team," said Blanca, "will be made up of myself, Ben and Alec. For your people, it's going to
be you, Ginny, and George Weasley. McGonagall and Slughorn will be at the access point outside the grounds, waiting for us incase something goes wrong."

Draco nodded vaguely, before Blanca's words suddenly registered with him and he turned to Ginny. "Wait, you're still going?" he asked sharply.

Ginny's jaw visibly tightened. "Yes," she said, her words slow and measured with warning.

Blanca glanced between the two of them. "Why wouldn't she go?" she asked, folding her arms.

"Honestly, Ginny," hissed Draco, turning to face his wife. "You didn't bloody tell her?"

Ginny's eyes widened.

"Tell me what?" snapped Blanca, instantly irritated. "Hey, I need an update on what the hell's going on, right now. Tell. Me. What."

Draco and Ginny entered into a baleful standoff, each measuring the other's resolve. Then Draco shifted to Blanca and said with a glare, "Ginny is pregnant."

Blanca stared, and Ginny pointedly looked away, but she didn't have a chance to respond before Blanca rounded on the both of them, formidable and severe in every way. "You have got to be fucking kidding me," the American said flatly.

"It was an accident," said Ginny at last through clenched teeth, glaring daggers at Draco. He could have sworn in that moment that she truly hated him. "Our potions got mixed up – "

"I don't care how it happened," said Blanca in a low hiss. "You're welcome to make all the damn babies you want. But I didn't bring my people here all the way from New York City to throw you a damn baby shower, Malfoy. We came to fight a war."

"What in the hell is a baby shower?" asked Draco, bewildered.

"Look," said Ginny, ignoring Draco, "we can still fight. Everything is going to go on as it did before. This doesn't change anything."

Blanca dragged a hand down her face. "Yeah, that's what you'd think, never having been a damn parent before." She shook her head, working her teeth in a tight grind before she finally looked to both of them again. "So? What? You really still want to fight?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Ginny fiercely. She shot another glare at Draco, who rolled his eyes with an angry huff. "Yes, we are still fighting, Blanca. And I am going to Hogwarts with you all. I swear."

Blanca's eyes flickered over to Draco's flat cold expression. "And you?"

Draco watched Ginny for a moment, before he looked back to Blanca. "Too late to turn back now," he said with no real inflection. Blanca raised both brows and looked back at Ginny, who was struggling against the desire to wither under Blanca's glare.

"Fine," said the American after a long moment. "I guess we don't have a choice but to see how this goes."

With that, she turned and walked out of the room, leaving Draco and Ginny alone. The redhead immediately rounded on him. "Why the hell did you do that?" she all but shouted, eyes blazing.

"Oh, what?" asked Draco. "You were planning on lying to her? Bloody fucking hell, Ginny, you
should have told her immediately!"

"I would have when I was damn well ready!" shrieked Ginny in reply.

"I can't believe," growled Draco, advancing on Ginny, "that you are so bloody selfish that you're going to go on this dangerous mission right now."

Ginny sucked in a sharp breath. "I am NOT selfish, you sorry bastard! You're selfish! Thinking that this child that's not even born yet is more important than EVERYTHING we've worked for!"

"You're DAMN right it is!" shouted Draco.

The two glared at one another before a pair of Americans came through, eyes wide at the sight of the argument. With one last scowl, Draco stomped away from Ginny and left Steep Park House. She would make her way home if she wanted.

That evening, Draco intentionally fell asleep on the lounge in the master suite he and Ginny slept in. After getting married, they had moved into his parents quarters, and Narcissa had moved to a smaller set of rooms in the west wing of the home.

This wasn't the same lounge he'd woken up on with Ginny that time before they'd gotten together. He sort of wished it was.

Ginny came home later that evening, and although Draco's eyes were closed and he feigned sleep, he could hear her pause near the couch, as if she thought of waking him up. However, she didn't, and instead she went to the bed and presumably fell asleep.

Since his eyes were closed, Draco was not able to gauge her expression. The burden sat firmly on his heart all night, and he slept very little.

The next morning, Draco rose first, showered and left the house. He'd told the little girl, Maggie, that he would be back at Steep Park House today, but he could not bear to go there now, knowing how noisy and chaotic it was. Besides, nearly everyone had heard his and Ginny's argument, and he did not think he could withstand so much as a side glance from any of those people at the moment.

Instead, he went to the home of Blaise Zabini.

By mid-morning, Draco was sitting at wrought-iron table in the garden area behind Blaise's townhome. It was a nice outdoor space lined in a black iron fence, which showed part of the street near the townhome's front door. The little wizarding area was a very nice one, and it was enjoyable enough to sit and drink tea while still people-watching the small magical district from the comfort of Blaise's posh home.

"So," said Blaise, tilting his tea cup a bit in his hands, "Is there a reason for your morose behavior today, or is this just you regressing to your sulky sixth-year self?"

Draco flashed Blaise an annoyed look. For a long moment, he didn't speak, and instead kept his eyes on the teacup. "Ginny is pregnant," he admitted at last.

Blaise's eyes widened a bit, and he let out an amused snort. "Good going," he said mildly.

"Shut up," muttered Draco with no venom.
After a pause, Blaise murmured, "Changes things, doesn't it?"

Draco scowled and shifted his shoulders back to look at Blaise. "Not to Ginny, it bloody doesn't."

He leaned forward, and then he paused. "Where did you and Jean meet?"

Blaise raised a brow. "A coffee shop in La Magie," he answered.

Satisfied, Draco sat back in his chair again. "She's still fighting," he told Blaise, who did not bother to question his suspicion, as this was a common trait in Slytherins. "She refuses to quit, even though she's pregnant. And what's worse, she won't even discuss it with me. She's pretending as though it's not happening at all."

"Oh dear," said Blaise. "Who might've guessed that a Weasley would be both stubborn and fertile?" He waved a hand. "Will wonders never cease?"

Draco sank his face into his hands as Jean approached and took the seat he'd vacated only a moment before. He now had a handful of cookies. "What's happened?" he asked, pushing three into his mouth. "What's wrong with Malfoy?"

"Apparently," said Blaise, watching him with amusement, "Draco's dear wife Ginny is pregnant."

"Oh," said Jean, eyes wide. He chomped on his cookies until he swallowed them. "Seems like bad timing," he observed to Draco, who dropped his hands just so he could send them both a sneer.

"Yes, well, at least I know who the father of my wife's child is," he pointed out cattily.

"Ouch," said Jean, putting a hand over his heart. "Hurtful."

"But valid," said Blaise. "Draco, you shouldn't worry so much about what your wife is doing or saying right now. Pregnancy makes women do insane and terrible things." He waved his fingers. "For example, yesterday Gabrielle dropped a saucer on the floor and then cried for thirty minutes."

Draco stared.

"However," continued Blaise, "whenever I thought I couldn't handle any more of Gabby's behavior, and I complained to Jean about it, he was able to offer me some of his sage medical advice. Jean, would you like to share your words with Draco?"

Jean raised a brow. "Would you like me to say it to him exactly as I said it to you?"

"By all means."

Jean turned to Draco and said, "Shut the fuck up." Then he ate another cookie.

Blaise smirked. "And yes, that is his expert medical advice.

Draco dropped both of his arms to the table with a thump and let his head fall back with a groan. "Malfoy," said Jean, leaning on the table as Draco forced himself to look at the French wizard again. "How much do you know about pregnancy?"

Draco scowled. "I know it starts with sex and usually results in a child," he said blandly.

"So," said Jean, "next to nothing, then." Draco rolled his eyes, but Jean held up a hand and then pulled out his wand. With it, he summoned his bag, where he rummaged around for a few minutes before he pulled out an enormous textbook and plopped it on the table with a loud thud. "Let's see here… I'm no midwife, but we had to cover all this in healer's school… Ah, here it is." Finding the
page he was looking for, Jean turned the book and dropped it in front of Draco.

Draco leaned forward uncertainly, before immediately jerking back. "Bloody fucking hell!" he practically shouted. "What is THAT?"

Blaise groaned too and turned his head away. "Damn it, Jean. I was planning on eating at some point today," he said, disgusted.

"That, my friend, is a ripped labia," answered Jean soundly, eating another cookie. "Just one of the many wonderful things that can occur during childbirth."

"Fucking Merlin," groaned Draco, pushing away the book with a single digit.

"Oh, there's more," said Jean cheerfully. "Even a normal, easy childbirth has all sorts of physical symptoms, even after the birth. Bleeding, soreness. Not to mention, you now have a baby in front of you, wanting to eat and whatnot."

Jean pointed at the book. "And that's when the child is actually born. Before that, everything in a woman's body goes through great deal of change for the pregnancy. Even under the best circumstances, it's a pretty grueling process." He shoved another cookie in his mouth and said around it, "I wouldn't want to be pregnant, that's for sure."

"Everything on that page is appalling," noted Draco, eyeing the book as though it might attack him.

"Welcome to my life for the last six months," Blaise said with a sweeping gesture.

"You should borrow my book," Jean told Draco. "It might teach you something."

"Or make me go blind," responded Draco, making a face as he closed the book so he didn't have to see the illustrations anymore. Jean smirked.

"Look, I'm not saying being pregnant excuses any kind of behavior, but show some consideration, will you? Ginny has good reason not to be thrilled, what with everything going on."

Draco simply grunted in reply, but he was saved from answering further by the arrival of Gabrielle, who came bouncing up to the front door of the townhouse, but paused to wave at the three wizards where she could see them beyond the fence. "I'm home!" she declared, her arms fully of shopping bags.

"What the hell is all that?" called Blaise to Gabby as she fumbled to open the door.

"Oh," she said, "just some zings for ze nursery!"

Both Blaise and Jean groaned in unison, and Jean dropped his head to the table in despair. "What else could she possibly have bought?" asked Blaise, exasperated.

"I don't know," said Jean, "but I'm pretty sure nothing else can fit in that room."

"I need some help, please!" called Gabrielle from the house.

Blaise started to rise, but Jean dragged himself and motioned for Blaise to take a seat. "Stay here with your guest, I'll help," he told him, sweeping a hand over Blaise's shoulder before heading inside to Gabrielle. Draco and Blaise looked to the window, where they could see Gabrielle happily sorting out bags with Jean's help. Despite his reluctance, he simply shook his head at her and smiled as they unpacked.
"Getting close to time for her to deliver, isn't it?" asked Draco, looking back to Blaise.

"A few weeks," confirmed Blaise, dragging his eyes away from the two inside. Jean and Gabrielle disappeared from view as they retreated further into the house.

"What do you want the baby to be?" asked Draco.

"Black," answered Blaise.

Draco snorted. "I meant a boy or girl, you idiot – "

"MALFOY!"

The two wizards stopped and turned in unison to the garden gate, which opened to reveal Theodore Nott Jr. Draco's brows instantly furrowed, his hackles raised. "Nott?"

"How DARE you try and get Lavender to fight for you?" growled Theo, wand already in hand. Draco's eyes widened, but he stood cautiously, his own hand lingering near his wand in his robes.

"Hold on there, Theo," said Draco, assuming a confident pose. "We didn't try and get her to do anything. We talked, that's all – "

"You know what Lavender went through!" said Theo fiercely, angrier than Draco had ever seen him. "You bloody well know it, and you're still trying to get her killed with you and your damned blood traitor wife!"

Draco scowled. "Watch your bloody fucking tongue, Nott, because if you insult my wife one more time, Lavender Brown is the last thing you'll have to worry about."

Theo raised his wand. "You deliberately came to the house while I was gone because you knew what you were doing was foolish. You knew you were putting her in danger!"

"I don't need your bloody permission to say anything to any damn person," snapped Draco, his ire at its peak. "You are not her bloody keeper, and I'll tell Lavender Brown or anyone else whatever I damn well please."

Theo's glare settled into a cold fury, and in a flash of movement, he hurled his wand forward and the curse flew at Draco with barely enough time for him to react. Throwing up his shield, Draco crouched behind the magical barrier and then, eyes narrowed, he retorted with a curse of his own.

Just like that, the curses began flying in every direction, and each curse Draco threw at Theo was matched immediately. The table overturned, the teacups shattered, and the nearby vases broke into a hundred pieces as one curse after another dashed viciously through the space between them. Dirt jumped up when the curses hit the ground, and dust filled the air as different pieces of furniture burst.

"Stop destroying my things!" shouted Blaise angrily from a hidden spot to Draco's left, but neither he nor Theo slowed in the slightest, with each curse growing more heated and violent. Draco barely dodged a nasty looking curse that might've been a Cruciatus, and he countered with a malicious one of his own, which Theo only barely dodged.

In a fit of fury, Draco and Theo fired curses directly at one another, and Draco deflected one that went wildly, shooting straight for the back door of the townhome. That was when something else shattered, and this time it was accompanied by a woman's scream.
Draco and Theo both froze, and Draco – his insides liquid – looked slowly over to the double-doors leading inside the townhome. Just before the dust cleared, he could clearly see Gabrielle's shocked face where she stood just at the edge of the garden. At her feet was a tray full of plates and teacups, which she had been carrying until only seconds before. All the contents of the tray were spilled and shattered, but Gabrielle's hands remained frozen in place, as if the tray were still there.

His heart pounding, Draco turned to face Gabrielle, only to see, as the dust finally cleared, that Jean stood in front of her, his magical shield in place in front of both of them.

"I'm – I'm okay," said Gabrielle shakily, putting her hands over her swollen belly. "We – we are alright, I zink."

Slowly, Jean turned to look at Theo and Draco, his expression morphing into a deadly glare. Theo backed away from him, his eyes wide, but Draco had his eyes on Blaise, and he raised a hand to his friend in a placating motion.

"Now, see here, Blaise – it was an accid –"

The curse hit him before he'd even registered the movement of Blaise's wand. In an instant, Draco was on his back, and hot white pain like he'd never felt before spread through his veins. Lurching back on the grass, Draco gasped loudly, his eyes wide and his body rigid as he felt what seemed like liquid heat travel through his body and scorch him from the inside out.

Dimly, Draco registered Theo on the ground right next to him, wheezing against Blaise's curse.

After what seemed like an eternity, Blaise's dark shadow fell over them, and a flick of his wand ended the curse. Gasping loudly, Draco rolled on to his side, unable to breathe properly even as he looked up at Blaise's severe features.

"I am taking my wife to St. Mungo's to be checked over," Blaise told Draco and Theo, his every word cold and lethal. "If either of you are still here when I return... you'd better hope you're already dead."

Then he stepped over Draco and moved to Gabrielle, taking her arm and leading her, with Jean, back into the home.

After several seconds, Theo managed to push himself up. With one last scathing glare at Draco, he stumbled far enough away to disapparate.

As soon as Draco could manage, he did the same.

Just a few minutes later, Draco stumbled through the door of the suite he shared with Ginny.

The redhead in question was sitting at a desk, though she had nothing in front of her. When she looked up and saw Draco, her eyes widened. "Draco, what happened?" she asked, although she had not spoken to him since their argument. She helped Draco sit on the lounge, her brows knitted with concern.

"Just a – disagreement," said Draco with a wince. "I'll explain later."

"Bloody hell," muttered Ginny, helping him pull off his cloak. Her soft hands moved to his neck and rubbed gently there, and Draco felt his body relax some. Looking over at Ginny, Draco met her gaze with his. Her hands slowed on his skin, and she dropped her gaze for a moment before edging a little closer.
Thinking back on what Jean had said, Draco opened his mouth to apologize.

"I'm sorry," said Ginny before he could. Her words were soft, and she dropped her hands into her lap. "You were right. I should've told Blanca what was going on." Redness tinged Ginny's cheeks, and she suddenly looked very tired.

Draco watched her for a moment before he moved his arms, still twitching with pain, and pulled Ginny into his embrace. Happily, she accepted and curled against him. "I'm sorry, too," he murmured against her hair.

He waited to see if Ginny would continue, maybe open up about the pregnancy. She didn't, though, and Draco forced himself to keep quiet. He wouldn't push her, he promised himself. Ginny reached up a hand and curled it in his robes, her cheek pressing against his front.

"I love you," she told him with a soft, frank sincerity.

Draco's lips quirked, despite the occasional jolts of pain he still felt. "I love you, too."
Chapter 29

Author's Note: Sorry for the wait! Also, I added in something small to a previous chapter to correct something I had forgotten. In my head, Draco had made certain the other DA coins were long since destroyed, so no one at the Ministry is alerted to their secret location. I had meant to write it in and simply forgot. Some of you were concerned, so I thought I would mention it. There are a lot of small details to keep straight in this story! Sorry for that!

Get ready for an intense chapter, guys. I suggest killer music for this one.

"[Harry] wanted to be stopped, to be dragged back, to be sent home... but he was home. Hogwarts was the first and best home he had known. He and Voldemort and Snape, the abandoned boys, had all found home here."

HPDH

In the early hours of the morning, Draco Malfoy crept into the home of Theodore Nott. His body still ached from the curse Blaise had ruthlessly set upon him only eight or nine hours before, but he forced himself to move in the shadows anyway. As soon as he found Theo sleeping in his bed, Draco pulled out his wand, his mouth set in a tight grimace.

He pointed the wand at Theo's head. After a pause, he murmured, "Obliviate."

Theo's body shifted and then sagged in sleep, but he didn't move further. His breathing continued, mellow and steady, and Draco lifted his wand, satisfied. However, as soon as he stepped out of the bedroom, he was met with the ghostly looking form of Lavender.

"He wouldn't have told," she murmured hoarsely, startling Draco, who relaxed only a little when he saw her.

"I can't take that chance," he told her. "He wanted to kill me."

"I told him not to do anything that would bring harm to either of you," said Lavender, her eyes shining. "I didn't know he was going to attack you."

"Doesn't matter now," said Draco, and honestly, he bore no grudge against Lavender. It was not her fault that he and Ginny had frightened her into a panic. They should have known better, but Ginny thought – she suggested … that it may help Lavender to try and fight again. She had been wrong. That was alright, but it left a few loose ends to tie up.

Draco gave Lavender a curt nod and then moved to slip past her, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Malfoy..." Her eyes lifted to his. "Can you – can you take my memories, too?"

Draco's brows furrowed. "You mean... oblivate you? Of the memory of what we told you?"

"Yes." She squared her shoulders, even as her body trembled. "I can't – I don't want to know." Her voice cracked.

Draco sighed. "It might be wiser for you to be aware of what's going on..."

"I can't handle it," she told him stoically, even as a single tear slipped down her cheek. "I won't feel
safe." She touched her fist to her stomach, and Draco knew without asking of the heavy weight she carried, the anxiety that twisted her insides. She did not feel safe with the knowledge she had been given. And he understood that.

There were a great many things he wished he did not know.

And so, in perhaps his greatest act of mercy, Draco stepped up to Lavender and lightly touched his wand to her temple. With a deep breath, he concentrated the complex spell on that morning he and Ginny had shared with Lavender. She closed her eyes as he whispered the spell, her hands still curled in tight fists against her front.

Several seconds passed in silence.

Lavender opened her eyes to find she was alone. Confused as to why she had gotten out of bed, the bewildered young witch walked back into her room, where her infant son lay sleeping in his crib.

She smiled, reaching out and lovingly tracing his cheek. Then she turned and went back into bed, where she slept peacefully for the rest of the night.

The day arrived sooner than Draco might've wished for their trip to Hogwarts. The adults gathered at Steep Park House, though Draco took as much time as possible to linger alone. He looked up to see Ginny talking with Blanca, as she often did. Ginny tried in every moment to match Blanca step for step. She was so impressed with the American witch, so smitten with Blanca's confidence and command. It made Draco smirk, because a part of him was glad to see Ginny look to someone she admired so much, someone who would have certainly been a Gryffindor had she been born in England.

Still, he wished she found so many admirable qualities in him. Perhaps she did. There was no time to discuss it now, though. Even when they were along, things felt strangely distanced between them. Just the night before, Draco had caught Ginny changing in their room, and his eyes lingered on her stomach, where the slightest hint of a bump was now visible.

Ginny had spotted him looking and hurriedly dressed herself before leaving, and Draco had fallen into a chair and stared balefully at the ceiling for half an hour before he could will himself to get up. He just wanted his wife back. His best friend. The only person who had truly lifted his heart in his entire life.

That person was still there, but she had become elusive. Her stubbornness had hardened into apathy, and her determination sharpened into near-ruthlessness. She was willing to do whatever it took to win this war, and while that might have been something Draco would have teasingly mentioned to her before as yet another Slytherin quality, now it simply felt like a crevice, a growing gap between them.

He could not make her talk, no matter what he tried. And he could not dissuade her from this dangerous mission. His only option was to be there with her… and prepare for the worst.

"Draco?"

He lifted his eyes at the sound of his name, and the heavy roll on the 'R' he knew to belong to that little Scottish Muggleborn girl, Maggie. "What?" he asked, leaning over to tie his boots from where he sat on a chair. They were to leave any minute now for Hogsmeade.

The little girl edged forward. "I know you're afraid," she said, although the children hadn't been told about the mission, so Draco wasn't sure how she knew that, "so I made you a friend to keep
you safe." She opened her palms to reveal a piece of paper folded like a bird. She had colored on it with crayon so that it had a blue head and pink-tipped wings. "I didn't name him," she said with a serious nod. "I wanted you to do it."

Draco reached out and accepted the bird, even though he did so with a raised brow. He paused, looking with a straight face at the little girl's earnest expression. "Thank you," he said at last, unable to conjure up an enthusiastic tone. "What should I do with it?"

"Well, you've got to name him, first." She waited for Draco to do so, and he barely kept himself from sighing.

"Fine," said Draco. "His name is…" He looked at the pink-tipped wings. "Pinkie."

"Thas' a good name," said Maggie, nodding in approval. "Now you just have to carry Pinkie with you, and when you need him, he will help you."

Draco looked at the motionless paper bird. "Right," he said, tucking the bird into his robes. "Good work."

Maggie smiled. She was less atrocious looking now that she had been cleaned up and put in some proper clothes. She even had little dimples, which were kind of cute. They both paused, and then Maggie looked up, tilting her head. "You should go," she told Draco. "They're waiting for you."

Draco followed her gaze, but whoever she must have seen, they were gone now. Rising with a sigh, Draco joined the others, including Ginny, who at least looked over at him with a small smile and took his hand in hers. Draco felt some of his anxiety ease at the familiar grip of her hand, and he returned the squeeze. Still, he could not help but think of the glimpse he'd seen earlier of her slowly growing belly. He was not a valiant Gryffindor or a well-trained soldier, like all the rest of those here. He could not guarantee that their mission would succeed, or that everyone would survive. All he knew was he would protect Ginny, whatever that meant for everyone else.

"Please, George," came a tearful voice, accent growing heavier in her despair. "Please let me come, I will be so worried –"

"Vera," murmured George, pulling her away from the others. "It would be better if you stayed here –"

"But I am so scared for you," she whispered in a small voice, cheeks shining.

"I have to go," he told her gently. "I know Hogwarts the best out of any of them. But don't worry, eh? I'll be fine." He gave her a small but genuine smile and brushed her lips with his. "I wouldn't leave you. You know that."

Vera gave a reluctant nod and sniffled, her shoulders curled tight. She murmured to him in Russian, and George must have understood, because he smiled more broadly and kissed each of her cheeks before letting go of her – albeit with a great deal of reluctance of his own – and moved away to the others. Vita stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her sister sympathetically.

"So," said Blanca to the entire group. "Just to review – I will be entering Hogwarts School with Alec and Ben on my team. Draco, Ginny and George Weasley will make up the other half of the expedition. McGonagall and Slughorn will go with us to the drop off point, and they'll be waiting for us in case anything goes wrong." Blanca put her hands on her hips. "Now, we're going to get in there, find this No-Maji'in tracker before Damien Black figures it out, and then get the hell out of there. If all goes well, this will be a quick in and out."
Alec looked like he was dying to make a joke about Blanca's instructions, but he kept it to himself.

"Alright," said Blanca, looking back to Ginny and Draco. "Let's move out."

A new night had just begun to settle over Hogsmeade when the group arrived in secret. The sky above had already darkened into a cool grey accented in purple, and a few brave stars made their artful appearances in the sky. The snow had since melted from Christmas time, and hints of spring made the occasional appearance in the form of fresh dewy grass and earthy smells. During this time of year, most of the homes in Hogsmeade normally kept their windows open, enjoying the growing warmth and the pleasant winds.

However, as the group arrived under the cover of growing shadows, they saw that not one window was open. In fact, many of the homes in the normally bustling village appeared abandoned, with openings boarded up and doors firmly closed. Some doorways looked damaged, as if they had been blasted open, and the scars of war still lingered in the form of divots along the well-worn roads.

George Weasley crept along at the front of the group, his normally playful eyes sharp.

"Honeydukes is this way," he whispered.

Draco and Ginny moved behind him, with the three Americans behind them, and Slughorn and McGonagall brought up the rear. Ginny looked around at the shadowy village, her eyes wide. It felt like a cruel mockery of what the place had been, and a quick glance at Draco's dark expression let her know that she wasn't the only one feeling distressed at Hogsmeade's hellish appearance. The mistiness that clinged to the roads further added to the chill in the air.

Blanca suddenly held up a hand. "Stop!" she hissed, and the entire group froze, though Ginny stumbled a little at the abrupt command. Looking to her right, wand in hand, Blanca's dark eyes focused on the narrow gap between two empty shops. The chill Ginny had felt before intensified sharply, and although she could not see what Blanca had seen, she knew instantly what hovered near them. Unease crawled along Ginny's skin and raised every hair, leaking into her pounding heart even as she kept as still and silent as she could.

Trembling, Ginny bit her lip hard to fight off the visions that plagued her as the tall, skeletal creatures wrapped in black robes glided down the streets of Hogsmeade. Ginny's body felt numb, and her knees threatened to give out on her. Her insides felt as if it had been engulfed in icy water, with stabbing pains attacking her every nerve.

Blanca kept her wand up and her eyes narrowed on the alleyway. Alec stayed by her side, and Ben crouched low, jaw set. The dementors had not seen them, but it was impossible to know how many of them there were patrolling Hogsmeade. They had to be careful.

Draco glanced down and saw Ginny trembling. His own insides felt like liquid, but he reached out and took her hand, curling his fingers in hers. He could not speak to her for fear of being overheard, so he simply lifted her knuckles to his lips and pressed a shaky kiss there. For a moment, Ginny did not react; then her watery eyes shifted to his, and she relaxed just a bit, giving him a small nod.

A few moments later, the trio of dementors had passed, and Blanca lowered her hand before pointing to George. The message was clear – move.

Nodding and shaking off the last of his own tremors, George hurried forward, still crouched, and the others followed behind him until they reached the back of Honeydukes. They came to the back
door and George tried to unlock it, but a simple Alohomora would not do the trick.

"Let me," whispered McGonagall, edging forward. With a flick of her wand and a complicated spell, she was able to unlock it, and the door opened with a slow, terrifying creak. Night had fallen in earnest now, and as the group shuffled into the dark, web-covered shop, they all seemed to realize in the same moment that it had not been in use in quite a while.

George beckoned them forward, and quickly he moved behind the counter and found the door to the cellar. Blanca looked to McGonagall and Slughorn. "This is where we leave you," she whispered. "You know the plan. We have an hour to get in and out of there. If you see red sparks, that means get the hell out of here, with or without us. Got it?"

McGonagall clenched her jaw and gave a tight nod. "Please take care of them," she said in a stiff whisper, her throat bobbing over a hard swallow. Blanca gave a firm nod, before turning and dropping down the steps into the pitch-dark cellar.

Ginny took one last look at McGonagall and Slughorn before moving inside as well, and Draco took no time in following her. George was, once more, at the front.

Quickly, George found the trap door leading to Hogwarts beneath the cellar. "Lumos," he whispered, as did the others. The light from their wands illuminated a winding passageway carved into the earth, with dirt and bits of stone supporting the narrow path and its walls. Draco glanced up as they began the hour-long walk to the opening at Hogwarts, and he felt himself shiver as the earth shifted and groaned around them. Bits of dirt occasionally fell from above them, landing on their robes. The skittering noises of creatures unknown further added to the eeriness of the passage, as did the knowledge that it was very possible Damien had discovered this passageway… and planted security measures along the way.

However, as they continued to walk in tense silence, no such obstacles met them. The path continued for what felt like a very long time, turning and twisting as if an underground river had carved this pathway for itself. Once or twice, Draco could swear he heard footsteps above them, but George assured them that this passage was deep underground, and no one would be able to hear them from above until they got closer to Hogwarts.

At last, the path straightened, and George slowed, peering ahead cautiously.

"Is that the entrance?" asked Blanca, and he nodded. She waved him away and stepped forward, with Alec at her back. Together, they moved to the short slide that signaled the stone sculpture which protected the Hogwarts entry to their tunnel. Climbing up it to the stone, Blanca listened carefully while Alec checked for harmful enchantments.

"Seems your guess was right, Weasley," he whispered to George. "Black must not know this path is here."

"Very few people do," admitted George. "The password for the statue is Dissendium. And you have to tap the stone."

Nodding, Blanca tapped her wand on the stone and murmured the password as George had directed. After a pause, the stone moved with a groan, sliding aside. Blanca and Alec stood crowding the doorway, ready to defend against anything or anyone that might be waiting. However, they were met only with the familiar stone corridors of Hogwarts. Pausing to listen for anyone investigating the sound of the stone, Blanca looked back and then nodded, as if satisfied. "Alright, Weasley. You're up again."
George stepped forward, and Ginny and Draco moved up behind him, with the Americans once again following behind. The group emerged from behind the statue and crept into the hallway, where they looked left and right before George jerked his head in one direction, and they followed. At first, they saw only the nondescript corridor. Then they began finding more classrooms and courtyards, where the night sky appeared in the shapes of the windows and arches, and the moon pushed back brilliantly against the darkness.

A growing sense of unease filled Draco, and he looked at Ginny and George, both of whom seemed to share his thoughts. The halls of Hogwarts seemed … strange, unfamiliar. Where there had once been lively chandeliers and brilliant banners, there were decrees written in thick text and housed in heavy frames. All the doors had great iron locks on them. The classrooms were devoid of their usual trinkets and décor, instead only housing many tables with textbooks already in place. George paused and picked one up, his brows furrowed. It had been printed, stated the cover, by the Department of Magical Education at the Ministry. Flipping through it, he saw that it was a mirror image of the non-practical book used by Umbridge during her time at Hogwarts. Scowling, he put it down and they continued.

"Hell of a creepy school you've got here," whispered Blanca from behind them, looking around.

"It's not supposed to look like this," murmured Ginny, fingers curling into fists. "This isn't Hogwarts."

"Come on," said George, edging away from the Charms classroom. "We need to get looking. And Dumbledore's old office is the best place to get started."

The group moved and turned for the staircases, which they traversed step by step, making every effort at silence. They had yet to see anyone, but Damien was there somewhere, as was some others. They were halfway up one staircase when it shifted, gliding at a leisurely pace and nearly losing Ben on the bottom step. "Holy hell!" he hissed lowly, gripping the banister. "What's going on?"

George grinned just a bit. "Relax, this is normal." At the Americans' blank stares, he asked, "What? The stairs at your school don't move?"

"Hell no our staircases don't fucking move!"

"We do have doors that shrink the closer you get to 'em, though," Blanca whispered dryly. "So sometimes you gotta run and dive through like you're fricken Alice in Wonderland."

They reached the landing George was looking for and turned to head in the direction of Dumbledore's office. "What are we even looking for?" asked Ginny at last, her heart pounding. "Do we have any idea?"

Draco crouched near Ginny as they shuffled along. "When I brought it up to McGonagall, she said Dumbledore had once told her there was a small tool or artifact or something he'd been given by Dippet to help find Muggleborns. It would be something inconspicuous, she said, something that would give him access to a part of Hogwarts no one else even knew about."

"Like a key?"

"Well, it would be great if that were the case, but I have a feeling it will be much more obscure than that…"

At last, they reached Dumbledore's office. "Lemon drop," tried George, but the great stone did not
move. "Damn. I bet Umbridge has changed it."

Blanca stepped forward. "We might can get it open –"

"Don't even bother," came a new voice, old and hoarse.

The group whirled around, wands raised, and the owner of the voice stumbled back, hands raised. "Hole it, hole it," the old caretaker grunted, stooped behind his arms. Draco's eyes widened.

"Filch," he said, before advancing on him, wand raised. Filch stumbled back again.

"Hole it, I said!" croaked the old man, his shifty eyes scanning the group of them. "You don't need into the Headmaster's office to find what yer' looking for."

Draco's eyes narrowed, his wand still pointing at Filch. "How do you know what we're looking for?"

"Why else would you be here?" asked Filch slowly, and although he apparently aimed to help them, he seemed to take delight in holding something they wanted. "You want to help the Muggleborns… right?" Reaching into his filthy cloak, he pulled out something he kept closed inside his palm.

"I been in this school…" he murmured, eyes on his hand. " … A real long time." He looked up at them, his misshapen face looking over them all with a snotty grimace. "This is what he used. I've seen it."

"Why would you give it to us?" asked Draco. "If it really is what you say it is."

At this, Filch's grotesque face contorted further, and Draco realized he looked as if he might cry. After a long moment, Filch admitted in a guttural whisper, "They killed her."

The group looked at one another.

"They killed her," he said again, "Mrs. Norris."

George and Ginny exchanged glances. Oh, thought Ginny, with a pang of sympathy. "Damien and the others, you mean?" she asked in a whisper.

"Ya, soon as they got here," said Filch, sniffling. "Cursed her right in front of me." He no longer seemed to care about teasing them, and he tossed the small item into Draco's palm. "Killed her, just like that! Heartless … vagabond… no-good wretches… Murderin' her like that..." He sniffled. "I hope they burn, I do." He looked up at them with sudden malice. "You take that thing, and you come back here an' you kill 'em. You kill 'em all, for what they did to my Mrs. Norris."

Draco raised a brow, as he had more than once gleefully imagined the death of that tattle-tail cat, but he simply nodded. "Very well then," he said, willing to take help where help was given. Filch grunted at them, sneered at Ginny and George and then hobbled away, disappearing around a corner.

"Do you think we can trust him?" asked Blanca, grimacing at his retreating back.

"If they really killed his cat," whispered George, "I'm surprised he hasn't brought this whole bloody castle down on their heads."

"A cat? Are you serious?" asked Ben.
"What did he give you, Malfoy?" asked Blanca, edging forward. Draco's brows furrowed, and he held it up between his fingers. It appeared to be a small stone triangle with a dark marble texture. In the center, there was the perfect cutout of a circle. The entire thing was small enough to fit in the center of Draco's palm.

"Just… this," he said, bewildered. "Do you think it'll work?"

"We won't know until we go to the Great Hall," said Ginny. "That's what the note said. The answer you seek lies in the sky, but not the one in which you fly."

Merlin, Draco hoped they were right.

After a few minutes, the group came to the Great Hall, and the three former Hogwarts students stopped to stare.

The four long dinner tables that had once gathered the students with their houses were now arranged in large square, with one long table in the middle, very close to all the others. It appeared that the professors and headmaster now sat in the center, close enough to hear the students' conversations and closely watch their habits. The banners and tapestries were all gone, as was the beautiful bronze owl podium that Dumbledore had used. In its place was a cold stand made of very dark wood, all its edges sharp and imposing. The floating candles had been replaced with lamps in the corners of the large room, shrouding the room in shadows. A sign near the entrance dictated that regular meals were now a requirement, and roll would be taken to ensure attendance.

Ginny's eyes flickered to the large double-doors leading into the room, and she saw that now it had great big locks on it, undone for the moment but there, it would seem, just in case. Her jaw clenched.

In unison, the three former students' eyes turned up, terrified that this, too, had changed.

However, it looked exactly as it always had – an exact mimic of the sky outside. Tonight, it was dark with sporadic highlights of navy blue and scattered stars. A mistiness had overtaken it, though, and occasionally the thick air overwhelmed the stars so that pockets of nothingness looked down on them from above.

Draco looked down at the triangle in his palm. "What do I do?"

No one answered him, because no one knew. Draco had hoped that simply holding the stone in the Great Hall would show him the way, but nothing had happened. It looked the same as before. Moving forward towards the ominous square of rigid, undecorated tables, Draco examined the triangle thoughtfully.

After several moments, Draco looked up at the sky again. For a moment, he did nothing. Then he raised the triangle and peered through the hole in its center, gaze aimed up at the artificial stars. At first, he saw nothing unusual. Then, as he began to scan the sky, he saw something remarkable.

"There's a staircase in here," he said to the others, still peering through the triangle.

"What?" said George. "You're mad. There's no staircase in the Great Hall."

"I'm looking at it," said Draco. With the triangle still up and in front of one eye, Draco stepped forward until he came to the strange staircase that had appeared in front of him. He took one step and then another, climbing higher and higher, above the square tables and austere place settings.

Ginny, George, Blanca, Alec and Ben all watched as Draco seemingly stepped onto pockets of air,
At the top of the stairs, Draco realized he was very near the ceiling, and for the very first time, he saw that it was not a flat surface, but multiple layers of air and wind, just as if he were outside. At the top of the stairs, he was hip-deep in the chilly magical air, with very little of the Great Hall left visible to him below. Clouds floated right next to his head, and he saw a star so close to his face that he felt as if he could open his mouth and swallow it. Draco reached forward in wonder.

As he did so, some of the clouds parted, and a small glowing set of stars appeared to him, just in front of where the staircase abruptly ended at its top. Draco hesitated, and then he inched the triangle forward, pressing it into the unique formation of stars. It fit perfectly, and when he tentatively released it, the triangle stayed there.

As he released it, the triangle glowed, and before anyone realized what was happening, the entire Great Hall was engulfed in a translucent field of moving figures highlighted in red sparkly tint. Ginny gasped, and Draco nearly fell off the stairs in alarm.

"What the hell?" whispered Blanca, looking all around, her wand raised defensively. However, it soon became apparent that these figures could not see them or hear them at all. In fact, they were not really there at all; each glowing shape was of a person, but they were interacting with others in an entirely different space.

As Draco turned in his spot high up in the air, he peered closer at the nearest figures. He could see a man cooking breakfast for his family. He saw a young teenage girl talking into some sort of Muggle device he didn't recognize. He saw yet more people hiding, crouched and low.

For a moment, Draco thought they were all Muggles. However, as he observed them closer, he realized they were witches and wizards – Muggleborns, of all ages and races and from all over Great Britain.

His first thought, of all things, was that there were so, so many of them. He felt confused, as if they were a mistake. How could there be so many Muggleborns in Great Britain? And after Voldemort's slaughter? Many of the highlighted figures were very young. Were these the next generation of Muggle-born students, not yet privy to their magic?

"Fuck," said Blanca, looking to the side, where one group of Muggleborns – the only visible part of their nightmarish surroundings – screamed and cried out against invisible people who seized them and dragged them away. Whatever was going on, the stunned group in Hogwarts could not see it. They could only see the Muggleborns.

"Step closer to them," ordered Draco from his spot, and Blanca moved forward, her eyes hard. As she did so, the names appeared beneath them in floating, smoky writing.

Mary Cattermole
Olivia Newbitt
Jacob Heraldson
Sarah Bennett
The Third Cell, Second Door

Department of MuggleBorn Registration, Ministry of Magic
London, England

Blanca stepped away, her eyes wide. The images of the Muggleborns began to fade, and the group seemed to sense that they were being dragged away. "I think this is what we need, Malfoy," said Blanca stiffly. "Let's wrap it up."

"How are we going to remember all this? We can't possibly record it," pointed at Draco, but even as he asked, the triangle glowed once more and a scroll appeared in front of him. On it came the names and addresses of those floating around him, and he received it in his hand, stunned. It was the first time in a very long time that magic had truly managed to impress him, and he wondered if this device, this strange magical spectacle, was as old as Hogwarts itself.

Taking both the scroll and the triangle, Draco navigated the invisible stairs back down to the floor and returned to the others. "We've got it, let's go."

The group left the Great Hall as the last of the glowing red specters fell away, and the Great Hall was left looking – well, not as it always had, but as the macabre version of itself that it had become since Damien and Umbridge had taken it over.

Together, they moved down the corridors and began to work their way back to the statue. However, voices ahead caused them to pause, and Draco's eyes widened. "It's Damien," he mouthed to the others, and Blanca, Alec and Ben all snatched the others back behind a trio of suits of armor. There was a small alcove which they all attempted to tuck themselves into for further concealment – there were gaps between the suits of armor, and the footsteps were approaching quickly – but how much cover the darkness offered, none of them was sure.

"… would like it all to be ready in a fortnight."

"Oh, I'm sure it will be. You musn't worry so much," came another voice, this one high-pitched and prim. "After all, you are not Headmaster of this school."

Ginny's jaw clenched, and a few of them peeked a bit to look down the hall, where Dolores Umbridge, cloaked in a garish pink cloak and a set of robes that fit a little too snuggly around her middle, looked up at Damien's unimpressed sneer.

"Who's that ugly bitch?" asked Blanca.

George took the liberty of explaining, "You-Know-Who thought it practical to combine used chewing gum with a toad. And out came Umbridge."

Down the corridor, Damien and Umbridge were still bickering. "I have every reason to be concerned when we are behind sched – "

"Ahem," fake-coughed Umbridge, and the desire to kill flared for a moment in Damien's eyes. When he stopped, Umbridge smiled. "May I remind you," she said with a chipper smile, "our schedule would not be quite so strained had you not released that troublesome poltergeist!"

Draco and Ginny both smirked, while Damien scowled. He and Umbridge turned and continued walking. The group quickly pressed back. Damien and Umbridge seemed ready to pass them, but then Ginny reached back to brace herself on the wall and a bit of stone crumbled and fell, creating small little thuds.

Damien stopped, cocking his head to the side, eyes narrowed. Ginny winced, her heart jumping into her throat. Her first instinct was to shout 'Sorry!' which thankfully, she did not do. However, it hardly mattered, because Damien clearly heard it. Bypassing Umbridge, he moved closer to the
suits of armor, his lips pressed tight.

Ginny's eyes widened. He was going to find them. Sweat poured from every part of her, and fear lanced her heart. George and Draco both winced, pulling back as far as they could.

Then Ben burst forth, stumbling right in front of Damien and startling him.

"Watch it, hole it!" he shouted, a broom suddenly in his hand. Ginny's eyes grew even wider as she saw – not Ben – but Filch right in front of them, crouched low and shuffling, muttering to himself as he pushed the broom back and forth. "Tryin' to clear here!" he barked at Damien, who had jumped at his sudden appearance.

Damien relaxed, scowling deeply. "What were you doing back there, you filthy squib?" Umbridge tutt'ed in disapproval.

"Let him do his job, Damien. No need to bother him."

"He's always doing this," hissed Damien, clearly irritated. "Lurking about!"

"Jus' tryin' to clean, sir," said Ben in a perfect imitation of Filch, and Ginny, George and Draco all looked at one another, lips parted in disbelief. Blanca kept her place, wand raised, though a small grim smirk was on her features.

Ben shuffled about, continuing to mutter and curse even as Damien rolled his eyes and turned away sharply. "The next time I find you hiding away in the shadows," said Damien, "I'll put you out on the streets like you deserve." With that, he turned and marched off with Umbridge, even as Ben kept sweeping and cursing about children and filth.

As soon as the other two were gone, Filch's features melted away and he straightened just as Ben's handsome young face made its reappearance. He raised both brows at the group, as if to say, well, what're you waiting for?

"Let's go," said Blanca, pulling the others along. Together, the group began to go back to the statue. Unfortunately, as they came to the corridor leading to their escape, the group was forced to halt at the appearance of a malevolent floating figure.

"Ehehehe," cackled Peeves, floating near the statue. When he twisted in mid-air to look at them, his translucent features lit up with delight. "Ooh," he said. "Lookee who's being sneaky…"

"Peeves…" said George, holding up his hands. "Please – "

"INTRUDERS! INTRUDERS IN THE CORRIDOR!"

Then, with a sweep of Peeves' hand, all the lights in the corridor burst and glass shattered everywhere. Thundering footsteps echoed down the opposite end of the corridor, and Blanca cursed. "Go back, go back!" They were too far from the statue to make it in time, so the group turned and ran full-speed. "Get us out of here, Weasley!"

"Uh – uh – " George grunted as he ran, mind racing.

"How can we get back to Hogsmeade?" hissed Blanca. "Weasley!"

"The Shrieking Shack!" George said suddenly, before hitting the brakes and turning in the opposite direction. Within moments, the group raced out onto the grounds and the cool night air hit them like a brick wall. George waved them on. "We can follow the tree line of the forest to give us
cover,” he told them breathlessly, and together, the group moved across the moonlit grounds, past courtyards and over unkempt gardens, until they came to the Forbidden Forest and ducked into the cover of the darkly spindly trees.

Inside the castle, Damien and Umbridge appeared in front of Peeves, who was still floating near the statue. Other newly-appointed professors appeared behind them, wands raised. "Where are they?" said Damien, before Umbridge could, and she made a face at him. "Where are the intruders?"

Peeves tapped his chin. "Well," he said, "they were right here." He pointed at the floor.

Damien scowled. "And where are they now?"

"How should I know?" Peeves asked coyly. "I can't be everywhere at once, can I? Nope, I'm just little old Peeves-ey…"

Umbridge stepped forward and held up her wand. "I demand you tell us who was here and where they went! Now!"

Peeves' eyes narrowed on Umbridge, and a curling grin took over his features as he dropped to hover right in front of them. "Demand… you say?" He squinted very closely at her, and Umbridge took a step back, though she lifted her chin and tried very hard to look him in his unsettling eyes.

"Tell us!" snapped Damien. "Now!"

"Fine," said Peeves, as if suddenly contrite. "They went that way." He pointed.

Scowling, Damien shoved past the poltergeist and the other professors, and he and Umbridge marched to the doors to the West Wing and ripped them open, only to stare in a split-second of horror before an entire room's worth of water came rushing down on all of them, washing the entire group down the hallway and launching some of the professors off the stairs in a river of dirty water.

"Whoopsie," said Peeves, floating off. "Guess someone left the sink on!"

Outside, under the cool dark sky, Draco and Ginny creeped next to one another, falling in and out of the shadows created by the twisting branches of the Forbidden Forest. Wind rustled the leaves and pushed them around their ankles, tugging at their robes like tiny insistent hands. The castle seemed quiet, and no one had come out yet looking for them, but they could not risk going out into the open until they absolutely had to.

"Not too much further," George assured them. "The entrance is at the base of the Whomping Willow."

They continued, leaves crunching underfoot. The occasional snapping twig sounded to Draco like the clanging of a bell at high noon. Around them, owls hooted, heads twisted much like Peeves' had been. At the front, George continued to move, his wand in hand. "We're almost there," he said, glancing back at Blanca. "Just – "

"Weasley, stop!" hissed Blanca, but it was too late. George's foot swept through a smoky line close to the ground, which shimmered and then disappeared. George's eyes widened.

"What – " he started, but then a chilling howl split the air, long and menacing. Draco's breath caught in his throat.
"Fuck," said Blanca, before snatching Ginny's robes and hauling her forward. "Run! All of you! Go!"

The group raced off, feet pounding against the earthy underbrush. Behind them – or in front of them, it was hard to tell – the howl rang out again, closer this time, and Draco's chest hurt from fear as he recognized it, knew what it was – a **werewolf**. They picked up speed, dashing in a full sprint through the dark forest, dodging low-hanging limbs, spider webs and high roots.

"I see it!" said Alec, pointing to their left, and for a split-second, Draco managed to look to the side and see a pair of glowing yellow eyes and narrow black slits. In a flash, Alec fired off a spell, but the thundering footfalls of the unseen creature did not fade away, but instead grew more intense, louder and visceral and heavy.

"**Everta Statum!**" exclaimed Alec, and the spell hit a tree, blasting straight through its center, but the eyes did not stop, and now there was grunting, the snapping of jaws. Ginny glanced to the side and gasped the flash of sharp white teeth she saw, gnashing at the air.

"**Confringo!**" Blanca shouted, blasting another tree, this one which was large and heavy and fell over in the direction of the predatory creature with a great crash. For a moment, the eyes disappeared, and the footsteps faded. "I think I got it!" she told them breathlessly, before slamming her heels into the earth to find everyone else had stopped at an opening in the forest floor. "Why the hell did you stop?" she growled, before looking around, her lips parted.

They had run straight into a clearing filled with cages, tall and iron and covered with deep claw marks and blood. A dozen enclosures, perhaps more, and they were all – to Draco's horror – open and empty.

Another howl sounded, and then more joined it, a cacophony of soul-shattering terror.

"**SHIT!**" Blanca shoved them all forward. Behind them, more menacing eyes had appeared, and now the chorus of howls was near-constant as the massive beasts raced towards them, ripping apart trees and cutting up the dirt with their large claws as they raced for them. "GO!" Blanca told them. Draco grabbed Ginny's hand and yanked her forward even as the feral snarling behind them came closer, ringing in their ears.

Draco and Ginny ran full-speed, chests heaving, bodies pumping even as Blanca stayed where she was, determined eyes set on the oncoming hoard of beasts. "**What about Blanca?**" shouted Ginny in a panic to Draco, but he only tugged her forward. Behind them, Blanca stayed her ground, her wand waving in a large circle as she continued to mutter spell after spell, her eyes intense.

The werewolves raced at her, closer by the second, as Blanca's spell began to appear in the air in the form of a great crackling lightning storm, jumping from the tip of her wand even as it built, built further, and then, just as the werewolves leaped at her, Blanca slammed her wand to the ground and lifted the spell up, so that a massive wall of magical lightning jumped from the earth to the tops of the trees.

The werewolves slammed into the wall of lightning and shrieked, writhing in agony against the spell as it shocked them. The gruesome smell of magical energy burning against flesh filled the air.

Ginny looked back and saw this, even as she ran as fast as she could, barely managing to avoid falling off the underbrush and roots. Without warning, a werewolf sprang at the pair from the side, and Ginny and Draco were forced apart as they fell and rolled on the forest floor. Draco hit the ground hard on his shoulder, and he barely rolled out of the way before a claw slammed into the ground where he'd been only seconds before. Scrambling, he ducked under a fallen tree just as the
werewolf snapped at his head with massive jaws.

Breathless, Draco wedged himself under the log even as the snarling werewolf dug furiously at the earth, trying to get at him. With every passing second, it grew closer, and Draco felt the heat of its mouth as it panted right at him, its twitching black nose close as it sniffed at him.

*Fuck,* thought Draco, trying to move his arm to pull out his wand, but there was no room, and all he could think of was was Ginny, and Merlin, had it gotten her? The thought made his heart hurt, and he reached up to touch his chest, only to find the little paper bird Maggie had made for him. As Draco pulled it out of his robes, it quickly fluttered to life in his hand, shifting its wings and then snapping out of his hand so that it flew, with its little paper wings, at the opening the werewolf was clawing at.

Popping out of the hole, the little paper bird pecked mercilessly at the werewolf's head, and it snapped back to swat angrily at the paper bird. The furious little bird did not give up, though, and it constantly flew at the werewolf's head until the werewolf had jumped up and clamped its jaws over the bird, swallowing it whole.

But by then, Draco had his wand, and as the werewolf turned to him again, Draco's furious curse blasted it into a tree. A sudden force knocked into Draco, and he turned, seeing it was Ginny who had run into him. "DRACO!" she threw her arms around him, but they had only a moment before Ben, George and Alec appeared again, grabbing them and pulling them into a run again.

Suddenly, the group burst forth from the forest, racing full-speed in the direction of the Whomping Willow with George still at the front and Alec and Ben behind him. Ginny felt like her lungs were on fire and her limbs were aching, but before she could speak out or collapse, the trees rustled angrily and out of the forest pounced a trio of snarling werewolves. The group skidded to a halt, chests heaving, as the massive lupine creatures turned their salivating jaws in their direction. The feral beasts stood between the group and the Whomping Willow.

With a sudden burst of movement, the werewolves raced towards them, and Alec and George both fired off spells as the others turned and ran, ran across the great empty moonlit space outside of Hogwarts, even as the werewolves picked up speed.

"How is this even possible?" shouted George as he ran, robes billowing. "The moon isn't even full!"

"Just keep running!" shouted Alec, firing off more spells over his shoulder.

Just then, Blanca jumped through the foliage at the side and joined them, eyes blazing as she cast a wave of fire at the group of werewolves. One of the beasts caught flame and fell to the grass, crying out, but the others moved around him and raced on, snapping their jaws and swiping out with razor-sharp claws.

The group flew across the grounds once more, feet pounding against the grass as they raced in the direction of the lake. More werewolves sprang forward from the forest, appearing at their sides, and Ginny screamed as one of them jumped at her and narrowly missed grabbing her shoulder. Another beast gained space on them from behind, and before anyone knew what was happening, it jumped at George and snatched him to the ground.

Ginny whirled around to see the werewolf dragging George in the direction of the forest. "NO!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, but before she could do anything, Alec turned and saw George. Without hesitation, he sprinted in the other wizard's direction, jumped at the werewolf, and in mid-leap, he transformed from a human into a massive tiger and ripped the werewolf off George, who
shouted and covered his head.

The werewolf and the tiger instantly tangled in a furious fight, blood and fur mixing with grass as they rolled and yowled on the earth. Shrieking howls and snarling roars punctuated every bite, every kick, and then the tiger sank his jaws into the throat of the werewolf and ripped it away, flesh and blood coating his face and jaws.

Draco and Ginny snatched up George and hauled him to his feet, and Blanca and Ben stepped forward, firing off hexes as yet more werewolves started to catch up to them, they were so fast, Ginny thought wildly. The tiger spit out the flesh and looked first to Blanca, then to the approaching group of werewolves.

With one last nod in their direction, the tiger sped off in the direction of the werewolves.

"ALEC!" shouted Ben in alarm, but in mere seconds, the tiger had jumped into the hoard of werewolves and began snapping its jaws, thrashing the werewolves with its claws and dragging them down, anything to slow them.

"Take them and go!" shouted Blanca to Ben, and Ben grabbed up the others before running again, even as they all fought against exhaustion. Blanca stayed behind and fired into the werewolves who were quickly overwhelming the tiger, but some of them broke loose and sprinted for her, and Blanca unfurled one last hateful curse at them just as one of the werewolves managed to grab the tiger's head and, with one vicious twist, snap his neck. The other werewolves descended on his body then, and Blanca let out a howl of rage before she was forced to turn and run again.

Once more dashing across the grass and running as fast as they could go with no hope of outlasting the werewolves, the five remaining witches and wizards cut across the grounds with the beasts behind them steadily gaining speed and space.

"What're we going to do?" shouted Ginny to Blanca, tears blinding her.

Blanca looked ahead, hair whipping around her face. The Black Lake spread out before them, flat and dark. "SINGLE FILE!" she called to the group. "BEHIND ME!" Without slowing her run, Blanca waved her wand at the lake. "Semita!" Then she ran straight out onto the lake as if walking an invisible path on the water's surface. The group fled onto the lake, small silhouettes against the large moon sitting behind the water's banks.

Ginny followed directly behind Blanca, with Draco, George and Ben behind them just as the nearest werewolf attempted to snatch Ben with its jaws. However, the werewolves came to an abrupt halt at the edge of the lake, and the narrow path the group ran led them to its center, where they all stopped, heaving as they bent over their knees and fought the urge to collapse.

The werewolves howled and came to a stop at the water's edge, but they did not leave, instead pacing tirelessly on the edge and snapping their jaws as the witches and wizards watched in fear. Looking all around them, Draco's dread took on new levels as the werewolves grew in number – there seemed to be fifteen or twenty of them now, where had they all come from? Had they all been crammed into those cages?

Just then, one of the lupine creatures jumped into the water with a guttural snarl and began to swim towards them. Emboldened, others began to do the same. The group stood trapped at the center of the lake on an invisible path, and the werewolves were swimming towards them, no longer afraid of the water.

Blanca met their snarl with an enraged sound of her own, and she and the others began throwing
curses at the swimming werewolves. Still, the werewolves were alarmingly fast, and they dodged them, coming closer and closer until the first one had reached their path and George barely managed to curse it back into the water before it could snatch him off the path and drag him below. They fought them off one-by-one, but more were arriving, and Ginny sucked in a high-pitched breath, something like a sob, as she looked over at Blanca and saw true panic begin to form in the American witch's face.

Draco and Ginny looked at each other as the splashing and snarling grew closer, and they reached out at the same time to take one another's hands, even as a tear slipped down Ginny's cheek. "I'm sorry," she whispered to Draco.

Four werewolves appeared in front of them and reached out with bloody jaws and claws.

That was when the lake erupted, water flying straight up from the surface and into the air, causing the witches and wizards to scream and duck as water rained down on them from above. Enormous tentacles leaped from the water, curling over the lake's surface before slamming down on the werewolves, snatching them around their middles and dragging them below the water in a great confusing mix of splashing and grappling.

"FUCK!" shouted Blanca, her arms over her soaked head as the tentacles snatched up the nearest werewolf to her and hurled it through the air, slamming it into a nearby tree. Other tentacles jumped up, snapping the spine of a werewolf near George and tossing it into the water, where grindylows appeared and pulled it down with vicious little noises. Yet another werewolf howled in misery as menacing mermaids jumped onto its back and sank their sharp teeth into its neck, dragging it below as they ripped at its flesh. Each lupine creature in the water fought against the tentacles, but each lost, disappearing in a bubble of blood and claws.

Ginny jumped back as one werewolf desperately tried to grab onto the invisible path, and for a moment, its face flickered and shifted into a near-human form, calling out for help. Horror seized Ginny's heart as she recognized it as the man from Diagon Alley, the one who had been seized on the street by the Ministry. She started to reach out to him, but the mermaids appeared and ruthlessly snatched him below the water's surface.

The last of the tentacles grabbed werewolves by the ankles and necks, pulling them below as they began to wind and disappear, giving one last curl in the direction of the group as if waving goodbye. Then the last tentacle slipped beneath the surface of the lake, and after a few seconds, the water was smooth and unbothered, as if nothing had happened there at all.

No hint of the werewolves remained.

Panting heavily, the witches and wizards slowly straightened from their crouches. A few feet in front of them, one mermaid hovered near the surface, only her serpentine eyes visible. She blinked, showed a flash of teeth and then dipped below again, disappearing.

Without looking at Blanca, Ben asked, shaking, "Alec?"

Blanca swallowed hard and shook her head. "Come on," she said, turning and hurrying down the narrow path, off the lake. She sent them all ahead to the Whomping Willow, disappearing for a few minutes before she returned with an extra wand close to her chest. Jaw set, she jerked her head. "Hurry up!"

The group finally made it to the Whomping Willow, which twisted its menacing branches in their direction, but shockingly, it did not attack them. Instead, it brought its thick limbs around the group with an aged groan, as if to further shield them. They ducked into the tunnel and fled Hogwarts'
grounds.

Near the castle, Damien and Umbridge emerged, only freshly recovered from their incident with Peeves. Filch shuffled behind them, his features pinched.

"Someone set off the traps," said Damien lowly. "I heard screaming. I know I did."

"Mm," said Filch. "Probably one of them Muggles from the town wandered too close again. Bloody mess when the last ones came 'round."

Scowling, Damien's eyes scoured the grounds. However, he could see only the calm, cool lake and the lesser-used courtyards nearby. If he'd wandered closer to the Forbidden Forest, he might've noticed the blood stain that started near the lake and then led to the forest, as if a carcass had been dragged into the shrouded mist there.

But there were werewolves about, Damien knew, and he did not care to investigate in the dark while they were roaming. "Find the disgusting creatures and get them back into their cages," he ordered Filch with a sneer. "Perhaps this time you'll lose a head, instead of just a finger."

Filch grunted, and Damien turned back inside, suspicious and wary.

The five remaining witches and wizards made it back to Slughorn and McGonagall. Without a word, they left Hogsmeade and absconded to Steep Park House, where they entered in the very early hours of the morning, morose and shaken.

Careful not to wake anyone, the group stopped at the door. Blanca looked to Ginny and Draco, her features hard. She still held two wands in her hand. One of them was coated with blood.

"So you got what you need," she said tonelessly to Draco.

He had trouble meeting her gaze. "Yes. I can use this to find Muggleborns… The Dark Lord will think I am doing so for him, but secretly, we will be transporting them to safety."

"And how are you going to manage that?" asked Blanca coolly.

Draco paused. "I have a plan." He hesitated again. "It will work," he said with more confidence than he felt.

"Good," said Blanca, as Ben stared blankly at the condensation on the window. Blanca tucked both of the wands into the pockets of her robes. "Because if you fail, then that means one of my people died for nothing." She shifted away from them. "Now if you guys are done, I have to talk to my Aurors."

Without another word, Blanca turned and left, with Ben going behind her, not looking at any of them.

Unable to stand on their feet any longer, the other three sank into chairs in the abnormally quiet dining room. No one spoke. No one comforted one another.

They simply sat, with only a dim lamp in the center of the table to illuminate the room.
Author's Note: This chapter did not come easily. It's one of the few I've had to re-write a few times. Hopefully, this works out well.

Warning: the front end of this chapter is pretty heavy. It lightens up towards the end. Hang in there, guys.

Draco had lied to Blanca.

He didn't really know how to get the Muggleborns out, not for certain. After the night they'd all had at Hogwarts, though, he couldn't make himself look Blanca in the eye and tell her that he wasn't sure where to go from there.

He knew his destination – freed Muggleborns, moving out of Great Britain and to a safe location. All he had to do was find them before someone else in the Ministry did, and then somehow convince Voldemort and the hundreds of Death Eaters lurking about that the poor sods were all dead.

It was no easy task, and Draco now felt the very real dread that sneaked into his heart alongside the pressure, the expectations. That moment on the lake, when he and Ginny had looked at one another and truly thought they were about to die, still weighed heavy on his mind.

Draco and Ginny had come home, curled up in bed together and cried. In a way, it had been soothing. That night was the first in many that Ginny had jumped into his arms and stayed there, with no strange distance between them. However, Draco knew that Ginny's iciness was likely to return in the morning. He dared not hope that things would suddenly change.

Lying in bed the morning after their mission to Hogwarts, Draco stared at the canopy of his bed and wished his blankets would swallow him. He was no stranger to fear, but that morning, as the morning dawned windy and grey, he felt a new sort of fear. It was caustic and unwelcome, a fear that threatened to devour.

Once upon a time, Draco truly believed he had experienced the worst of life, that there were no more unpleasant surprises in store for him, because he had endured all that a human being possibly could. He had been wrong.

Rising out of bed, Draco pressed his bare feet to the floor of his room, pulled on his robes and glanced back at Ginny, who continued to sleep fitfully. He tried not to imagine the small bump in her stomach, nor how he'd felt grasping her hand as a dozen bloodthirsty werewolves raced right at them.

It was too much; Draco left the room and wandered down the hall feeling dazed and lost, as if he were trapped in the misty English moors instead of his own home. After a few minutes, he came to the parlor, where his mother was sitting in her chair and drinking tea.

When Narcissa looked up and saw Draco, she frowned and reached out to him, drawing him into the chair next to her. "Darling," she said, blue eyes sweeping over his face. "Are you alright?"

"No," Draco replied. He did not let go of Narcissa's hand when he sat down, and she curled her smaller fingers in his. Using his free hand, Draco rubbed at his eyes. He felt eighty. "I almost lost Ginny last night," he admitted to his mother in raspy whisper. His eyes were not on her, but on an
unremarkable section of the wall. "We both almost died."

Narcissa's hand trembled in his, and he saw her throat work over a sob. She kept herself steady, though, and squeezed his fingers.

"I almost lost her," Draco went on, lifting his head but still not looking at her. "And all I could think about was how... dying at her side was not so bad, but I would never be able to rest if we'd died as we were about to last night, feeling as though there was an entire world between us."

"Concerning the pregnancy, you mean?" asked Narcissa softly.

Draco met her gaze. "If she never wanted children, I would understand. But she's told me before we married that she does, and -- then this happens and -- "

Everything suddenly fell on Draco's heart at once, pushed forward by the sound of Alec's neck snapping, which echoed in Draco's mind. Other noises joined in: George's scream when he'd been pulled down by the werewolf, Blanca's agonized shout, Ginny's cries.

The empty echo of the corridors in what used to be Hogwarts. A tear leaked from Draco's eye and slipped down his cheek.

"I was so afraid last night," Draco told Narcissa, "that I was never going to get to meet my child... and I was afraid that Ginny didn't even want to."

Family was the only thing that Draco had ever prioritized over himself. Until he'd brought Ginny into their home, Family had only included his parents. All other lives were dispensable, some worth more than others but none so grand, so valuable as those precious few he loved.

Now that included Ginny, and by extension, the child she carried. It took everything in Draco's power not to steal her away, forget the war, forget the rebellion, let all the Mudbloods die. He didn't care. He wanted her, and he wanted his family.

But Ginny didn't think that way. He could hardly hold that against her; he loved her for what she was. And yet this...

It hurt Draco more than he could possibly convey, to know that Ginny would rather die for her cause than live with him. He had never realized now that this was the case, but he knew it to be true, and he hated it.

Draco and Narcissa sat in silence for a long time. At last, his mother tugged on his hand again, and Draco looked up to see the saddest smile he'd ever witnessed on her beautiful features. "Draco," said Narcissa, leaning closer, "did you know... that even though you are my only child in truth, you are actually my fourth child in my heart?"

Draco's brows furrowed. "Fourth?" he repeated.

Narcissa's smile trembled. "My first pregnancy," she said haltingly, morose in a way Draco had never seen her. She cleared her throat and started again. "My first pregnancy lasted only... nine weeks." Her eyes were glistening. Draco stared, as he had never known about this.

"When I lost it," continued Narcissa, "Your father and I were devastated. It was - " she paused again, " -- I know you aren't aware of the details of such a thing, and I pray you never are, but you should know that... losing a child in pregnancy is unlike any other agony in the world. It is a culmination of the worst types of every sort of pain. It is a physical, emotional, mental connection that is so brutally severed." She blinked, tears sticking to her eyelashes. "And it is torture."
Her fingers twitched in Draco's. "But after the first loss, your father and I thought – well, we are young. We will try again, and this time it will work." The sad smile returned. "The second pregnancy lasted ten weeks. And the third… " her voice grew small "… nearly five months."

Draco lowered his eyes, his chest feeling concave.

"I tried everything," Narcissa continued shakily. "I went to healers and midwives. I took tonics and remedies and potions. Nothing worked, no matter how hard I tried. And I just – I could not figure out why – " Tears slipped down her cheeks. "I could not understand why my body was rejecting something my heart desired so much." She put a hand to her chest. "I could not understand why something that seemed so easy for everyone else was so very difficult for me, why I couldn't – protect my child, keep them safe – "

Narcissa took in a deep breath and steadied herself. "After the third time, your father and I decided that was enough. We could endure it no longer. Your grandfather Abraxas was furious, of course. He blamed me, telling Lucius I was a sickly, weak wife. He told us we had to keep trying." A hint of a real smile lit up Narcissa's eyes for a moment. "But Lucius told him no. He said I had been through enough. That was the first time I'd ever seen him stand up to Abraxas. And that was when I knew he really loved me."

Sighing, Narcissa continued, "So your father and I gave up, and we went on with our lives. And then, two years later, out of the blue, I became pregnant." There was a long pause here. "But there was no celebration," whispered Narcissa.

"We did not feel joy. We were not happy." She looked up at the ceiling, as if she were inviting Lucius to chime in. "We knew this path, and we knew where it ended. We could not enjoy it, for we knew the pain that lay ahead. So we did not speak of the pregnancy at all. We did not announce it or celebrate it. We did not prepare a nursery, or pick out a name. Even when the pregnancy went further than all the others before it, we refused still to do or say anything. We could not."

Narcissa looked at Draco. "We didn't have the strength, Draco. We felt as if it had all been gone." She looked down at her lap, and her cheeks grew wet again. "And because of that, we could not – dared not – think on how this child might … look … or sound. What it might feel like – " she pressed a hand over her mouth. " – in my arms. I could not think of its skin, or how soft it might be, or how its eyes might look when it gazed upon me." Fresh tears fell down her cheeks. "We could not bear it, Draco. We dared not hope. It hurt too much."

Narcissa bit her lip, her entire body shaking. Finally, she looked up at Draco again. "And then," she said in a whisper, "the most amazing thing happened." Their eyes met. "You were born."

Draco blinked away his tears.

"And you were perfect," said Narcissa, her voice cracking.

She squeezed his hand and smiled through her tears, which fell freely now. "Oh, your father – he was so proud, Draco. He held you in his arms and he showed you to everyone in the hospital, I think. And I couldn't – I couldn't figure out what I had done, this time, what was so different, how I had finally managed to – to deserve you – "

Narcissa finally let go of his hand and pressed both of hers over her face. "I didn't know, but I didn't care. Because as soon as I saw you, I knew that all the pain – all the misery – it had all been worth it." She looked up and swept a hand over Draco's face. "We hadn't prepared ourselves to love
you, Draco, because we were so afraid of losing you. We could not give our hearts to you, not yet, knowing that we may never get that last piece back." Slipping both her hands over Draco's, she shifted until their knees brushed.

"But when we saw you, oh," she exhaled, closing her eyes for a long moment, "it was as if the sky had opened up and shown us the sun for the first time in our lives." Brushing back Draco's hair from his face, Narcissa leaned her own close to his and brushed their foreheads together tenderly.

"Do you see, Draco? The reason Ginny is acting this way is not for a lack of love. It is because she is afraid," murmured Narcissa tearfully. "She is afraid of losing those she loves again, just as your father and I were. She cannot allow herself to care for this child yet because there is too much at risk. For you. For her. For everyone. She feels responsible." Narcissa opened her eyes, and Draco did, too.

"It is not because she does not love you, and it is not because she resents this child. It is because she has felt loss so deeply… and sometimes, the fear of that loss can cause us to hide ourselves away, to pull back. But the love isn't gone, Draco. It's simply waiting for the sky to open back up."

Draco put a hand over his face, curling close to his mother's shoulder as he cried.

They stayed that way for a long time, saying nothing more. After a while, Draco pulled back from Narcissa, but not before curling both of her hands in his and kissing the tops of them.

"I love you, Mother," he told her in a hoarse whisper.

Eyes still rimmed with tears, Narcissa smiled brightly and swept her hand over his face. "I love you, too, son."

Draco held her for a moment longer. Then he rose from his chair and went down the hall again, his eyes still burning with tears. When he reached his room, he saw the door was ajar. Peering through the crack, he spotted Ginny sitting on the window seat, still wearing her pajamas. She was curled up in one corner near the glass, and her eyes were low on her stomach. As Draco watched, she tenderly moved a hand over her stomach, fingers curling at the top. At the same time, she bit her lip, looking as though she might cry.

Draco sucked in a deep breath and stepped inside. Ginny immediately looked up and dropped her hand, but before she could say anything, Draco slid into place next to her and curled his fingers over hers, pressing a kiss to her temple. It felt as though they exhaled together in that moment, both loosening the heavy weight that sat on their chests.

After a few minutes of silence, Draco shifted and looked at Ginny. "I have someone I want you to meet," he said suddenly. Ginny looked surprised, and he had to admit, he was a bit shocked himself. However, he kept going, pulling Ginny gently up from her spot and getting them both dressed. A little while later, they arrived at Steep Park House, which was still in the process of waking up.

Leading Ginny through the home, Draco perused the rooms until he found who he was looking for.

"Maggie," he said, and the little girl looked up from where she was eating a bowl of eggs at a table by herself.

"Draco!" The little girl hopped up from her seat and bound up to them happily. "Yer' here early!" she said in her thick Scottish lilt. Draco turned and looked at Ginny, who watched the little girl with a curious smile.
"Maggie, I don't think you've had a chance to meet my wife, Ginny. Ginny, this is Maggie, one of the Muggleborns who was brought here a few weeks ago."

Maggie gasped, excited to meet Ginny. The three took seats near one another. "Oh, hello!" said Maggie, beaming up at Ginny. To Draco's delight, Ginny's weary features lifted in a real smile.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Maggie."

"Maggie," said Draco, "made me a little paper bird before we left for our mission last night. She told me it would keep me safe." He looked over at Maggie, appreciating her earnest, wide-eyed look as she gazed at them both.

"And did it?" asked Maggie, lips parted and fingers fisted near her face in anticipation.

"It did," said Draco honestly, looking sidelong at Ginny's surprised face. "It distracted a large beast that was trying to hurt me, and I was able to get away." He looked back at Maggie, whose joy at this news could not possibly be matched. "So thank you, Maggie. You saved my life."

Tears welled in Ginny's eyes, and she reached over with both hands, grabbing Draco's and kissing his cheek, taking a moment to press against him. The emotion seemed overwhelming, even for Maggie, who moved to stand in front of the two young adults, her hands on their knees.

"I'll make you another one," she told him adamantly. "And you, too, Ginny!" Then she let out a gasp, tilted her head at Ginny and said, "You're going to have a bebe!"

Ginny blinked, startled, and Draco quickly shook his head. He hadn't told Maggie that. "Well," said Ginny with a shocked laugh, "yes, we are. How did you know?"

Maggie just shrugged and looked at Ginny's belly, which wasn't really visible beneath her robes. "'Thas' so exciting," she said, "If you want, I'll help out when it's born! I'm good with bebes. Except that time with my little cousin, but that wasn't my fault! He jumped out of the window, not me."

Ginny slapped a hand over her face to stifle her laugh.

"What're you going to name it?" asked Maggie.

Draco glanced quickly at Ginny. This discussion had always led to anger before. However, when Ginny looked up at his face, it was strangely bereft of all the rigidity it had once held. Instead, Ginny looked back at Maggie and simply smiled and shrugged. "We don't know yet. We're not even sure if it's a boy or a girl."

"Oh," said Maggie with understanding. "Well, if it's a girl, I've got an idea."

Draco's lips quirked at a smirk. "Oh? What is it?"

Maggie clambered up in Draco's lap and threw her legs over Ginny's lap, too. Then she folded her hands and said matter-of-factly, "If it's a girl, you should name her Athena."

"Athena?" repeated Ginny, laughing. "Where did you hear that name?"

"I read it in a book," said Maggie. "Athena was very, um, smart and powerful and strong, and she was um, really beautiful, too. I'm pretty sure she was a hero."

"Is that what you think our child will be?" asked Draco with quiet amusement. "A hero?"

Maggie looked up at them both. "Well, sure," she said earnestly. "That's what you two are!"
Ginny and Draco stared, lips parted, and Draco looked at Ginny just in time to see tears well in her eyes again. This time the tears spilled over, and Ginny wrapped her arms around Maggie and tugged her tight, which Maggie accepted with all the happiness and pleasure in the world.

"Alright then," whispered Ginny, her shining eyes looking at Draco over the top of Maggie's head. She was smiling. It wasn't a big smile, and her cheeks were still wet with tears, but it was the loveliest sight Draco had seen in ages. "Athena it is."

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Three days later, Draco and Ginny made their official pregnancy announcement to wizarding society. The world was practically abuzz with the news, and the Dark Lord couldn't have been more pleased. Ginny knew he assumed that this meant that Ginny and Draco were officially no threat at all, if he'd ever been suspicious of them in the first place.

The idea of making such a public spectacle of their pregnancy was appalling to Ginny, but Narcissa had insisted, letting her know that it was expected, and if she and Draco wanted to avoid suspicion, they needed to jump through every hoop of upper-class society.

However, the celebration party turned out to be more fun than Ginny expected. The night before, Draco and Ginny had spent every hour of darkness curled together in bed in a way they hadn't been in what felt like ages, talking and cuddling.

After that day at Steep Park House with Maggie, Ginny felt freed. She could not explain why that was, and she knew that every ounce of fear and anxiety remained, but it had been overshadowed for the time being. To think about the pregnancy too often was still something she could not allow herself, not when there was so much else to do, but something had changed after Hogwarts.

Tragic as it had been, they had succeeded in their mission. They were going to do this. She imagined Maggie's face again in her mind, looking up at them in awe.

For a split-second, she thought about what her own child's face might look like, peering up at them in that same impressed way. However, that image was gone in an instant, safely tucked away in Ginny's heart for another time and place, one which she could hopefully use to give it the time and attention it deserved.

At the announcement party, Ginny and Draco stood in front of a mixed group of mortal enemies and dear friends, announcing their pregnancy and receiving their cheers. Draco's arm around Ginny's waist felt like an anchor keeping her from drifting too far, and her heart swelled each time she looked at him.

She could have lost him. On that lake, she thought they were gone. It was over. But it wasn't, because of brave souls like Alec, and she'd be damned if she let that go to waste.

"Ginny," said a voice, and she and Draco turned to see Andromeda carrying Teddy to them. She beamed. "Oh, I'm so happy for the two of you!"

"Thank you," said Ginny, hugging Andromeda as Draco took Teddy in his arms. Teddy had grown to adore Draco, and Ginny felt bad they hadn't had him over more often.

"How are you feeling?" asked Andromeda, sweeping some hair behind Ginny's ear, tenderly, as a mother would. Ginny swallowed tightly.

"Better," she answered honestly. They both knew the conversation meant a lot more than either of them could speak of aloud. Unfortunately, their moment was cut off by the arrival of two of the most unwanted figures in existence.
"Well, well," said Damien Black, moving up to smile his peculiar smile at them. "I suppose congratulations are in order."

Ginny's heart turned to ice when she saw who was standing next to him – Bellatrix. Andromeda froze next to Ginny, and their small circle instantly became as tensely wired as a spider web, with every motion sending a tremor through the air. Bellatrix turned her heavy-lidded eyes to Andromeda and curled her lips in a mocking smile.

"Look at you," crooned Bellatrix, speaking to Andromeda. Never before had Andromeda look as murderous as she did in that moment; it made her look more like Bellatrix than ever before, and a shiver shot down Ginny's spine. "Finally free of the Mudblood, hm?" continued Bellatrix, eyes flitting over Narcissa. "Well, let's just hope your dirty blood can be diluted after a few generations. Wouldn't want it mucking up this wonderful world I've helped create."

Andromeda's fingers were frozen, claw-like, at her sides. When Bellatrix shifted her eyes to look at Teddy, the little boy whimpered and tucked his head against Draco's shoulder. He turned an assortment of different colors in an instant, as if he were hoping to hide himself amongst Draco's clothes like a chameleon.

Damien's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "The boy is a metamorphmagus," he noted, his eyes dancing. "How wonderful. And why isn't he registered with the Ministry? I'm sure I would have known if he had been."

Andromeda stepped in front of Teddy to block him from view. "He doesn't have to be registered until he starts school," she said stiffly.

"Oh," said Damien with false politeness, "those were the old rules, I'm afraid. The new Ministry decrees that all changelings be listed immediately, regardless of their age." His eyes flickered to Draco, who held Teddy tight to him. "The Ministry likes to keep track of these things, you know. You never know when they might call on you for something."

"He's a toddler," snapped Ginny. "The Ministry doesn't need him for anything."

Damien's strange smile deepened. "Register him," he said to Andromeda, no longer bothering to sound polite. "Or there will be consequences."

He walked away, and Bellatrix giggled, flashing one last look at Andromeda before shifting forward and putting a hand on Ginny's stomach through her robes. Ginny barely kept from retching.

"Good job on doing your part," she hissed to Ginny in a malicious whisper. "Nothing so useful as a little breeding stock." She slinked away after that, leaving all the others glaring hatefully at her backs.

"Some day," whispered Ginny to Andromeda, as they all turned away. "I'll kill that bitch for what she did to Tonks."

Andromeda clenched her jaw and accepted Teddy back into her arms. "Not if I get to her, first."

Relaxed now that Bellatrix was gone, Teddy bounced in his grandmother's arms and then made a funny noise with his mouth. When Draco followed the little boy's distracted gaze, he saw Teddy was looking at the Floo chimney.

"Whoosh!" said Teddy, just as somebody appeared and strolled in to join the party. "Whoosh!"
Draco blinked a few times – and then it hit him. He knew what to do.

He knew how to save the Muggleborns.

The next week was a whirlwind for Draco. He went immediately to Blanca and asked her for her two best alchemists, and she immediately pointed him to Renz and Keosha. When Draco told them of his plan, they were instantly on board.

Together, the trio worked night and day, pouring their energies into the wide assortment of alchemical ingredients Draco brought over. Draco knew what he wanted to accomplish, but he needed the more experienced alchemists to help get them there.

Ginny was wildly curious about what he was doing, but Draco didn't have the time or energy to explain it to her. It might not even work – but if it did –

It would be exactly what they needed.

Meanwhile, Ginny devoted her spare time to helping out around Steep Park House. One afternoon, while Draco was working and the house was relatively quiet, Ginny found Blanca sitting at the kitchen table, and for once, she wasn't surrounded by people. Ginny took a seat across from her.

"What's kickin?" asked Blanca, taking a moment to look up from some parchment she was reading.

Ginny's lips quirked. "Nothing," she said honestly. The house was quiet. "Blanca," she said after a few minutes, "do you have any family back in the States?"

Blanca looked up from her parchment and shifted it into her lap as she grinned. "I sure do," she said. "Smoking hot wife and two kids."

Ginny smiled. "Mind if I ask their names?"

"Ah," said Blanca. "Well, my wife is named Anna. And I've got a girl, Mayra, who's seven, and a boy, Marco, who's nine."

Ginny put her chin in her hands. "I'm sure I already know the answer to this," she said softly. "But do you miss them when you have to leave?"

Blanca's brown eyes, normally sharp, softened. "Every minute of every day."

The two fell quiet for a moment, before Blanca said, "Believe it or not, sometimes I think about getting a desk job at MACUSA. You know, something doing all that paperwork shit they love so much." She rolled her eyes, and her gaze landed on the table, which she picked at with one hand. "Then, you know, I could be at home more often. Work an 8 to 5. Be at home for dinner. Make all the," she sighed, "... the basketball games and award ceremonies and birthday parties." Her fingernail scraped on the table.

"I have a hard time imagining you behind a desk," volunteered Ginny softly.

Blanca's eyes flickered up to Ginny's. "So do I," she admitted.

Ginny hesitated, and then asked, "Does your wife mind that you're gone so much?"

At this, Blanca smiled and her eyes lifted. "Nah, she's – she's the best. She never complains, she never tries to get me to change. She just – does it all, working, too, and I don't know how, I guess
she's just Wonder Woman. I mean, she's amazing." Ginny loved the look of wistful adoration on Blanca's features, which was so starkly different from her usual demeanor. "And you'd think she wouldn't understand about my job," went on Blanca, "considering she's actually a No-Maj. But she does."

"Your wife is a Muggle?" asked Ginny, surprised. "Has she always known you were a witch?"

A wicked grin flashed over Blanca's features. "Oh, she knew I was magic from the start," she said suggestively, and Ginny laughed. "But, uh," continued Blanca, "it's kind of funny, actually." She shifted forward, elbows on the table. "So I grew up in a mixed neighborhood, magical and non-magical, and Anna was my neighbor. We went to school together when we were little kids, but then I left for Ilvermorny. So when I came back during the summers, we'd hang out, just as friends, you know."

Blanca bit her lip, amused at the memory. "And then, the summer I was sixteen, we were sitting out in a field together – we lived in the middle of nowhere Pennsylvania – and Anna looked me and asked, 'Where do you really go during the school year?' And I looked over at her, and I told her – Well, I'll tell you the truth, but only if you kiss me."

Ginny laughed at Blanca's devious grin. "I didn't think she'd really do it," admitted Blanca with a shrug. "But she did. And then – well, I mean, I had to tell her, right? I promised." Blanca leaned back in her chair and smiled at her hands. "That was twenty years ago. And we've been together ever since."

"Sounds to me like she's the one who bewitched you," said Ginny with a smirk.

Blanca laughed. "Yeah, okay. Maybe." After a moment, she said, "You want to know the real funny thing?" At Ginny's curious look, she continued, looking delighted, "Anna carried both of our kids, so they're not biologically related to me. But…" she grinned. "They're both magical."

Ginny gasped. "Really?" she asked, delighted.

"Oh, yeah," said Blanca. "I mean, they haven't gotten their letters yet, but I can just tell. I can see it on them, feel it in their skin. One day, they'll go to Ilvermorny, and it'll be their home. Just like it is for me."

Ginny smiled softened, and she thought of Hogwarts. It had felt like such a cruel mockery of the castle she'd known. Sensing her thoughts, Blanca leaned forward again. "Hey," she told Ginny, touching her hand. She slipped her long fingers over Ginny's smaller hand. "You'll get Hogwarts back. Those bastards aren't keeping it that way forever."

Ginny gave a slow nod, her smile returning. "Thank you," she murmured. "And I'm so sorry about Alec. You – you all have made such a difference here, Blanca. I'm so glad you came."

Blanca's eyes flickered at the mention of Alec, but she squeezed Ginny's hand anyway. "I'm glad we're here, too," she told Ginny.

At that moment, Draco entered, his sleeves rolled up and his skin stained with various ingredients. He eyed their joined hands and scoffed. "Something I need to know about?" he asked dryly, retrieving a glass of water for himself.

The moment over, Blanca let go of Ginny's hand and rose with a smirk. "Don't kid yourself, Malfoy," she told Draco cockily. "If I wanted your woman, she'd already be mine." Then she sauntered out, missing Draco's aghast look at her back and Ginny's loud laughter.
Four days later, Draco and the other alchemists finally had their breakthrough. As soon as they were able, they called together all the other members of Steep Park House. Crowded into the dining hall, the group watched as Draco, along with Keosha and Renz, stood at the front of the room with some space cleared for them. Ginny watched, as curious as all the rest, as Draco hadn't told her anything of his experiments.

"Alright," said Draco, speaking mostly to Blanca, who sat with her arms folded expectantly in the front row. Everyone else was crowded behind her. "So we know we have to let the Snatchers catch the Muggleborns and bring them to Ministry, which is no different than before. One good thing about the Ministry's attempt to appear civilized is that they are still allowing Muggleborns a trial, which also means they must be brought into the Ministry alive. Snatchers are not allowed to kill them unless they absolutely must.

Now, for the past several months, the Ministry has been bringing in what Muggleborns it can, putting them on a very short and obviously rigged trial, and then killing them one by one via spell before disposing of their bodies in a number of ridiculous and wasteful ways."

Ginny grimaced. Draco was being practical in his approach, but it was gross hearing how the Ministry had attempted to streamline their murder operations.

"What I proposed today at the Ministry," said Draco, "is a new way of disposing of Muggleborns. We bring them in, give them their trial, and as soon as they're found guilty, we take them in groups to a new room in the Ministry, where they are poisoned in large groups and then – " he paused, " – dumped into a large furnace."

Blanca stared. "So… your plan is to – what? Shuffle them down a separate hallway when no one's looking?"

"Oh, no," said Draco. "We're really going to poison them and throw them into a furnace. It's the only way." At Blanca's glare, Draco held up a hand. "But instead of having real fire, the furnaces will instead have this." Bringing up his hand, Draco tossed down a small vial filled with liquid, and it burst on the ground, making everyone jump. A small circle of fire jumped up in front of Draco, crackling brazenly and throwing heat into the room.

"This," said Draco, "has every appearance of an actual fire. However – " He gestured to Keosha, who did the same motion on the opposite side of the room. Another plume of fire appeared, strangely concentrated in its one spot. "Instead of burning, these fires have an entirely different purpose."

At that, Draco stepped directly into the fire. Ginny's eyes widened, but just then, Draco stepped out of the other fire, the one in front of Keosha. In a split-second, he had vanished from one spot and appeared in another, all through the flames.

Blanca sat up, suddenly much more attentive.

"It works the same way as Floo powder," said Renz, the other alchemist. "But the difference is, no fool is going to get close to this flame. It feels just like real fire, and it even has a burning sensation if they get to close. It's all magical, though. There's no physical damage from interacting with it."

Blanca stood and moved across the floor, sweeping her hand over the flames, her eyes sharp. "Damn," she said, pulling back her hand. "It does feel real."

"We dump the unconscious Muggleborns into these pits," said Draco, gesturing, "even letting Snatchers do it themselves, so that they're satisfied the Muggleborns are dead. They won't need any
more proof than a pile of ash after that." He looked at Blanca. "No more bodies. No more hiding spaces. We'll have the furnaces act as one end of the network, and the other will be near here, with a group waiting to pick up the Muggleborns and transport them back to the house."

Draco caught a quick glimpse of Ginny, and he saw she was beaming. Pride swelled in his chest.

"I'll be damned," said Blanca. "That's pretty fucking brilliant, Malfoy."

"Keosha and Renz did the hardest bit," Draco admitted freely. "I only had the basic idea."

Blanca clapped a hand on Keosha's shoulder. "Good work." The gears in her head were already turning. "We'll have to make sure the dropoff point is far from the house, just in case some dumbass Snatcher falls in and lands at our spot. But if they do, we'll be ready for em. Kill 'em on the spot."

She turned swiftly and pointed. "Elliot!" The wizard snapped to attention. "We got our route out of here for the ones who can't fight?"

"Ready," he confirmed. "We can start moving out the children and injured tomorrow. Small groups, though. We don't want to attract too much attention."

"Good," said Blanca, before looking at Draco impatiently. "Well?" she said at his blank stare. "Make it happen, Malfoy! We've got work to do!"

Draco did, indeed, make it happen.

It took only ten minutes to convince the Dark Lord of the effectiveness of his new plan involving the furnaces, and within days, the Snatchers were bringing in trios and small groups of terrified Muggleborns, much to the Dark Lord's delight, if there was such a thing.

The first time, Draco was practically sweating, hovering nearby to make sure the Snatchers didn't rough up the Muggleborns too badly, although some of them did have broken limbs by the time they arrived. It was a small price to pay for their lives, though. Draco could offer them no comfort, and he could not even hint to them that they were being saved. They struggled and cried out, but Draco watched it all stoically.

When they were "poisoned" (Draco had tempered the effectiveness of the solution, so that it took longer and could be remedied at the hideout), the Muggleborns fell into piles and the Snatchers dumped them into the furnaces in piles. The flames jumped up, causing the Snatchers to pull back at the heat, and then they went along with their business. The bodies were gone, exactly as expected, and the Snatchers were practically jocordial with their new sinister purpose.

Hundreds of miles away, in the middle of a wooded area, people like Vita, Xenophilius and Richard waited on the opposite end of the fire. When the confused Muggleborns arrived, they reassured them, led them away, and brought them to the comfort of Steep Park House.

And so it happened, day after day after day. Draco was careful not to bring in too many at once, but the Muggleborns weren't always easy to track down, and it was still more "progress" than the Ministry had made in purifying their great land in months.

In essence, it worked perfectly.

A week into this, more good news came.
"Draco!" Ginny found Draco at the Ministry and tugged on his robes. "Gabrielle had her baby!"

Twenty minutes later, Draco and Ginny arrived at St. Mungo's Hospital, which was swarming with people. "I'm really not so sure we should be here," Draco said, slipping his hands into the pockets of his robes. "Unless you've forgotten, Blaise and Jean aren't exactly happy with me at the moment."

"Draco," said Ginny, "if we avoided every establishment that had people who wanted to kill you, we'd never go out." She signed them in at the front. "Just try not to be a prat."

Draco made a face at her. "It was a bloody accident!"

"And anyway," said Ginny as they walked, passing a trio of Healers, "Gabrielle already wrote me saying she forgave you. So Blaise and Jean should, too."

"We'll see how that logic works out," said Draco looking around. Just then, Ginny pointed.

"Oh, there's Jean! I bet he can take us to Gabrielle's room." Ginny bound up to Jean, who was clearly working, as he was wearing his Healer's robes and observing a piece of parchment outside a hospital room door. "Hi Jean," she said. "We're here to see Gabrielle. Can you tell us where she is?"

Jean glanced up from his parchment, and when he saw them, his eyes instantly narrowed on Draco. Ginny balked. More than once, she had wondered how someone as friendly as Jean could get along with Blaise, who seemed his opposite.

However, as the tall French wizard looked down on them both with a cold glare, Ginny saw that Jean could be every bit as intimidating as Blaise, which was quite a feat. Draco remained partially behind Ginny and eyed Jean apprehensively.

At last, Jean turned back to his parchment and marked on it with a quill. "No," he said flatly in response to her question.

Scowling, Ginny put her hands on her hips. "Oh, come on, Jean! You know Gabrielle would want to see us!"

"I'm busy," said Jean, glaring at them even as he reached over and held the medical document towards a clip on the wall. Draco and Ginny both pulled back when the clip, which looked like talons, jumped out and snatched the parchment into place on the hospital room's door. Jean turned to leave.

"Please, Jean!" Ginny bounced in front of him. "We want to see the baby!"

"Just tell us," cut in Draco, rolling his eyes. "We'll figure it out eventually."

Jean ignored them, but just then, Fleur appeared. "Oh, ze're you two are! Come, come!" She beckoned them both with her, and Jean scowled. Draco, meanwhile, smirked and winked at Jean, who responded with a scathing glare.

"Go on then," Draco taunted as Fleur led them away. "Run back to your protector Blaise."

"Shut up!" Ginny said, snatching Draco's sleeve as Jean turned swiftly and marched off in the opposite direction. Snickering, Draco followed Ginny and Fleur to a room a few halls over, and they ducked inside.
There Gabrielle sat, upright in a hospital bed with a bundle in her arms. She looked lovely as ever, if a bit tired. However, she was positively glowing, and as soon as she saw Draco and Ginny, she let out a happy squeal.

"Oh, good! You are here!" She beckoned them forward. "Come, come. See my beautiful new son."

Grinning, Ginny joined Gabrielle's right side while Draco moved to her left. Together, they peered down at the bundle, and Gabrielle tenderly moved the blanket aside to reveal his face. Draco let out a chuckle.

"Well," he said as soon as Fleur left the room, "it's definitely Blaise's."

"Thank goodness," breathed Gabrielle, laughing. "Isn't he handsome!" The baby little lips were slightly parted, and he had big plump cheeks with skin just a shade or so lighter than Blaise's. He also had dark swirls of jet black hair on his head. His every feature looked to be the spitting image of Blaise – until he opened his eyes, revealing bright blue orbs that stood in stark contrast to his otherwise dark features.

"Wow," murmured Ginny. "He truly is gorgeous, Gabrielle."

"Of course he is," cut in another voice. "He's a Zabini." Draco and Ginny looked up to see Blaise enter the room with Jean behind him. Draco barely kept from rolling his eyes a second time. Tattle-tail. Blaise turned and settled a rather unfriendly look on the Malfoys.

"Draco," he greeted. "How convenient your death would be here, considering the proximity of a morgue."

"I'd like to see you try," replied Draco, in what Ginny thought was a very cocky manner considering how Blaise had beaten him quite soundly before. Blaise seemed to agree; he was not at all intimidated, and neither was Jean, who looked as ready to square off as Blaise.

However, before things could progress further, Gabrielle shifted the baby in her arms and used her newly freed hand to snap in the air. "No! All of you stop zis right now. No negativity around my baby!" She pointed at Blaise and Jean. "Zat means you two!"

Jean immediately began to protest in French, but Gabrielle cut him off, going on a full sixty seconds of non-stop French that left both Blaise and Jean looking more cowed than Draco had ever seen them. By the end of it, they were both glaring at opposite walls, but no longer arguing.

"Now," said Gabrielle pointedly, returning to English, "We are going to all be friends again, and zere will be no more fighting. Understand?"

Blaise and Jean set flat glares on Draco, but they didn't argue. Draco was genuinely impressed. Apparently, Fleur's legendary ferocity had not been lost on Gabrielle.

"Good," said Gabrielle, flashing a smile. "Ah, isn't zis better? Good friends. And when we get home from the hospital, we will all go for tea, yes?"

Ginny smirked and tried not to laugh at the boys' pouts. "That sounds great, Gabby."

Sighing loudly, Jean picked up his charts. "I have to return to work," he said, before crossing the room. His expression finally relaxed into the gentle one Ginny knew much better, and he kissed the top of the baby's head before kissing Gabrielle's cheek as well. "I'll be back in a few hours," he promised her.
"Have a good work shift," she told him. After that, Jean turned and left the room, pausing for a moment to curl his fingers in Blaise's and lift his knuckles to his lips before he departed. Blaise watched him go, looked at Draco and Ginny peevishly before he moved to Gabrielle's bedside and rested in the chair next to her. Gabrielle passed the baby to him, and he accepted it into his arms.

Ginny glanced at Draco, and she knew he must be thinking the same thing she was – how strange Blaise looked, cold and austere as he was, gently shifting a tiny infant in his arms. He did, though, and the pride that crossed his features when he looked at the infant made him look warmer and more approachable than Ginny had ever seen him.

"What's his name?" asked Ginny.

Gabrielle smiled tenderly at Blaise and the baby. "Marseille," she informed them happily, and Draco snorted.

"A French name? Really?"

At this, Blaise rolled his eyes. "I got outvoted," he informed Draco, and the two exchanged their usual wry looks. Ginny grinned, knowing things between the two would quickly return to normal, if for no other reason than because they enjoyed being dour together.

"I love it," said Ginny. "I think it suits him. Marseille Zabini."

Gabrielle gasped. "Oh, Ginny! Do you know, I just realized – if Marseille attends Hogwarts, he and your child may be in the same year together!" She clapped her hands together. "Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Blaise scoffed, looking down fondly on his son. "Don't wish that on the poor Malfoy child, darling. If it's in the same year as our Marseille, it'll have to spend its whole life being only second best." He eyed Draco with an arrogant smirk.

"You bloody wish," exclaimed Draco indignantly. "Ten of your offspring wouldn't match up to one of mine!"

Ginny slapped a hand over her face, and Gabrielle giggled. "Well, at least zey're talking again," she whispered to Ginny, who laughed.

"Not so sure that's a good thing," she muttered back, even as Draco and Blaise continued to exchange insults and jibes about things that hadn't even happened yet and wouldn't for years to come. However, it was an amusing display of bravado, and Ginny found herself oddly glad to watch it.

While Draco and Blaise argued, Gabrielle took back the baby and passed it along to Ginny, who curled the squirming infant in her arms and smiled. He truly was the prettiest baby Ginny had ever seen, and his uniquely bright eyes – inherited from Gabrielle – were sure to create an allure when he got older.

"I hope we get to see you grow up big and strong," Ginny whispered to the baby. "I promise we'll try."

Gabrielle was released for the hospital a few days later, and she returned home happily with her expanded family. Ginny went on with her own business, and Draco continued elevating his status as the premier Muggleborn catcher at the Ministry.
He'd had to make up something about his method of finding them, because he couldn't give away his knowledge of Hogwarts, but the Ministry was so busy with activity that few even thought to bother him about it.

With the exception, of course, of Damien Black, who Draco felt watching him at every turn.

However, Draco felt outrageously victorious already, and so he dismissed Damien. For the first time in ages, things were coming together. And best of all, he and Ginny were talking again, really talking, as they had before. It was remarkable what this did for both their moods.

Unfortunately, as always seemed to happen, their happiness was punctured one morning when a frantic knocking came at their door. The house-elf opened it to reveal Andromeda, distraught.

"Andromeda?" questioned Narcissa, brows furrowed. Draco and Ginny appeared behind her, and Andromeda staggered across the threshold of the door and fell into Narcissa's arms.

"Oh, Cissy, they – they took him," she sobbed.

"What?" said Ginny, heart pounding. "Who took who?"

"Teddy!" exclaimed Andromeda, and Draco's jaw clenched. "Some Ministry officials came to my house and they – they said he needed to be in a place where he can be trained, so that his abilities can be made useful for the ministry! A three-year-old!"

Andromeda sank to her knees. "They ripped him from arms," she sobbed into the floor. "He was screaming – and –"

Draco was already pulling on his cloak, and Ginny was behind him. "We'll get him back, Andromeda," Draco told his aunt. "Stay here with Mother." The two women looked up as Ginny and Draco hurried out of the houses, each step fierce and angry.

Into the Ministry they moved, each cutting fearsome figures as people quickly hurried out of their way. Within moments, they were at the Department of Magical Education, and Draco threw open the door before marching in.

"Where is my cousin, you son of a bitch?" snapped Draco without preamble.

Damien Black was standing at his desk, and when Draco entered abruptly with Ginny on his heels, Damien did not look at all disturbed or surprised. "Now, now, Draco," said Damien calmly, infuriating Ginny even more. "Don't be selfish. He's my cousin, too."

"You don't have the right to take him from Andromeda!" exclaimed Ginny fiercely.

"His gifts, I'm afraid, necessitate that he live elsewhere," refuted Damien, folding his hands. "And who better to teach him to use his talents than me?"

"You can't keep a bloody toddler," growled Draco. "You're going to be at the school!"

"I have a team of caretakers at my disposal," said Damien. "I'll manage." He began picking up a long row of identical potion bottles, one by one, and depositing them into a bag. "You're not getting him back, Draco. The Dark Lord himself has agreed to this course of action. Better that the child is with me, learning what he ought, than spending his formative years in the care of a blood traitor."

Draco gripped the desk and leaned forward. "If you harm that child, Damien, I will end your worthless life myself."
At this, Damien paused, his hands still on one of the many identical potion bottles. "Don't be so dramatic, Draco," he said languidly, and it was obvious he enjoyed their fury. "I have no plans to hurt the little half-blood." He straightened, strange eyes moving over them both. "Besides, you should be focused on your own upcoming child, not this one… not to mention all your – " he sneered here " – success as Head of Muggleborn Registration."

Ginny's eyes widened. "You're only doing this because you're angry that Draco's doing well! You're trying to get back at him!"

Damien shrugged. "My purposes are layered. But yes, that is indeed one brilliant aspect of all this." He looked directly at Draco, all hints of amusement gone. "I relish the fact that I can take away one of your kin on a moment's notice. And if I were to mean him harm," he leaned close and whispered, "I am happy to say there is nothing you could do about it."

Fury filled the air between them, and Damien pulled back. After a tense pause, he smiled again and waved the bottle in his hands. "But you're not the only one sponsoring new developments, Draco. Did you know? I had this potion commissioned just this year, and it has been remarkably successful. Would you like to know what it does?"

Draco and Ginny glared and said nothing.

"This," went on Damien anyway, "is a potion that acts as the reverse of a Wolfsbane potion. Instead of subduing the more volatile effects of lycanthropy, it triggers them, causing near to full transformations even without the help of a full moon."

Ginny's breath caught in her chest as Damien watched them both very closely.

"Essentially," Damien continued, "it's possible to use this potion to keep werewolves in a constant beast-like state. Amazing, isn't it?"

"That's barbaric," managed Ginny with a hard glare. She carefully pushed away her memory of the man in the lake, the very same she'd witnessed getting abducted in Diagon Alley.

"Werewolves," said Damien with an eyeroll, "are barbaric. And any life is too good for them." He put the potion away. "Fortunately, the Ministry has found use for them, just like they do with any and all others." He glowered in their direction. "Even you two."

Turning swiftly, Draco caught Damien's arm before he could leave. The look on his face was so reminiscent of Lucius Malfoy that it took Ginny's breath away.

"You can hide behind all the different faces you want, Damien," Draco told him lowly. "But it won't matter when I cut your fucking neck." He then released Damien roughly, and the elder wizard, glaring, straightened his robes before marching out.

Ginny moved up next to Draco and put a soothing hand on his arm.

"He will die," she assured Draco, her own voice low and even. "They've no idea what's coming for them."

Draco put his arm around Ginny and silently agreed.

Author's Note: -danger music playing-

Also, Marseille's name is pronounced Mar-say.
Chapter 31

Author's Note: Heyyyy. Have a (comparatively) light-hearted chapter. Finally.

Thanks for everything, guys.

Over the next three days, Draco worked tirelessly with Blanca's spy inside the Ministry – a fellow named David – to figure out exactly where little Teddy had been taken.

"Got it," said David, approaching Draco and Ginny at Steep Park House one day. "Damien didn't take the kid to Hogwarts. He's at a house here in England, being cared for by Damien's wife."

"Wow," said Ginny, folding her arms. "So she is real."

"Perhaps we should pay her a visit," said Draco darkly.

"Good luck with that," remarked David. "She doesn't speak a word of English."

Ginny's brows furrowed. "None at all? Then why would he bother to bring her to England?"

"Because in England, her chances of sharing information are slim," pointed out Draco, leaning against a table. "Putting her in a country where she doesn't speak the language is probably Damien's way of keeping her quiet."

Ginny paused and thought on this. After a moment, she tilted her head at a doorway, where she knew her brother and his wife were nearby, unloading cartons of food they'd brought to stock the house. Ginny's lips curled deviously.

"And Damien's from where, Draco?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Draco paused. "St. Petersburg."

"Got it," said Ginny, rising from her spot.

Two days later, Vera Weasley weaved her way confidently down the pathway leading up to a stately but isolated country manor. The home sat far away from the hills that surrounded it, nestled on a patch of grass and shrubbery that had all seen better days. It had probably been a very nice home, once upon a time, but it was now more of an antique than anything, beautiful for its age but not well-kept.

Vera glanced side to side, taking in her surroundings, wand tucked into the pocket in her robes. Rosewood, 11 inches with a core of White River Monster spine, a substance known to produce spells of force and elegance.

Exactly as Vera herself did.

As Vera walked, she contemplated exactly what she would say to this woman. It was refreshing to have this request made of her, and despite the desperate situation, she was glad for it. It wasn't often that she got to speak her native language with anyone other than her sister anymore, and she was tired of having to fumble through English to get her point across.

It wasn't that she didn't appreciate everyone's help, and she was glad to have come to England,
because she truly loved George and was happy to be his wife. However, Vera had discovered it was very hard to be fully yourself in another language, and as she felt she was a very interesting person, it pained her to know that all her English-speaking friends only knew half of her.

In English, Vera was usually stiff and formal, mostly for lack of better option. In Russian, however, she was a powerhouse of quick quips and scathing retorts. She could also cut quite the intimidating figure when she wished it, and it was this talent she called on now as she reached the front door of the house and rapped on it twice.

A timid looking house-elf answered the door. Vera looked down at it, her honey-colored eyes sweeping over the creature before she raised a brow. "I need to speak with Inga Black," she told the elf in Russian.

The house-elf hesitated, but after a moment, it said timidly, "Madam is in the back courtyard." It then proceeded to lead Vera through the house, which had sparse furniture, and into the grassy area behind a set of double-doors paned with glass.

There, Vera was quick to spot a young but weary looking woman sitting on a blanket, and there next to her was Teddy, who was disinterestedly poking some toys. The woman was smiling gently and doing her best to engage him, but Teddy only gave her half of his attention, instead looking up and around.

The woman looked up and spotted Vera as she appeared, and she stood up quickly, looking startled. Vera took in the way she stood with her shoulders hunched, every bit of her posture appearing submissive.

The other woman tried to say 'No English,' but she fumbled over it, and Vera was already speaking anyway.

"Good afternoon," said Vera coolly in Russian, stopping with her hands on her hips as she swept her eyes critically over the woman. "Are you Inga Black?"

Inga's eyes widened in surprised. "I am," she responded in their shared tongue. "Who are you?"

At once, Vera understood that this woman did not need to be intimidated. She was already a scared mouse, and though it was possible this was a facade, Vera did not think so. Inga looked positively terrified, and she shrank away from Vera almost instantly.

So Vera changed tactics. She smiled, softening her pretty features into a much more inviting expression. Inga observed this cautiously.

"I'm sorry for intruding," said Vera kindly. "I just heard another Russian family had moved to the area, and I wanted to greet you." She stepped up to Inga and pressed kiss to each one of the other woman's cheeks, which Inga accepted with a shaky smile.

"Oh, that is – I didn't expect that," said Inga. "My husband told me there were no other Russian families nearby."

"Oh?" said Vera innocently. "We've only been here a while. I'm sure he just didn't know." She glanced at the blanket and gestured. "May I take a seat?"

"Of course," said Inga, seeming a little excited. She sat down with Teddy. "What is your name?"

"Vera Otala," said Vera, smoothly skipping over her married name for her maiden one. "My family left Uganda for Russia during the time of my great-grandparents."
"Really?" said Inga, sounding genuinely interested. "And so the rest of your family is here in England, too?"

"My immediate family, yes," said Vera, before looking to Teddy. He looked at her curiously, and she knew that although he didn't know her well enough to come to her, he must have remembered her from Draco and Ginny's wedding. He was a clever child. "What an adorable son you have," said Vera, her eyes flickering to Inga. "What is his name?"

"Oh," said Inga, hesitating. "Well, he's – he's not really mine. I'm just taking care of him for a while." Vera said nothing, her eyes on Inga. Finally, the other woman said with a soft smile, "But he's very sweet, and I care for him a lot. His name is Teddy."

"How nice," said Vera.

Inga bit her lip. "I – I'm sorry, Vera. But I'm not really supposed to be talking to anyone." She looked up at Vera, her eyes wide, and Vera felt a pang of sympathy. This woman looked no older than thirty, but she had deep circles under her eyes and sunken, well-worn features that spoke of years spent cowering. She didn't appear to be harmed or abused, but it was clear that she did not live a full life.

Damn. And Vera had been so excited to terrorize this woman into giving Teddy back, or at the very least, scare her into keeping him safe. However, it was becoming increasingly clear to Vera that Inga was simply a lonely woman who was happy to have a child to care for.

"Why aren't you supposed to talk to anyone?" asked Vera, shifting to sit right next to Inga. She touched her shoulder gently, as if she were concerned. "Are you not safe here?"

Inga bit her lip. "My husband, he is just – protective of me, that is all. He works a lot, and he's usually not home. So… he doesn't like me talking to strangers."

"But everyone needs friends," said Vera, petting back a piece of Inga's limp brown hair. "Especially when you're in a strange country." She paused, before adding with a smile, "And I can promise you, England is a very strange country. Their language makes no sense, and their food is awful. You will never understand their ways unless you have help."

Inga glanced uncertainly at Vera. "But my husband –"

"– doesn't need to worry," cut in Vera, eyes shining, "because if he truly spends so much time away from home, then surely he won't mind if you have some girl time, right?"

Inga paused again. "Girl time?" she repeated, as though this concept was foreign to her. "You mean…"

"Friends," said Vera again. "Wouldn't that be nice?"

Again, Vera felt a glimmer of guilt at the hope that shone in Inga's eyes. The idea of something as simple as friendship seemed to both alarm and delight her, and Vera wondered what on earth her life in St. Petersburg had been like. From what Vera knew of Damien, it was likely an unpleasant existence.

At last, Inga asked, "So you can help me … learn about things here?"

"Of course," said Vera. "And I have a younger sister, too. She's twenty years old, and she's a lot of fun. We can all do things together." Her tone grew more alluring. "Shopping, eating at restaurants, all sorts of fun. We need to stick together, all of us Russians. It's the only way we'll survive here."
After a long pause, Inga said, "That makes sense." Then she nodded, her shaky smile making its reappearance. "I suppose my husband won’t … mind." Even she didn't seem to believe that, but it was clear that this offer was simply too tempting for her – to have actual friends, and ones who even spoke her language.

Vera grasped the other woman's hand. "Wonderful," she said, glancing one last time at Teddy.

The following day, Vera reported back to Draco, Ginny and Blanca.

"You're sure it wasn't all an act?" asked Ginny skeptically. "Or that it wasn't actually Damien in disguise? He's the sort of creepy bloke to do something like that."

"Damien was at the school yesterday," said Blanca. "My sources have him there, so it wasn't him."

"I think she is real," said Vera, making a face. "She is looking scared even before I talk to her. I think she is – by her own – a lot. No one else."

"And you managed to convince her to be your friend?" asked Draco, smirking. "You would've made a mighty fine Slytherin, Vera."

"Think she'll give us anything useful?" asked Blanca to Vera, who nodded.

"Yes. With time. She is wanting to talk. I can see it." Vera pointed to herself. "I will spend time with Inga, make her friends. Friends talk. We will hear important things. I know it."

"Good," said Blanca. "Keep working with her, Vera. While you do that, we will have eyes and ears both in the Ministry and in the school. Which means," she said with a sigh, "Now all we have to do is … wait."

"Wait for what, exactly?" asked Draco.

Blanca settled a look on Draco and Ginny. "Anything that can tell us when and where to strike," she said seriously. "We've got the Muggleborns escaping through Malfoy's system, we're transporting people out of the country and to a neutral place, and now we've got the possibility of detailed inside information. The next – and last – move is going to be the offensive."

"The battle," murmured Ginny.

"Exactly," said Blanca. "We're probably only going to get one shot, so we've got to make it count."

"So now we wait," said Draco uncertainly.

"Right," said Blanca.

And so that was exactly what they did.

Over the next few months, the activity at Steep Park House evolved into a steady routine. The original freed Muggleborns and prisoners of war were moved out of the safehouse, led by Blanca's people on foot until they reached the borders of Blanca's wards, and then apparated in small groups to a portkey that had been set up to take them out of Great Britain. However, they could only do this in trips of three to four people, because it was up to Blanca's people to guide them through the apparitions and location of the portkey.

That meant that every day, people were coming and going through Steep Park House, which was a
little unnerving to Draco. Not all left, though. Many of the old Dumbledore's Army crew stayed
behind, opting to remain in England to fight rather than going to safety. Other Muggleborns Draco
did not know stayed behind as well, although all those underage were told explicitly that they
would have to leave. Ginny convinced Draco to make an exception for the Creevey brothers, who
demanded to fight and were therefore allowed to remain.

Later, Draco found himself having nearly the same argument with Maggie, who told Draco in no
uncertain terms that she did not want to go with the other children when they were transported out
of the safehouse.

"Please, Draco," she said, clinging to his robes. "I want to be here when you and Ginny have yer'
babe!"

"Maggie," said Draco, trying to pry her away, "You aren't safe here. You have to go."

"But who will take care of me there?" she asked, her eyes wide with fear.

"There's other adults going. They'll make sure you're safe," he told her as gently as he could, sitting
down to get eye-level with her. "I promise, we wouldn't send you if it wasn't for the best."

"But, but…" said Maggie, eyes watering. "Well, at least let me go last! Please? I mean, what if –
what if you bring other kids through here? You need me here, so I can help them feel better!"

Draco eyed her. Well, it was true that the Muggleborns he was capturing and transporting through
his Floo system were often young. Maggie was an observant one. At last, he sighed. "Fine, you can
be among the last group. But only if you behave. No more yelling out or throwing things during
your lessons."

Maggie made a face. "That boy was picking his nose! I was only trying to stop him!"

Draco rolled his eyes. To give the children a sense of normalcy, one of Blanca's people had been
keeping the younger children entertained with little school lessons and readings during the
mornings. Maggie had consistently gotten in trouble every single day for being disruptive, and for
whatever reason, Draco was the only person who could make her mind her manners.

"It doesn't matter," he told her. "When Keosha tells you to sit still and listen, you do it.
Understand?"

Lip puckered to the side, Maggie folded her arms and nodded with a huff.

Satisfied, Draco stood, using Maggie's head to boost himself as he got off his chair. He did that
often, because it annoyed her, and she swatted at him as he left.

That evening, Draco crawled into bed with Ginny, who was turned away from him and dozing
already. When she felt him slip under the sheets, she turned a bit and smiled tenderly at him in the
semi-darkness. Wordlessly, she reached out her hand and Draco caught it, intertwining their fingers
and then moving his arm around her. His lip met the back of her neck, and to his surprise, Ginny
settled his arm around her waist.

For the first time ever, Ginny guided his hand to her growing stomach, and Draco pressed his
fingers curiously over the warm surface, only thinly veiled by Ginny's nightdress. His heart lifted,
one thumb moving to sweep gently over the area.

He was nearly asleep when something thumped on his hand, and both Ginny and Draco startled,
peering down beneath the covers. "What was that?" asked Draco, sitting up on one elbow.
Ginny shifted to look at him, her expression incredulous. "I think… I think it moved."

Draco stared. "The … baby?"

"Yes," said Ginny with a surprised laugh.

They both put their hands on her stomach again and waited. Thirty seconds later, it happened again. "Ow," said Ginny, poking her stomach. "What're you trying to do, break down a door? Stop that!"

"Like you haven't broken multiple doors," scoffed Draco, even as he grinned. They settled back down on the bed, and luckily, the kicking stopped.

Wow, thought Draco, utterly amazed. He'd felt his child move. And Ginny… she wasn't hiding it from him. He kissed the back of her neck again.

And then he fell asleep, dreaming of what their child might be like.

It truly seemed to Ginny and Draco that just yesterday it had been March and Blaise had been telling them about Gabrielle's pregnancy, and the very next moment, it was the first of December and nearly Christmas.

Much had happened during those months, of course. The entire formation of their rebellion had been cultivated during that time, and so it had flown, but to realize it was so near Christmas again was positively insulting to Draco, who felt he was not prepared for it.

Ginny also seemed rather bewildered, though that was almost certainly her growing pregnancy. Each day, she grew a little rounder and more wobbly on her feet, which she did not appreciate one bit. The reason Draco knew she didn't appreciate it was because she told him so every day, and she blamed him for her predicament on a regular basis.

"Being pregnant," she told Draco hotly over breakfast, "is terrible."

Narcissa glanced up from her own plate of eggs. "Are you having nausea?" she asked, more understanding than Draco had ever (in his entire life) seen her. "I have more of the tonic."

"No thanks," grumbled Ginny, poking at her food. "It's not nausea. It's just – every other gross thing. And it is bloody hot in here. And my feet hurt." She wasn't normally such a complainer, but her moods hadn't exactly been stable lately, as Draco had been forced to realize. "AND," she went on, when no one said anything, "I'm supposed to have stupid bloody tea today with all those people I hate. And I hate them!" Her hands fisted in the air like a furious toddler.

Draco drank slowly from his teacup, hoping it was arsenic.

"You've already canceled twice," Narcissa ventured, rather bravely, Draco thought.

"I hope they all die before they get here," said Ginny. "I hope they fall into a vat of acid."

"Unlikely," said Draco, unable to stop himself. At Ginny's increasingly hostile glare, he cleared his throat a bit. "I should probably just go ahead and go – not really hungry – "

"Sit. Down." That was Narcissa, her steely gaze on Draco even as he froze in mid-rise. He dutifully sat back down at his spot and endured glares from both women until he put on his most patient expression and listened to Ginny list all the violent ways in which she hoped her tea companions died.
At last, breakfast was finished, and he timidly gave her a kiss before nearly running out of the manor.

(Ginny apologized as soon as he got home later. Then she cried some. Later, he brought her some of her favorite muffins, and she was perfectly content once more.)

While Draco waited for Ginny's pregnancy moods to even out (she always seemed better in the evenings), Draco went to Steep Park House to find ways to help out. It was sometimes useful for him to speak with the Muggleborns, who were often terrified and confused when they arrived. Many of them remembered him from the Ministry, and they were understandably mistrustful of his intentions. However, once Blanca explained her part and assured them they were not being killed, and instead being transported to safety, many were easily calmed.

Draco did find it troubling, though, just how many Muggleborns there were. He knew the pureblood families in Great Britain had become considerably fewer over the last one hundred years, but to see just how outnumbered by Muggleborns they were alarmed him. He had not expected this, and more and more often, he wondered if there would soon be no purebloods left at all.

This was not a prospect that sat well with him, but he didn't want to bring it up with Ginny. He knew she didn't share his concerns about Muggleborns, that it was one of their few remaining points of contention. If she was feeling reasonable, she might've been willing to discuss it, but Draco felt it was best to avoid the topic altogether for the time being.

It wasn't that Draco wanted Muggleborns to die. He obviously didn't. But … to have them outnumber purebloods? And so greatly? How was that possible? And what would it mean for the preservation of magical culture? He wished there weren't so many. Secretly, Draco wished there was a way to thin them out without killing them.

Maybe send them away? Maybe just – create a new school, just for them?

Because if there really were so many Muggleborns, and perhaps one day no more purebloods, wouldn't the quality of their magical world decrease? Would they begin introducing their Muggle customs into magical traditions? Would everything Draco knew growing up as a child change, altering forever the fabric of his world?

This was very alarming to Draco, and it bothered him. Unfortunately, he didn't think it was best to talk to Ginny about it, and he had no one else he trusted with these thoughts, so he had to keep it all to himself.

One day, during the first week of December, Draco entered Steep Park House with Ginny at his side. Now seven months along, she was most content when working from the comfort of a cushy chair, so Draco led her to one and then left her there with a kiss. Blanca showed up and sat with her, which Draco was grateful for, because Ginny enjoyed Blanca's company.

Ginny squeezed Draco's hand gratefully before he left, and Draco ducked through a doorway to find Keosha reading to the current group of children, many of whom had come into Steep Park House just two days before. Maggie was sitting with them, and for once, she wasn't causing a ruckus. However, as Draco paused and watched, he saw that Maggie's good behavior was really just exhaustion.

Draco's brows furrowed. Maggie looked inexplicably tired, with her eyelids drooping and her posture slumped. She hadn't looked well, he remembered, for the last few weeks, but there had
been a stomach bug going around and they were in close quarters. He had talked to her about it, but she'd insisted she wasn't sick, so he let it go.

Now, she looked very unwell. Her skin was even paler than usual, and she struggled to stay awake as Keosha read. Draco looked over the other children. None seemed to appear as haggard as Maggie did.

Finally, Keosha finished the book and dismissed the kids to go and eat lunch, which they all did with a great deal of excitement... all except Maggie, who rose from her spot with a bleary-eyed blink before she shuffled to a chair. Draco took a seat across from her, and her face lit up in a smile, even though the weariness didn't fade from her features.

"Draco," she said, not eating her food or even grabbing her fork. She put her chin in her hand and tilted her head, even as her eyes drooped one more. She yawned widely.

"Are you alright?" asked Draco, looking over her. He reached over and touched her head, but it wasn't feverish.

"M'fine," she said, picking up her fork at last and smooshing her peas. "Jus' sleepy." She yawned again, so widely her jaw cracked. "I can't sleep at night."

"Why not?" he asked. Maggie shrugged, and Draco leaned on the table. "Tell me, Maggie. What's keeping you awake?"

The little girl scraped some peas to the side but didn't eat any. "Jus' all the noise," she said, reaching up to rub at her temples. "So noisy. All the time at night."

Draco's brows furrowed, and he looked at the other children, all of whom had seemingly slept fine. Perhaps Maggie was a light sleeper, he thought. "Who's making noise? Is it the other children?"

"I don't know," she murmured, head tilting again. "Jus' everyone. All night."

"What're they saying?" he asked, wondering now if Blanca and her people were training at night and Maggie could hear them. "Are they... talking or fighting or --"

"I don' know," said Maggie again, sounding frustrated. "It's not always voices. Sometimes it's just --" she tapped her temple, and Draco sat back in his chair, perplexed. "And then when I do sleep," she went on, "I have weird dreams, and sometimes it's real scary." She pointed across the room at Ben. "Sometimes I have dreams that he's fighting big scary wolf things."

Draco balked, visibly surprised.

"And," she said, pointing at what he assumed was Blanca in the next room, "sometimes I see her running through a dark forest, and she's real scared. And I see big lights, like a storm." Maggie made circular motions at her temples again. "Crazy crazy dreams. Scares me, and wakes me right up. Then I can't go back to sleep, because I hear people cryin' and yellin' and everythin' else!"

She scowled, and Draco watched her, perplexed. How strange, he thought.

"I know," said Maggie aloud, staring tiredly at her plate.

At this, Draco sat straight up, comprehension forming at last. He suddenly remembered Maggie knowing everyone was afraid before their mission to Hogwarts, and how she'd guessed that Ginny was pregnant when no one else knew.
"Bloody hell," he said, amazed. "You're a Legilimens!"

Maggie stared back, unimpressed. "A what?"

Draco fell back in his chair. Legilimency could be taught, but it was a very difficult and complex magical art. Only a select few witches and wizards Draco could think of had the ability to do it without training and without a wand. A natural-born Legilimens was a rare thing, indeed.

Suddenly, Draco felt terribly sorry for Maggie. No wonder the poor child hadn't been able to sleep; she'd been living for months in a house filled with people whose most recent memories consisted of being tortured and abused, torn from their families and ripped from their homes. Draco had no doubt their minds were a terrible burden on Maggie, who had no way to contend with it all.

"Legilimens," said Draco after a long moment, "is what you call a magical person who has the ability to see into other peoples' minds. It's a very rare gift, to be able to do it so easily."

"Oh," said Maggie, breathing in deeply and closing her eyes for a moment. "Thas' neat, I 'spose."

Draco smirked a little. He would help her, of course, but first he sat back to admire her. Maggie could not appreciate how unique her gift was because she had been born to Muggles, but it truly was a remarkable thing.

And the Ministry claimed Muggleborns stole their magic. Ridiculous. *How could anyone ever doubt she's a real witch?* wondered Draco.

Understanding hit Draco like a punch squarely to his chest.

The same question he'd just asked in his own mind echoed endlessly, pulling so uncomfortably at his heart that, for a moment, he felt strained tears pushing at his unblinking eyes. How… how could anyone – this girl – this Muggleborn child –

His throat felt dry. He looked over Maggie again, this little girl from the Scottish countryside who had been born to a factory worker and maid, as Maggie had told them. Blanca's people had done their investigations on Maggie. She had been born to Muggles and raised amongst them. She had no knowledge of Hogwarts, and hardly any of the magical world at all.

By all of Draco's previous logic, she had no real connection to his universe.

And yet here she was, suffering in silence while she dealt with a powerful magical ability that witches and wizards of the purest blood would have killed for.

Maggie was a witch. And never before had that sentence sounded so simple, so plain to Draco. The qualifier of Muggleborn seemed secondary, or perhaps even unnecessary now, in the face of this new revelation.

Draco had never experienced understanding that was so swift, so sudden, and so unexpected. It was as though he could feel the literal click in his mind, the shift from one level of comprehension to another. He did not particularly enjoy it for the first few moments, because it meant that now he had a great deal of personal feelings to reevaluate, but gradually the panic subsided and Draco instead found his attention on Maggie once more.

She was practically asleep in her chair. And she was just a child.

Finally, Draco rose from his chair and gently touched her shoulder. "Come on, Maggie. Go and take a nap." She reached for him even as she muttered about missing her lessons. Draco scooped
her up in her arms, and she laid her head on his shoulder as he walked her out of the room. "It's alright, I'll tell them where you are."

Maggie closed her eyes, her arms wrapped around his shoulders. "Can you keep the bad dreams away?" she asked in a sleepy murmur.

"I can try," he told her. He took her to the room with all the childrens' beds, and he put her in the one he knew was hers. Maggie was asleep before her head even hit the pillow, and Draco covered her up before drawing the curtains closed to block the sunlight.

Before he left the room, he set up the best shields he knew, hoping they would block the magical transference of memories and feelings that Maggie was feeling.

It was fortunate that he was skilled at Occlumency. He would have to teach her, in order to keep her from going insane from the constant intrusions of others. Hopefully, that would be enough to help her deal with her gift.

Once he was satisfied with his wards, Draco went back to the chair he'd been in, sinking into it slowly and turning his thoughtful gaze to the window.

It was a beautiful day outside.

Over the next few weeks, Draco worked with Maggie on creating shields so she didn't "hear" everything going on around her. As it turned out, Maggie's gift was very sensitive, but it was possible for her to "blank everything" as she called it, but only when she concentrated.

"It will get easier," Draco promised her when she grew frustrated. "You're still very young."

"Maybe everyone should jus' stop thinkin'," she suggested quite seriously.

Draco smirked. "I'm sorry, but I doubt that will happen."

Maggie sighed and continued with her lessons. Often, she would find Ginny after – perhaps tired of Draco, even though she often clunged to him – and she would sit next to her and pet her belly and speak to the baby. Draco wondered if Maggie could actually sense the growing mind of the baby, and he asked if she knew anything about it.

"It's definitely a girl," she told him, to Ginny and Draco's surprise. "Yer' going to name her Athena, right? You promised!"

Ginny laughed. "Yes, if you're right – "

"I am!"

"– we will name her Athena."

"Good," said Maggie.

As Christmas grew nearer, Ginny and Draco both began to think about the previous Christmas.

"We first kissed at Christmas," Ginny reminded Draco, as if he'd forgotten. Her husband curled her in his arms and kissed her temple.

"I recall," he told her. "In the woods, near your brother's house."
He paused, feeling a wave of sadness as he realized this would be his first Christmas without his father. Sensing his morose thoughts, Ginny brought up a hand and touched his jaw lightly, drawing his gaze to hers.

"I love you," she told him. "And your father loved you, too."

"I know," he responded in a murmur, touching his head to hers. For a long time, they sat quietly. Then Ginny looked up at Draco.

"We should give them a Christmas," she said. "Everyone at the safehouse."

Draco's lips quirked. "A tree, gifts, and a great big dinner?"

"All of it," said Ginny with a grin.

Draco nodded. "Let's do it."

Two and a half weeks later, with a little collaboration from Blanca, the entire Steep Park House was evacuated into the snowy clearing behind the house, much to the bewilderment of everyone involved.

"It's called a drill," snapped Blanca. "Jesus Christ, people. Just stand there and don't run off. It's not Advanced Arithmancy."

After waiting for fifteen minutes, Blanca glanced at her watch and nodded to the uncertain group, all of whom were standing around aimlessly in the courtyard of the illustrious manor, some playing with snow but most just looking uncomfortable and cold.

"There," she said. "Good drill. Next time, don't drag your asses. Okay, you can all go back inside."

Grumbling, the large group went back into the house through the double-doors that led into the dining room. The Creevey brothers were the first through, and as soon as they entered, Colin let out a shout of surprise.

"Guys, look!"

In the time the dwellers had been outside, the entire dining room had been transformed into a magnificent Christmas hall. A large pine tree, fully decorated with (hastily placed) Christmas ornaments sat in the corner, a fire was blazing in the hearth, tinsel and lights were everywhere, a pile of presents sat nearby, and there was a magnificent meal set along every inch of the three long dining room tables.

Breathless, George, Vera, Draco and Ginny all stood on the opposite side of the room, beaming.

"Happy Christmas!" exclaimed Ginny, and all the people rushed in, elated. The children positively shrieked at the sight of such festivities, and some of the former prisoners cried, standing in the middle of the festive hall. Luna hugged her father tightly, tears welling in her eyes.

"We're having Christmas again, Father," she told him gleefully, and Xeno sniffled and nodded, his cheek pressed against her head.

"This is amazing!" exclaimed Ben, clapping a hand on Draco's shoulder. "You guys really did all this for us?"

"You're missing Christmas with your families to help us," said Ginny, overwhelmed at their
reactions. "It's the least we could do."

For a moment, Ben seemed too overcome to say anything. Then he simply smiled and went to join the others. Some of the adults positively skipped to their seats, and Draco and Ginny grinned before joining them, sitting near the head of one table with Blanca, Ben and many others nearby. George and Vera joined Vita, Xenophilius and Luna, and Maggie hurried over to leap into Draco's arms and demand that she sit between he and Ginny, which they happily allowed.

"We're really having Christmas!" she said, before declaring, "Everyone is so happy!"

The others all laughed, and Ginny swept an affectionate hand over Maggie's head, which the little girl leaned into contentedly. The meal began in earnest, and it was a mighty selection of ham, pork, turkey and chicken, all of which was paired with all manner of side dish and dessert. It truly was a feast, every bit as fine as any the Malfoys had given in the past.

"You guys have no idea what this means for them," Blanca told them both quietly, her lips quirked in a rare smile. Ginny looked down the table. Lee Jordan was talking animatedly to George between mouthfuls of mashed potatoes. Cho Chang was exchanging holiday stories with Oliver Wood. Andromeda was sitting very close with her husband, murmuring affectionately with him as they both ate and smiled, so elated to be together once more. McGonagall was reprimanding Colin Creevey for flinging some gravy, and Colin's brother was admiring one of the Americans who was sitting next to him, a man called Richard.

"Blimey," said Dennis to Richard, who was quite muscular. "You're a big bloke. What do you do in your spare time in the States? Move houses with your bare hands?"

Richard laughed. "Actually," he said, "I used to play football for the Seattle Seahawks."

"The who?" asked Dennis.

His brother leaned over. "American football, mate."

"Oh, right."

Ginny grinned at Blanca again. "I think it's pretty special for all of us," she said, before digging into her own food.

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Draco and Ginny went back to their own home and woke the next morning to Christmas with Narcissa and Andromeda, who tore herself away from Ted to be with her sister for her first Christmas without Lucius.

"Just think," said Andromeda to Ginny, "Next Christmas, you'll be celebrating with a little one of your own."

It was a staggering thought, but it was one Ginny had become more accustomed to. Squeezing Andromeda's hand, Ginny sat back in her chair and admired her family.

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Author's Note: My cat kept climbing into my lap as I was typing this, so sorry if there's anything weird spliced into this chapter.

Also, next chapter, things get turned up about one thousand notches. Prepare yourselves.
The weeks following the Christmas holidays progressed rather naturally, with no major news or mishaps to report. The Ministry – and Draco's office in particular – continued its steady location and "extermination" of Muggleborns, and the Steep Park House greeted them with open arms and then, once they were capable of leaving, transported them to the portkey where they were taken out of the country.

Many of the former DA members remained, as well as other witches and wizards who wished to fight when the moment came. Vera was still keeping a close eye on Damien's wife, and together with Vita, the two often took the meek woman to tea and shopping and drew out her trust bit by bit. Vera was confident they would have valuable information soon.

When she was not spending time with her sister, Vita was either shopping with Gabrielle – the two had met at Draco and Ginny's wedding and became fast friends – or staying at Steep Park House. Not many knew her real reason for loitering there, but Blanca had long since figured it out.

"Remember," Blanca told Vita, Xenophilius Lovegood and her own Auror, Jillian. "Open the portal at exactly five minutes to the dropoff time. Then make sure your end of the portal is closed after it's all done."

"Yes," said Vita, who didn't have enough English to say just how annoying she found it that Blanca felt the need to tell them this every single time. However, her expression spoke volumes. Jillian smirked a little, but she knew better than to give Blanca attitude. Xeno put a placating hand on Vita's shoulder, and the younger witch reigned in her expression under the heat of Blanca's glare.

The three left Steep Park House, walked beyond the anti-apparition barriers, and then appeared moments later at a desolate spot in the forest around five miles from the nearest homestead. They always arrived to the dropoff point well ahead of time, and the trio had done this together many times, so Jillian took a relaxed seat against a tree and Vita and Xenophilius wandered just a bit.

"This flower," said Vita, holding it in her hand and twirling it with a smile. She looked around and pointed. "Those flowers."

Xeno smiled. "Those flowers," he corrected gently. "Remember, that – " he held up one finger, " – those." He held up multiple fingers.

"Those flowers," repeated Vita carefully, indicating all the flowers in the patch. "This – " she paused, before correcting herself, "These flowers – these blue flowers." She held up multiple blue ones, and Xeno beamed and nodded.

"Very good," he told her tenderly as the two paused and leaned against the same tree. Vita's face lit up at the praise, and she twisted the flower between her fingertips, pulling a little closer to Xeno.

"Xeno," she said. "Luna – she like me, yes?"

"Of course she does," he replied, looking surprised. Jillian remained seated a few feet away, minding her own business as she usually did when they all came out there together. "Luna loves you. She considers you a friend."
Vita bit her lip and stepped closer, eyes batting as she looked up at Xeno. "Then why you not speak her about us?" she asked, frowning. "You are not say to her anything about – how we are."

Xeno's eyes flickered, and he looked down at his hands. After a moment, he touched Vita's fingers and squeezed them reassuringly. "Luna lost her mother at a young age, and she is not accustomed to seeing me with anyone else. It is not about you, Vita. Luna cares about you. I just don't know what she will think."

Vita nodded in understanding. "You do not want her sad," she said. "Because she miss her mother."

"Exactly," said Xeno, bringing Vita's hand to his lips briefly. "But I – I promise, I will tell her soon."

At this, Vita smiled. "Yes, please. I want Luna to – to – see that we are – that we feel love. So – everyone know." Xeno's cheeks flushed red at this, and Vita giggled, pulling him close to plant a quick kiss on his lips.

"Focus, guys," called Jillian dryly from her spot. "We've got eight minutes until the dropoff time."

Xeno quickly backed away, growing even redder, but Vita just laughed and tugged him back over in Jillian's direction. However, just as the two began to prepare for the opening of the fire, Jillian's head snapped up. Her eyes narrowed, and she rose from her spot.

"What is it?" asked Xeno, but Jillian just held up her hand.

Vita's features grew sharp. "The wards," she murmured. The trio looked all around them. The forest was quiet, with only the occasional chirping of a bird to disturb the stillness. The morning was bright and sunny, and sunlight filtered through the treetops, soft and undisturbed.

Jillian's hard face turned in all directions, and for a long moment, nothing was said.

Then a voice sounded. "I'm telling you," said the wizard as he was dragged forcibly along. "I've been feeling magical disturbances here for weeks – there's got to be something – "

"You'd better be right, Abbott!" snarled Dolohov. "The Ministry doesn't reward those who lead them on wild chases for noth – " The group of Death Eaters, six in number, stopped at the sight of Jillian, Xeno, and Vita.

One of them pointed. "That's Lovegood! He escaped during the transport months ago!"

Abbott was roughly shoved away, and Dolohov pulled out his wand. "SEIZE THEM!"

"GET DOWN!" shouted Jillian.

Jillian, Vita, and Xenophilius all dove behind trees as a wave of spells flooded the space between them and the Death Eaters, bright green lights mixed with vicious red curses. "Try to keep them alive!" snapped Dolohov over the noise. "We need to find out what they're up to out here!"

Vita shrieked and ducked behind a tree, snatchting out her wand and whirling around to fire off a curse at the Death Eaters. "We need run!" she screamed to Xeno, but Jillian burst forth and fired off a spell that had all the Death Eaters darting away.

"We can't!" she hissed to Vita. "If we leave here, the Muggleborns won't have anywhere to end up! We've got to get these guys away from the dropoff point!"
Xenophilius jumped out and took down one Death Eater with a nasty curse before hurrying back behind his tree. "What do we do?" he called to Jillian, who clenched her wand before jerking her head towards the east.

"I'll lead them off! You two stay here and see if you can get it open in time!"

With that, Jillian sprang from her spot and let out a golden rope from her wand, lashing all the Death Eaters at the ankles and sending them sprawling to the forest floor. Then she took off in a run, leaping right past them and sprinting as hard as she could away from their spot. As she ran, her golden rope tightened around the ankles of the Death Eaters and she yanked them behind her, dragging their scrambling bodies through the leaves and underbrush for several feet before one of them finally managed to sever the magical rope.

Furious, four of the Death Eaters jumped up and ran after her, while the other two turned back and stumbled in the direction of Vita and Xeno, who were waiting for them. The battle blazed, and Xeno and Vita hurled spell after spell, ducking behind their own wards and taking refuge behind the thicker trees.

Jillian continued to run, chest heaving as the four Death Eaters behind her dogged her every step with menacing curses.

"Who is she?!" one of them exclaimed, but none of them knew.

Jillian jumped high over a log and tumbled in the underbrush. She could hide, she could disappear, but if she did that, the Death Eaters would just return to Vita and Xeno, and she knew there were only minutes left until the Muggleborns arrived. She wasn't sure what would happen to them if there was no receiving end to the portal.

Spinning on her spot, Jillian suddenly stopped running and lashed out at the Death Eaters, all of whom split to avoid her hellish curses. Two popped up one side, and Jillian absorbed their curses in her ward, ducking low and sending back one that sent a Death Eater flying off her feet. Jillian jumped back, and her ankles splashed in a creek she'd come to. Further down, the water ran thicker and heavier, and as the three remaining Death Eaters approached her, Jillian took a deep breath and waved her wand in a wide circle.

"**FLUCTUS MAERENS!**" she called out, pulling against the power of the spell as she tipped her wand over her head and then waved it out at the Death Eaters. Within seconds, the level of the creek rose and the rocks disappeared as water came rushing down the ravine. Before the Death Eaters knew what was happening, water spilled over them like a tsunami, and Jillian only barely managed to get out of the way so that the sudden magical flood did not take her with it.

Two of the Death Eaters were swallowed up by the water, and they disappeared down the creek, leaving only one – Dolohov – staring Jillian down. "Who the hell are you?" he snapped, but then he reached out with his wand and Jillian only just tumbled out of the way before the searing curse split a tree in half just where she had been. Splashing through the now low creek once more, Jillian sprinted back into the forest for cover, but Dolohov was hot on her trail.

One of his curses hit a tree and knocked it over, and Jillian jumped to avoid it only to have a thick branch fall on her arm and knock her to her side. "Shit!" She rolled over before the rest of the tree crushed her, and Dolohov was suddenly right over her. Jillian kicked out and managed to connect with his knee, which he wasn't expecting, and then she jumped up and began running again.

Somewhere in the forest, she heard Vita scream, and she skidded to a halt. The hesitation was just enough for Dolohov to hit her in the back with a curse that knocked her down, but before he was
able to raise his wand once more, Jillian disapparated from her spot and re-appeared right behind him. Picking up a large branch, she swung with all her strength and connected the branch with Dolohov's face. He sank to the ground with a thud, and Jillian turned without a second's rest, running back in the direction of the clearing where Vita and Xeno had been.

But when she arrived, she saw that the two Death Eaters had Xeno and Vita on their knees, their hands bound and their eyes wide with terror, scratches and bruises showing they had already been soundly beaten. Jillian froze, eyes ticking over the situation as the two Death Eaters rounded to face her, wands raised.

She could beat them, and maybe then they'd have time – they could –

But then Dolohov reappeared, furious and with a broken jaw, just as the two Death Eaters Jillian had sent downriver also came into view, soaking wet and equally as angry. All five of the remaining Death Eaters trained their wands on her from different directions; Jillian looked over at Vita and Xeno, bound and wandless, side by side with one another.

She had time for only one last spell.

So, knowing what was about to happen, Jillian lashed out with her wand and shouted, "OBVLILATE!" in Xeno and Vita's direction. The two lurched under the power of the spell, eyes wide and spines straight before they sagged, gazes now listless and blank.

The spell was barely out of Jillian's mouth before all the curses hit her at once, causing her to jerk side to side until she fell to the forest floor, now dead.

That same afternoon, Draco and Ginny Malfoy walked peacefully in the busy street of Diagon Alley. They had been out for the entire day, enjoying the slow rise of the temperature as it marched onwards in the direction of spring. Together, the pair met with Blaise, Jean, and Gabrielle, and they had a nice tea together, exactly as Gabriella had proposed.

Their previous feud forgotten, Draco argued with Blaise and Jean about Quidditch instead, until Ginny finally chimed in and shut them all down with a valid point that none of them had thought of until then. Gabrielle merely giggled before she distracted Ginny with a surprise baby gift, which was a lovely blanket she had special ordered for her friend.

After a while, the group left the tea shop and wandered into the streets once more, which was full of shoppers. When they came near George and Vera's shop, they stopped, because there was a crowd growing nearby.

"What's going on here?" Draco wondered, his arm around Ginny. Blaise rolled his eyes.

"Something stupid, I'm sure," he said, hands in the pockets of his robes.

Ahead of them, in front of the rows of people blocking their view, appeared to be a makeshift stage. On it, a man in Ministry attire was talking. "There has been," he said, his voice booming over the crowd, "a most grievous error in judgment made today!" His features were severe, and his words even more so. Despite the number of people looking up at him, the street was very quiet.

"Today," the wizard continued heatedly, "three selfish individuals threatened YOUR safety, YOUR Ministry, and YOUR magical community by refusing to surrender themselves to Ministry officials!"

Behind him, on the stage, Death Eaters in full regalia brought out two people with sacks over their
heads. They were shoved to their knees at the front of the stage, and their hands were bound.

"Jean," said Blaise, without taking his eyes off the stage. "Get Gabby home. Now."

Jean looked at Blaise, his eyes wide. "But Blaise –"

"Now," hissed Blaise, and Jean balked before taking Gabrielle in his arms and pulling her back from the crowd. She pushed frantically against his grip.

"What is going on?" she asked, frightened. "Who are z'ose people?"

"Come on, Gabby –"

"Tell me what is happening!"

But Jean did not, and instead he pulled her up fully into his arms and dragged her away to the Apparition point, where they both vanished in an instant, cutting off Gabrielle's protests mid-word.

All the while, Draco, Ginny and Blaise watched with rigid expressions.

"These heinous people are a threat to you!" the wizard told the crowd viciously. "They hate your government! They disrespect your law! They defy YOUR Ministry! And for that, they will pay dearly!"

The hoods were ripped off the two on-stage prisoners to reveal the bruised and bloodied faces of Xenophilius Lovegood and Vita.

Horror seized Ginny Malfoy's heart, and she gripped Draco's hand tightly, her lips parted. "Draco," she barely managed in a terrified exhale, eyes watering. Draco gripped her hand and forced her to remain still. A hundred people stood between them and the stage.

Nearby, George and Vera emerged from their spot, and Vera's eyes turned towards the stage. Instantly, she leaped forward. "VITA!" she screamed, but George grabbed her and held her still, his own features stricken.

"What's wrong with them?" gasped Ginny, trembling. Vita and Xeno's eyes were blank, and everything about their expression looked vacant and lost. No one answered her.

"One of these traitors," crowed the man on the stage, "is a known criminal to the Ministry! The other is a foreigner, a blood traitor who claimed to know and respect our ways!" He swept his furious gaze over the terrified crowd. "These two have forsaken our great and glorious purpose here! And for this, they will be PUNISHED!"

With that, the Death Eaters who had brought in the captives pointed their wands at Vita and Xeno and called out together, "CRUCIO!"

"NO!" screamed Vera, fighting against George as the curses hit Xeno and Vita all at once. People in the crowd screamed and scrambled back as the bodies on the stage lurched and writhed with vulgar thuds and bangs.

"WE WILL FIND OUT!" screamed the wizard on the stage over all the screams and panic. "WE WILL DISCOVER THEIR EVIL PURPOSE! AND ANY WHO CHOOSES TO SHELTER THEM OR THEIR KIND WILL BE PUNISHED JUST THE SAME!"

Vita and Xeno continued to pulse helplessly against the painful spells, and Ginny could only watch
in horror as they struggled, heads snapping back and joints twisting.

The crowd was in a full panic now, and many were running from the stage, but the Death Eaters were still working their curses, unrelenting.

"LET THIS BE A LESSON!" screamed the wizard over the cries of the crowd. "THERE WILL BE NO TRAITORS IN OUR MINISTRY! THERE WILL ONLY – BE – ORDER!"

Then, with one last movement of their wands, the Death Eaters swept a wave of green light over Xenophilus and Vita, and they were dead.

"VITA!" screamed out Vera again at the top of her lungs, wailing even over the noise of the stampeding crowd. George hauled his sobbing wife back from the crowd, and now the Death Eaters had noticed Vera and were pushing through the people to get to her, skeletal masks in place.

"I know, I know, I promise, I know," whispered George over and over again through his tears. "But we have to go – Vera – we have to go!"

Draco and Ginny could only watch from several feet away as George yanked Vera behind him and fled his shop. The two barely made it to the Apparition point before they were caught, and the furious Death Eaters yelled out in anger.

"Put out a warrant for those two!" shouted the wizard from the stage. "Call them in for questioning!"

"We need to get out of here, too," said Draco, snatching Ginny's arm. Together, they hurried away with the rest of the terrified crowd and disappeared. Blaise turned sharply to leave only to see Jean staring with glassy eyes at the stage. He had found a perch on the base of a streetlight, and now he looked only at the two limp bodies. Gabrielle was not with him.

Blaise and Jean met gazes, and Blaise turned his own eyes away pointedly before starting off. Jean stayed where he was for a few moments before he shakily climbed down and joined him. Together, they disappeared at the Apparition point and went home.

"We've been trying to get in contact with you all fucking day!" exclaimed Blanca fiercely as soon as Draco and Ginny arrived at Steep Park House.

"We've been out," said Draco heatedly. "We didn't know there was a fucking crisis!"

"What happened?" cut in Ginny, her eyes blazing. Blanca ran a hand over her face. "They didn't return from their dropoff of the Muggleborns," she said more calmly, though her hands clenched the table, "and by ten minutes after, we had people out looking for them. We went to the dropoff point and figured out they'd never opened their end of the portal. We could tell there'd been a fight, but we didn't have bodies and no one was fucking left. We tried to get in contact with you two, but our messages went to your damn house. Which you weren't in."

"Your Auror wasn't with them," said Draco. "Or at least not on the stage. Do you think they have her?"

"Probably," said Blanca, her eyes dark and severe. "But if they do, she's dead. She'd never let them take her alive."
"I think Xeno and Vita were Obliviated," said Draco.

Blanca's eyes shifted over to him. "They must have been," she said. "Or else we'd all be in a shit storm of Death Eaters right now. She must've known they'd never be able to hold out under torture."

"What about the Muggleborns you sent to the furnace today?" asked Ginny to Draco, her chest painfully tight. Draco shook his head.

"I'm not sure. I haven't heard anything strange." He picked up his cloak. "I'll have to go there now."

"How the hell did they know where to go?" Blanca called after Draco furiously. "You find that out for me, Malfoy. How the fuck did those Death Eaters know to show up there?"

"I'll figure it out," he said firmly.

"Good," snapped Blanca.

"Stay here," Draco told Ginny. "Just in case." She nodded and held tight to him for a moment, whispering her love for him in his ear before he left. Trembling like mad, Ginny turned away from Blanca and went to the doorway to one of the bedrooms, where George held a sobbing Vera tight in his arms. He was crying as well, and all Ginny could hear was his voice saying, "I know, I know…” over and over again, but sincere each time.

At the Ministry, Draco swept through the corridors until he came to his office. Finding it undisturbed, Draco then went to the large room he had personally added just months before. As he opened it, he found it was empty, save for the large iron furnace burning in the corner. In it was the magical alchemical flame he had created with Renz and Keosha, and it burned as brightly and hotly as ever before.

There were no Death Eaters in the room. No one stood guard here, as there was no point. The room was only used when the captured Muggleborns were brought in, already heavily sedated with the poison they were administered. They were then placed on large slabs and then dumped directly into the fire to be incinerated.

Draco approached the burning fire cautiously and pulled aside the grate to peer inside.

Thirteen Muggleborns had been sent here this morning. They had been meant for Steep Park House. However, when Draco peered inside, he saw nothing. They had vanished from this end of the portal, but nothing had opened up for them on the other end. He slowly shut the grate again, his heart in turmoil.

He wasn't sure exactly what happened to them, but he could guess. They had been splinched and destroyed, as sometimes happened to very inexperienced people who used Floo powder. If no proper location was given, the magical transport went awry. It was a dangerous side-effect of such a seemingly simple device.

Walking slowly out of the room, Draco saw the two Death Eaters who had worked the furnace that morning.

"Everything go alright today?" Draco asked them stiffly. They were playing cards while waiting for their shifts to be over.
One of them looked up and shrugged. "Ya, - I mean, yes, sir, Mister Malfoy." They both looked bored.

Draco nodded and carried on, his feet growing heavier with every step. The Ministry carried on as usual around him, and even though he passed several people who recognized him, no one stopped him or gave him a second look.

Finally, he conceded that whatever had happened with the Muggleborns in the furnace, it had not been noticed, and no one seemed to trace the day's events to him. This brought him only minimal relief.

Once back at Steep Park House, Draco reported to Blanca that no one at the Ministry was any the wiser. He also told her what he had overheard after spending some time wandering around at the Ministry, that a nearby magical villager had noticed the surge of magical energy in the area and reported it to the Ministry in the hopes of getting an award for citing suspicious activity.

"We need to remake the alchemical solution," he told Blanca tonelessly. "It needs to leave less of a signature."

"Fine," said Blanca, not saying anything more.

Draco turned and left, as he had nothing left to say anyway.

Two uncomfortable, tense days went by.

In the posh neighborhood of Myrddin, Gabrielle Zabini stood in the sitting room and watched her infant son. Outside, the hour was late and the night sky was clear and sprinkled with stars. The lighting in the elegant room was low, with shadows bouncing on the other side of candle flames. The walls appeared warm with lights, but pockets of darkness held fast to the corners. Despite the hour, tiny Marseille was not asleep, but instead happily sitting in his holder, occasionally batting at a toy that dangled on a handle above it.

Blaise looked on as Gabrielle watched their son with a sad smile. Thinking to distract her from her thoughts, he asked, "You're going to lunch tomorrow, aren't you?"

"No, darling," replied Gabrielle softly. Blaise raised a brow.

"Why not? You told me last week you were."

Gabrielle bit her lip and finally looked away from Marseille. "It was with Vita," she whispered, blue eyes shining. Blaise cursed inwardly. Rising from his spot, he crossed the room to his young wife.

"So then go out anyway," he suggested. "I can watch Marseille for a few hours by myself, and Jean won't be gone all day. You can go and shop."

"I don't want to shop," Gabrielle told him in a small voice, eyes downcast. Blaise scowled. "Gabby, put her out of your damn head already."

"But she was my friend," said Gabrielle, looking up at him with wide eyes. "And now she's --"

"That fool woman made her choice," Blaise informed her.

"She was only trying to help," said Gabrielle tearfully, keeping her voice low. Blaise reached up
and touched Gabrielle's jaw gently, one thumb smoothing over the tear and wiping it away.

"Stop it," Blaise commanded quietly. "The Ministry is going to be looking to families like ours for support. We cannot afford to have you moping about, giving the public and the Ministry reason to think we disapprove of their actions. That would place us all in danger. Do you understand?"

Gabrielle whimpered and nodded. When she did, Blaise dropped his hand and Gabrielle leaned into his chest, hiding her face in the front of his robes. Blaise accepted her there and touched the back of her head soothingly, although he had no comforting words for her, mostly because he was not any good at them.

Marseille gurgled from his spot in the holder, and he began to whine and hold out his hands. Gabrielle pulled away from Blaise and wiped at her face before giving a small smile to her son. "Oh, what is it, little one? You want Mother and Father's attention?" She took him out of the holder and bounced him in her arms, kissing his warm cheek and pressing him close.

Blaise watched from his spot, still unmoving. When Gabrielle tucked her cheek against the soft top of Marseille's head, she took his little hand and waved it at Blaise. This caused Blaise's lips to quirk, just a little. "He's not a puppet," he informed Gabrielle wryly.

A moment later, the doors opened and Jean came in wearing his Healer's robes and looking drained. "I'm home," he said tiredly, dropping his bag near the door.

"Goodness," said Gabrielle, glancing at the clock. "We were starting to get worried! You're nearly an hour late!"

"I know," said Jean apologetically, reaching Blaise first and kissing him briefly, a hand on Blaise's arm before he dropped it. "It was a long day." Blaise let him go, and Jean went to Gabrielle and Marseille next, kissing Gabrielle before he smiled at Marseille and snuggled the baby's cheek for a moment.

"You look like hell," observed Blaise. "Drink?"

"Please," said Jean, moving to sit on the couch.

"Wait, wait!" rushed out Gabrielle, and Jean nearly fell over. "Sorry, darling, but you are covered in blood."

"And Merlin only knows what else," said Blaise, wrinkling his nose.

"Oh," mumbled Jean, looking down at his stained robes. "I'd forgotten."

Gabrielle waved her hand, still holding Marseille with one arm. "Here, take z'ose off," she said, and Jean obediently pulled off his filthy robes, leaving himself in an undershirt and shorts. Gabrielle accepted the robes in her free hand. "Dipper," she said, and the house-elf appeared. She handed the robes to him. "Take zese to ze wash, please." The house-elf nodded and disappeared again, and Jean was finally able to sit down, which he did with an exhausted huff. Blaise handed him a drink, which he accepted.

"Let me go and put Marseille to bed," Gabrielle told Jean, "And I will bring back some clean pajamas for you."

"Thank you, ma chérie," said Jean with a small but grateful smile.

Gabrielle shifted the baby in her arms and waved his little hand again, this time at both Blaise and
Jean. "Say good night to Father and Papa!" she told the little baby, who coo'ed in response.

"Good night, Marseille," the two wizards said, and Gabrielle left. The door closed behind her.

When she was gone, Blaise looked over at Jean, who kept his eyes low and on his glass of wine. "Hard day?" he asked, reaching an arm on the back of the couch and settling it behind Jean's head. Jean glanced up at him before looking at the glass again.

"It usually is," he admitted.

"I don't understand why you work that grueling job in the first place," said Blaise. "It's not as if you need the salary."

This time it was Jean's turn to look annoyed. "I didn't go to Healer's school for six years so I could live off your gold, Blaise." He swirled around his drink. "Besides," he went on quietly, "I like helping people." After this, Jean fell silent.

When Blaise could take it no more, he rose from his spot and went to fix himself another glass of wine. "Honestly," he said peevishly, "I wish you and Gabby would snap out of it, already. If you two get any more melancholy, I'll need a bloody prescription to deal with you."

Jean looked up at Blaise and stood as well. "How are you not bothered?" he asked, picking up on the topic immediately. "You saw what they did, Blaise."

"Yes, I did," said Blaise without turning around. "People die. It happens."

When he turned to face Jean again, the other man's eyes were deeply narrowed, and Blaise observed him cautiously.

"You think I don't know that?" asked Jean heatedly. "I watch people die every day, Blaise. I watch them cry and suffer and pray and then die anyway. So yes, I'm perfectly aware that it happens. What I don't understand is why it happens so senselessly, and why the damn Ministry is the one sanctioning it."

"Let it go," responded Blaise simply, features growing dark.

But Jean did not. Instead, he said after a long pause, "I change my vote, Blaise."

Jaw tight, Blaise looked directly at Jean's features. "You can't change your vote," he told him, tone deceptively light. "It doesn't work that way."

"You change your mind all the time," pointed out Jean, his words calm but low. "Why can't I?"

"Because no matter the illusion of democracy I may give you and Gabrielle," said Blaise, stepping forward, "I am still the head of this household. And what I say goes."

Jean didn't back down. "I'm a grown man, Blaise. Just because I care about you doesn't mean I have to live my entire life according to you."

"So what are you saying, Jean?" challenged Blaise. "That you want to leave here? That you want to forsake everything we have together, including our family?"

"Of course not," said Jean, his tone wavering.

"Then drop it!" snapped Blaise. "I already had to have this damn talk with Gabrielle today. I am in no mood to continue it with you." Turning away, Blaise retreated to the window, where he looked...
out through the cool glass. Jean remained silent for a few moments before speaking again.

"Do you love me, Blaise?"

Moving slowly to look at Jean, Blaise watched him without saying a word.

"I never ask you to say it," said Jean softly, "but I'm asking you now. Do you love me?"

Blaise waited a very long time before answering. "Yes," he answered stiffly at last.

Stepping forward, Jean came to stand in front of him. "Then you must fight with Malfoy and the others," he told Blaise, no longer sounding angry, but instead quiet and hesitant. "Because if you don't – " Jean faltered here, his voice wavering. "If you don't, I – Blaise, I could … end up on a stage, being tortured just like those people were."

Blaise shifted back to look at Jean fully, his gaze suspicious. "Why? What have you done?"

"Nothing," answered Jean truthfully.

"Have you been working with Draco behind my back?"

"No!" said Jean, as Blaise folded his arms and waited. "No, I swear, but …" Shaking now, Jean set his wine glass aside and lifted his gaze to Blaise's. "Blaise, I…" At last, Jean took a deep breath and said –

"I'm a Muggleborn."

The other wizard stared. A moment passed in stillness before he scoffed. "Don't be stupid," said Blaise. "I've met your parents. They're as magical as anyone."

"I was adopted, Blaise," Jean told him, stepping forward. "And I was old enough to remember my birthparents. They were Muggles, Blaise. They died in a car accident." When Blaise said nothing, Jean continued, "I was found by a magical couple while I was in foster care, they raised me. I never – it was never important before, because I've been around magic since I was seven years old, and I went to Beauxbatons and – " He swallowed. "That's why I was afraid to fight before. Because if the Dark Lord knew the truth about me, he wouldn't care that I had lived for almost twenty years with magical parents. He would kill me."

Blaise watched, unmoving and silent.

"I didn't mean to lie to you," he told Blaise in a trembling whisper. "It just never mattered before." He looked at last to Blaise's dark eyes. "But it will matter to your new Ministry if they ever find out. So please, Blaise… Fight. Or at least don't hate me for fighting on my own. Because I can't let this go on any longer. I have to do something."

A long silence followed. Turning away from Jean, Blaise wandered to his window once more and looked out. Jean waited behind him.

Finally, without turning around, Blaise spoke.

"Get out."

He could see Jean's shocked expression in the reflection on the glass.

"What?" said Jean, eyes wide.
Blaise turned to face him. His expression was chilling. "You heard me. I said get out of my house."

"Blaise, please," said Jean, his voice cracking.

"Are you deaf?" exclaimed Blaise suddenly, his eyes blazing. "I said get out of my house, you filthy Mudblood!"

Jean froze in his spot, shocked. Eyes watering, he quickly looked down at the ground before turning his eyes back up to Blaise. "Blaise," he said again, "We've been together for over three years…"

"All because of your lies," hissed Blaise. "Now you listen to me, Mudblood. You are going to get out of my house, quit your job at St. Mungo's, and then you are going to go back to France on this very fucking night, do you understand?" Blaise advanced on Jean, who stood paralyzed. "And if I so much as think you are still on British soil by tomorrow morning, I will turn you in to the Dark Lord myself."

Jean tried to inhale, but it stuck in his chest. Blaise's furious glare did not abate, and Jean finally took a step back, turning his trembling gaze away. "Can I at least say good-bye to Gabrielle and Marseille?" he asked in a whisper.

"No," growled Blaise. "Don't you dare speak to them." He turned away. "Now get out, before I kill you and send your corpse to the fucking Ministry."

Behind him, Blaise heard Jean shuffling, uncertain. Then, after a few moments, he heard the noise of Jean grabbing his cloak and heading out of the door. Within moments, the door had closed behind him and Blaise was left alone in the room.

Once the door was shut, Blaise turned and walked to a chair, which he sat in slowly. Once he was seated, Blaise set his hard gaze on the fire and braced his head with one hand, so that his fingers cloaked most of his face.

Gabrielle entered a moment later, pajamas in her arms. After a moment of searching, she spotted Blaise in the chair. "Where did Jean go?" she asked, holding up the pajamas.

Blaise stared at the fire under the cover of his fingers. "He's gone," he told the fire. "He went back to France."

Gabrielle's brows furrowed, and she looked around, as if Blaise was playing a trick on her. "What? When is he coming back?"

"He's not."

Gabrielle's features began to crumple. "What are – What are you talking about – "

"I told him to leave," Blaise said at last, his jaw tight.

Gabrielle dropped the robes and moved around the front of Blaise's chair. "Why would you do zat?" she demanded furiously. "Why would you make him leave? Blaise? Answer me, damn it!"

However, Blaise remained silent, even as Gabrielle's cries grew more insistent and heated.

"Tell me, Blaise!" she exclaimed, tears spilling down her cheeks. "Tell me why you would send him away!" Still, Blaise refused to respond, and finally Gabrielle fled from the room. It was only when she was gone that he finally bothered to reply, although there was no one left to listen.
"Because he wasn't safe here," whispered Blaise, a tear rolling down his cheek.

The very next morning, Draco Malfoy looked up at the sound of a knock at his front door. Suspicious, Draco got up with Ginny and walked to the foyer, where a house-elf was standing, poised to answer.

Waving the house-elf away, Draco peered through the window at their front stoop and then glanced at Ginny, who stood at his side. A moment later, Draco pulled open the door.

"Jean," he said, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

The young French wizard looked between them, his features set in firm lines. "I'm not much of a fighter," he admitted without shame. "But I'm a damn good Healer, if you need one."

Draco and Ginny looked at one another.

Ginny said softly, "I think we need Healers most of all." Then she and Draco stepped aside, and Jean cast one last glance over his shoulder before moving up the steps and disappearing into the entrance of Malfoy Manor.
In the large dining hall of Steep Park House, a low table occupied the far-right corner, just near a wide open window. During the day, the sun beamed brilliantly through the glass and hit the table so that the lone picture frame gained a reflective quality. When night fell, the surface became awash in cool greys and blues.

Until tonight, the table had remained otherwise undecorated. Now, however, the lone photo received some company.

Blanca crouched low and reached forward, three different photographs in her two hands. Each one now had a frame, lovingly protecting the magical photograph within. Once the newest additions to the table were arranged, Blanca rose from her spot and took a step back to observe.

Alec's photo sat at the center. In a dark frame next to it was Jillian, blonde with large eyes and an easy smile, waving at the camera. Next to her was a well-worn photo slightly indented by a desperate grip; this one showed Xenophilius Lovegood. The last was of Vita, smiling brilliantly as she arranged flowers on a table that now sat just a few steps away from her memorial.

Blanca stood and stared at the photos as if an entire crowd of people was not gathered behind her, hovering just a few inches away, silent. Ben stepped forward solemnly and extended a handful of items to Blanca.

Ginny and Draco watched, their fingers wrapped tightly together between them.

Blanca accepted the items and curled her fingers around them. The first item was a Cherrywood wand with a silver ornament on the bottom. Blanca opened a pocket of her robes, which already held a battered and bloodied wand she'd taken from one battle site. She slipped the other wand next to the first, face grim. Then she turned to look at those who had gathered, none of whom seemed to breathe at all.

Stepping forward, Blanca first extended a second wand – this one elm, with swirls on the handle – to Vera. The Russian witch reached out trembling hands and took the wand from Blanca, and as soon as she pulled it to her chest, she sobbed loudly. George enveloped her in his arms and pressed his lips to her temple.

Next, Blanca took something smaller in her hand and pressed her fingers to Luna's. The younger witch seemed reluctant to accept it at first, her chin tucking against her chest and her entire body shaking. Finally, she opened her palm. In it, Blanca gently placed a silver Deathly Hallows charm at the end of a chain necklace. The symbol lay flat against Luna's hand, and the chain coiled around it. Both disappeared when Luna clenched the necklace and brought her knuckles to her mouth.

Stepping away from the crowd, Blanca took a deep breath and addressed them all.

"We've lost some good people," she told them, eyes dark. "And I'm not going to lie to you guys… We'll probably lose some more."
"But," said Blanca more firmly, growing louder with each word, "our fight is not over. Our time here is not finished. And our job is not done." She pointed with one hand. "And it won't be over—and it won't be done—until this country is free again!" She jabbed a finger on the table. "We will not leave this soil—we will not abandon this war—and we will not go home—until Tom Marvolo Riddle has been wiped from the face of this planet!"

Ginny lifted her chin, even as tears streamed down her cheeks. The people who had bowed their heads looked up, too. Blanca's eyes were fire.

"So mourn your loved ones today," Blanca told them. "And fight for them tomorrow. Because we—are—not—done!" She slammed her hands on the table in front of her, her voice suddenly dropping to a fierce whisper. "But Tom Riddle is."

Draco watched, his hand tight in Ginny's and his jaw set. He felt something pressing at his mind, and he looked back through the crowd of gathered people to see Maggie peeking in from the hallway. Her eyes were wide with terror, and in a flash, he saw what she had seen in his mind—that horrible moment when Xeno and Vita fell on stage, convulsing until they died.

As soon as he could break away from the others, Draco took her aside and shook her a little. "Damn it, Maggie. That's why you're not supposed to look into people's minds. You don't need to see everything that we see!"

She looked like she had that very first day, when she'd told Draco about what had happened to her father. "It was those bad men again," she whispered, cheeks red and eyes swollen with tears. She scarcely blinked. "They did that to Xeno and Vita…"

Then she looked at Draco, and her expression crumbled into that of a normal seven-year-old, confused and scared. "Why?" she asked Draco desperately, as if he really might know the answer. "Why are some people so bad?"

Draco swallowed tightly. "I don't know, Maggie." And I don't know why I was one of them, he added mentally, hating himself with a sudden intensity that startled him. He did not hate just what he had done in the past, but what he could not do now, in the present.

"Come on," he said to her, before leading her away by her hand.

A few hours later, after many of the others had gone to bed, Draco and Ginny found Blanca sitting in a lone chair on the western balcony of the second floor. George and Vera Weasley trailed behind them.

"Blanca," said Ginny. "Vera said she's learned something from Damien's wife, Inga."

Blanca, who had been staring vacantly over an open field bathed in shadows, looked up and blinked away the mistiness from her eyes. "What is it?" she asked sharply.

Vera squared her shoulders and stepped forward, blinking rapidly against her tears. Her face was still a map of her misery, but she spoke as calmly as she could muster. "Before the—" she cleared her throat, gesturing vaguely to where the memorial table was located downstairs, "—I learned an important thing. I was to come to tell you, but …"

"It's alright," said Blanca stoically. "Just tell me now."
Vera swallowed. "During the –" she paused, trying to think over her English in her grief, "– the finishing ceremony for Hogwarts students –"

"The commencement," George supplied quietly.

"Yes, the commencement," said Vera. "In June, when the term ends and the seven years complete. That is going to be big event for the Dark Lord. He is planning large celebration, and he is to command all people to be there. All Death Eaters. All Regulators. All important people."

Blanca listened carefully.

"And," said Vera, her eyes flashing, "the Dark Lord himself will be there, but few know this. He is surprising them. He want to – have everyone see him."

"Is that so," said Blanca, moving from her spot and walking away from the group, her back to them.

"What're you thinking?" asked Draco, watching Blanca with dark eyes. Blanca paused and then shifted back to face them all, her hands on her hips.

"I'm thinkin' that sounds like a good day for a son of a bitch to die."

Ginny glanced at the others and stepped forward. "You're saying we fight him at Hogwarts? During the Commencement Ceremony?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Blanca replied.

"Blanca, we've already fought him once at Hogwarts," pointed out George. "It didn't turn out well for us."

"That's different," said Blanca. "You let him come to you. This time, we'll be the ones making the move. He won't even realize we're there until we're on top of him. And he won't be able to Apparate to get away. He'll either have to fight or die."

"If the Dark Lord really plans to make this a spectacle," cut in Draco, "that means it will be full of civilians, and many of them will be children."

"Exactly," said Blanca, unfazed. "Better camouflage for us. Besides, the more people who see his downfall, the better." She folded her arms and paced as she thought. "We can plant ourselves all over – in the crowd, on the stage, amongst the students. And then, when the time is right, we strike." She lifted a hand to stop their protests. "We'll need a team of people dedicated to nothing but shielding charms so we can keep the crowd out of the fight."

Draco scoffed. "You really think you can cast shield charms to cover what may well be a crowd of a thousand people?"

"Me?" said Blanca. "Hell no. My shields are shit. But I've got people for that. They can handle it, if they have a little backup from some of your people." It was hard to argue with Blanca's steadfast confidence. Nothing was said for a moment. Then Vera stepped forward.

"I will help shield," she said, her eyes hard. "I am good."

"Vera," said George, turning to her. "That will leave you totally open if there's a breach. Your wand will be occupied –"
"I can do it," she told him firmly. "I could not protect Vita. No Death Eater is to hurt anyone else I can help." She looked back at Blanca. "Help me train."

"You got it," said Blanca, looking satisfied. She looked to the Draco and Ginny. "I like this idea. It'll give us four full months to prepare, and Ginny will have enough time to give birth and recover." She looked over them. "What do you say? Are you two ready to return to Hogwarts and finish this?"

Draco and Ginny looked to one another. Without speaking a word, they both looked back to Blanca and nodded.

"June it is," said Draco, gripping Ginny's hand again.

Just then, a voice sounded outside the door. "Is Draco in there?" It was Maggie. She sounded sleepy and upset. Blanca's eyes softened a bit, and Ginny felt as though the American witch was reliving a private moment in her mind. Blanca scratched at her face and waved them all away.

"Go on," she said.

Draco and Ginny left the room with George and Vera behind them. As soon as Draco saw Maggie in her rumpled nightgown, he reached down and picked her up, and he and Ginny took her back to her room and sat on either side of her on the bed until she fell asleep once more.

Even after Maggie's movements stilled and her breathing turned steady, Draco and Ginny remained there on the bed with her, each looking out of the window at the night sky and reliving private moments of their own.

Three days later, Draco and Ginny – who by now was having some real trouble moving around, and was quite cross about it – went to Diagon Alley to meet with the Zabinis. Of course, this meeting was a bit different than many of those before it.

Even if Draco and Ginny hadn't known about Jean's absence, it was clear from the very start of the meeting that Gabrielle was deeply unhappy and Blaise was doing his best to ignore her frowns. Draco and Ginny took seats from across the miserable pair and feigned polite conversation for a few minutes.

Then, because Jean had sworn them to secrecy, Draco asked, "Where's Jean? At work?"

Gabrielle, who had scarcely said a word since Ginny and Draco had arrived, cut her eyes in Blaise's direction and waited for his answer. Blaise took a long drink from his cup of tea. "He returned to France," he said at last, his tone even. "I asked him to."

"Why?" asked Ginny, watching the wizard's face closely.

Blaise paused. "People were starting to talk. I thought it best if he and I ended things."

Gabrielle's made an incredulous noise from her spot. "Zat is your excuse, Blaise? People talked?" She tossed up her hands. "Oh, dear, we must not have people talking! Especially not about Blaise Zabini, who has never once given any consideration to anyone's opinions about anyzing, much less his personal life!"

"Gabrielle, don't," said Blaise with a scowl.

His wife turned to Draco and Ginny. "Well, at least be grateful he bothered to lie to you. He would
not tell me *anyzing."

Blaise snapped, "Stop being so damn dramatic, Gabrielle!"

At this, Gabrielle's features hardened, even as tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. "Dramatic?" she repeated, and now she sounded hurt. Blaise shifted uncomfortably in his spot. "Blaise, my friend was murdered on a stage in front of a crowd of people, my family has been torn apart, and now my husband is – " Her voice cracked "– lying to me."

Blaise stared at her, looking almost afraid. Gabrielle bit her pink lip, a single tear falling down her cheek. "I am not dramatic," she told him, as if there was no one else in the room, "I am heartbroken."

Blaise's eyes shifted, and despite his stony expression, there was a definite discomfort in his movements, as if he were a spirit inhabiting a strange body and had not yet figured out how it worked.

When he said nothing, Gabrielle shook her head and picked up her bag, standing away from the table. "I'm sorry," she said to Draco and Ginny, who had watched the entire exchange in silence, "I have to go – "

"Gabby – "

"No, Blaise," she said, turning swiftly to face him. "Do not talk to me again until you can tell me ze truth." With that, she left the table and swept out of the café. Blaise watched her go with one hand extended. As soon as she left, he pulled it back and sat stiffly in his spot, expressionless.

After several seconds of silence, Draco volunteered, "Perhaps you should go and talk to her."

Blaise's eyes snapped to his. "No," he said flatly. "If she wants to play the silent game, I'll just let her." He toyed with his coffee cup. "Be the first bloody moment of peace I've had in a damn year," he muttered, eyes on the rim of his saucer.

Draco and Ginny said nothing. Half a minute later –

"Fuck," hissed Blaise, slamming down his cup and rising from his spot. He left the café after Gabrielle without another word to Draco and Ginny. They watched him go and finished their tea.

Despite the speed he'd shown in leaving the café, Blaise did not immediately chase down Gabrielle. Instead, he wasted nearly two hours of his life by pacing the streets of Diagon Alley and imagining all the different ways the world might one day end. Imagining the total annihilation of the human race gave him some peace.

At last, he ventured back to his home in Myrddin. It was early evening by the time he arrived, and the nanny greeted him at the door. "Oh," she said, "Mr. Zabini, I have just fed Marseille – "

"Great, whatever. Where is my wife?"

The nanny said, "She told me she was going down for a nap, sir."

Blaise bypassed her and walked towards the back of the luxurious home where the living quarters were. After he opened the double-doors to the elegant corridor that led off to the bedrooms, Blaise hesitated. He could hear piano music. Which meant…
Blaise closed his eyes. Gabrielle adored the piano; a love of classical music was one thing she and Blaise shared. However, Gabrielle couldn't play the instrument herself, so Blaise had bought her a one-of-a-kind enchanted grand piano when she'd come home from giving birth to Marseille. The wood was dark with a spotless finish, and each musically-controlled key was pristine and unmarked. On top of the keys was a songbook, and the piano, when activated with a wand, played beautifully each and every note of the song selected.

The piano was in Gabrielle's room, and it was playing. This inspired in Blaise a sudden, irrational fear.

Gabrielle had always had her own room in the house, and it was decorated precisely to her tastes. It was also filled with many of her favorite things, including her vanity, many closets, and all her beloved art from France.

It also had a magnificent four-poster bed. However, Gabrielle had started sleeping in Blaise and Jean's bed as soon as she had learned she was pregnant, and she had continued to do so even after Marseille was born.

When Blaise came to stand in front of Gabrielle's bedroom door, he pressed it open and looked reluctantly to the bed. It was empty.

Blaise let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Then he turned and walked to the other master bedroom, the one that had been his and Jean's, and then all of theirs. When he stepped inside the shadowed room, he saw Gabrielle occupied only one small space on the massive bed, at the edge of the left side, where she had always been.

Gabrielle and Jean both slept on the edges. They were the ones who woke up early.

Closing the door behind him, Blaise walked over to the bed and pulled off his robes, leaving himself in only his underclothes as he climbed into the bed. Piano music, quiet through the closed door but still audible, punctuated each step he took with a soft note. It was still early, but he pulled the blankets up around them anyway, as if the hour was late and they were retiring after a normal day.

Gabrielle stirred when she felt Blaise close to her; she was the lightest sleeper of them by far.

When she saw Blaise, she blinked in surprise and then turned her face away, pointedly shoving her cheek into the pillow. Blaise sighed and reached over, pulling her until she was on her back. "He is safe," he told her in a low murmur. "That is all you should care about right now."

Gabrielle's eyes shimmered. "He was safe here with us," she whispered back tearfully. "You protect us."

Blaise's eyes lowered. He could not bring himself to reply to such unwavering confidence. Perhaps sensing his apprehension, Gabrielle reached up and gently touched his face, fingertips soft against his skin. Blaise looked back at her, his features unreadable but his brow creased. Gabrielle didn't question him further. Instead, she simply curled her fingers at his jaw, drawing a line there with her thumb.

This simple motion urged Blaise forward, and he caught her mouth with his, pulling himself over her in one slow, deliberate shift. Gabrielle accepted him there, looping her arms around his neck and dropping her hands behind his shoulders to linger at the top of his spine.

Blaise responded by rolling his hips against hers, and the kisses grew more heated. Brushes of the
hand transformed into grips, and fingernails pressed into skin, leaving indentions. Within moments, the pair had banished the rest of their clothes, tossed carelessly onto the floor. It was an anguished coupling, equal parts loving and despairing.

And then, once it was done, the pair fell asleep still entangled in one another, with Blaise at the center of the bed, Gabrielle curled to his left, and an empty, cold space on Blaise's right.

A few weeks passed, and the tension throughout the country did not abate. The air in England felt tainted and unbreathable. Diagon Alley was stifling. The Ministry seemed made of glass. People walked as quietly as they could. Sales of magical watches like the Weasley family clock skyrocketed.

It felt as though England had become one entity, a miserable and shackled creature that had once been wild, but was now confined to a cage. The weight of this brought Ginny's shoulders lower a little more each day.

There was also the very real physical weight she was carrying slowing her down, too. Only two more months, she told herself.

Pulling herself up with a wince from a couch in one of the smaller rooms of Steep Park House, Ginny made her way to a table to get some water. It was a quiet evening, with most of the household in bed. Draco was nearby, though she wasn't sure where. She had reclined on the couch for a nap. Pregnant Ginny did that a lot.

Napping was also a welcome respite from all the worry. Ginny couldn't train like everyone else; all she could do was sit and think on the worst possible outcome, ruminate on her fears, hold her stomach and slide her fingers along the taut skin of her belly until she could feel the pressure that meant the baby's feet or elbows were there. She needed to know it was still with her, still moving, still growing.

Swallowing the last of her water, Ginny turned to waddle back to the couch. Suddenly, a sharp pain stopped her, and she gasped, clutching her stomach low. One hand gripping the table, Ginny leaned over and inhaled deeply. After a moment, she felt somewhat recovered, and she tried to stand again.

"AGH!" The pain blasted through her, hot white and searing. Ginny fell to her knees this time, crying out against the ache and clutching her stomach with both hands. Tears clouded her eyes, and she tried to call out for Draco, but the pain stole her breath away. For a terrifying moment, she remembered being strangled by Damien in the hallway at Malfoy Manor, and how she had tried to call for Draco then, too.

"Fu – Fuuck," gasped out Ginny, just before another wave of agony swept over her. Her hands dove between her legs, because the ache had traveled there, too. Her body pitched forward, and she yanked away her hands to brace herself. When her bleary vision landed on her fingers, she saw they were covered in blood.

Ginny's eyes widened with terror. Looking down, she saw blood pooled at the front of her robes. It was coming from her. She took a deep breath and screamed as loudly as she could.

"DRACO!"

Seconds later, the door to the room burst open and her husband hurried in, dropping to her side in an instant. "What is it? What's wrong?" he asked frantically, before he spotted the blood and the
color drained from his face. "We have to get you to St. Mungo's. Now!" He moved to pick her up. Jean raced in behind him. "Don't Apparate with her!" he shouted to Draco, waving his arms.

"She has to get to St. Mungo's!" argued Draco frantically. "Look at her!"

Jean's eyes dropped to the blood and he paused for half a second to process. Then he looked back to Draco and said, "You can't risk Apparating with her like that, you'll almost certainly splinch her and the baby."

"We can't call St. Mungo's to come and get her from here!" hissed Draco, but Jean was already at the door and beckoning to him.

"Come on, bring her in here – BLANCA!" yelled Jean, and the American witch appeared in an instant. "I need all your Healers, now."

Blanca took one look at Ginny and her eyes widened. "Got it," she said, disappearing in a flash. Draco carried Ginny in his arms, holding tight to her even when she lurched forward, gasping in pain.

"What's happening?" asked Draco as he and Jean lowered Ginny to a vacant bed.

"Out, out!" Jean told all the other people in the room, and they all hurried away. As they left, the other three Healers – Richard, Avery, and Rebecca – appeared with Blanca on their heels. They closed the doors behind them, and Blanca cursed but stayed back, out of the way.

"What's wrong?" exclaimed Draco again, since no one was telling him anything. "Is she going into labor? Is she supposed to be bleeding?"

"No," Jean admitted, his eyes flickering over Ginny even as he pushed up the sleeves of his robes. He pulled out his wand and split Ginny's robes with a quick charm, pushing them back off her body.

"Agh!" cried out Ginny, tossing back her head in pain. "Jean, please – "

The other Healers raced over and Rebecca tossed back the bottom of Ginny's robes to peer between her legs. "Lotta blood," she admitted, "but no external injuries."

Jean paused to gather himself and then waved his wand over Ginny's swollen torso, murmuring a spell as he did so. Ginny's body glowed and her skin shimmered, becoming translucent. Richard came rushing around the side and looked, his eyes scanning over everything they could see beyond the tissues and organs.

"There!" he said, pointing quickly. "She's got a uterine rupture."

Draco couldn't breathe. Numbly, he registered Blanca reaching up and pulling him back a few steps as the Healers moved around Ginny. Blood continued to accumulate on the bed, sticking to Ginny's legs and creating a great scarlet pool beneath her. Jean pulled the other three Healers aside, away from Ginny and Draco. "Can you repair it?" he asked Richard.

Richard met Jean's gaze. "Not with the baby in there."

Jean cursed. "It's not due for eight more weeks!"
"Not to mention the fact that we aren't midwives," said Avery darkly. "If she has it here – and premature –"

"I can't fix that rupture without removing the baby," cut in Richard sharply. "So it's either we deliver the baby now, or she bleeds out and they both die anyway."

Jean stared hard at the other three Healers. Then, with a sharp nod, he moved away and joined Ginny again at her side. "Alright, Ginny," he said lightly, "Change of plans. You're going to deliver today."

"What?" gasped Ginny, her face red with tears, "but it's – ah! It's too early –"

"No, it's not," Jean told her confidently. "We're just going to take the baby out via c-section, and then we're going to fix you up. Got it?" Without waiting for a response, he beckoned to Avery and the other Healer tossed him a bottle, which Jean upturned against Ginny's lips. Ginny gulped it down between her cries of pain, and Jean tossed it away before jerking his head in Draco's direction.

"She's going to need blood, Draco. What is her blood type?"

Draco fought to speak. "I – I don't know," he admitted.

"I'm O Negative," said Blanca, yanking up her sleeve. "Take mine."

"Get her started," Jean told Avery. "Richard, are you ready?" The other wizard nodded, and Rebecca moved to Ginny's legs while Richard poised himself at her stomach. Pulling out a series of magical and non-magical medical tools, Richard pulled on his gloves, opened Ginny's robes fully to her swollen belly and prepared her for the incision. Ginny was no longer crying; the potion had taken its effect, and she was quickly losing consciousness.

Draco watched from only a few feet away, unable to move or think or inhale.

Ginny's head went slack and her eyes closed. In minutes, the surgery began with a magical incision started by the tip of Richard's wand. Richard was sweating, but he remained focused all the way through the cut, fingers steady.

"Rebecca, be ready for the baby," Jean told her, moving in with Richard to pull apart the folds of Ginny's skin and pull out the baby, still tiny but – they hoped – developed enough to survive outside the womb. Draco could not see from behind Richard's broad back, so he did not see them remove the baby and place it in the blanket covering Rebecca's arms. All he knew was Ginny's face, slack and unmoving, and the terrifying silence that followed the removal of the baby, which did not cry.

For a moment, he nearly lost himself, overwhelmed by fear. He heard his mother's voice in his head.

A connection severed...

He shuddered, a chill seizing his heart.

Rebecca took the silent baby to another bed, and Avery jumped up to help her now that a needle and a tube were steadily drawing blood from a vein in Blanca's arm. Draco wanted to go and look, but he couldn't make himself move from his spot. He felt as though his world had collapsed around him, and perhaps if he did not stray from his spot, he would not have to see the debris.
"Alright, here – " Jean was saying to Richard, his words quick but calm. "I've got this – "

"Just hold it," said Richard, reaching for his wand again. He began to murmur the healing words for the rupture, moving with painstaking slowness along the ripped internal lining of Ginny's uterus. "Emantur ligna, emantur ligna, emantur ligna," murmured Richard over and over again, moving the tip of his wand centimeter by centimeter.

Draco felt as if the words were etched into his brain, chiseled there by a sharp and unforgiving point.

"Emantur ligna, emantur ligna, emantur ligna…"

The room suddenly went quiet. Richard's chanting stopped.

"It's done," said the American wizard, exhaling at last. "The rupture is repaired. Now for this – "

Together, he and Jean stitched up Ginny's stomach with their wands working side by side, the skin pulling itself back together seamlessly piece by piece.

"Now blood," said Jean, looking up at Blanca, who pulled out her own needle rather brutally and brought over the newly filled bottle, which was full of her blood. She staggered a little – it had ended up being quite a lot – but she handed it over and Jean took it, quickly sterilizing everything with his wand before he set up a makeshift transfusion.

Once it was hooked up, nothing was said. Everyone waited. Blood flowed back into Ginny, but she did not wake or stir.

Draco stood up and walked, with halting steps, to Ginny's bedside. Please, he thought with such desperate hope. Please wake up. He kneeled down next to her bed, his trembling fingers reaching up to brush back Ginny's red hair from her face. Jean and Richard watched as well.

That was when a cry startled Draco out of his stupor.

He forced himself to stand slowly, his knees creaking against the effort. Across the room, Rebecca, looking very much relieved, turned to face them all. The crying had come from a tiny bundle her arms.

At that same moment, something brushed Draco's dangling hand. When he looked down, he saw Ginny, eyes fluttering but open, her fingers wrapped weakly around his. Draco looked to her, astonished, wondering if the baby's cries had roused her.

"Ginny," he managed, his voice cracking.

"Will you hold the baby?" she asked breathlessly. Her lips formed a small gentle smile, and some of the color had returned to her cheeks. "My arms are too weak." Draco could only nod, too overwhelmed to do much else.

A few feet away, Jean stepped back and fell into a chair, his hands over his face. Richard collapsed next to him and slung an arm over his shoulders, squeezing him tightly for a moment. Blanca watched, smiling through unshed tears.

Rebecca approached then, a smile stretching her features. "Congratulations," she told the pair. "You are now the parents of a beautiful baby girl."

Draco accepted the bundle of blankets in his arms and sank onto the bed next to Ginny, who was shaking still, but smiling brilliantly now. As the two parents pulled back the blankets to look at the
child, they both let out little cries to see the tender face there.

The little girl was indeed tiny, but her features appeared so perfect, so delicate that Draco could not imagine them being any different. She opened her eyes for only a moment to peer at her curious new world, and Draco saw that they were the same slate grey as his own.

"Oh, Draco…” Ginny sobbed. "Look at her."

Draco reached up and brushed back the blanket fully so he could see the infant's head. Then he let out a choked gasp. "Bloody hell," he exclaimed. "She's a ginger!"

The tension in the room burst like a bubble, and Ginny and Draco laughed through their tears while all the others did the same. "What did I ever do to deserve this?” groaned Draco, tucking his head against Ginny's, half-crying and half-chuckling.

"It's more like strawberry blonde," Ginny pointed out with a weary grin. It was true; the little girl's crop of hair was much lighter than Ginny's, blonde with a bright red sheen. "Don't you think?"

"It's beautiful," Draco murmured against her head.

After a few minutes, Ginny felt strong enough to hold her daughter, and Draco shifted her into Ginny's arms. The others in the room, with the exception of Jean and Blanca, left to give them further privacy. They promised to linger nearby, though, incase anything went wrong.

Draco rose from his spot and faced Blanca. "Thank you," he told her, the words dust in comparison to the monument that was his actual gratitude. He was still shaking. He did not know if he would ever stop.

"What’re you going to call her?” asked Blanca with a rare gentle smile.

Draco looked back at Ginny, who was listening. "We did promise Maggie," she reminded him, and Draco laughed again.

"Yes, we did." He looked back to Blanca. "Her name is Athena."

"Athena Malfoy," said Blanca thoughtfully. "I like it. She'll be a tiny little badass."

"That's what we're hoping for," confirmed Draco. Blanca grinned and clapped him on the shoulder before coming over to Ginny and the baby, talking quietly with her before she nodded to them both and departed.

Jean, who had risen from his chair to check over Ginny's vitals, looked up as Draco approached. "Perhaps I should get a less stressful job," he joked weakly with the other two.

Draco swallowed. "If you had a less stressful job, Ginny and my daughter might not be here right now."

The two wizards observed each other for a moment of unfiltered appreciation. Then they clasped hands, pulling close to hug tightly for a few moments. When they pulled away, Jean squeezed Draco's shoulder before sitting next to Ginny again.

"I promise I'll leave you alone so you can rest in just a minute," he told her. "I just want to make sure everything is showing normal."

"Thank you, Jean," said Ginny, reaching for his hand. He gripped her fingers gently in return,
Jean cleared his throat and pressed away something that might have been a tear. "I'm glad I could help," he choked out, and although he had been the only person in the room who had managed not to cry before, he seemed looked as though it might all overwhelm him at once. The calm he had carefully maintained during the surgery receded like the tide, and his shoulders hunched forward, his eyes closing.

All the while, Ginny kept a hold of his hand. "I know the way you came to us wasn't ideal for you," Ginny told him. "But I am so grateful you were here."

Finally, Jean looked up again and smiled. "So am I," he whispered.

A little while later, while Ginny rested and Jean stayed nearby to monitor her, Draco took the little baby Athena in his arms and paced the room with her. He could not take his eyes off her face; soon, he would have to take Ginny and Athena to St. Mungo's to be checked over, but for now he would enjoy the sunrise with his sleeping daughter in his arms.

*Your father... he was so proud, Draco. He held you in his arms and showed you to everyone in the hospital, I think.*

Draco closed his eyes and touched his forehead to Athena's.

*But when we saw you, oh, it was as if the sky had opened up and shown us the sun for the first time in our lives...*

Draco clutched the little girl in his arms and placed his lips against the soft skin of her ginger hair.

*I couldn't figure out... how I had managed to deserve you ... but I didn't care. As soon as I saw you, I knew that all the pain – all the misery – it had all been worth it.*

Yes, thought Draco to himself. He could quite agree.
Chapter 34

Author's Note: Sorry this chapter took a while (by my standards). I’ve had a lot going on. Only a few more chapters left… really, this time.

For what felt like hours, Ginny tossed and turned in a state of restlessness between waking and sleeping. Finally, she fell into a light slumber, only vaguely aware of what was going on around her.

The next time she opened her eyes, brilliant sunlight streamed through the window just near her bed. Blurry surroundings cleared after a few blinks to reveal a hospital room positively filled with flowers. Shifting with a soft groan, Ginny forced herself to stretch. The cracks in her joints were some of the most satisfying sensations she'd ever felt.

"Ginny!"

Draco appeared next to her, and he was beaming. Ginny's heart leaped. How rarely she had seen him look that way, overcome with joy. "Draco," she mumbled, still feeling foggy even as she smiled and reached out for him. Draco pulled her into his warm arms, and for a moment, the two simply sat embracing each other.

Slowly, Ginny's muddled mind cleared, and anxiety pierced her sleepy state. "Dr – Draco, the baby _"" 

"She's fine," Draco reassured her, pulling back and petting Ginny's matted hair back from her face. "I'll get her for you in a moment when you're feeling better. We're at St. Mungo's."

Ginny fought to quell her panic; she believed Draco, of course, but suddenly, all she could think about was her terror from the last time she'd been awake. Where had that been? It took her a few minutes to remember, and then it came back to her all at once.

Steep Park House. The blood. Jean and the other Healers telling her she was giving birth then, too early. She gripped Draco's arm, but he comforted her with a kiss to her temple.

"She's alright, love, I swear." Draco stroked Ginny's jaw with his thumb. "I had to bring the two of you here right after your procedure," he whispered very quietly. Glancing around, he went on in a murmur, "I told them all you had the baby at home, and there was no time to call anyone."

Finally relaxing, Ginny leaned back in her bed and touched her stomach with a wince. It was sore. "Did they believe you?"

"Of course. No one here is going to argue with a Malfoy," Draco told her haughtily, and Ginny felt herself grin. The earlier anxiety she'd felt faded, but she knew it wouldn't leave her entirely until she saw the child. "Do you remember…?" asked Draco.

"Sort of," admitted Ginny, frowning as she realized she could barely remembering holding Athena in her arms. Everything was a pain-filled blur. "Not really, though," she said, disappointed. "I was drugged as hell."

"Probably for the best," said Draco, curling her hand in his. "It was pretty terrifying. Pretty sure I've blocked most of it from my memory as well."
Ginny's lips quirked, and she tugged on his arm until he laid out on the bed next to her, which he did happily. It was a good thing they were narrow people. Even so, the bed was barely large enough for both of them, and Ginny giggled. Her throat felt dry, and she scratched at it absently before Draco caught on and got her some water. She gulped it all down in seconds.

"I want to see her now," insisted Ginny. "Please go and get her."

Draco nodded, jumping up with an uncharacteristic air of excitement and bounding off for a healer. A few minutes later, Draco came back into the room, and this time he was trailed by a midwife. He also had a swaddled bundle in his arms.

Ginny felt her heart in her throat, and despite her grogginess from before, she now felt as if she'd dunked fully into an ocean of water. Excitement and worry spilled over her and electrified her senses, jarring her into an awareness that she'd ever known. Everything seemed brighter around Draco and the tiny little creature in his arms, both alarmingly so, like a too-close flame.

While the midwife checked Ginny's vitals, Draco moved over to her bed and sat gingerly on the edge, turning the bundle until Ginny could see the little face there. Her breath left her all at once.

"Oh, Merlin," she said, clapping a hand over her mouth as her eyes instantly filled with tears.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" asked Draco, elated. Ginny tore her eyes away from little Athena for a moment, just so she could appreciate the pride on Draco's face. Smiling so hard her face hurt, Ginny extended her arms and accepted Athena there. The little girl's eyes had been closed until then, but as soon as Ginny pulled her against her bare skin, touching her to the area just below her collarbone, Athena's grey eyes opened and blinked right up at her.

"Wow," breathed Ginny. "She's amazing."

"The midwife wants to keep the both of you here for at least two weeks," Draco told her, stroking a curled finger over Athena's plump cheek. "Given how premature she was. They said she has some catching up to do, but she's surprisingly healthy."

"Thank Merlin," said Ginny, completely awestruck. The little girl in her arms looked powerfully like Draco, with her strawberry blonde hair being the only hint of Weasley-ness to be found. After nearly ten minutes of simply staring in wonder, Ginny looked up at Draco. "Has your mother seen her?"

"Not yet," Draco told her. "I wanted to wait until you were awake. But she knows, and she's waiting."

Ginny grinned. "Go on and bring the woman, then."

Smirking, Draco jumped up and sent a quick notice to Narcissa. He rejoined Ginny while she fed Athena for the first time, which took a few attempts but went rather well. They waited for Narcissa, but half an hour later, Narcissa still hadn't shown up.

Just as Draco was beginning to worry, the door to the hospital room entered and Narcissa Malfoy entered in all of her ostentatious glory, positively laden with bags of Merlin only knew what. Her poor house-elf Toto was right behind her with even MORE boxes and bags, all of which were too tall to even allow her to see in front of her.

"Where," said Narcissa, sweeping off her sunglasses, "is my granddaughter?"

"Come on, Narcissa," said Ginny, laughing as Narcissa hurried to her bedside, already weepy.
When the woman was seated, Ginny shifted the baby in her arms. "Here she is," Ginny said as Narcissa gasped, "Athena Molly Malfoy."

A little squeak escaped Narcissa, and she reached out, balking as she touched Athena with just the lightest sweep of her fingers on the infant's forehead. "Oh, well," managed Narcissa, "she's quite – and very – you know – " Then she sucked in a deep breath and said, "Just the loveliest little girl I've ever seen." Draco handed his mother a handkerchief, and Narcissa dabbed at her eyes.

"Isn't she?" said Ginny, practically bouncing. Athena yawned widely, making a little mewling sound as she did so. "She's small, but the healers and midwives all say she's remarkably well-developed."

"She's perfect," whispered Narcissa. She clasped her hands over her heart. After a few minutes of silence, Draco spoke up again.

"Excuse me," he said to his mother, "What in the hell is all of this stuff?" He gestured to the massive mound of shopping bags.

"Oh," said Narcissa, drying her eyes. "Gifts, of course, for their hospital stay. Some things for the baby, you know, but absolute necessities for Ginny during her stay." Narcissa looked back at Ginny and said with a squint, "Hospitals are hardly as hospitable as they claim. We can't have you living like some plebian here." She pointed at the boxes. "Those are special towels – don't use the ones here, they've touched other people – and your hair products, bath products, makeup, special loofas, a foot soaking tub – believe me, you'll want it – plus fresh clothes – don't wear hospital robes, those are hideous – "

Ginny and Draco exchanged amused looks as Narcissa went on.

" – perfumes, including air fresheners for this room – we don't want you smelling like a hospital, after all – magazines and books to read during your stay, high-quality sheets, feather pillows, the best slippers money can buy, a new house robe – "

"Okay, okay," said Ginny at last, laughing. "I'll look through it all. Thank you, Narcissa."

Narcissa dropped her hand and smiled. "And a radio," she finished. "So you can listen to your silly Quidditch games."

Ginny's heart swelled. "Thank you," she said again, softer this time. "It's good to know I'll be cared for while I'm here. Not looking forward to being here so long, but whatever we have to do to make sure Athena is alright." After that, Ginny shifted Athena in her arms to let Narcissa hold her, and the older witch took the child reverently into her arms.

"Oh, how precious," murmured Narcissa, eyes adoring as she looked over the little girl. "You are so loved, little one." For a moment, her features pinched with the effort not to cry. "And your grandfather Lucius would have loved to meet you." Ginny bit her lip, and Draco sank down next to her, his arm around her shoulders and his eyes downcast for a moment.

"And your other grandparents, too," went on Narcissa to the little baby, much to Ginny's surprise. "You are loved in every realm, little one. Never forget that."

The group fell quiet for a moment, and Ginny looked up at Draco with meaning. Nodding, he got up and cast silencing charms on the rooms. "Narcissa," said Ginny to her mother-in-law, who was now rapt with attention. "I know we said you would take her right after she was born, but…"

Narcissa reached out and touched Ginny's arm. "It's different now that she's here, isn't it?"
Ginny sighed. "She'll still have to go… just – maybe not right now." She already missed holding Athena in her arms. That day would come, she knew, but the thought of sending Athena so soon was agonizing.

"I'll keep my friend on the alert for us," said Narcissa with understanding. "Whenever you're ready, I'll be able to leave at a moment's notice. Just tell me."

"Thank you," whispered Ginny.

After a few minutes, Narcissa passed the baby back to Ginny. "Well, then, I suppose you two will be needing a nursery once you get home, won't you? Ginny, I included a catalogue for you – "

"No way. That's all you, Narcissa," Ginny informed her mother-in-law, much to the older witch's delight.

"Really?" exclaimed Narcissa. "Are you sure? You can – you know, make suggestions – "

Ginny laughed. "Uh, no. I have zero interest in decorating a nursery. Go nuts, Narcissa." She paused. "Just no pink, yeah?"

Narcissa jumped up from her seat, more excited than Ginny had ever seen her. "No pink, got it." She tapped her chin. "Oh! Perhaps some soft purples and greys, hm? Yes, yes. That sounds quite splendid." She rounded to face the young parents. "Well, I have a lot of work to do! I'll see you both soon." Kissing Draco's cheek, she waved them both good-bye and walked out with her house-elf, who had only just now managed to extricate herself from the pile of boxes that had fallen on her.

Snickering, Draco sank down on the bed again, his arms around Ginny's shoulders and his eyes on the little girl.

Surprisingly, the next two weeks in the hospital flew by for Ginny. Hell, after the year she'd had, lying around in a hospital bed for a while – and having no expectations thrust on her – was practically a vacation. Plus, between Narcissa's demands for "nothing but the best" and all the special attention from healers due to their status, Ginny wanted for absolutely nothing.

And oh, what a joy it was to watch Athena grow stronger and healthier each day.

Ginny could not believe how much she loved this child, the one that blinked up at her with wide grey eyes and little pink lips, always parted, as if she was ready to speak already and just hadn't quite figured it out. Draco stayed with them nearly every minute, though he left occasionally to visit Steep Park House and update them on Ginny and the baby's condition.

"They're all very eager to see you," he informed Ginny with a chuckle. "Especially Maggie."

"Tell her I miss her," Ginny told him as she gathered up her bags. They were finally prepared to leave, and Ginny was ready for it. "And we'll see her soon."

"I will," he said, snapping his fingers at their house-elves, who hurried forward and gathered up the ridiculous amount of gifts and other luggage they needed to take home. "Come on, love. Time to finally go home."

So they did.

Holding her daughter in her arms, Ginny left with Draco and took a carriage (as it was too
dangerous to Apparate with a baby) back to their home, where Narcissa was waiting, practically rocking back and forth on her heels. When Ginny and Draco arrived, she led them to the same corridor their room was. Just across the hall from it was a former guest room, now converted to Athena's nursery.

When Narcissa opened the doors, even Draco was impressed.

"Wow, Mother," he said, laughing. "This is nice."

"Nothing but the best," said Narcissa smugly, leading them further inside. "You've got a crib here, of course – ivory, hand-carved – and your changing table, the same. You've got two rocking chairs, special ordered from Italy, and all the lighting is magically controlled for optimal softness, so as to not damage the baby's eyes. You've got silk curtains here, hand-stitched, imported from France and designed with lace detail. Oh, and this rug! It is my absolute favorite, it's from the same designer who decorated the Minister of Magic's manor."

Looking around, Ginny took in the expensive furniture, all of which was tastefully done in shades of white, grey and lavender, just as Narcissa had told her before. It was all very lovely, but above all else, it looked comfortable. She peered in the crib and spotted several stuffed animals. They all appeared new except one, a soft little plush that looked like a little dragon.

"Hey," said Draco, reaching in and taking it out. "This was mine!"

"I know," said Narcissa, smiling gently. "One day you told me you were too old for it, but I saved it. Now it can be Athena's."

"Of course it's a dragon," snickered Ginny, taking the little plush and bouncing it in front of Athena before replacing it. "This is perfect, Narcissa. Thank you."

"Oh, good," said the other witch, looking pleased.

For a while, the three of them remained in the nursery, sitting in the chairs or stretching out on the soft white couch, enjoying the comforts of being home. That night, Ginny and Draco fell into their bed, exhausted but happier than they'd been in ages.

And so began their lives as parents, which – as it turned out – was a lot harder when they weren't constantly surrounded by healers and midwives.

Narcissa had thoughtfully included a pull-out bed in Athena's nursery, and more often than not, that was where Ginny and Draco slept. Like most newborns, Athena woke randomly and at all hours, crying for food or needing a diaper change. Each morning, when Draco and Ginny dragged themselves to the breakfast table, Narcissa would observe their haggard appearances with a deeply amused look.

But of course, the days were no easier. For the first few weeks at home, Ginny and Draco hardly had time to appreciate their daughter, mostly because she needed so much constant care. She was also too tiny for most average baby clothes, so they had to special-order suitable garments for her which still never seemed to fit right.

"I am the richest man in this country," Draco told Madam Malkin in just short of a shriek, "Make me some damn clothes that fit my little tiny daughter!"

Ginny's solution, of course, was just to leave the baby stark naked whenever possible. "Naked, naked, naked," chanted Ginny, bouncing Athena in her arms. "Babies grow too fast for clothes
anyway, Draco. Pretty sure I was naked a lot when I was a kid!"

"That's weird," he replied flatly. "Put clothes on her."

Ginny stuck her tongue out at him.

But that wasn't the only challenge they ran into. Athena still needed a lot of healer visits, and she also had a list of supplements and tonics to help her growth and development. The schedule was so grueling that Draco and Ginny sometimes had no idea what was going on. One day, Athena cried for seemingly no reason, and Ginny and Draco's frazzled brains threatened to shut down entirely. "What's wrooong?" wailed Ginny so she could be heard over Athena, who was squalling at the top of her little baby lungs.

"I have no idea!" exclaimed Draco, but then Narcissa swept in, picked up the baby, and checked her diaper.

"Oh, she's wet, you idiots," Narcissa told them as Draco and Ginny blinked stupidly. "Honestly," said the woman, carting Athena away, "sometimes I think you two have the combined parental instincts of a lizard."

Draco stared. "Wow," he said, pushing his hair through his hair and leaving it sticking straight up. "Why didn't we think of that?"

"I think we are pretty bad at this," said Ginny, a bit amused.

"Yeah," agreed Draco. "Thank Merlin for my mother." He looked over at his wife and smirked. "Hey, you know what we are good at?" He leaned close. "Sleeping."

"Ooh, we are! Let's do that!" said Ginny, jumping under the overs with Draco even though it was exactly 2:03 PM. They were asleep in four minutes.

After a little while, though, the pair finally managed to create a routine – with Narcissa's help, of course. Once they weren't quite so sleep-deprived, they were able to enjoy their time with Athena more, and they would lie her on the bed between them and admire her every facial expression, her tiny little kicks, the way she looked up at everything with wide-eyed curiosity.

"Athena," said Ginny to the little girl, "you are so amazing. Do you know that? I can't wait to see how you grow up."

"Be in Slytherin," Draco whispered to the baby, and Ginny thwapped his shoulder. The baby kicked and made a noise that sounded like a giggle. "Oh!" said Draco. "Did you hear that?" He paused. "Wait. When do babies learn to talk?"

Ginny thought about it before laughing. "I have no bloody idea."

"None? Seriously? Merlin, what are you good for?" asked Draco, jumping away from Ginny's pinch. "I'm sure someone knows. Where's my mother?"

"I don't know. Can we make her first word a swear? Just for laughs?"

"I think it would have to be a pretty simple swear word," Draco pointed out. "Let's think of one." Ginny shot up. "Bugger!"

"I think that one's too hard," said Draco, but Ginny was squinting at the clock.
"I forgot, the Notts are coming today," she said. It was the first time they'd received formal visitors since coming home from the hospital two weeks before. Just the day before, Athena had turned one month old.

"Oh, right," said Draco, sitting up with a yawn. "Go and shower first, I'll watch Athena."

Beaming, Ginny kissed Athena's head and then Draco before going off to get decent for company. Forty-five minutes later, the house-elf came to notify them of the Notts arrival, and by that time, the little family had moved to the elegant nursery.

"This is the nicest I've looked in ages," mused Ginny, checking herself out in a mirror. "Look how clean my hair is."

"Likewise," said Draco, peering over her head at his reflection. "I'd almost forgotten how good-looking I am."

The doors opened, and Draco and Ginny turned to see Theo, Lavender, and Astoria all enter, with Parvartus situated on Lavender's hip. Draco silently congratulated himself on casting two very effective memory spells. Lavender and Theo didn't remember a thing.

"Oh! Look!" exclaimed Lavender as soon as she entered. "I am so HAPPY for you two!" She rushed to Ginny and hugged her, cooing over the baby as Astoria did the same.

Theo observed all of this and then shook Draco's hand. "Nice work," he said simply, and Draco snickered.

"Thanks. I did very little, though."

After talking with everyone for a few minutes, Ginny's eyes caught sight of something on Astoria's hand. "Wait a moment," she said, before looking to Theo, who flushed a furious shade of red. Astoria beamed, practically wiggling with excitement.

"That's right!" She stuck out her hand. "Theo proposed!"

"How wonderful!" said Ginny, laughing at Theo's obvious embarrassment. "I'm so happy for you two!"

"Look at you," said Draco to Theo, laughing. "All grown up."

"Shut up, Malfoy," muttered Theo, though his lips quirked. Lavender leaned over to Ginny.

"Guess what?" said Lavender. "Theo is having a small home built for me on the property, very near the manor. I'll move into it once they're married. It's going to be the loveliest little cottage. I'm so excited!"

"We told her it wasn't necessary for her to move," Astoria told them.

"Oh, pah," said Lavender. "You two are going to be newlyweds! You need your space. Besides, I'll still be a short walk away." She bounced Parvartus on her lap. "He'll still have his Uncle Theo and Aunt Astoria always close. Barely six paces!"

"I think that sounds perfect," said Ginny sincerely. Lavender needed a fresh place to start, one outside of the manor she'd had to live in with Theo's father.

The group stayed for a little while longer before leaving the Malfoys to return to their own homes.
Over the next week, visitors came and went, all coming to give their congratulations for the newest Malfoy heir. Some Ginny didn't care for – Ministry people who didn't give a damn about Ginny, but instead wanted to be able to say they'd seen the child for themselves – but others, Ginny was glad to see.

Andromeda visited to Ginny's delight. Charlie and Fleur came later with Margrethe, though George and Vera were still in hiding and would have to wait at Steep Park House with the others.

Of course, the Zabinis paid a visit as well, just a few days after the Notts.

"Ginny!" shouted Gabrielle as soon as they entered, her arms thrust out and her beautiful face positively jubilant. She had Marseille strapped into an expensive looking stroller, which she pushed forward as Blaise trailed behind her two bags in one hand. He looked bemused, as usual.

"Hi Gabby," said Ginny, accepting her friend's hug.

"Let me see," pleaded Gabrielle, "let me see ze new little girl!"

Draco shook Blaise's hand, and then looked down at the bags. "What are those?" Draco asked.

"Oh," said Blaise. "This one here is a gift for your child – I have no idea what it is – and this is a gift for you." He paused. "It's whiskey."

"Spot on," commended Draco, tossing the gift for Athena on the couch and keeping his.

"Here, Marseille," said Gabrielle, taking her baby out of his stroller and sitting him close to Athena, who was propped up in Ginny's arms and blinking curiously at Gabrielle. "Zis is Athena Malfoy, and she is going to be your lifelong friend," she told her baby very importantly. Marseille stared, nearly as expressionless as his father.

"He doesn't look impressed," remarked Blaise with a smirk.

"Shut up," said Draco, still observing his whiskey.

"I hear you two didn't have her at the hospital," said Blaise, shifting to look over Draco's face carefully. "Why the home birth?"

Draco set the bottle aside, his eyes flickering over Blaise's for a moment before he pursed his lips and shrugged. "Came early, obviously. We didn't have time to call anyone."

"Really," said Blaise. "Not two seconds to spare for a wand wave? How strange. Who delivered it, then? You?"

"My mother helped," said Draco. The two Slytherins looked at one another, Draco keeping his features straight and Blaise's eyes narrowed just a bit.

"Hm," was all Blaise said.

Meanwhile, Gabrielle and Ginny were talking a few feet away. "How are things?" asked Ginny, as the last time they'd seen the Zabinis had been the day Gabrielle had stormed out of the café. Gabrielle's eyes flickered with sadness.

"Zey are okay. We are talking, of course… " She sighed softly. "I care for Blaise so much. It's just – I know zere is more to what happened with Jean zan he is telling me. And we boz miss Jean so much… Blaise won't admit it, but he does. Our home feels empty wizout him."
Ginny squeezed Gabrielle's hand sympathetically. She wished she could comfort Gabrielle by telling her that Jean was safe, that he had been a part of Athena's birth, but Jean had sworn them both to secrecy, so she kept her mouth shut. After a few minutes, Ginny got her our magical camera and took pictures of the babies together. At one point, Marseille made a motion that really looked like he was trying to shove Athena off the chair.

"Look at that little chap," commented Blaise of his son, smirking. "Trying to commit homicide at ten months. I waited until I was eight years old, at least."

Draco looked thoughtful. "Eight years old? Isn't that how old you were when your first step-father died?"

Blaise sipped his drink and raised a brow.

Ginny and Gabrielle quickly got their photos before either of the babies could hurt one another (or themselves), and they laughed as they looked over them while they developed. The four parents continued chatting for a few minutes, making plans for lunch later on.

However, they were interrupted by Bleaker appearing.

"Masters," said Bleaker, looking uncharacteristically irritable, "You have a visi – "

"Out of my way, elf," said a voice, before Damien Black suddenly appeared in their quaint nursery, a bag on his hand. All conversation ceased. "I can announce myself," said Damien with a wide smile. When nothing was said for a long moment, he swept a hand through the air. "Hello, sweet family."

Ginny's jaw locked tight, and she stood up, taking slow steps to Draco before handing off Athena. Within seconds, she had marched right up to Damien and jabbed her wand at his throat, which caused him to balk and take a step back.


Damien's eyes flickered to Ginny's wand, and he held up both hands, palms open in a show of peace. "Now, now, Mrs. Malfoy… You wouldn't want to do anything rash, would you." His lips quirked in a vile way. "I can assure you, the Dark Lord would be much angrier at my death than he was at Theo Nott's."

Fire burned through Ginny's veins, but when Damien's eyes flickered behind her to Draco and her daughter, she slowly pulled back her wand, though she did not retreat. They were still playing the role of good pureblood citizens. Voldemort knew they didn't get along with Damien, but the slimy bastard was right; they couldn't kill him without swift retribution.

Still. "I can't kill you, but I can tell you to get the hell out," Ginny snapped.

"Honestly, no need for such dramatics," said Damien. "I only came to give you a gift for your new daughter." He held out the bag.

Without breaking eye contact, Ginny accepted the bag and held it straight out to her side, the handle pinched between her fingers. "Bleaker," she said, eyes still locked on Damien, "throw this in the rubbish."

"Gladly," said the house-elf, glaring at Damien. He took the bag and vanished.

"Shame," said Damien, folding his newly freed hands in front of him. "That was expensive."
"I don't want anything from you," said Ginny.

"Oh, but," Damien walked around her, side-stepping Ginny so quickly that she couldn't stop him. "I'm sure that's not true... After all, I have so much to offer you and your sweet little family." He looked over Draco, who was holding Athena protectively in his arms and giving Damien the legendary glare he'd inherited from Lucius Malfoy. "Look at that," said Damien, peering at Athena. "How very small she is, so frail... I hear she was born early." He tsk'ed, looking over his shoulder at Ginny. "Weak blood causes that sometimes. You should have taken better care of yourself."

Ginny's hand squeezed her wand so tightly the wood groaned.

Draco clearly wanted to respond, but he wasn't willing to chance it while he was holding Athena. Damien smirked, sensing his unease and fear. Whereas before, Draco had been willing to throw himself at Damien's mercy, knowing he could beat him if necessary, he now had a very obvious vulnerability, and everyone in the room seemed aware of it, including Damien.

The peculiar wizard's eyes flickered over to Blaise, Gabrielle, and Marseille, all of whom had been silent during the exchange. As soon as Damien looked over at them, Blaise walked forward with deceptive casualness, hands in the pockets of his robes. The movement placed him between Damien and the rest of his family.

"And just who are you?" asked Damien to Blaise.

The darker wizard remained expressionless. "If you had any business knowing," said Blaise, "you wouldn't have to ask."

Damien narrowed his eyes, apparently caught off guard. After a moment, his eyes widened with understanding, and his malicious smirk returned. "Oh, I know now," he said, slinking closer to Blaise, who did not move. Gabrielle stood behind him, arms wrapped around Marseille. "You're Zabini, aren't you?"

Damien swept his eyes over Blaise. "I've heard all about you. Your family refused to fight for the Dark Lord in both of the previous wars, didn't they? Why did the Dark Lord allow you all to live?" He tilted his head. "I wonder."

"Often, I'm sure," replied Blaise.

This caused a crack in Damien's cool manner, and his eyes flashed. Blaise seemed unmoved by Damien's obvious irritation; he looked eye-to-eye with the other wizard, the only person in the room who was actually taller than Damien. After a moment, Damien stepped back. "You should communicate to your friend, dear cousin, the dangers of being so impulsive. After all, I'm sure you would hate for him to learn the lesson you did."

"And what lesson is that, Damien?" asked Draco icily. Damien looked back to Blaise, his features twisted.

"That everything you think is yours is actually property of the Dark Lord," said Damien, locking eyes with Blaise. "And he can take it away... at a moment's notice."

Blaise cocked a brow. "The only thing I see in this room that is property of the Dark Lord, Mister Black, is you."

This time, Damien – for a split-second – looked as though he might actually attacked Blaise. Then he reeled it in and scoffed. "Have it your way," he murmured, looking purposefully to Gabrielle and Marseille behind Blaise's shoulder. He looked back to Draco and Ginny, then.
"Oh, by the way," said Damien as he prepared to leave, "… Little Teddy says hello."

After that, he left the group, disappearing out of the doors without a second glance.

Damien's visit was hard to shake, but after a few days, Ginny and Draco finally felt Athena was well enough to visit Steep Park House. They gathered her up, piled into a thestral-drawn carriage and arrived at the home around mid-morning.

"Alright, alright," said Ginny, laughing and flushing when the entire house burst into furious yells and cries of congratulations as soon as she entered.

"YOU'RE BACK!" yelled Maggie, flying across the room. Ginny had Athena in her arms, so Draco was the one who caught Maggie, pulling her up into his arms. "Thas' her! Thas' the babe!" She gasped, completely awe-struck. "She's the best little thing I ever saw'ed!"

All the gathered witches and wizards laughed, and after the commotion died down a little, Ginny took a seat on the couch with Maggie right next to her, and people all came to see the baby. After the others had all looked and spoken, Ginny sat Maggie carefully on the couch and gingerly handed her the baby, instructing her how to hold the baby's head. Maggie held the child reverently, with all manner of caution. "I love her," she told Ginny, eyes wide. Ginny grinned and snapped a picture of Maggie, elated, holding baby Athena. "Look," said Ginny showing it to Maggie once it developed.

"Thas' the best picture ever," Maggie told Ginny. She paused and then leaned her forehead close to Athena's, and after a moment, she looked up at Ginny with a bright smile. "Oh, she's so smart, Ginny! I can see all kinds of lights in her head!"

"Wow," said Ginny, genuinely interested. "Really?"

"Mnmhm," said Maggie, petting Athena's head affectionately. "She has so much to say, when she can."

As Maggie continued to hold Ginny and the three witches spent time together, Draco hung back with Blanca, who stood with her arms crossed and her expression uncharacteristically soft.

"Thanks again," said Draco to Blanca. "I'm glad you were there."

Blanca glanced at him and her lips quirked. "No problem. I'm glad it worked out." She observed Ginny, Maggie, and Athena together on the couch. "Getting some good sleep?" teased Blanca.

Draco made a face. "Hardly," he groaned. "I feel like I'm ninety instead of nineteen."

Blanca balked. "Jesus Christ, you're only nineteen?" she put her hands on her hips. "How old is Ginny?"

"Eighteen," answered Draco, amused.

"Holy shit," said Blanca. "I feel old as fuck." She looked over at Draco with what appeared to be a new level of respect. "You guys are really somethin', you know that? You two are real mature."

"Not really," admitted Draco wryly. "We're actually both pretty childish. I think what you're seeing is the post-traumatic stress disorder." Blanca blinked up at him, and Draco smirked. "It's okay. You can laugh."
Blanca did, chuckling heartily before she clapped Draco on the shoulder and walked away.

After a while, Ginny stood up and took the baby into a smaller room to nurse. "Stop right there, heathen," said Draco, picking up Maggie before she could follow Ginny and the baby. He hauled her up off the floor and then dumped her on the couch again. "The baby needs quiet while she nurses."

"Aww," groaned Maggie, but she quickly became happy again once Draco took a seat with her. The room had been mostly vacated. Since they had a moment to themselves, Draco figured it was the best time to have a conversation he'd been avoiding.

"Maggie," he said, shifting to face her. "You know we're going to fighting soon, don't you?"

"Aye," said Maggie, inspecting her foot. Draco tapped her head to make her look at him. "Wha'?"

"That means," said Draco, trying to keep her focused, "that you are going to have to leave with the last group of civilians very soon. In a few days, actually."

This certainly got Maggie's attention. As Draco expected, her eyes immediately watered. "But – wait, no – "

"Maggie, we already kept you here longer than all the other children – "

"Please, please don't send me away," cried Maggie, tears already streaming down her face. "Jus' a little while longer – "

Draco fought with himself to be firm. "Listen to me. You need to leave soon in order to be safe. And you won't be alone, there will be people to take care of you once you get there."

"But – but – when will I come back?" whimpered Maggie.

"After the war is over," Draco told her, trying to sound reassuring. "And then you can come back and go – " he stopped, frowning as he realized that telling her she could go home was a lie. Her only guardian was dead. Maggie sensed this, and she lowered her eyes, tears spilling down her freckled cheeks.

"Where will I go…?" she asked softly.

"You'll be safe," Draco said, but that hardly seemed like a good enough promise.

Bringing up her large eyes to Draco's, Maggie bit her lip an asked, in a trembling whisper, "Could I… could I come home with you?" she asked, and before Draco could reply, she went on in a frenzied rush, "I'll be SO good, I promise! I swear, I'll – I'll do my chores, and I'll listen during my schoolin', and I'll be such a good big sister to Athena! I promise!" The last word came out a desperate squeak.

Draco stared, and when he didn't say anything, Maggie whispered, "And I won't read no one's mind. I pinky-promise."

This certainly sounded like something he should talk to Ginny about. However, after a split-second consideration, he knew what his wife would say. "Yes, Maggie," he told her, surprising himself as he gave the little girl a small smile. "After the war, you can come home with us."

Maggie's features all came alive at once. "Really?" she said breathlessly, and then she dove at Draco, clinging to his neck in a tight embrace. "Oh, thank you! Thank you!"
Draco cleared his throat, a little embarrassed. *I am an idiot,* he thought to himself a bit hysterically. He had been twelve when Maggie was born, and now he was going to be her bloody parent. Hugging Maggie back – secretly delighted to make her happy – Draco thought about how all of this was Ginny's fault, because apparently she'd softened him into a squishy bleeding heart who crumbled at the tears of a seven-year-old.

_Eugh._

Ginny, meanwhile, was just finishing up feeding Athena when a soft knock came at her door.

"It's me," said Jean's voice through the door. Ginny covered up (though it wasn't as if Jean hadn't seen practically all of her during her procedure) and called him inside.

"I was wondering where you were out there," said Ginny with a smile. "Come and see her."

"I didn't want to rush you," he said with a tender smile, moving to sit next to Ginny in the blessed quiet of the bedroom. The French wizard looked over Athena contentedly, and Ginny shifted to let him hold her, which he did. Ginny could tell that Jean was not just admiring her, but checking over her. She had a sneaking suspicion that he did not even realize he was doing it.

"She looks so healthy, and her color is better," he told Ginny. "I'm glad." He gently pressed a fingertip in Athena's hand, and the little girl gripped it. This made Jean smile again.

"I have something for you," said Ginny, before she pulled out the photograph she'd taken of Athena and Marseille. "They came to visit a few days ago." She handed the photo to Jean, who accepted it and bit his lip. A little choked noise escaped him. He quickly cleared his throat.

"Merlin," said Jean, handing back Athena and looking at the photograph. "He's grown so much since I left." He held the photo with both hands.

Ginny looked over his face. "They miss you," she told him. Jean glanced up, though his features pinched a little. He shook his head, eyes back on the photo. "It's probably for the best that I left," he said quietly to the photo. "Now they can have a normal marriage."

Ginny frowned. "To hell with normal marriages!" she exclaimed. "You three were happy."

"That's what I thought, too," murmured Jean, not looking at her. After a few minutes of silence, Jean said quietly, "I helped deliver Marseille too, you know. I would have been there no matter what, but especially since we thought he might be mine…" Jean sighed, eyes low even when he smiled a little. "I was a little disappointed, you know? When we saw that he saw Blaise's. I mean, don't get me wrong, I still loved him, of course. But I'd never considered before that I might have biological children."

He swallowed over a lump in his throat. "And since I have no blood family that I know of, that was… sort of difficult to move past. But then with Gabby, it was suddenly possible." He turned the photo in his hands listlessly. "It was easier for all of us that he was Blaise's. But I still had a little hope that – maybe someday, you know if Gabby wanted…" He bit his lip again, and this time Ginny saw – to her distress – that he looked close to tears. For the first time, she fully appreciated how difficult it was for him to be at Steep Park House in a home full of strangers, not working, not seeing or speaking with any of his family.

"Maybe," said Ginny, reaching out to touch his arm, "After the war, you could talk to Blaise…"
Jean's features hardened. "He called me a Mudblood, Ginny."

"I know," murmured Ginny. "He was wrong to do that." She didn't follow up her comment with anything else. There was no excusing what Blaise did. However, she had a sneaking suspicion that although Blaise had surely meant that word on many occasions, he had not been sincere in his argument with Jean. Slytherin men had a terrible time with emotions, and Blaise perhaps more than anyone. Draco had called Ginny many names during their first (several) meetings, both before the war and after, and Ginny had done the same. Hell, they'd tried to kill each other on several occasions. Still, it didn't seem fitting to mention this to Jean. He didn't deserve to be abused.

"Thank you for the picture," said Jean, tucking it into his robes. He seemed to snap out of his morose behavior in just a few seconds, and when Draco arrived, he shook the other wizard's hand and left. Draco dropped onto the bed next to Ginny and their now sleeping daughter.

After a moment, Draco asked quite casually, "Do we have any spare rooms in the manor?"

Ginny laughed. "Uh," she said, "Yeah, like fifty."

"Oh, good," said Draco, drumming his fingers on his stomach. "Because I told Maggie we would adopt her after the war." He looked over at her.

Ginny stared. For several seconds, nothing was said. Then Ginny let out a sudden burst of laughter. "You're bloody joking!" she exclaimed, startling the baby awake. "You softie, you," she said, grinning and pulling him over for a kiss.

"I'm sorry I didn't ask you," he said. "I'm pathetic, I know. I should renounce my Slytherin-ship."

He tossed up his hands. "She was bloody crying!"

"I love you," Ginny pronounced to him, and leaned in to kiss him again.

Author's Note: I hope you all enjoyed this break from the misery of the last fifteen chapters because it's back to our regularly scheduled shitstorm in the next chapter.
Chapter 35

Author's Note: Thank you for all the support! Gear up. We are closing in on the end…

The streets of Diagon Alley were barren.

Only a brave few treaded the streets, stirring the occasional paper or passing the darkened windows. Any development that had taken place over the last several months had come to a stop. The stage where the Death Eaters had executed two people in front of a large crowd remained where it was, empty and ominous.

George and Vera's shop – one of the main trading centers in the Alley – was also empty. It had been left unattended since that day, when they had both been forced to flee. Other shop-owners dared not even pass it, for fear that they would be taken in and questioned by the malevolent Regulator taskforce.

Diagon Alley had been on its way to recovery; now, however, those citizens who had been able to overlook all the small nuances of a totalitarian government now had nothing to serve as a blinder. There were no happy shoppers. The holiday season was done. All that was left was the grim reminder of Voldemort's presence, of his never-ending conquest of British magical society.

Fog hovered in the sky, blotting out the sun. Some of it sank low and sifted over the cobblestones, disguising the path so that the once bustling shopping district looked more like a bog.

And the world was quiet.

At least, that is, until a figure stepped up to George and Vera's shop, unlocking the door and letting himself inside. The open area was still filled with shelves lined with products. The time-card machine waited, a bit dusty from lack of use in the recent weeks. There was still gold in the register, and a list of items that needed to be done.

Something rustled in the back of the store, and the figure turned sharply, alerted to someone nearby.

However, when the face appeared, it was the warm friendly features of the shop-boy, William. When he saw who was there, his face lit up in a smile. "George!" he exclaimed, hurrying forward as the redhead stepped out of the shadows. Young William let out a breath of relief and set aside the box he'd been toting. "I wasn't sure I'd see you again, sir," he said. "You and Vera disappeared weeks ago!"

George smiled grimly. "Sorry to have worried you. We had a lot going on." His eyes flickered at the aprons hanging on a hook nearby. They each had nametags. "William," he said to the boy. "I'm not supposed to be here. The Ministry can't know. But I need to get some supplies."

William nodded, frowning now. "I've been trying to do some cleaning, at least. And keep people from breaking in, stealing stuff. Some of the other shops have been getting looted." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "I think people are starting to panic. You know, on account of all the deaths. Those crazy Regulators killed three more people yesterday, right in the street!"

"How terrible," said George. "You should keep yourself safe."

"I'll do my best," said William with a firm nod.
George's eyes flickered over to a pile of boxes that were set aside and carefully wrapped. "What are those?"

The younger wizard looked over. "Oh," he said, wiping his dusty hands off on his robes. "Those are the donations, you know? For that charity you and Vera always go to every few weeks? I can load 'em up, if you want. The thestral carriage is out back, ready to go." He shrugged. "I would have taken them myself, but you guys never let me go, so I'm not sure where you take them."

George observed the boxes. "Load them up for me. I'll take them." He took out a handful of Galleons and placed them in William's open hand. "For your work."

"Thanks!" said William, before he took the boxes out back and put them in a large open carriage hidden behind the shop. A dozing thestral awoke and looked curiously at the two wizards. Once William was done, George climbed into the driver's seat.

"I'll be seeing you," said George to William, who smiled and waved him off.

Rapping the reigns against the thestral's back, George sat back and let the creature fly off on his usual path. Without direction, the thestral flew off above Diagon Alley and transported the carriage over miles and miles of land.

When it finally came to a stop a few hours later, it was in a clearing that did not seem to be near any villages or towns. George climbed out, looking around him curiously. As he did so, his features trembled and melted, shifting and changing shape.

By the time his group of Regulators appeared, Damien Black looked once more like himself.

"Patrol this area," he told the Regulators, his grey eyes narrowed. "I've a feeling we will have some company very soon."

The Regulators spread out, but Damien remained with the carriage of supplies, his hands in the pockets of his robes and his expression vigilant.

At the Malfoy Manor in Wiltshire, Ginny Malfoy observed herself in a mirror and felt quite satisfied.

After a few months of being at home – and not being pregnant – she felt like herself again. It was nice to finally have a clear head and a decent amount of energy. The last year felt like a decade. Ginny was glad to be moving forward.

Twisting and turning in front of the long mirror, Ginny observed her changed body. After having Athena, she had lost a lot of weight, but her body wasn't exactly like it had been before, of course. She wasn't surprised. Ginny liked the additional curves and cushion; it made her feel womanly, something she didn't always feel before.

And Draco obviously didn't have a problem with it, Ginny thought with a snicker. Not that Draco's approval was mandatory for her self-confidence, but it certainly was nice. As if to prove her point, Ginny looked up at that moment and caught a glimpse of Draco watching her from their room.

"Bloody lecher!" she exclaimed, tugging her house-robe around her with a grin.

Draco came up behind her with a snigger and wrapped his arms around her, pressing a kiss to her neck. "I'm sorry," he said quite insincerely. "I can't help myself. I mean, really. Look at you. What am I supposed to do?"
"It's alright," said Ginny. "I spy on you, too."

"Oh, there's no need for that," said Draco, turning her gently to face him and keeping his arms wrapped around her. "Any time you want me naked, you only need to say the word."

"The word," said Ginny with a smirk.

"Done." Draco reached down and picked her up behind her legs, carrying her into their bedroom and dropping her onto their bed, hands deftly pulling open her robe even as she laughed.

"Aren't we supposed to be – getting ready – " she asked between kisses " – to go the house?"

"Uh," said Draco intelligently, "Is it urgent?"

"Nope," replied Ginny gleefully.

"Oh, good." Draco shifted and kissed a line down Ginny's stomach, stopping at the hem of her underwear and curling his hand warmly over her hip. Moments later, he made good on his promise to get naked, and the two wrapped up in each other's arms under the warmth of the early morning sun as it filtered into their bedroom through the large windows.

"I love you so very much," Ginny told him breathlessly, just before he pressed inside her and they both groaned. Her chest briefly swelled with emotion, and she gripped him to her. Draco's response was to curl her closer and kiss down her neck to her collarbone. With each thrust, he managed to press his lips to a new part of her, his movements nothing short of worship.

"You are my everything," he told her in a whisper, and Ginny bit her lip before tugging his mouth against hers again, their tongues meeting and their hips pushing against one another. The sensations pulsing between them proved to be too much just a few moments later, and Ginny stifled her cry against his chest before dragging her feet across the fine silk sheets, savoring the feeling. Draco barely lasted longer than Ginny, and as soon as it was done, he stretched out next to her like a lazy cat and wrapped her fully in his arms, skin to skin. "You better be taking your bloody potion," he murmured, and Ginny made a face.

"Oh, believe me, I am. Getting the damn potion every day myself just to make sure."

"Good," said Draco. "Damn fertile Weasley womb."

Ginny hit him and laughed. "Jerk."

The two lazed about in the bed for a few minutes before reluctantly getting up, showering, and then getting dressed. They went to Athena's nursery to get her, and Narcissa was there, happily bouncing the delighted baby in her lap. "Are you two off?" asked Narcissa, pouting when she had to hand the baby over.

"Just for a little while," said Draco, extending a finger to Athena, who took it and gurgled. "We'll be back for dinner. Visiting some friends is all." The young parents prepared to leave with Athena.

"Oh," said Draco to Narcissa, "by the way, we have another daughter now. You'll get to meet her later."


"Good-bye Narcissa!" called out Ginny, laughing as she and Draco hurried away with no further explanation to the baffled witch.
"What're you talking about?" shrieked Narcissa to their retreating backs.

A little while later, Ginny and Draco arrived at Steep Park House with Athena in tow. They placed the baby in her holder in the dining room, where Maggie was excitedly waiting, practically rocking back and forth on her heels. After greeting them both with a delighted squeal, she settled down on the floor to play with Athena. It would be her last chance to do so before the rest of the non-fighters were removed from Steep Park House to the safe zone in the United States. Draco and Ginny both wanted to spend as much time with her as possible before that happened.

Unfortunately, Steep Park House had become quite crowded in the last few days. A surprise group of Muggleborns – mostly comprised of children – had been rounded up by the Snatchers and brought to Draco's team of "exterminators." Draco hadn't ordained it; the Snatchers had simply "lucked out." However, he couldn't turn them away from the Ministry without looking suspicious, so he'd been forced to ask the people at Steep Park House to take on even more Muggleborn children in their last trip to the safehouse portkey.

Sadly, without George and Vera's steady stream of supplies (which had been unceremoniously cut off when they'd been forced to flee after Vito and Xeno's deaths), the new Muggleborn children – many of whom had been on the run and living in terrible conditions – were without some basic necessities.

"Draco," Maggie had said, tugging on his sleeve. She pointed to the new children, all of whom were scared and dirty. "They need new clothes! And look, that little girl doesn't even have any shoes on."

"They'll have to do without for now," Draco had told her, frowning. Maggie had seemed very bothered by all this, but Draco had reassured her that all the children would get what they needed once they had passed through the portkey with Maggie and into the United States, where a group was waiting to take care of them for the duration of the war. That had been a few days ago, and although the new children were still doing without, they had calmed quite a bit.

"Oh, Athena," said Maggie, now happily talking to the little baby and dangling a toy in front of her while Athena giggled with delight. "We're goin' ta be the best sisters ever! And I'm'a goin' ta help you and teach you and love you forever and ever!" Suddenly, Maggie stopped playing with Athena and looked up to glare at one of the Americans, Michael. "Ew!" she said. "Stop thinkin' about kissing Luna, tha's gross."

Michael, who was standing right next to Luna, turned beet-red. Luna's eyes also widened, and she shifted to look curiously at Michael.

"Maggie!" admonished Draco, trying not to laugh. "Shields!"

"I can't help it sometimes," said Maggie, unconcerned. Michael cleared his throat and muttered something about needing to check the perimeters of the house. Then he left very quickly, as did Luna, who looked dazed. Draco shook his head.

"I've got to figure out a better way to help her," he said to Ginny. "She's not going to have any bloody friends at school if people are afraid she's reading their minds."

Ginny shrugged. "Maybe it won't be so bad. Depends on what house she's in."

"She's a Gryffindor," said Draco flatly.

"How do you know?" she asked.
"Because, Ginny, yesterday she tried to slingshot herself to the top of a tree so she could save a baby squirrel." Draco shook his head in despair. "If that isn't a prime example of Gryffindor idiocy, I don't know what is."

"Mm," hummed Ginny, grinning. "Point made." She stood. "Hey, would you mind watching them for a minute? I wanted to talk to Blanca." Draco waved her away, and Ginny stood and slipped away from the children, wandering the house until she came to the small alcove Blanca had taken for an office of sorts. It only had a small table with a bin under it, along with a single chair, but it was where Blanca could most often be found.

When Ginny came upon her, Blanca was bent over the desk writing on a piece of parchment. Ginny figured it was a report. Blanca was always recording things.

"Hey," said Ginny, before hesitating. "Are you busy? I can leave you alone if you want."

Blanca looked up and blinked a few times, as if she wasn't sure who she was looking at for a minute. Then she relaxed a little and her lips quirked. "Nah, it's fine. Take a seat, Red." She snapped her fingers at a nearby chair, and it zoomed over the floor to settle right next to her. Ginny sat in it and glanced curiously at the parchment.

"Doing work?"

Blanca, who still had a quill in her hand, looked over at the parchment and made a little huff that sounded like a laugh. "Uh, no. Actually, I'm writing a letter to my wife."

"Oh," said Ginny softly. "I didn't realize you had a way to send letters from here."

"I don't," admitted Blanca, looking back at the parchment and leaving her gaze on it. "But I write them anyway. You know, just in case I don't make it back… This way, at least she'll know I was thinking about her." The quill ticked back and forth in Blanca's hand. "Every day," she finished in a murm. 

Ginny's heart constricted. Merlin, she hoped this war ended soon. "I am so grateful you're all here," she told Blanca as sincerely as she could.

Blanca responded to this with a subtle smile. "Me, too." She shifted higher in her chair and set her quill aside. Her tone resumed its more customary tone. "So, what's up?"

Biting her lip, Ginny took a moment to answer. She had been thinking about this for a while, and she wanted to be careful in how she approached it. At last, she asked, "Do you know who Bellatrix Lestrange is?"

"Oh yeah," said Blanca, shifting up a leg so she could balance her arm on a knee. "I got a file six inches thick on that crazy bitch."

Ginny nodded. "She's every bit as terrible as you've heard… and every bit as powerful." She looked directly at Blanca. "She murdered my parents."

Blanca's brows knitted together, her eyes flashing in that dangerous way that was uniquely hers.

"And I'm not the only one who's lost family because of her," went on Ginny. "She's killed dozens and dozens of people. She's ruthless. And unfortunately, she is very, very skilled in combat." She hesitated again, unsure if she should even be putting this to Blanca, who had already put so much on the line for them. "Blanca, the reason I'm talking to you about this is because… I truly believe you might be the only person here who could stop her, the only person who could match her
strengh and skill in combat. I don't – I don't want to put the responsibility for her squarely on your shoulders, but... "

Blanca seemed to think about this for a moment. Then she shifted forward and put her elbows on her knees, eyes dark and serious. "She gonna be at Voldemort's little graduation party?"

Ginny paused. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Good," said Blanca. "Then I'll tell you what, Ginny. On the day we fight, I want you to go on that battlefield, and I want you to point this bitch out to me." She waved her own pointed finger. "And when you do, you and me are going to go after her together." She locked eyes with Ginny before murmuring lowly, "...And we will ruin her fucking day. Got it?"

Ginny felt a surge of confidence burst through her chest. "Got it."

"Let's make it happen," said Blanca with a grin.

The two exchanged appreciative looks, but the moment was broken after only a few seconds. The door swung open and Blanca's Ministry informant, David, burst in. "Blanca, I need to talk to you. Now."

Blanca shot up. "Get Draco," she told Ginny sharply, and the younger witch jumped to her feet, terror suddenly filling her at the look on David's face. "Ben!" called out Blanca, and her second-in-command appeared just as Draco and Ginny both returned.

"Alright," said Blanca, already looking pissed off. "What is it?"

David swallowed thickly. "I just decoded some intel I got at the Ministry. Things are worse than we thought." He glanced briefly at the others before shaking his head, looking shaken. "Blanca," he said, looking directly at her. "Voldemort is planning an attack on the Parliament."

Next to her, Draco's mouth dropped open. "The Muggle Parliament?"

"Yes," said David, and Ginny felt her bones turn to liquid. "Just a few days after the Commencement Ceremony at Hogwarts. That's what he plans to announce there, that's why he wants everyone in attendance. He plans to take over ALL of Great Britain, not just the magical portions."

"You've got to be kidding me," said Ben, looking horrified.

"And he's not even going to be covert about it," went on David. "This isn't going to be an infiltration." He bravely met Blanca's wide-eyed gaze. "He's planning on exposing ALL magical people... to everyone."

Blanca stared in disbelief. "So you're telling me this son of a bitch is going to break the International Statue of Secrecy?" she asked, her fingers curled in tight claw-like positions at her side. "For the entire fucking world to see?"

"Yes," breathed David shakily. "Which can only mean he plans to create similar uprisings in other magical governments as well."

Blanca took a step back, dragging her hand down her face. For the first time ever, Ginny detected a tremble in her movements. Blanca kept her hand over her face as she thought, eyes low. "So now," she said after a long moment, "that also means that if we fail on the day of the Commencement Ceremony, we aren't just losing Great Britain." She looked up at the others. "All magical people
across the entire world will be jeopardized."

Silence hovered between the small group, strangled by tension. Ginny had never felt such fear in her entire life.

At last, Blanca dropped her hand, revealing a face set in hard lines. "We've got to get word to the President."

"How?" asked Ginny weakly. "We can't send owls, we can't use a Floo – " But Blanca was already on her way out of the room. She shoved open a door and crossed over the dining room on her way to the front doors of the illustrious manor. Outside, grey clouds gathered ominously in the sky, and thunder rolled in the distance.

As soon as Blanca was clear of the door, she pulled out her wand and hurled it forward. 
"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" From the tip of her wand burst an immense ethereal falcon, wings spread wide. It crowed at the sky and then turned sharply, wings flapping as it paused in front of its creator.

"Tell the President what we learned here," Blanca told her Patronus, eyes blazing. "Let him know that we have a very short period of time before the entire magical world is compromised, and that everything depends on our victory in June. Now go!"

The spectral falcon clicked its jaws in understanding, turning in mid-air and beating its wings furiously as it climbed into the sky. Blanca clenched her hands at her sides. "AND TELL HIM TO SEND ME SOME MORE GODDAMN AURORS!" she bellowed after it.

With that, Blanca turned and swept past everyone else, slamming the doors behind her. Draco reached out blindly and took Ginny's hand, and together, they returned to the house and sat down with Maggie and Athena, two little girls who were none the wiser to the peril that surrounded them.

That same night, Draco and Ginny said good-bye to Maggie.

"We'll see you soon," Ginny told the little girl, who was now weeping. "I know you don't want to go, but you'll be safe – "

"Please, please," pleaded Maggie. "Let me stay – "

"Maggie," said Draco firmly. "You have to. We've already been over this." He kneeled in front of her. "In just a few short weeks, the war will be over and you can come home. I swear." It would be a little longer than a few weeks – the battle was set for June, and they were currently only in the first week of April – but Draco knew Maggie never paid attention to dates anyway. To a seven-year-old, a few weeks and two months may as well be the same thing.

Maggie sniffled, her cheeks red and her eyes puffy. "But what if those bad men hurt you?" she asked in a whisper. "Like they did with my Pa?"

Draco tilted her chin up. "They won't. We won't let them."

At last, Draco and Ginny got Maggie to bed, only to find the room was crowded with children who had come in during the last group. Draco wasn't even sure of all their names. It wouldn't matter; they were all leaving in the morning with Maggie.

Anyone who could not fight would finally be gone. It was only the warriors that would be left.
With one last look at Maggie, sleeping fitfully in her bed, Draco and Ginny took Athena and left Steep Park house.

The next morning, while Draco worked at the Ministry and Ginny stayed at the Malfoy Manor with Narcissa and Athena, Ben rounded up the departing group at Steep Park House. He took Renz, Matt (the fellow who once blew up a lake), and Richard. Vera also volunteered to join them, and Ben agreed.

Together, the adults gathered up the remaining children, including Maggie, who was determined to help out as much as possible. She kept the other children quiet and in-line. When Renz thanked her, she told him quite proudly that she was practicing her new "big sister" role.

Ben led the group away from Steep Park House, with Blanca watching from the steps.

Together, the group walked into the quiet forest that surrounded their hiding spot. Ben kept to the front, while his people flanked the sides. Vera watched from the back, wand in hand. They’d only just made it out of Blanca’s wall of wards when someone hurried up behind Vera.

"George!" she exclaimed, putting a hand over her heart. Ben turned around sharply, then exhaled.

"What're you doing, Weasley?" he asked, eyes narrowed in irritation. "You scared the hell out of us."

"Sorry!" piped up George. "I just wanted to help." He looked to Vera with a small smile. "Didn't want you alone." He reached out for her hand, and Vera accepted it, smiling. Rolling his eyes, Ben turned and continued forward. The group marched on, with the children crowded between them. After a little while, George leaned over to Vera.

"How much further, you think?"

"Not very far," whispered Vera back. The woods around them were strangely still and silent; despite the bright morning sky, the forest floor was spotted with shadows from the overhanging branches. Only pockets of sunshine managed to struggle through, creating rays of dusty light.

"Then we can go back to the house."

"Good," said George, squeezing her hand.

They walked on for a few steps, but the couple came to a stop when one of the children in front of them stumbled. George reached out and extended a hand. The child who grabbed it was Maggie.

"Thanks," said Maggie, looking up at George's face. He started to release her, but Maggie gripped his hand, her face contorting with confusion. George hesitated, and then he tried to pull his hand away. This time, Maggie let it go, and her eyes widened with horror.

"You're not George," she whispered.

Vera looked at Maggie, her brows furrowed. "Maggie? What?"

But Maggie was already on her feet, her features twisted with terror. She turned and fled, screaming. "HE'S NOT GEORGE! HE'S NOT GEORGE!"

Ben and the other Aurors whirled in their spots, narrowed gazes falling on the man next to Vera. The wizard who wore George's face scowled and snatched his wand from the pocket of his robes.
"CAPTURE THEM!" he roared to figures unseen, and as he did so, Regulators burst from hidden spots all around the group. "AND KILL THAT BRAT!" he shouted, striking out with his wand in the direction of Maggie, who scrambled away from the group and into the trees.

"Get the kids out!" Ben shouted to Vera and Renz, pulling out his own wand and cutting a line through the air with it. The two Regulators nearest to him were launched off their feet and sent flying into a thick tree, each one cracking under the force of the impact.

A battle broke out in a furious haze of curses and counter-curses. Spells flew through the air, slamming into trees and knocking through branches, filling the air with buzzing magical energy. The children screamed and scattered, many fleeing between the trees and others ducking to hide. Vera and Renz tried frantically to corral them, but the Regulators were soon on them as well, hurling curse after curse.

"Get to the Ministry for back-up!" snapped Damien to one of the Regulators, who nodded and disappeared.

When one of the Regulators reeled back to throw a spell at two fleeing children, Matt rushed forward with a blaze of magic and the Regulator went spinning off the ground, flying through the air until the spell sent him crashing to the ground with such force that the ground caved beneath him.

In the Ministry of Magic, a Regulator by the name of Davies burst into the office of the Muggleborn Registration Commission.

Draco Malfoy looked up from his desk.

"Malfoy," said Davies breathlessly, shutting the door behind him. "You've got to come quick. Damien led us to a group of Muggleborn children trying to escape to a Portkey!"

Draco shot up from his desk. "Who else knows?"

Davies looked confused. "No one! Just now – they're all still there – "

"Avada Kedavra!"

Davies hit the ground, still and dead. Without a second thought, Draco used his wand to hurl the body into a trunk in his office. Then he rushed out.

Damien Black, still disguised as George Weasley, sneered and launched a spell at Vera as she tried to shield two children. However, his attack was interrupted by a beam of magic that split his spell in mid-air. Furious, Damien whirled to face the American, Ben, who glared with his wand extended.

Damien flung his wand in Ben's direction with a nasty curse, but Ben easily deflected it, and the two crashed in a flurry of spells that flew in all directions, bursting through tree branches and dashing over earthy, leaf-covered floors. Each time Damien threw a spell at Ben, the American wizard deflected it and responded with one of his own, each of which came closer and closer to hitting its mark. Haggard, Damien shifted to face Ben with a sneer.

"You're skilled," he told the American. "I'll give you that. Perhaps I should try things your way?"

With that, Damien shifted his features into a perfect replica of Ben's. Rather than alarming his opponent, however, Damien's change seemed to have no effect at all.
"So far as I'm concerned, Damien Black," taunted Ben, "you've just given yourself an upgrade."

Damien's borrowed features lifted in shock. How did this wizard know who he was? Furious now, Damien fired off another spell, but Ben blocked it and turned it around on him. The two continued to fight, and Ben pushed forward, forcing Damien to step back.

"It's different when you're not fighting children, isn't it?" growled Ben, bearing down on him.

Damien scowled. "You tell me," he hissed before shifting form again, this time taking on the appearance of a child. Then he broke the combat and sprinted off, rushing to join the remaining children as they hurried off towards the portkey.

"Fuck!" Ben turned and rushed after him. Just before Damien reached the group of children, Ben lashed out with his wand and snatched Damien's fake body around its middle with a glowing rope of magic. Shrieking, Damien tried to claw at the ground, but Ben yanked him back and flung him across the forest floor until he hit a tree. As soon as he fell to the ground, he reverted to his true form.

Damien staggered to his feet, barely able to block the next curse and then the next, with no time or energy to retaliate. Looking around, he spotted the other Regulators, many of whom had been killed or subdued. "GET OVER HERE!" he yelled to the remaining four, all of whom rushed to him and began to fire at Ben, who was forced to duck behind a tree.

"I want that bloody portkey!" shouted Damien to his Regulators. The group turned and rushed off in the direction the children had gone with Vera and Renz.

Ben and Richard ran as hard as they could behind them, but Damien and his Regulators were ahead of them. Coming to a sudden stop, Ben looked to Richard, who nodded. Together, they brought up their wands and raised them high.

"ARBORETUM MORTIS!" they shouted together, slamming their wands to the ground. A shockwave of magic jumped out from the tips of their wands and climbed into the trees from their roots. The massive pillars of wood and pine around them shuddered to life, and as Damien and his Regulators ran towards the children, large branches began to move and sway. All at once, the trees lining their path to the children moved forward like great large arms and began slamming into the ground, beating the earth with powerful hits that made the earth tremble. Damien barely managed to skid to a stop to avoid being struck by a large leafy branch. The Regulator next to him was not so lucky, and his scream was cut short by the crushing weight of a massive branch. He was dead before the tree even pried its limb out of the indentation it had made.

Damien turned in his spot just long enough to send a heated glare in Ben and Richard's direction. However, he could not pause for long, because the trees were still moving, swinging, fighting. One Regulator was caught by a hit and sent flying through the air, where he crashed out of sight.

Marshall, one of the Regulators Damien had brought with him from Russia, panicked and tried to let loose a spell that would stop the trees. Fire burst from the tip of his wand and caught the branch, and the tree pulled away for a moment as if in pain. However, it only continued its assault on the ground, and when it did, the fire jumped from its branches to the ground and spread in a growing carpet of flame.

"You bloody idiot!" shouted Damien, jumping away as the fire consumed the forest floor in a matter of seconds.

"Contain the fire!" Ben ordered to Richard, before he jumped forward past the flame and went after
Damien, who had turned and fled, abandoning his Regulators who were trapped. By this time, they were completely encircled in a wall of flame. Ben shot a curse after Damien, who was forced to stop and face him.

Ben's fury was nearly as palpable as the fire. He sent another curse at Damien, but the other wizard managed to block it. The area around them was growing tighter because of the heat, and so the two wizards only had so much room to maneuver. Damien managed to fire several spells at Ben that nearly hit him, so Ben backed off and locked gazes with the other wizard.

"Do you want to know what a real metamorphmagus can do?" asked Ben, eyes narrowed. Just as Damien processed this, Ben closed his eyes – and then completely vanished. The Russian wizard's eyes widened, and he scowled deeply, sweat pouring down his face.

Ben was not truly invisible, but had only taken on the colors of the flames behind him. Damien tried to keep track of the vague outline of his movements, but he had no time. Ben was firing on him time after time, each second growing bolder, and Damien could barely keep him off.

However, just when Ben re-appeared in front of Damien with his wand near the other wizard's throat, a little girl's scream sounded just behind them, where the fire had spread and consumed the woods. Ben jerked around, trying to see who it was, and Damien took advantage of that moment to hit him with a curse.

Ben flew back, landing just short of the fire's heat. Screaming in agony, he clutched his arm, which was steadily growing black. Damien hurried forward to finish him off, but Richard and Renz both appeared then, and they fired at Damien so that he had to hurry back.

At last, seeing that his Regulators were caught and there was no way to win, Damien let out a wordless shout of rage and then vanished, disappearing from his spot.

Richard dropped next to Ben and hurriedly contained the curse, assuaging Ben's pain and helping him to stand. Renz created shields for them to pass through the fire, and together, they helped Ben stagger out of the forest and into the clearing several yards away, where the portkey waited.

Ben turned and looked back, chest heaving as he hacked against the smoke that filled his lungs.

The entire forest was on fire. Only Blanca's wards would keep Steep Park house from burning as well. "Fuck," he groaned, trying to stand under his own power. He looked back to the gathered children, knowing without even counting that many of them were missing. He looked back to the burning forest, his heart a heavy stone weight. "We've got to find them."

A dangerously low voice sounded suddenly behind the group. "What – happened?"

Ben turned in his spot to face Draco Malfoy as he approached. "Damien Black was here, disguised as George Weasley," said Ben dully. "I don't know how he found us, but he must've been waiting. He had a whole team of Regulators."

"And where is he now?"

Ben shook his head. "We got his Regulators, but… Black is gone. He apparated out when he knew he'd lost."

Which meant he would be back as soon as he'd recovered. Draco suspected the only reason Voldemort was not immediately upon them was because Damien did not want to admit his defeat. He also did not know exactly what was going on here, or who Ben was. He would need more answer before going to the Dark Lord.
But it wouldn't take him long.

Turning in his spot, Draco observed the remaining children. For a long moment, nothing was said. His chest tightened, but he refused to acknowledge it. To even think.

"Where is Maggie?"

Ben hesitated, shame etched into his features. "I don't know," he admitted. "Some of the kids, they panicked and ran…" He swallowed tightly. "She was the one who told us it wasn't George. If she hadn't warned us, we would have led him straight to the portkey."

Draco swallowed hard. Turning swiftly, he began to march towards the blazing inferno that had, only minutes ago, been a forest. "Malfoy!" called out Ben, but Draco marched on, more and more determined as he got to the fire.

The flame was so hot that he could not even step close enough to see. It seemed to melt the very air. However, he wasn't going to leave yet. Not until he knew. Taking out his wand, Draco began pulling the heat from the air so that the flames cooled. Hurrying up behind him, Vera began doing the same, and Renz, Richard, and Ben came up – keeping the children nearby – to help. It took nearly half an hour, but the flames finally died, and only the ashen forest remained. Trees, looking skeletal and black, curled sadly over the ground. The earth was scorched, and only a few pockets of dirt and leaves remained undamaged.

Wandering as if in a terrible daze, Draco walked into the smoldering ruins with the wind whistling ominously around him. He called out Maggie's name and heard no response.

The others waited behind him, silent.

"MAGGIE!" he called out again, fighting off the urge to tremble. No, he would not. She was here, somewhere. "MAGGIE!"

There was no answer, but Draco refused to lose hope. No, she was here, she was –

And that was when he spotted something, a blackened shape on the ground. His heart stopped. Smoke continued to waft through the air, creating an irritating fog, but Draco did not even notice it. The small black outline on the ground was the only thing his heart or mind would allow.

He turned and walked stiffly towards it. Most of the body was so thick with ash, the features were impossible to make out. It could have been a log on the ground for all Draco knew.

Except for the shoes.

Barely visible at the edge of the charred body was a pair of glittery red shoes, the very same Draco and Ginny had gifted to Maggie that Christmas. She wore them every single day.

Now they were the only spot of color in an otherwise black landscape. Behind Draco, Vera let out a cry and covered her mouth. Ben sank into a crouch, his face in his hands. Draco swayed in his spot, his features tight and unmoving. He turned his head away from the burnt corpse, his hands clenched at his sides.

"Who cast the spell?" he asked.

Richard cleared his throat. "One of the Regulators. Not sure which one."

Draco turned slowly in his spot to face them. "Where are they?"
Ben looked up, making a motion as if he might stop Draco as he passed. However, he seemed to think better of it, and he lowered his hand. As soon as Draco stepped in front of the captive Regulators, though, he turned quickly to Vera. "Get the kids to the portkey, now. We'll try to find the rest and send them separately."

Draco stood in front of the bound Regulators now, wand in hand. His grey eyes were steel.

"Now, Vera!" snapped Ben.

The witch jumped into action, pulling the children away as quickly as she could. However, Draco did not wait for them to depart. He did not even seem to know they were there. Instead, he reached down and picked up a fallen wand of one of the Regulators. "Prior Incantato," whispered Draco. An echo of the last spell seeped out of the wand, but it was not the one Draco was looking for.

So he lashed out at the wand's owner with a curse of his own. "Avada Kedavra!"

The Regulator fell over with a dull thud. A few of the older children hesitated, still within view. The entire group seemed frozen as it watched Draco move from Regulator to Regulator, looking through each wand. When he did not find what he was looking for, he ended their life with a cold jet of green light.

One of the older Muggleborn children stared in disbelief. "Wizards can do that?" he asked in a murmur. "Kill someone? Just like that?"

"No," said Colin Creevy without taking his eyes off Draco. "You have to really mean it."

"Avada Kedavra!" Another Regulator fell. Draco picked up the last wand. "Prior Incantato." This time, the spell that echoed was all flame and heat. Draco's head twisted in that Regulator's direction, and Ben shoved the others back at the portkey. This time they listened, and the group hurried off just as Draco withdrew his wand and pointed it directly at the final Regulator.

The last thing Ben saw as he glanced back was the Regulator high in the air, straining against the vicious grip of Draco's curse. As soon as they got to the portkey, that was when they heard it – a long, strangled scream from the forest, a gurgled cry of pain that lasted a terribly long time. They could no longer see Draco or the Regulator, and for that, Ben was glad.

Finally, the remaining children were delivered through the portkey, and they were safe.

Still in the smoking remains of the forest, Draco Malfoy walked aimlessly, ashen ground crunching underfoot. Everything around him was silence. Even the wind seemed to have stopped. The hems of his robes dragged in the dark soot, but it was blood that stained his robes and speckled his face. He did not even bother to wipe it away; he didn't care.

After a few minutes, Draco found himself near the crumbling body of Maggie once more. A few spots of glittery red peeked out at him tauntingly, and Draco sank to the ground next to it. Burying his face in his arms, Draco let out a whimper. He was now completely and utterly alone. Ben and all the others had left.

He stayed that way for what felt like a long while, lost in a haze of misery. For the first time in years, he truly felt like dying.

"Hullo?"

Blinking against the darkness of his arms, Draco lifted his head slowly. Surely he must have
imagined a voice. Shifting in his spot on the ground, Draco peered around at the black forest.

That was when a small figure emerged from a hollowed area beneath a very large tree. Draco felt his breath catch. "S'anyone here?" she called out again, sounding teary.

Climbing to his feet, Draco looked above the broken remains of a burnt tree only to see a little girl standing alone, looking scared. Shocked, Draco looked down at her feet.

She didn't have any shoes on.

"Maggie?" he croaked.

The girl turned swiftly, and when she spotted Draco, her teary face lit up in a brilliant expression of relief. "DRACO!" she shouted, rushing across the space between them and jumping in his arms. Draco caught her with a strangled noise, squeezing her in his arms as he shut his eyes tightly. "I was so scared," she sobbed. "I was so scared, so, so scared…"

"Damn it, Maggie," cried out Draco. "Where are your damn shoes?"

"I gave them to one of the other girls," Maggie told him, before adding in a tiny whisper, "She didn't have any."

Draco tucked his head against Maggie's shoulder and held her close, his entire body shaking. After a few minutes, he carried her out of the forest and back to Steep Park House.

They never recovered any of the other lost children. Instead, Maggie was taken by Blanca that very night to a drop-off point where a special agent was waiting. Maggie cried, desperate not to go, but Draco handed her over and then quickly left, unable to bear the thought of her remaining.

Maggie would have to forgive him when she got back.

By the time Draco finally arrived back at the Malfoy Manor, night had fallen in earnest. The sky outside was pitch black, with scarcely any stars. Draco walked into Athena's nursery, still covered in soot and blood, wearing a blank expression.

"Draco…?" asked Ginny, her eyes wide at the sight of him. Draco said nothing, and instead walked up to Ginny where she stood next to Athena's crib, placing his tight grip on the ivory railing as he looked down on the sleeping baby.

"We need to get her out of here," he murmured tonelessly.

Then he walked away, leaving a smear of blood where his hand had been.

So Ginny and Draco said good-bye to both of their girls.

Two days after the last of the Muggleborns left Steep Park House, Draco and Ginny walked with Athena to a carriage that waited outside their home. Narcissa stood next to it, wringing her hands in front of her. The morning was grey and dismal, with specks of rain hitting them as they procrastinated next to the horseless carriage.

"I will protect her with my life," said Narcissa at last.

Ginny gripped Athena tightly to her, and the baby squirmed. "I know," she whispered, her jaw tight. Turning to Draco, the two of them whispered their good-byes to Athena, each leaving her
with a kiss before Ginny forced herself to hand over Athena. Narcissa accepted the baby in her arms, and Athena began to cry.

"We'll see you both soon," said Draco stiffly.

Narcissa's eyes welled with tears, but she nodded and stepped forward, hugging Draco first and then Ginny. "I am so proud of you," she told Draco, a tear slipping free and sliding down her cheek. "So proud of both of you."

Turning, Narcissa curled Athena in her arms and stepped into the carriage, which shut soundly behind her. Draco and Ginny took a step back as the carriage moved forward with a jolt. Then it rolled on and began to rise from the ground, climbing higher until it was a part of the misty grey sky.

As soon as the carriage departed, Ginny tucked her head and let out a loud sob. Rain began to fall around them, small dots of precipitation growing more insistent by the second. However, the pair did not even acknowledge the weather.

Instead, they simply turned and held each other as their child went further and further away, possibly never to return.
Chapter 36

Author's Note: Alright, guys. This is the second to last chapter. I hope you're ready.

Three agonizing weeks passed.

Without Athena and Narcissa, the Malfoy Manor felt more desolate than ever. Each time Ginny looked out through the windows into the English moors, she felt as if the distance between them and the rest of the world had stretched even further. The Manor, which had been so illustrious in its inception, now looked like a skeleton forgotten in its final resting place.

If Ginny had hated it before, she positively loathed it now.

Each time she passed Athena's empty nursery, her anger grew. Every morning when she awakened, most often alone, hot tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. She didn't want to feel that way; she wanted to be determined, confident, ready. She wanted to feel strong and certain.

The fight was looming; June drew nearer with every passing moment.

Unfortunately, Ginny simply could not martial her strength. She trained with Blanca often at Steep Park House, but she could not concentrate. And it was not just Athena's absence or the loss of all the Muggleborn children to Damien that had her distracted.

Draco had completely withdrawn.

She should have expected this. Their relationship, meaningful and loving though it was, would not be enough to release him from years of social conditioning. Draco dealt with stress the way he always had, and that was by retreating. Ginny, on the other hand, had often had close friends and family to turn to. Now, however, most of her family was in hiding (like George and Vera) or otherwise distracted by pretending to be upstanding pureblood citizens (like Charlie and Fleur).

Ginny tried to be understanding of Draco's silence, but it was starting to get to her. Each time she walked the corridors of Malfoy Manor alone, she felt as if she was being haunted. In the last several months, since their wedding and Athena's birth, Ginny had begun to think of the manor as her home. It had a comforting familiarity to it, as well as its own set of wonderful memories to replace the terrible ones from before. Even Narcissa had become a welcome part of Ginny's life, a reliable and sometimes even understanding member of Ginny's family.

Now, she was gone as well.

A grandfather clock chimed loudly down the hallway, snapping Ginny out of her morose thoughts. Blinking against dry eyes, Ginny shifted and listened to the ringing noise, expecting it to chime several times. However, it only chimed once, and Ginny frowned before turning and looking at the small antique clock on their mantlepiece. It was one in the morning.

And Draco still was not home.

Fury filled Ginny, an anger that was sudden and feral. Draco had told her hours ago that he was going to Blaise's to "play cards," and even though Ginny had wanted to scream at him not to leave her alone, because she was just as miserable as he was and she didn't want to be by herself, she had let him go in the hopes that spending time with his friend would cheer him up.
Still, that had been just after dinner, and he still wasn't back. *That sorry bastard*, Ginny thought venomously, more than ready to take out all her anxiety-fueled frustrations on Draco. It was bad enough that he wasn't talking to her, but now he was going to stay out late with Blaise?

Scowling, Ginny jumped up from her spot in their room, grabbed her cloak, and then headed out of the door. Bleaker paused near the entry way. "Will you return soon, Mistress?" he asked, looking concerned.

"Yes," said Ginny. "I'm going to go find that stupid prat Master of yours and bring him home. Wait for me here at the door."

Bleaker nodded obediently and stepped away. Ginny was out of the door a moment later, and she disappeared at the Apparition point.

An hour later, emerging from the paths just outside of the gates, Ginny Malfoy returned to the front door of the Manor and let herself inside. Bleaker was waiting there for her, and he looked up at her with large eyes.

"Welcome back, Mistress Malfoy," he said. "Did you find Master?"

Ginny looked down at the elf. "Yes," she said. "He's fine, elf."

Then she bypassed Bleaker and disappeared down the hallways, with Bleaker watching her back with a suspicious eye.

Although his services were no longer required, he followed her at a distance.

The Ginny Malfoy who had actually left the Malfoy Manor was not at home. Instead, she was where her husband had said he would be: the Zabini house.

Storming up the steps, Ginny banged her fist on the door of the home. When the house-elf answered, Ginny stepped in past him. Her trip to the Zabini household had done nothing to diminish her temper, and she was more than ready to give Draco a piece of her mind for staying out so late, for not coming home, for leaving her alone AGAIN –

"Wait, Missus – " The house-elf scrambled after her.

"Where is he?" demanded Ginny. "Where is Draco Malfoy?"

The house-elf looked startled. "Dipper – Dipper is not sure, Mistress Malfoy."

Huffing, Ginny began to move through the home, only just now noticing that many of the rooms were dark. Mere moments after her furious search began, it was brought to a sudden halt by the tip of a wand pointed directly at her throat. Ginny froze, her eyes wide, and she shifted to see Blaise Zabini glaring at her with his wand drawn. Ginny relaxed – but only a little.

"Relax, Zabini. It's me."

"I can see that," said Blaise, not lowering his wand. Ginny's eyes flickered over him, and she realized he was wearing a pair of pajama pants and nothing else. Ginny's brows furrowed. Nearby, Gabrielle peeked into the room with a concerned look; she was also wearing nightclothes. Ginny's heart fluttered with panic and confusion.
"Were you two asleep?" asked Ginny, and Blaise lowered his wand, but only a little. He scowled.

"Of course we were, you simpleton. It's one in the morning. What do you want?"

Ginny swallowed. "Is – Is Draco not here?"

Gabrielle emerged fully to stand next to Blaise, who raised a brow. "Is he supposed to be?" asked Blaise.

"Yes!" exclaimed Ginny, panic threatening to fully take her heart captive now. "Yes, he told me – I mean, was he here earlier? Did he just leave already?"

Blaise dropped his wand to his side at last. "Draco hasn't been here all evening," he told Ginny tonelessly. "I haven't spoken to him in two days."

"Oh, Merlin." Ginny pushed her hands over her face as every terrible fate rolled over her mind, crushing her heart and soul. Draco wasn't accounted for, and he wasn't home, and oh, what had happened to him? Not normally one to assume the worst, Ginny could hardly contend with the crippling anxiety that robbed her of her ability to breathe. Gabrielle hurried forward and touched her shoulder soothingly.

"Perhaps zis is all a misunderstanding, hm? I'm sure Draco is fine!"

"What did he tell you?" asked Blaise. "Tell me his exact words."

Ginny swallowed. "He said – he would be here."

"Doing what?"

Ginny sucked in a deep breath. "He said you two were playing cards. That was hours ago."

At this, Blaise's features took on a look of understanding. "Ah," he said, before sighing heavily. "I know where he is."

Ginny's eyes shot up. "What? Really?" She stepped forward. "But why would you know when I don't?"

"Because, quite frankly, I know him better than you do," said Blaise, before he turned to the side. "Dipper." The house-elf reappeared. "Get me a cloak and some robes." He turned again to Ginny. "I'll go and retrieve him. I can assure you, it's not the sort of place you would enjoy attending."

"But – "

"Don't worry, Ginny," said Gabrielle, petting her friend's head. "Blaise will take care of it. You can wait here wiz me."

Ginny thought about arguing more, but Blaise hardly left her the time. He got his things from the house-elf, and a few minutes later, he was fully dressed and out the door. Ginny and Gabrielle watched him go, and then Gabrielle took Ginny into their sitting room and curled up with her on the couch to await their return.

Fifteen minutes later, Blaise Zabini stepped into the seedy streets of Knockturn Alley and sighed. He hated this area; not because of all the Dark Magical artifacts or illegal activities, but because it was dirty and smelly. People here were often just plain disgusting.
Still, it did have one redeeming quality, and that was its "fine" selection of all-night pubs. The establishments themselves were representative of Knockturn Alley in every way, dark and dank and probably supported almost entirely by murder. However, they did provide somewhere for all the miscreants and vagabonds of magical Great Britain to gather, so they were useful in that respect.

None of these places were the type in which a well-to-do young wizard should loiter, and yet when Blaise strolled into The Lethe, that was exactly where Draco Malfoy was. He did not see Blaise, but instead focused all his attention on the bartender. A few other shadowed figures lingered in the room, but none of them dared speak to Blaise as he swept through and went directly to the bar.

"Another," said Draco to the bartender, and the old grubby wizard slid a shot glass full of amber liquid in his direction. However, before he could pick it up, Blaise's hand darted out and took it from him. Draco's brows furrowed, and he looked up as Blaise downed the drink and set the empty glass back on the bar.

"Damn it," slurred Draco, blinking slowly. "That was mine."

"Too bad," said Blaise, sitting next to him. "Hello, stupid."

Draco ignored him and looked back at the bartender, motioning for another. Blaise stopped this, though, with a narrowed glare in the bartender's direction. He shuffled away, grunting, and Draco scowled. "Go away, Blaise."

"You know," said his friend, ignoring Draco's words, "you are not being a very good husband right now." He paused. "Then again, I don't think anyone really expected you to be."

Draco dropped his head on the bar with a thunk. "Mind your own business," he grumbled.

"I would love to, believe me," said Blaise languidly. "Unfortunately, there is a very angry ginger floating around my house right now, and I can't return to sleep until you go back to her."

Draco lifted his head and squinted. "Just – tell her I'll be home by midnight."

"Nice try, mate," said Blaise, rolling his eyes. "It's one-thirty in the bloody morning."

At last, Draco looked concerned. "Oh, fuck," he muttered.

"Precisely," said Blaise. "So, pay your bloody tab, sober up, and go home."

Draco responded to this with another scowl, and he tried to wave the bartender back over. "No, I want to be drunk. Bugger off."

"I was not making a request," said Blaise coolly. "I was ordering you. Get out of here and – "

"Do you remember the first time I came here?" asked Draco suddenly, his words slow and poorly-formed. Blaise sighed deeply, but Draco went on, "It was right after I got the Dark Mark. My father was in Azkaban. My family was a mess. And I was… terrified." He picked up the empty shot glass and twirled it in his fingers before looking over at Blaise and smiling, though it was completely devoid of joy. "I wanted to kill myself," said Draco. "And I had every intention of doing so." He pointed a finger at Blaise. "But you talked me out of it."

Blaise put his chin in his hand. "A decision I am currently re-evaluating."

"Why did you do it?" asked Draco. "Why did you talk me out of it?"
Blaise huffed. "Purely selfish reasons, of course," he said after a moment. "You were always good in school, so you were easy to copy. You were an excellent scapegoat for when I got in trouble." He paused. "And standing next to you makes me look even more handsome by comparison."

Draco snorted, dropping the glass with the bar again with a soft clink.

"There," said Blaise. "Satisfied? May we go now?"

Without waiting for an answer, he stood up and tugged Draco off the barstool. Draco struggled to fight him off, though, which he was not able to do very successfully. Blaise shoved his hand into the pocket of Draco's robes, pulled out a handful of Galleons, dumped them on the bar and then bodily yanked his friend from the pub. Draco nearly fell on his face from the force of it, but he continued to struggle.

"No, Blaise! Damn it all, I want to be drunk!" The two stopped in the front of the dark, desolate cobblestone road, and Draco's features transformed into an expression of sorrow. He hiccupped. "I – I miss my daughter," he whispered.

Blaise stared at him. "What? Well, where is she?"

Draco pulled his hands away and stared morosely at the street. "We sent her away," he murmured. "Her and my mother. Far away from England."

Blaise's brows furrowed. "Why would you do a thing like – " he stopped, and his eyes grew wide. "Merlin," he said, looking aghast. "What are you planning, Draco?"

The other wizard remained silent, and Blaise pulled away with a sharp shake of his head. "Nevermind," he snapped. "Don't tell me. I'm better off not knowing." Then he grabbed Draco's arm and Apparated them both back to his home.

As soon as they arrived, Draco struggled to get away again, but Blaise grabbed both of his arms and dragged him down the elegant hallway until he came to the bathroom.

In the next room, Ginny Malfoy waited with Gabrielle, who was snoozing on her shoulder. She heard footsteps first, the sound of a struggle next, and then the slamming of a door. Seconds later, rushing water and a furious tangled shriek of curses sounded. The person screaming was undoubtedly Draco, who let loose a series of swear words that even Ginny had never heard before.

Moments later, Blaise appeared alone. He delicately flicked some water off his fingers. "Your husband will be with you shortly," he told Ginny stoically. He moved over to Gabrielle and gently tugged her off the couch.

Still half-asleep, Gabrielle leaned on him as they walked back to their bedroom. "Is everyzing okay?" she asked Blaise in a sleepy murmur.

"Yes," said her husband.

"Oh, good," she said, before looking over her shoulder at Ginny. "You two can sleep in one of ze spare rooms if you want." Then they disappeared through their bedroom door, and Ginny was left alone.

Ginny set her jaw and stood up, moving down the hallway to one of the guest bedrooms. She could still hear Draco banging around – and possibly drowning – in the shower, so she left the door open and waited where he would see her, sitting on the edge of the bed just across the hall from him.
Nearly fifteen minutes later, Draco finally appeared at the door of the guest bedroom. He was
soaking wet, still fully dressed in his sopping robes. At the very least, he looked rather sober and
very cowed. As soon as he saw Ginny, he lowered his eyes and walked in slowly, closing the door
behind him.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, because Ginny was glaring at him, but hadn't said anything.

In a flash, the redhead was up and directly in front of Draco. She shoved at his chest hard, hot tears
stinging her eyes. "What the fuck, Draco?" she exclaimed, already on the verge of tears.
"Everything we've got going on, and you fucking disappear on me to go get drunk in a bloody pub?
Are you serious?"

"I know," he murmured, not sitting anywhere because he was still very wet. "You're right to be
angry."

Ginny folded her arms and glared at him from a few feet away. When nothing more was said, she
brought up a fist and knocked it against the bedpost. Then she looked back at him, shoved her tears
forcefully off her face and walked up to Draco. "Get your bloody robes off, you're soaking wet.
You bloody idiot."

Draco complied, getting undressed and finally getting dry one Ginny secured at towel for him.
They called the house-elf, and he brought them some spare night clothes. Ginny had already
decided that she could not stand to return to the manor. She felt bad knowing that Bleaker was
waiting for her, and she'd told him she would only be out a little while, but he would just have to
endure for the time being.

When Draco was finally dry and dressed in some spare pajamas of Blaise's, he leaned on the
bedpost and still did not sit. He hadn't said a word in several minutes, and Ginny felt as if she was
about to crack down the very center of her soul.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Ginny. "Why won't you just talk to me?"

Draco looked as if he wanted to say something, but he couldn't. Instead, he dragged a hand over his
face and simply shook his head. Ginny dropped her head for a moment, fresh tears sliding down
her cheek. "Bloody hell, Draco! I miss them, too! I'm scared, too! But I can't bloody do this if
you're not with me – "

"I am," he said, looking up at her at last, his voice cracking. "I am with you, Ginny – I just – I don't
know how – "

"You can't do this," cried Ginny. "You aren't alone anymore, Draco! You can't retreat to that dark
space where you hide in your mind, and expect me not to follow!" She moved up to stand in front
of him. "I need you, Draco. You can't do that anymore."

Draco's eyes lifted to hers, and upon seeing her expression, he reached out for her and curled her
tight in his embrace. "I'm sorry," he said again, and this time he sounded more sincere. "Really."

Ginny let herself relax into his hold, and she wrapped her arms tightly around him, sniffling. "If
you need time alone, Draco, that's okay. But you've got to tell me the truth. Please don't lie to me
again. I thought something terrible had happened to you." She pulled away to look at his face, and
her fingertips brushed alone the line of his jaw. "What would you have done, if you'd found me
missing? How would you have felt if you'd gone looking for me, and I wasn't where I said?"

Draco looked ashamed, and Ginny knew that he understood then. "You're right," he murmured. "I
would have panicked, I would have been furious with you…"

"Exactly," whispered Ginny. She tucked her head against his chest, and he stroked her hair away from her face. "You are not alone anymore. Please don't forget that."

"I won't," he promised her. "I swear."

After that, the couple curled up on the bed together and fell asleep, each comforted by the other's nearness.

The following morning, Draco and Ginny awoke before their hosts. Seeing that it was early morning, they decided to go ahead and leave to return home. They got dressed and crept quietly down the hallway, hand in hand.

The pair had only just stepped towards the doorway when the Zabini house-elf Dipper appeared, looking frantic. "Malfoys," he said desperately. "Your house-elf is here!"

Ginny balked. Shooting a quick look at Draco, the two rushed to the front door, where Bleaker lay in the ground, his eyes half-lidded and his hand at his side. "Bleaker!" Ginny hurried to the elf's side, and he looked up at her and let out a shuddering exhale.

"Missus Malfoy…" he looked over at Draco, "Master – "

"What are you doing here?" asked Draco, kneeling next to him. Ginny reached over and moved Bleaker's hand, and to her great distress, she saw he was severely injured. The shoddy pillowcase he wore in lieu of clothes was damaged and bloody. Each breath he took sounded pained, and he could not sit up.

"Do not – go home," the house-elf warned them both, gripping Draco's arm suddenly. "Not – safe – "

"What do you mean? What happened?" asked Draco sharply. Ginny felt her eyes well with tears again.

Bleaker looked between them, and each word sounded as though it might be his last. "It was – Damien Black – "

Ginny's heart seized with fear.

"He disguised himself as Missus Malfoy," wheezed Bleaker, and a tear rolled down his cheek. "Bleaker was – suspicious, but – too late. Damien found – the book – "

"Book?" repeated Draco. "What book – " And then it hit him. His eyes widened. "The book in my safe? The one behind the blood seal?" He looked up at Ginny, stricken. "Ginny… That was the Elder Wand book. Damien has it."

"Which means he has proof that you're the true holder of the Elder Wand," whispered Ginny, trembling violently. She looked up at Draco, fingers frozen in claw-like poses at Bleaker's side. "Draco… He's going to come for you."

Bleaker grabbed Ginny's arm, but his strength was failing, and his grip was weak. "Damien thinks – Bleaker is dead, but Bleaker… got away – to warn you. Bleaker tried to stop him, Missus… Bleaker failed," he whimpered. Ginny looked back to him and reached for the house-elf, curling him in her arms.
"No, no, Bleaker, you didn't fail," she told the house-elf tearfully.

"Bleaker did not protect your book," sobbed the house-elf. "And now you are – in danger – " he looked to Draco, tears rolling down his weathered face. "Bleaker promised your father, to protect you… Always."

Draco stiffened, and he bit his lip tightly, dropping his head. "You did, Bleaker. It's alright," he told the house-elf in a trembling whisper.

"You did very well, Bleaker," whispered Ginny through her tears. "You didn't fail, I swear. You didn't fail at all. You did everything you could."

At last, Bleaker's expression, pinched with pain, relaxed. He smiled. "Good," he whispered groggily, even as his body went slack. "Bleaker is… glad." Seconds later, his eyes closed.

"Bleaker?" whimpered Ginny, holding him close, the house-elf who had been her protector and confidante, her constant companion since the moment she had stepped foot in Malfoy Manor. He was gone.

"Ginny." Draco pulled on her arm. "We've got to go. We can't let the Dark Lord find us here."

With a furious cry, Ginny gathered up Bleaker's body in her arms. "We're taking him with us," she told Draco staunchly, and he gave a quick huff before accepting the house-elf from her. Then he took one last glance at the hallway where he knew Blaise and Gabrielle were sleeping in their bedroom.

"Thanks," he told his friend in a whisper. Then he took Ginny and they vanished.

When they arrived at Steep Park House, Draco passed off the house-elf to a bewildered Richard, who was one of the many Aurors pacing the perimeter. "Bury him with the others," he told Richard, who simply nodded. Draco and Ginny hurried into the house, which was still quiet, with many of its occupants asleep.

Blanca and Ben, however, were already awake and drinking coffee at a table. When they saw Ginny and Draco rush in, their expressions stricken, Blanca jumped to her feet. "What happened?" she asked sharply.

Draco met her gaze. "Damien Black broke into our house while we were gone last night," he told her as Ben came to stand next to Blanca's side. "He knows I'm the holder of the Elder Wand. And by now, he will have told the Dark Lord. As soon as we return home… " he swallowed tightly. "The Dark Lord will be waiting for me."

Blanca and Ben stared. "Fuck," murmured Blanca, shoving strings of loose hair off her face. She turned and walked a few steps away, her hands on her hips. "How the hell does he know? What did he find?"

"A book," explained Draco. "It catalogues the owners of the Elder Wand. It's how we figured it out ourselves."

"And you just kept that lying around?" snapped Blanca.

"It was behind a blood seal," hissed Draco vehemently. "I don't know how he got it out." He scowled and shook his head. "We didn't want to destroy it after we found it, we thought we might need it to prove our case while we gathered allies."
Blanca inhaled deeply and took a few measured steps around. "So now Voldemort is going to be waiting for you," she said more calmly. "And as soon as he kills you, he's going to have full control of the Elder Wand." She rubbed her jaw and held up a hand. "Well, obviously, we can't let that happen."

"Maybe we can just hide him here," suggested Ginny, finally able to speak again.

"We could try," said Blanca, "but I'm not even sure how much longer this base will hold out. We've got those god damn Regulators prowling the area every damn day thanks to Damien Black and his little field trip."

"Besides," said Draco wearily, "if the Dark Lord really believes I'm the sole owner of the Elder Wand, he won't leave it to his henchmen to find me. He'll come looking himself. And if he does that... He will find me, wherever I am."

"So what do we do?" asked Ginny, looking desperately to Blanca for answers. Unfortunately, the other woman remained silent, and for the first time ever, Ginny feared that Blanca simply did not know.

After several minutes of heavy silence, Ben straightened from his spot. "Let me go in his place, Blanca."

The American witch looked up and quickly flicked her eyes at Ben, looking annoyed. "Shut the hell up, Ben. That's not happening and you know it."

Ben seemed to have anticipated this response. "Blanca, I'm serious."

Blanca's jaw twitched, and she turned to face her second-in-command. "And so am I. You're not going, Ben. It's stupid."

"I can fool him," said Ben more heatedly, stepping forward. "Blanca, we can't let Voldemort kill Draco Malfoy. If he gets control of the Elder Wand, we will never be able to stop him."

Blanca scowled. "Ben - "

"He's going to reveal everyone, Blanca!" exclaimed Ben, eyes blazing. "For the love of Merlin, just let me do what we came here to do already!"

"No!" snapped Blanca fiercely. "That plan isn't going to cut it, Ben. This is Voldemort, we're talking about. I'm not going to let you just – put on one of your disguises and go in front of him to be tortured to death. There's a better plan than that."

"Oh yeah?" said Ben, folding his arms. "And what is it?"

"I don't know," grunted Blanca. "But I'll figure it out. So just shut up – "

"There is no better plan, Blanca!" roared Ben, and Draco and Ginny took a step back as the two Americans rounded on one another. "We can't let Draco die, and we can't hide him here. Voldemort HAS to believe he's killed him. That way, we'll still have some time before the commencement ceremony in June, and he won't be hunting Draco anymore – "

"For the last fucking time," yelled Blanca, advancing on him, "I said NO – "

"God damn it, Blanca, I'm dying anyway!"
At this, Blanca's stomps came to an abrupt halt. "What?"

In front of her, Ben raked a hand through his hair. "I'm dying, Blanca," he told her in a murmur. He reached up and pulled down the collar of his robes, only to reveal an inky black mass on his skin that spread like the roots of a tree. "The curse Damien Black hit me with… The healers were able to slow it down, but they can't stop it." Ben met Blanca's gaze, his features tight. "I've got… a few months at the most."

Blanca stood in front of him, rigid and silent.

"So please," said Ben more softly, a slight tremor to his voice. "Let me do this. Let my death actually mean something, let it be useful."

Blanca blinked. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

The other American shifted uneasily. "Because I knew you'd send me home – "

"YOU'RE DAMN RIGHT I WOULD HAVE SENT YOU HOME!" bellowed Blanca, and Ben winced. She walked right up to him and pointed a finger at his chest. "I would have sent you home in a fucking heartbeat, so you could be with your fucking family, Ben!"

Ben looked away from her with tight swallow. "We came here to fight, Blanca," he told her. "And we're not done."

Blanca pulled away from him roughly and paced, her back to him. Putting her hands on her hips again, she turned to face Ben. To Ginny's great shock, she saw tears forming in Blanca's eyes. She had never seen Blanca cry.

"Ben… What would I tell Sarah?" asked Blanca, and Ben shifted away from her, a hand over his face while Blanca made a soft noise of distress. "What the hell would I tell your boys?"

Ben dropped his hand and sniffed. "You would tell them," he said, working over a sob in his throat, "that I loved them very much… and that I did this so they could be safe." He looked up at Blanca, his eyes shining. However, he held himself together. When Blanca failed to respond, he stepped forward and reached into his robes.

Ben pulled out his wand. "Please, Blanca. You know it's the right thing to do." He extended the wand to her. "You know it's our best option." The wand remained where it was, hovering at the edges of Ben's fingertips. Blanca stared at him, gaze trembling, her hands on her hips.

She did not move, but neither did Ben.

After several moments, Blanca slowly lifted her hand and, meeting Ben's gaze, she took his wand. Then she pulled open the pocket of her robe, where two other weathered and bloodied wands sat. With shaking fingers, she slid Ben's wand next to Alec's and Jillian's.

Ben gave a short nod, and then he looked to Ginny and Draco. "Does Voldemort know that you've been warned?"

"No," murmured Draco, utterly ashamed. "He thinks my house-elf died before he had a chance to contact us."

"Good," said Ben stiffly. "Then he'll have no reason to be suspicious."

Ginny reached for Draco's hand and tugged on it. "We'll give you two a few minutes," she said
softly. She and Draco left the room after that, and Ben and Blanca remained alone. Ginny was not sure if she could handle seeing Blanca cry; the sounds that filtered through the closed door were horrible enough.

A few minutes later, Blanca emerged, called together her Aurors, and informed them of the plan. There were many protests, but Blanca stiffly and harshly told them this was necessary. The group was dismissed after that, and the Americans were able to say good-bye to Ben.

Keosha sat down heavily next to Ginny and Draco.

"So Ben and Blanca were close?" asked Draco, looking out into the tree line.

Keosha frowned. "Since Ilvermorny," she muttered. "She's the one who convinced him to become an Auror."

Draco buried his face in his hands. A few minutes later, he was called inside, and he found Ben standing in one of the small bedrooms. Draco closed the door behind him, and Ben extended some robes to him. "I need yours," he told Draco matter-of-factly. "And your wand, too. Ginny can return it to you later."

Draco took the robes in numb fingers, and he began to pull off his own to hand over to Ben. "I'm sorry," said Draco, because he had to say something. He looked up at Ben. "You lot came here to help us, to help fix a situation that I caused."

Ben gave him a small smile, and he stopped his work to lean on a table. After a moment, he looked up at Draco. "Hey, can you do me a favor?"

"Of course," said Draco, pausing as well.

Ben fiddled with his robes, looking younger than before. It was clear he was doing his best to keep normal, and the conversation was taxing on him. He cleared his throat. "I, um, I have two sons at home," he said, and Draco felt his heart twist. "I need yours," he told Draco matter-of-factly. "And your wand, too. Ginny can return it to you later."

Draco barely managed to nod. "Yes, certainly," he told Ben. "They'll have the very best."

Ben smiled sincerely at this, even as he seemed desperately to want to cry. "Good, thank you." After that, he began getting ready again. Draco gave Ben his robes and his wand, and Ben donned them all. "Don't worry," he teased to Draco. "I can do a lot of accents."

"I'm sure," murmured Draco, trying unsuccessfully to smile at the man who was willfully dying in his place.

Ten minutes later, Ben was dressed as Draco and standing next to Ginny, who was also doing her very best not to have a complete breakdown. She had to show up with "Draco" and act normal. They needed Voldemort to believe in Draco's death, or this was for nothing.

Blanca and all the others looked on as Ben gave them all one last smile wearing his own face. After that, he transformed into Draco and offered Ginny his hand. Once their fingers were locked together, they walked out of Steep Park House and past the barriers.

"Are you ready?" asked Ben to Ginny, sounding remarkably calm.
Only able to nod, Ginny leaned into him, and they both vanished.

In mere moments, the two arrived at the Malfoy Manor, just outside the main gate. Ginny could not see inside, but as soon as they appeared, she stopped and tugged on Ben's hand. "I can feel him," she whispered, and Ben's borrowed features looked down at her. "He's in there," Ginny told him.

Ben nodded. "Good," he said. "Then we'll be able to get it over with quickly." He looked back to Ginny. "Try and make sure you cover me, once it's over. I should maintain my form for a little while, but it won't last forever."

Ginny's features pinched sorrowfully, and she jumped into Ben's arms. "I will," she told him, arms around his neck. Ben chuckled tearfully and held her, and they both stayed where they were, needing each other's comfort in that moment.

"It's alright," soothed Ben in a shaky whisper. "It'll all be okay." His accent seemed strange, coming from Draco's features. He smoothed her hair back from her face.

"You are so – so brave," sobbed Ginny. "And you would have made such – a good Gryffindor."

Ben smiled tearfully. "That's a very big compliment," he said, "coming from someone like you." He reached up a hand and pressed away her tears with a curled finger. "Come on."

Taking each other's hands again, Ben led Ginny down the pathway to the stately manor home. One of the few remaining house-elves let them in, and Ginny and "Draco" entered the parlor to find Voldemort, Damien, and Bellatrix Lestrange all waiting for them.

The entire event would later fall to a strangely theatrical place in Ginny's mind, a misty haze of surreal acts that she would revisit with uncertainty many times later in her life. There was Damien, holding the book he had stolen and gleefully telling them that he'd come to their house looking for proof of their part in what had happened in the forest, and instead finding this. He laughingly told them about how he'd procured some of Athena's blood from the hospital to bypass the blood seal, as she was a direct descendent of Draco's, and her blood was as good as his.

Ginny would later remember how Ben dropped to his knees in front of Voldemort and begged him for forgiveness. He pleaded with Voldemort, telling him that it would be enough to simply disarm him, he didn't need to kill him. He affected every nuance of Draco's voice, his mannerisms, so convincing in his act that Ginny's agony was compounded to the point of hysteria. Nothing about her anguish was insincere; not a single tear was forced.

The only comfort Ginny had, as she thrashed against Bellatrix's hands restraining her, was that Voldemort was tired of playing games. When he pointed his wand at Ben, he did not bother to torture or maim him.

It was a flash of green light, and he was dead.

"NO!" screamed Ginny, and Bellatrix finally let her go, cackling as Ginny fell to her knees next to the body and threw herself on top of it. Voldemort turned to leave, but Damien lingered.

"I suppose that means you're on the market once more," he whispered to Ginny tauntingly as he passed. Ginny looked up, her face red and streaked with tears.

"GET OUT!" she bellowed furiously, and the entire room surged with magical energy, shattering all the glass in the room. Bellatrix pulled out her wand with a sneer, moving as though to punish
Ginny for her outburst, but Voldemort held up a hand.

"Careful now, Bellatrix," he said, unmoved by Ginny's sobs. "You might be looking at your successor."

Then he left, with Bellatrix's wild-eyed rage shifting in Ginny's direction. She stormed off after Voldemort, and Damien – rather wisely – did the same. The trio left the house, and Ginny was once again left alone.

The grandfather clock in the hallway chimed again, and it seemed as though it rang in Ginny's head for days.

The *Daily Prophet* ran the story before the day had even ended. The headline read: **DRACO MALFOY, HEAD OF MUGGLEBORN REGISTRATION, DEAD AFTER TRAGIC ACCIDENT AT HOME.**

In Myrrdin, Blaise Zabini looked over the newspaper in his hand as he stood next to the fireplace. The article was brief and deliberately vague, but he read it for a very long time.

"Because you let me stay at your home," he murmured, "when I was too afraid to go back to my own."

He crushed the paper in his hand after that, tossed it in the fire, and then left the room.

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Blaise, why are you like this.
They buried Ben and Bleaker with the rest of the heroes at Steep Park House.

The ceremony was brief and quiet. Ginny stood next to Draco, her hand locked in his. Unlike before, Blanca did not speak. She remained rigid and still, silent as Richard offered words of comfort instead. Later that same evening, after everyone else had gone inside, Blanca remained at the crude marker where Ben was buried.

After a while, she sat down in front of it, arms balanced on her upraised knees. Then she clasped her hands and bowed her head against her curled palms.

"What is she doing?" Ginny asked Richard.

Richard looked out of the window. "She's praying."

"Oh," whispered Ginny. She left after that, giving Blanca some privacy. Her hand never left Draco's, and as soon as they were alone, she curled into his arms and pressed her cheek firmly against his chest. "I watched you die," she murmured, eyes glassy.

He held her tighter. "I'm here," he whispered into her hair. Draco shifted so she could see his face, and he stroked her hair back from her tear-stained cheeks. "I love you so much," he told her fervently, blinking away tears of his own. "More than I've ever loved anyone or anything in my life."

Ginny's fingers curled in his robes, and she ducked into his neck.

Unfortunately, Draco had to stay at Steep Park House, and Ginny could not remain there with him. So in the end, she returned to the manor and endured, hour after hour, the isolation it brought. Letters flooded their post, condolences for Draco's death, bids to attract Ginny's attention.

She ignored it all; her focus was on training. Each day, as soon as she could get away, Ginny ventured to Steep Park House and practiced with Blanca, strengthening her shields and learning new spells. She trained with a mad rigor, burning with a hunger like nothing she'd known before.

One day, Blanca sat down with Draco and Ginny. "You need to be prepared to take possession of the Elder Wand," Blanca told Draco firmly. "We're going to disarm him, but you need to be the one to use the wand to end him."

"How are you going to disarm him?" asked Draco. "It's going to take more than a simple Expelliarmus."

"Leave that to us," said Blanca, leaning back in her chair, eyes dark. "Just be ready."

"But –"

"We'll handle it," Blanca said, and Draco fell quiet.

The days passed, as did the weeks. Each stretch of daylight was a haze of stilted anxiety, and with every passing moment, Ginny had to fight harder and harder not to crumble under the weight of her
fear. If they lost – if they did not defeat Voldemort – it was not just England that would suffer. The entire magical population was at stake. The lives that had already been lost would be for nothing. Ginny could not stand for that, but she did not know if she had the strength to do anything about it.

The evening before the commencement ceremony arrived, and it found Ginny at the manor alone, as she had been for so many nights. Ginny sat in the suite she shared with Draco, her eyes on the calendar on the wall.

Tomorrow was June 4th, 2001, two days before Draco's twentieth birthday.

A fire crackled in the hearth, but the heat of it was oppressive, given the muggy air outside. Standing away from it, Ginny walked the halls of the dark, desolate manor until she found herself outside. Despite the humidity, the night was far more inviting than the stuffy mansion corridors, so Ginny let herself walk out into the moonlight and simply wander.

Turning her face up against the bright moonlight, Ginny closed her eyes and tried to inhale. The breath stuck in her chest, and her features pinched in frustration. All she wanted was to breathe, but she could not.

Slowly re-opening her eyes, Ginny sighed. That was when she became aware of someone nearby, a lingering gaze upon her. Turning swiftly, Ginny looked towards the courtyard.

There, at the opening of the garden, stood Harry Potter.

Ginny froze; her skin grew hot, and her eyes watered. For a few seconds, the two figures simply looked at one another. Then Ginny's features twisted with fury. "Fuck you, Damien!" she shrieked, picking up a brick from a planter and hurled it at him. "Stop trying to trick me!"

The brick sailed through the air and, to Ginny's dismay, passed straight through his torso. Harry looked down, his expression curious. Shocked, Ginny staggered, and nothing was said. Finally, Harry's lips quirked at a small smile. "Hello Ginny," he said.

Ginny breathed in a shuddering inhale, her hand still frozen in the motion of her throw. After a few seconds, she dropped her arm, a violent tremble seizing her body. "H – Harry?" she murmured. She took a cautious step forward. He looked so real; she could see the wind stirring his clothes, the flecks in his eyes. She could even spot the reflection of herself in his glasses. "I don't understand," she murmured. "Are you real? Or are you just in my head?"

"Of course I'm in your head, Ginny," said Harry. "But why should that mean I'm not real?"

When Ginny simply stared at him, Harry took a step forward, closing the distance between them. "I've been trying to help you," he told her, before smiling sheepishly. "But I'm not really sure how this works. Sometimes I'm here and … sometimes I'm not." He tilted his head at her.

"You led me to those girls who were talking about Luna," recalled Ginny, remembering his image in the forest. "And you were there in Diagon Alley, and in the house, too."

"Yes," he said. "I couldn't always be here when I wanted to be, though. I couldn't always help you." His features fell. "I'm sorry. I hated having to watch you go through so much pain." He moved as if to reach out to her, but then seemed to think better of it. Instead, he looked to her with a soft smile, and Ginny's entire body ached. "But you've had happiness, too." Harry met her gaze. "You have a wonderful family, Ginny. And I'm so happy for you."
"Really?" squeaked Ginny tearfully. "You are? I mean – " she stumbled, swiping furiously at her tears before she looked to him, her eyes pleading. "You're not angry?" she whispered.

"No," said Harry. "A little surprised, at first. But the longer it went on, the more I understood it. Draco Malfoy needs someone like you, Ginny. And believe it or not, you need him." Harry held out a hand to her, and this time, it lingered near Ginny's face. She could not feel any air from the movement, nor the heat from his skin. The hand did not touch her, and he dropped it. "Draco needs you to help him guard his heart against darkness," Harry told her softly. "And you need him to remind you that there is always a way out of that darkness."

Ginny stared at him, doing her best to commit every inch of his face to memory. "I'm sorry," she murmured after a long time. "I'm so sorry you had to die."

"It's alright," he told her, and a brilliant smile took over his face. "I'm with my parents, now."

Ginny choked back another sob and smiled through her tears. "That's great," she said, her voice cracking. "I'm happy for you." Her eyes flickered, and she sucked in a deep breath. "Are – Are my parents there, too?"

Harry's smile remained. "Yes," he told her, and Ginny let out a choked noise of joy. "And they're so, so proud of you," Harry said earnestly. "They want you to know that they love you, and that they're fine."

Ginny pressed both of her hands over her face and trembled.

"And," went on Harry, his voice tender, "they want you to know that they truly love your little girl, too."

Ginny dropped her hands. "You can see her?" she asked eagerly. "They've – they've seen her?"

Harry nodded, smiling. "We've all seen her. She's beautiful."

A strangled laugh escaped Ginny, a joyful noise suffocated by her tears. "Is she – can you see her now? Is she okay?"

"She's doing well," Harry said. "She and Narcissa are well taken care of."

"Oh, Merlin." Ginny pushed her hands through her hair, her eyes closing for a moment. When she re-opened them, she realized Harry stood just in front of her. Oh, he looked so solid, so real.

"Ginny," said Harry, "tomorrow, you're going to return to Hogwarts, and you will have to face Tom Riddle again. But I don't want you to be afraid." He reached for her again, and this time, Ginny could swear she felt his fingertips graze her cheek. "We will be there with you. All of us."

"You will?" asked Ginny, trembling.

Harry smiled again. "Until the very end."

At last, Ginny managed a real smile, even as tears clouded her vision. After a long moment, she breathed in for the first time in what felt like ages.

"Good-bye Harry," she whispered.

"Good-bye Ginny," Harry said.

In the next blink, he was gone. It was as if he had never really been there at all. No hint of him
remained. Ginny looked to where he'd been standing, and she saw that the grass was not even indented.

Turning, Ginny walked through the garden until she came to its center. Looking up at the night sky, she took in a deep breath. Strength flooded her limbs, and she drank in the power of the moonlight, eyes closed again in the direction of the star-lit sky.

When she re-opened them, there were no more tears.

"It's time, Tom," she promised the sky.

June 4th, 2001

The day of the first-ever Commencement Ceremony for Glanfuil School of Witchcraft and Wizardry dawned bright and beautiful. The sky was a brilliant blue, punctuated occasionally by passing white clouds, rounded and soft. The air was lighter than it had been days before, without the sticky humidity. The sun shone radiantly, warming every gust of air as it rolled over the growing crowd in the form of a breeze.

People gathered, arriving in droves and passing through the school's gates with invitations in hand. Regulators in uniform walked through the crowd, features heavy and severe. Despite the celebration that was to take place, the majority of the gathered witches and wizards were quiet and morose. A heavy air of dread lingered around all, and no one seemed ready to remain still, instead filing around listlessly and feigning polite conversation.

The ceremony grounds were set up just outside of the castle, with a large stage manufactured in front of the crowd, and several rows of chairs sat off to the side for the graduating students. While the ceremony would have normally warranted no more than a five hundred people or so, a crowd of nearly a thousand gathered. As a result, there were no seats for the spectators. Everyone remained standing, restless. Above the crowd, hot rays beamed down on them in dotted rays of light.

In the midst of the crowd, Ginny Malfoy stood, wearing a fine set of dress robes and a hard expression. The graduating seventh years took their seats near the stage, many looking uncomfortable and uncertain. As Voldemort had declared, all of the most important figures in the British magical population were there; in fact, nearly everyone was, even if they did not have friends or family in the ceremony.

Just as with the wedding, Voldemort had taken what was meant to be a celebration and perverted it. He had manipulated this event to further fuel his own purposes, his hunger for power. Today was not about the graduating seventh years, but about Him.

And everyone knew it.

Ginny looked up at the large stage. At the moment, it was empty, with only a line of chairs waiting to be filled. Her eyes flickered through the large crowd, and several feet away, she spotted Blanca, waiting in the midst of the crowd. The two locked eyes for only a moment before looking forward once more.

Close to the front of the crowd, Blaise Zabini stood, bored and annoyed that he'd been obligated to attend. Gabrielle stood at his side, although Marseille was not with them, as he had been left with the nanny. Lavender Nott, Theo, and Astoria were also nearby; they, too, had left the baby at home, considering the nature of the event.
Sighing, Blaise shifted under the hot sun and scanned the attendees as they waited for the ceremony to begin. Being quite tall, it was easy for him to see over many heads and faces. After a few minutes, he saw something that made him balk.

It was Jean.

The French wizard cut his eyes in Blaise's direction, his eyes narrowed and his jaw set. Blaise's brow furrowed in confusion when the two made eye-contact, and for a moment, he was simply bewildered. Then understanding hit him, and Blaise's eyes widened.

Jean watched as comprehension formed first in Blaise's features, before it was replaced with panic.

*Don't do this,* mouthing Blaise to Jean.

Jean kept his features hard, and he shifted his eyes away from Blaise's pleading expression. Shaken, Blaise shifted forward once more, his hand tensely seeking out Gabrielle's. When he grabbed it, his wife looked up at him curiously. "What is it, darling?" she asked, but Blaise did not answer.

At that moment, a hush fell over the crowd.

Ginny looked forward to see a line of darkly-clad witches and wizards moving for the stage. They were being led by Damien Black and Dolores Umbridge. Smug as ever, Damien climbed the steps of the stage and turned to face the massive crowd.

"Welcome," he declared to the all those gathered, smiling his peculiar smile. "You are here to celebrate a most momentous occasion! For today, we will call forward our first-ever graduating class of Glanfuil School of Witchcraft and Wizardry – a pureblood school we can be proud of!"

Enthusiastic clapping rang out from a small section of the crowd, as well as those gathered on the stage. Umbridge was positively furious in her delight. The rest of the crowd gave a smattering of mild applause in response.

"Now," said Damien to the crowd, and even at a distance, Ginny could see his eyes glittering, "It is all of your privilege to welcome the wizard who made it happen – the wizard who has created your newly improved country, which is the envy of all the magical world!"

Lord Voldemort emerged in the center of the stage, a black figure looking outlandish against the bright backdrop of Hogwarts. He moved open his arms, flashing his teeth as he did so. More applause rang out, though the first few rows of witches and wizards seemed to move back, further from the stage. Nearby, the Regulators formed a line in front of the stage, hands folded in front of them.

Voldemort did not need to amplify his voice, as Damien had done. It carried over the silent crowd like a tidal wave, with no corner left untouched.

"To the graduating witches and wizards of England, Ireland, and Scotland," said Voldemort, shifting to look at the tense waiting class of seventh-years, "I greet you … as your protector, and your guardian. It is my hope that you all will continue to contribute to your country as you have done, to be the next fine generation of truly magical citizens. Our nation is the greatest on this earth, and for that, you must all take credit."

Voldemort moved across the stage. As he did so, Death Eaters began to appear in full regalia. They
marched in uniform lines up each side of the crowd, in the direction of the stage.

"We have done what no one thought possible," Voldemort told them grandly. "We have created the superior magical community! And we will not stop there!" He looked to the students. "You have a duty to your country and your kinsmen to keep our world pure, powerful, and protected. And now, thanks to the efforts of Glanfuil and our Ministry, you have every tool at your disposal to build our nation even further! For even after you are all gone, and your lives have faded away, your country will remain. You must do all you can for it, in order to demonstrate your unwavering loyalty to our magical cause. In you, our great pureblood community will live on."

The cloaked Death Eaters continued to approach from both sides, each step in sync. Once they reached the stage, they filed into a line just in front of the Regulators.

"They have tried to stop us," Voldemort went on, growing more heated. Bellatrix stood at his side. "The Muggles and their Mudblood impersonators have tried to taint us! To defile us! They have threatened your culture, your way of life, your children and your families! They seek to take away what we have because they know we are fortunate, that we are powerful! But we – your Ministry – have saved you! And we will continue to do so, in whatever manner we must!"

Voldemort stepped forward. "We have the greatest magical nation the world has ever seen! And because of this, it is only right that we share it with the world! It is only just that we take back what the Muggles have stolen from us, that we emerge from our hiding places to dominate them as we did in better days past!"

The crowd shifted nervously, and people began to look at one another. Ginny's face remained hard.

"Soon," boomed Voldemort's voice, "we will take our new generation of witches and wizards, growing stronger each day without the contamination of Muggles and Mudbloods, and we will march on those inferior beings who took so much away from us! We will reclaim our country, we will reclaim your ancient rights, we will – take – our – places – at the forefront of the world!"

Voldemort held out his arms. "ALL – FOR THE GLORY – OF – "

Suddenly, Draco Malfoy and five others burst out of their Death Eater cloaks, turned towards the Regulators, and blasted them back into the stage.

At the same moment, Ginny and her team surged forward. The crowd began to break and panic, people screaming as the stage exploded under a barrage of curse fire. When the first line of Americans reached the front of the crowd, they slammed down their wands. "PROTEGO!" they shouted in unison, and a large shield jumped up from the ground and began to cover the panicked masses. Others hurried forward and did the same for the students, many of whom had jumped out of their seats and tried to run.

Ginny, Blanca, and many others hurtled forward, leaping over the people as they rushed to get away from the stage. Ginny jumped over the growing barrier and leaped directly into the fight, and as soon as she stepped forward in front of the stage, she hurled her wand forward at the first Regulator she saw.

Voldemort's furious howl sounded, and Ginny skidded to a stop right next to Draco just as Voldemort spotted them both, his eyes wide. "MALFOY!" he shouted furiously, advancing on them from the ruins of the stage. McGonagall, Slughorn, and two Americans jumped in his path and began dueling him, throwing hex after hex even while they ducked the flurry of curses shooting through the air around them.
The air filled with smoke and became alight with spells as they flew in every direction. In the sky above, Charlie Weasley and Oliver Wood flew in on brooms, and next to Charlie, a massive gryphon-like creature flapped its wings. "NOW!" shouted Charlie, and the creature out let a cry that sparked the air with magical energy. As soon as it did so, the bright sky darkened and filled with thick grey clouds. Thunder rolled in the distance, and with every beat of the creature's wings, the storm grew more severe.

Rain appeared suddenly and pelted the ground, and the clouds swallowed up the sun, pitching the battleground into darkness. Lightning formed in the sky, and it struck down to the ground, catching a Regulator and killing him on the spot. The gryphon-like creature let out another yell and swooped down, snatching a Death Eater in its claws and ripping him off the ground.

Charlie and Oliver were right behind it, flying in on their brooms and snatching one arm each from the next nearest Death Eater. With a large heave, they tossed the struggling Death Eater directly off the edge of the grounds and into the gaping canyon that stretched between both ends of the bridge at the front of the castle.

On the ground, fighters clashed with magic and might, even as freezing cold rain fell on them like bullets from the sky. Lightning jumped down from the sky again, striking another Death Eater and sending him to the ground. Thunder sounded like a great boom, so loud it made the ground tremble.

Draco and Ginny fought next to each other for a moment before a spell shot directly between them, and they looked up to see Damien, panting and furious as he aimed a wand in their direction. "Go!" Draco told Ginny, before turning his fierce glare to Damien. "I can handle him."

Ginny nodded, giving her husband one last look before she rushed off. Draco raised his wand to Damien, and the two circled one another, each soaked to the bone. Lightning flashed behind Damien's shoulder.

"You – fool," hissed Damien. "You were better off dead."

"I'm sure you will be, too," growled Draco.

With that, Draco stepped forward and lashed out with his wand. Two spells met in the center of the dueling wizards and crackled, creating great tall beams of light each time one spell was caught by another. Damien rushed at Draco, sending spell after spell. One of Damien's curses hit the rock behind Draco and it exploded, fizzling as it came back down to the ground. Draco rolled out of the way and fired back at Damien, and the other wizard barely ducked it.

Yelling out, Damien lurched at Draco with a furious curse, and Draco blocked it, digging in his heels as he pressed back against the power of the curse and then countered with one of his own. The Stunning spell hit Damien, but he managed to duck away before Draco could advance.

"You – will – die!" yelled out Damien, and the furious barrage of spells began again.

Several feet away, in the protected crowd, Gabrielle Zabini gasped and pointed. "Blaise, Jean is out zere!" She looked desperately to him. "We have to do somezing! We have to help!"

But Blaise remained frozen, his grip on her hand unrelenting. "Blaise!" cried out Gabrielle. When he refused to respond, Gabrielle let out an angry cry and yanked her hand from his. That was when he reacted, but he was too late – Gabrielle was already rushing to the front of the shield.

"GABBY, NO!" Blaise shouted even as she sprinted forward.
"Let me through!" Gabrielle commanded, and the American wizard peeled back the shield for Gabrielle to leap through. On the battlefield, Jean was bent over a bleeding Colin Creevey. He healed him even as curses whizzed right by him, very near his own shoulder. "There, you're good!" he told Colin, yanking the younger boy to his feet. "Go!" Colin, newly healed, raced off and fired more hexes.

Jean hurried to the next fallen wizard, but as soon as he bent down to help him, two Death Eaters advanced on him with their wands raised. Jean looked up, his eyes wide with panic, but a blistering curse sailed by them and knocked one Death Eater off his feet. That was when Gabrielle skidded to a stop in front of him, turned to the second Death Eater, and then morphed her face into the terrifying features of an angry Veela to let out an inhuman scream.

The Death Eater stumbled over his own feet before running off in a panic.

Jean stared, his mouth open. Gabrielle's face shifted back to normal as she looked back at him. "Keep going!" she exclaimed, before taking up a defensive stance in front of him. Jean quickly turned his attention back to the ailing wizard.

Near them, Ginny Malfoy was fighting her way through two Regulators. A spell she'd learned from Blanca blasted the two apart, and Ginny turned then, only to see Bellatrix Lestrange just near the point of killing Luna Lovegood and Ernie Macmillan. Turning sharply, Ginny called out, "Blanca!"

The other woman stopped a few feet away, and Ginny turned, pointing at Bellatrix. A feral grin took over Blanca's features, and she raced up a boulder only to jump through the air and sent out a golden rope from her wand, which she used to slash through Bellatrix's spell and release her two victims. Bellatrix jerked, surprised, and then she turned to see Blanca rising from her crouch, wand pointed directly at Bellatrix.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" sneered Bellatrix.

Blanca narrowed her eyes. "Why don't you come down here and find out?"

Letting out a shriek, Bellatrix rushed in Blanca's direction, and the two locked in battle, each curse and hex more powerful than the last. Bellatrix and Blanca were evenly matched, and each time their spells hit, they were flush against the other's shield, pushing the magical energy high in the sky and sending shockwaves throughout the crowd around them. While Bellatrix was defending, Ginny rushed in from the side and sent a powerful hex her way. Bellatrix barely dodged it, and when she looked to see it was Ginny, she let out a furious snarl.

Blanca was relentless, pushing forward against Bellatrix. The dark witch could hold her own against Blanca, but she was having trouble defending against the both of them, and they were pushing her back.

Meanwhile, Lavender Nott had jumped up from her spot, determination filling her eyes. She moved forward, but Theo reached out and grabbed her arm. "Lavender, don't do this!" he pleaded. "Please! Think about your son! Think about Parvartus!"

Lavender swallowed tightly and looked back at Theo. "I am," she told him. Then she pulled her away and ran towards the shield. Astoria gasped, and she turned to Theo, who hesitated in his spot for only a moment.

"FUCK!" Theo yelled angrily before jumping up after her. Astoria was right on his heels, and the three jumped into the fray together. As soon as they were outside of the barrier, the three were forced to duck curses and hexes from every direction. Rain continued to pour, and lightning cut
through the air right in front of them. Lavender unleashed a hellish curse on a nearby Death Eater, and Theo and Astoria joined her, fighting back as many of them as they could.

Then Lavender spotted a massive figure rushing at them. She froze, her eyes wide as Fenrir Greyback marched in their direction, flashing his fangs when he saw Lavender, who stumbled back, terrified. When she did, she ran into Theo and Astoria, both of whom stepped up with her.

"Come on, Lav!" said Astoria, before she and Theo began firing curses at Greyback. Lavender looked to them both and then sucked in a deep breath before stepping forward, too, her spells growing in strength with every blast. All at once, they fired on Greyback, and he stumbled back, teetering very near the edge of the cliff next to the bridge.

That was when Lavender, with a furious yell, rushed forward. "YOU KILLED PARVARTI!" she screamed, before she shoved Greyback hard in the chest with both hands so that he fell, tumbling off the edge and into the rocky canyon. "BURN IN HELL!" she bellowed after his falling body.

A few feet away, Richard fell to a nasty curse, gasping against the power of it as it tried to strangle him. Jean was next to him in a flash, and he healed Richard in an instant, practically bringing the other wizard back to life. "Thanks!" coughed Richard before jumping up and running off. As soon as he was off, Gabrielle blocked one spell and then another, but when she and Jean turned, there were four Death Eaters staring them in the face.

"Look out!" exclaimed Jean, before both he and Gabrielle were blasted off the feet, rolling very near the edge of the cliff. One of the Death Eaters hurried forward and cried out, "Expelliarmus!"

With that, Jean and Gabrielle's wands were yanked from their grips. The four Death Eaters moved towards them, wands raised, and Jean jumped over Gabrielle to protect her.

The Death Eater at the front, Avery, raised his wand with a sneer. "CRUC - "

Suddenly, a wall of flame split the space between the feuding sides in half. Jean and Gabrielle jerked back, alarmed, as did the Death Eaters. The fire burned high, resisting the rain, hot-white in its intensity.

Blaise Zabini walked out in slow, measured steps, wand in hand and eyes dark. He stopped at the center of the burning wall, between the Death Eaters and their adversaries. Avery scowled.

"You a blood-traitor now, Zabini?" he sneered.

Blaise raised a brow.

"Kill him!" ordered Avery, and one of the Death Eaters hurried forward, hurling a killing curse at Blaise. Blaise jerked his arm and deflected the curse with scarcely a movement. The Death Eater balked, and then tried again, this time moving closer. Blaise blocked this curse as well, and the next. Once the Death Eater was close enough, he threw one last curse at Blaise. This time, instead of blocking it, Blaise brought up his wand, snatched the curse from the air, and with one twist of his body, he hurled it back at the Death Eater and killed him in an instant.

Avery's eyes widened, as did Jean and Gabrielle's, from where they watched on the other side of the flames.

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Blaise brought up his wand and pointed it directly at Avery. With a howl, all three remaining Death Eaters began to fire on Blaise at the same time. Blaise blocked each one, though he had little time to retaliate. After several curses, Blaise ducked low, flung his arm forward and let loose a curse that hit the Death Eater next to Avery, causing the other wizard to fall forward with a
strangled cry, heave up a lungful of blood, and then fall over, dead.

In the next moment, Blaise battled the two remaining Death Eaters with a speed and ferocity that they could not together overcome. One of Avery's deflected curses soared at the other Death Eater, and it left him dead as he fell to the ground.

In a rage, Avery blasted a powerful curse at Blaise, and the younger wizard caught it, though the curse continued to bear down on him. Twisting his ankles to give him more leverage, Blaise dug into his spot, hunched his shoulders and pushed forward, pressing through the curse and sending Avery flying back off his feet. Before he could recover, Blaise lashed out with his wand. "Frigus Morteum!"

Avery screamed shrilly as the curse struck him, and he lurched back, head twisted as ice began to overtake his skin. His eyes glazed over, his limbs froze, and he began to cough violently until his entire body trembled. Blaise lifted his wand, and Avery rose with it, jerking in the air against the strangling power of the curse. Then Blaise slammed his wand back down to the ground, and Avery followed, smashing into a million pieces of ice as he did so.

Blaise straightened, panting, before he held up his wand. The wall of flame jumped back into the tip, disappearing in an instant. That was when Blaise looked over his shoulder at the stunned Gabrielle and Jean.

He smirked.

On the opposite end of the battlefield, Draco ducked away from Damien's curse, and now he had two other Death Eaters to contend with as well. However, Michael and Mary spotted him from where they were fighting, and they hurried over, letting out whooping yells as they sent a magical explosion soaring over the space between them. Both of the Death Eaters were caught in the flame and screamed, fleeing from the fight.

Damien scowled. "Bloody useless cowards!" he shrieked, but he had only a moment to recover, as Draco was bearing down on him with stunning ferocity.

Damien backed away, but Draco pressed, advancing on Damien with each step. Their spells met between them, one blocking the other, until Draco caught Damien once and sent the other wizard scrambling for cover.

That was when Draco narrowed his cold grey eyes, gripped his wand, and pushed forward. "CONFRINGO!" he shouted, and the boulder Damien had been hiding behind blasted into hundreds of pieces, sending the other wizard flying through the air and on to the ground.

"Expelliarmus!" shouted Draco, and Damien's wand flew from his hand. The panicked wizard jerked his gaze in the direction of the wand, but he could not reach it, and Draco moved forward only to slam his foot into Damien's stomach to hold him there. Damien grunted, crying out, and Draco raised a wand directly at his face.

"No!" cried out Damien, before suddenly, his features melted away and formed the face of Lucius Malfoy.

Draco froze.

"Please, son," pleaded Lucius. "It was me all the time. I was – I was hiding from the Dark Lord, in order to protect you. Don't kill me!"

Draco's hold on his wand trembled.
"Please, son..." whispered Lucius, reaching a hand out to him. "It's me. Don't kill me..."

Draco's heart seized, and for a moment, his grip on the wand slackened. Then he let out a furious cry and kicked hard in the wizard's stomach, causing him to grunt in pain. Draco leaned forward, jabbing his wand in the throat of the struggling wizard beneath him. "I told you I would cut your fucking throat, Damien."

Draco twisted his wand and whispered venomously, "Sectumsempra."

The spell cut so deeply that Damien's head was instantly severed, leaving bloody indentions in the ground below him.

The spell simmered and faded; Lucius's face melted away, and after that, all that remained was the true face of Damien Black: plain, unremarkable, and dead.

Jerking his head up, Draco saw Ginny and Blanca still battling Bellatrix. Bellatrix was weathered, panting, unable to keep up with both of them at the same time as Blanca pressed her back, blistering in each spell. It seemed they had her, until Bellatrix seized a moment of opportunity and turned, firing not at Blanca, but directly at Ginny. The spell had such force that Ginny, even behind her shield, was launched off her feet, where she went crashing into the ground.

Draco rushed forward to help her, but three more Regulators jumped in his way, and he was forced to stay back.

Blanca whipped her head in Ginny's direction, and Bellatrix used that moment to fire on her. Blanca jumped behind her shield, but she, too, was knocked off her feet, and she landed hard very near the cliff, rolling so quickly that she tumbled right off the side.

"BLANCA!" screamed Ginny, but Richard was closer, and he lashed out with his wand to snatch Blanca around the middle with a glowing gold rope.

"I'VE GOT HER!" he yelled to Ginny, but Ginny barely heard him, because Bellatrix was in front of her now, relentlessly hurtling curse after curse in her direction. Ginny jumped up and scrambled to get out of the way, but she had no hope of firing back. Bellatrix was too fast and too strong.

It was just the two of them now.

Sliding in the mud from the rain, Ginny hurried to hide behind a piece of the broken stage, but Bellatrix blasted right through it, and Ginny fell over with a cry. Whirling to face the dark witch, Bellatrix and Ginny stood squarely in front of each other.

Inhaling deeply, Ginny pulled up her wand and set herself to fight.

Grinning wildly, Bellatrix rushed at her, firing off another curse that Ginny only just managed to avoid. "Oh, I am so glad you're here, little blood traitor!" taunted Bellatrix in a malicious shout. "After all, I do so love having a matched set!"

She fired off another hex, and Ginny barely rolled out of the way. She fired at Bellatrix, but the other witch blocked it effortlessly. Ginny's heart pounded, and she felt true panic. There was no one here to help her. Everyone else was fighting for their lives.

"First I killed your stupid brother," called out Bellatrix with delight. "And then your mother!" She fired at Ginny, who cried out from behind her shield. "And THEN YOUR FATHER!" Another curse, and Ginny's curse fell away entirely.
"And now," said Bellatrix, features curled, "I have you!" Ginny jerked up her wand to block, but Bellatrix was faster. "CRUCIO!"

The curse hit Ginny before she could even think. Agonizing pain shot through her every limb, and Ginny barely had the strength to cry out as she fell to her knees. Somewhere behind her, she heard Draco call out her name, but he sounded faraway. Pained tears filled Ginny's eyes, and her chest tightened. She couldn't breathe.

Bellatrix laughed, long and loud.

"But why should I stop with you?" she taunted, sliding closer, even as the agony immobilized Ginny entirely. "No, I think after today..." her eyes danced with malevolent delight, "... I'll go and find that little girl of yours."

Ginny's eyes jerked up, her entire body shaking violently against the curse. Even her blood hurt.

Bellatrix's dark lips curled in a twisted grin. "That's right, little Weasley. I know you've hidden her away somewhere, but I will find her. And when I do, I'll take my knife, and I'll cut her sweet, soft skin, over and over and over again..."

Ginny made an unintelligible noise against the curse, her face red and streaked with tears. Her teeth clicked strongly together, her fingers curled in claw-like positions at her sides.

"... until her little helpless infant body can't take it anymore," crooned Bellatrix, stepping closer. Fury filled Ginny, her breathing coming faster, her every joint shaking.

"And then," Bellatrix taunted, "once I've given that little brat all the pain, all the suffering she can endure – I will end her life with a slow, painful stroke of my blade... all before she's ever even old enough to know her name."

Suddenly, Ginny felt a presence all around her. Her strained eyes darted around, and she saw at her side, Arthur and Molly Weasley. Fred, Bill, Percy, and Ron were next to her as well, faces determined.

"Come on, Ginny," said Ron. "You can do it. Don't let her win. We're here."

She heard another voice behind her. "We've got you, Ginny," said Harry. "We won't let you fall."

"You're stronger than her, Ginny!" came Hermione's voice. "You are!"

"Fight, Ginny!" the voices chorused together.

Ginny's body seized, jerking against the spell, and with a great, burgeoning yell, she threw off the curse with such force that Bellatrix staggered back, shocked. Ginny heaved in a deep breath.

"NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!" Ginny hurled her wand forward. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The ray of green light pierced Bellatrix's chest directly at its center, and the dark witch staggered back, eyes wide, lips parted, before she fell in an arch and landed in a lifeless heap on the broken grounds of Hogwarts.

Nearby, Voldemort let out a great yell of rage as he watched Bellatrix fall.

That was when, from behind him, Blanca, Richard, and Michael lashed out with their wands and yelled in unison, "SECARE!" Identical beams of red light shot of their wands and sliced right
through Voldemort's arm, severing it from its joint.

Draco ran forward, throwing out his own wand. "**ACCIO ELDER WAND!**"

The struggling wand jerked from Voldemort's unanchored grasp and flew across the scarred battleground, jumping right into Draco's outstretched fingers.

Draco snatched the wand out of the sky, and the power coursed through him like a shockwave, jolting him with its immense strength. Voldemort, now sans one arm, turned to face Draco with a monstrous yell.

Draco locked eyes with Voldemort. "Malfoys," he told Voldemort fiercely, "are servants to *no one.*"

Then Draco waved his arm, and the Elder Wand, as if it could read his mind, let out a jet of green light before the spell had even finished crossing Draco's lips. "**AVADA KEDAVRA!**"

As soon as the curse struck Voldemort, the dark wizard froze, his spine going straight and his inhuman face creasing with an unfinished shout. Time seemed to slow as he took a step back, only to find that his legs were crumbling beneath him and the hard, unforgiving ground rose up to meet him.

With that, Tom Marvolo Riddle fell, dead before he even hit the ground.

The battle came to a stop, all eyes turning to Voldemort as he crumpled to the ground and did not stir. Draco stared, wand still extended, chest heaving. Moving slowly from her spot, Ginny edged closer, mud and blood splattered all the way up her fine robes and onto her face.

No one said anything. The battle had grown quiet, still.

"He's dead," said Draco at last, trembling with disbelief. He looked up to Ginny. "Voldemort is dead."

The entire magical population of Great Britain could only stare, unmoving. Nearby, Blanca ambled forward, favoring one leg, and she looked down at Voldemort. For a split-second, she seemed frozen as well.

Then she hurried forward, climbing onto a piece of rubble, dragging her broken leg behind her as she did so. Everyone turned to watch her climb to the top, and when Blanca reached a spot above everyone else, she turned her face to the sky and let out a howl.

"**WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!**" Blanca screamed joyfully at the top of her lungs.

Ginny let out a loud laugh, and the Americans joined Blanca, screaming wordlessly into the air and thrusting their wands high, so that colorful bursts of magic leaped into the air like fireworks and exploded over Hogwarts.

All at once, the massive crowd of people began to do the same, and more shouts filled the air, yet more explosions jumping into the sky as people tossed up their wands and filled the air with elated shouts of joy. The cries grew so loud that the ground seemed to tremble, and at the same moment, the shields disappeared and the sky opened up again, the magical storm falling away.

The bright sun returned, and the clouds vanished. And still, the crowd grew louder, witches and wizards calling out and throwing up their arms with gleeful cheers.
The remaining Death Eaters hit their knees in disbelief, hands behind their heads as the Aurors snatched them up and put them in restraints.

Ginny looked across the battlefield and saw Draco, who stared at her. Crying out with joy, they ran to each other, and Ginny leaped into Draco's arms, wrapping her arms and legs around him as he twirled her. Nearby, George and Vera rushed to one another, as did Charlie and Fleur.

Luna Lovegood held out her arms and spun in circles, crying out over and over again, "He's gone, Father! He's gone!"

"I can't believe it!" sobbed Ginny, taking Draco's face in her muddy hands. She pressed their faces together, tears pouring down her cheeks. "He's dead, Draco. Tom Riddle is dead."

Draco let out an incredulous laugh, holding her tight against him and whimpering as he held her close. Suddenly, something tackled them from the side; it was Blanca.

Draco laughed and dropped Ginny. "Disarm him!" he shouted to Blanca. "You bloody Americans are so FUCKING literal!"

"Hey man, whatever works!" crowed Blanca, before she wrapped them both up in her arms and hauled them off the ground in a hug.

Nearby, Theodore Nott dragged his hands down his face. "Can we please just go home now?" he cried out, looking upset. Lavender and Astoria both laughed and slung their arms around him, leading him off.

A few feet away, Blaise Zabini was brushing some dirt off his robes. "Well," he said, turning to face Gabrielle and Jean, "I hope you two would-be Gryffindors are happy, because I am now officially – " he checked his pocket watch, " – late for brunch with my mother. And you know damn well that a government coup is no excuse for tardiness."

Gabrielle and Jean exchanged amused looks. "Sorry darling," said Gabrielle, while Jean muttered, "Sorry, dear."

"So," said Blaise smoothly, "my suggestion to the… two of you," his eyes flickered to Jean, "is that you spend the rest of the day thinking about all the best possible ways to make this up to me. Is that clear?"

"Oui," they said in unison, each smirking.

"Good," said Blaise. "Then I'll see you both at home."

With that, he turned and walked away. Behind him, Gabrielle nudged Jean, and then she jerked her head in Blaise's direction. Jean hesitated for only a moment, and then he grinned, rushing forward to catch Blaise by the arm. As soon as the other wizard rounded to face him, Jean put his hand behind Blaise's head and pulled him into a deep kiss.

There was no hesitation; Blaise returned the kiss with a hand on Jean's chest, and when he pulled away, he gave Jean a real smile, which Jean returned fully. Pulling back, Blaise pursed his lips to hide his smile, but it did not vanish entirely. Flickering his eyes over Jean's face, Blaise pulled away from him, slid his hands in the pockets of his robes, and walked off.

"YAY!" shrieked Gabrielle, jumping up and down and clapping her hands.

Jean turned back and rushed to her, encircling her in his arms and pulling her up so she could wrap
her legs around him and cling to his neck. "I missed you so much!" Gabrielle exclaimed. "Let's have another baby!"

Jean laughed joyfully, carrying Gabrielle off. "Okay!" he told her.

Gabrielle cheered. "Two to one! We win!"

Near the front of Hogwarts, Ginny wrapped Draco in her arms and kissed him, fingers tight in his robes. "I love you so very much," she told him against his lips, and Draco smiled at her, looking so like he had that day they'd kissed in the forest.

"And I am so grateful for everything about you," he told her in a whisper.

"Ahem," said a voice, and they pulled away to see Minerva McGonagall smiling. She looked in the direction of the castle. "Mrs. Malfoy, if you would be so kind," she said, gesturing at an austere stone sign.

Grinning, Ginny stepped forward with her wand and pointed it directly at the large engraved letters. They read: GLANFUIL SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY. With a deep breath, Ginny sliced her wand through the air. "CONFRINGO!"

The sign blasted apart, revealing the banners of Hogwarts School and Witchcraft behind it. The crowd cheered again, raucous noises of celebration thundering into the sky. Laughing, Ginny climbed onto the rubble and looked out at Hogwarts, her arms spread wide.

As she did so, she spotted a group of figures on the bridge just in front of Hogwarts's immense front doors. Ginny lowered her arms, lips parted as she recognized Harry Potter standing there.

Behind him was Ron Weasley, and next to Ron was Hermione. Fred was there, too, and Bill and Percy. Molly and Arthur Weasley held each other and smiled, looking directly at Ginny, tearfully tabbing at their eyes and waving at her. Behind them, many more faces gathered, all just in front of the entrance to Hogwarts.

She saw Harry meet her gaze over the long distance and smile. The two figures who stood at his sides smiled, too – James and Lily Potter. A lump rose in Ginny's throat as those gathered behind Harry turned in unison and walked in the direction of the doors.

As Ginny watched, the departed souls returned to Hogwarts. Harry lingered after all the rest, taking one final look at Ginny before he gave her a last wave.

Ginny lifted her hand and waved back.

"Ginny?" said Draco, following her gaze and seeing nothing. "What're you waving at?"

She looked down at Draco and stumbled off her perch, falling into his arms and letting out a watery chuckle. "Just some old friends," she told him, before she jumped into his arms again. "Come on," she told Draco. "Let's go get our girls."

Draco smiled brilliantly, pulling Ginny into a kiss as he lowered her to the ground.

"That," he said, "is an excellent idea."

Ginny smirked. "I'm full of them," she whispered against his lips.

And with that, they left.
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was re-opened the following September under Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. Once more allowing witches and wizards of all backgrounds, the school flourished.

Kingsley Shacklebolt was nominated Minister of Magic, and the Regulator force was deposed. All surviving Death Eaters were imprisoned, and the remaining departments of Muggleborn subjugation were shut down.

Draco willingly surrendered custody of the Elder Wand. It was housed in the Ministry of Magic, never to be touched again.

Shacklebolt also offered Draco a new position in the Ministry, but Draco refused, telling him, "Working is for poor people, and I do not plan to do it for a moment longer."

A few days after the war, Blanca and the other Americans returned home to the United States. Blanca and her family came back to England every year, though, and enjoyed a vacation with the Malfoys. As a result, the two families remained very close for the rest of their lives.

As it turned out, Blanca was right; both of her children turned out to be magical. Marco and Mayra each attended Ilvermorny and were both sorted into Horned Serpent.

The war over, Andromeda and Ted Tonks were finally able to reunite. They also regained custody of Teddy, who had actually been very well taken care of by Damien's wife, Inga. In fact, Inga so cared for Teddy that Andromeda and Ted allowed her to continue visiting him throughout his life. This made Inga very happy, and she was able to find many friends in England after her abusive husband's death.

Andromeda and Ted also adopted and raised two orphaned Muggleborns alongside their grandson.

Teddy attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and he was sorted into Hufflepuff.

Charlie and Fleur remained married after the war, although they never had any more children. Instead, they were happy to raise Margrethe, which they did with a great deal of love and compassion. When Margrethe started school, they left to travel the world together, with Charlie continuing his magizoological work and Fleur writing travel editorials for Witch Weekly.

Margrethe attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and was sorted into Gryffindor.

George and Vera returned to their shop, and they reopened it to great success. Although they both suffered greatly from the loss of their siblings, they were able to find solace together, and they remained happily married for many years.

The couple eventually had two children, a boy named Fred and a girl named Vita.

Fred and Vita both attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and they were each sorted into Gryffindor.

Four months after the war, Theo and Astoria married in a lovely ceremony in London. The pair later had two sons, Laertes and Horatio. However, Theo once revealed to Lavender that he preferred Parvartus over his own sons, stating that they reminded him too much of his father.
Lavender moved into her cottage with Parvartus, and a few years after the war, she opened up a flower shop in Diagon Alley. The shop was called Bouquets of Lavender, and it was a great success.

Theo remained Parvartus's primary father figure throughout his entire life, and as a result, Parvartus spent most of his childhood under the assumption that Lavender and Theo were actually brother and sister. Just before his first year at Hogwarts, Theo and Lavender sat him down and gently explained the true circumstances of his birth. Parvartus, being a sensitive boy, was upset at first, but he eventually came to understand, and their relationships all remained largely unchanged.

Lavender did not date for many years, instead preferring to happily divide her time between her family, friends, and business. One day, though, a kindly Irish wizard who frequented her shop asked if he could take her to lunch. After much internal debate, Lavender accepted.

She had a wonderful time.

Parvartus attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry one year ahead of his two best friends. He was sorted into Hufflepuff, much to Theo's dismay.

Once the battle was over, Jean returned to the Zabini household. He regained his old job at St. Mungo's, and Blaise and Gabrielle once more took up their positions as socialites. A year after the war, Blaise and Gabrielle planned a special proposal for Jean and offered to make him an "official" part of the family. Jean happily accepted, and the Zabinis had a grand wedding ceremony; the ensuing party was the talk of magical England for years.

After that, Jean changed his name to Zabini, wore a wedding ring, and never found a reason to leave again.

Gabrielle went on to have three more children: twin girls by Jean, whom they named Marinette and Leilette, and a last girl by Blaise, this time named Isabella. When Blaise saw that their fourth and final child was a girl, he turned to Marseille, took him by the shoulders and said, "I'm sorry, son. I have given you my curse." Then he left to go smoke a cigar.

Marseille attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and was sorted into Slytherin. All three of the girls opted to attend Beauxbatons instead, stating that no boys would ever date them at Hogwarts because they were all too afraid of Marseille.

Draco Malfoy renounced his position as Head of Muggleborn Registration Commission. After cracking the nameplate on the door, he tossed it over his shoulder, told Shacklebolt to "bugger off," and then left. From then on, he devoted all his time and energy to his family and hobbies.

As soon as he and Ginny were able, they rushed to Sweden to pick up Athena and Narcissa. From there, they went to America, where Maggie was waiting for them. Maggie was so happy to see them, she cried and clinged to them for an hour, never wanting to let go. Draco and Ginny brought both of the girls home, and they were finally able to begin their lives as a family.

Shortly after, Draco personally funded the building of a beautiful and stately children's home for all the Muggleborns who had been orphaned by the war. He then campaigned for it tirelessly, making certain that each child was eventually adopted.

He also kept his promise to Ben Jankowski and brought his wife and two sons to England. They
stayed at the most elegant magical hotel in all of Great Britain, and every single expense was entirely paid for. Draco also enlisted in the help of Oliver Wood to show the family the Muggle parts of London. As a result, Oliver grew very close to the family, even moving to the United States a year later to be closer to them.

Three years after the war, Ginny tried out for the Holyhead Harpies Quidditch team. She made the team as a reserve Chaser, and within a year, she was a starter. Within two more years, she was their Captain. In all, Ginny played professional Quidditch for eight years. She took her team to three national championships, and she also played for the English national team four times.

In her final year as a Quidditch player, Ginny helped her team win the World Cup while her family watched from the stands, cheering louder than anyone else there.

After that, Ginny retired from Quidditch to spend more time with her family. She and Draco went on to have one more child, a rambunctious little boy they named Atticus.

Maggie, Athena, and Atticus all attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. As Draco predicted, Maggie was sorted into Gryffindor, as was Atticus.

And Athena? Well, officially she was sorted into Ravenclaw.

But only because she asked.

"Not Slytherin, eh? ... Are you sure? You could be great, you know…"

- The Sorting Hat, HPSS

The End.

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